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Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Adolescent Schoolgirls' Education in Rural Sierra Leone

Mohamed Hassimiu Barrie
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Mohamed Hassimiu Barrie

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Adolescent Schoolgirls' Education in Rural Sierra

Leone

by

Mohamed Hassimiu Barrie

MPhil, Walden University, 2021

MBA, Aspen University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

August 2022

Abstract

Since 1990, Sierra Leone has experienced several major emergencies that required global attention: a decade-long rebel war, Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks. Each disproportionately affected schoolgirls' educations. In 2021, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion Policy to support the education of girls and lift a policy that banned pregnant girls from attending mainstream schools to allow thousands of schoolgirls who were impregnated during the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks to return to schools. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone, and the related public policy implications. The conceptual framework of this study was based on feminist theory, punctuated equilibrium theory, and Heidegger's phenomenological theory. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with 16 participants from two schools. The data analysis was guided by Moustakas's advanced series of methods. The results showed that many schoolgirls dropped out of school during the COVID-19 outbreak. Some schoolgirls returned to school due to the government introducing the Radical Inclusion Policy. The findings showed that many of the issues schoolgirls faced during the Ebola outbreak, such as long periods of school closures, girls dropping out of school, pregnancy of schoolgirls, and schoolgirls being mothers, reemerged and negatively impacted the education of schoolgirls. Findings may lead to positive social change by enabling the government of Sierra Leone to formulate and implement appropriate public policies to support the safety and education of adolescent schoolgirls.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to all of the schoolgirls in Sierra Leone and other parts of the world who are braving the challenges created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak and similar conditions to go to school. We will stand by you and accompany you through these challenges to enable you to complete your school and lead in the transformation of your country for the glory of all humanity.

I dedicate this study to my wife, Asmao Jalloh, the bastion of our family and the love of my life. Together we have two wonderful daughters, Hassatu Barrie and Osmani Tanu Barrie, and a son, Alhaji Ahmad Sada Barrie. These wonderful people, my family, are the purpose of this study. I see the need to protect and support girls and other vulnerable students to be educated and succeed through the lens of my daughters and son.

This wonderful story will never be completed without expressing my profound appreciation to my father and mother, Alhaji Ahmad Sada Barrie and Haja Osmani Tanu Barrie, respectively, and all of my siblings. From the day I was born, these people have been committed to my education and success. Fortunately, I was born and bred at 27 Adelaide Street, Freetown, Sierra Leone. Even as a child, every member of this community believed in me. Many of my earlier inspirers have passed away, but your footprints in my life live on. Your inspirations have made me a global player in transforming the lives of millions of people in every corner of this world. I will continue praying for you till my last breath, and I am certain of our reunion in the hereafter. Amin!

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I am privileged to have such a wonderful chair of my doctoral committee. Dr. Timothy Fadgen, I thank you for your dedicated and unwavering support throughout this dissertation process. To my second committee member, Dr. George Kieh, I appreciate the helpful feedback. To my university research reviewer, Dr. Victoria Landu-Adams, I learned from all of your incredible feedback. My interactions with this wonderful committee have tremendously improved my capacity to succeed in this study and made me a better professional. I am also grateful to Bridgette Williams, my student adviser. You have been supportive throughout my study.

This tribute will not complete without thanking Jake Ross and Kayode Sanni, who were my professional mentors during my studies. Working with these wonderful people at Mott MacDonald during the critical period of my dissertation helped me achieve this amazing milestone. Completing this study was part of my performance development, and you consistently encouraged me to attain this commendable achievement. I am humbly thankful and express my profound appreciation to you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The frequent disruptions to education in Sierra Leone due to wars and outbreak diseases have disproportionately affected adolescent schoolgirls (Menzel, 2019). The frequent closures of schools due to the over 10 years war and pandemics has left the country's education in abrupt decline. In addition to decline in learning, adolescent schoolgirls are exposed to many abuses, including teenage pregnancies and school dropouts during these extended school closures. Tens of thousands of adolescent schoolgirls were impregnated, and many of them dropped out of schools due to long periods of school closures during pandemic periods (Amnesty International, 2015). Because Sierra Leone is prone to instabilities (war, Ebola, and COVID-19 outbreaks), these instabilities undermine the ability of government to adequately formulate and implement policies to provide safe school environments for adolescent schoolgirls. These constant instabilities require public policies to be constantly updated to respond to the changing circumstances (Flink, 2019).

As the world strives toward girls' empowerment by closing the gap in the school completion rate between girls and boys, educational progress of schoolgirls in Sierra Leone has been constantly interrupted by unrest, pandemics, and harmful norms and practices (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2011), 27% of women age 15 to 49 years were married or in a consensual union before age 15 years, and 62% of these women were married before age 18 years. In addition, 25% of women age 15 to 19 years started sexual intercourse before age 15 years, while 71% of those age 20 to 24 years had sex before age

18 years (UNFPA, 2011). The frequent unrest and pandemics in Sierra Leone have led to long periods of school closures that exacerbated the lack of protection for schoolgirls. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, schools were closed in Sierra Leone for 7 months, and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) indicated that many schoolgirls had been impregnated during the school closure period. The actual number of impregnated schoolgirls is yet to be confirmed. However, this is a clear indication that the vicious cycle continues, and adolescent schoolgirls continue to be disproportionately affected by these school disruptions.

The extended school closures during the Ebola outbreak in 2014–2015 left about 15,000 schoolgirls impregnated (Menzel, 2019). In April 2015, the government of Sierra Leone introduced a policy banning visibly pregnant adolescents from continuing their education (Massaquoi et al., 2021). However, in March 2020, Sierra Leone lifted the ban on pregnant girls attending schools. To address the inequalities created by the COVID-19 outbreak, on April 27, 2021, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion Policy. This public policy concerned the removal of all infrastructural and systemic policy and practice impediments that limited learning for any child. This policy focused on creating an enabling an inclusive environment that eradicates stigma, harassment, intolerance, and exclusion of any type. This policy emphasized the inclusion of historically marginalized groups such as pregnant girls, parent learners, and children with disabilities (MBSSE, 2021).

The current study addressed the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education and safety of adolescent schoolgirls. The result of this study may inform

government authorities, education actors, and school-related stakeholders regarding how the COVID-19 outbreak affected the education of adolescent schoolgirls and exposed the poor safeguarding conditions in the school environments. With this knowledge, education actors may act to support the schoolgirls who are affected and protect them in the future from being exposed to such abuses. In addition, scholar practitioners, researchers, and students may build on this study to protect and empower adolescent girls through improved education and safeguarding. Chapter 1 includes a discussion the background of the lived experiences of adolescent schoolgirls in Sierra Leone, focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter also includes the problem, purpose, research questions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, scope, significance, definitions of key terms, conceptual framework, and design of the study.

Background

In most parts of the world, women and girls disproportionately suffer the brunt of instabilities such as wars, epidemics, and other natural disasters (Oxfam Intermón, 2019). The abuse and brutality on women and girls are more severe and frequent in underdeveloped countries. This is because poor countries are more prone to instabilities and disasters, and in many cases, there are little or no safeguarding structures to protect women and girls (Oxfam Intermón, 2019).

Sierra Leone's economy was steadily growing since the end of the war in early 2000 all through to 2013. From 2013 to 2019, the country's economy had been in decline because of the multiple shocks in the economy, which included the fall in mining commodity (notably iron ore) prices and the Ebola outbreak in 2014 and 2015. The

country's economic growth was hinged on iron ore exports, which led to the economic boom in 2012–2013. By the end of the Ebola outbreak in 2015, the economy collapsed with a double-digit drop in gross domestic product growth. Measurements of most metrics reflect this volatility and vulnerability (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak, like the Ebola outbreak in 2014–2015, damaged the education prospects of adolescent girls and their human capital potentials. This was due to the prevalence of child marriage and early childbearing, risk of girls dropping out of school, and other gender-related abuses that were exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis (World Bank Group, 2020).

The 10 years brutal rebel war in Sierra Leone left the education and most other vital sectors of the country in ruins. The war claimed over 50,000 lives, and at the peak of the war, millions of Sierra Leoneans were either refugees or internally displaced persons (Shepler & Williams, 2017). This bloody war led to the closure of thousands of schools across the country, and by 2001 forced about 70% of all school-age children out of schools (Ozisik, 2015). Over a decade after the war, in 2014 the largest Ebola outbreak in living memory struck Sierra Leone and destroyed the socioeconomic recoveries that the country had made. Before the Ebola outbreak was declared over in Sierra Leone by the World Health Organization (WHO) in November 2015, the virus had claimed over 4,000 lives and infected close to 9,000 persons. In total, the Ebola virus killed over 11,000 people and infected 28,000 people in the three worse-hit countries of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea (Kamradt-Scott, 2015). The Ebola outbreak killed 80 teachers and

many students, left many other students orphaned, and resulted in over 15,000 adolescent schoolgirls being impregnated and out of school (Menzel, 2019).

The first COVID-19 cases in Sierra Leone were reported on March 31, 2020. This date coincided with the end of second term of school. To mitigate the spread of the virus, the government closed schools and universities, and reopened them in late September when the spread of the virus had subsided (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). This closure of schools left 2.6 million Sierra Leonean students from preprimary to senior secondary out of schools for 6 months. The MBSSE conducted radio and TV teaching programs to conduct classes for primary and secondary school students when they were at home (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). However, the 2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey indicated that only 54.7% of households had a radio, which was 44% of rural households compared to 67% for urban households. Only 18% of the population had a TV, which was 38.7% in urban areas compared to 1.5% in rural areas (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017). This general lack of access to radios and TVs created a problem for nationwide access to the teaching programs provided by the ministry of education. A back-to-school study conducted by a UK government-funded program stated that 70% of students did not have access to the teaching program (Leh Wi Lan Programme, 2020). Students in rural areas were disproportionately disadvantaged.

The COVID-19 outbreak started when the education system of Sierra Leone was recovering from the impact of the Ebola outbreak. In addition to the poor safety of adolescent schoolgirls, there was already severe loss in learning time that the education system was dealing with. Many students were already 2 or 3 grades behind their current

grade/class levels (Leh Wi Lan Programme, 2019). This meant that many students were not ready for public exams, and this was leading to large number of failures among students in public exams. According to the Ministry of Education in Sierra Leone, only 4.5% of students got the university entry requirements in the 2020 West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations (MBSSE, 2020).

According to the Sierra Leone 2015 population and housing census, 37.8% (about 2.4 million people) were students. Half of these students were in primary schools, while about 33% (close to 900,000) were in secondary schools. Over half of the secondary school students were adolescent schoolboys and girls, and more than half of the adolescent student population was adolescent schoolgirls (Statistic Sierra Leone, 2017). Due to socioeconomic and other challenges, schoolgirl dropout rates were high, and the rates became higher whenever girls made the transition from one education level to another (i.e., from primary to junior secondary, from junior secondary to senior secondary, and from senior secondary to university (Government of Sierra Leone, 2015) Even though tens of thousands of schoolgirls were impregnated during the school closures during the Ebola outbreak, the MBSSE reported that many schoolgirls were also impregnated during school closures for the COVID-19 outbreak. According to the international charity World Vision, about 1 million schoolgirls were impregnated in sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 school closures (World Vision, 2020). There were no statistics on the number or demographics of these girls. However, the lessons learned during the Ebola outbreak regarding the need to protect girls during extended school closures were not implemented to protect the girls.

In 2010, Sierra Leone introduced the Free Education program to ensure that all students in public primary and junior secondary schools received free and compulsory basic education (Mocan & Cannonier, 2012). After the devastating Ebola outbreak in 2015, the government of Sierra Leone, with support from donors, instituted public policies and practices to recover from the devastating impact of the Ebola outbreak with focus on the education and well-being of girls. The country introduced the Ebola Recovery Strategy, which included three focused areas (health, education, and economic recovery). The education pillar of the Ebola Recovery Strategy (a public policy document) was a rapid catch-up on learning time that was lost during the school closures and provided a safe school environment for girls (Government of Sierra Leone, 2015). In addition, in April 2015, the government of Sierra Leone introduced a policy banning visibly pregnant adolescents from continuing their education (Massaquoi et al., 2021). However, after another extended period of school closures to combat the COVID-19 outbreak, which led to the impregnation of many teenage schoolgirls, the government of Sierra Leone lifted the ban on pregnant schoolgirls attending mainstream schools to allow the tens of thousands of schoolgirls who were impregnated during the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks to return to mainstream schools. On April 27, 2021, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion Policy, which focused on creating an enabling an inclusive environment that eradicated stigma, harassment, intolerance, and exclusion of any type. This policy emphasized the inclusion of historically marginalized groups such as pregnant girls, parent learners, and children with disabilities (MBSSE, 2021). The formulation and implementation of these policies was intended to improve

access to education in Sierra Leone. This was evidenced by the increase in primary school completion rate at 75%, which was higher than the West African regional average of 69%, and improved gender parity (World Bank Group, 2020). However, inadequate resources by the government of Sierra Leone posed a key challenge for the implementation of these policies. Nevertheless, formulating these policies demonstrated a bold intention by the government of Sierra Leone to prioritize girls' education.

