



Gender-Based Violence and Access to Education: An Empirical Analysis for Women in Koinadugu District in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT: The study explored gender-based violence (GBV) consequences on women economic empowerment within Sierra Leone. Koinadugu District, in particular, has reported many cases of GBV in the decade running between 2010 and 2022, the cases are immense. The aim of this study examined the effects of gender-based violence on the women access to education. This investigation was guided by ecological theory and a descriptive survey design. Using questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews to collect data, the results are based on achieved response of a group of 40 women, 2 chiefs and 2 officers in charge of children protection unit and 3 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) staff. Study findings indicate that there was notable impact of GBV on women's access to education in Koinadugu District. Cases of school dropout because of teenage pregnancies, early marriage, child labour and giving preference to boys in education were some of the outstanding findings. This study recommends that the empowerment of women will reduce the unequal power relationship between women and men which has been identified as the root cause of GBV.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender Based Violence (GBV) is more of an “umbrella” term for every destructive demonstration which is executed against an individual's will and that depends on socially attributed gender contrasts among males and females (Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2015). It is brutality against an individual based on gender and it envelops a wide scope of human rights infringement secured by worldwide instruments are shown. Types of GBV differ as indicated by nations and societies yet the most widely recognized structures incorporate rape, sexual brutality, sexual misuse or potentially misuse, disavowal of chances, female genital mutilation (FGM) and household violence (IASC, 2010). While a few kinds of GBV can likewise apply to men, GBV is regularly used to mean viciousness against women and young ladies given their expanded defenselessness and subordinate status in many social orders (IASC, 2015). GBV is as rising as a genuine worldwide wellbeing, human rights and improvement issue since it is a side effect of sexual orientation imbalances in the general public. As indicated by WHO (2011), it is a genuine motivation of death and damage among ladies and kids, yet it is acknowledged by traditions and blossoms with exemption.

As per Human Rights Watch (2003), in principle, GBV is “brutality that is focused on women or men on account of their gender as well as their socially developed gender roles”. It incorporates, yet is not restricted to, different types of sexual violence. GBV suggests any destructive demonstration that is sustained against an individual's will and that depends on socially attributed contrasts among male and females. Instances of GBV include sexual violence, for example, sexual exploitation, abuse and forced prostitution; aggressive behavior at home; child trafficking; forced early marriage; and destructive customary practices, for example, female genital mutilation, rituals and widow inheritance. The United Nations Development Fund for women evaluates that somewhere around the world, one of each three ladies is likely to be abused in one manner or the other in her lifetime. Notably, the abuser is an individual from her own family. It has been broadly recognized that most people affected by GBV are

women; roughly one out of four ladies and young ladies from the age of 15 years' experience sexual viciousness in their lives. The rates of sexual maltreatment going from (1% to 12%) throughout a lady's lifetime in Sierra Leone (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2009).

An investigation by the World Health Organization (2011) demonstrates that among mature ladies (15 - 44 years), GBV represents a larger number of deaths and inabilities than the joined impacts of malignant growth, intestinal sickness, traffic wounds and war. Furthermore, trafficking in women and young ladies for sexual abuse is mostly regular among poor women. Women who are casualties of aggressive behavior at home are multiple times bound to endeavor suicide than the individuals who do not experience such brutality. For instance, Haiti, which has had a long history of gender segregation, GBV and especially assault, after the tremor in 2010 - reports of sexual brutality fundamentally expanded (Amnesty International, 2011). Women have greater powerlessness to sexual brutality because of the demolition of their employments and encouraging groups of people, just as unreliable conditions in settlement camps and safe houses.

An investigation by the UK social pattern report shows that women are horribly unrepresented in government and basic leadership bodies. GBV is high in Africa due to adherence to retrogressive social practices that undermine the limit with regards to self-security and dependence square or lessen access to social assurance delay (Uthman et al, 2009). This has thus prompted the expansion of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) / Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in Africa. Statistics show that about 60% of the people living with HIV and AIDS in Africa are women and girls of which 59.6% of them are in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS, 2009).

In consistency with Johnson, Scott, Rughita, Kisielewski and Lawry (2010), up to 40% of women in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo have encountered sexual violence. It is alleged that most individuals with the military engaged with the contention, both nationals and neighboring government powers inclusive, have submitted demonstrations of assault and sexual brutality. Numerous assaults happen in open settings, frequently with the constrained participation of victims' relatives. In another country report review, and consistent with Peterman, Palermo and Bredenkamp (2011), it has been demonstrated that between 1.69 – 1.8 million women reported having been assaulted in lifetime. These cases have higher association with the military compared to the civilians. These figures are way far from the absence of up-to-date measurements and the numerous cases go unreported.

