

ARTICLE



Girl-Child Education in Post-War Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Conflict in any part of the world creates a multidimensional impact on society. It depletes the state's human and material resources. While the material resources destroyed by conflict can be easily replaced, damage to human resources is, in most cases, difficult to restore. The damaging hands of conflict have touched the Sierra Leonean state. The consequences of the conflict on the girl child have directly and indirectly affected development of the overall human capital of the state. Today, increasing numbers of girls who grew up in the war-torn country are turning into teenage mothers, thus creating a dangerous multiplier effect on the nation-building process. The poverty level in the country has enlarged the pool of uneducated girls in the society, creating potential danger for the country's future children, who would be nurtured by these largely uneducated present and future mothers. This paper looks at the need for education of the girl child as part of the Sierra Leone nation-building process. It highlights a number of post-conflict peace building strategies which could be useful, and concludes that all stakeholders in the country should promote education for the girl child, in one way or another, to improve national development.



Keywords

girl child, education, Sierra Leone, war, teenage mothers

BACKGROUND NOTE ON GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE

In 1993, UNESCO reported that two-thirds of the global population were women, and 62.3% of the 130 million children they give birth to were girls who had no access to education. The pervasiveness of this anomaly continues. The National Education Action Plan (1994, p. 11) of the Sierra Leonean Government shows that national illiteracy at the time was over 89%. Thorpe (2006) wrote that the 1985 National Population Census revealed that, whereas 64.07% of the male population had no education, the percentage of

the female population without education was 77.2%. The Government of Sierra Leone's National Report on Women stated that 86% of the female population were uneducated in 1990: only 14% were educated (Thorpe, 2006).

The population of Sierra Leone grew from around 3.2 million in 1980 to over five million by 2000. The National Report on Women revealed that 1.1 million women above 15 years old were illiterate as of 1991 (National Report on Women, 1995, p. 11), and this relatively poor education of women affected the quality of training and life expectancy in the country. Life expectancy at birth in Sierra Leone is among the lowest in the world, at 38 for males and 41 for females (Keegan, 2002). Indeed, there is a direct correlation between education and mortality.



The more educated a person is, the higher their life expectancy, as well as that of their families. Notwithstanding the fact that other social variables could improve the situation, education for young girls could increase knowledge of behaviours and healthy lifestyles that promote long life. A 1993 government report on demographic and social monitoring indicated a higher dropout rate for girls in schools. Performance figures of girls and boys show that female students start from a disadvantaged position. An analysis of the performance of girls in the Selective Entrance Examination (SEE) for 1986-1990 revealed that a high percentage of girls failed (see Thorpe, 2006).

The *Beckley Report* of 1993 showed that the performance of girls was generally lower than that of boys, with girls in the top score range dropping from 50.1% in 1987 to 38.8% in 1990. Similarly, graduation figures at the University of Sierra Leone show that, in 1990, only 21% of those graduating were women. It was discovered that 250 girls between the ages of 14 and 16 could not be admitted into highschool due to pregnancy related issues (Thorpe, 2006, p. 75).

It is estimated that over 80% of Sierra Leoneans, predominately women and children lived below the poverty line in 2002 (Keegan, 2002). This is because of a lack of the basic education that is needed to awaken their creative tendencies that would generate the needed resources and capital for a better standard of living. However, Thorpe (2006) went on to show that, at all levels of education, female students lag behind males. At the primary school level, enrolment of girls was 43% while that of boys was 61% in 1980, and in 1990, the figures were 39% and 56% respectively.

Education remains one of the indispensable keys to national development. Education for girls gives the family unit the social, mental and economic mobilization needed for societal development. Access to education is not only a basic human right, it is also a key factor for social progress and for the reduction of socio-economic gaps among genders and different age groups. On several occasions at national conferences and developmental workshops, the crucial importance of girl-child education has been emphasized, yet the education gap between boys and girls has remained wide in many developing countries.

Ohiri-Aniche (2000, pp. 52-60) documented that the 1990 statistics for developing countries showed that women made up less than 20% of the literate population and that in most developing countries, school attendance by boys was, in most cases, as much as 20% higher than that of girls. "The question of girl's access to education has taken the front burner in various world summits. For instance, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNESCO 1960), The International Year for Women by the United Nations in 1975, The United Nations Decade for Women in 1976, The Jomtien Conference in 1990 and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals of 2000. Recently, these efforts have not so far yielded the desired

results as gender disparities still exist at all levels of the educational system." (Bazza, 2007, p. 66)

Fewer women apply for entry to universities in Sierra Leone as a result of the fact that not many complete their secondary school education. Bazza (2007, p. 72) goes on to argue that generally, a smaller number of women apply for tertiary education compared to their male counterparts because of their relatively lower success rate in secondary education. Thorpe (2006) added that gender discrimination has increased this gap. The fact remains that only a small percentage of girls attend tertiary education because many of them drop out of secondary education. These factors often have a direct impact on the status of women in the country. Obanya (2003) wrote that only a very small proportion have access to post-secondary education and consequently only a very few do get into those commanding heights of national life for which higher education is a pre-requisite.

