Full Length Research Paper

Exploring socio-economic factors in the exploitation of girls in the eastern province of Sierra Leone

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Access to formal education reduces the chances of the exploitation of children. However, with increased access to formal education comes the attendant problem of ensuring that children, especially girls, the sex that is disadvantaged in their participation in education, are able to complete their schooling. The aim of this paper is to investigate issues in the socio-economic exploitation of girls in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. The research was based on primary data collected from a sample of eight percent of the population of school girls at the lower secondary school level in the study area. Before the questionnaires were distributed to these girls, they were pre-tested to girls in another district and changes and corrections were made based on the realities on the ground. It was discovered that a lot of factors lead to the continued exploitation of girls in the home. Most of these girls come from humble backgrounds and are involved in income generating activities and chores that interfere with their schooling. It is important that organizations involved in the education of these girls focus attention on improving the socio-economic status of these homes as well as helping to increase the earning capacity of parents, especially the mothers.

Key words: Exploitation, girls’ education, Sierra Leone, socio-economic factors.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of economic exploitation is very often, and understandably so, charged with emotional content. Exploitation, understood as inhumane working conditions, is something to be avoided per se, regardless of the age of the worker. However, according to ILO (2002), child labour involving salaried work out of the home is to be differentiated from work within the home. Child labour is a form of the degradation that children have undergone especially during the Industrial Revolution in the Western world. It was assumed that exploitation of children ended with the emphasis on compulsory and free basic schooling which has been adopted by many countries. Basic education is now the rallying cry of most nations, including developing countries that have come to realize that there can be no development without education. Economic exploitation of a child refers to the use of the child in work or other activities for the benefit of others. This includes, but is not limited to, child labour and child prostitution. For school children such work may impede their participation in school.

There are both normative and positive reasons to believe that commercial exploitation of children is unacceptable. From the normative perspective, an adequate childhood education and a work-free youth are ethical considerations (Kuklin and Masih, 2003). As for the more pragmatic reasons, child labor creates a vicious cycle of child labor and poverty. Moreover, it has been empirically established that children who start working at a younger age attain a lower level of education, which has an obvious impact on the child's future welfare and ability to generate income (UNICEF, 1996). These activities are to the detriment of the child's physical or mental health, educational, or spiritual, moral or social-emotional development. The world considers the issue of
exploitative labour to be a rather serious one in Sub-Saharan Africa. Activists throughout the world typically offer a picture of impoverished boys and girls working under hazardous conditions for next-to-nothing wages (ILO, 2005).

According to UNICEF (2005), in Africa, as a result of poverty, traditional socio-cultural beliefs and the negative attitude that many parents have towards the education of the girl child, countless numbers of children, especially girls are engaged in exploitative labour in the informal sector selling many things on the streets, in agriculture or hidden away in houses far from the reach of official labour inspectors and from media security. Even after eliminating exploitative working conditions for children and free basic education, numerous chores and housework still have a negative effect on children’s welfare (Holland, 1989).

In many developing countries, parents often see little choice but to have their children help directly on their own farms or in informal sector activities. Johnson (2008) research on reasons why there is poor participation of girls in schools in Sierra Leone revealed that as a result of poverty, education is seen as a less urgent necessity and whenever financial pressures of the home coupled with school financial commitments bear down heavily on them, the result includes chores, hawking and even attrition. Odaga and Heneveld (1995), using examples from many countries in Sub-Saharan countries stated that exploitation of children, notably school girls is different from child labour as the focus is on its effect on their participation in schools. They draw a distinction between child labour which usually involves children who are not in school and the exploitative use of school going children in their homes or out of it. They state that the incidence of child economic exploitation in developing countries is high partly because of the deterioration of the school system, itself a result of economic decline. Poor infrastructure, low teacher morale and the introduction of school fees under the country’s structural adjustment programme have also contributed to higher drop-out and truancy rates.

Recognizing that the roots of child labour lie in family poverty and that it cannot simply be legislated out of existence, an ILO Report (2002) draws a distinction between family obligations which negatively affect school children and labour which goes with wages and loss of schooling. A UNICEF (2005) study on West and Central Africa similarly acknowledges that African culture allows children to work within the family and community, but emphasizes that economic hardships, HIV/AIDS and other disasters have distorted traditional forms of child work into exploitative practices.

In 1989 the UN’s General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child as an international human rights treaty. In the 1990’s every country in the world except for Somalia and the United States became a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). According to the U.N., even Somalia signed the convention in 2002. The delay of signing was believed to be due to Somalia not having a government to sign the convention (UNICEF, 1996).

The CRC provides the strongest and most consistent international legal language prohibiting the exploitation of children. This document stipulates in article 32 that; state parties recognize the rights of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education or harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. Despite the enactment of the Child Rights Act in all African countries, Kirmani (1990) in an analysis of Kenyan educational policy, found out that the true barrier to low enrolment and persistence of school children was not parental aspirations but finance. The Kenyan study concluded that free education has its hidden costs and household incomes are constrained by school charges. The overwhelming impact of poverty means that the poor cannot afford slates, books, pencils, food, clothes, transportation and gifts to teachers. The researcher concluded that poverty does not only have an adverse effect on meaningful home and school integration but also on the school careers of children as even parents involve their children in duties and chores which may impede their education.

