

Gender and Other Inequalities in Secondary Education in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone: Exploring the Experiences and Outcomes of Girls in Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study extends limited research on understanding gender and education in post-conflict contexts. The study goes beyond the descriptive analysis of equality in terms of numbers but rather focuses on the gendered processes and conditions of learning (i.e., The content of what girls learn and how they learn). It gives an account of how schooling experiences produce and reproduce inequalities in secondary education. This critical analysis utilizes the intersectionality framework to illustrate how the intersection of multiple identities such as gender, social class, sexuality, culture, and location influences girls' learning experiences and outcomes in secondary school in post-conflict Sierra Leone. I particularly draw on girls' explanations of these issues as they negotiate and are affected by them. Therefore, a detailed qualitative ethnographic study was conducted in a secondary school from the south region of Sierra Leone to explore gendered experiences and their intersecting inequalities in everyday schooling. This is to understand the gendered institutional life of the school and as far as possible do this through the voices and perspectives of those within the school, especially the girls. What this research does is to broaden the in-school research knowledge by focusing on investigating the gendered process of learning, everyday formal and informal in-school interactions, cultures and practices and the intersection of gender with other social identities like sexuality, Socioeconomic status (SES), Location and Traditions. I also tracked how these new directions of knowledge influence girls' performance, retention, and attainment. This study adopted a qualitative research method using an ethnographic approach to examine the pupils' and teachers' detailed secondary schooling experiences. This was achieved by using in-depth interviews to explore students' individual personal experiences of secondary schooling. The studied participants were purposively selected based on the established parameters for this study. The findings of this study revealed a highly gendered school environment, and that the intersection of multiple identities, such as gender, social class, sexuality, culture, and location, exacerbates inequalities in secondary education and influences girls' learning experiences. Additionally, the study highlighted the impact of societal factors, such as early marriage and teenage pregnancy, on girls' educational outcomes, especially in a post-conflict context like Sierra Leone.

Keywords: post-conflict, intersectionality, gender, secondary schooling, inequality

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1. Introduction

It has been almost two decades following the end of the civil war (1991 – 2003) in Sierra Leone. While the country has made tremendous progress in rebuilding public services including education, it is still struggling to rebuild an all-inclusive educational system as a key element of post-conflict reconstruction (World Bank 2007; GoSL 2017). During the civil war, women and girls faced extreme and extensive forms of violence and abuse. For instance, thousands of women and girls were systematically abducted and abused by all parties to the conflict (Maclure and Denov 2009). Rape and other forms of violence were used as 'weapons of war' (Marks 2013). As a result, post-conflict educational reconstruction has been underscored as a

‘...key opportunity to rectify endemic discrimination against women by fostering the promotion and protection of women’s rights’ (Maclure and Denov 2009 p.613). It is assumed that post-conflict educational reconstruction reforms educational institutions and facilitates gender equity. Further, Maclure and Denov (2009) argued that post-conflict educational reconstruction is seen as a driver for ‘...contesting gender-related disparities and enhancing the overall status of girls and women’ (p.612).

Unlike the above assumptions that post-conflict educational reconstruction ushers in transformative policies that seek to contest gender-related disparities and promote the rights of women and girls, post-conflict educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone has promoted blatant gender disparities and failed to capture the goal of gender equity, because of ‘...deeply-seated institutional and cultural constraints that exist within systems of education and in the broader social contexts that affect educational structures and processes’(Maclure and Denov p.613). Against this background, this research explores pervasive gender inequalities propagated by a gendered school system that has exacerbated education inequity in post-conflict Sierra Leone and produced negative effects on the retention and attainment of female students in schools. The analysis focuses predominantly on gendered experiences of schooling in the southern region and its intersection with other social identities such as socio-economic status, region, ethnic traditions, sexuality etc. and tracks how it has shaped classroom practices and produced gender-differentiated patterns of retention and attainment.

Therefore, a detailed qualitative ethnographic study was conducted in 1 secondary school from the region to explore gendered experiences and their intersecting inequalities in everyday schooling. This is to understand the gendered institutional life of the schools and as far as possible do this through the voices and perspectives of those within the school, especially the girls. This encompasses a range of institutional conditions and practices including gender bias in textbooks and teaching practices, the hidden curriculum, school-related gender-based violence, and social norms and practices as well as the under-representation of female teachers in secondary school education. In concert with other researchers, I believe that the school as a social institution where teachers and students interact contributes to the production and reproduction of regulated and normalized gendered practices, power relations, and identities.

1.1. Position and Perspective: Research Rationale and Standpoints

There is a considerable number of literature on gender equality in secondary education (Dunne et al. 2005; Dunne 2008). There is also a considerable amount of research work on constraints to girls’ schooling especially issues of girls’ lower participation rate in school (Dunne et al. 2005). However, post-conflict context literature is significantly limited and requires further exploration. Existing literature is almost silent on the paradox of post-conflict education reconstruction. Additionally, research in gender and education in a post-conflict context has been criticized for its lack of focus on school-level specifics such as gender relations, school interactions, school retention, performance, and attainment (Dunne et al. 2005; Maclure and Denov 2009). Furthermore, existing literature primarily focuses on access to education, in most cases primary education and the pernicious effects of the war on girls and women other than gender relations. For instance, in-school research has been ‘limited and resolved around formal aspects such as inappropriate curricula, limited subject choices for girls, gender-biased textbooks, poor career choices and the need for more teachers’ (Dunne et. al 2005 p.2). They, therefore, recommended the need for a ‘more systematic and larger study of gender relations in schools’ and explore the interaction of gender with other social identities (Dunne et. al 2005 p.72). As with most contributions to the study of gender and schooling, scholars’ inquiries are predominately on the analysis of ‘...gender as an aspect of identity formation within schools’ (Dejaeghere and Vavrus 2011 p.). Little or no attention has been paid to its intersection with

other social identities such as social class, sexuality, region, and ethnic traditions. Furthermore, very few literatures have used an intersectional lens to explore students' in-school experiences.

An intersectional lens is important for understanding the 'educational experiences of an increasingly diverse student populace' (Davis et al 2015 p.8). However, evidence has shown that there is a research gap in the study of intersectionality in an increasingly diverse secondary school population. For instance, Grant & Sleeter (1986), mentioned that attempts have been made to analyze social identities in school separately, but argued that failure to apply an intersectional lens in analyzing social identities in educational research 'leads at times to an oversimplification or inaccurate understanding of what occurs in schools (cited in Davis et al. 2015 p.8).