Unfortunately, it has to be noted that the problems for improving education for girls are felt more in the north, as in the northern parts of other West African countries. There the girl child has been marginalized further by cultural and religious inhibitions, which are closely tied to religious beliefs and traditional practices. Many factors have been identified to account for this gap being more prevalent in the north of Sierra Leone. One is due to the large Muslim population there, where there is a historic bias against western education, often championed by fanatics.

Fafunwa (1976) and Awa (1991) related the problem to colonialism. They argued that the arrival of missionaries led to an increase in ecumenical teachers who were mainly interested in producing more evangelists in the south and protecting the status quo in the north. Bazza (2007) argued that the socio-cultural patterns embodied in western education, introduced into the north by an entirely different religious group, was the main cause of scepticism and resistance by Muslims to this type of education. In very extreme cases, western education was perceived as *haram* (the concept of something being not permissible in Islam).

Derble (1980) equally argued that another factor promoting poor education opportunities for the girl child in the northern part of West Africa was teenage pregnancy and early marriage. He quoted many UNESCO findings to support the argument. Bazza (2007, p. 73), on her side, acknowledged the reality of the above fact, but stated that, while these situations are becoming less common in homes with educated parents, the high illiteracy rate amongst other parents often impedes wider acceptance of the need for change.

The negative traditional African myths and misconceptions do not help matters. Bazza (2007) explained one of the myths associated with female education in a country in north Africa. The belief that educated girls do not make good wives, are morally bankrupt or promiscuous and that it is difficult for men to marry them remains endemic in ru-



ral settings in Africa. The height of this historic, male-fashioned strategy of reducing development of female capacity is the misperception of the female gender's quest for an equal playing field with males in different spheres of national life. An issue that still affects the Sierra Leonean state today.

Sierra Leone suffered under the destructive effects of a civil war, which had a lot of gender implications. Thorpe (2006, p. 7) wrote "The first gun shots in the Sierra Leone civil war were heard in the village of Bomaru in the Kailahun District in Eastern Province of Sierra Leone on 23rd March 1991." By 6th January 1999, the nation's capital, Freetown, fell under the yoke of the war. In 1999, Dr. Kandeh Yumkellah, the former Minister of Trade, Industry and State Enterprise, Sierra Leone and Head of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) argued that illiteracy, poverty and injustice promoted the Sierra Leonean conflict. Yumkellah (1999, p. 9) quoted in Thorpe (2006) wrote: "The current crisis has its roots in poverty and patronage. Deprived of education and financial opportunities, denied access to justice, Sierra Leoneans as members of the poorest country in the world, have been socialized to perceive politics as a means of gaining power and economic advantage for the individual and the clan."

Yumkellah (1999) revealed that part of the challenge of the Sierra Leonean society on the eve of the war was lack of access to education and the politicization of universities. While the neglect in education was suffered by both genders, the girl child tended to be the greater victim. This is because, while the war came and went, the need to manage the long term effects on young girls in particular and the large number of their siblings in the society they nurture, cannot be neglected. This work therefore aims to look at the terrible effect of the civil war on girls and their mothers as well as the need for girl-child education as a post-conflict peace building strategy.

STATUS OF GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN POST-WAR SIERRA LEONE

Unfortunately, when the rain of gunfire began in Bomaru, on the 23 March 1991, little did Sierra Leonean young women know that hell had been let loose. From 23 March, 1991 to 18 January 2002, when they declared the war over, many young Sierra Leonean girls "knew no peace". This is because the effect of the war threatened their existence by making many young women prone to all manners of war-driven violence, especially rape and ultimately death. Their problem was compounded by illiteracy and post-conflict trauma as well as poverty. The elderly, young girls and infants were often systematically targeted in violent acts. Two young female captives in their early teens reported the following:

"They said they would take us away, but that excluded old women and mothers with babies. We watched them dump into a pit latrine three babies that had been forcefully snatched from their mothers' backs. In front of us, they killed all the old women among us and ordered the rest of us to follow them." Mamadou

