

# Adolescent Girls and School Based Factors: Push Factors?

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## Abstract

Schools have assumed the role of preparing the young for the realization of individual needs and aspirations. Gender continues to determine access, retention and performance. It is important that the school must not be seen as an avenue that does not adequately fulfill its obligations. The aim of this paper was to examine determinants of school factors that impact on the school lives of adolescent girls in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. Primary data was collected through questionnaires. The sample was 8% of the population of girls at JSS 3, the last stage of the junior secondary level. Qualitative data was also employed to enrich the work. The conclusion reached was that there were indeed constraining factors within the school that impede on girls' education. These were the lack of motivational factors in the schools such as inadequate teaching and learning materials and absence of extra coaching. Most of these school girls do not have access to school guidance counsellors and even when they are present, they are not being used by them. School girls are facing a lot of problems within the school and more efforts have to be made by school authorities to improve on girls' participation in education.

## Key words

Girls' Education, School Based Factors, Sierra Leone

## I. Introduction

Education is a means of transmitting worthwhile ideas that are considered necessary for an individual to conveniently adjust to his total environment. Expanding education, especially formal basic education has been an objective of the education policies in developing countries over the past two decades. The benefits of education are now well established. Education raises the quality of life; it improves individuals' access to paid employment and often facilitates social and political participation.

According to UNICEF (2006) the single greatest stumbling block to the achievement of Education for All (EFA) is gender discrimination. Both girls and boys have hurdles to overcome, but for girls, the barriers to education are usually higher and more difficult to overcome. When a child is female and faced with discrimination based on poverty and gender stereotyping among others that child is at a double disadvantage.

Secondary education is crucial in the lives of girls. Girls can become more empowered and self confident as they acquire the range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes critical for negotiating their place in society. Adolescence defined as from ages 10 to 19, is a critical time to learn and acquire skill and values that can last a lifetime. It is in these years, for example, that the gender gap in education yawns widest: while 6 per cent more boys than girls in developing countries enroll in primary school, the gap opens up to 16 per cent in the secondary years- and in South Asia reaches an alarming 36 per cent, (UNFPA Publications, 2006). It is teenage girls who are most likely to be threatened by sexual abuse, exposure to HIV/AIDS, child molestation, violence in the home, Female Genital Cutting (FGC), trafficking or exploitative forms of child labour; just as it is they who are compelled by cultural insistence or overt command towards early marriage and childbearing.

It was the new Policy of Education published in 1995 by the Ministry of Education that highlights a number of measures designed specifically to halt the disadvantaged status of girls in formal basic education. A section in the New National Policy is devoted to statements of affirmative policies for girls in formal education. It states: "It is imperative that action be taken to increase participation of all school age children. However, particular attention should be paid to girls whose participation lags behind that of boys". Pp. x

Specific Policy statements referring to girls' education are:

- a) The gradual provision of free and compulsory education for all girls at basic education level as and when the national economy picks up.
- b) Legislation specifying a minimum marriage age for girls (i.e. 18 years) and penalties for men/boys who impregnate girls before they are 18 years.
- c) The promotion of counseling and family life education as means of avoiding early pregnancy.
- d) The re-admission of "mother-girls" into schools.
- e) The increased participation of girls in Mathematics, Science and Technology, Pp 54.

The paragraphs detailed above show that Sierra Leone is committed to eradicating the gender imbalance in education. The Sierra Leone Millennium Development Goals Report (2006) asserts that although the Sierra Leone Government has committed itself to the education of the girl-child and achievements have been recorded, there is continuing poor participation of girls within the 6-3-3-4 system of education especially at the secondary level. The Report goes on to give statistics that whilst at the primary level, gender ratio is 1.01, the indicator drops to 0.78 at the secondary level. Johnson (2006) study in Kenema district reveals that although there have been significant gains in access to basic education, gender equity is still elusive and girls continue to lag and trail behind boys educationally, especially at the secondary level.

Odaga and Henelved (1995) are of the opinion that school-related factors play an important role in motivating girls to enroll and stay on in schools. According to them some of these school factors include: educationally motivational issues, counseling and guidance services and curriculum offerings. School based factors are viewed as driving demands to enhance girls' participation at the formal basic education level. If girls are to go to school, there must be more enhanced school related factors open to them. There must be more school places and a general commitment to compulsory, free basic education.

