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A woman rides a motorcycle in Ouagadougou, on March 2, 2023. — AFP



Students from the Women's Center for Initiation and Learning to Trades (CFIAM) take practical courses in mechanics, in Ouagadougou, on March 2, 2023.

In Burkina, motorbikes bring treasured independence for women

The motorcycles that buzz along the streets of Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, have a story to tell. Once the preserve of men and a sign of male status in this West African country, today they are used ubiquitously by women — and are a prized tool of emancipation.

When Nigerian filmmaker Kagho Idhebor first came to Ouagadougou he was overwhelmed by how many women whizzed about on a motorbike. "I'd never seen women drive with such attitude, such independence," he said. "There are more motorbikes than cars, and more women than men on these motorbikes."

He was so struck by the phenomenon that he made "Burkina Babes" — a documentary which ran at the pan-African FESPACO cinema and TV festival in Ouagadougou that ended last weekend. Dressed in jeans or a suit, some with a baby slung on their back, women of all ages ride around on motorbikes in Burkina Faso. "The motorbike is above all a necessity" for getting around, said Valerie Dambre, who had stopped at a traffic light. But they are also a symbol of

autonomy for many women in a deeply poor country beset with problems imposed by a brutal years-long jihadist insurgency.

Nearly one person in seven in Burkina's population of 22 million has a motorbike, according to transport ministry figures for 2020. Between 2011 and 2020, the number of motorbikes tripled as a share of the population, cementing their role as a solution for mobility.

Breaking barriers

"In the coastal countries (in West Africa), people went straight to cars" from walking or using bicycles, said anthropologist Jocelyne Vokouma. "But we (in Burkina) turned to motorbikes before using cars." The key period of change was the early 1990s, she said. Until then, "a woman would proudly say that her motorbike had been bought by her husband. 'My husband is doing OK,' was what women used to say," Vokouma said.

But the country went through wrenching austerity and many men lost their jobs. It was women who picked up the baton, setting up small businesses such as selling fruit and vegetables to

make money — and as time progressed, many used their savings to swap their bicycle for a motorbike. With that came greater freedom, in developing their business, taking the children to school, seeing friends or just going out for a ride. But, said Vokouma, some important seeds had already been sown by Burkina Faso's revolutionary leftwing leader, Thomas Sankara. During his four years in power in the 1980s, which ended traumatically with his assassination, Sankara "played an emancipating role, breaking down traditional mindsets and thrusting women into the public space, outside the home," she said. "Young women today were brought up on his ideas."

Training

Hand in hand with the new mobility has come an entry for women into the male-dominated business of auto maintenance. Since 1997, the Women's School for Skills Initiation and Training (CFIAM) has trained more than 700 women to be mechanics and bodywork repairers. Its CEO and founder, Bernard Zongo, said he set up the school to help "girls... into non-traditional areas of

work, so that they can become economically independent."

He hired a full-time woman psychologist and installed a nursery for students with babies. The center gets by through donations from NGOs, which account for 75 percent of revenue, while the remaining income comes from fees. The two-year course costs 100,000 CFA francs (\$163) — a hefty sum in a country where annual per-capita income is little more than \$900.

Other African countries, including Niger, Ivory Coast and Mali have sent representatives to the CFIAM to see how it operates, and "boys are asking to enrol," Zongo said with a smile. "There are people we know who are jealous of us," said one student, Salamata Congo, speaking above a racket of cutting and hammering. But patriarchal habits and machismo die hard. "Men try to discourage you," said Berenice Zagali, who is learning to become a mechanic. "They say, 'You're a woman, what are you doing here? This is man's work. Your place is the kitchen, the office.'" — AFP

Caterpillars easy prey in artificial light: Study

Artificial light is providing predatory insects with an unfair advantage in hunting caterpillars, potentially decimating butterflies and moth populations already suffering from a global insect decline, according to a study published Wednesday. When researchers glued fake clay caterpillars to forest leaves and punched holes in the leaves to mimic their eating habits, the dummy green larvae experienced a significantly higher attack rate when exposed to unnatural light. The uptick is likely due to an increase in the abundance of light-seeking predators, higher visibility, and the opportunity for daytime hunters to seek prey at night.

