



Reconstruction versus transformation: Post-war education and the struggle for gender equity in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

In post-war contexts, education is widely regarded as essential not only for civic reconciliation, but also as a key force for gender equity. In Sierra Leone, however, despite enhanced educational opportunities for girls, much of the emphasis on post-war educational reconstruction is unlikely to rectify gender inequities that remain entrenched within mainstream schooling and in the broader social context. Yet the capacity of education to contribute to gender-based change has not been entirely muted. Several women's associations are supporting girls' education as integral to economic and political actions aimed at challenging the hegemony of patriarchy and gendered violence. What remains to be seen is whether these discrete efforts can foster a women's movement capable of altering the structures of patriarchal power in Sierra Leone.

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1. Education and gender in post-conflict societies: The paradox of reconstruction and transformation

This war has made progress impossible for me. I want to go to school. So I am appealing to the government to support me, and children like me, to return to school. That is what I really want for myself. We are ready to learn (Former girl soldier, Sierra Leone).¹

... first we need women's empowerment, before schools can contribute towards women's advancement... Throwing away our school bags is essential for our liberation! (Longwe, 1998, pp. 25 & 26).

In light of the devastating effects that civil wars have had on children in different regions of the world, there is now general acceptance that when peace is brokered among the warring parties the reconstruction of education systems must be a top priority (Buckland, 2005; Davies, 2004; Kagawa, 2005). From a political economy perspective, rapid educational reconstruction in the wake of severe and prolonged civil strife is widely considered as a

sine qua non for the reinvigoration of war-torn economies and the cultivation of peaceful civic relations. Through the transmission of knowledge and skills, systems of education can facilitate the expansion of employment possibilities and economic productivity. Education can likewise foster societal reconciliation and the diminishment of past corrosive social tensions (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Tidwell, 2004). From a child rights perspective, education is also seen as essential for instilling stability and normalcy in the lives of children who have experienced the turbulence and trauma of civil war (BEC, 2003; Kuterovac and Kontac, 2002). In place of violence, fear, and uncertainty, the swift re-establishment of schools and other forms of education can be a significant 'life-affirming activity' that restores hope and purpose for war-affected children and their families (Machel, 1996, p. 92). Apart from re-instituting the delivery of conventional academically oriented school curricula, post-war educational reconstruction can incorporate new curricula and pedagogical practices that are sensitive to children's war-time experiences and help to strengthen their confidence and self-esteem.

Reflecting the tenor of hope and renewal that generally accompanies the cessation of armed hostilities, post-war educational reconstruction is also widely assumed to be a potentially transformative process that can address fundamental social inequities and injustices (Pigozzi, 1999; Seitz, 2004). Nowhere is this more evident than in discussions pertaining to the role of post-conflict education as a vehicle for contesting gender-related disparities and enhancing the overall status of girls and women. As a plethora of reports have documented, not only do girls and women suffer uniquely disastrous and long-lasting effects from

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¹ This quotation, and others of former girl soldiers found in the text, originate from our interviews with former child soldiers in Sierra Leone. The research project, sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency, explored the life histories and experiences of boys and girls formerly associated with Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front.

armed civic conflicts, but also invariably a host of deep-seated obstacles undermine their reintegration and overall safety in post-conflict circumstances (McKay and Mazurana, 2004; UNICEF, 2004; UNICEF, 2007).² Accordingly, post-war educational reconstruction is increasingly seen as affording a key opportunity to rectify endemic discrimination against women by fostering the promotion and protection of women's rights (El-Bushra et al., 2002; Mazurana and Carlson, 2004; UNICEF, 2004).

In practice, however, in post-war countries confronted with the re-settlement of populations and the re-building of shattered economies, institutions, and systems of governance, it is far from evident that the goal of gender equity can figure prominently as a central feature in the drive for educational reconstruction. As critics have long pointed out, the ideal of education as a catalyst for women's empowerment entails reforms in curricula and pedagogy, and in the organization and administration of schools. Yet such changes are often confounded by deep-seated institutional and cultural constraints that exist within systems of education and in the wider social contexts that affect educational structures and processes (Colclough et al., 2000; Longwe, 1998; Stromquist, 1998). Even in circumstances that are generally affluent and stable, efforts to institutionalize alternative norms, procedures, and relationships within established systems of education are almost always contested by forces that are strongly attuned to retaining or resurrecting the prevailing institutional status quo (Cuban, 1990). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in countries struggling to recover from the devastation of civil war, hopes that reconstructed educational systems can enhance women's rights must be tempered with recognition of inevitable resistance to new values and practices associated with the re-arrangement of established gender relations. Indeed, a key constraint may be found in the very notion of post-war reconstruction which implies the resurrection of pre-existing institutional frameworks with accompanying norms and procedures that may have contributed to, or done little to alleviate, systemic discrimination against girls and women.