This research, therefore, tried to address the multiple gaps mentioned above and makes important contributions to knowledge. Firstly, the study extends limited research on understanding gender and education in post-conflict contexts. This research is among the few studies that have explored the paradox of educational reconstruction and transformation. Secondly, it extends the research on how the intersection of multiple identities such as gender, social class, sexuality, culture, and location influences girls' learning outcomes in secondary school. It gives an account of how schooling experiences produce and reproduce inequalities in secondary education. This study goes beyond the descriptive analysis of equality in terms of numbers but rather focuses on the gendered processes and conditions of learning (i.e., The content of what girls learn and how they learn). Thirdly, this study extends the research on the concept of sexuality in schooling. I explored sexuality beyond heterosexual relations. Sexuality in this research is precisely reflected in the interaction of students '...through gendered sexual expectations and power imbalances, negotiating the lack of female sexual autonomy, compulsory heterosexuality, and the norms that locate girls as objects of male sexual desires' (Muhanguzi et al. 2011 p.135). I am concerned with the everyday school experiences of pupils and teachers, especially girls. What this research has done is to broaden the in-school research knowledge by focusing on investigating the gendered process of learning, everyday formal and informal in-school interactions, cultures and practices and the intersection of gender with other social identities like sexuality, SES, Location and Traditions. I tracked how these new directions of knowledge influence girls' performance, retention, and attainment.

To be able to make the above-mentioned contributions, the study explored 3 research questions.

- RQ-1: How are schooling experiences and outcomes differentiated by gender, ethnic traditions, SES, sexuality, and region in post-conflict Sierra Leone?
- RQ-2: What are the experiences of female and male staff in the school and how do these influence their daily working lives, roles within the school and relationships with students?
- RQ-3: How can the school as a social institution create an enabling schooling environment for all students and staff?

2. Country Context

Sierra Leone is located on the west coast of Africa covering an area of 27,925 sq. miles (73,326 sq. km) that borders Liberia on the South, Guinea on the northeast, and the Atlantic Ocean on the west and southwest. The country is divided into 4 administrative regions (North, South, East & West) with Freetown as the capital city (GoSL 2013). It is further divided into 14 political districts, 19 local councils, and 149 chiefdoms). An estimated 65 per cent of the ethnically diverse population of 7,092,113 reside in rural areas (SSL 2015).

The history of Sierra Leone has been marked by an armed conflict that lasted for eleven years (1991 – 2002), causing an estimated death of 70,000 people and humanitarian displacement of 2.6 million from their homes (Kaldor and Vincent 2006). Following this, the 2014- 2016 Ebola pandemic caused an estimated death of 3,956 people and infected 14,124 people (CDC 2019). These have all taken place in Sierra Leone's entrenched patriarchal society characterized by rigid social and cultural norms. Gender relations within communities promote gender identities and hierarchies that reproduce inequalities within households, communities, and the productive economy (Ani and Osakwe 2014). Consequently, women and girls suffered the most from sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence, including rape and other forms of violence that were used as 'weapons of war' (Marks 2013). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report notes that 'women and girls were the deliberate targets of sexual violence and rape by all the armed groups during the conflict' (GoSL 2004 p.167). The conflict and Ebola pandemic affected women and girls severely due to the '...caregivers and economic agents' roles they played during the outbreaks (UNDP 2015 p.2). In addition, the loss of husbands and relatives due to the conflict and or pandemics has resulted in their increased vulnerability to poverty.

Sierra Leone currently operates a 6-3-3-4 education system (see Figure 1 below) which was adopted in 1993 in line with other English-speaking West African countries (World Bank 2007). The system starts with 6 years of primary education, followed by three years of Junior Secondary School, three years of Senior Secondary School, and four years of Tertiary education (Colleges, Universities, Polytechnics, and Teacher Training) (World Bank 2007). Gender parity has been achieved at the primary level while at the secondary school level gender disparities are evident as those continuing with their education include 33.2 per cent girls and 39.9 per cent boys (GoSL 2013). The overall literacy in the country stands at 43 per cent and 62 per cent for women and men respectively (GoSL 2020). Schooling, especially secondary schooling in post-conflict Sierra Leone is characterised by significant disparities in gender, Socioeconomic status and location. According to the country's latest education analysis, the chances for children from rural areas to complete senior secondary school (SSS) is at 12 per cent against their urban peers at 50 per cent (GoSL 2020). In the same vein, only 7 per cent of pupils from poor households complete SSS against 60 per cent of their peers from wealthy households (GoSL 2020). Similarly, it is reported that 'for every 100 boys completing SSS, only 66 girls complete the cycle' (GoSL 2020 p.xxiv). In a case where all these three characteristics intersect, it is reported that only 5 per cent of girls from poor rural households complete secondary schooling against 68 per cent of their boys peers from rich urban households (GoSL 2020).

Evidence has shown that in post-conflict Sierra Leone, girls have higher chances of dropping out of school than boys because their transition and retention rates are significantly low (GoSL 2020). The poor retention rates in education mean that there are high levels of uneducated women/girls in the country, which has been associated with high fertility rates, maternal mortality, teenage pregnancy and child marriage (UNFPA 2016). Research has highlighted the multiple forms of gender violence suffered by girls including forceful female genital cutting, forced / early marriage, gender-based violence, and high rates of teenage pregnancy coupled with sociocultural biases (DCI 2015; Leach 2015; Reilly 2014).

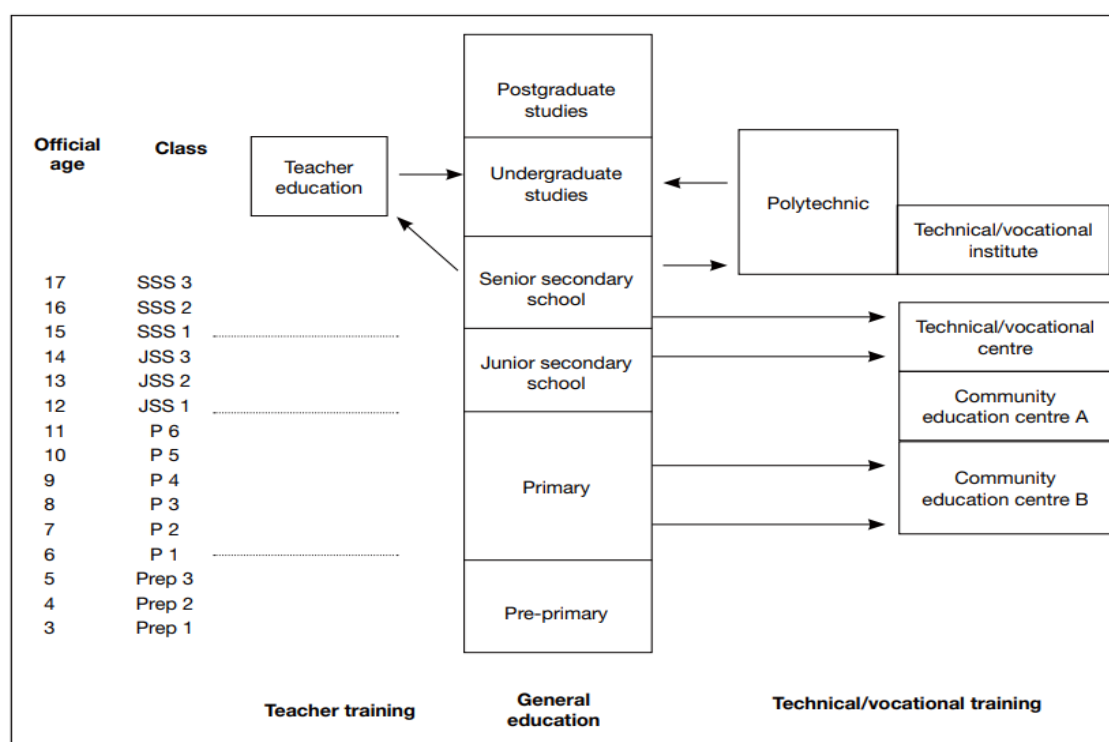


Figure 1. Structure of Post-Conflict Sierra Leone Education System
Source: GoSL 2020

3. Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this document is centred around how gender, social class and sexuality are conceptualized in this research. The conceptualization of these identities establishes a roadmap for addressing unanswered research questions. Firstly, the way gender has been conceptualized has evolved, with various theoretical approaches. The concept escaped from the essentialist notion of the naturalness of sex differences to the central argument of the social constructivism of gendered behaviour as socially constructed. Feminists such as de Beauvoir 1953; Oakley 1972, argued that alongside biology, sociocultural factors should be considered in defining gender. Thus, they assert that the two terms should be distinguished. In this paper, I have adopted a post-modern approach which conceptualized gender as performative. In other words, in this study gender is understood as '...continuously produced through everyday practices and social interactions' (Richardson 2015 p.1). Butler's gender is performatively enacted; hence, identities are performed differently in everyday life. What is more often referred to as 'doing gender', gender in this context is understood by how identities are constituted by expression (Butler 2003).

As with most educational research, the categorization of pupils as girls and boys is mostly perpetuated by researchers. Most educational researchers tend to categorize pupils most times leaving little or no room for pupils to identify themselves beyond the boys' and girls' identification. Conducting this research, I realized that trying to move away from the binary understanding of gender in education research can be problematic. This is reiterated by Francis and Paecter (2015), who noted that any attempt not to 'identify and analyse research participants according to gender, the feminist project is rendered inoperable' (p.783). However, in line with my post-modern approach, gender analysis in this research allows pupils to self-define themselves. Secondly, social class has been conceptualized in this work with a specific focus on the socioeconomic status of students such as family income and occupation, living in a deprived community, and living in poverty. As with many other studies, in this research, I

was able to establish a strong relationship between students' secondary schooling participation and their SES. The pupils interviewed stressed the role of resources in limiting their participation as well as attainment in school. This is buttressed by Croizet and colleagues who mentioned that 'academic achievement is most dependent on students' social class' (Croizet et al. 2019 p.39). I was able to understand that there was a difference in performance and participatory ability between pupils from poor households and those from the upper class. Thirdly, evidence from the field has shown that schools are highly sexualized, and they are heavily involved in regulating and producing individual sexualities. It is against this background that this study explored sexuality beyond heterosexual relations. Thus, sexuality in this research has been precisely reflected in the interaction of students 'through gendered sexual expectations and power imbalances, negotiating the lack of female sexual autonomy, compulsory heterosexuality, and the norms that locate girls as objects of male sexual desires' (Muhanguzi et al. 2011 p.135).

4. Analytical Framework

In analysing discourse and school practices that affect girls' lives in their pursuit of secondary education, this paper draws on the theoretical concepts of intersectionality. Subsequently, a brief review of the theoretical lens adopted in this research creates the link between the research questions and the likely contributions of the study. I showcased why intersectionality suits this work and how it helped me to formulate the above-mentioned concepts. What is important to note is that no one identity operates unitarily. I believe that addressing issues of education inequality using a single-axis framework contributes to the marginalization of girls. This research believes that intersectionality addresses dimensions of identities and gives a critical understanding of how multiple identities such as class, gender, ethnicity etc. 'operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities (Collins 2015 p.1). I strongly believe the concept of intersectionality is worth adopting when trying to identify the interaction of multiple factors that lead to inequalities in schools. Therefore, intersectionality in this research refers to '...understanding of gender as a social construct, which intersects with other social markers such as class, ethnicity, race, caste, sexuality, and religion to create multi-faceted and multi-layered forms of discrimination (Leech 2015 p.31-32). The intersectionality concept suits contemporary analysis of multiple forms of oppression women and girls face in social institutions such as schools. The approach is dynamic and, thus, has shifted from the original focus on race and gender to incorporate other forms of subordination. Therefore, the concept is central to exploring multiple forms of inequalities in schooling. As mentioned by Bose (2012), the concept of intersectionality has 'proved fruitful...in research studies on specific inequalities' (p.68). Richardson described intersectionality as a 'framework for understanding gender and its co-construction with other social categories' (p.16).

The strength of intersectionality theory lies in its ability to explore the complexity of inequalities beyond a mono-categorical analysis. This is stressed by Collins (2015), that intersectionality 'examines social formations of multiple complex social inequalities. (p.5). Hence, during my pilot research, I did not just mention the term but rather adopted an 'analytic sensibility' of the concept. In other words, I adopted critical intersectional thinking about the problems of multiple inequalities and their interconnections to influence girls' performance, participation, retention, and attainment at secondary school. In exploring the social disadvantages girls face in secondary schooling, I did not treat the female group as a homogenous group because there are differences within groups. Therefore, inequalities were explored beyond gender, considering other social categories. For example, during the interviews, I was able to establish that girls living in rural areas from lower-class families have

higher chances of dropping out of school. In their work in Botswana and Ghana, Mairead Dunne and colleagues illustrated how the interaction of gender, social class, and location perpetuated the gender gap in secondary schooling attainment. They found out that girls from poor households living in rural areas have a limited chance of participating and performing well in science-related subjects (2005). In conclusion, I believe the experiences of schooling for girls in post-conflict Sierra Leone vary in form and context.

4.1. Education and Gender in Post-Conflict Reconstruction Context: Assumptions and Realities

Conflict has emerged to be a hindrance to a country's education sector. It usually leaves unforgettable scars in the sector because of the devastation it causes. Evidence has shown that conflict brought about the destruction of school infrastructure, human resource gap, weakening institutional capacity, poor learning outcomes, overcrowded classrooms and psychological trauma (World Bank 2006). Largely, there is a considerable amount of literature on the impact of conflict on education, however, very little literature has explored post-conflict educational reconstruction in sub-Saharan countries like Sierra Leone. Therefore, post-conflict reconstruction needs to be effective, aggressive, and intentional. Hence, post-conflict gendered schooling requires a broader investigation and perspectives because of the interplay between gender and violent conflict. This is because gender inequality is further heightened by violent conflict. Women and girls are the most affected as they are deliberately targeted for sexual violence by all sides of the conflict. For instance, it is argued that girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys in communities that have experienced conflict (Mitra & Bang 2021). Using a cross-national analysis Mitra & Bang noted that conflict '...unambiguously worsens gender outcomes especially secondary schooling (2021 p.134). Empirical evidence has shown that civil conflict exacerbates gender disparities in education, especially secondary schooling. However, Matra & Bang argue that these disparities can be eliminated if critical institutional reforms are adopted (2021). In the process of exploring post-conflict context education research, this paper focused on three problematic areas that I believe have affected the gender equality drive in post-conflict educational reconstruction.

