

The Issues Behind Girl Empowerment in Teenage Pregnancy: The Case of Sierra Leone

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Abstract: This article takes Sierra Leone as an example to analyze the problems of teenage empowerment discourse in addressing teenage pregnancy. By lacking sufficient outside help, girls are likely to be trapped in a situation where they are informed but powerless to change the status quo due to structural inequalities in the environment. They are even trapped in more pain because of the prevalence of girl empowerment. This paper argues that this dilemma is an existing staged problem, and women's empowerment needs to change from thinking to more targeted social support to reduce the gap. This paper proposes strategies to improve women's educational attainment as possible support directions. Since Sierra Leone is a typical low-income country, this article has reference value for the similar plight of other low- and middle-income countries.

Keywords: adolescent pregnancy, children marriage, education, girl empower, Sierra Leone

1. Introduction

Adolescent pregnancy, defined as teenage pregnancy between the ages of 10 and 19, is considered by the World Health Organization to be a significant public health problem [1]. The vast majority of early pregnancies occur in low- and middle-income countries. In addition to premature pregnancy, which brings more significant physical risks to pregnant women and newborns, these countries usually have a series of factors that affect adolescent pregnancy, such as low overall medical levels and gender inequality. Pregnancy is also one of the important reasons girls drop out of school, resulting in lower educational attainment and lifetime earnings [1]. However, at the same time, low education and low income are also important reasons for Adolescent pregnancy, forming an endless loop. Therefore, Adolescent pregnancy has become an essential focus of these low- and middle-income countries and non-profit organizations.

In recent years, girl empowerment has become a buzzword, but with that popularity comes questions about its real effectiveness. The process of empowerment is one of dynamic transformation. Rights should not be given by others but owned by oneself. Empowering girls, therefore, sees girls not only as empowered to drive change but also obliged to make the right choice [2]. However, the popularity of this kind of discourse can cause simplification of the problem, which eventually leads to poor results or false empowerment. Thais Bessa argues that the conceptualization of empowerment, while burdening girls, leads to the masking of global inequalities [2]. She believes that in the context of child marriage, empowerment actually creates a

shift in conflict, making the family and community the site of confrontation and conflict rather than help [2]. Empowerment personalizes responsibility and heightens the focus on individual choices, ignoring the structural inequalities in the environment that are likely to leave girls in situations where they are often informed but powerless. This article uses Sierra Leone as an example to understand how girls fall into this predicament, the reasons behind this and possible subsequent developments.

2. Sierra Leone's Condition

Sierra Leone is one of the least developed countries. Its human development index is only 0.452, ranking at the bottom globally [3]. And it ranks 153st out of 162 countries in the world on the Gender Inequality Index [4]. Sierra Leone also has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, "with 1,360 mothers dying in every 100,000 live births" [5]. Pregnancy is a hazardous thing in this country. Moreover, this country has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the world, as high as 34% and about 40% of maternal deaths are adolescents [6]. Reducing teenage pregnancy is vital to the public health and overall development of this country. The Sierra Leone government released a strategy for teenage pregnancy in 2013 and established the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy to address the issue.

There is a giant billboard near Congo Cross, a central transportation hub in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. It shows a photo of a row of smiling girls in school uniforms and two slogans: "Teen Pregnancy, Not Me, Not Now!" and "Thinking. Dream. Choose" [7]. This is the Government of Sierra Leone and UNICEF in collaboration with Aid Ireland [7]. This picture gives a nice picture of going to school and having a great future, and it seems like it is possible just by denying teenage pregnancy. However, it is more common for girls to be involuntary.

2.1. Pregnancy Due to Child Marriage

Child marriage is a marriage in which one party is under 18 [8]. From the perspective of the history of social development, early marriage is a common tradition around the world, but with the development of society, the overall age of marriage in the world has shown a significant increase. However, child marriage remains widespread in many low- and middle-income countries. "Sierra Leone has the 19th highest child marriage prevalence globally, with 12.5 percent of women aged 20–24 years marrying before the age of 15 years, and 38.9 percent of women in the same age bracket marrying before the age of 18 years" [9]. And the country has a tradition of encouraging early marriage, with girls traditionally marrying during adolescence after joining a female secret society [10]. Child marriage is a necessary but reasonable option for low-income families. Sierra Leonean women have an average of 5.2 children [6], which, combined with the prevalence of polygamy, leads to a relatively large average family size in Sierra Leone. Such a family is difficult to support, so child marriage reduces the burden on the family population and can also get a bride price to improve the family situation. Girls who marry early also tend to conceive earlier. 24% of girls in child marriages had their first child within the first year of marriage [9]. Pregnancy may also lead to child marriage, as they are sent to live with the conceived [9].

