

## **EMPOWERING GIRLS AND CONNECTING PEOPLE THROUGH SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The girl-child is hindered from achieving her full potential in life due to an “unknown burden”. The unknown unexpected burden comprises people, poverty, pregnancy, diseases, illiteracy and maltreatment. The purpose of the paper is to examine if the girl-child could be empowered to live an improved qualitative life through a school social work intervention and connecting the people who will support the girl-child. Are there problems in the life of a girl-child that prevent her from maximizing her educational opportunities? The intervention was conducted in two schools in Akinyele Local Government Area, Oyo State, Nigeria. All students (638) who attended the intervention workshop constituted the sample for the study. Data was collected through questionnaires administered after a presentation of the “unknown burden” of the girl-child to the entire school population. Data collected were analysed through frequency counts and percentages. Findings showed that the majority of the girls were aware of their burden, even though they do not know how to deal with it. In conclusion, the intervention was successful at giving the girl-child a forum to air her burden and help her to identify sources of support. Recommendations made included the establishment of the position of school social workers and the empowerment of the girl-child to be self-determined to succeed at school.*

**KEY TERMS:** empowerment, connecting people, school social work, girl-child, intervention, unknown burden

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Majority of people from the developing world are victims of poor economic circumstances and because of this situation we have been taught right from home and primary school that education is a sure way to get out of poverty. There are so many well educated and successful people who have stories of having poor and humble backgrounds to share but they were able to make a head way in life having studied and acquired good education. This has been corroborated by a 300 year study of world human development that showed that education was the strongest and greatest tool of human development and progress Prados de la Escosura (2014). Education is the best legacy we can bequeath children has been an old time expression and is still very much relevant in these modern times. Hence, it is believed that whatever it will take, all children especially girls should be well-educated in preparation for their future. As we are all aware, the girl child has hopes and aspirations about her future, but certain unknown unseen and unexpected burden hinder her from actualizing her desires in life.

Many people contribute to the situation the girl-child has found herself in, for example, socialization on the basis of sex often starts at the earliest stages of life where the training given to the girls most often differ from the one given to boys. It is the society or the system that limits the girl-child, or restricts her through socially constructed gender roles, which may eventually allow the girl-child little say about her aspirations and hopes, therefore restricting her from achieving her real dream.

When the girl-child gets overwhelmed with the unknown burden as most of them do not have adequate knowledge and information to take an informed decision at that stage, significant people around her act or react to criticize the girl-child, blaming and sometimes abusing her, thus adding insult to the injury of the girl-child instead of identifying with the girl, understanding her situation, and helping her through. Eventually, such girls drop out of school adding to the ever-increasing rate of out of school children in Nigeria. **Objectives of the study**

The general objective of this study was empowering the girls in the school system through creating an environment that is conducive to keeping them in school through secondary school level and ensuring that they are eventually literate.

**Specific objectives were to** find out the reality of the “unknown burden” from the entire school population most especially from the girls themselves; find out from the students if some girls they know have dropped out of school due to any of the aforementioned items on the unknown burden; empower the girls through providing information and generating discussion on the unknown burden”; encourage self-determination towards success at school; mobilize the support of significant adults and decision makers on the plight and situations of the girl-child.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There are so many theoretical and empirical literatures on the situation of the girl-child, a few of them is reviewed. According to a data released by UNESCO, there are an estimated 61 million children of primary school age who are out of school worldwide. Of this figure, Nigeria's share is 10.5 million. The global figure for out of school children is estimated at 121 million, 65 million being girls. Over 80 per cent of these girls live in sub-saharan Africa. A drastic intervention is urgently needed to stop the children from dropping out of school. Educating girls according to UNFPA (2012) is a powerful lever for their empowerment, as well as for reducing poverty. It is believed that girls who are educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller and healthier families. Education helps girls to know their rights and claim them, for themselves and their families. Education can translate into economic opportunities for women and their families. The importance of ensuring girls finish school successfully reduces gender inequalities as highlighted in the Millennium

Development goals. The MDGs call for the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education by the year 2005 and to all levels of education by the year 2015.

### *The problem of child marriage*

Social expectations often put pressure on girls to marry and begin bearing children before they are ready. Despite a shift towards later marriage in many parts of the world, 82 million girls in developing countries who are now between the ages of 10 and 17 will be married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Child marriage jeopardizes the health and limits the opportunities afforded to women, usually disrupts their education and often violates their human rights. Married adolescent girls often find it difficult to access reproductive health services. In some countries, marriage to older men makes girls more vulnerable to HIV and VVF.