Being the fourth largest district in Sierra Leone, Koinadugu district has in the current years been recording extended cases on violence against women with incidence cases being, rape, defilement, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and denied get entry to employment and schooling. Gender based violence in Koinadugu District, is widespread as most of the settlements are informal, thus forming slums. The underlying causes of household poverty include and not limited to low income of family heads who are mostly women. Unemployment, low levels of education for family heads and other household members, family separations, and social cultural barriers make them more vulnerable to Gender based violence. The civil society representing the target areas are mainly implementing projects on national policies, which most of the time do not reach the local communities. The groups also hardly respond to felt needs in the specific community. The larger population in this area is made up of female-headed families with one estate dominated by Muslims. Most court cases on Gender based violence have collapsed due to lack of evidence as most witnesses shy away. Besides, Muslim women do not report Gender based violence as they believe it is solved at home. This has led to the increased cases of violence on women in Koinadugu district. The economic empowerment of women is a social right and justice issue. When Sierra Leone women get freedom to reach their potential, all Sierra Leonean families and communities will grow stronger. Women's economic empowerment is important as it is the basis of all development actions as women have greater influence on their families' choices to plan. This also reduces dependency burden and positively contribute towards social development. Violence against women is thus, a major threat to global development. It is on this basis that this study sought to analyze the extent to which Gender based violence has affected the access to education of women in Koinadugu District.

In March 30, 2020, Sierra Leone President Julius Maada Bio, together with Basic and Senior Secondary Education Minister David Moinina Sengeh, announced the immediate end to this ban. Often referred to as a 10-year ban, the practice in fact existed informally long before a government memorandum formalized the ban in 2010. It served to deprive girls of their right to education and push them to the fringes of their communities, while also reinforcing patriarchal beliefs and negative narratives about adolescent girls. In its 2004 report, Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation commission stated "The practice of expelling girls who become pregnant from educational institutions is discriminatory and archaic." Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Witness to Truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2004

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This investigation was guided by the ecological hypothesis that was supported by Heise (1998). The hypothesis was utilized to see the association of non-public relationship, scenario and social cultural factors that blend to cause violence against women. The hypothesis demonstrates how nature impacts human practices and other path round which centers around the association between the two dimensions. These particular frameworks have partner impact on a person's life from earliest stages to adulthood (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Nature comprises of the political, social, monetary and mental setting. The political condition comprises

of pioneers and political exercises; the social setting is family and resources, houses of worship and clubs. The social setting is the qualities, morals and conventions of a general public: it's the system by which people live. The economic or rather the monetary condition is framed by trade and business and furthermore the rate of work; it is additionally formed by casual business. The mental/psychological condition comprises of the frames of mind that people appear towards life around them (Swanepoel and de Brew, 2006). Four dimensions of natural components are utilized to appreciate the impact of class cognizant ecological frameworks on individuals. These are the microsystems, which alludes to a people groups quick condition; the ecosystem, which alludes to the intelligent technique between the microsystems; the ecosystem, which influences an individual by implication, and the full-scale framework, which are the political, social, social and economic powers influencing singular working.

This theory combines biological, socio-cultural and personal factors affecting an individual, which could include women experiences of violence at home as well as in the community. There is also a focus on close relationships among family, friends and peers. It explores how these relationships increase the risk of being a victim or perpetrator of violence (WHO, 2010). Ecological theory also focuses on the societal factors creating or inhibiting a climate of violence. This includes the social and cultural norms for example, those which entrench male dominance over women, gender roles as well as the acceptability of violence (Krug, Dahlberg & Zwi, 2002; WHO, 2010). Finally, the theory advocates that societal factor including health, economic, educational as well as social policies may help to maintain economic or social inequality between societal groups. The theory suited the study as it helped in understanding the effects of the Gender Based Violence on access to education among women in Koinadugu District, Sierra Leone.

2.2 Review of Empirical Literature

As indicated by the Global synthesis report (2017), marriage of children is a critical test. Young girls are significantly more without a doubt to drop out of school and complete fewer long periods of instruction than their companions who marry later. This influences the training and soundness of their youngsters, including their capacity to gain a living. For the ongoing report, in excess of 41,000 young girls – younger than 18 years old get married day by day. Putting a conclusion to the exercise would build the women's' normal scholastic achievement, and with it, their potential income.

