

A RESEARCH ON GIRLS' RETENTION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS CASE STUDY: GLOUCESTER VILLAGE SIERRA LEONE.

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Abstract

In Sierra Leone, there are reports of increased dropout rates mostly among girls in public secondary schools. Many of them drop out of school just before they make the transition to secondary school while others drop out around grade 9. Consequently, there is a hindrance to the Human resource capacity of the country. The failure to take measures to secure girls' retention and completion in secondary schools will certainly hamper the future of the society as female are the first line of educators in the family and they constitute almost half of the population (49.7) in Sierra Leone, as reported in the Sierra Leone National census in 2008.

According to the Sierra Leone school census of 2013, More than 60% school aged children are out-of-school due to parental poverty and government inability to provide the much needed resources to improve the school system nationwide. Unfortunately, over half of the 60% out of school children are girls.

In an effort to promote and increase equal access for girls in Education, the GOL launched its Girls' Education Policy in 2006 through which free and compulsory education was launched for upper and lower basic education (Grade 1-9). In addition, the National Policy was revised in order to make provision for and capture new trends in Girls' Education related issues. However, in spite of many interventions aimed at promoting equal access for girls, girls' transition to and retention in secondary schools has become a major issue across counties in Sierra Leone.

In lieu of the above, this paper sort to explore factors inhibiting girls' retention in secondary schools in Sierra Leone and come up with solid policy recommendations to help curb the situation. In doing so, extensive literatures were reviewed to gain an insight on the subject matter. Following the literatures, a research design was done in view to solicit information from respondents at the target schools. An interview was conducted with some key stake holders . In the results from our exploration, we discovered that initiation rites particularly the Female Genital mutilation, early marriages, parental attitude towards female students in comparison to boy child in traditional view, the roles in the community and household chores and finally the poverty that has to do with paying of school fees for the girl-child in secondary schools among several other factors are responsible for the low retention rate of girl child in secondary schools.

The study also investigated the government's efforts put in place to curb the challenges of female retention in secondary schools through the provision of supports.

The findings of this study are significant to all stakeholders involved in education sector, political leaders, and policy makers. Both effective leadership and enormous resources are necessary to bolster the effort of girl-child in secondary education and all stakeholders must play their rightful roles if any meaningful gain is to be made in

empowerment of the girl-child Education in Sierra Leone. The findings of this study have therefore provided enough evidence to press upon the government and other players in the education sector to take monitoring and evaluation seriously in order to address the possible factors that affect the girl-child from retention and performance in secondary schools in Sierra Leone.

Keywords: Girls retention, Secondary schools, Enrolment, Performance, Sierra Leone

Introduction

Over the past decade there has been an increased global recognition of the issue of gender parity and equity in education evident of the millennium Development Goal 2&3 and EFA (2009) owing to facts that girls' education leads to more equitable development, stronger families, better services, better child health and effective participation in governance. UNICEF (2004) Reports indicates that more than half of the 60% rates of out of school children in Sierra Leone are girls, Sierra Leone School Census (2013). Additionally, Emmanuel Boone Waydon, Liu Ying and Barbara L. Ketter (2016) observed that Sierra Leonean girls, for various reasons bordering on religious, cultural, socio-economic and school related factors, are not given a fair chance in the educational sector.

Like many other countries, Sierra Leone has been trying to mainstream gender equity in education and other sectors of the society in an attempt to be on par with global development agenda. In an effort to promote and increase equal access for girls in Education, the GOL launched its Girls' Education Policy in 2006 through which free and compulsory education was launched for upper and lower basic education (Grade 1-9). In addition, the National Policy was revised in order to make provision for and capture new trends in Girls' Education related issues.

However, in spite of many interventions aimed at promoting equal access for girls, girls' transition to and retention in secondary schools has become a major issue throughout the country.

Girls' retention in secondary schools is one of the fewest areas that have been studied in Sierra Leone even though many other interventions have been done in promoting girls' education.

This research is focusing on factors influencing increased dropout rate among girls in secondary school in Sierra Leone. The literature review of the research contains information published on internet. It relies on foreign articles, journals, reports from international Organization and books because it is very hard to find Sierra Leonean articles or books on the topic under discussion. The research will focus on methods.

Failure to retain girls in secondary schools can be considered as a waste of potential human resources (INEE, 2010). In Sierra Leone, there are reports of increased dropout rates mostly among girls in public secondary schools. Many of them drop out of school just before they make the transition to secondary school while others drop out around grade 9. As a result, this is affecting the country's Human development. The failure to take measures to secure girls' retention and completion in secondary schools will certainly hamper the future of the society as female are the first line of educators in the family and they constitute almost half of the population (49.7.) in Sierra Leone, National census (2008).