The current study addressed the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education. In addition to the challenges, the study addressed how to overcome these challenges and provide a good and protective learning environment for adolescent schoolgirls in rural communities in Sierra Leone. The study included proposed measures to protect adolescent schoolgirls in the face of pandemics and other disasters that would lead to extended school closures. The study focused on the perceptions of the schoolgirls, parents, and other education stakeholders regarding how they can leverage community-led structures to provide a protective school environment that can support the learning of adolescent schoolgirls. In addition, the study added to the literature on the impact of the war and the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in Sierra Leone.

Problem Statement

The frequent disruptions to education in Sierra Leone due to emergencies that led to extended school closures have disproportionately impacted the education of adolescent schoolgirls. Since 1990, Sierra Leone has seen major emergencies that required global attention. These emergencies included a decade long rebel war between 1991 and 2002,

the largest Ebola outbreak in living memory between 2014 and 2015, and the COVID-19 outbreak. All of these emergencies led to long periods of school closures and disproportionately affected adolescent schoolgirls. In addition to participating in the war and being dropped out of schools, many adolescent schoolgirls were impregnated during these emergencies. Over 15,000 adolescent schoolgirls were recorded to have been impregnated and dropped out of schools during the Ebola outbreak (Betancourt et al., 2008). Due to these circumstances, it was important to investigate how COVID-19 had impacted adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone.

The 10 years civil war in Sierra Leone left the education sector in poor condition (Shepler & Williams, 2017). The war led to the closure of 1,300 schools across the country, and by 2001 forced about 70% of all school-age children out of schools (Ozirik, 2015). As the country recovered from the devastation of the civil war, it was hit by the largest Ebola outbreak in living memory. In August 2014, the WHO declared the Ebola outbreak an emergency (Kamradt-Scott, 2015). In response to the declaration, the government of Sierra Leone, as part of its efforts to contain the spread of the virus, closed all schools for 7 months. This closure disrupted the education of 1.7 million pupils in the country (Government of Sierra Leone, 2015). By the end of the Ebola outbreak in 2015, the virus had killed 4,000 Sierra Leoneans, including 80 teachers and many students. The virus left many pupils orphaned and over 15,000 adolescent schoolgirls impregnated and out of school (Menzel, 2019). Sierra Leone, with support from donors, instituted policies and practices to recover from the devastating impact of the Ebola outbreak with a focus on the education and safety of girls. The country introduced the Ebola Recovery Strategy,

which included three focused areas (health, education, and economic recovery). The education pillar of the Ebola Recovery Strategy (a public policy document) was a rapid catch-up on learning time that was lost during the school closures and providing safe school environment for girls (Government of Sierra Leone, 2015). On March 31, 2020, as part of its effort to contain the COVID-19 outbreak, the government of Sierra Leone closed all schools in the country. This school closure left about 2.2 million students out of schools (MBSSE, 2020). In September 2020, COVID-19 cases subsided in Sierra Leone, and the government reopened schools. Accelerated learning was reintroduced to catch up on lost time. Also, the government policy that banned pregnant schoolgirls from attending mainstream schools was lifted to allow the tens of thousands of schoolgirls who were impregnated during the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks to return to mainstream schools.

The COVID-19 outbreak had a devastating effect on an already fragile education system and the country's economy. Sierra Leone's 2020 pass rate for entrance exams into universities and other tertiary-level educational institutions was 4.5%, which was far below the West Africa regional average for 2020 (MBSSE, 2020). This poor pass rate was even worse among adolescent schoolgirls (MBSSE, 2020). The disruption to the school system as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak had the potential to exacerbate this poor pass rate among schoolgirls, compromise the safety of adolescent schoolgirls, and worsen the overall academic performance of the schoolgirls.

The long and frequent instabilities of Sierra Leone rendered the country unable to reform its public policies, especially those related to girls' education and safety. Until

2007, Sierra Leone does not have a comprehensive legal and policy framework to protect the basic human rights (including rights to education) of women and children. However, to enhance women's protection and empowerment, Sierra Leone enacted the three Gender Acts (the Domestic Violence Act, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, and the Devolution of Estate Act; M'Cormack-Hale & Beoku-Betts, 2015). In addition, Sierra Leone enacted the Child Rights Act 2007 as public legislation and policy to protect children, with specific provisions to protect the rights of young mothers (Veale et al., 2017). Over the past decade, Sierra Leone has enacted many laws and public policies that enhanced girls' education. In 2010, Sierra Leone introduced the Free Education Policy to ensure that all students in public primary and junior secondary schools received free and compulsory basic education (Mocan & Cannonier, 2012). In 2018, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) program to provide free and quality education for students in all public primary and junior and senior secondary schools. On April 27, 2021, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion Policy, which focused on creating an enabling and inclusive environment that eradicated stigma, harassment, intolerance, and exclusion of any type (MBSSE, 2021). However, government policies in Sierra Leone are largely funded by international aid partners (Kargbo & Sen, 2014). Inadequate resources have hindered the government's ability to implement these public policies.

The issue that prompted me to search the literature was that the 10 years civil war in Sierra Leone left the education sector in poor condition (Shepler & Williams, 2017). The war led to the closure of 1,300 schools across the country, and by 2001 forced about

70% of all school-age children out of schools (Ozirik, 2015). As the country recovered from the devastation of the civil war, it was hit by the largest Ebola outbreak in living memory. In August 2014, the WHO declared the Ebola outbreak an emergency (Kamradt-Scott, 2015). In response to the declaration, the government of Sierra Leone, as part of its efforts to contain the spread of the virus, closed all schools for 7 months. This closure disrupted the education of 1.7 million pupils in the country (Government of Sierra Leone, 2015). By the end of the Ebola outbreak in 2015, the virus had killed 4,000 Sierra Leoneans, including 80 teachers and many students. The virus left many pupils orphaned and over 15,000 adolescent schoolgirls impregnated and out of school (Menzel, 2019). Sierra Leone, with support from donors, instituted policies and practices to recover from the devastating impact of the Ebola outbreak with focus on the education and safety of girls. The country introduced the Ebola Recovery Strategy, which included three focused areas (health, education, and economic recovery). The education pillar of the Ebola Recovery Strategy (a public policy document) was a rapid catch-up on learning time that was lost during the school closures and provided a safe school environment for girls (Government of Sierra Leone, 2015). However, on March 31, 2020, as part of its effort to contain the COVID-19 outbreak, the government of Sierra Leone closed all schools in the country. This school closure left about 2.2 million students out of schools (MBSSE, 2020). In September 2020, COVID-19 cases subsided in Sierra Leone, and the government reopened schools. Accelerated learning was reintroduced to catch up on lost time. Also, the government policy that banned pregnant schoolgirls from attending

mainstream schools was lifted to allow the tens of thousands of schoolgirls who were impregnated during the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks to return to mainstream schools.

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The long and frequent instabilities of Sierra Leone rendered the country unable to reform its public policies, especially those related to girls' education and safety. Until 2007, Sierra Leone did not have a comprehensive legal and policy framework to protect the basic human rights (including rights to education) of women and children. However, to enhance women's protection and empowerment, Sierra Leone enacted the three Gender Acts (the Domestic Violence Act, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, and the Devolution of Estate Act; M'Cormack-Hale & Beoku-Betts, 2015). In addition, Sierra Leone enacted the Child Rights Act 2007 as public legislation and policy to protect children, with specific provisions to protect the rights of young mothers (Veale et al., 2017). Over the past decade, Sierra Leone has enacted many laws and public policies that enhanced girls' education. In 2010, Sierra Leone introduced the Free Education Policy to ensure that all students in public primary and junior secondary

schools received free and compulsory basic education (Mocan & Cannonier, 2012). In 2018, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the FQSE program to provide free and quality education for students in all public primary and junior and senior secondary schools. However, government policies are largely funded by the international aid partners (Kargbo & Sen, 2014). Inadequate resources have hindered the government's ability to implement these public policies.

The current study addressed the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone, and the implications for policy formulation, reforms, and implementation on the education of adolescent schoolgirls during the COVID-19 period. This study may provide insight into the impact of the extended school closure on the well-being and pass rates of adolescent schoolgirls. The study may provide recommendations on how to protect and retain adolescent schoolgirls in schools and improve their academic performance. Moreover, the results of this study may influence Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education to formulate, reform, and implement public policies that support the education and well-being of schoolgirls. Also, this study may provide useful information to the education sector stakeholders (including the government of Sierra Leone, schools, donors, and researchers) regarding the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone and the related implications of educational policy reforms and implementations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone, and the public

policy implications on adolescent schoolgirls' education during the COVID-19 period. The timing and relevance of this study may enable it to contribute to clarifying the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education, particularly in rural parts of Sierra Leone and similar countries. In addition, the result of this study may help the government of Sierra Leone and its partners formulate and implement public policies that can support the education and safety of adolescent schoolgirls.

Research Question

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of the school community on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone?

RQ2: How have the members of rural schools in Sierra Leone experienced government policy responses to COVID-19?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was based on feminist theory, punctuated equilibrium theory, and Heidegger's phenomenological theory because phenomenology was the research design of this study. The feminist theory for this study focused on gender educational empowerment. Feminist theory is a change-oriented scholarly practice challenging oppression and working toward justice. The feminist theory is rooted in and responsible to movements for equality, freedom, and justice (Ferguson, 2017). I used feminist theory that related to gender empowerment, with an emphasis on girls' access to education (see Pärnebjörk, 2016). For the purpose of this study, gender was defined as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on 'perceived' differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (Scott, 1986, p.

1067 & 1069). Feminist theory is not just about women. The greatest achievements of many feminist theorists reflect intense political passions over the best ways to understand and improve the lives of women, men, children, other species, and the whole planet (Ferguson, 2017).

Gender as related to feminism (or women's liberation movement) originated in the United States in the 18th century. Since this original movement, there have been several movements to promote the rights and welfare of women and girls throughout the United States and the rest of the world (Pärnebjörk, 2016). These movements have come a long way to promote and protect the rights of women at the international and national levels. However, there is still a long way to go, as many countries and communities still hold various levels of prejudices that impede the rights and welfare of women and girls. In addition, feminism and gender theories are broad, but I focused on gender empowerment (particularly adolescent schoolgirls' empowerment) from the lens of educational empowerment. Traditional concepts recognize higher education as an instrument of personal development. Educational empowerment helps in developing an individual's intellectual horizons, well-being, and potential for socioeconomic empowerment (Mandal, 2013).

From the public policy reforms and implementation perspective, I also relied on the punctuated equilibrium theory. This theory states that policies would adapt incrementally over time. However, policies would also be subject to periodic large changes called punctuations. This theory recognizes the balanced public policy must promote stability and maintain flexibility to meet changing demands in the environment

(Flink, 2019). In addition, punctuated equilibrium theory states that policy changes are mostly small, incremental alterations to existing policy (Flink, 2019). Baumgartner and Jones (2012, as cited in Kuhlmann & Heijden, 2018) noted that the development of this theory was based on empirical studies of the American policy process in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although existing theoretical frameworks of the policy process used to focus on stability, Baumgartner and Jones (2012, as cited in Kuhlmann & Heijden, 2018) found that stability was only one side of the issue. Baumgartner and Jones (2012, as cited in Kuhlmann & Heijden, 2018) claimed that policies tend to be stable for a long time, but that this stability can sometimes be interrupted by rapid and substantial policy change.

The current study was based on the qualitative phenomenological approach from Heidegger's interpretive tradition. According to Cohen (1987, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004), one scholar who modified and built on the work of Husserl was Heidegger, who challenged some of the assumptions about how phenomenology could guide meaningful inquiry. Heidegger's ideas in this respect comprised the interpretive, or hermeneutic, research tradition (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Solomon (1987, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004) noted that in relation to the study of human experience, hermeneutics goes beyond mere description of core concepts and essences to look for meanings embedded in common life practices. These meanings are not always apparent to the participants but can be gleaned from the narratives produced by them. The focus of a hermeneutic inquiry is what humans experience rather than what they consciously know (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

The situation of adolescent schoolgirls in Sierra Leone was a feminist and gender issue in which the education of adolescent schoolgirls had been repeatedly interrupted by instabilities such as war, the Ebola outbreak, and the COVID-19 outbreak. In all these interruptions to learning, schoolgirls were disproportionately affected compared to boys. Many girls faced issues of abuse (some sexual in nature). Due to these abuses and other socioeconomic conditions, many schoolgirls were unable to return to school, and they became dropouts in society. Even though Sierra Leone enacted public policies to protect the welfare of schoolgirls so that they can continue learning, these frequent instabilities made these policies difficult to implement. I used feminism and punctuated equilibrium theory to understand how the extended school closure due to the COVID-19 outbreak affected the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone. I also explored how the public policies to protect adolescent schoolgirls' education had been implemented to provide a safe and conducive learning environment for adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was qualitative. I employed the phenomenological design to collect and analyze data. According to Creswell (1998, as cited in Maxfield & Russell, 2017), the phenomenological approach is a qualitative method used to explore and interpret deep human experiences. The simplicity and flexibility of the phenomenological approach allows the researcher to engage participants in real life (Maxfield & Russell, 2017).