This conundrum is especially evident in Sierra Leone, a country that is struggling to overcome the devastation of a vicious 10-year civil war that had especially pernicious effects on vast numbers of girls and women. In acknowledgment of the stark gender disparities that were accentuated during the war, the fledgling post-war government of Sierra Leone and numerous international and national organizations have championed the expansion of girls' education as a priority of educational reconstruction. Underlying this effort is an assumption that out of the ashes of a destroyed school system will emerge a reformed institutional phoenix capable of facilitating women's empowerment (Bretherton et al., 2003; Skelt, 2003). Yet half a decade after the end of the war, while girls' access to education in Sierra Leone has steadily improved, both in the formal school system and in an array of nonformal educational programs, daunting structural constraints are undermining the potential of a reconstituted educational system to function as a force for societal change.

At the heart of the matter is whether rapid post-war educational expansion can help to foster a transformation of gender relations in an impoverished country where the hegemony of patriarchy continues to be embedded in public and private discourse and where violence against women is commonplace. Stimulated by the sentiments of a cohort of former female child soldiers who expressed to us their faith in

education as a panacea for their future prospects (Denov and Maclure, 2006; Maclure and Denov, 2006), in this paper we examine the likelihood of education as a basis for improving the status of girls and women in post-conflict Sierra Leone. While there is no question about the principle of girls' universal right to good quality education, what is becoming increasingly evident is that the central focus on rapid educational reconstruction, with the lion's share of resources allocated to expansion of formal schooling, is unlikely to foster the rectification of entrenched gender disparities. Official preoccupation with quantitative targets – the numbers of schools built, teachers hired, and students enrolled – is overshadowing post-war faith in the overall transformative potential of education.

Nevertheless, while much of the school system in Sierra Leone is fraught with resource constraints and structural weaknesses, there are signs that a growing number of women's associations in post-war Sierra Leone have begun to harness girls' education to a feminist political struggle aimed at incrementally wresting power away from established structures of patriarchy. As we shall discuss, this entails an alternative approach to education that so far lies essentially outside the boundaries of the conventional reconstructed school system. Before examining this dynamic, however, it is necessary to provide an overview of girls' education in post-war Sierra Leone.

2. Girls' education in Sierra Leone: War-time collapse and post-war reconstruction

Sierra Leone is among the poorest and most battered countries of the world. Saddled with a legacy of slave re-settlement, colonialism, and kleptocratic post-independence governance that left it economically stagnant, the country was embroiled in a rapacious conflict throughout the 1990s that wreaked havoc on the civilian population. An estimated 50,000 people were killed, half the country's population of approximately five million was displaced, and more than two thirds of its infrastructure was destroyed (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Schools in particular were targeted for destruction, and by the late 1990s an estimated 70% of children in Sierra Leone had no access to education (MYES, 2001).

Within this context of impoverishment and violent conflict, women suffered extensive and often extreme forms of abuse. While female vulnerability had already been exacerbated by steady economic and civic decline in the years preceding the war, the outbreak of hostilities between rebel forces and the government in 1990 unleashed an unprecedented period of terror and violence, much of it directed specifically at girls and women. Thousands of girls were systematically abducted by rebel forces and forced into slave labour (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Although a proportion of girls caught up in the fighting did participate as combatants and perpetrators of atrocities, almost all females who became attached to rebel forces were subjected to repeated sexual assault, a tactic that served to thoroughly subjugate them to their male oppressors and to sow fear among the general populace (McKay and Mazurana, 2004). Estimations are that anywhere from 215,000 to 257,000 women and girls in Sierra Leone were raped during the conflict (Amowitz et al., 2002). Girls' access to education was likewise severely curtailed. During the height of the war only 20% of eligible girls were actually enrolled in primary school, and many of the schools that did function consisted of make-shift structures in internally displaced people's (IDP) camps (MYES, 2001). By the time hostilities drew to a close in 2002, a generation of Sierra Leonean girls had 'imbibed a culture of violence' as combatants, refugees, and victims of atrocities (Thorpe, 2002), and very few had even the most rudimentary literacy skills (UNICEF-SL, 2005).

² Several international conventions have drawn the world's attention to the plight of girls and women, although with limited effect. Notable among them are the Vienna Declaration on Women's Rights (1993), the UN Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993), and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women and Peace and Security (2000).

While the termination of the war brought about a cessation of militarized conflict, it did not bring an end to an entrenched patriarchal social system that continued to subject girls and women to arbitrary discrimination and abuse. With limited or no property rights, and family support systems often weakened or wholly demolished by the atrocities of war, a large sub-sector of the female populace has continued to languish in impoverished post-war circumstances (King, 2006). In contrast to male counterparts, very few female combatants benefited from the demobilization and reintegration programs set up for former child soldiers (McKay and Mazurana, 2004), and many women continue to be burdened by war-induced trauma and the consequences of physical and sexual assault (Denov and Maclure, 2006).