Tracking 2005/2006 cohort for a period of seven years up to 2014, the gross retention rate of girls in government secondary schools was 16% lower compared to that of boys (see figure 1-1 below). There was a higher declining trend among the girls than boys as this cohort transited from grade 6 to 9. Challenges of girls' retention in secondary schools may be attributed to many reasons including school-based factors. The broader objective of this research is to examine factors influencing girls' retention in secondary schools in Sierra Leone. Given the general objective, the following specific objectives will be considered:

- To determine the factors that influences the retention of secondary School girls in Sierra Leone.
- To determine how the factors influence secondary School girls' retention in Sierra Leone.
- To provide suggestions to the Sierra Leone Ministry of Education in order to improve retention, of the girl-child in Sierra Leone secondary schools

Literature Review

As an adage in Sierra Leone states, “we sit on the old mat to make a New one “the viability of every research work depends greatly on previous existing ideas from similar studies in order to build upon and improve on needed ideas. As such, the practice of reviewing literature was also engaged in this study.

This study is concerned with the low enrolment and retention rate of secondary school girls in Public schools in Sierra Leone and the challenges they face. This section reviews literature on factors affecting enrolment, retention and performance of girls, perception of the girl-child and the community toward girls’ education. It considers the challenges that the girl-child in Sierra Leone faces which affects them in terms of access, performance and retention in secondary school and the strategies they employ to mitigate these challenges.

Early Marriages and the Retention of Girls in Secondary Schools

Early marriages are common in most African societies. Re-entry into education after early marriage has not been possible (UNESCO – UNICEF, 2012) Research work by Onyango (2013) indicated that socio-cultural norms and practices such as value attached to bride wealth influenced parents to marry off their daughters before maturity. Maritim (2012) supported the findings by Onyango by stating that families in the lower socio-economic structures marry off their daughters in order to provide economic support in terms of bride wealth to the family. Mbilinyi and Mbughuri (2014) added that in some African communities, girls are valued as objects of exchange in bridal wealth. Girls are seen as sources of income by their parents in the custom of charging fines for adultery and pregnancies of unmarried girls. In this arrangement girls are denied opportunity for education. They are withdrawn from schooling during periods for initiation and betrothal ceremonies (United Nations, 2004). Odaga (2012) concurred with Mbilinyi and Mbughuri by adding that African tradition and culture requires that girls be married off to qualify as good African women. This made members of the household to usually struggle to socialize their daughters to master skills of being good wives. The result of this is early drop out of school.

Abagi (2011) stated that marriage oriented socialization has made some girls withdraw from school for marriage. Although early marriage is disregarded, there is a general fear of missing husbands after attaining higher education because of the men's suspicion of the learned girls. African men are used to orders and dictatorial instructions to women, which may not be accepted by learned women who are reasonable and rational. In this case schooling is therefore, seen as increasing the value of girls but lowering their chances for marriages (Mbilinyi and Mbughuri, 2014).

Despite the fact that early marriage hinders attainment of higher education for girls, a study carried out on jobs and skills programs for Africans revealed some positive attitudes towards female education. In the study men are seen working in mines of South Africa while mothers manage their chores without the help of their daughters. Here the dropout rate of girls is lower than that of boys and mothers value education as good even if they are not employed. Reading, writing, counting and science are valued for being good for children and hence provide justification for school attendance (Oxenham, 2013).

However, the positive attitude towards attaining education in females is not widespread in many African countries. World Bank research of 2007 revealed that rates of schooling of girls in Zaire were lower than that of boys as girls drop out of school to get married. In Sierra Leone, early marriage is against the law but it is still high with serious implications for girls' educational development.

Shahidul (2012) also found that in Bangladesh girls with lower socioeconomic backgrounds drop out from secondary school when schooling or higher education inflates dowry in the marriage market of girls. In this research, the author argues that if girls have higher education but have lower parental socio-economic background, they face difficulties in getting a husband because pattern in which parents need to pay a higher amount of dowry to marry their educated daughters to similarly educated grooms thus resulting in early dropout among girls.