According to Erhard et al. (2010, as cited in Eddles-Hirsch, 2015) and Husserl (1927, as cited in Eddles-Hirsch, 2015), phenomenology is a discipline that provides access to being and action as a first-person experience or phenomena. Creswell (1998, as cited in Eddles-Hirsch, 2015) stated that phenomenology is oriented theoretically and requires guidelines but does not make deductions from propositions that can be tested empirically. Rather, it demonstrates its findings/premises through descriptive analyses. van Manen (2014, as cited in Maxfield & Russell, 2017) noted that the phenomenological approach allows readers gain an understanding of how the phenomena of human perception are experienced. According to Creswell (2013, as cited in Eddles-Hirsch, 2015), phenomenologists are interested in the analytical and descriptive experience of phenomena by individuals in their everyday world, the phenomenological term for this being the lifeworld.

Semistructured face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the participants' personal experiences on the impact of COVID-19 on the education of adolescent schoolgirls and the related policy implications. The phenomenological approach allowed the detailed exploration of the participants' views to be combined with other outside views and sources (see Alase, 2017). The interview questions used for the in-depth semistructured interviews were prepared and approved in advance by the institutional review board (IRB) to guide the interviews. The interviews were recorded using digital recording devices, which were scripted and later analyzed. Turner (2010, as cited in Kallio et al., 2016) noted that the form of a semistructured interview guide is considered loose and flexible, which allows dialogue during an interview, provides the

opportunity to change the order of the questions, and facilitates easy movement from question to question. The participants were consulted, and their consents were obtained before the interviews. Minors were not engaged for the interviews. Therefore, the consents of their parents or guardians were not obtained. As noted by Mottram (2011, as cited in O’Keeffe et al., 2016), correct introduction of the study to potential participants is essential when gaining informed consent. This involves a clear and concise explanation of the purpose of the research, what the interview will involve, and how the researcher is going to use and store the information collected. The respondents are under no obligation to answer any of the questions if they do not wish to (O’Keeffe et al., 2016).

The data collected during the research were analyzed. Computer software was employed to ensure swift and effective analysis (see Oswald, 2019). Moustakas’s structured method of data analysis formula was employed to analyze the data. According to Braun et al. (2019, as cited in Lester et al., 2020), thematic analysis is best defined as an umbrella term designating different approaches aimed at identifying patterns across qualitative data sets. Due to its broad and flexible nature, thematic analysis has been widely used in diverse fields including psychology, medicine, health services, tourism, human resource development, and education (Lester et al., 2020).

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, definitions of the terms below are outlined as follows:

Adolescent schoolgirls: Schoolgirls who are in the process of developing from a child into an adult. Most adolescent schoolgirls are teenagers in the final year of junior secondary school and senior secondary school.

Epidemic: The Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks in Sierra Leone and in some cases abroad.

Instabilities: The Sierra Leone war and the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks. Sierra Leone had gone through a 10 years rebel war and experienced Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks that killed many people and disrupted the education of millions of students.

Lived experiences: Events that are lived through by a person or group.

Outbreaks: The Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks.

Assumptions

Assumptions are elements of a study that are believed to be correct but cannot be confirmed with factual accuracy to be true (Matthiesen & Nelius, 2018). The notable assumptions of the current study were that the participants provided true and honest views of their life experiences, and that the sample size of this study provided an adequate representation of the target population and the topic of this study.

Scope and Delimitations

The study focused on adolescent schoolgirls because of how extended closures of schools due to war, pandemics, or other disasters in Sierra Leone disproportionately affected adolescent schoolgirls (see World Bank Group, 2020). These negative effects were more severe and prevalent in rural communities of Sierra Leone. The participants were restricted to official members of the secondary school community. I chose the

Western Area Rural District in Sierra Leone as the target location for this study because of the disproportionate impact of emergencies in rural Sierra Leone compared to urban parts of the country.

The focus of the study was how the COVID-19 outbreak affected adolescent schoolgirls and the related policy implications due to the history of how the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone impacted adolescent schoolgirls (see Menzel, 2019). The COVID-19 outbreak led to the closure of schools for 6 months. The current study addressed how these extended closures of schools affected the learning and well-being of adolescent schoolgirls, and the related public policy implications.

Limitations

This study focused on the lived experiences of the participants, who were official members of secondary schools, to explore how the COVID-19 outbreak impacted adolescent schoolgirls' education in the Western Area Rural District of Sierra Leone. Relying on the experiences of the participants was supported and reflected in many sections of this study, including the conceptual framework, research questions, research method and approach, and the data collection method. I employed qualitative phenomenology and conducted in-depth interviews to understand and interpret the lived experiences of the participants.

Despite the merits of employing the qualitative phenomenological approach and in-depth interviews for this study, this approach had some fundamental limitations. The use of the phenomenological approach limited the study to the lived experiences of the participants. Limiting the study to this research approach meant that the study could not

be informed by other phenomena that were beyond the lived experiences of the participants. The other limitation was the selection of the participants and the in-depth interview method that was employed for the data collection. The participants were limited to official members of rural secondary schools in the Western Area Rural District of Sierra Leone, whose lived experiences informed this study. Also, the in-depth interview data collection method, if not adequately validated, was open to misrepresentations by the participants, which could have limited the credibility of the study. Some of these limitations were mitigated by triangulating the data collected from the diverse participants who were engaged in this study. In addition, the literature and policy documents that were already part of this study provided useful references and additional information for this study.

Significance

This study may help fill a gap in knowledge by focusing on how the COVID-19 outbreak impacted adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone. The 2020 global COVID-19 outbreak affected the education of schoolgirls all over the world. Going to school is the best public policy tool available to raise skills (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). There was a gap in literature regarding understanding the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls and the related public policy implications. The COVID-19 outbreak had the potential to disproportionately affect countries like Sierra Leone, which has weak health and education systems, without adequate structures to protect vulnerable adolescent schoolgirls (Ozisk, 2015).

This study extended existing studies of the Ebola outbreak and the rebel war in Sierra Leone that left millions of students and thousands of adolescent schoolgirls impregnated (see Menzel, 2019). Because the government of Sierra Leone was trying to cope with the negative consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education sector, the results of this study may provide information on how the government can formulate and implement public policies that support the education and safety of adolescent schoolgirls. Scholars, researchers, and students may build on this study to provide scholarly information on the impact of COVID-19 on adolescent schoolgirls in Sierra Leone and across the world, and the related public policies that are to be formulated and implemented to support the learning and well-being of adolescent schoolgirls. The results of this study may effect positive social change on the education and well-being of adolescent schoolgirls by informing the government of Sierra Leone and other stakeholders of the socioeconomic experiences of adolescent schoolgirls during the COVID-19 outbreak. The information provided by this study may enable the government to formulate and implement appropriate public policies to support the safety and education of adolescent schoolgirls.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the topic of this study with a background illustrating the problems and gaps. This chapter presented a broad socioeconomic description of Sierra Leone outlining the recent instabilities (war, Ebola, and COVID-19 outbreaks) that have affected the country. In addition, I explained how these instabilities had affected education in Sierra Leone, with specific emphasis on the effects on adolescent schoolgirls

and the related policy implications. Also, I discussed the conceptual framework, the feminist and punctuation equilibrium theories, as the guiding framework for this study. Moreover, I presented the two research questions. I also discussed how this study would be significant to the users to promote the education and welfare of adolescent schoolgirls, with a clear outline of the limitations and significance of the study.

Chapter 2 includes the literature search strategy, a review of the literature on how extended periods of school closures due to instabilities such as COVID-19, Ebola outbreak, and war affected the education and safety of adolescent schoolgirls, and the related public policy implications. Also, Chapter 2 includes a detailed discussion of the feminist and punctuated equilibrium theories, with specific focus on the education and well-being of adolescent schoolgirls. I also discuss Heidegger's phenomenological approach.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone, and the public policy implications on adolescent schoolgirls' education during the COVID-19 period. Adolescent girls are susceptible to sexual violence in schools. Yale Law School et al. (2013, as cited in Reilly, 2014) noted that the perception that a girl has attained adulthood in Sierra Leone is associated with the physical development of her body rather than her age. This means that once a girl has visibly passed through puberty, she is considered to have attained adulthood even if she is still in her early teenage years (Reilly, 2014). Also, in addition to challenging learning conditions, adolescent schoolgirls are exposed to many abuses including teenage pregnancies and school dropouts during extended periods of school closures. Tens of thousands of adolescent schoolgirls were impregnated, and many of them dropped out of schools due to long periods of school closures during pandemic periods (Amnesty International, 2015). The COVID-19 outbreak led to an extended closure of schools in Sierra Leone and exacerbated the economic hardship in the country. Extended school closures and economic hardships are conditions that worsened the increase in teenage pregnancies during the Ebola outbreak in 2014–2015 (Massaquoi et al., 2021). The current study was one of the early studies to explore how COVID-19 had impacted adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone. The result of this study extended existing studies of the COVID-19 and Ebola outbreaks, the rebel war, and other gender and related public policy issues in Sierra Leone that left

millions of students out of school and tens of thousands of adolescent schoolgirls impregnated.

This chapter focuses on the literature review of the impact of the instabilities (war and COVID-19 and Ebola outbreaks) in Sierra Leone on teenage schoolgirls, with particular focus on education and the related public policy implications. In addition, I review the literature supporting the conceptual framework of the feminist and punctuated equilibrium theories. Furthermore, this chapter includes a discussion of the literature search strategies, which includes the databases used to conduct the searches and the key terms that were searched during the literature review.

Literature Research Strategy

To locate and review articles that were related to my topic, I searched many databases. The keywords and databases searched included the *impact of COVID-19*, *impact on education*, *adolescent schoolgirls*, *Sierra Leone*, *teenage pregnancy*, *sexual violence*, *public policy*, *impact of Ebola*, *impact of war*, *economy of Sierra Leone*, *feminism theory*, and *punctuated equilibrium theory* in the following databases: EBSCO ebooks, ERIC, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, ProQuest Central, SAGE journals, Walden Library Books, Google Scholar, and the website of the Sierra Leone MBSSE. The literature review was customized to focus on peer-reviewed journals on how the COVID-19 outbreak impacted the education of adolescent schoolgirls in Sierra Leone and the related public policy implications. The filtered searches that I conducted focused on peer-reviewed articles that were published after 2014. However, in specific cases, articles that were published before 2014 were referenced.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was based on the feminist theory and the punctuated equilibrium theory and also included Heidegger's phenomenological theory because phenomenology was the research design of this study. The challenges adolescent girls face during extended school closures due to pandemics or wars were both feminist and policy issues. Therefore, it was appropriate to base this study on both the feminist theory for the gender-related issues and the punctuated equilibrium theory for the policy reforms and implementation issues.

The feminist theory for this study focused on gender educational empowerment. Feminist theory is a change-oriented scholarly practice, challenging oppression and working toward justice. The feminist theory is rooted in and responsible to movements for equality, freedom, and justice (Ferguson, 2017). I relied on a theory that relates to feminist and gender empowerment, with an emphasis on girls' access to education (see Pärnebjörk, 2016). For the purpose of this study, gender was defined as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on 'perceived' differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (Scott, 1986, p. 1067 & 1069). Feminist theory is not only about women. The greatest achievements of many feminist theorists reflect intense political passions over the best ways to understand and improve the lives of women and men, children, other species, and the whole planet (Ferguson, 2017). Gender as related to feminism (or women's liberation movement) originated in the United States in the 18th century. Since this original movement, there have been several movements to promote the rights and welfare of women and girls

throughout the United States and the rest of the world (Pärnebjörk, 2016). Traditional concepts recognize higher education as an instrument of personal development.

Educational empowerment helps develop an individual's intellectual horizons, well-being, and potential for socioeconomic empowerment (Mandal, 2013).