"Your porch light can influence the lives of insects even if they're not fluttering around the light bulb," lead author John Deitsch of Cornell University told AFP. Light pollution impacts caterpillars even if they don't flock to bright bulbs the way moths or butterflies do, he explained. Both the expanding area affected by artificial light at night (ALAN) and increased brightness threaten insect biodiversity, driving changes in natural cycles that govern everything from insect reproduction to pollination and navigation. Earlier research has shown that light pollution increases the vulnerability to predation of other insect species such as adult moths, but the new study is the first to observe impacts on early life stages. Nocturnal light pollution is probably affecting caterpillar populations, said the authors.

Energy vs biodiversity

Nearly half of the over 500 clay caterpillars deployed showed predatory marks from an array of forest-dwellers including birds, beetles and spiders, with more attacks occurring when the predators had a guiding light. Caterpillars are critical members of the food web and many feed at night, decreasing the risk of becoming a bird's or bat's snack. The type of light-bulb can also play a role in predation, according to the findings. Energy-efficient LED lights — altering the intensity and directionality of light pollution — can employ a much sharper white light compared to the low-pressure yellow-orange glow of older streetlights.

The study reported a nine percent higher predation rate in the presence of artificial light — strong enough to overcome changes such as temperature or lunar phases. But the researchers acknowledged that dummy caterpillars could only provide a proxy for actual attack rates, which might be lower due to anti-predation tactics such as rolling off leaves, or higher if predators are attracted to movement. — AFP



This picture taken on February 7, 2023, shows children sitting next to a campfire at a forest camp on the outskirts of Ballerup, Denmark.



This picture taken on February 7, 2023, shows a girl having lunch at a forest camp on the outskirts of Ballerup, Denmark.

Wild education: The joy of Scandinavia's forest preschools

Come rain, sleet or snow, young children nap outside even in mid-winter all across Scandinavia, where outdoor preschools teach children a love of nature. Sitting in the forest on a tarp laid out over the snow in Solna near Stockholm, Agnes and her friends — all around five — are lining up sticks.

"We use pieces of wood to show them that you can use anything you find in nature to do maths," said their preschool teacher Lisa Bystrom. In a scene that would shock some parents elsewhere, the children whittle sticks with large knives, their teachers seemingly unperturbed. "Once they get to school, they will sit down with a piece of paper and a pencil but here we think this is more fun," Bystrom said. In Sweden and Denmark, school is mandatory from the age of six. But before that most children attend daycare or preschool, with many parents opting for outdoor ones where children play in the woods and learn to appreciate nature.

"Technology today takes over most (things), so I think it's necessary to be in nature from a young age to learn how to behave and to respect nature," said Andreas Pegado, one of the educators whose daughter also attends the preschool. Every day, the little ones eat lunch seated on wooden benches around a wood fire — unless heavy rain forces them indoors. After their meal, kids that are two and under settle down for a nap, bundled into sleeping bags under a canopy — even when the temperature falls below zero.

"They get a lot of fresh air, (so) they sleep longer, they sleep better," said Johanna Karlsson, the head of the "Ur & Skur" (Come Rain or Shine) preschool, unbothered by the day's temperature of five degrees Celsius (41 Fahrenheit).

'Forest buses'

In neighboring Denmark, many preschools use "forest buses" to bring "asphalt kids" to nature areas. Every day, a group from the Stenurten preschool — one of 78 Copenhagen preschools that offer daily excursions like this — leaves the Norrebro neighborhood in the city center on a 30-minute bus ride to the forest. A little wooden house provides shelter if necessary, and a large field leads to the forest where the kids can run free. In the open air, the educators can vary their

The educators all agree: young children who spend their days outside have better self-confidence and are sick less often. In the 1920s, an Icelandic doctor recommended that babies sleep outdoors to strengthen their immune systems, a practice now common across the Nordic countries and which the medical community has never contradicted.

A study published in 2018 in the British Educational Research Journal suggested that outdoor preschools improve children's team working skills by encouraging



Children from the "Ur och Skur" preschool are pictured as they wait for their lunch to be prepared, on March 1, 2023, in Jarvastaden, Solna, Sweden.

pedagogical approaches and develop the children's independence. "Their curiosity is a bit different here," said Iben Ohrgaard, one of the preschool staff.