Firstly, I found it important to explore what Maclure and Denov (2008) described as the 'paradox of post-conflict educational reconstruction and transformation'. The significance of post-conflict educational reconstruction cannot be over-emphasized because evidence has shown that it usually ushered in policies and reforms that address gender disparities in education. Maclure & Danov (2008) in addition mentioned post-conflict education to be a process that incorporates gender-sensitive new curricula and pedagogical practices that strengthen pupils' confidence and self-esteem, especially girls. Hence, it is widely assumed that post-conflict educational reconstruction is a vehicle that drives gender parity as well as foster girls' rights in schools. I agree with this notion to some extent because post-conflict educational reconstruction introduces policies and reforms that seek to improve gender-related disparities and enhance girls' position within the school system. However, Maclure and Danov (2008) challenged the assumption to be flawed because they argue that '...it is far from evident that the goal of gender equality can figure prominently as a central feature in the drive for education reconstruction (p.613). Mitra and Bang (2021) noted that even though post-conflict education recovery significantly improves gender outcomes in secondary schooling, it does not restore the levels of equality expected. They argue that post-conflict educational reconstruction 'mitigates most conflict-induced inequalities but not fully' (Mitra & Bang 2021, p.134). Researchers like Longwe (1998); Stromquist (1998) and Colclough et al. (2000) have argued that even in cases where reforms are made 'such changes are often compounded by deep-seated institutional and cultural constraints that exist within systems of education and in in the wider

social contexts that affect educational structures and processes (cited in Maclure & Denov 2021, p.613). In other words, post-conflict educational reconstruction tendencies to drive gender-related reforms and policies are undermined by the pre-war institutional status quo.

This conundrum fits the Sierra Leone context because the intended goal to 'serve as a change agent in reshaping the country's priorities' could not be achieved (Wurie 2007 p.61). Matsumoto (2011) argued that post-conflict reconstruction could not meet intended expectations in Sierra Leone because the approach to exclusively focus on expanding schools, increasing schooling relevance and improving access to school was inadequate. I am not saying post-conflict educational reconstruction has not improved gender-related disparities. My argument is that post-conflict context goes beyond access and that the concept has fallen short in addressing gender relations in schools. Dunne (2007) argued that limiting gender equity based on access often fails to understand the way school experiences are gendered. Hence, this research goes beyond the descriptive analysis of equality in terms of numbers but focuses on the gendered learning processes.

A further problem of the post-conflict educational reconstruction is entirely adopting the WID approach in the formulation of gender-friendly educational reforms. The WID approach stresses numbers and rates of enrollment and attainment (Unterhalter 2006). Furthermore, the WID approach pays little or no attention to the gendered process and conditions of learning, which this study focuses on. As with most post-conflict reconstruction studies, the approach focused on improving school infrastructures such as the expansion of schooling for boys and girls, the employment of female teachers and the number of male and female images in textbooks, provision of free schooling and mobilizing girls (Unterhalter 2006). However, it ignores gendered learning processes in classrooms and public spaces within the school; thereby, establishing a schooling system that is gendered and reinforces gender structures. I believe the WID practices have significantly influenced post-conflict educational policy reforms, and studies have shown that they ignore the everyday school experiences of girls and female teachers (Unterhalter 2006).

The WID approach has undoubtedly improved the visibility and articulation of girls' and women's issues. I agree with Buckland's argument of the need for tradeoff decisions. For instance, he mentioned the need to prioritize key decisions and approaches based on sequencing (Buckland 2004). My argument is that a post-conflict environment presents an opportunity to adopt both the WID and GAD approaches to address education disparities. Therefore, adopting both approaches simultaneously allows both approaches to complement each other while addressing the range of demanding gender issues. However, post-conflict education reconstruction and transformation has largely adopted the WID approach and practices of improving gender equality in secondary schooling; thereby, ignoring the 'content of what girls learn, how they learn or whether gender inequalities face them after their years in school' (Unterhalter 2006 p.99).

On the contrary, the GAD approach focuses on 'gender as a process, part of complex and changing social relations' (Unterhalter 2006 p.96). Unlike the WID approach I earlier stated, the GAD approach looks into gender relations within social institutions like schools and how they are reproduced. Evidence has shown that the approach's interest in gendered processes in classrooms for example has had '...some impact on educational practices' (Unterhalter 2006). Although the GAD theorist writers have not particularly focused their writing on formal education, I however, believe that the GAD central element of looking at gendered social relations inside and outside social institutions makes it an ideal approach to address inequalities in secondary schooling, especially in a post-conflict reconstruction context. I believe the deficit in policy reforms in the WID approach to educational reconstruction has exacerbated

inequalities in post-conflict Sierra Leone. The reconstruction policies have failed to challenge the stack inequalities that existed before the war. Unlike the WID approach that stresses 'inequality based on equality of resources,' the GAD approach views equality based on the 'removal of the structures that shape gender inequality' such as unequal schooling processes (Unterhalter 2006 p.101). Therefore, this research concentrates on examining the structures and processes that have shaped gender inequality in secondary schooling in Sierra Leone despite an extensive post-conflict educational reconstruction program.

Lastly, the assumption that 'post-war circumstances are essentially free of violent conflict' has proven to be a 'misplaced perception' (Maclure & Denov 2009, p.616). Evidence has shown that conflict increases dropouts and repetitions and increases school-based and gender-based violence for women and girls (Herut & Dube 2022). Although Mitra & Bang (2021) argue about the ambiguity of the 'differential gender impact of conflict', I believe war affects women and girls more than men and boys. For instance, even though men and boys account for the highest mortalities in a conflict, women and girls assume the mortality burden of the conflict (Buckland 2005). Conflict-induced violence such as sexual violence has had a psychological impact on women and girls. According to Buckland, 'for girls, getting to and from school becomes even more of a personal safety hazard during periods of conflict and the instability of early reconstruction' (2005 p.19). This resulted in dropout due to the burden of unwanted pregnancy. Critics have argued conflict tends to reduce boys' education attainment than girls due to them being recruited to fight (Swee 2015). I agree that more boys than girls are recruited during conflict, however, in addition to the high number sexual violence girls face, they are also being used as commodities in the form of child marriage in a post-conflict context. For instance, the post-conflict context in Sierra Leone is characterized by 'militarized masculinity' induced by the conflict. This continues to facilitate gendered violence in both private and public spaces including school classrooms (Maclure & Denov 2009, p.616).