Beauvoir (2011, as cited in Ferguson, 2017) observed that men defined the world from their own point of view, which they confused with the absolute truth. The creation of a voice for women, or for particular groups of women, entails articulating the world from those women's points of view, identifying the locations from which they speak, and generating a critique of prevailing conditions and a vision of a better world. Women who inhabit particular identity categories, such as transgender, working class, or African American, as well as women who have been subjected to certain victimizations, such as rape or trafficking, tell their stories to challenge the dominant gender, class, or racial imaginaries, and to contest the dominant narratives (Ferguson, 2017). Feminist theory operates within what was recognized as a set of transdisciplinary concepts, which included sex, gender, woman, sexuality, and sexual difference, and the use of these concepts (particularly gender) in feminist philosophy has been the most far-reaching continuation in the late modern days of the critique of philosophy initiated by Marx and pursued by critical theory (Sandford, 2015). This diversity and vastness of feminism made it far-reaching, multidimensional, and also complex.

Amina Mama (1997, as cited in Connell, 2015) emphasized that to understand violence against women in postcolonial Africa, individuals must understand the violence of colonialism; to understand that they must start with gender relations and gender

violence at the imperial source. However, there is still a long way to go, as many countries and communities still hold various levels of prejudices that impede the rights and welfare of women and girls. In addition, the feminist theory is broad, but I focused on gender empowerment (particularly schoolgirls' empowerment) from the lens of educational empowerment. Traditional concepts recognized higher education as an instrument of personal development. Educational empowerment helps develop an individual's intellectual horizons, well-being, and potential for socioeconomic empowerment (Mandal, 2013).

The punctuated equilibrium theory states that policies would adapt incrementally over time. However, policies are also subject to periodic large changes called punctuations. This theory recognizes the balance public policy must maintain between promoting stability and maintaining flexibility to meet changing demands in the environment. In addition, punctuated equilibrium theory states that policy changes are mostly small, incremental alterations to existing policy (Flink, 2019). Baumgartner and Jones (2012, as cited in Kuhlmann & Heijden, 2018) noted that the development of this theory was based on empirical studies of the American policy process in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although existing theoretical frameworks of the policy process used to focus on stability, Baumgartner and Jones (2012, as cited in (Kuhlmann & Heijden, 2018) found that stability was only one side of the issue. Baumgartner and Jones (2012, as cited in (Kuhlmann & Heijden, 2018) claimed that policies tend to be stable for a long time, but that this stability can sometimes be interrupted by rapid and substantial policy change.

The punctuated equilibrium theory of public policy (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2009, as cited in Jennings et al., 2020) has been used to explain the observation that policymaking is often characterized by extended periods of stability and equilibrium, but occasionally undergoes large-scale policy shifts that upset the status quo (Jennings et al., 2020). The key components of punctuated equilibrium theory are (a) policy monopolies as institutional arrangements that maintain stable and entrenched patterns of decision making around an issue, supported by (b) an established issue frame or definition, and (c) positive feedback processes that give rise to sudden realignments in public policy (i.e., policy punctuations) due to disruption of those policy monopolies and issue definitions. This theoretical framework provides important insights into the sometimes unstable dynamics of policy change (Jennings et al., 2020).

According to Cairney and Weible (2015, as cited in Fern'andez -i-Marin et al., 2019), Cashore and Howlett (2007, as cited in Fern'andez -i-Marin et al., 2019), and McGee and Jones (2019, as cited in Fern'andez -i-Marin et al., 2019), the policy subsystem is the central building block for most of the theoretical frameworks dealing with the analysis of policy change. Policy subsystems are defined by a substantive issue area (domain), a geographical scope, and a relatively stable set of actors who interact within well-defined institutional boundaries (Fern'andez -i-Marin et al., 2019). The rationale behind this dominant focus on policy subsystems is that the typical mode of policymaking is considered to be driven by dynamics that are endogenous to the subsystem. The policy agenda is usually controlled by stable networks of politicians, bureaucrats, and interest group representatives operating in a given domain. As a result,

policies display high stability over time and undergo only incremental changes (Fernández-Marin et al., 2019).

The current study was based on the qualitative phenomenological approach and Heidegger's interpretive tradition. According to Cohen (1987, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004), one scholar who modified and built on the work of Husserl was Heidegger (a student of Husserl) who challenged some of the assumptions about how phenomenology could guide meaningful inquiry. Heidegger's ideas in this respect comprised the interpretive, or hermeneutic, research tradition. Thompson (1990, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004) stated that the word "hermeneutic" is derived from Hermes, a Greek god who was responsible for making clear (or interpreting) messages between gods. Spiegelberg (1976, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004) identified hermeneutics as a process and method for bringing out and making manifest what is normally hidden in human experience and human relations. Solomon (1987, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004) mentioned that in relation to the study of human experience, hermeneutics goes beyond mere description of core concepts and essences to look for meanings embedded in common life practices. These meanings are not always apparent to the participants but can be gleaned from the narratives produced by them. The focus of a hermeneutic inquiry is on what humans experience rather than what they consciously know (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

The situation of adolescent schoolgirls in Sierra Leone was a combination of feminist and policy reform and implementation issues. The education of adolescent schoolgirls in Sierra Leone has been repeatedly interrupted by instabilities such as war,

the Ebola outbreak, and the COVID-19 outbreak. In all of these interruptions to learning, schoolgirls have been disproportionately affected compared to boys. Many girls faced issues of abuse (some sexual in nature). Due to these abuses and other socioeconomic conditions, many schoolgirls were unable to return to schools, and they became dropouts in society. I used the feminist and punctuated equilibrium theories, from the lens of educational empowerment for adolescent schoolgirls, to understand how the extended school closure, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, affected the education and well-being of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

According to the World Bank (2014, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018), despite Sierra Leone's immense economic potentials, the country is one of the poorest countries in the world. Moyi (2013, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018) and Mulkeen and Chen (2008, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018) noted that poverty, along with civil war and inadequate educational investments, has resulted in some of the highest adult illiteracy rates and lowest school enrollment levels in Africa (Allen & McDermott, 2018). The instabilities in Sierra Leone included a 10-year rebel war, the largest Ebola outbreak in living memory, and the COVID-19 outbreak. These instabilities led to abuses and violence against adolescent schoolgirls that led some schoolgirls to be impregnated and drop out of school. During the rebel war, thousands of women and girls of all ages were subjected to widespread and systemic sexual violence, mostly by rebel forces (Denov, 2006). Even though extended school closures due to the Ebola and COVID-19 outbreaks affected the learning of most students, adolescent schoolgirls were

disproportionately affected (Jalloh & Raschid, 2018). Long periods of school closures have disproportionately led to abuses (many sexual in nature) and exacerbated the dropout rates among adolescent schoolgirls (Jalloh & Raschid, 2018). Long and frequent instabilities of Sierra Leone for extended periods rendered the country unable to reform and implement its public policies, especially those related to girls' education and safety. However, in 2007, to enhance women's protection and empowerment, Sierra Leone enacted the three Gender Acts (the Domestic Violence Act, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, and the Devolution of Estate Act; M'Cormack-Hale & Beoku-Betts, 2015). In addition, the country enacted the Child Rights Act 2007 as a public policy to protect children (Veale et al., 2017). Over the past decade, Sierra Leone has enacted many public policies to provide safe and quality education for adolescent girls. These include the Radical Inclusion Policy.

Extended Periods of School Closures That Affect Schoolgirls

Extended periods of school closures have the potential to disproportionately affect the education and well-being of schoolgirls. At the peak of school closures during the COVID-19 outbreak in April 2020, over 95% of countries fully or partially closed schools, affecting an unprecedented 1.725 billion children across the world (Smith, 2020). The effect of this extended periods of school closures on girls was indicated in the tens of thousands of adolescent schoolgirls who were impregnated during the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone (Amnesty International, 2015). Most of the impregnated schoolgirls were unable to return to school because of a government policy that banned pregnant girls from attending schools. However, this policy was lifted by the government

of Sierra Leone in 2020, after intense advocacy and pressure by donors and nongovernmental organizations. The government of Sierra Leone also enacted the Radical Inclusion Policy, which includes providing an enabling school environment to support the learning and well-being of adolescent schoolgirls (MBSSE, 2021).

Extended Periods of School Closures Due to a Decade of War

Sierra Leone's civil war (1991 to 2002) was notorious for its widespread killings, sexual violence, recruitment of child soldiers, and amputations. An estimated 70,000 people were killed, nearly half the country's 5 million people were internally and externally displaced, and much of the country's basic infrastructure destroyed (Gellman, 2015). During the Sierra Leone war, over 10,000 children were captured and forced to work as child soldiers for the rebels (Asangna, 2017). According to Orogun (2004, as cited in Asangna, 2017), the existence of diamonds in Sierra Leone laid the foundation for prolonged civil war as the enormous proceeds that were generated from the diamond trade were used for the purchase of ammunition.

According to Denov and Maclure (2006, as cited in Denov., 2006), in 2002, Physicians for Human Rights conducted a survey of female heads of households in communities of displaced persons in Sierra Leone. This survey calculated that as many as 215,000 to 257,000 Sierra Leonean women and girls may have been subjected to sexual violence during the conflict period. Also, thousands of Sierra Leonean women and girls were abducted by rebel forces and confined among their ranks for long periods. The adoptees were required to perform multiple roles that included domestic servants, espionage, and combat activities. Vast numbers of these women and girls were repeatedly

raped and forced into sexual slavery (Denov, 2006). Human Right Watch (2003, as cited in Denov, 2006) mentioned that, even with the highly militarised and patriarchal structure of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), as well as the secondary status of females within its ranks, girls still made up approximately 30% of the RUF. These girls were among the least secured, particularly regarding sexual violence. Although girls were forced to endure a variety of forms of victimizations and forced perpetration amid the RUF, Sierra Leonean girls have reported that it was the pervasive sexual victimization that was most devastating (Denov, 2006). One important standard deviation in conflict intensity reduced the educational attainment of pre-school, primary school, and secondary school-age children in Sierra Leone by between 0.3 and 0.5 years. This translated into a reduction in educational attainment by between one and almost two years of schooling when moving someone from one of the chiefdoms least affected by conflict to one of the most highly affected chiefdoms (Tillman, 2018).

Extended Periods of School Closures Due to Ebola Outbreak

On March 27th, 2014, Sierra Leone and Liberia confirmed that they had identified 14 suspected Ebola virus cases, and within 72 hours laboratory tests verified that cases had indeed appeared in Liberia (Kamradt-Scott, 2015). In August 2014, the WHO declared the Ebola outbreak an emergency. In response to this declaration, the government of Sierra Leone, as part of its efforts to contain the spread of the outbreak, closed all schools for 7 months. This closure disrupted the education of all 1.7 million students in the country (Jalloh & Raschid, 2018). Between 2014 and 2016, over 14,000 individuals in Sierra Leone were infected with the Ebola virus, over 4,000 individuals

died as a result of the disease, equivalent to a death rate of 28.5% (Jalloh & Raschid, 2018). The Ebola outbreak was finally declared over by WHO on March 17th, 2016, after 42 days (two incubation periods) had passed since the last Ebola patient tested negative (Wickramage, 2019).

Local conceptions of the Ebola virus also had profound implications for gender relations during the Ebola outbreak. Women were generally obligated to serve as caregivers, and this involved maintaining the bodily and environmental hygiene of the family, particularly in relation to children. During the Ebola outbreak, women's caregiving role placed them in regular contact with the bodily fluids of children and other dependents, leaving them little room to follow Ebola prevention protocols (Minor, 2017). In Sierra Leone, adolescent girls were more susceptible to sexual exploitations. During the Ebola outbreak, reports found that girls suffered far more violence and sexual exploitation when they were isolated, quarantined or moved to other areas to escape the outbreak. Research from the Eastern Region of Sierra Leone found that during the Ebola outbreak adolescent pregnancies increased by up to 65% in some targeted communities due to the socioeconomic conditions created by the outbreak (Massaquoi, et al., 2021).

Extended Periods of School Closures Due to COVID-19 Outbreak

In December 2019, an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus infection occurred in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. On January 30th, 2020, WHO declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern. This virus quickly spread across China and beyond. On February 12th, 2020, the WHO officially named the disease caused by the novel coronavirus as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-

19) (Zu, et al., 2020). By the July 2021, the COVID-19 virus has infected over 185 million people globally, killing over four million of those (World Health Organisation, 2021). Even though many vaccines are being rolled out in many developed countries, including Europe and the USA, most of the poor countries, including Sierra Leone, are yet to vaccinate majority of its population. Unfortunately, the virus continues to spread, and many people are still dying of the COVID-19 virus.