A research study of one of the communities in India revealed that they prepare early for all their duties in marriage in good time. The school is seen to offer nothing in this direction and so they opt to stay at home to learn from their mothers, aunts, and grandmother who give them thorough knowledge to prepare them for practical apprenticeship and socialization. Risk of being disorientated by the school is avoided because what the school offers is not enough

to dispense of the necessities of domestic education (Oxenham, 2013). In this respect the parents should try as much as possible to be closer to their daughters for easy retention of the girl child in School.

Initiation/Ceremonies and the Retention of Girls in Secondary Schools

Initiation rites or ceremonies for girls have a bearing on whether the girls remain in Secondary Schools or not.

Dennis, C., & Stahley, K. (2012) asserts that education is an investment, which is just as profitable as any other form of investment. As the case is in any other investment, a choice has to be made preceded by a series of fundamental private decisions. Gender, therefore becomes a crucial factor in decision making regarding who goes to school and for how long (Education Law, 2011). Before such decisions are made, families consider their priorities and in most cases, the socio-cultural and socio-economic constraints combine to put girls' continuing with education at disadvantage. One such constraint is female genital mutilation. (Manacorda, M., 2012) stated in his study that initiations are a disruptive force that pulls girls off their studies. This is so because after initiation girls and boys are regarded as adults and to behave as such. He further added that after initiation the performances of girls start going down, others drop out of school; others get pregnant and drop out of school or are expelled all together.

A study by (UNESCO, 2012) revealed that female circumcision or similar practices are observed in at least 25 countries in African, Asia and Arab regions. The number of girls affected by these practices is estimated at about one hundred million, with another two million added each year (UNICEF, 1992). In most cases the initiations are done at puberty, which brings with it additional traumas due to unhealthy connotations and sexual overtones associated with it (Shahidul, S.M., 2012). In many cultures, it begins as a process of emotional and physical isolation as well as other rituals that are demeaning to the girls (World Bank, 2011). (Carrell, Scott E., 2010) added that genital mutilation, as it is now referred to, is symbolic of violence against girls in many countries. This practice hampers advancement in education for girls since they are bogged down with management of these initiations rather than being engaged in educational work (Family Health International, 2009). United National report of 2004 Beijing China stated that many tribes keep girls at home for mutilation during poverty while boys go to school. (Asif, J., et al., 2012) concurred with the report and added that cases where the girls themselves are left to choose whether to be in school or go for initiations the choice is for initiation. (Clegg, S. & Jacqueline, S., 2012) in her research titled "Who cares? Gender dynamics in the valuing of extra-curricular activities in higher education", says, girls themselves perceive schooling as a waste of time after initiation because they wait for marriage as the next greater goal in life. This was confirmed by (Grant, M., et al., 2013) in their findings, which states "it is perceived in many countries that school is not necessary after initiation".

Female African women educationalist (World Bank, 2011) carried out a study on education of girls and women in Africa and reported that after initiation rites, girls may be forced into marriages, and in cases where they pursue education, school becomes a conducive environment to them (World Bank, 2011). It is for this reason that communities with traditional inclinations regard initiation as more important than schooling. The parents on the other hand should be positive by taking their daughter to School and pay for them the school fees without any condition.

Parents Attitudes towards Secondary School Education for Girls

The attitude of parents towards the education of their children is an important determinant of the retention of girls in Secondary Schools. Illustrations of the parental attitudes on their children's education are discussed below.

A study carried out by (Mansory, A. 2017,) revealed that enrolment of girls in schools is lower than that of boys. Generally, most households have negative attitude towards education of girls. This impedes the education of girls, (Asif, J., et al., 2012). Mothers favour education of male children because they provide for them old age insurance. Male education is therefore seen as insurance for old age (Manacorda, M., 2012). (Kingdon, G.G., 2015) supported this view and states that, parents invest in schooling for boys who are believed to retain and provide continuity of their roles and responsibilities. (Sohoni, 2010) asserted that the son is a potential and permanent source of income. In families where there is no protective cover of social security and pensioner provision the son is the only protection parents have against poverty, old age and other disabling circumstances. That is why they are preferred for education. (Leung, M. C. M., & Zhang, J., 2013), a Nigerian researcher found out that many poor and large families

preferred to educate boys for family continuity, headship of household and property inheritance, since girls marry off and go away from home. This is a general trend in most communities in our republic. Men carry out most commercial activities. This is why males are preferred for education (UNESCO-UNICEF, 2011).