The country's pre-war context encouraged stark gender disparities. For instance, before 2007, husbands were not prosecuted for marital rape because it was encouraged under the customary law of the country (Human Right Watch 2003). The impact of civil conflict in Sierra Leone exacerbated poverty within households which reduced resources. These reductions of resources within post-conflict households together with patriarchal norms lead to the prioritization of boys in the allocation of household resources. Hence, boys are preferred to be sent to school since educating a girl is seen as a 'costly investment' (Dejaeghere and Miske 2009). Amartya Sen, in addressing poverty as capability deprivation, mentioned how the systematic 'boy preference' results in the neglect of girls in the family distribution of resources (Sen 2000). Mitra & Bang also argued that in post-conflict societies, girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys due to reduced household resources and gender bias that '...leads the household to prioritize boys in its allocation decisions, especially if education is a costly investment (2021 p.136).

5. Methodology

In the research, I adopted qualitative research using an ethnographic approach to examine the pupils' and teachers' detailed experiences of secondary schooling. A qualitative research method of in-depth interviews was used. It is important to point out that this is pilot research that forms the basis for my broader PhD research. As a result, this study is limited in its scope as it focuses on one secondary school and uses a small sample size (N=5). However, the sample size does not have any influence on the findings because results from a larger sample size conducted in Botswana and Ghana by Mairaid Dunne in 2006 reported similar results. A similar research conducted in Vietnam by Dejaeghere and Miske (2009) also reported similar results.

For example, findings from Vietnam indicated that to meet family needs, girls stay home instead of going to school so ‘...they can earn income by making textile bags for their fathers to sell for income’ (Dejaeghere and Miske (2009 p.167). In their research, families of secondary school girls argued that girls’ education is ‘not a cost-effective strategy for their immediate wellbeing or future livelihood’ and that ‘educating a girl will not result in economic returns for her birth family’ (Dejaeghere and Miske 2009 p.168). Hence, these data validate the results of this research. The data generated were mostly from semi-structured interviews of male and female students, I listened to their stories and observed their body language. Data collected has been able to establish that qualitative methods better suit this research because they link the research questions, the literature, and the analysis to make new contributions to knowledge in the field of secondary schooling research. The data collection processes started with successful ethical approval from Lancaster University and that of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education of Sierra Leone. The ministry’s approval was given to access the research district and school through the Chief Education Officer. Upon approval, I travelled with a letter from the CEO that introduced myself and the research to the Deputy Director of Education for the district. The DDE and I visited the research school where the DDE introduced me to the school management of the school. A purposive sampling was used to select five pupils from one case study school in one district, in the south of the country. All the targeted research participants were young people aged 16-18. Among the participants, one of them is a teenage pregnant mother who had dropped out of school and has returned to school. At least 2 student participants resided 5 km to 10 km away from the school. In the process of recruiting the participants, very short, structured interviews were conducted to sample participants to determine who better fits the above research criteria. Each student should have been in that school for at least a minimum of two (2) academic years. To build rapport and trust with the students and teachers, I tried to engage them in small talk, participated in some of their activities, communicated in their local language and initiated contact. This approach helped me to informally explain the purpose of my visit and also allowed me to slowly blend into the school setting. To allow for in-depth data collection, I had casual conversations with each participant to assure them that they did not have to worry about the answers they provided and that these answers would bring no harm to them. I reminded each participant that they do not need to answer if they do not feel comfortable.

Each interview lasted between 45 – 60 mins conducted in a secured and private space provided by the school where participants expressed their views on a range of issues unhindered. In order not to disrupt their lessons, the interviews were conducted during break time and after school. Every conversation was audio-recorded with the consent of the studied participants.

A three-way consent approach was adopted in this research. Consent was obtained from the school for the use of their institution. Second consent was obtained from the students for their participation. Third consent was obtained from the parents. Every effort was made to ensure that they had the time and opportunity to access support in their decision-making; for example, students were allowed to thoroughly go through both PIS and consent forms. This was achieved with an open mind, curiosity, empathy, and flexibility. To manage the fear of retaliation or victimization by adults who suspect that their behaviour is being reported, ALL interviews were conducted in a safe and conducive space.

Respondents within the case study school were offered similar levels of confidentiality and anonymity. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used in all cases for the school and the name of respondents. In cases where respondents disclose data that will make them identifiable, I ensured that such data is not reflected in this research. Recordings of such data were also deleted from all tools used to collect it. Data analysis started with listening to each interview, and I transcribed these interviews using Nvivo and stored them in the university’s secure

storage facility. The data was coded based on key themes generated. The data was encrypted, and password protected. The field notes were typed up on a password-protected computer.

6. Results and Discussion

To test whether the method adopted would enable me to answer my research questions, I evaluated the effectiveness of the questions designed. Having successfully conducted interviews with five pupils, it is important to note that subsequent data has shown that the interview questions are effective and fit for purpose. The study participants comprise 4 female students aged between 16-18 years and 1 male student aged 17. All interviews were conducted in one school in the south of Sierra Leone. The semi-structured interviews were recorded by the consent document and field notes were made for the observation. Data analysis and transcription were done using the NVIVO qualitative data analysis software. Coded themes were plotted using the software in line with the research questions. Preliminary analysis has provided general findings that can be pinpointed in more detailed and large research. The data as mentioned earlier are analysed using self-identity categorization of the studied participants. Below are some of the themes so far identified, I believe with broader research more themes may be included.

- **Reproduction of patterns of subordination constructed through a sexual division of labor within the school institution**

This theme attempts to partly answer the research question, how are schooling experiences and outcomes differentiated by gender, ethnic traditions, SES, sexuality, and region in post-conflict Sierra Leone? Data collected has subsequently indicated that the institutional life of the school has constructed gender inequality through normalized forms of gendered behaviours and interactions. This has been achieved through the role of gender regime. It is an approach that scrutinizes 'the school as a whole for the motifs and models of masculinity and femininity' (Acker 1994 p.92). Therefore, the concept of gender regime in this research focuses on 'the pattern of practices that constructs various kinds of masculinity and femininity among staff and students, orders them in terms of prestige and power, and constructs a sexual division of labor within the institution (Kessler et al. 1985 p.85). The interview notes suggest that schooling shapes the minds of pupils, therefore schooling has significantly contributed to shaping girls' mentality to occupy subordinate positions, ceding priority to boys. Available data shows that schooling processes and practices perpetuate gender stereotypes. Connell (2006) notes that the gender regime regulates every aspect of the schooling experience. Furthermore, it is believed that boys and men largely benefit from the practice because according to Connell (1995), 'it reflects hegemonic masculinity'.