The first cases of the COVID-19 in Sierra Leone were documented at the end of March 2020, and nationwide lockdowns were declared in April 2020 (Buonsenso, et al., 2020). The date that the first cases of the virus were reported coincided with the end of second term of the school year. To control and mitigate the spread of the virus, the government of Sierra Leone closed schools and universities, and only reopened them in late September 2020 when the spread of the first wave of the virus subsided. This closure of schools left millions of Sierra Leonean students, from preprimary to university, out of schools for 6 months. The MBSSE conducted home tuition for primary and secondary school students through radio and TV teaching programs. The 2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey indicated that only 54.7% of households have a radio, which is 44% of rural households compared to 67% for urban households. Challengingly, just 18% of the population have TV, which is 38.7% in urban areas compared and 1.5% rural areas (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017). This limited access to radios and TVs created a problem for nationwide access to the teaching programs provided by the MBSSE. Students in rural areas were disproportionately disadvantaged. The back-to-school Study conducted by the UK AID funded Leh Wi Lan program for MBSSE showed that 70% of students were

unable to access the radio and TV teaching programs due to lack of access to radio or TV at home or other related socioeconomic conditions (Leh Wi Lan Programme, 2020).

Sexual Violence and Teenage Pregnancy

According to Statistics Sierra Leone and International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health International (2014, as cited in Cornish, et al., 2019), adolescents age 10–19 years constituted about 20% of Sierra Leone’s population, and many teenagers reached adulthood with little to no information about reproductive and sexual health (Cornish, et al., 2019). In the case of Sierra Leone, the Ebola epidemic of 2014 – 2015 and before that the civil war that raged from 1991-2002, resulted in high numbers of sexual violence against women including teenagers. According to the UNFP (2015, as cited in Denney, et al., 2015), teenage pregnancy has long been a problem in Sierra Leone. In 2013, the country ranked among the 10 highest in the world, with 28% of girls age 15-19 years pregnant or already having given birth at least once (Denney, et al., 2015).

Alarmingly, 34% of all pregnancies in the country occurred amongst teenage girls, and the adolescent fertility rate stood at 122 per 1000. Furthermore, an estimated 40% of all maternal deaths were among adolescents. Also, 50% of girls were married or in consensual union before the age of 18, whilst 95% of young women age 15–19 who were married or living with a partner were not using any contraceptive method (Bash-Taqi, et al., 2020). In addition, high rates of early marriage, low contraceptive prevalence amongst adolescents, poverty, sexual abuse, social norms, and transactional sex were all

identified as factors contributing to the high rate of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone (Bash-Taqi, et al., 2020).

The RUF, which perpetrated the over a decade long civil war in Sierra Leone, is one of the most notoriously violent rebel groups in Africa. Like most rebel groups, the RUF has been depicted as an overwhelmingly male enterprise, an interpretation that is reinforced by data collection that focused on male combatants and female victims (Marks, 2013). The Sierra Leone case has played a key role in shaping two phases of feminist research. The first has been an activist-oriented normative approach that foregrounded women as victims of wartime sexual violence and established a discourse in which women were the bodily sites of rape, which is a weapon, a targeted act of terror that served as one of the most extreme and effective forms of patriarchal control. The second phase has called for a corrective, agency-oriented examination of women as both perpetrators and victims who contributed to war (Marks, 2013).

Gorgen et al, (1998, as cited in Baiete-Coker, 2014) mentioned that Africa has a close to universal policy to expel pregnant girls from school. With this policy, combined with the high pregnancy rate among teenage girls, the chances for women to be educated are significantly limited. Without education, women are significantly restricted to participate in the labour force and contribute to meaningful economic development. As such, early childbearing is a significant deterrent to women's empowerment. Having said that, in 2020, the Government of Sierra Leone lifted a ban on pregnant schoolgirls attending school. This ban was introduced in 2015 when schools reopened aftermath the Ebola outbreak. This change of policy came about after significant pressure of the

government of Sierra Leone by donors and nongovernment organizations. This new policy can support the education of teenage girls and contributes to women's empowerment. In addition, the government of Sierra Leone has enacted the Radical Inclusion Policy to provide a supportive and protective learning environment for girls and other vulnerable groups of students (MBSSE, 2021).

Irish Aid and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2015, as cited in Menzel, 2019) reported that the closing down of schools as a quarantine measure during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 rendered girls more vulnerable to sexual abuse as they were unsupervised and more visible to men who can take advantage. The heightened economic distress and food insecurity in the country put pressures on girls to engage in transactional sex. Perpetrators knew that they would likely get away with abuses because the crisis had exacerbated the problems of an already malfunctioning system and the possibility of addressing sexual abuses became more elusive. According to Plan Sierra Leone (2011, as cited in Reilly, 2014), girls revealed that student-teacher sexual relationships are common. Many girls agreed that they were sometimes forced by their male teachers to have sex with them (Reilly, 2014).

According to Yale Law School et al. (2013, as cited in Reilly, 2014), adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence in schools. In Sierra Leone, the perception that a girl has attained adulthood is associated with her physical development rather than her age. Therefore, once a girl has visibly passed through puberty, she is considered to have attained adulthood, even if she is still in her early teenage years. Also, the fact that Junior Secondary Schools are often located long distances from their homes

means girls must often travel long distances or stay with extended family, increasing their vulnerability to abuses and exploitations.

Education and Well-Being of Girls

In Sierra Leone, girls are 23.4% less likely to attend secondary education than boys. This difference between the sexes increased the gender gap in educational attainment. As noted by Grant and Behrman (2010, as cited in Kamanda, et al., 2016) and Kazeem et al., (2010, as cited in Kamanda, et al., 2016), many countries, particularly those in West and Central Africa, had low gender parity ratios, which suggested that there is an underrepresentation of girls in the education system. As a result, girls and women in these countries lagged behind in the benefits of education, including poor health outcomes and economic prosperity. In post-war contexts, education is widely regarded as a key force for gender equity. However, in Sierra Leone, 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. Having said that, 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 challenging the supremacy of patriarchy and gendered violence. What remains to be seen is whether these efforts can foster a women's movement capable of altering the social structures of patriarchal power in Sierra Leone (Maclure & Denov, 2009).

Partly due to constant instabilities in Sierra Leone, girls' access to education was severely curtailed. According to Sierra Leone's Ministry of Youth, Education, and

Science (2001, as cited in Maclure & Denov, 2009), during the height of the civil war, only 20% of eligible girls were enrolled in primary school. Many of the schools that did function consisted of makeshift structures in internally displaced people's camps.

According to Bennell, Harding, and Rogers-Wright (2004, as cited in Nishimuko, 2009), about 50% of health and educational facilities were destroyed. Nearly 90% of the school buildings across the country were completely destroyed or heavily damaged. Also, according to Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (2007, as cited in Nishimuko, 2009), the government's strong commitment to achieving education for all by 2015 resulted in a rapid increase in the number of enrolled pupils. The net enrolment for primary education increased from 42% in 1990 to 63% in 2004. The number of enrolled pupils increased from 659,503 in 2001/2002 school year to 1,280,853 in the 2004/2005 school year. This was tremendous progress in access to primary education. However, Nishimuko (2007, as cited in Nishimuko, 2009) noted that the government does not have the ability to provide appropriate finances, logistics, and personnel to improve the educational services. According to Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education Science and Technology (2007, as cited in Nishimuko, 2009), more than 30% of children at the primary education ages were still out of school, and national primary completion rates were below 60% (64% for boys and 48% for girls). These indicators highlighted the government's inability to provide adequate education services for all children. The illiteracy rate, especially among girls was high, with 66% of Sierra Leonean women had never been to school, compared with 50% of men. According to Sierra Leone's Ministry of Youth, Education, and Science (2001, as cited in Denney, Gordon, &

Ibrahim, 2015), schools were targeted for destruction, and by the late 1990s an estimated 70% of children in Sierra Leone had no access to education. Also, as indicated by the Demographic Health Survey (2008, as cited in Denney, et al., 2015), 71% of teenage mothers were illiterates and this was directly related to the poor health seeking behaviors, including low contraceptive rate of 1.2% for ages 15-19. In addition to the educational challenges, early teenage pregnancy can cause severe health problems for both the mother and child (Denney, et al., 2015). According to Thorpe (2002, as cited in Maclure & Denov, 2009), by the time the war ended in 2002, a generation of Sierra Leonean girls had imbibed a culture of violence as combatants, refugees, and victims of atrocities. Also, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Sierra Leone (2005, as cited in Maclure & Denov, 2009), very few girls had even the most basic literacy skills.

According to the World Bank (2007, as cited in Maclure & Denov, 2009), aid agencies and government authority worked collaboratively to support girls' education. This support included provision of school materials, construction of classrooms, training of teachers, and safe schooling environment for girls. These initiatives stimulated a steady expansion of female enrolment rates in formal and nonformal education in the past 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. According to Bennell et al, (2004) and the Government of Sierra Leone (2006, as cited in Maclure & Denov, 2009), in view of the recent rate of educational reconstruction, estimates were that Sierra Leone may achieve universal primary enrolments by 2015. However, despite the extraordinarily rapid progress of

educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone, and notable efforts devoted to expanding girls' enrolment in schools and in other nonschool 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. Problems within the expanding educational system itself and fundamental constraints integral to the broader socioeconomic context of Sierra Leone, weigh heavily against the ideal of education as a catalyst for female emancipation. According to Sierra Leone's Ministry of Science and Technology (2007, as cited in Maclure & Denov, 2009), above and beyond these comprehensive efforts to expand the formal school system, additional measures were taken to ensure a steady boost in female enrolment levels. Besides formally abolishing school fees, the government of Sierra Leone extended supplemental financial and material assistance to female pupils in disadvantaged rural regions and adopted a policy of providing free Junior Secondary enrolment to girls in the North and East regions of the country. In 2018, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the FQSE initiative, which is the flagship of the current president. The FQSE introduced free education (no school fees) for primary and secondary education for all boys and girls. This new initiative aim to provide improved access to education for girls and boys in the country. On April, 27th 2021, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion Policy, to provide enabling school environment for girls and other vulnerable students (MBSSE, 2021).

Effects of Poverty on Girls' Education

According to the Government of Sierra Leone (2010, as cited in McPerson, 2012), despite Sierra Leone's vast extractive resources including diamonds, gold, bauxite, and

reserves of rutile that are among the world's largest, the country had consistently ranked among the least developed in the UNDP Human Development Index and is one of the poorest with a per capita income of about US \$700. Sierra Leone was one of the world's most unequal income distributions, with a Gini Index of 66. As a result, over 70% of the population subsists below the poverty line of one dollar a day. Poverty was widespread in Sierra Leone. According to the Government of Sierra Leone Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2005-2007, as cited in McFerson, 2012), about 26% of the population cannot afford a basic diet and, 70% subsist below the poverty line of \$1.25 a day. There was wide disparity in geographical distribution, with poverty especially prevalent in rural areas, reaching over 80% in the poorest districts, partly from destruction of tree crops during the war (McFerson, 2012). As noted by the Foreign Policy (2008, as cited in McFerson, 2012), as poor as Sierra Leoneans were in general, the poverty situation of women were worse. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper-II, (SL-PRSP- 2009, as cited in McFerson, 2012) noted that while there was a decrease in poverty in the urban areas since 2003, poverty was predominant in rural areas. In terms of gender, female-headed households appeared to be somewhat worse off in terms of ownership of assets, with women likely to own only 5% land ownership. Also, the Foreign Policy (2008, as cited in McFerson, 2012) noted that women's income averaged only 45% of men's income, and three out of four rural women lived on less than 50 cents of a dollar a day.

Access to education increased in Sierra Leone as the net enrolment rate increased, although the ratio of girls to boys remained constant. Due to the increased focus on girls' education, the number of girls accessing secondary schools increased significantly

(Faroh, 2015). Hanushek and Kimko (2000, as cited in Mocan & Cannonier, 2012) explained that the impact of education on wellbeing is also documented at the country level. For instance, education of the labor force, which is a measure of human capital in a country is a significant determinant of economic growth. Although low-income countries struggle with low levels of human capital as a barrier to development, many of these countries exhibit substantial discrepancies in education acquired by men vs. women.

According to the United Nations Development Program (2017, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018), Sierra Leone's population is young, with nearly 60% of its people 25 years old or younger. Although Sierra Leone's economy struggled to provide employment for its young people at an acceptable standard of living for its people, it was steadily improving since the end of its civil war in 2002. As noted by Moyi (2013, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018), and Mulkeen and Chen (2008, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018), despite such potential, poverty, a long civil war, and inadequate educational investment had resulted in some of the highest adult illiteracy rates and lowest school enrollment levels in Africa. According to the Global Partnership for Education (2016, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018) and the World Bank (2014, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018), the Government of Sierra Leone funding for rural schools is limited, and many rural teachers have acquired little or no preparation to teach. According to Moyi (2013, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018) Sierra Leone's rural schools lacked certified teachers and classroom resources. The isolation and distance to travel to the rural regions discouraged young, newly prepared teachers to teach in these remote locations. Rural parents typically have less education than those in urban centers,

and many rural families do not encourage their children to attend school because they see little reason in doing so. In addition, Wang (2007, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018) and Moyi (2013, as cited in Allen & McDermott, 2018) explained that gender disparity in the children's school attendance is a particular problem in Sierra Leone's rural regions, with many girls participating in primary grade education for only a few years, if any at all. As rural children progressed throughout the grades, their school attendance decreased, so that by adolescence, only 25% of all children have reported completing primary grade education, and this was even less so for rural girls.