In fact, from the history of social development, child marriage is traditionally more common. Lifespans were shorter, and the overall pace of life was faster. However, as society develops and the overall age of marriage recedes, child marriage is seen as a human rights violation, as girls are thought to marry, often under pressure and coercion. In modern discourse, child marriage is seen as shortening and robbing childhood [8]. However, this is involved in the definition of childhood. The existing concept of childhood comes from the idea of an "innocent child" put forward by the modern West [8]. Childhood is considered a happy time for playing, and children should be

innocent and protected. However, there is a popular saying in China: poor children manage household affairs early. This sentence means that children who are in trouble in life are sensible earlier and more self-reliant. Traditionally, child marriage is feasible because the age at which children mature psychologically is not fixed. Adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries are thus more likely to be mentally mature than their peers. Girls who grow up in situations like Sierra Leone are more able to understand and accept the possibility of child marriage. Nor do parents act solely in the interests of the family. In the case of extreme poverty, the family that can afford enough is more likely than the girl's parents to protect the girl and give her hope in life. Many girls also accept marriage because they want their families to be more relaxed.

However, in modern times, the global concept of marriage has changed to one based on love, which is another crucial reason why arranged marriages are considered oppressive. The problem is that marriage is an economic rather than an emotional issue for women in most low- and middle-income countries, and marriages without an economic basis are difficult to survive in such places. Hoko Horii pointed out that prohibiting child marriage deprives the right to choose to marry [8]. The mainstream discourse holds that women have lost the right to choose marriage, so girls need to be empowered to make their own choices. Girls are called on to choose to speak up for themselves, challenge conventions and constraints, and oppose child marriage. The success stories of these empowerment campaigns are often typical: girls challenge tradition, rebel against families and communities, and ultimately avoid child marriage [2]. However, these success stories are often the few that are singled out for motivating activism. Moreover, it pits girls against their families, putting them under a more significant burden and stress. First of all, family affection is a vital emotional connection. From a psychological point of view, rebelling against the family is not necessarily what girls want. Second, in these heavily patriarchal areas, resistance may lead to greater oppression and violence, leading to worse outcomes. Finally, the girl may have a more difficult life after a successful resistance. Rebellion against family and community is often accompanied by stigma, creating concerns about future marital prospects [2]. Girls may also be evicted from their families and lose shelter and financial resources. Girls who are forced to live alone are likely to be sexually abused or forced to live in sex trafficking because they cannot find one. Therefore, resistance does not necessarily bring good results and is more likely to lead to worse endings.

2.2. Pregnancy Outside of Marriage

In addition to teenage pregnancies caused by child marriage, there are also unintended pregnancies, which are due to the rampage of sexual assault and sex trafficking. In Sierra Leone, physical growth is the criterion by which girls are judged to be of adulthood [11]. Therefore, when girls begin to menstruate, they are considered adults, so even if they are 12 or 3-year-old girls, they are easily sexually assaulted or forced to participate in related sex transactions.

Extreme poverty has made prostitution a means of survival in this country. Save the Children reported a very realistic story in which Kadiatu recounted that during Ebola, lack of food left her so hungry that her vision blurred, and sex trafficking became her only food and financial option [12]. Girls are dependent on wealthy "big men" for food and necessities and even to fund their education [10]. Poor girls are forced to agree to relationships for material gain or to consent to sex because of their vulnerability [10]. It may be the only option for surviving and improving the standard of living that they have access to.

While increasing educational attainment has been shown to be effective in reducing teenage pregnancies, education is likely to be the reason they are violated. Teacher-student relationships are common in Sierra Leone. Some male teachers may force girls to have sex in exchange for grades, extra school fees and exams [10, 11, 13]. Girls usually cannot refuse such a request because the

teacher has more than enough means of revenge. They can humiliate them in the classroom, make girls fail exams, or force them to drop out of school when they fail their entrance exams when they refuse to be tutored for exams. This has led to a lot of girls accepting the situation by default, and the teacher becomes their “big men”. When I visited a middle school near Freetown during my school trip, a group member once witnessed a girl who was in charge of taking us to study holding hands with the teacher in charge and acquiesced that the teacher was her boyfriend. As it is a way for these most vulnerable girls to complete their education, this situation is easily overlooked by parents [11].