Violence also unfavorably impacts access to education and an ensured setting for learning. In Haiti, recent research highlights that one in three Haitian women (ages 15 to 49 years) has experienced physical and/or sexual violence, and that of women who received money for sex before turning 18 years old were 27%. They reported that the schools were the most common location for solicitation. According to UNESCO estimates, 130 million girls between the age of 6 and 17 years are out of school and 15 million girls of primary-school age live in sub-Saharan Africa. These girls are predicted to never enter a classroom due to the existing cultural norms and the male dominance society where boys are given more privileges than girls. While these statistics communicate the disparities, it is reported that better educated women tend to be healthier, participate more in the formal labor market, earn higher income, have fewer children, marry at a later age, and provide good care to their children.

A global population conference and development held in Cairo, Egypt in September 1994, identifies education as some of the most vital means of providing information and self-confidence women need to take part absolutely and equally in improvement approaches. On maximum, basic degree, there is an urgent want to improve literacy fees for women and girls in many parts of the global. Following this, most countries basic literacy rates for young women aged fifteen and older have increased significantly over the past several decades. However, very high rates of illiteracy continue to prevail in northern parts of Africa.

Statistics show that the illiteracy rate for young women in rural areas is typically two to three times higher than in urban areas. Furthermore, illiteracy rates among women over twenty-five years of age are characteristically twice or more than those of young women aged fifteen to twenty-four (World Bank, 2017). Significant barrier to the education of female children is attitudinal. Women and girls are routinely denied access to education out of fear of the impact of too much freedom for females, a preference for investing in sons and traditional stereotypes that continue to raise questions about the usefulness of educating girls.

Nevertheless, a significant body of research shows that giving women and girls access to education is among the most effective of all means for raising the level of health, education and prosperity for the entire population.

In South Africa, some girls have left school entirely as a result of their experiences with sexual violence. Tolerance of gender-based violence in schools is a serious form of discriminatory treatment that compromises the learning environment and educational opportunities for women. Girls are disproportionately the victims of physical and sexual abuse at school (Wilson, 2006). In addition, girls are raped, sexually assaulted, abused, and sexually harassed by their male classmates and even by their teachers. Significant progress has been made in improving the situation of women and men across the world. This advancement is considered in narrowing sex holes in real social fiscal signs. The unending imbalance among women and men holds society to a decline phase of generation and, at last, to a diminishing cost of monetary increment.

Concurring Barker (2011), presence of sex-based violence in Kenya denies ladies the likelihood to go to class and effectively partake in education. The act of tyke marriage is socially and financially implanted. The most youthful girls – around the age of 12 years – marry more aged and established men who are already married, and sometimes to more than one wife. Tyke marriage denies them education, and thus denying them plausibility to build their capabilities, grow capacities, improve their employment competitiveness and increment of their future potential. A number of United Nations (UN) reports have mounted the globally accepted rights of women and girls' schooling. Primary criminal binding tool was designed to comfy this right as realized in the conference on the elimination of violence against women held in 1979. United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which was established in November 1945, affirmed in its preamble that the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace (is) dispensable and constitutes a revered duty which nations must satisfy. This, in addition, referred to as push for full and identical possibilities for education for all and entreated member states to collaborate in growing educational activities. This aimed at improvement in the equality of tutorial possibility without regard to race, sex or any distinction, economic or social.

2.3 Methodology

The study adopted descriptive survey design. The accessible target population comprised of *a group of 40 women, 2 chiefs and 2 officers in charge of children protection unit and 3 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) staff* with related programmes. Systematic random sampling was utilized to select a sample of 40 women who were GBV victims as reported to various CSOs in the Koinadugu District. Primary data was collected from the women through a set questionnaire. FGDs were conducted with the local community members drawn from chief. Key informant interviews were administered to a purposive sample of 2 Sub-community chiefs, 2 gender desk officers, 3 civil society officers, and 3 church leaders. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse quantitative whereas thematic technique was used to analyse qualitative data.

Data sources are broadly classified into primary and secondary data. Primary data means original data that has been collected specifically for the purpose of this study meaning the data was collected from the original source first hand. Secondary data is a data that has been already collected by and readily available from other sources (Manu, 2013).