Attitudes Toward Girls' Education

Due to social norms and lack of economic power, women may feel obligated to submit to the wishes of others (e.g., their husband or father) even though doing so would in some cases clearly have negative effects on their well-being (Mocan & Cannonier, 2012). According to Plan Sierra Leone (2011, as cited in Reilly, 2014), girls revealed that student-teacher sexual relationships were common and that there were high levels of violence and abuse against girls in schools. According to the Yale Law School et al. (2013, as cited in Reilly, 2014), adolescent girls were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence in schools. In Sierra Leone, the perception that a girl has attained adulthood is associated with her physical development rather than her age in Sierra Leone. Once a girl has visibly passed through puberty, she is considered to have attained adulthood, even if she is still in her early teenage years. Moreover, the fact that Junior Secondary Schools are often located long distances from girls' homes, means that girls must often travel long

distances or stay with extended family, and this increased their susceptibility to abuse and exploitation.

As noted by Weir (2007, as cited in Umelaila & Chohan, 2013), the attitudes of parents towards the education of their children was determined when a child is enrolled in the school or was not enrolled. Also, as noted by Hague (2002, as cited in Umelaila & Chohan, 2013), the role of the parent was significant in the education of their children as they make decisions that affect the future of their children. In addition, Ali and Buzdar (2011, as cited in Umelaila & Chohan, 2013) argued that parents were aware of the significance of their daughters' education, but resources restricted them to engage their daughters in education. However, he stated that generally even parents in rural areas want to educate their daughters. Research from UNICEF and Statistics Sierra Leone (2010, as cited in Johnson, 2013) acknowledged that there were multiple reasons why students do not achieve academically in schools. One of the reasons identified that negatively affect students' performance was the support and attitudes of the parents. The research stated that the home has a great deal of influence on girls' participation and level of success attained in their educational careers. Parents and community attitudes were influenced by traditional beliefs regarding the ideal roles of women and girls in society.

Silliman (1987, as cited in Johnson, 2013) observed that girls from low socioeconomic homes inculcated a culturally disadvantaged value system and their attitude impact negatively on their participation in school. Traditionally, the roles available to women were those of wives and mothers. These attitudes have prevailed even in current times when socioeconomic changes have resulted in changes in the roles

women were now expected to undertake. The issues of early marriage, teenage pregnancy, child labour was identified as factors that were community-based that acted as deterrent to girls' participation in education. As a result of these negative attitudes, Lopez (2001, as cited in Johnson, 2013), stated that it was an indisputable fact that without parents and community support, efforts to improve girls' participation in education will be greatly hampered. If girls are to perform well in school, the importance of the development of positive attitudes towards education cannot be overemphasized. Children must have a positive attitude towards school if they are to develop liking for school.

Public Policies That Support Girls' Education and Wellbeing

Damrosch, Henkin, Pugh, Schachter, and Smit (2001, as cited in Mullins, 2018) stated that women's rights were more of a recent development in international human rights law and activism. Ulrich (2000, as cited in Mullins, 2018) noted that on 18th September 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted one of the most significant developments of human rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, or CEDAW. Vanegas and Pruitt (2012, as cited in Mullins, 2018) explained that this is an international agreement citing women's rights as human rights and it came into effect on 3rd September 1981. In addition, Vanegas and Pruitt (2012) mentioned that CEDAW was one of the most ratified treaties on human rights to date (Mullins, 2018). In 1988, without reservation, Sierra Leone ratified the CEDAW. Also, in July 2015, Sierra Leone adopted the Maputo Protocol. This protocol was the primary legal instrument that protect women and girls and is the first treaty to

recognize abortion under certain conditions as a human right for women who seek it without restriction or fear of prosecution.

Twelve years after the civil war, which ended in 2002, Sierra Leone recorded numerous developments, including three largely peaceful competitive elections and the successful conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Special Court. Also, the country made some significant strides in women's empowerment by enacting the three Gender Acts (the Domestic Violence Act, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, and the Devolution of Estate Act), to protect the human rights of women (M'Cormack-Hale & Beoku-Betts, 2015). In addition, Sierra Leone enacted the Child Rights Act as a public policy to protect the rights of children, with specific provisions to provide protection for the rights of teenage mothers (Veale, et al., 2017). After tens of thousands of adolescent girls were impregnated during the Ebola outbreak, In April 2015, the Government of Sierra Leone banned visibly pregnant adolescents from finishing their education (Massaquoi, et al., 2021). However, in March 2020, Sierra Leone lifted the ban on pregnant girls attending mainstream schools. This declaration followed the ruling by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice on December 12, 2019, which found the ban to be in violation of the rights of pregnant girls to education. The court found the government of Sierra Leone to be in breach of the articles of the African Charter, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention Against Discrimination in Education.

On April 27th, 2021, the government of Sierra Leone, through MBSSE, introduced the Radical Inclusion Policy, which focused on creating an enabling and

inclusive environment that eradicates stigma, harassment, intolerance, and exclusion of any type. As mentioned above, this policy particularly emphasized the inclusion of historically marginalized groups, such as pregnant girls, parent learners, children with disabilities (MBSSE, 2021)

Effect of Sextual and Reproductive Health Care on Adolescent Girls

According to the World Health Organisation et al. 2018, Sierra Leone had one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates during childbirth. The country recorded 1,360 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2013 compared to 546 deaths on average across sub-Saharan Africa. According to Statistics Sierra Leone and International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health International (2014, as cited in Cornish, et al., 2019), Sierra Leone's neonatal mortality rate is estimated at 39 deaths per 1000 live births, the infant mortality rate is 92 deaths per 1000 live births, and the under-five mortality rate is very high at 156 deaths per 1000 live births. The Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone in 2014 exacerbated Sierra Leone's fragile health services. In Sierra Leone, inequitable gender norms, including fragile health infrastructure, high poverty and illiteracy rates continues to undermine the availability and accessibility of health services for the most vulnerable children, women, and men (Cornish, et al., 2019).

Statistics Sierra Leone and International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health International (2014, as cited in Cornish, et al., 2019) mentioned that the adolescents age 10–19 years constituted about 20% of Sierra Leone's population, and many teenagers reached adulthood with little or no information about reproductive and sexual health. Also, according to the Sierra Leone Demographic Health Survey (2013),

the majority of young people age between 10 and 25 years had incorrect information about Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) prevention methods such as condom use or limiting number of sexual partners (Cornish, et al., 2019).

According to Statistics Sierra Leone, 34% of all pregnancies in the country were adolescent pregnancies and 40% of maternal mortality occurs as a result of adolescent pregnancy. The high rates of pregnancy may impair adolescent girls' future social, economic, and political empowerment. This is because many adolescent girls get pregnant before they complete primary level education. Additionally, infants born to young mothers under the age of 20 also had 50% higher risk of newborn mortality. In 2010, considering the high rates of maternal and child mortality, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the free health care initiative to provide free maternal and reproductive healthcare for lactating mothers and children under five to utilise medical facilities. The initiative led to a 45% increase in institutional childbirths. However, mass relocation of health funds was utilized to fight the Ebola outbreak in 2014, deprioritizing obstetrical services and placing pregnant women at an increased risk of undetected complications and maternal mortality (Massaquoi, et al., 2021). The study found that during the Ebola outbreak, the underlying reason for poor health seeking behavior among adolescent mothers was due to the fear of contracting the Ebola virus, and other barriers such as lack of access, excessive cost of medicines, and poor treatment from healthcare workers (Massaquoi, et al., 2021).

In April 2015, the Government of Sierra Leone took controversial measures by banning visibly pregnant adolescents from finishing their education (in either primary or

secondary schools). Because of this policy, international donors aided the government to support more than 14,500 pregnant girls, by initiating educational programs and community learning centres (Massaquoi, et al., 2021). In March 2020, the government of Sierra Leone lifted the ban on pregnant schoolgirls attending schools. The statistics outlined above showed the negative impact of poor sexual and reproductive healthcare on the education of many adolescent schoolgirls in Sierra Leone.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a comprehensive literature review on how COVID-19 impacted adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone. The review focused largely on recent peer-reviewed literature on the different crises that has befallen Sierra Leone in the recent past, and current period that has exacerbated the challenges that adolescent schoolgirls faced in education. These crises include the civil war, the Ebola, and COVID-19 outbreaks. The narratives in this chapter indicated that these crises led to long periods of school closures that caused many girls unable to continue their education. Furthermore, this chapter provided a clear picture of the socioeconomic dynamics of Sierra Leone, and how all indices pointed out to high rates of violence and severe shortages in social services (health, education, and protection) to support the education and well-being of adolescent girls.

Summary

Research has shown that every crisis in Sierra Leone, girls were disproportionately affected. This is particularly true for adolescent schoolgirls, who were constantly abused, including large number of sexual abuses, which left tens of thousands

of girls out of schools (Denov, 2006). The effect of the extended periods of school closures was indicated in the tens of thousands of adolescent schoolgirls that were impregnated during the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone (Amnesty International, 2015). Sierra Leone's Ministry of Youth, Education, and Science (2001) emphasized that during the height of the civil war, only 20% of eligible girls were enrolled in primary school. Many of the schools that did function consisted of makeshift structures in internally displaced people's camps (Maclure & Denov, 2009). In addition, according to Thorpe (2002), by the time the Sierra Leone war ended in 2002, a generation of girls had imbibed a culture of violence as combatants, refugees, and victims of atrocities. Notably, according to UNICEF Sierra Leone (2005), very few girls had even the most basic literacy skills (Maclure & Denov, 2009).

Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive literature review of how the COVID-19 outbreak impacted on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in Sierra Leone. To build on existing literature on how crises and pandemics affected the education of adolescent schoolgirls in Sierra Leone, there was a comprehensive review of literature about how the Sierra Leone civil war and the Ebola outbreak impacted on the education and general well-being of adolescent schoolgirls. Also, this chapter reviewed relevant literature about the feminism and punctuated equilibrium theories, and the phenomenological approach from Heidegger's interpretive tradition.

Chapter 3 outlined the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, research methodology, logic of selecting participants, instrumentation, procedures for

recruitment, participation, and data collection, data analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone, and the public policy implications on adolescent schoolgirls' education during the COVID-19 period. The nature of this study was qualitative. I employed the phenomenological design and in-depth interview method to collect and analyze data. This approach allowed me to analyze and describe the lived experiences of the participants (see Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

The phenomenological research method, which is one of the qualitative research approaches, was preferred in this study to explore the experiences of the school community on how the COVID-19 outbreak affected the education and well-being of adolescent schoolgirls, and the related policy implications. What is most appreciated about the phenomenological approach is its ability to utilize the structured method of data analysis formula that Moustakas developed to help phenomenological researchers analyze their research data (Alase, 2017). In this chapter, the research design and rationale for the qualitative phenomenological approach are discussed, as well as the justification for choosing it against other approaches. This chapter also presents my role as the researcher, the methodology, and the issues of trustworthiness in this study.

Research Design and Rationale

As noted by Lodico et al. (2010, as cited in Thompson, 2018), Rumrill et al., (2011, as cited in Thompson, 2018), and Yin (2009, as cited in Thompson, 2018), the qualitative research method is chosen because it allows the researcher to obtain a better understanding of the participants in the study. According to Creswell (2013, as cited in

Thompson, 2018), qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explores a social or human problem.

Qualitative research methods allow a researcher to build the whole picture, analyze words and experiences, report the participants' views in detail, and provide a natural setting in which a study takes place (Thompson, 2018). In relation to the current study, the qualitative research method provided answers as to how COVID-19 had impacted adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone, and the related public policy implications.