However, behind the empowerment pitch of “Not me” lies the suspicion that unwanted pregnancies occur due to girls being perceived as immoral. After Ebola, the government in Sierra Leone briefly banned visibly pregnant girls from school. The then Minister of Education, Science and Technology expressed the view that “[pregnant girls’] presence in the classroom would serve as a negative influence to other innocent girls.” [14]. The presence of pregnant girls at school was thought to encourage other girls to do the same, and barring them from school was seen as punishment for doing something wrong. Sex trafficking in this environment is seen as an option for girls to be reckless or even proactively look for easier routes. Some blame the girl for teacher-student sex trafficking, arguing that she initiates the relationship for grades [11]. Someone also thinks that girls may want to have sex because their friends do it [10]. Some even think that girls choose materialistic pursuits to acquire the latest fashions, such as nice clothes and smartphones [10]. Calls for the empowerment of girls heighten the focus on self-choice, which reinforces the notion that sex trafficking is immoral for girls. This has led to a shift in focus, with the girl who was the victim becoming the object of blame and stigma.

3. Empower Girls: Issues and Outlook

The examples of child marriage and sex trafficking reflect some problems in the current empowerment of girls, including simplifying the problem, making girls bear more responsibility for analysis, and even causing girls to be morally condemned. It is a lot to do with the intensity of aid. The problem is not that girls do not like the bright future pictured in the propaganda of empowerment, but how to get it. This is not as simple as a change of mind. The reality usually prevents them from achieving the success of publicity by willpower and requires more intensive help. Otherwise, these empowerments just let girls know there is such a future, but they cannot reach it. They even blame themselves for not being strong enough because they envy the successful cases in the publicity.

Moreover, the fact that helping a lot of the time stays or only focuses on changing minds is the root cause of the powerlessness of empowerment. “Empowerment is often implemented by delivering information and knowledge to girls in areas such as rights, sexual and reproductive health, financial literacy, and vocational and life skills”, which leads to the fact that the measure of success of these empowerment projects is often “‘increased knowledge’ and ‘attitudinal/behaviour change’.” [2]. These programs focus on making girls aware of these issues and the need for change but do not provide the help that can bear the consequences of thinking about change. They may not even measure actual change. This leaves a mess where the girl is often powerless and ends up with desires that don’t match reality and even more pain. This has resulted in girls’ empowerment narratives being attractive to funders but not enough to change girls’ lives.

Most of these projects are aid dependent. A funder is usually selective about her concerns and will only give to issues that match their preferences and are feasible in principle [10]. Several activists in Sierra Leone in dialogue on this issue pointed out that having large donor funds often also means very strict regulatory constraints, making it difficult for local organizations to do things organically [7]. Moiyattu Banya, another experienced person engaged in related projects,

encountered a similar problem. She was teaching girls about leadership and empowerment in the Nkwanta area of Ghana, but she was stumped when a girl approached her and asked her to help her solve practical problems such as staying in school because of financial aid, not within the project's remit [13].

On the whole, existing girls' empowerment does not seem to be a good solution to real problems, but the conversations of activists point to a more optimistic outlook. They pointed out that with efforts to raise awareness, girls were informed enough to make more informed decisions, but social support was still lacking [7]. So follow-up support is necessary and critical. Nevertheless, they also point out that empowerment begins with willpower and then structure. So there is a healthy part of existing empowerment advocacy that takes girls from ignorance to knowledge through knowledge gives. This is a slowly progressing project that still takes time. They expect more structural changes to take place.