The production of patterns of subordination through sustained gender and sexual division of roles is evident in the assignment of classroom chores. For instance, teachers usually assign responsibilities closely related to domestic or clerical tasks such as sweeping, cleaning, picking up garbage and fetching water are done by girls (Dunne 2007). These roles are assigned to girls by teachers' assumption that girls' primary role and ambition is to be wives and mothers (Davison and d Kanyuka cited in Liu 2006 p.429). Findings from the data suggest that even in situations where girls are assigned leadership roles in the class, they tend to assign traditional feminine roles to their colleagues. For example, Green (Female & 17) has been a class prefect for 3 years and in all those years, she has assigned roles to girls that reflect the wider society's unequal distribution of roles even when authority is at her hands.

Researcher: Tell me about your experience as a class prefect with the boys.

Green: Like in my class, I don't ask boys to sweep.

Researcher: Why are you not asking boys to sweep?

Green: I know they are not convenient to do it, even though they can do it, but the girls just need to do it.

Researcher: Why do you think girls need to sweep?

Green: Because we are the ones that take care of the house, the man cannot take care of the house. The girls just take care of everything. So, girls need to clean and tidy up the place, you know. So, the girls are supposed to cook. You cannot cook and you expect a boy to come and sweep there for you.

As these quotations suggest, sex roles assigned to girls are reflected in the broader societal approach. Such remarks give a detailed knowledge of how schooling significantly contributes to shaping girls' mentality to occupy subordinate positions, ceding priority to boys. Thereby developing and reinforcing stereotypes and exaggerating the negative aspects of sex roles. In that regard, I believe this act has contributed significantly to girls receiving huge workloads of classroom responsibilities while boys get more academic attention from teachers. When asked about her perspective on boys' cooking, Green stated that;

Boys are supposed to. But you know how lazy boys are. So, girls are always ready to cook.

Critics may want to argue that Green, having broken the glass ceiling and taken up authority should act in ways that promote gender equality. My response here resonates with Acker's suggestion that these types of girls find themselves in an already hegemonic school process that normalizes gender differentiation. Accordingly, the actions of these girls and even teachers are '...rooted in tradition and common sense rather than malice' (Acker 1994 p.93). I believe the institutional practice of gender-specific roles in schools is because of the overwhelming masculine image of the school. Some girls interviewed think the boys need to pay more attention in class because they will get married and be taken care of. For instance, when asked what is there take on teachers giving more attention to boys than girls, Yellow (female and 17) replied;

"The teachers usually tell the boys to pay more attention because we the girls are more likely to drop out of school and get married. Well, I believe we both should be treated equally because we are all here for education. Even though I believe the teachers have some point there because if I leave school, I am going to get married. The boys, if they fail to be educated, I believe that me as a girl child if I am not educated it is better than a boy who is not educated."

I believe that the outcome of girls' output in education has been constrained by how schooling shapes the minds of pupils. The reproduction of inequality in daily school lives is created by a school system that invests in pupils' gendered thoughts and practices required for the labour market.

- The school is an unsafe learning environment

This theme is linked to the research question, how are schooling experiences and outcomes differentiated by gender, ethnic traditions, SES, sexuality, and region in post-conflict Sierra Leone? Available data collected pinpoints the prevalence of gender violence as a driving force for girls' dropout and low participation in school activities. Thus, making the school an unsafe environment for learning. All forms of gender violence mentioned during the interviews suggest are based on gender relations. Therefore, the term 'gender violence' is used in this study to acknowledge the fact that all forms of violence in the school are gendered (Dunne et

al. 2005). For this research, gender violence constitutes physical harm, verbal and physical harassment, sexual acts, bullying and intimidation, and psychological/emotional abuse.

The school should provide safety for all pupils irrespective of gender, class and sexual orientation. However, evidence shows that secondary schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone are not immune to gendered violence which is mostly perpetuated by boys and male teachers. Maclure and Denov (2009) suggest that gendered violence in post-conflict Sierra Leone schools is because of 'the lingering militarized masculinity induced by the civil war (p.616). To a large extent, I may want to agree with them, although it's over two decades since the end of the war and little or none of the current enrolled secondary pupils participated in the war; I believe the conflict instilled violent attitude and behaviour in their fathers and male teachers who frequently commit gendered violence as a form exercising their masculinity authority. Boys tend to act the same way because they think it is normal to do it.

Data collected suggests girls at the secondary school level in Sierra Leone are faced with coercive or transactional sex, male teachers pressuring and punishing girls for rejecting their sexual advances, sexual harassment, bullying and cross-generational relationships with teachers or older men. For instance, during the study, when asked about the safety of the school environment, all the girls described the school as an unsafe learning environment for girls. Below, I have analyzed the key issues raised by the participants during the interviews.

- **Classroom Interaction – Bullying and Intimidation during Classroom Talk**

Evidence from Luke (1994) and Renold (2006) has shown that boys are three times more likely to out-talk girls in the classroom because male students have regulated and dominated the classroom space. Conducting this qualitative research, I found out that boys tend to dominate classroom talk by talking over or provoking girls to ignore or override and silence their ideas or participation in class. For example, when asked between the boys and girls who participate or contribute more in the classroom, all respondents replied that it is the boys. One of the girls had this to say;

Green: We easily get distracted, boys always disturb us. Most times when you want to answer a question as soon as you miss it, they will laugh at you. They mostly do it to those girls they think are vulnerable. Those girls are ashamed of opening their mouths. So, they do that to them. They bully them that way and it affects their participation and performance in the class.

The remarks above illustrate how boys dominate discussions in class throughout by trying to control topics, interrupt, disrupt, and talk more aggressively, especially targeting girls who they think are vulnerable. According to a UK research, classroom talk is significantly 'central to the teaching and learning process' (Paechter 2002 p.24). As with other areas of educational research on gender and schooling, exploring how girls are disadvantaged and marginalized in classroom talk, is a significant aspect of teaching and learning that has been highlighted by feminist researchers. Available data so far suggests boys use intimidating and bullying tactics to dominate both the physical and verbal space in the classroom to limit girls' active participation in the learning space. For example, when asked if she had had a scenario where she felt very embarrassed and had to report somebody? Green replied;

"There is a boy in my class. That boy always bullies me. Whenever I stand to talk in front of the class. He jeered and taunted me. The other day the boy insulted me, and I had to complain him to the principal"

The quotation reflects the traditional socio-cultural paradigm of male superiority and female inferiority. Although not every girl conforms to gender stereotypes; some 'girls use several strategies to assert their power and prevent marginalization' (Paechter 2002 p.26). These girls

who tend to resist male domination and authority are seen as 'deviant' and 'tarty' and considered as 'discipline problems' by both male teachers and boys (Robinson 1992; Paechter 2002; Renold 2006). Furthermore, research has shown that those girls who do not conform to gender stereotypes, are competitive and have assumed leadership positions in school also have to deal with boys who challenge their authority. Green had this to say when asked about her experiences as a class prefect, especially maintaining discipline when there are no teachers.

“When I was class rep in SSS1. There was a boy in the class. When I asked the class to maintain quietness he and other boys refused. So, I wrote their names in the noisemakers list. But that boy did not stop. When the teacher entered and requested for the noise makers list, he still met this boy talking. And then the teacher asked me to call the names of the noisemakers. I then called his name and the names of all the other children that were among them. They gave them two lashes. So as soon as they were flogged, this boy started threatening me and swearing at me. He told me I was going to die very soon.”