The central phenomenon of this study was the lived experiences of adolescent schoolgirls regarding how the COVID-19 outbreak affected their education and well-being, and the related public policy implications. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2008, as cited in Okur, 2021), although other traditional qualitative research approaches can be employed, the phenomenological approach is chosen to perceive and interpret events happening around the individual in a unique way. The phenomenological method, which is one of the qualitative research approaches, was preferred in the current study to explore the perceptions of the participants regarding how the COVID-19 outbreak affected adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone and the related public policy implications. According to Annells (2006, as cited in Okur, 2021) and Creswell (2013, as cited in Okur, 2021), the phenomenological method focuses on phenomena that researchers do not have an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of but are aware of. According to Moustakas (1994, as cited in Eddles-Hirsch, 2015), the key characteristic of phenomenological research is its rich, detailed descriptions of the

phenomenon being investigated. The description should present how the participants experienced the phenomenon investigated rather than the preconceived perception the researcher may have of the phenomenon being studied (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). In phenomenology, the researcher is the primary instrument for gathering and interpreting data. Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to reflect on, and state as clearly as possible, the assumptions and beliefs they bring to the research (Hopkins et al., 2016). Riger (2015 as cited in Dziva et al., 2020) mentioned that giving victims a voice is valuable and helps in the identification of ways in which victims create meanings and experiences in their lives.

According to Creswell (1998, as cited in Maxfield & Russel, 2017), the phenomenological approach is a qualitative research method used to explore and interpret deep human experiences. Erhard et al. (2010, as cited in Maxfield & Russel, 2017) and Husserl (1927, as cited in Maxfield & Russel, 2017) explained that phenomenology is a discipline that provides access to being and action as a first-person experience or phenomenon. Creswell (1998, as cited in Maxfield & Russel, 2017) stated that phenomenology is oriented theoretically and requires guidelines, but phenomenological researchers do not make deductions from propositions that can be tested empirically; rather, they demonstrate their findings through descriptive analyses. van Manen (2014, as cited in Maxfield & Russel, 2017) noted that the phenomenological approach allows readers to gain an understanding of how the phenomena of human perception are experienced. Creswell (2013, as cited in Eddles-Hirsch, 2015) explained that phenomenologists are interested in the analytical and descriptive experience of

phenomena by individuals in their everyday world, the phenomenological term for this being the lifeworld.

There is more than one philosophical school of phenomenology, and the research findings generated will depend on which philosophical approach is used (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Cohen (1987, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004) explained that Husserl's (1970, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004) philosophical ideas about how science should be conducted gave rise to the descriptive phenomenological approach to inquiry. Husserl believed that subjective information should be important to scientists seeking to understand human motivation because human actions are influenced by what people perceive to be real. Phenomenology is often referred to as a philosophical movement, which indicates that seminal ideas have not remained static but, rather, have been modified by subsequent scholars. One scholar who modified and built on the work of Husserl was Heidegger, a student of Husserl who challenged some of the assumptions about how phenomenology could guide meaningful inquiry (Lopez & Willis, 2004). According to Cohen (1987, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004), Heidegger's ideas in this respect comprise the interpretive, or hermeneutic, research tradition. In relation to the study of human experience, hermeneutics goes beyond mere description of core concepts and essences to look for meanings embedded in common life practices. noted that the focus of a hermeneutic inquiry is on what humans experience rather than what they consciously know.

There are varieties of data research approaches that researchers can use for their research. Some of these research approaches are narrative, grounded theory, ethnography,

case study, and phenomenology. Arguments can be made for the use of any of these approaches. Therefore, it is appropriate for the researcher to choose the research approach that aligns with the subject the researcher is investigating (Alase, 2017). Creswell (2013, as cited in Alase, 2017) stated that the participants' lived experiences are what guides many of the qualitative approaches. However, what is most appreciated about the phenomenological approach is researchers' ability to use the structured method of data analysis formula that Moustakas (1994, as cited in Alase, 2017) developed to help phenomenological researchers analyze their data. The other qualitative approaches are as functional as they could be with their analysis. However, the phenomenological approach goes a bit further (Alase, 2017). Creswell (2013, as cited in Alase, 2017) summarized the added advantage of phenomenological approach and stated that the suggestions for narrative analysis present a general template for qualitative researchers. In contrast, in phenomenology, there have been specific, structured methods of analysis advanced. This advancement by Moustakas was to give phenomenological researchers added advantage in their data analysis. Finally, as a research tradition that is interpretative, interpersonal, and interactive in nature, phenomenology is endowed with many features that can equip studies (and researchers) with rich abundance of data insight and holistic flavor to the stories that are being explored (Alase, 2017).

Gray (2010, as cited in Morrell-Scott, 2018) explained that phenomenology is a theoretical perspective that includes relatively unstructured methods of data collection. A criticism of phenomenological research is that it is often built on small case studies that can give rise to concerns about its generalisability (Morrell-Scott, 2018). In addition,

Polit and Beck (2010, as cited Morrell-Scott, 2018) and Gray (2010, as cited in Morrell-Scott, 2018) mentioned that a problem with using data that are from a phenomenological source may be that they were difficult to replicate, especially on a larger scale. The implication of this is that if the research is to be repeated, particularly on a large scale, then this may be difficult to achieve (Morrell-Scott, 2018). In phenomenology, the researcher is the primary instrument for gathering and interpreting data. Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to reflect on, and state as clearly as possible, the assumptions and beliefs they bring to the research. These beliefs and assumptions are the researcher's positionality, which includes their philosophical stance amidst the various perspectives underpinning phenomenology (Hopkins et al., 2016). In a qualitative study, there are various data analysis approaches that researchers can use. Creswell (2013, as cited in Alase, 2017) stated that the participants' lived experiences are what guides many of the qualitative approaches. However, what is most appreciated about the phenomenological approach is researchers' ability to use the structured method of data analysis formula that Moustakas (1994, as cited in Alase, 2017) developed to help phenomenological researchers analyze their data. The other qualitative approaches are as functional as they could be with their analysis. However, the phenomenological approach goes a bit further.

The main reason for choosing the phenomenological approach was that it helped me answer the research questions of this study. The research questions for this study were the following: What are the lived experiences of the school community on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone? How have the members of rural schools in Sierra Leone experienced government policy

responses to COVID-19? These research questions were too open to be answered by a quantitative strategy because most of the traditional quantitative strategies follow the positivist model to control variables and test hypotheses. In contrast, my research questions required producing descriptive and interpretive analysis that highlighted deep understanding of the experience of the participants regarding how the COVID-19 outbreak impacted adolescent girls' education in rural Sierra Leone, and the related policy implications. The nonspecific feature of these research questions made this study more explorative than explanative. The questions provided certain freedom for me to describe and have an in-depth understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent girls' education in rural Sierra Leone. Given this justification, a phenomenological approach was suitable for answering these questions.

The participants from Western Area Rural District, Sierra Leone were asked to share their lived experiences regarding how the COVID-19 outbreak impacted adolescent schoolgirls' education in their communities and the public policy implications. I used semistructured face-to-face in-depth interviews to explore the participants' personal experiences regarding the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls. Because the girls' education was a top agenda of most international organizations, I also conducted reviews of the reports produced by these organizations that were related to this topic. In addition, I conducted reviews of the Radical Inclusion Policy and the FQSE policy. These were the two main public policies that were formulated and implemented by the government of schools, aid organizations, and schools to support the education and well-being of adolescent schoolgirls. I used the

phenomenological approach and its structured method of data analysis to analyze my research data (see Alase, 2017).

Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative study, the role of the researcher is to attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of the participants. This is not a simple task because it involves asking participants to talk about things that may be very personal and sometimes confidential to them (Call-Cummings et al., 2019). In conducting research, the role of a researcher depends on the situation, the aims and objectives of the research, the theoretical stance of the researcher, and the personality and values of the researcher (Call-Cummings et al., 2019). I assumed the role of the researcher for this study. As part of that role, I collected all the data through interviewing the participants, and I reviewed all of the relevant documentation. Also, as the researcher, I conducted the analysis of the data collected and reported the findings.

The researcher is the main instrument in a qualitative study (Nowell et al., 2017). The qualitative researcher should influence the research process. Qualitative researchers and the study participants always interact in a social process. The researcher builds a relationship during the data collection, for the short-term in an interview, or for the long-term during observations or longitudinal studies (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). This relationship influences the research process and its findings, which is why the findings need to be transparent about the researcher's perspective and should acknowledge areas of subjectivity (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Because of the influence of the researcher on the research, there is a need for neutrality and objectivity by the researcher. The role of the qualitative researcher requires empathy and distance. By empathy, the researcher should put themselves into the participants' situation. Empathy is needed to establish a trusting relationship, but might also bring about emotional distress. Distance refers to the researcher needing to be aware of their values, which influence the data collection, and that the researcher has to be nonjudgmental and nondirective (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The relationship between the researcher and the researched has been a recurrent concern in research. The privileged position of the researcher against the researched has been strongly emphasized. The inherent power imbalance between the researcher and the researched, and the ethical concerns pertaining to this imbalance, have been commonly reflected on, with particular attention to the predetermined unequal roles between the researcher and the researched (Råheim et al., 2016). Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009, as cited in Råheim et al., 2016) argued that defining what knowledge is to count in a concrete researcher–researched encounter is not the sole privilege of the researcher because participants also bring their agendas to the research situation (Råheim et al., 2016).

There is always a power difference between the researcher and participants. Especially, feminist researchers acknowledged that the research was done by, for, and about women and the focus was on gender domination and discrimination. Feminist researchers tried to establish a trustworthy and nonexploitative relationship and place themselves within the study to avoid objectification. Feminist research is transformative to change oppressive structures for women (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The researcher

conducting a feminism focused study should be conscious of feminist values, which were most often deployed to challenge the continued marginalisation of poor women and girls from decision-making, resources, and opportunities in a range of contexts (Jenkins, et al., 2019). Most importantly, the feminist researchers in international development were interested in power: its nature, the ways it can be wielded, and by whom. Feminist researchers were interested in the effect powerful institutions and the elites who head them have on gender inequality, the material effects of which they tend to disproportionately affect women and girls living in poverty in the global south. Also, the feminist researchers were interested to understand how the slow progress to women's equal rights is going, where it is encountering resistance, and how women and girls (particularly the most marginalised) were finding opportunities to negotiate with the powerful, find spaces for resistance, and organise for empowerment (Jenkins, et al., 2019).

Understanding the role that policy reforms and implementations played on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education and well-being of adolescent schoolgirls is important for this study. The government of Sierra Leone, through MBSSE, introduced many policies to protect the learning and well-being adolescent schoolgirls. It is important to understand the impact of these public policies on the education of adolescent schoolgirls during the period of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The punctuated equilibrium theory stated that policies would adapt incrementally over time. However, policies would also be subject to periodic large changes called punctuations. This theory recognized the balance public policy must keep between

promoting stability and maintaining flexibility to meet changing demands in the environment. In addition, punctuated equilibrium theory states that policy changes are mostly small, incremental alterations to existing policy (Flink, 2019). The punctuated equilibrium theory of public policy (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2009, as cited in Jennings, Farrall, Gray, & Hay, 2020) seeks to explain the observation that policymaking is often characterized by extended periods of stability and equilibrium, but occasionally undergoes large-scale policy shifts that upset the status quo.

My role as the researcher for this study included protecting the rights and welfare of the participants, based on to the provisions of the Walden University's Intuitional Review Board (IRB) (Walden University, 2021). These rights were explicitly clear and comprehensible to the participants, and they gave their consents to enhanced transparency and avoid any form of exploitation. The participants for this study were recruited from two schools at the Western Area Rural district of Sierra Leone. Based on the requirements of Walden University, I received IRB approval before I engaged the participants (Walden University, 2021). The IRB approval number was 12-14-21-0539646. To ensure I get IRB approval, I prepared and submitted to the IRB for review and approval the following tools: the ethics approval form, the ethics self-check application for IRB approval, letters of cooperation with the partner organizations, and sample of the interview questions. After couple of iterations to the satisfaction of the IRB, I was approved by the IRB to conduct my research, which included engaging the participants, conducting the analysis, and reporting the findings. When developing the tools for engaging the participants, I knew that some of the participants would be

vulnerable and hard-to-reach participants such as adolescent schoolgirls, and parents of adolescent schoolgirls. Liamputtong (2007, as cited in Ellard-Gray, et al., 2015) and Stone (2003, as cited in Ellard-Gray, et al., 2015) emphasized that certain populations may be hard to reach because of their physical or social locations (e.g., remote geographical location, social elites), but they may also be hard to reach because they are vulnerable (disenfranchised, subject to discrimination or stigma).

Protecting the rights and welfare of the participants was at the heart to data collection process. As mentioned above, the data collection process for this study involved confidentiality wherein the identities of the participants were masked and the information they provided treated with confidentiality. In this study, I implemented the provisions of the IRB to protect the right and welfare of all the participants, including the vulnerable participants (Walden University, 2021). One way that I protected the welfare of the participants (including vulnerable participants) is maintaining confidentiality. This seems particularly important in situations where participants hide their membership in a stigmatized group or when they were critical of persons or institutions on which they depend (Surmiak, 2018).