Snowsuits for all

Everyone is kitted out in snowsuits, kids and adults alike. A popular Nordic saying goes: "There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes." But is it really reasonable to stay outside all day, even when it's minus 10 Celsius?

kids to collaborate through play, among other things. Outdoors "they try different solutions themselves," said Ohrgaard, helping limit conflicts. "If they climb a bit too high in a tree, they know there are adults there. But they try a little more themselves. And they grow up with the feeling that 'I can do it,'" she explained. "That gives them the strength to try once more before asking for help." — AFP

China's students leap 'Great Firewall' to get homework help from ChatGPT

Chinese schoolchildren are turning to AI bot ChatGPT to slash their homework time — vaulting the country's "Great Firewall" to write book reports and bone up on their language skills. With its ability to produce A-grade essays, poems and programming code within seconds, ChatGPT has sparked a global gold rush in artificial intelligence tech. But it has also prompted concern from teachers, worried over the possibilities for cheating and plagiarism. In China, where the service is unavailable without a virtual private network (VPN), over a dozen students told AFP they have used it to write essays, solve science and maths problems, and generate computer code.



This file photo taken on January 23, 2023 in Toulouse, southwestern France, shows screens displaying the logos of OpenAI and ChatGPT. — AFP

Eleven-year-old Esther Chen said ChatGPT has helped to halve the time she studies at home, while her sister Nicole uses it to learn English. Esther, who attends a competitive school in the southern megacity of Shenzhen, said she used to spend four to five hours every day on homework. "My mum would stay up late until I finished all my homework and we would fight constantly," she said. "Now, ChatGPT helps me to do the research quickly."

Several students told AFP they had bought foreign phone numbers online or used VPNs to bypass restrictions and access ChatGPT. One retailer allows users to buy a US number for just 5.5 yuan (\$0.8), while one registered in India costs less than one yuan. And for those unable to scale the firewall, AI Life on the ubiquitous WeChat app charges one yuan (\$0.15) to ask ChatGPT a question, as do other services.

AI book report

Chinese media last month reported major tech firms, including WeChat's parent Tencent and rival Ant Group, had been ordered to cut access to ChatGPT on their platforms, and state media blasted it as a tool for spreading "foreign political propaganda". But Esther's mother, Wang Jingjing, said she wasn't worried. "We've used a VPN for years. The girls are encouraged to read widely from different sources," she told AFP, adding she is more worried about plagiarism and keeps a close eye on her daughter.

Esther insisted she does not get the chatbot to do the work for her, pointing to a recent assignment in which she needed to finish a book report on the novel "Hold up the Sky" by Liu Cixin, a globally renowned Chinese sci-fi writer. With a weekly schedule crammed with piano practice, swimming, chess and rhythmic gymnastics, she said she did not have time to finish the book. Instead, she asked ChatGPT to give her a summary and paragraphs about the main characters and themes, writing the report from that.

'It's less pressure'

Students are also using ChatGPT to bypass China's lucrative English language test prep industry, in which applicants learn thousands of words by rote with expensive tutors ahead of the exams needed to enter colleges in the United States, United Kingdom or Australia. "I didn't want to memorise word lists or entire conversations," Stella Zhang, 17, told AFP. So instead of spending up to 600 yuan (\$85) an hour, she dropped out and now learns through conversations with the chatbot. "It's less pressure... It also offers instant feedback on my essays, and I can submit different versions," she explained.

Thomas Lau, a college admissions counsellor in the eastern city of Suzhou, said more than two dozen students he works with have dropped out of language cramming schools and opted to prepare with ChatGPT. But the tool has created new problems. "I run all the personal statements and other application materials written by students through software to detect whether parts of it have been written using AI," Lau said. "Many fail the test."

A flurry of Chinese tech firms including Baidu, Alibaba and JD.com said they are developing rivals to ChatGPT. But Beijing is already primed to crack down and said it would soon introduce new rules to govern AI. While tools to detect whether a text has been written using AI can be accessed in China, schools are also training teachers to ensure academic ethics are upheld. — AFP