"I was among the school children captured by the RUF in 1995. When we were captured, we were all taken to a very remote RUF base. By then I was 15 years old and a virgin. I was gang raped the night I was captured, as an initiation to the RUF community. We spent three months in military training at the hills there. When government jets bombarded our base, we pulled out to another location for one month. We were drugged whenever we were to go on mission. On coming back to the base, there were three particular rebels who would ask me for sex. If I dare refused, I would be forced at gunpoint or gang raped. They did not want us to escape and join our relatives. They were so cruel to girls. I seized the opportunity to escape when we attacked Freetown in [January] 1999; by then I was eight months pregnant. Barely two months after my escape I delivered twins – 2 boys." Zainab victim (Keegan, 2002).

The above woes were the daily experience of girls and women during the years of the conflict, simply because of their gender. However, on 18th January 2002, Ahmed Tejah Kabbah, the then President of Sierra Leone, stated that "today we are happy that those flames of war have been extinguished and the flames of peace will destroy some of the implements of war" (Kabbah, 2002, p. 6). That was a figurative statement that announced the official end of the war. Paradoxically, the wind of post-war peace often continually struggles under the burden of the past conflict, terror and its psychology, that sometimes creates a negative flame of post-conflict effects on the society, like stereotyping, social insecurity, etc.

The disturbing reality was that a few years after the end of the long and devastating war, many young girls were still roaming the streets without the hope of education. There have been inadequate intervention programmes to help the victims of rape and the teenage mothers cope in a world that was built on the traditional idea that knowledge is power. Today, the need for their education is becoming increasingly pressing because affairs on the world stage are driven by a knowledge economy (Ani, 2010, p. 9). "What is begging for our attention is that adolescence is a time when black girls, striving for maturity, lose the support of others in three significant ways. Firstly, they are abandoned by the educational system; secondly, they become mere sexual companions for boys and men; third, these problems create a split between the girls and their families and significant others." (Kaplan, 2002, p. 61)



The situation is further compounded by the fact that many of the uneducated young girls often rush into early marriage as a means of coping with the challenges of poverty which have befallen them. Many of them suffered under the burden of teenage pregnancy during the war years and some were born as a result of rape by wartime soldiers. It is obvious that most of the fathers are not known. Will the negative psychology of not knowing the father of their children ever leave the teenage mothers and their children? Will the practice of forcing young girls to marry as a social strategy salvage their situation? How can a child-mother make a good mother? How can society manage the numerous post-conflict effects of war-torn teenage mothers and the thousands of young daughters begging for educational empowerment? When will the Millennium Development Goals and other international provisions on girl-child education be attained in Sierra Leone?

The problems affecting young girls in Sierra Leone are numerous. Enrolment into all levels of education is poor. Girls dropout from school in increasing numbers, especially the daughters of the teenage mothers of the civil war period, some of whom do not have the financial means to maintain an average standard of living or life above poverty line. Sooner or later, the children leave school due to the mother's inability to provide for the financial needs of their educational training. Despite the efforts made by the government of Sierra Leone, foreign embassies and non-governmental organizations to overcome the problems, a permanent solution has remained elusive. To summarize, taking into account the above, some of the constraints undermining girl-child education in the post-conflict Sierra Leonean state include:

- a) The traumatic effect of war experiences.
- b) Teenage motherhood burden.
- c) Some parents' lack of interest in educating girls while favouring forced or early marriage.
- d) Structural violence embedded in the Sierra Leonean society that institutionalizes gender discrimination.
- e) The inability of the government to implement adequate policies that would promote sustainable girl-child education.

GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION AS A PEACE BUILDING STRATEGY

Goal number 2 of the Dakar Declaration of Education for All (2000, p. 15) includes ensuring that "by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality". The panacea is simply good governance and international support, such as broadening the spectrum

of those whose responsibility is to protect. As a strategic concept, there is an intrinsic value in girl-child education, aimed at promoting peace building through the progressive educational emancipation of the young girl.

Peace building involves individual and collective efforts through sound interaction that promotes peaceful existence. It is aimed at the tactical transformation of men and women to produce a peaceful society. Wilson (2009, p. 3) stated that peace building is associated with efforts aimed at conflict prevention, reconciliation, transitional justice, education for peace, bridging the reality gap and communication of peace. One of the ways to bridge the reality gap in a post conflict environment is through the education of the girls who, like some of their mothers, were not spared the long trauma of rape and unwanted pregnancy.