This research has provided evidence of the classroom being unsafe and a dangerous space for both vulnerable and strong girls. How boys use forms of verbal and physical bullying to limit girls' active participation in the classroom. Furthermore, what this research has shown is that verbal and physical sexual harassment directed at girls by boys is highly tolerated by male teachers who view it to be a '...natural part of boisterous adolescence' (Liu 2006). For example, Yellow reported how a girl stopped coming to school because the boys could not stop bullying her because of her deep masculine voice. She narrated.

“There was this girl the boys were always provoking because she had a big voice; she stopped participating in class and later left school. The teachers did not do enough to stop the boys from provoking her.”

I believe both male teachers and boys have deliberately adopted verbal and physical harassment to assert male authority in the classroom and staff room. Girls interviewed reported that this act has had serious implications for their self-esteem and confidence to participate actively in class and their overall academic performance. I believe classroom disruption by boys means that girls are marginalized in two forms – the ability to learn through collaborative discussion in mixed groups and the ability to participate in classroom discussions with teachers (Paechter 1998). Therefore, girls are missing an important aspect of learning contexts.

• Sexual Violence

As mentioned earlier, sexual violence has proven to be critical to gender violence, creating an unsafe learning environment for girls. For this study, sexual violence will constitute the following: sexual harassment; sexual abuse (rape); coercive or transaction sex; rejected sexual advances and cross-generational relationships. Secondary school-based studies have suggested that public spaces outside the classroom (toilets, playground etc) are not safe for both girls and female staff. Post-war society it is assumed protects women and girls from discrimination and fear of violence and can realize their full potential (Maclure and Denov 2009). It is important to note that the mothers of some of these schoolgirls are survivors of sexual violence experienced during the war. And some of these schoolgirls are products of unwanted pregnancies from being raped. The psychological and physical trauma of sexual violence experienced by these mothers during the war has a significant negative influence on these girls. Therefore, any form of sexual violence in school will result in absenteeism or dropout. Preliminary pilot data have reported that boys and male teachers use the public space as a site for verbal and physical harassment. For instance, female pupils interviewed expressed frustration about the attitude of boys while trying to use the toilets. When two of the girls were

asked what it is like using common spaces like the toilets in the school and whether they get proper privacy? They replied

"Purple: Not at all. For instance, when the girls try to use common spaces like the toilet, the boys always stand and watch us. Even when we tell them to go and stop that behaviour they will not do it."

"Yellow: I feel bad. Most times when we want to urinate, the boys will stand at the exact location where we go, so they will stand and watch us urinate. Even if we tell them to go, they will not."

The remarks above illustrate the gender dynamics outside the classroom which suggests that boys dominate the physical space due to male privileges. Based on the Commonwealth Secretariat's manual on combating 'gender-based violence' (GBV), such behaviour by the boys constitutes sexual violence by extension gender violence.

Another key sexual violence challenge to girls' learning in secondary schooling is sexual harassment and advances from boys and male teachers. Paechter found that boys as well as male teachers use forms of verbal and physical bullying such as name-calling, sexual joking and sexual harassment to limit girls' active participation in the classroom. Emma Renold argued that the use of sexual joking by both male secondary school teachers and boys is a way of establishing relationships with girls irrespective of how these girls feel (2006). For instance, studies suggest that male teachers get engaged in coercive and cross-generational relationships in the form of transactional sex (Dunne et al. 2006; Bajaj 2009; Ombati et al. 2012). This practice is more prevalent among girls in poor households from rural areas. Humphreys and Leach (2007) mentioned that in cases where a girl becomes pregnant by a teacher, the girl's family will most often go into a financial agreement with that teacher instead of prosecuting that teacher. Hence, Leach and Machakary (2000) believed that 'money played an important part in these demonstrations of male sexuality' (p.4). I agree with Eloundou-Enyegue and colleagues' argument that girls of lower socioeconomic status do not share the same fate as girls of higher economic status (2009). My argument is that inequality in secondary schooling is exacerbated when identities intersect. Thus, the above practices and behaviour do not equate to equal schooling outcomes. For example, when I asked female pupils to tell me about their perception of the male teachers in the school, Yellow responded;

"Well, some of the male teachers fall in love with girls in the school. For instance, I know of cases where male teachers continuously punish female students because they refuse to be with them. In cases where a female student refuses sexual advancement from a male teacher, that student faces continuous punishment from that teacher. Whether she is late or not he punishes her until that student gives in. Some female students will start absenting themselves from school especially if they know that teacher will be teaching them that day."

As this quotation indicates, female pupils daily encounter violence and harassment in the school, a place they should be the safest. Ombati and colleagues in their work *Gender Inequality in Education in sub-Saharan Africa*, point out the challenges girls face from boys and male teachers when they reject their sexual advances. For instance, in Guinea, they reported that boys were '...very aggressive towards girls and that they use physical force threats and tease girls to silence them in class' (2012 p.129). They also reported that 'Teachers also prey on girls, threatening to fail them, or publicly humiliate them, to prod them into sexual liaisons' (Ombati et al. 2012 p.129). As a consequence, all the girls asked between male and female teachers who they were more convenient to discuss the above issues with, and they all responded saying female teachers.

“Green: If a boy harasses me, I will go and report that boy to a female teacher. Because if that boy touches me inappropriately in a sensitive part for instance if a boy touches me on my buttocks, maybe I will be ashamed to stand in front of a male teacher to say a boy slaps my buttocks. But when I say it to a female teacher, I will be so bold to tell her what a boy has done to me. So, I’ll be so bold. I won’t be shy to tell her.”

“Yellow: It is the female teachers. A female teacher listens to me, she encourages me and we talk about very sensitive issues without afraid.”

One thing that stood clear during the interview is that due to a lack of financial and material resources, some parents used girls as commodities. Sexual violence takes the form of coercive relationships, such as child/early marriages, between schoolgirls and older men facilitated by parents. Resisting girls often endure pressure and ostracism, being expelled from their homes and communities for defying their parents. For instance, when asked what some of the factors are that limit girls' performance in the class, Yellow had this to say;

“Well, for us girls we are mostly distracted by a lot of things, so we don't focus well in class. Most parents in this town are poor, so some parent will force their girl child to get married and if she refuses it will be a serious target between that girl and her parent.”

The remarks indicate that marriage is used as a coping mechanism for poor parents. It is also used as a tool to police girls' sexuality (Leach 2008). In Sierra Leone, early secondary schooling was built on Christian femininity and masculinity. Secondary school girls are prepared to be 'responsible wives and mothers' (Leach 2008 p.45). Studies have established how important schools and the wider society are in shaping the minds of pupils. What I found out is that some girls believe they don't need to do well in school because they are most likely getting married before they finish school. What came out clearly is that parents from poor households use their girl children as commodities in exchange for financial resources.