Stromquist (1989) insists that girls' persistence in school depends more than boys on; the quality and content of education offered. According to her, as a result of the seen advantages of education, governments since the 1960s have concentrated on increasing

the supply the schools instead of improving school based factors to improve participation. Female low achievers leave school in larger proportion than do boys in the lower grades and she concluded that girls are given fewer chances for success in the present school systems. King and Bellew (1989) state that if the school provides a free textbook system, girls are 1.3 times more likely to go to school than boys. They conclude that the quality of the learning process was more important in determining how many years of schooling girls had. For Haq (1994) school based factors are stronger determinants on female participation in school than home based factors. The reason he gives for his stance is that school based factors are easier to rectify than home based factors that are usually out of the control of governments and more difficult to amend.

Schools have assumed the roles of preparing the young for their future roles and have a responsibility to their students, especially female students. May-Parker (1984) has suggested that specially trained female counselors with proper understanding of adolescent girls are essential if the problem of low female participation in education is to be minimized. Girls especially in the last three years of basic education have unsettled personalities, still not properly crystallized. These girls have libidinal needs, their interest in external stimulation become great, and the problem of sexuality may tip the scale in favour of sexual gratification. Holland (1989) research revealed that girls' retention in schools are handicapped by punishment meted out to them as well as lack of incentives in the schools.

Hove (2007) states that getting girls enrolled is only one step in the process of girls' participation; retention and performance are proving to be as important as access. Push factors related to poor school quality can cause girls to stop attending school.

## II. Methodology

This study is conceived to find out school based factors that impede girls' participation in secondary education in the three districts of the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. The UNDP Human Development Report (2010) ranked Sierra Leone as the second from the bottom least developed country in the world and the report went on to state that children born in such countries are unfortunate. This region hosts two among the twelve districts which are among the extreme poor districts in the country. The principal sample group in this study was the final year class of the Junior Secondary Schools (JSS 3) in each of the three districts. Seven hundred and two girls representing 8% of the population formed the sample. About 49 % of the respondents were drawn from schools in the rural areas whilst 51% were residing in the urban areas. The data for this study was obtained using questionnaires. Descriptive statistic was used to analyze the results.

## III. Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Motivational Factors in Schools of Respondents

Factors		Adequacy	Inad- equacy	Total
Presence of School Feeding	Freq. %	16 2.3	686 97.7	702 100
Availability of Scholarships	Freq %	141 20.1	561 79.9	702 100
Availability of T/ Learning Materials	Freq %	134 19.1	568 80.9	702 100
Presence of Library Facilities	Freq %	146 20.8	556 79.2	702 100
Friendliness of Teachers	Freq %	231 47.1	329 67.1	702 100
Presence of Extra/ Remedial Coaching	Freq %	222 31.6	480 68.4	702 100

To find out the contribution made by the school to girls' participation, the table on motivational factors in schools was developed. From the above table, on the presence of school feeding in their school, 97.7% stated that there was no school feeding and 2.3% answered in the affirmative. Despite the wide spread poverty of the region, there was almost no school feeding programmes being run for girls at the JSS level.

Secondary education is not free in Sierra Leone. To ascertain whether girls were privileged to the offer of scholarships to aid their education, 79.9% responded negatively and 20.1% responded positively to the statement. The results presented continued to present a climate of non-interference and non-participation by the government and organizations to improve the participation of girls at the JSS level.

In the third item in the series of the school's motivation to education, 80.9% of the respondents stated that teaching learning materials were not being provided whilst 19.1% replied in the affirmative. In a situation of widespread poverty, provision of teaching and learning materials greatly improves participation in schools and prevents attrition of participants in schools. Teaching and learning materials are essential aids to learning and a school environment where these resources were absent hindered the learning process of its participants.

The data in the table showed that the library facilities were very inadequate in schools as 79.2% of the responses indicated its absence whilst 20.8% of the responses were positive to the statement. The absence of a library contradicts the spirit of modern educational planning. Stake-holders have to concentrate on this area of need of school children if their participation in education is to be meaningfully improved.

The fifth statement in table 1 was designed to further assist in throwing light on the motivational factors in school. 67.1% stated that they lacked friendly teachers in their schools and 32.9% affirmed that they had friendly teachers in their schools. The teacher has a big part to play in ensuring that the school climate is accommodating and friendly. The information depicted here showed that the girls were not satisfied with the conduct of their teachers towards them.

The last item in the series of statements of motivational aspects in the school revealed that the majority of the girls, 68.4% were dissatisfied with the level of extra coaching or remedial teaching that they received whilst the minority, 31.6% were satisfied with this aspect being investigated. This result helped to reinforce the fact that the schools are failing to enhance the school life of young

girls. These respondents were going to school under very adverse conditions and these deprivation items impacted negatively on their participation.