According to Silliman (1987) the situation is worse for school girls. For many young female children, especially girls in rural, disadvantaged communities, household chores and income-generating tasks become a part of their daily routine. In many rural areas, girls spend many hours every day fetching water and fuel. Infrastructural improvements such as access to conveniently located and affordable safe water sanitation, modern cooking fuels and better transportation that could ease the burden of work and release girls to attend school are still not available. Lopez (2001) stated that girls’ poor performance in their school work in Indian schools could be traced to the work that they have to perform at home given to them not by employers but by parents and guardians.

Difficult questions remain to be analyzed. For example, is economic exploitation in and of itself a phenomenon that negatively affects the welfare of the child, and, if so, for what reasons? Is the banning of child labor having any positive effects on poor families’ welfare or has it increased children’s economic exploitation at home and by parents and guardians? As many analysts have emphasized, if one is to design effective policies it is important to disentangle the relevant analytical issues regarding the economic causes and effects of exploitation of children at home.

METHODOLOGY

This study used questionnaires to determine the extent to which adolescent girls’ performance in school in particular and their lives
FINDINGS

Table 1 illustrated that 70.7% of the respondents were involved in some form of income generation. The other 29.3% answered this question negatively, showing that they were not involved in income generation for the family. From the responses analyzed in Table 1, it can be deduced that most of these girls of school-going age are being treated as economic assets by their parents or guardians.

The data on Table 2 depicted the time spent by these girls in engaging in income generation activities. The study established that 34.8% raised money during weekends, 29.3% during holidays and 9.7% during school days. Income generating activities may not only upset their study schedule as these girls had to spend time away from their studies to raise money for the family.

Figure 1 further presents information on the income generating activities of the respondents. From the respondents that were involved in income generation, 69.3% of the respondents: 25.9% did hawking; 16.5% were occupied in production of materials and 16.2% helped to sell in a stall or shop. A further 10.8% helped in the production and sale of items and the rest of the respondents; 3.6% helped in other types of income generation not listed by the researcher. School girls found difficulties at school because economic activities curtailed their study time and adversely affected their participation in school.

The analyses of Table 3 was done to help continue the search for answers to the questions of what features of home life retarded or promoted girls’ participation in school. In the context of household chores, 80.3% of the girls included in the sample stated that household chores do interfere with their school work. Only 19.7% stated that chores did not interfere with their schooling. Most of these girls were probably too tired after the day’s activities to study hard and compete with girls who were not facing such exploitation at their homes.

Table 4 elicited further information on the most frequent type of house-hold chores that the respondents were engaged in; 27.8% of them were baby sitters for younger siblings; 27.4% listed house keeping as a tiresome chore; 25.4% recorded cooking and the last chore of preference that interfered with their schooling was going on errands which was .3%. The respondents came from humble
homes and they had to help do the chores at home which unfortunately interfered with their school work. Also, some of these girls were regarded as economic assets and their guardians put more premiums on their finishing the house chores than in studying or doing school assignments.

Tables 5 and 6 were based on the respondents’ socio-economic status and were designed to find out how far the socio-economic homes girls come from impinge on the situation of the economic exploitation of school girls. Figure 2 portrayed the various categories of people that the respondents were living with. 58% were living with their parents; followed by 29% who were living with relatives. Forster parents formed the third group with 6% of the respondents living with them. 5% lived with step parents and 1.9% lived with friends. Although, the majority of the girls lived with their parents, a large percentage, 42% did not. Many of these girls living with non-parents including friends, may face exploitative work within the home.

Figure 3 gives information on the educational attainment of parents/guardians of the respondents. The
majority, 35.3% had no formal schooling; 28.1% had some form of primary education; 25.4% had secondary education and 11.3% had post secondary education. This was deemed as unfortunate and the finding here supports the Household Census Report (2005) that Sierra Leone has a low adult literacy rate. These girls who start their educational career with such disadvantages are mostly likely to fare poorly in schools because of being used as economic assets by their guardians and parents.

Table 5 investigated the importance of home finances on the respondents and showed that the largest group, 59.5% was the parent/guardian with periodic income followed by the group with steady income with 32.9% and 7.5% of respondents had parent/guardian with no regular source of income. These school girls come from homes where they experienced deprivation as a result of the poverty of their parents or guardians. Table 6 examined the regularity and punctuality of these respondents in their schools.

Table 6 was related to respondents’ parents/guardians attendance of the school’s Community/Teachers’ Association meetings. The responses of the girls as analyzed revealed that 41.2% of parents, guardians never attend Community Teachers’ Association; 34.8% sometimes attended CTA and 24.1% always attended CTA meetings. The data from this table showed that parents/guardians have to show more interest in their girls’ education by participating in CTA meetings where issues regarding their education are discussed.