A further problem of sexual violence in school is the issue of transactional sex between girls and male teachers. My take on transactional sex is tied to the power relation between male teachers and female students. I believe girls are sexually exploited irrespective of their age or consent. Male teachers are using their position of power to seek sexual relationships with girls who most often are vulnerable and poor. These teachers most often trade sex for grades. They also provide academic and financial assistance for sex (Bajaj 2009). In a similar vein, Hunter (2002) notes that sexual relationships between male teachers and female students are often '...used as a means to access power and resources in ways that can both challenge and reproduce gender inequalities' (p.25).

- Unequal experiences of schooling: gender differences in schooling experiences & outcomes

Exploring the lived experiences of girls in secondary school gives an insight into the everyday school experiences of girls and their influence on retention and attainment. The above-mentioned theme attempts to answer the research question: how are schooling experiences and outcomes differentiated by gender, ethnic traditions, SES, sexuality, and region in post-conflict Sierra Leone? Data shows that inequalities of gender, class, ethnic traditions, and sexuality account for all differences in schooling outcomes. In conducting the interviews, I asked the studied participants if they think that being in school is different for Girls and boys. Green for example responded;

Do you mean if my experiences as a girl are different than boys? Yes, of course. What I go through boys don't go through that. As a girl, I can see my menstrual period and boy cannot see it. As a girl, I am vulnerable to teenage pregnancy, but the boys are not.

I sometimes can feel so much pain while on my period. Boys don't have to go through that. That's why things are different between boys and Girls.

The remark by Green indicates unequal experiences in school between girls and boys. These experiences produce differences in schooling outcomes such as teenage pregnancy. Challenges of menstrual period and pain can sometimes lead to absenteeism in school. It is important to note that gender violence mentioned earlier also contributes greatly to unequal experiences of schooling that most times result in dropout, teenage pregnancy, and early marriage. For instance, Purple is a victim of teenage pregnancy and explained about her experience returning to school and the impact of dropping out of school because of teenage pregnancy.

Returning to school, Initially, I felt strange, with all my previous classmates now ahead. I was, however, embraced well by both boys and girls. I did not receive any negative comments from anybody. Teenage pregnancy has affected me greatly. I cannot read well at home because I must care for my child. I have also lagged in school.

Purple's account brings to the fore the institutional inequality of the school. School policies require pregnant schoolgirls to leave school while boys are rarely asked to leave when they are implicated in impregnating a schoolgirl (Dunne et al. 2006). As explained by Purple, this action usually has negative educational outcomes for girls. In concluding the pilot interviews, I asked all the study participants to tell me based on their experiences what affects girls' performance, attendance, retention, and attainment in this school. Below are five responses from each participant;

Green: One is teenage pregnancy, two is the kind of place a girl child can be found or the family she's coming from and early marriage. Most parents send the boys and leave the girls out, saying it is because the girls were meant to go to marriage or neither do the housework. So, they give privilege to the boy.

Yellow: Number one is teenage pregnancy. The most female student who gets pregnant dropout. Those who may want to come could not pay attention in class.

Blue: Mostly because of teenage pregnancy and poverty that leads to early marriage

Purple: Because of teenage pregnancy and early marriage. Girls in the school get married early.

Jack (boy 17): I know one girl; she was my classmate. When we entered SSS1, she was attending and when time had gone far, I asked her why you are staying home, and she told me that she lacked a uniform and other materials for school. Then she said that no, she was not going to come again.

As these quotations suggest, gender intersects with other social identities like SES and Location to produce negative educational outcomes for girls. The most important point that emerged from this section of the interviews is that the negative socio-cultural practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early child marriage at secondary school affect girls' education negatively because they facilitate and promote school dropout among girls; thus, limiting their potential and opportunity to attain education goals. For instance, early marriage is mostly linked to '...enhancing family and community welfare and short-term economic opportunities' (Dejaeghere and Miske 2009 p.168). teenage pregnancy and early marriage are key drivers to poor retention and achievement rates in secondary schooling in post-conflict Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone, Fiona Leach found out that child marriage was used as a practice to regulate the sexuality of girls (2008). On the other hand, FGM seriously impacted girls' secondary schooling negatively. The practice paves the way for the high rate of teenage pregnancy and early marriage among girls that has resulted in increased out-of-school girls (Ombati et al.

2012). Ombati and colleagues mentioned that the socio-cultural practice of FGM makes ‘girls feel grown up, and they have no qualms having sexual relations and the community also views them mature and ready for marriage’ (2012 p.123). In Sierra Leone, the practice is seen as a rite of passage for girls to transition to womanhood (DCI 2015). It is important to note that these sociocultural practices' intersection with other identities does not only limit girls' schooling outcomes but also affects girls' secondary schooling experiences differently from boys. I therefore agree with Dejaeghere and Miske that girls' inability to make choices about their sexual relationships affects both their 'bodily integrity and health & mental integrity' (2009 p.175). It also illustrates how their sexuality is been regulated to meet the needs of the family and community.

7. Conclusion

Sierra Leone has made a tremendous effort to recover from the civil war, especially in improving access to education. The country's post-conflict education approach has increased access to schooling for boys and girls with the gender gap narrowing. However, as shown in the evidence above, the approach has failed to address stark inequalities in the schools because it failed to address in-school gender relations and the individual experiences of pupils. I have attempted to illustrate how individual identities operate as a single axis to oppress and influence inequalities in secondary schooling. I have also illustrated how gender and social class interact in complex ways with ethnicity, sexuality, and location to produce and reproduce educational inequalities in secondary schooling. This study brings to the fore the importance of understanding how the complex interactions of gender, social class, ethnicity, location and sexuality shape girls' schooling experience and outcomes. I have shifted from exploring individual identities like gender in isolation to a more prudent approach to exploring how these identities intersect. The findings from this research have been able to establish the need for addressing secondary schooling inequalities beyond one social identity but rather an intersectional approach. For instance, the intersectional analysis of violence against girls in school focuses on the combination of overlapping identities that produces structural inequalities. Furthermore, the findings have been able to illustrate that post-conflict reconstruction policy and research should not be limited to expansion and access to primary schools. It is important to explore the everyday gender relations in schools, especially secondary schools. The research findings underscore the importance of expanding the exploration of individual experiences in secondary schooling, moving beyond a focus solely on sex-related inequality to consider intersectional inequalities. However, the limited data set prevents conclusive and exhaustive results. The study provides insights into broader research that will address all research questions and contribute to knowledge.

This paper is built on two underlying assumptions. Firstly, it posits that reconstructing secondary education after conflict serves as a crucial means to tackle education inequalities, particularly when employing an approach addressing access, expansion, and in-school gender relations. Secondly, it emphasizes the significance of examining the interplay of individual identities and their impact on the participation and capabilities gained through education, especially for the most disadvantaged girls in rural communities.

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