Shahidul (2013) examine data in Bangladesh and found that if a mother participates in the household's decision-making process, the dropout rate of girls is decreased. Though female headship eventually gives advantage to girls, studies sometimes show controversial results. This is because, many studies found that single-female headed households face greater financial and time constraints than two-parent households in general which may impact differently on children's academic achievement (Guo & Harris, 2000; Pong et al., 2003). In fact, children in households headed by married women have higher educational attainment while children of widows are more likely to work.

Girls are seen as a source of productive labour force of another household when they marry off, while men, on the other hand are given maximum training in order to attain the higher status as heads of Female African women. It is therefore very important to educate both boys and girls and practice affirmative action in order to protect the girl child and give equal opportunities for both children as required by the child rights.

Methodology

Qualitative method is used for this research. Qualitative research is a set of investigation techniques which are widely used in research methods especially in educational research. It gives an insight into the behavior and perceptions of people and allows studying multiple views on a particular topic in more depth than with a qualitative method. A description and interpretation of an individual's social, environmental or organization's external context is imperative in order to achieve a gestalt perspective (Patton, 2002).

Due to the subjective nature of this study, it can be argued that qualitative research provides better findings (Brown et al., 2005). Furthermore, qualitative research can be used to explore several areas which cannot be quantified but yet important to an organization to understand. According to Jean Lee (2004), there are many reasons or advantages for using qualitative research in organizations and the main ones are: qualitative research provides a more realistic feel of the world that cannot be experienced in the numerical data and statistical analysis used in quantitative research. It provides flexible ways of collecting, analyzing and interpreting data and information and the use of primary and unstructured data gives qualitative research a descriptive capability. The procedure used for analyzing the interview data in this present study is such that, after each individual interview, the interview answers were written down immediately. The researcher then analyzed the data obtained through the interviews. The information gathered were first grouped into common theme that is reflective of the aims and objectives of the study. After that, the data and information were matched with the selected indicators in the theoretical framework in order to identify which indicators are suitable as girls' retention in secondary schools for the case study community in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

We further employed the qualitative method through group discussion in gaining an insight into the behavior and perceptions of our target respondents and this had allowed us to study multiple views on the issues of girls' retention in the schools in more depth. The discussion helped us generate ideas that helped us understand how an issue is perceived by each targeted group.

Analysis of the Findings

The analysis is based on data gathered from the respondents, interviews and discussions of major investigations under pertinent research questions.

The Effect of Early Marriage on Female Student's Retention in Secondary Schools

One of the objectives of the study was to establish the factors that influence enrolment, retention and performance in secondary schools among girls in Gloucester Village, Sierra Leone. Among the factors established was early marriage. To achieve this objective, Principals of sample Schools were asked whether early marriage affected retention of female students in secondary schools. **Interviewee-Head Teacher**

“There is a problem of early marriage for girls not only in this school, but in this community as a whole”

The results show that head teachers and teachers interviewed mentioned that early marriage affected the retention of female students in Secondary Schools. Further results from school administrators' responses show that early marriage led to high drop out of girls from Secondary Schools. Most of the Principals and teachers indicated that there is a problem of early marriage for girls in the Gloucester Village, Sierra Leone. Results from school

Administrators and Teachers imply that the retention of girls in Secondary School education in Gloucester Village is being hampered greatly by the issues of early marriage of girls.

The study also sought to find out the role of parents in early marriage of girls. This question was targeted at both teachers and principals. One of the respondents indicated that “majority of the parents one way or the other encourages early marriage of their girls” (**Interviewee-Senior Teacher**). The results given thus show that there is rampant early marriage of girls in Gloucester village in spite of Sierra Leone’s latest involvement in December 2018 in the Launch of the African Union Campaign to end Child Marriage. Mostly in situations of poor illiterate parents, single parents with many children and even polygamous families, girls are often turned bread winners for the family and source of support for their male siblings. Accumulation of the latter coupled with other religious and traditional practices; many parents of girls encourage early marriage with a hope of benefiting from would be in-laws. This therefore could be taken as one of the reasons of the low retention of girls in secondary schools. The results imply that to increase the retention of girls in secondary schools in Gloucester village, two things can be done. First discourage early marriage through the enforcement of existing laws and secondly, continue sensitization and awareness on the 2018 Children act, the importance of girl child education and the dangers of early marriage.

The Effect of Initiation Rites on the Retention of Female Students in Secondary Schools

The second point of the study was to determine how initiation rites affect retention of female students in secondary schools in Gloucester Village, Sierra Leone. In this regard the respondents were asked to indicate whether there was initiation rites performed on female students in the area. The results indicate that initiations are being conducted on female students.