From the analyses based on Figure 4, 78.6% of the parents/guardians of the girls never visited the school; 17.7% sometimes visited the school and 3.7% always visited the schools. The responses continued to reveal that there is need for more interest to be shown by parents/guardians in the education of their girls.

**DISCUSSION**

The research has revealed that girls living in this region come from deprived homes and are engaged in economic exploitative activities. These activities were done through income generating activities and household chores that interfered with their schooling. This observation corroborates the findings of Lopez (2001) that girls because of socio-economic reasons become economic chattels at the mercy of parents or guardians. Sierra Leone is one of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries of the world and poverty of households is found in all districts of
the country. The income base of parents is uncertain and low, some of them subsist on periodic income as most of them are farmers and miners. Silliman (1987) states that a major reason why there is continued gender disparity in education is because when household income is limited although there was an improvement in access to education, girls’ participation was still fraught with a lot of problems. As discussed by Silliman (1987), some of these parents would prefer the ideal situation where their girls would just concentrate on their studies, but their economic base determines otherwise.

Most of the respondents were involved in some form of income generation for their parents/guardians even as they were going to school. Hawking either after school, during week-ends or during holidays has emerged as one of the popular forms of income generation in poor homes. A depressing home environment also included household chores that interfered with their school work. Most of these girls were too tired after the day’s activities to study hard and compete with girls from better socio-economic status homes. Although, these children are in school, the study brings out the fact that exploitation of the girl child is also taking place in the homes. Girls have become economic assets by their guardians as poverty of the homes means that if they do not help to contribute to the family’s income, they may not be able to continue their schooling and may even drop out.

The problem stated earlier was further compounded by the findings of the research on the categories of people pupils were living with. The analyzed data left much food for thought as it revealed that about forty two percent of children do not live or during their parents. This is another factor that has to be taken into account when discussing issues of exploitation of school children as some of them are living with guardians who may be more interested in their economic worth than on their school performance.

The Community Teachers Association (CTA) acts as a liaison between the school, the home and the community. CTA meetings are organized at least three times a term to provide a channel of communication between these two groups. In these meetings, parents, the community members and the school officials review and discuss a variety of topics of interest and of concern to the school and the pupils. These meetings should not be missed by caring parents as they provide a platform for the groups to meet, interact and learn of all the opportunities that can benefit their wards.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Legal action taken against the proliferation of economic exploitation of children often produces few results. Laws against such abuses have little effect in a nation where this abhorred practice is accepted as being necessary for poor families to earn an income. Thus, macro economic policies involving an extensive reform process which strives to end the desperate poverty in the nation is necessary to eliminate the proliferation of child economic exploitative abuses in Sierra Leone. Changing the structure of the economic base of the homes in a poor country may seem unrealistic and difficult but efforts have to be made to improve the interaction between the home and the school as many girls come from homes that are poor and cannot adequately support them academically. The social welfare of children is strongly linked to the social and economic position of mothers. A commitment to girls’ education must be part of the commitment to strengthen women’s access to paid labour because when a woman’s income improves, so too does the situation of her children. Women need access to good jobs and improved life-styles. Micro-credit funding has to be done to help parents to be more economically stable to help maintain their daughters in schools. Mothers Clubs and Girls Clubs sponsored by NGOs must be established with the aim of not only sensitization of girls and stakeholders on the importance of education but also helping the parents to improve on their income base and increasing the motivational strategies that will improve participation in schools.

In Sierra Leone, this level of education, lower secondary, although part of basic education is still not free. Free compulsory secondary education with scholarships to help parents provide the motivational inputs necessary for schooling must also be practiced. In order to stop the socio-economic exploitation of school girls, all
stakeholders in education must do their utmost to ensure that participation involving access, retention and performance be encouraged. The government of Sierra Leone has to come up with strategies to monitor children, not only in school but also at home. Social Welfare workers have to be employed in all districts, urban as well as rural to ensure that girls do not participate in chores and income generating activities that harm or impede their school lives and work.

As already mentioned in the paper, almost all African countries including Sierra Leone have enacted the Children’s Rights Act which establishes that exploitative labour is prohibited. These laws, enforced by Ministries of Labour tend to be more effective in combating child labour abuses in the formal sector (the sector of the economy which lawfully employs people and pays taxes) in urban and rural areas. However legal protection does not extend beyond the formal sector to the kinds of work children are most involved in, especially in the homes they reside. Policies have to be put in place to ensure that children especially girls are not exploited by adults who are supposed to be caregivers. As a result of this, the Government has to enact and enforce policies and strategies to ensure that home factors of girls be monitored so that they do not impede girls participation in school.

Conclusion

Education is the key to ending the exploitation of children. According to UNICEF (2005), for every year of education that a child receives, their adult earning potential increases by a worldwide average of 10%. The focus of all stakeholders in the education sector should not just be on increasing access to education of children. Emphasis should also be on providing quality education for children. If an education system is to attract and retain children, efforts must be made to ensure that the homes girls come from are conducive for learning.

REFERENCES