In recognition of entrenched gender disparities and the plight of vast numbers of girls and women, the post-war government of Sierra Leone, with support from an array of international development organizations, has embraced a policy of rapid educational expansion as an essential basis for rectifying stark gender inequities and improving women's long term social and economic livelihoods (Bennell et al., 2004; MEST, 2003). Accordingly, even before a formal ceasefire had come into being, the government had secured a series of grants and loans in order to embark on an intensive programme of school construction, renovation, and replenishment. In announcing that education was 'fundamental to an ending of the war and the sustenance of peace', the Ministry of Education undertook several measures to swiftly boost primary school enrolments and retention rates: a reduction in the duration of regular primary schooling from the pre-war seven-year span to six years; the free provision of core textbooks and learning materials for all pupils; a universal school feeding program; the abolition of primary school enrolment fees; and the termination of payments to sit for the national primary school leaving examination (MEST, 2003). For older children who were forced out of school because of the war, or who were prevented from attending school at all, the government established a programme entitled Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS) which enabled young people to complete primary school equivalency within a three-year period. This evolved from a similar post-war UNICEF initiative, a six-month Rapid Response Education Programme (RREP) that allowed children to 'catch up' with their schooling and thereby be more easily integrated into the re-established regular school system. Between 2001 and 2004, an estimated 19% of Sierra Leone's national budget was earmarked for educational reconstruction (MEST, 2007).

International aid agencies have likewise rallied to directly assist in re-building the country's shattered school system and in extending education to as many girls and boys as possible. A combined World Bank/African Development Bank initiative, the *Sababu* Project, has focused on reconstructing or rehabilitating 600 primary and junior secondary schools within a five-year period (MEST, 2007), and the UNICEF-sponsored Community Movement for Education (CoME) facilitated the construction of more than a thousand low-cost school structures that provided space for 375,000 children within a span of three years (UNICEF-SL, 2005). The World Bank has likewise invested substantially in establishing technical and vocational education programs for young people. Recent estimates are that over 30,000 students are enrolled at any one time in Sierra Leone's "technical and vocational education and training" (TVET) programme (World Bank, 2007b). Similar interventions sponsored by various faith-based organizations, and by international NGOs such as Plan International, Catholic Relief Services, and Save the Children UK, have been directed towards school construction, the hiring and training of teachers, and the provision of instructional and learning materials (MEST, 2007).

Above and beyond these comprehensive efforts to expand the formal school system, additional measures have been undertaken to ensure a steady boost in female enrolment levels. Besides formally abolishing school fees, the government has extended supplemental financial and material assistance to female pupils in disadvantaged rural regions and has adopted a policy of providing officially free junior secondary enrolment to girls in the North and East regions of the country (MEST, 2007). Women's associations, churches, and NGOs, generally with assistance from international donors, have likewise provided financial bursaries for female students and have established all-female schools for girls unable to enroll in state primary schools (MEST, 2007, p. viii; FAWE, 2003; Sharkey, 2008).

During the immediate post-war period the thrust for educational renewal was often accompanied by curricular and pedagogical innovations. Generally initiated by aid agencies and international NGOs, activities such as child-to-child (*Pikin to Pikin*) learning (PPM, 2007), experiential narratives through theatre, music, and artwork (UNICEF-SL, 2005; Women's Commission, 2003), and psycho-social therapy through games and sports (FAWE, 2003; Plan-Sierra Leone, 2003) were introduced at various times and locations in order to accommodate the cognitive and psychological needs of pupils who had been adversely affected by the war. School textbooks and lesson plans likewise began to include topics related to human rights and gender equity, and more attention was directed toward the ideal of establishing 'girl friendly environments' in schools (MEST, 2003). Numerous international aid agencies and local NGOs, many of them working in conjunction with the new post-war Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, also became engaged in an array of nonformal educational projects aimed specifically at young women, ranging from functional literacy training to conventional life skills instruction in areas such as health and nutrition, child care, personal counseling, and context-specific vocational training (Mazurana and Carlson, 2004; FAWE, 2003; UNGEI, 2006; Women's Commission, 2003).

All such initiatives have helped to stimulate a steady expansion of female enrolment rates in formal and nonformal education during the past half decade. Between 2001 and 2004 the number of children attending primary school almost doubled, rising from an estimated 650,000 to 1.3 million, with girls accounting for 45% of all primary school enrolments (World Bank, 2007a). In view of the recent rate of educational reconstruction, estimates are that Sierra Leone will achieve universal primary enrolments by 2015 (Bennell et al., 2004; Government of Sierra Leone, 2006). Yet despite the extraordinarily rapid process of educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone, and notable efforts devoted to expanding girls' enrolment in schools and in other non-school spheres of structured learning, the extent to which the focus on rapid educational expansion can foster gender equity and serve as a basis for women's empowerment remains in doubt. As we shall now discuss, problems within the expanding educational system itself, and fundamental constraints integral to the broader socio-cultural and economic context of Sierra Leone, weigh heavily against the ideal of education as a catalyst for female emancipation.