Interviewee-School Proprietor

“Female genital mutilation (F.G.M) was the main initiation rite followed by tattooing and other rights as an initiation method on the girls”.

Conclusively, the result implies that the respondents are of the full conviction that F.G.M has a negative impact on the female retention in Secondary Schools in Gloucester Village, Sierra Leone. Subsequently, the respondents were asked whether the initiation rites have positive or negative effects on girls’ education. The teachers and principals who responded yes to initiation rites being performed felt that initiation rites were not good for the girls. These initiation rites could be a negative factor affecting the retention of girls in secondary schools in Gloucester Village, Sierra Leone.

Inhibiting factors of Girls Completing Secondary Education

In the group discussion, the investigator asked all the participants to state inhibiting factors that stop girls from accessing secondary education in spite of free basic education. In response to this question, the respondents stated the following challenges: Cultural and religious belief that girls are supposed to stay at home to be married at an early age as some parents feel that when girls go to school, their moral fabrics may decay. Moreover, poor academic background and Poor performance at primary level has greatly contributed to parents developing cold low morale in girls’ education.

Lack of motivation and female role models even among teachers as pointed out by (Otieno, 2016) who sighted Lack of teachers and teacher absenteeism as source of de-motivation to the learners. Poor transition rate of girls from primary to secondary as reported in this study can also be attributed to the misconception of girls from the misperceptions of parents and community that, their husbands will take care of them when they get married even without going through secondary education or schooling. In support of this kind of view, there are many local adages used to stereotype girls’ education. An example of one such adage says “The education of a girl ends nowhere else but the kitchen”.

High Poverty level in most homes and lack of freedom of expression of the girl-child was made mention of by participants in the group discussion. The study finally revealed that though the Government introduced free and compulsory education law in all Public schools, a lot of other challenges still remain; ranging from inadequate enough school facilities to accommodate students, affordability of registration and other fees collected by some Public schools unknown to the Ministry of Education; WAEC (West African Examination Council) fees and lack of information to some parents on the existence of subsidized secondary education.

Suggestions and Mitigation Measures for Addressing the Problem

In this study there were several challenges the girl-child is faced with in Gloucester Village, therefore, we attempted to get the views of respondents on how to mitigate the drawback of low retention of secondary school girls. These views and opinions were as itemized below:

Educating the community on the importance of education and enforcing the free and compulsory education law. Government should provide subsidy to private schools and prevail on them to reduce the high cost of school fees in order to be able to accommodate more girls; encourage more female by mean of scholarship to go into the teaching profession as a means of motivation and also creating a more friendly school environment for girls. In addition, Government should enforce existing laws on early marriage by imposing strict measures against any man who marries a girl below the age of 18 years. The Ministry of Education and Education stakeholders should actively engage raising the awareness of age appropriate enrollment as a means of curtailing overage enrollment.

Other forms of motivations to increase female students' motivations should also be considered. It was also established that sex education and national awareness, and increased political and financial commitment through advocacy and sensitization of policy makers at all levels be engaged coupled with campaigns for girl-child education through the media and religious forum. School PTA (Parent Teacher Association) be trained, strengthened and empowered in order to be able to assist school Administrators and GOL with activities that promote girls' education.

Concluding Remarks

The study in essence focuses on examining factors that affect girls' retention in secondary schools in Gloucester village, Sierra Leone. Through the investigation, the study found that early marriage, FGM initiation rites, and negative Parents' attitudes towards in traditional view; the roles of the community, household chores and finally poverty which contributes immensely to the inability of parents to pay school fees for girls in secondary schools to be major challenges.

This study also discussed government's efforts put in place to curb the challenges of female retention in secondary schools through the provision of supports.

Conclusions drawn from the study indicate that in order to improve girls' retention and performance in secondary schools in Gloucester village, Sierra Leone, educating the community on the importance of the existence of free education. Government should reinforce the free and compulsory Education Act and the Child Right Act so as to discourage early marriages. Government and Education stakeholders should provide scholarship schemes and financial aid programs for top performers to motivate girls and reduce burden on parents.

The findings of this study are significant to all stakeholders involved in education sector, political leaders, and policy makers. Both effective leadership and enormous resources are necessary to bolster the effort of girl-child in secondary education and all stakeholders must play their rightful roles if any meaningful gain is to be made in the education the girl-child in Sierra Leone.

Evidently, findings of this study have provided enough evidence to press upon the government and other players in the education sector to take monitoring and evaluation seriously in order to address possible factors that affect girls from retention and performance in secondary schools.

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