4. Education as a Solution

Although pregnancy and child marriage lead to school dropouts, improving educational attainment is an essential solution to this problem. This is because poverty is the main cause of these problems, and education is the most important way to solve poverty and promote development in a sustainable manner. A higher level of education usually means a better income. "Each additional year of education can increase a woman's income by 10–20 percent" [13]. And this advantage benefits not only girls but also their families and the next generation. Women invest 90% of their income in their families, compared to 30%-40% for men [13]. And educated mothers promote education for their children. Women's educational level significantly affects the possibility of their children going to school. In data from Sierra Leone, living with a mother with secondary or tertiary education has a clear effect on lower secondary school enrollment [15]. A 10% increase in the proportion of mothers with secondary or tertiary education in a community without mothers with secondary or tertiary education can increase lower secondary school enrollment by 8% [15]. And junior high school is the watershed when girls drop out of school because of a series of gender problems after menstruation.

A number of strategies can help promote girls studying abroad and help reduce teenage pregnancy:

- Increase cash transfers. Funding for girls or their families can positively improve expected educational outcomes [16].
- Build separate toilets for men and women. Menstrual problems can be an important challenge for adolescent girls to attend school. Many schools do not have separate toilets, and adequate water and soap exacerbate the difficulty of managing menstruation, causing girls to take time off work or even drop out of school in order to manage menstruation [17].
- Increase the proportion of female teachers. Inappropriate female teachers can serve as role models to encourage girls to attend school [16] and can reduce girls' vulnerability to teacher abuse [11]. Girls are also more likely to discuss intimate matters such as menstruation or report abuse to female teachers [11, 17].
- Promote the return of pregnant girls to school. Although Sierra Leone formally ended the school ban on visibly pregnant girls in 2020, overall public opinion remains negative for these girls [18]. But giving pregnant girls the opportunity to go back to school to continue their education is good for their future.
- Increase access to sex education. Girls in Sierra Leone lack relevant knowledge. Sex in this country is very private and not talked about in public. Girls usually learn this knowledge from their elders after joining a mystical women's group. Families are likely to be forced to live in

one room because housing is tight, resulting in girls witnessing sex at an early age but having a hard time getting the right education. Only 5.4% of girls who became pregnant during Ebola had knowledge about the conception process [9]. A better understanding of sexuality can encourage girls to view sexuality in a positive way, reduce menstrual panic and improve contraception rates.

- Promote the establishment of community-based schools for girls in the context of existing girls' empowerment projects and increase girls' access to education within the school context.

5. Conclusion

Girls' empowerment is a popular strategy to address women's inequalities, but purely through empowerment that promotes mind-changing. The method can easily create a situation where girls know but are powerless because this kind of empowerment requires girls to be able to support themselves to a certain extent, which is often difficult for girls due to poverty and other constraints. Empowerment requires girls to take responsibility and make good choices, but in both cases, there are clear aspects of impact. Fighting against child marriage pits girls against their families and communities, which is not always what girls want. And resistance can have some serious consequences, including domestic violence and loss of shelter and financial support that the family provides. Even women who rebel successfully fear and are stigmatized about their future marital prospects. And another empowerment targeting the denial of teenage pregnancy has led to questions about the morality of pregnant girls. Extreme poverty makes sex the only way to obtain necessities such as food, money, and even education in some cases. However, the powerless sexual assault caused by the natural rights suppression of the teacher-student relationship is downplayed. Girls were seen as likely to actively choose relationships for material comfort or better grades. This stigma can make it harder for girls to get pregnant. So empowering girls seems to make life harder for girls.

This dilemma is caused by way of empowerment. Many programs only focus on changing minds and do not provide enough material conditions to help girls face the consequences. However, since most of the help relies on aid funds, this method can attract donors, but it is difficult to further help girls, and the actual implementers of the project are also unable to solve the problem more organically due to strict funding restrictions. However, local activists believe that the ideological changes brought about by empowerment are the basis for promoting the movement, and women's empowerment in Sierra Leone is still in the stage of slow development. Since poverty is the main cause of teenage pregnancy, this paper proposes to increase the education level of girls to reduce poverty and thus reduce the occurrence of teenage pregnancy. And put forward six feasible strategies for this, including (1) giving cash transfers; (2) building gender-segregated toilets; (3) hiring female teachers; (4) promoting pregnant girls to return to school; (5) providing sex education; (6) establishing community schools focused on women.

Sierra Leone is a typical case of low-income countries, so this article will be helpful in understanding similar dilemmas in low- and middle-income countries. How to take the next step from an empowerment discourse that focuses on thought change to focuses more on social support is a topic that deserves more follow-up research.

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