3. The inherent weaknesses of rapid educational reconstruction

At the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone, with over 80% of the primary school system either completely destroyed or severely damaged, there was never any question that educational reconstruction would be an enormously daunting task, even without the ideal of fostering gender equity in and through education (Krech and Maclure, 2003). Yet as time has progressed, it has become abundantly clear that the concentration of resources

allocated for the rapid reconstruction and expansion of schooling, coupled with the range of organizational actors involved in the educational sector, has taken a toll on the prospects of education as a force for the transformation of gender relations. Indeed, while efforts to reconstruct and refurbish the school system in Sierra Leone have been laudable, an abiding concern is the inadequate flow of financial and technical resources necessary for ensuring reasonable across-the-board educational quality and systemic capacity to cover the ever-rising recurrent costs of schooling. Despite official policy pronouncements concerning “free” primary education for all students, a recent government report indicates that an estimated 44% of educational costs are borne by households either through financial contributions or by providing additional material and labour for school maintenance (MEST, 2007). Yet with many families living in impoverished conditions, the aggregation of household resources is insufficient to ensure the necessary infrastructural and material upkeep of schools, especially in rural areas (Ibid.). Consequently, although school buildings have been constructed at a rapid pace, benches and chairs in many government school classrooms are regularly in short supply or in poor condition, and pupils are often without books and other essential school materials (IRIN, 2007).

Inevitably, the paucity of resources necessary to sustain recurrent educational expenditures of an expanding school system has had a direct effect on the quantity and quality of teachers. While primary school enrolments have increased rapidly, the number of qualified teachers has consistently been far less than required. By 2006 the average estimated pupil–teacher ratio for the country was 66 to one, while the numbers of pupils in relation to fully certified teachers was estimated to be 112 to one (MEST, 2007). In many parts of the country public school classrooms are therefore overcrowded, with noise levels and lack of space making it all but impossible for effective teaching and learning to occur (IRIN, 2007). Efforts to adjust to skewed pupil–teacher ratios have included the introduction of double shift teaching to alleviate school congestion in densely populated urban areas and the imposition of multiple grade classrooms in rural areas where schools remain under-staffed. Although such measures are aimed at improving conditions for pupils, they generally result in additional demands and stresses on beleaguered teachers and therefore do little to enhance the overall quality of education (Ibid.).

Just as the growth of the teacher corps in Sierra Leone has not kept pace with pupil enrolment increases, neither have programmes of teacher training and professional development attained the levels that are required for the provision of good quality teaching and learning on a mass scale. Despite substantial allocation of governmental and aid agency resources for pre-service teacher training, recent estimates are that 40% of all primary school teachers in Sierra Leone are secondary school graduates with limited or no pre-service pedagogical training, and that in Northern region over half of all teachers are unqualified (MEST, 2007). Many of these uncertified teachers are engaged by NGOs or local communities to teach in nongovernmental community schools in relatively remote or impoverished regions where school material and equipment are usually in short supply and where government stipends for housing and transportation are minimal. Low professional morale has thus been a recurring issue, even among certified teachers working in urban areas. Frequent delays in salary payments have generated frustration and widespread mistrust of the country’s educational leadership (IRIN, 2007). In 2004 the threat of a national public teachers strike on the basis of long salary delays was narrowly averted, but many teachers continue to live and work in conditions that are deemed unsatisfactory. As compensation, teachers frequently seek remuneration beyond their stipulated salaries, including the offer of

tutorials for children whose parents are able to pay for private lessons (Bu-Buakei Jabba, 2007). Teacher absenteeism from the classroom is thus a common complaint (Ibid.).

Such circumstances are hardly conducive for pedagogical innovativeness and the promotion of gender equity through classroom teaching and learning. Despite official pronouncements concerning the need to augment and strengthen girls’ education, gender sensitivity training is rarely a key aspect of pre-service teacher training programmes, and topics such as domestic violence, the impunity of persistent sexual harassment of girls and women, and the overall socio-economic discrimination of women do not figure prominently in school curricula (Herz and Sperling, 2004). Indeed, in an overall context of post-war governance characterized by “weak policy compliance, low resources, and entrenched gender positions” (Dunne et al., 2006, p. 90), there is little evidence that the majority of teachers in Sierra Leone view education as a basis for contesting social inequities and promoting the rights of girls and women.

Beyond the constraints and qualitative shortcomings of teaching and learning environments in school classrooms, the educational system in Sierra Leone is burdened with institutional weaknesses and administrative inefficiencies that stem from its near demise during the war years. Characterized in an internal policy document as being organizationally and managerially inadequate (MEST, 2003), the Ministry of Education is encumbered by technical deficiencies, resource limitations, and under-skilled staff. Augmenting concerns about weak institutional capacity, the educational system has also suffered problems of financial mismanagement. Reports of “ghost” teachers on school payrolls, fictitious organizations collecting Ministry of Education vouchers, and various forms of kickbacks related to the allocation of contracts and the dispensation of salaries, promotions and transfers are indicators of corruption that have long plagued administrative aspects of the educational system (Kpaka and Klemm, 2005). Reflecting a recent survey indicating that the majority of civil servants in Sierra Leone consider the misappropriation of funds within the Ministry of Education as “common practice”, public confidence in educational leadership and in the integrity of the system is tenuous (Bu-Buakei Jabba, 2007).