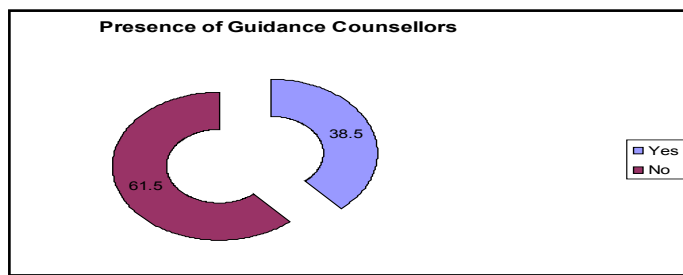


Fig. 1 : Presence of Guidance/Counsellors in Schools

Guidance Counsellors play a big part in ensuring that the push factors in schools are eliminated and that push factors are enhanced to enhance participation. The responses of the girls to the question of whether there is a guidance/counselor in their school, 61.5% responded negatively whilst 38.5% responded positively. This figure effectively represents the status of Guidance Counselling in the schools. The table has shown that contrary to what the Education Sector Plan (2007) states that every secondary school must have a Guidance Counsellor; the majority of the girls did not have such an important personnel in the schools.

Table 2: Respondents' Private Sessions with Guidance Counsellors

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	17	2.4	6.1	6.1
	Sometimes	63	9.0	22.5	28.6
	Never	200	28.5	71.4	100.0
	Total	280	39.9	100.0	
Missing	System	422	60.1		
Total		702	100.0		

To further find out from respondents who have Guidance Counsellors in their schools the use made by them of these school personnel, table 1 was developed. 28.5% never used the services of the Counsellor; 9.0% sometimes consulted the counselors and 2.4% always made use of the guidance services in their schools. The role of Guidance and Counselling Services in schools cannot be underestimated. It was disturbing finding out that even when they were present in the schools; the majority of the female students, never made use of them were a cause for concern. This table shows that the three big areas of Counselling: vocational, personal and academic, essential in the school lives of adolescent girls are not being taken care of.

Table 3 : Respondents' Private Sessions with Class teachers

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	126	17.9	17.9	17.9
	Sometimes	177	25.2	25.2	43.2
	Never	399	56.8	56.8	100.0
	Total	702	100.0	100.0	

When these girls were asked whether they had private sessions or counseling sessions with their class teachers, 56.8% said that they never had these sessions; 25.2% said sometimes and 17.9% said that they always had regular private sessions with their teachers. The majority of the female respondents did not have private sessions with their teachers. Friendly teachers contribute a lot to shaping girls' values and moral judgment; the adjustment and mental health of the children in school. Unfortunately, in a situation where school guidance counsellors are absent and teachers do not take over some of their responsibilities, schools tend to be harsh and unattractive to its participants.

#### IV. Conclusions

The responses as analyzed in this paper bring out the mismatch between the policy statements that government has advanced to halt the deprived status of girls in schools and the continuing adverse conditions that prevail in the schools. These adolescent girls are attending schools that lack motivational factors and an enabling environment that improves school participation. Adolescent girls have a depressing school environment which leads to disgruntlement, poor participation in school and even propel them to early withdrawal from school.

The absence of Guidance Counsellors and friendly interaction between pupils and pupils lead to a harsh school climate that negates against girls' participation in school and is detrimental to the creation of a friendly and attractive school climate which helps girls, especially adolescents to make a successful adjustment between school and home problems. Despite the efforts that are being made by the Government through policy promulgation, the school climate continues to be sterile and inadequate to help girls coming from poor socio-economic backgrounds. The study has shown that the schools are not doing enough to encourage girls' participation in education. Adolescent girls do not have easy access to friendly teachers or trained Guidance Counsellors who can help teach life-skills that can protect them from violence and abuse not only in the schools but even at homes and their communities.

The study has shown that the schools, its personnel, the government and Non Governmental Organizations involved in the education of girls are not actively promoting girls' participation in education. These stakeholders have to play a more determined role in providing a warm and friendly school climate. As Odaga and Henelved (1995) state, school factors are driving factors that are within the province of the government and other stakeholders to 'pull' girls into better participation in school.

#### V. Recommendations

School based factors are easier to eradicate or minimize as policy makers and implementers can easily make a difference in minimizing or eradicating negative school factors and consequently provide positive school factors that can positively impact on girls' education. The government has to be more committed to implementing programmes that enhances the education of girls. Measures such as the provision of Guidance Counsellors in schools, the eradication of violence in schools and the proper monitoring of schools by school inspectors must be undertaken. Finally, all stakeholders involved in the education of girls have to be more serious in ensuring that schools are as friendly as possible to its participants, especially girls.

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