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Data Analyses from the Questionnaire

Results from data collection (personal interviews and self-administered questionnaires) are discussed here. The results are based on achieved response from a group of 40 women, 2 chiefs and 2 officers in charge of children protection unit and 3 CSOs staff.

Demographic Characteristics: Every question/statement on each questionnaire was thoroughly checked for different types of errors before they are entered for analysis. If, in the process of identifying errors a questionnaire is found to have some missing data, the questionnaire was either rejected or accepted based on the extent of the errors. The demographics of the participating women were – majority (73.2%) were married, (19.5%) were separated, (4.9) were single while only one (2.4%) was widowed. The analyses revealed that (39%) of the respondents are between the age of 18 - 30 years, (29.3%) of them are between 31 - 40 years, (17.3%) of them are between 41 – 50 years and while (12.2%) fall between 51 – 60 years and above, this implies that majority of the respondents fall under the youthful age range.

Also revealed on the educational qualification of the respondents, the analysis showed that (46.3%) have attained secondary education, (34.2%) attained primary education, (14.6%) attained tertiary education while only (4.9%) had no formal education.

RQ1: Assessing whether the respondents ever forced to drop out of school as a result of GBV - the analysis revealed that (74.7%) of the respondents confirmed dropping out as a result of GBV, of which (34.3%) dropped at primary and (44.7%) at secondary levels. The Researcher further probed the responses through interviews to give circumstances which led to the drop out and the following realized.

1st Key informant: I was raped on the way to school and got pregnant so I was forced to drop out of school.

2nd key informant: When my mother died, my father gave me out for marriage while I was in JSS3 that he had no fees to waste on girl's education; so, I was forced to drop out of school.

3rd key informant: I did not like my teacher's comment that girls smell in class during their monthly period cycle because we. girls could not afford to buy sanitary towels; this was always embarrassing as the boys always laughed. As a result of this, I skipped school during my cycle until I eventually dropped out of school and became a house help.

The interviews with the respondents revealed that teenage pregnancy, child marriage and sexual abuse in schools attributed to school dropout. These findings were supported by the World Bank (2017) posting that child marriage as a critical test that leaves children undecided on what to do with their lives. From the responses, the researcher was interested on the consequences of the above situation on the victims' life and some of the explanations were:

1st key informant: Now I can work and earn income to improve on my standard of living.

2nd key informant: the challenge of being unable to read and write has made it impossible for me to start a business.

3rd key informant: My dream of ever being a teacher was shattered.

It is evident from these findings that GBV denies girls access to education and hence economic wellbeing. This in turn affect their abilities and opportunities to improve their level of health and general socioeconomic wellbeing.

RQ2: Assessing whether community decisions denied girls the opportunity to education – the result revealed that (90%) of the respondents confirmed that there were decisions made at community level that denied girls the opportunity to go to school for a better future. From the findings the respondents associated such decisions as - women being denied access to education as a result of negative cultural norm in the community. These findings are supported by Tacoli (2012) who opine that culture among communities may affect girls' rights to specific life elements. Women have less access to basic education at (16%) illiteracy level compared to men at (9%) illiteracy. This is to some extent because of structural reasons and limitations in movement that is attributed to traditional norms, religion and/or family everyday jobs or demands. It was also evident from the focus group discussion (FGD) held where one participant had the understanding of negative cultural norms that hinder women progress.

P5 said: '*We women are always told that our duty in the family is to give birth, bring up the children and work for the family. For instance, my husband simply told me that it is useless to educate a girl who will be married, and this really depressed me since I have witnessed many educated women leaders so why deny our girls the opportunity...*

RQ3: Assessing whether working in the field or doing household work during school hours denied girls equal opportunity to education – the researcher sought to find out if women were subjected to household work which denied them equal opportunity to education. The study findings revealed that (31.7%) of the respondents admitted to ever stayed home to take care of the younger siblings while others went to school and others were forced to become house helps and support their families. The findings are supported by the ILO's most recent global estimate of the extent of child labour indicated that more than 100 million girls between 5 and 17 years old were involved in child labour denying them access to education. This was supported by the responses from the interviewees who said that child labour in Koinadugu District was notably high. According to one key informant:

"The quest for family financial support in Koinadugu district has a role in child labour most victims being girls employed as house helps and so are unable to continue with education.