In view of these organizational and administrative problems, the reconstruction of education in Sierra Leone has had to rely heavily on NGOs and faith-based organizations, often with financial and material support from international donors. While undoubtedly this has facilitated the expansion of schooling and a steady rise in enrolment rates, it has also exacerbated difficulties in coordination. The quality of infrastructure development and maintenance, the availability and adequacy of school supplies, the effectiveness of pre-service and in-service teacher training, and responsiveness to teachers’ needs and concerns all vary greatly depending on whether schools are administered by the government, by NGOs, or by local communities. As Kpaka and Klemm, 2005 (p. 73) have argued, while some degree of variability within a system of education is to be expected, in Sierra Leone lack of consistency and overall national direction are symptomatic of an educational system that is in “a shambles”.

Overall, therefore, as schools continue to be built, as pupil enrolments steadily rise, and as the pressure to hire more teachers regardless of qualifications remains acute, there is scant evidence that rapid educational reconstruction will serve as a catalyst for the rectification of entrenched gender inequities in Sierra Leone. Instead, the prevailing policy of educational expansion is based on a utilitarian ethos that places emphasis on quantitative targets and the transmission of specific skills and knowledge deemed necessary to satisfy popular demand for education and the imperative of stabilizing and developing an as yet fragile political economy (MEST, 2007). For the foreseeable future this utilitarian

perspective is likely to outweigh the prospects of education as a potential force for transforming the power relations underlying systemic gender inequity in Sierra Leone.

4. External constraints to gender equity in and through education

The propensity of education to enhance the rights of girls and women in Sierra Leone is constrained not only by the inherent weaknesses of the educational system itself, but by factors of social context that severely limit the function of education as a force for social transformation. Two issues in particular remain largely impervious to the singular focus on rapid educational reconstruction and increased female enrolment in schools. First is the extensiveness of violence in both private and public spheres of life. Contrary to the misplaced perception that “post-war” circumstances are essentially free of violent conflict, in Sierra Leone violence against girls and women continues to be a distressing phenomenon in domestic situations as well as in public settings, including school classrooms. Much of this gendered violence derives from the lingering “militarized masculinity” induced by the civil war, but also from the predominant patriarchal arrangements that infuse social, economic, and political relations throughout Sierra Leone. Customarily girls and women are still widely viewed as subordinate to the authority of fathers, brothers, and husbands (Bledsoe, 2005). Within this context of patriarchal dominance, gender-based violence, ranging from verbal and emotional abuse through to economic deprivation and physical and sexual assault, has been an endemic social problem consistently overlooked by police, judges, and medical personnel (Sharkey, 2008).

In fact, until very recently state laws and traditional sanctions offered little protection for girls and women. Under customary law in Sierra Leone a husband had the right to “reasonably chastise his wife by physical force” and was free from prosecution for committing marital rape (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Male dominance within households and in public domains was largely sustained by criminal justice and traditional law. Consequently women who have suffered physically and emotionally at the hands of husbands and other males in authority have tended to remain silent about crimes committed against them (Lebbie-Moebiyer, 2001). This reticence to openly challenge or seek legal redress against male aggression has been reinforced by the sense of shame and stigmatization that women often experience after they have been abused, and by fears of reprisals if they complain or attempt to resist (Keen, 2005). In 2007, however, in response to the lack of legal protections for girls and women, a comprehensive “Gender Bill” clarifying the terms of marriage and divorce, outlawing domestic violence, and recognizing women’s inheritance and property rights was passed into legislation.³ Yet formal passage of legislation does not signal expeditious change. Women are largely unaware of these legislative measures designed to protect them, and there are no assurances that laws safeguarding women’s rights will be either respected or enforced (Kamara, 2008).

Schools are not immune to gendered violence. Although schools are commonly regarded as spaces that ought to be provide safety as well as learning for all children, available evidence suggests that teachers in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in Africa routinely exercise their classroom authority through “flogging” and verbal abuse of pupils (Leach et al., 2003; Morrell, 2002). In a recent case study of girls’ schooling in Sierra Leone, Sharkey (2008) highlighted the draconian nature of classroom management, with teachers

frequently resorting to verbal and physical abuse as the predominant means of reprimanding their female pupils. In such circumstances, when violence is incorporated as a normative method of school discipline and is meted out routinely irrespective of age and gender, the notion of education as a safe haven reinforcing the rights of girls and women is bound to remain illusive.