Some 14 million women and girls between ages 15 and 19 - both married and unmarried give birth each year, for this age group, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death, with unsafe

abortion being a major factor. The complications that may arise from early child bearing include vesico vaginal fistula (VVF). This is a gynecologic condition that severely impairs a woman's quality of life because its commonest complication is incontinence Aboh et al (2014).

### ***Harmful traditional practices***

There are so many harmful traditional practices that predispose the girl-child to the problems of the unknown burden. Some of them as reported by Ejikeme (2003) and Erinsho (2005) documented in Folaranmi (2007) are listed here for emphasis: forced early marriage, girl prostitution or commercial sexual exploitation of girls, use of the girl-child by a handicapped adult as a guide during street begging, exploitative girl-child labour, abduction and trafficking of female children, female genital mutilation and many more too numerous to mention. Efforts must be made by all concerned, like the family, the school, the media, religious organizations,

government etc. to take drastic measures at reducing the incidence of the practices.

### ***Parent participation***

Parental participation “in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children” is an important factor in academic achievement. Schools cannot educate children, particularly vulnerable children without the cooperation of their parents. Recent studies provide substantial evidence of the importance of “parental connectedness” in providing protection against a range of risk behaviours. Such connectedness involves frequency of activities of children with parents, perceived caring and high expectations of school performance.

### ***The principle of client’s self-determination***

The principle of client self-determination with practical recognition of the right and need of clients to freedom in making their own choices and decision in the casework process. Caseworkers have a corresponding duty to respect that right, recognize that need, stimulate and help to activate that potential for self-direction by helping the

client to see and use the available and appropriate resources of the community and of his own personality. The client's right to self-determination however is limited by the client's capacity for positive and constructive decision making by the framework of civil and moral law, and by the function of the agency, Biestek (1968).

All individuals have innate abilities and strengths that are particular to their culture, beliefs, interpersonal relationships and natural resources. Best professional practice with human systems focuses and builds on strengths, capacities and resources rather than emphasizing their limitation. This is an area where people generally need to be educated on the need to support and encourage girls when they are overwhelmed the burden. Building on the assets and resources of human systems recognizes that significant change only takes place when persons and social systems are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993).

## **METHODOLOGY**

For the purpose of this study, Akinyele local government area was purposively selected because of its apparent features of rurality and semi-urbanization. Akinyele L.G.A. is one of the six local governments that make up Ibadan less city. Its headquarters is at Moniya.

Two schools which are located close to the headquarters were purposively selected because students who attend these schools live around the headquarters where all the factors that pre-dispose the girl-child to the ‘unknown burden’ are very common. All the girls both in school and out of school are susceptible to the unknown burden; hence this was an intervention study. The programme was presented to the whole school population as a workshop with the teachers and vice principals present, there was time for questions and answers after which the questionnaires were distributed, completed and returned. Simple percentages and frequencies were used to analyze the data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: *Distribution of Personal Characteristics of Respondents*

	Personal Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
(a)	Sex		
	Male	179	28.1
	Female	459	71.9
(b)	Age (Years)		
	11-13	184	28.8
	14-16	327	51.3
	17-19	119	18.6
	20 and above	8	1.3
(c)	Class		
	JSS	377	59.1
	SSS	261	40.9
(d)	Religion		
	Christianity	245	38.4
	Islam	390	61.1
	Traditional	2	0.3
(e)	Parents' Marital Status	575	90.1
	Married	34	5.3
	Separated	21	3.3
	Widowed	8	1.3
	Divorced		
(f)	Students who live with their parents		
	Yes	565	88.6
	No	73	11.4

Table 1 showed that a total of 638 students completed the questionnaire at the two schools where the workshop of the unknown burden was conducted. Out of the total no of 638, 179 (28.1%) were male while 459 (71.9%) were female. This is deliberate since the intervention was targeted at girls. Hence more girls were given the questionnaire to fill.

Most of the students (51.3%) were in the age bracket of 14-16 years and in the junior secondary class (59.1%).

More than half of the students (61.1%) were of the Islamic faith. This makes many of the girls susceptible to the dangers of the “unknown burden” as most of the harmful cultural practices are more dominant with the Islamic religious families. It was reported that majority (90.1%) of the students’ parents are married and living together.