Lederach (1994, p. 14) defined peace building as "The efforts to transform potentially violent social relations into sustainable peaceful relations and outcomes". The experience of rape and unwanted pregnancy are the manifestation of violent social relations that could still create more social violence in the future, through its effects on later female - male relationships. Hence, there is a need for proper education of victims of rape to avert the negative effects on gender relations in the society at large. "Peace building centres on values of empowerment and self-determination. Clearly, peace building efforts should aim to persuade rather than force or manipulate people to change. When people's cognition, attitudes or behaviours change by their own choice, as a result of persuasion, the changes are more likely to endure than if the changes were brought about by force or manipulation." (Opeyemi, 2009, p. 98)

The policy implementers must be philosophically committed to the fact that peace is not an end but a means that is attainable through intellectual empowerment of the young female, and that such a policy is desirable as a way to contribute positively to the building process in order for the country to adopt girl-child education as a peace building strategy. It must eschew positive empiricism for societal re-engineering. Thus, by simply providing education for young girls, a move is made toward realization of the goal of peace. There are generally two ways to implement girl-child education in order to achieve the peace building objective in a post-conflict state. The first is to concentrate on the psychological level and take an essentially objective view towards sustainable peace in society. Peace ambassadors could do this.

These peace ambassadors could be seen in the light of the universal peace apologists who believe that conflicts begin in the minds of men (Evans and Newnhan, 1997, p. 425). Here, their social reconstruction focus is on the perceptions and misperceptions in the minds of mothers and daughters in order to create peace-oriented behaviours. This is because there is a relationship between human psychological processes and education in peace building process. It cannot be neglected that conflicts start in the



mind, and that the mental disposition in favour of conflict behaviour easily finds expression in violent behaviour. This work preaches concentration on a micro-dimensional approach to attain peace building in the long run through girl-child education.

The second way is to concentrate on structural transformation of the society through a sound nation-building process. It should be stated that, when the private and public experts who manage the different sectors of the national economy begin to work well, they improve all the factors that enhance girl-child education. This process concentrates on the effectiveness and integration of the operational dynamics for peace in the Sierra Leone national environment. A new roadmap is needed for the local and international actors to promote societal peace through national transformation that enhances girl-child education. In this way, the concentration is on a macro-dimensional approach to peace building where all the institutions of the state as well as all private and public enterprises in that country factor girl-child education in.

Girl-child education should be structured to encompass scholarly themes and disciplines as well as programmes for practical skill acquisition backed by guidance and counselling, which should be rooted in sound psycho-healing theories. The unlimited power of psycho-healing ensures that such education can bring about a new start for this group, who still suffers the lasting effects of the conflict, towards progressive self-transformation. It is noteworthy that girl-child education as a strategy towards societal peace cannot be successful without adequate professional peace educators and experts in peace research. These peace educators are the main facilitators of the peace process. They are the roots of the peace building process, because the practical implementation of education as a peace building strategy is on their shoulders. However, the role of teachers who are professionally trained in the tenets of the pedagogic process cannot be neglected in the peace building process. Peace education is vital in the undergraduate teacher training program of Sierra Leone.

HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAMMING AS PART OF PEACE BUILDING

Keegan (2002) documented that Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the United States Committee for Refugees (USCR), and Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) are four of the prominent international organizations that published and disseminated reports detailing atrocities committed primarily by the rebel forces of Sierra Leone. USCR reported, in July 2002, that "72% of Sierra Leonean women surveyed, had experienced human rights abuses,

and more than 50% had been victims of sexual violence." PHR estimates (based on a 2001 survey) indicate that approximately 50,000- 64,000 female internally displaced persons (IDPs) have histories of war-related assault.

In the 1999 Lomé Accords, the individuals who committed these atrocities were given blanket amnesty for their crimes. Ironically, the use of amnesty as a tool for conflict management often creates the problem of lack of social justice for the numerous people that were victims and casualties of violence during the conflict, hence the need for transitional forgiveness. Ironically, the road to social justice and transitional forgiveness as a subtle way of promoting good conscience in the country has not been easy, due to the challenges of the inherent post-conflict psychology of violence.

The process of post-conflict peace building in any society or state is never easy. Though relative peace has been restored to the nation since the signing of the July 1999 Lomé Peace Accords, women and children remain extremely marginalized and abused in various forms throughout Sierra Leone. In addition to the ongoing trials and tribulations of everyday life, women and children continue to suffer from the physical, emotional, and psychological trauma of massive human rights abuses during and after the war. The roadmap to end such human rights abuses can be factored into education.