The second issue that is essentially disconnected from the process of educational reconstruction and the ideal of gender equity in and through education is the fragility of Sierra Leone’s economy and the corresponding high unemployment rate among young people. As in all countries, the vast majority of male and female youth in Sierra Leone long for education mainly because of their faith in its connection with the attainment of social status and long-lasting economic security. Yet although the combined forces of the state and international aid have focused on rapidly accommodating popular demand for education, notably by expanding access to primary schooling, they have been far less able to generate job opportunities for young people. Recently ranked at the bottom of 177 countries in economic performance, Sierra Leone is burdened with high levels of joblessness among the more than 50% of the population that is aged 25 years and younger (UNDP, 2006). Although employment figures are notoriously difficult to gauge because of the significance of the informal economy and the seasonal and part-time nature of many jobs in Sierra Leone, a recent World Bank study has estimated that approximately 30% of Sierra Leonean men in their early twenties were without any occupation, and that many others had undertaken work for which there is no monetary remuneration (World Bank, 2007b). Apart from teaching, public sector job openings are few and far between in Sierra Leone, while employment opportunities in the largely informal private sector tend to arise more from personal networks than from evidence of occupational skills or educational attainment (Ibid.). As a result, in light of the constricted reality of the job market in Sierra Leone, many young women and men have sought recourse in risky activities such as commercial sex work and the slave-like conditions of unregulated diamond mining. Other young people have simply resorted to crime. While a National Youth Policy has recently been adopted with a view to promoting youth entry into the work force, it focuses largely on the supply side measures of vocational training and has done little to alleviate employment bottlenecks for youth (Government of Sierra Leone, 2006).

Wishful sentiments about the role of education as a force for economic development cannot disguise the tenuous connection between educational expansion and job markets. As Farrell (1999, p. 168) has argued, “In very poor societies [where] almost everyone is engaged in subsistence survival, . . . education can have very little effect on occupational mobility because there are very few occupational destinations into which one can be mobile”. Although the rapid provision of education in some regions of Sierra Leone has helped to stabilize the lives of children and their families following the turmoil of war, the current shift to a wholesale reconstruction of the national school system harbours the risk of generating frustrations and grievances among growing numbers of school leavers who may be unable to obtain the social and economic livelihoods that they believe their education entitles them to have. This is an unsettling issue for a country whose descent into civil war was in large part provoked by widespread failure to respond to the frustrations of youth following years of political and economic mismanagement.

The dynamics of economic and political uncertainty, and potential youth volatility, do not bode well for the prospect of education as a force for gender equity. The pressing need to create opportunities that will respond to young people’s occupational aspirations and harness their energies through productive

³ These consisted of: (a) the Domestic Violence Act; (b) the Devolution of Estates Act; and (c) the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act.

remunerative work is invariably bound up with patriarchal notions of the economy as an essentially male preserve. Fears of a rekindling of the sort of youth disenchantment that stoked the fires of civil war in the 1990s serve to reinforce a systemic bias in favour of boys' schooling and male job placement, in part because of the pervasive worry that angry young men are more likely than young women to provoke a climate of unrest that could jeopardize efforts to establish lasting peace and stability (Brett and Specht, 2004). From this perspective, unless young males can be engaged productively in Sierra Leone's fragile recovery process, there is a risk that many will become fodder for the forces of political disruption and organized crime (European Union ACP, 2003). Given the interconnections between the scramble for work and the prevalence of patriarchal power relations, expansion of girls' access to education is unlikely to fundamentally transform traditional gender disparities that have long consigned women to low skilled, poorly remunerated work in agriculture and in informal trading and retailing. In sum, the current policy emphasis on rapid educational expansion *per se* is unlikely provide the impetus for overcoming the pervasiveness of women's economic dependency and vulnerability in Sierra Leone.

5. Beyond conventional schooling: Women's organizations and education

Despite the obvious quantitative gains in educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone, and the steady rise in female school enrolment rates, it is clear that a policy of rapid post-war educational expansion, even with its emphasis on increased girls' access to schooling, will not fundamentally alter the status and overall welfare of the vast majority of girls and women. Indeed, rather than diminishing systemic discrimination against girls and women, the preoccupation with rapid school expansion is far more likely to reinforce a deeply structured patriarchal social system that perpetuates female subservience at local and national levels. This then raises the question as to whether education in Sierra Leone can contribute – if at all – to a transformation of power arrangements that is a *sine qua non* for the rectification of inequitable gender relations.

The answer to this question, we believe, is a qualified “yes”, but only if one considers education as serving the purposes of a deliberately politicized women's rights strategy. As a number of women's associations in Sierra Leone are demonstrating, an alternative vision of education as counter-hegemony can be implemented in contrast to the structural conventions that have infused much of the post-war educational reconstruction process. Rather than relying on a reconstructed school system that is unlikely to play a significant transformative role in rectifying gender inequities in Sierra Leone, these organizations are wedded to the notion of girls' education as an aspect of a broad-based feminist struggle interconnecting education with specific actions aimed at challenging the hegemony of patriarchy and gendered violence. While space does not permit a detailed review of the educational activities of the burgeoning women's movement in Sierra Leone, three national women's associations in particular exemplify this more radical approach to the education of girls and women.