Ninety percent of the students reported that they live with their parents, which supports the fact that parental

participation in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children is an important factor in academic achievement. It is when students live with their parents that parents can be involved in the education of their children.

On the whole, the students seemed to be coping well with school. This is also in line with the progress that Nigeria has made in the educational system. The UNDP found that of the 8 millennium Development Goals, Universal Basic Education is one of the 3 that Nigeria has the high potential of achieving by the year 2015, the other 2 goals are: Improving Maternal Health and Developing a Global Partnership for Trade. However, the reality of the burden of the girl child was demonstrated by the fact that more girls reported poor outcomes than boys.

Table 2: *Reality of the burden*

	Agree		Disagree		Not sure	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
I do not like school because I cannot read and write	25	3.9	606	95.0	7	1.1
I do not understand my teachers	28	4.4	600	94	10	1.6
Teacher's abuse	61	9.6	549	86.1	28	4.4
Parent/Guardian maltreatment	61	9.6	552	84.5	25	3.9
Hunger	64	10.0	561	87.9	13	2.0
Relationship	50	7.8	564	88.4	24	3.8
Hawking	119	18.7	507	79.5	12	1.9
Pregnancy	144	22.6	410	64.3	84	13.2

Table 3: *Empowering Girls and Connecting People*

	Agree		Disagree		Not sure	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Decision taking above my body/self	547	85.7	76	11.9	15	2.5
I can learn/read to pass my exams	588	92.2	39	6.1	11	1.7
Teachers/Parent/Religious leaders want my success	591	92.6	37	5.8	10	1.6
I discuss my problems with adults	465	72.9	146	22.9	27	4.2
I have learnt from this workshop	580	90.9	46	7.2	12	1.9

In the survey, a total of 25 students reported their dislike for school and in keeping with other studies, 72% of these were girls. In this survey the reality of the burden of the girl child is that, of those students who agreed that they hawk, 63% of them were girls ( $p = 0.02$ ). More than half of the students who reported abuse or malpractice were girls ( $p > 0.0001$ ). However, more boys agreed to previous experience of parental maltreatment and hunger ( $p > 0.0001$ ). Seventy percent of the students who said

they could not take good decisions about their bodies were girls. Seventy four percent of those who were definite they could not pass school examinations were girls and 91% of those who were not sure they could pass examination were also girls. Sixty two percent of the students who do not discuss their fears with adults are girls. 580 (91%) of the respondents agreed that they learnt lesson. Of the forty six students who disagreed that they did not learn lesson, 74% were girls. 65% of those who agreed pregnancy is common are girls ( $p = 0.014$ ). Two thirds of the respondents who reported that pregnancy was common in their school were girls ( $p = 0.014$ ).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Establishment of the position of school social workers is highly recommended for schools in Oyo State. The Department of Social Work would organize an awareness workshop for school principals and vice-principals. This would be feasible through a partnership between the Ministries of Education, Women Affairs, Social Welfare and Community Development and the Teaching Service Commission of Oyo State, Nigeria.

Replication of school social work intervention programme SSWIP in all schools and to other stakeholders in education to raise the awareness of everybody to the plight of the girl child. Efforts should be geared towards including this in the national policy on Education.

Parents should be empowered financially to take care of their children considering the high level of unemployment which has a ripple effect on the care of children. Parents should also be cognizant of the problem of the girl-child through awareness programmes at Parents-Teachers' meetings.

Every girl should be taught to be determined to break the powerful of cycle of poverty at her point through education in line with one of the core principles of social work which is Client's self-determination.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the workshop was successful because the girls had a forum to voice out their burdens and also became aware of sources of support and help. This is an important step because two-thirds of the world's illiterate population are women, and of the millions of school aged children not in school, the majority are girls, it is being recommended that all hands should be on deck to make sure that girls who start school finish and pass out, at the same time ensure that school age girls who are not in school should be located and encouraged to go to school.

Girls' education does not only bring the immediate benefit of empowering girls, but is seen as the best investment in a country's development. Educated girls develop essential life skills, including self-confidence, the ability to participate effectively in society, and protect themselves from HIV/AIDS, sexual exploitation. Girl's education also helps cutting children and maternal mortality rates, contributing to national wealth and controlling disease and health status. Children of educated women are more likely to go to school and,

consequently, this has exponential positive effects on education and poverty reduction for generations to come.

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