RQ4: Assessing incidents of sexual abuse perpetrated by teachers or male counterparts in school - the findings revealed that only (22%) of the respondents admitted to being victims of this category of offence by their male teachers or counterpart in school. The researcher went further to inquire on the impact the abuse. The findings showed that the victims suffered psychological and physical harm, and that the extreme ones had to drop out of school. Concurring Ahmed et al. (2009), the presence of sex-based violence in Sierra Leone diminishes the likelihood of the girls to go to class, participate effectively, compete, and appreciate quality education.

RQ5: Government initiative in support of women education - This study investigated the role of the government in enhancing access to education through anti-GBV initiatives. The questionnaire findings (women) indicated that (11%) agreed that the government had a big role in promoting girl's education. The study confirmed that government of Sierra Leone and its agencies like local councils, community development officers, at police stations, education offices and local community leaders have been vital in handling GBV cases. This was affirmed by 3 key informants interviewed as they gave similar report on the endless efforts of the government.

'The government is actively involved in ensuring all our children and especially girls are given equal opportunity to go to school'.

3.2 Discussions

Study findings indicate that there were notable impact of GBV on women access to education in Koinadugu district. Cases of school dropout as a result of teenage pregnancies, early marriage, child labour, and giving preference to boys in education are stated in the findings. From the study, education increases women's employment opportunities and socio-economic status. It was seen that empowerment of women reduces the unequal power relationship between women and men which has been identified as the root cause of GBV. Schools and other educational institutions are not isolated from traditions, culture, norms, customary laws

and governmental policies that exist in the country and the communities, or from individual experiences of women realized from the findings. (74.7%) of the women indicated that they were forced to drop out of school due to GBV, teenage pregnancy, child marriage and sexual abuse in schools were attributed to school dropout (90%) of the respondents accepted that there are decisions made in the communities that denied girls the opportunity to go to school that will ensure a better future. Also, the findings revealed that women were denied access to education as a result of negative cultural norm in the communities. If not addressed properly, schools and other community decisions can implicitly legitimize and reinforce harmful gender norms, such as non-enrolment of girls in schools, employing girls as house helps affirming an early marriage that hinders the girl progress to education.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

Gender base violence (GBV) has no doubt been on the rise as a genuine worldwide wellbeing, human rights and improvement issue since it is a side effect of sexual orientation imbalances in the general public.

This research work was set out basically to examine the effects of gender-based violence on the women access to education. Case study approach was adopted with a focus on the Koinadugu District in Sierra Leone.

In an attempt to accomplish this aim, some objectives were laid out which include:

1. To assess whether the victims ever forced to drop out of school as a result of GBV;
2. To assess whether community decisions denied girls the opportunity to education;
3. To assess whether working in the field or household work during school denied women access to education;
4. To investigate if sexual abuse is perpetrated by teachers or male counterparts in school; and
5. To assess government initiatives in support of women education in Sierra Leone.

However, the study findings depict a negative effect of GBV on women access to education. Cases of school dropout as a result of teenage pregnancies, early marriage, child labour, and giving preference to boys in education were top on the findings. Empowerment of women reduces the unequal power relationship between women and men which has been identified as the root cause of GBV. Sierra Leone's government has implemented several initiatives to support girl child education, including the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) program, which provides free access to government schools, and the Radical Inclusion Policy, which aims to create a more inclusive educational system. These initiatives are part of a broader commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, recognizing education as a key factor in achieving these goals. Here's a more detailed look at the initiatives: Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Program: Launched in August 2018, the FQSE program aims to reduce financial barriers to education by abolishing school and exam fees for all children in government-approved schools. The program also includes increased access to school meals, further addressing economic challenges that may prevent girls from attending school. This initiative is crucial for improving access to education for girls, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

4.2 Recommendations

The government of Sierra Leone is currently attracting global recognition and celebrating its policies and commitments toward advancing and securing access to education for girls, in particular pregnant girls and young mothers; many of which had been excluded from education due to a longstanding ban on visibly-pregnant girls attending school. Significant progress has been made in this aspect. However, the study recommends that the government of Sierra Leone should also ensure effectiveness of the laws to protect women more especially after settling all the conflicts that disrupt their family at the police stations and/or in courts. During the conduct of the study, it was revealed that women fear reporting their husbands sometimes due to fear of being threatened of maltreatment and/or physically harmed. Laws to ensure their maximum protection should be put in place.

Also, the study recommends that for the past few years, the introduction of FQSE programme which has made significant strides as well as gained global recognition must be maintained as a continued agenda of any subsequent government in order to reduce the financial burden to accessing education on its citizenry.

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