5.1. Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)

FAWE in Sierra Leone is a national organization that is affiliated with the pan-Africanist association of the same name, and is mandated to promote the rights and welfare of African girls and women through education. Consequently, although actively supporting girls' access to formal education in Sierra Leone, FAWE's activities coalesce around the struggle for women's rights.

Its approach to girls' education, both within the school system and through diverse forms of training and consciousness-raising in nonformal educational settings, is to expand economic opportunities for women and to promote their right to safety. In conjunction with the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs and with a number of INGOs, FAWE has organized vocational training for girls in non-traditional skills such as information technology and media communication, and has combined programmes in health awareness and in HIV/AIDS prevention with workshops outlining women's civic rights (FAWE, 2003). Alongside its educational programmes that specifically target girls and women, FAWE provides resources to support rape victims and the rehabilitation of young female sex workers and has campaigned publicly for legal sanctions that counter endemic violence against women (Ibid.). Education is thus, for FAWE, a component of an explicit struggle for women's rights rather than an end that will benefit a fortunate few.

5.2. The Grassroots Gender Empowerment Movement (GGEM)

Established more than 30 years ago, the GGEM initially focused on enhancing the lives of girls and women largely in the context of family households. Since the mid-1990s, however, its mandate has shifted towards a broader agenda of women's economic empowerment. While supporting the principle of more and better schools for girls, the GGEM focuses essentially on out-of-school education for girls and women. Through training in literacy and basic computer skills, in accounting and business management, and in marketing and community leadership, the GGEM's primary purpose is to develop and strengthen women's entrepreneurial capacities and assist them in breaking through gendered barriers in business and commerce. In so doing, the long term aim is to transform productive female producers and entrepreneurs from low to middle income-earning levels, and thus enhance the scope for women's social and financial independence, and their engagement in economic decision-making. To further reinforce these ends, with support from a number of international donors, and through networking with other partner groups, the GGEM exploits the use of print and broadcast media in simultaneously promoting the merits of women's gender parity in the economy, and exposing those structures and actions that obstruct women's opportunities in the work place (GGEM, 2008).

5.3. The 50/50 Group

As reflected in its title, the 50/50 Group is an association that strives to achieve full gender equality within the country's political system. Embracing the slogan, “Woman's place is in the House of Parliament”, the Group was established in 2000 with a mandate to remove gender inequality in politics and to equip women with the skills and wherewithal to become actively engaged in political processes at all levels. Accordingly, the Group regards education and advocacy as politically directed processes that are mutually reinforcing. In the lead-up to national elections in 2002, the 50/50 Group provided training to assist female candidates in articulating platforms on gender issues and compiled a list of legislative priorities for women's rights that became known as the “Sierra Leone Women's Manifesto” (NDI, 2007). Due in part to the concerted efforts of the 50/50 Group, all competing parties included women on their electoral lists for the national 2002 election, and 18 women were subsequently elected to parliament, three times the number who were elected in the previous national election of 1996.

Apart from its encouragement of women's direct involvement in political activity, particularly during local as well as national elections, the 50/50 Group supports a year-round radio talk show devoted to educating the general public on political and legal

dimensions of women's issues. Through the use of popular media, the Group has examined cultural prejudices, economic barriers, and political impediments that systematically undermine women in Sierra Leone, and has advocated for political and legislative measures to overcome gender-based injustices (Kargbo, 2007). In keeping with its emphasis on education for advocacy the Group has likewise undertaken workshops to publicize women's rights legislation, principally the so-called "Gender Bill" noted above. These workshops have been organized not only for women, but as well for traditional rulers, community leaders, the police, and local magistrates (Ibid.).

Similar to other women's groups in Sierra Leone, the 50/50 Group advocates the need to increase female literacy and girls' access to formal schooling, but does so as part of its mandate to enhance women's critical awareness of gender disparities at all levels and hence to facilitate their political activism. From this perspective, education is not an end in itself, but is a singular component of women's struggle for justice. Rather than accepting a conventional utilitarian perspective of girls' education, the 50/50 Group perceives education as an integral aspect of the outright "fight to increase [women's] role in development and...their total and legitimate participation" in economic and political life (Bangura, 2007, p. 2) [authors' italics].

Underlying the activities of all these associations is an ideological orientation towards education as a form of counter-hegemony whose ultimate end is to enable learners to confront structures perpetuating women's disempowerment and to acquire the skills and aptitudes necessary to alter these structures. In practical terms, this approach to education ties it to strategies for augmenting women's access to resources, to economic opportunities, and to political power. By connecting the use of alternative media, new communication technologies, and a mix of academic, vocational, and consciousness-raising educational activities beyond the formal school system, these organizations are striving to advance the shared struggles of women in everyday life.

6. Conclusion

I really want to go to school so that I'll become a somebody [sic] like the schoolgirls I see in their uniforms every day. I do admire them so much. I'm tired of living in the street (Former girl soldier, Sierra Leone).