The year 2000 Fourth World Conference on Women stated, in paragraph 73, that discrimination in girls' access to education persists in many areas, owing to customary attitudes (early marriages) and pregnancies, inadequate gender-based teaching and educational materials, sexual harassment, and lack of adequate and accessible schooling facilities. And in paragraph 84(k), it stated that humanity must ensure access to (quality) education and training at all appropriate levels for adult women (see Thorpe, 2006).

The International Conference on Population and Development documented in paragraph 6:8 that "equal educational opportunities must be ensured by boys and girls at every level..." Paragraph 4:18 reports that "all countries are urged to ensure the widest and earliest possible access by girls and women to secondary and higher levels of education, as well as to vocational education and technical training..." The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, in its Article 12: 2 have called for nations to:

- a) Promote literacy among women;
- b) Promote education and training for women at all levels and in all disciplines, particularly in the fields of science and technology;
- c) Promote the enrolment and retention of girls in schools and other training institutions and the organisation of programmes for women who leave school prematurely.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Human societies experience conflict in one form or another at different times in history. These conflicts last as long as the actors in the process continue the quest to attain their violent aims, making its duration long or short. The conflict in Sierra Leone was not short; however, the gender-based implications are many. Years after the end of the destructive war in the country, many Sierra Leonean girls are still battling with the trauma, stigmatization, misperception and neurosis, as well as societal segregation stemming from the war era. At home, they are ridiculed, on the street they are the subject of gossip. Unfortunately, many of those who summoned the courage to go back to school developed serious emotional issues due to the harassment they suffered yet they were simply the unfortunate victims of the war. In some cases, they developed a mild psychological disorder characterized by anxiety, depression or hypochondria.

The push and pull effect of social violence on the victims remains today, creating post-conflict traumatic stress. During the war these teenage mothers were “deprived of every resource needed for any human being to function well in our society: education, jobs, food, medical care, a secure place to live, love and respect, the ability to securely connect with others. In addition, these girls were silenced by the insidious and insistent stereotyping as promiscuous and aberrant teenage girls” (Kaplan, 2002, p. 61).

Parker and Gottman (1989) showed how society uses gossip to reinforce the suffering of these teenage mothers. At times, the few of them who tried to go to school dropped out because social cliques often carried the told tales of their societal challenges to teachers and school administrators (Sluckin, 1981). The worst experience in their post-conflict psychology was not only that some were being ignored but also that these teenage mothers were being taunted. “Taunts ranged from verbal insults to put-downs to singsong chants” aimed at hurting them (Power, 2002, p. 175). Anyone who could find a way to tease these girls was favoured with societal attention and imitated (Fine, 1981).

There is a need for new coping strategies. Timm and Peterson, quoted in Omoregie and Jimoh (2002), stated that coping is a process whereby people under a form of

psychical challenge contend with stressors, confronting them often by trial and error, until they achieve some degree of satisfaction. It is through post-conflict psychical management that the young Sierra Leonean girl may learn how to deal successfully with the difficult challenge of post-conflict trauma. There are many ways of coping. They include problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. In the first method, the post-conflict manager evaluates the stressful situation (stressor) on the girl child and tries to change it, while in the second method the post-conflict manager tries to reduce the anxiety caused by the war experience and does nothing in the short term to eradicate the stressor.

It has been generally accepted by psychotherapists that the problem-focused method of management is better than the emotion-focused method. However, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have argued that, if the psychical challenges emanate from the death of a loved one (during the conflict era), it is advisable to adopt emotion-focused coping. Generally, post-conflict traumatic stress among Sierra Leonean girls needs to be evaluated to identify the violent stressor through proper appraisal to see whether to use the problem-focused or emotion-focused strategy. It should be noted that any method that the post-conflict psychical manager decides to use needs to include at least one of the following: a cognitive, behavioural or a physiological coping strategy. Girl-child education helps girls in their progress towards womanhood, while promoting peaceful nation-building process at large.

Finally, the value of girl-child education cannot be under-estimated in the nation-building process of any state. Many education experts, like Blumberg (1989) and Rufai (2001), have outlined compelling economic arguments that justify the need for increased education of young girls. They showed that it promotes productivity and a country's GNP. There is a link between girl-child education and improvement of the people's health. In this work we have shown that girl-child education is a vital necessity for societal re-engineering and peace building in the post-conflict Sierra Leonean state. When the girl is well educated, she contributes to the growth of the peace culture of the state, at home, in the workplace and in society at large. Hence, all hands must be on deck to promote girl-child education in Sierra Leone as a peace building strategy and in order to move the nation forward.

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