Women's participation is necessary to further everything in this country... The more women get involved in all aspects of national life the better for the nation (Christiana Thorpe, National Electoral Commissioner, 2007).⁴

As Sierra Leone continues its efforts to recover from its devastating civil war, consensus concerning the imperative of girls' education is unquestionable. Reflecting this consensus are myriad policies and programmes oriented towards facilitating increased female access to educational opportunities, particularly within a reconstructed school system. As officially espoused by the government of Sierra Leone and those aid agencies that have contributed to the building and furnishing of schools and the training of teachers, increased female accessibility to schooling is a significant step towards achieving the combined goals of education for all and equitable treatment of girls and women. Underlying this commitment is the transformative ideal of education as ushering in a post-war society in which women are liberated from discrimination and fear of violence, and are able to realize their rights as full citizens.

Yet as we have discussed in this paper, in view of major constraints and shortcomings that are inherent within Sierra Leone's rapidly expanding school system, and given the fragility of the country's political economy and the lingering pervasiveness of gendered violence and post-war structures of patriarchy, there is little likelihood that schooling *per se* will generate the structural changes implied by the notions of female empowerment and gender parity. In reality, the transformative ideal of gender equity in and through education has been superimposed on an educational system in which pragmatic emphasis has so far been directed far more toward rapid reconstruction of conventional schooling than it has been towards systemic educational reform. While the language of gender equity and women's empowerment permeates the discourse of post-war educational policies and programmes, it is language that has been largely depoliticized by the singular focus on quantifiable targets, and by the predominant view of reconstructed schooling as a basis for the emergence of a social order guided by the precepts of economic growth and civic peace. This utilitarian perspective of education is widely embraced not only by the government of Sierra Leone and many external aid agencies, but as well by most educators and by vast numbers of parents and students (female and male alike). This is hardly surprising, however, for as articulated by the former girl soldier cited above (and by many others whom we interviewed), in popular terms education is seen as an avenue of *escape* from pervasive conditions of poverty and subservience rather than as a force for bringing an *end* to poverty and a reversal of the structural conditions that have perpetuated the marginalization of women. Implicit in this view is that while education of girls and women is to be valued, it is something akin to a lottery—an opportunity for individual girls to attain social and economic security, but largely within the context of an entrenched status quo that offers limited opportunities and benefits for the majority of women.

Ironically perhaps, despite the evident limitations of post-war educational reconstruction as an agent of change in Sierra Leone, proponents of gender equity are generally supportive of increased female enrolment in the formal school system. For one thing, in many areas of the country, schooling is the only available educational option for girls. Consequently, no matter how dubious in terms of the quality of instruction and learning, and the likelihood of individual gain, the appeal of the lottery of schooling remains widespread, and any open opposition to the chance for a segment of the population to participate in the lottery would provoke popular resentment and harsh criticism from the forces investing in rapid educational reconstruction. Since the social and moral imperative of girls' education is not in question, there is general agreement that increased female access to schooling is preferable than the imposition of barriers to any form of structured learning at all. Moreover, precisely because of the hegemonic function of schooling and the abiding national and international support for universal primary schooling as reflected in the MDGs, there is little to be gained in attempting to overturn the predominant policy emphasis of rapid school expansion.

Yet the quandary remains: how to foster gender equity in and through an educational system which is showing every sign of reasserting its purported neutrality towards—and hence implicit reinforcement of—an inequitable patriarchal status quo? While clearly there is no magic bullet in the form of a radical educational alternative, there is nonetheless mounting evidence that a number of women's organizations in Sierra Leone have taken up the activist mantle as articulated above by Christiana Thorpe (a former executive director of FAWE). In acknowledging that progress towards achieving gender equity entails a process of contestation, these organizations are focusing on girls' education not as a neutral end in itself, but rather as an integral component of a broad-based

⁴ Cited in Davies-Venn and Delaney, 2007.

politicized struggle to advance the cause of women's participation "in all aspects of national life". By explicitly combining education with feminist advocacy and the pursuit of gender equity in political and economic realms, women's associations such as FAWE and the 50/50 Group have adopted a counter-hegemonic approach to education that is focused on a vision of gender equality and the transformation of prevailing patriarchal power arrangements. For each of these groups, a key aim of girls' education is to facilitate consciousness of a shared struggle, and to enable women to more effectively confront and contest gendered inequalities and injustices that are embedded in the larger society. This underscores a key argument of contemporary social movement theorists: that the foundations of opposition to the structures of (patriarchal) oppression lie in diverse, yet increasingly interconnected, grassroots action (Ratner, 1997). By promoting the discourse of women's empowerment through a variety of educational forums that are linked to feminist advocacy, enhanced economic clout, and political activism, these organizations are attempting to sow the seeds of solidarity among growing numbers of women. What remains to be seen is whether the continuing prominence of women's organizations in the provision of education for girls and women will stimulate the coalescence of marginalized women into a mass social movement that can effectively alter the prevailing structures of patriarchal power in Sierra Leone.

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