Methodology

This section of the proposal included details about participants selection; instruments developed by the researcher; procedures for recruiting participants; interview protocols; participation; data collection; and the data analysis plan.

Participant Selection Logic

The selection of participants for this study was guided by information power. In quantitative studies, power calculations determined which sample size was necessary to demonstrate effects of a certain magnitude from an intervention. Information power indicated that the more information the sample holds relevant for the actual study, the lower the number of participants needed for the study (Malterud, et al., 2015). According to information power, the size of a sample with sufficient information power depends on (a) the aim of the study, (b) sample specificity, (c) use of established theory, (d) quality of dialogue, and (e) analysis strategy (Malterud, et al., 2015).

Saturation was the prevailing concept for sample size in qualitative studies. However, saturation is closely tied to a specific research method - the grounded theory methodology, and the term is inconsistently applied in other methodologies (Malterud, et al., 2015). The saturation concept was originally coined by Glaser and Strauss (1999, as cited in Malterud, et al., 2015) as a specific element of constant comparison in grounded theory analysis. Within the grounded theory framework, sample size was appraised as an element of the ongoing analysis where every new observation is compared with previous analysis to identify similarities and differences. However, the saturation concept is commonly claimed in studies based on other analytic approaches, without any explanation of how the concept should be understood in this non-ground theory context, and how it serves to justify the number of participants (Malterud, et al., 2015).

In addition to using information power to guide the sample size of this study, purposeful sampling was also used to guide the selection of the sample size. According to

Patton (2002, as cited in Palinkas, et al., 2016), purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources. According to Cresswell and Plano Clark (2011, as cited in Palinkas, et al., 2016), this technique involved identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002, as cited in Palinkas, et al., 2016) and Spradley (1979, as cited in Palinkas, et al., 2016) noted the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner.

For the purpose of data collection, I engaged 16 participants in two schools in the Western Area Rural district of Sierra Leone. These participants were drawn exclusively from the schools, and they were official members of the schools. The participants included adolescent schoolgirls, school principals, teachers, school mentors, parent members of the community teacher associations, parent members of the school board of governors, and school quality assurance officers. This sample provided the information that is relevant for the study (see Malterud, et al., 2015). Also, the sample size involved identifying and selecting individuals that were especially knowledgeable about and experienced with the phenomenon of interest (see Palinkas, et al., 2016)

Instrumentation

As mentioned above, this study engages 16 participants to participate in the research. Since many of these participants lived in rural communities with limited access

to phones and internet, face-to-face semistructured interview method were used to engage the participants. According to Barriball and While (1994, as cited in Kallio, et al., 2016), the semistructured interview method is suitable for studying people's perceptions and opinions on complex or emotionally sensitive issues (Kallio, et al., 2016). In addition, according to Åstedt-Kurki and Heikkinen (1994, as cited in Kallio, et al., 2016), the semistructured interview method is also appropriate when participants had a low level of awareness of the subject or when there were issues that participants were not used to talk about, such as values, intentions, and ideals. Moreover, according to Cridland et al. (2015, as cited in Kallio, et al., 2016), in a semistructured interview, it is possible to focus on the issues that were meaningful to the participant, allowing diverse perceptions to be expressed.

As part of the IRB approval, I prepared the interview questions in advance of the interviews. Also, I recorded the interviews using a voice recorder, which I transcribed using the Otter audio transcription software. Later, I analyzed the data using MS Word and Excel, which I then recorded in my dissertation. According to Barriball and While (1994, as cited in Kallio, et al., 2016); Krauss et al. (2009, as cited in Kallio, et al., 2016); Rabionet (2011, as cited in Kallio, et al., 2016); and Cridland et al. (2015, as cited in Kallio, et al., 2016), the quality of the interview guide affects the implementation of the interview and the analysis of the data collected. Åstedt-Kurki and Heikkinen (1994, as cited in Kallio, et al., 2016); Dearnley (2005, as cited in Kallio, et al., 2016); and Turner (2010, as cited in Kallio, et al., 2016) noted that this form of a semistructured interview guide is considered loose and flexible, which allowed dialogue during an interview, and

provided the opportunity to change the order of the questions, and easy movement from question to question.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The participants for this study were recruited exclusively from two schools in the Western Area Rural District of Sierra Leone. Both schools were based in communities with unreliable and limited access to internet and telephone communication. After getting the permission of the MBSSE, I physically visited the schools and engaged the school principals to request for willing participation of the appropriate members of the school to participate in the research. In addition, I formally invited each of the participants, and I only interviewed the participants after they have consented (in writing) to participate in this study. Throughout the engagement, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and more importantly, my obligation to protect their identities, keep the information they provide confidential, and their rights to withdraw from the research at any time. Based on the requirements of Walden University, the participants were approved by the IRB before I engaged them (Walden University, 2021). As mentioned above, some vulnerable and hard-to-reach participants such as adolescent schoolgirls, and parents of adolescent schoolgirls were engaged. However, minors were not engaged for this study. As noted by Bailey (2008, as cited in Ellard-Gray, et al., 2015); Cundiff (2012, as cited in Ellard-Gray, et al., 2015); and Liamputtong (2007, as cited in Ellard-Gray, et al., 2015), certain social groups continue to be excluded from social research, and these include women, sexual minorities, and ethnic minorities, among others. Excluded groups are often difficult for researchers to access when traditional sampling methods are

ineffective or inappropriate because of the group's social or physical location, vulnerability, or otherwise hidden nature. Liamputtong (2007, as cited in Ellard-Gray, et al., 2015) and Stone (2003, as cited in Ellard-Gray, et al., 2015) emphasized that certain populations may be hard to reach because of their physical or social locations (e.g., remote geographical location, social elites), but they may also be hard to reach because they are vulnerable (disenfranchised, subject to discrimination or stigma).

The participants were consulted, and their consents obtained well before the interviews. As mentioned by Mottram (2011, as cited in O'Keeffe, et al., 2016), correct introduction of the study to potential participants is essential when gaining informed consent. This involved a clear and concise explanation of the purpose of the research, what the interview involved, and how to use and store the information collected. It should also be highlighted that the respondents are under no obligation to answer any of the questions if they do not wish to. As noted by Rabionet (2011, as cited in O'Keeffe, et al., 2016), this component of the research is important not only in creating the right kind of environment where the interviewees feel they can provide the information, but also in building good rapport with the individuals. According to Bartholomew, Henderson, and Marcia (2000, as cited in McIntosh & Morse, 2015), participants should be free to respond to open-ended questions as they wish, and the researcher may probe these responses. This framework and flexibility of the responses constitute the semistructured aspect of this method. It makes it unique among interview methods for the degree of relevance it provides the topic while remaining responsive to the participants.

Data Analysis Plan

Analysing multiple forms of data presents a challenging task for qualitative researchers. To enhance swift and effective analysis, I employed computer aided software. I used the Otter audio transcription software to transcribe the data that I collected from the interviews through a voice recorder. In addition, I used Microsoft Word and Excel to analyse the data collected. As noted by Paulus et al. (2014, as cited in Oswald, 2019), given the heightened complexity of qualitative social work research, it is necessary that scholars learn strategies to streamline the research process, and digital tools for qualitative research are a mechanism to do so. Computers can assist in qualitative data analysis because the programs facilitate tasks, usually making the data easier and faster to complete. Having said that, Microsoft Word or Excel are also other options to be considered to conduct the data analysis.

Determining how to conduct qualitative analyses is often quite challenging for researchers new to qualitative research. Part of this challenge is due to the seemingly limitless approaches that a qualitative researcher might leverage, as well as simply learning to think like a qualitative researcher when analysing data (Lester, et al., 2020). Anfara et al. (2002, as cited in Lester, et al., 2020), broadly conceived, qualitative data analyses bring meaning to a data set, with qualitative data including a wide range of materials, which includes conversational data, images, observations, and unstructured, semistructured, or structured interviews, among others.

To analyse the data collected for this study, I observed the guidance set forth by Moustakas. Moustakas (1994, as cited in Alase, 2017) advanced series of methods that

phenomenological researchers were advised to use in analysing their studies. The idea is to provide researchers with a more cohesive analysis method that will reflect the phenomenological philosophy in their research study. As a tradition that encourages researchers to “bracket” themselves away from the lived experiences of the research participants. Creswell (2013, as cited in Alase, 2017) advised researchers to first describe their personal experience with the phenomenon under study. In addition, Creswell (2013, as cited in Alase, 2017) advised that researchers should develop a list of significant statements as a foundation to understanding the phenomenon. These statements can come from interviews and other relevant research sources that speak to the experience that is being studied. Creswell (2013, as cited in Alase, 2017) suggested that researchers should treat each statement as having equal worth, and works to develop a list of nonrepetitive non-overlapping statements. According to Creswell (2013, as cited in Alase, 2017), after the development of these statements, researchers should take the significant statements and then group them into larger units of information called themes or meaning units. The next step, Creswell (2013, as cited in Alase, 2017) suggested that researchers should write a description of what the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon. This is known as the textural description of the participants’ experiences, and the written descriptions of what happened to the research participants must include verbatim examples. At this stage of the phenomenological method of analysis, Creswell (2013, as cited in Alase, 2017) suggested that researchers should write a description of how the experience happened, which is the structural description. This enables the researcher to reflect on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was

experienced. Finally, Creswell (2013, as cited in Alase, 2017) advised researchers to write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions. In a qualitative research analysis, the interview transcript should be transcribed verbatim into a hard copy and then analyzed by utilizing the color-coded (or any other practical methods) and categorization for analyses (common themes).

Borrowing from the earlier work of Lochmiller and Lester (2017 as cited in Lester, et al., 2020), this study followed seven phases of data analysis which was used when completing the qualitative analysis. These phases are:

1. Preparing and organising the data for analysis. The qualitative fieldwork generated a considerable data. Hours of interviews to be retrieved and referenced during the data collection.
2. Transcribing the data. I used the Otter audio transition software to transcribe the data that I collected from the interviews through a voice recorder. I spent less than three days to transcribe the data in preparation for further analysis.
3. Becoming familiar with the data. Once the data is organised and transcribed, I familiarized myself with the data. It can be helpful to think of this step as initial analysis, wherein I took note of the ideas and experiences that were described by participants during the interviews, recorded in observation notes, or described in documents.
4. Memoing the data. As I reviewed the data, it helped to generate memos that described initial reflections about the data, as well as emergent interpretations.

5. Coding the data. A particularly important part of the thematic analysis process involves coding the data. A code is simply a short, descriptive word or phrase that assigns meaning to the data related to the researcher's analytic interests. As noted by Saldana (2016), although coding is often completed in an unstructured manner, for a thematic analysis it is important to think of coding as occurring in multiple phases.
6. Moving from codes to categories and categories to themes. Thematic analysis involves inductive engagement with the data, with researchers moving from isolated cases to broader interpretations. This process involves the application of codes, development of categories, and ultimately the production of themes. Interestingly, during the data analysis of this study, four themes and 11 subthemes emerged, which formed the bases of my findings, recommendations, and reporting.
7. Making the analytic process transparent. An important consideration when conducting a thematic analysis is to present information about the analytic process in a transparent and verifiable manner (Lester, et al., 2020).

Issues of Trustworthiness

According to Starks and Trinidad (2007, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017), when conducting data analysis, the researcher becomes the instrument for analysis, making judgments about coding, theming, decontextualising, and recontextualising the data. Each qualitative research approach has specific techniques for conducting, documenting, and evaluating data analysis processes, but it is the individual researcher's responsibility to

assure rigor and trustworthiness. Attride-Stirling (2001, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017); Coˆt'e and Turgeon (2005, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017); and Ryan, Coughlan, and Cronin (2007, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017) explained that qualitative researchers can demonstrate how data analysis has been conducted through recording, systematising, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible. In qualitative research, ensuring the trustworthiness of a study involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

According to Tobin and Begley (2004, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017), credibility addresses the fit between respondents' views and the researcher's representation of them. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017) suggested several techniques to address credibility including activities such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data collection triangulation, and researcher triangulation. They also recommended peer debriefing to provide an external check on the research process, which may therefore increase credibility, as well as examining referential adequacy to check preliminary findings and interpretations against the raw data. Credibility can also be operationalized through the process of member checking to test the findings and interpretations with the participants. I employed many of the techniques mentioned above to enhance the creditability of the study. Some of these techniques included data collection triangulation and external support and checks by the robust Walden University's IRB and my doctoral committee.

According to Martinson, Anderson, and de Vries (2005, as cited in Haven & Grootel, 2019) and Fanelli (2009, as cited in Haven & Grootel, 2019), the credibility of academic science is under examination. This is primarily due to two recent findings. Firstly, researchers don't always behave as they should; researchers even admitted to engaging in research misbehaviours that ranges from fabrication of data to leaving out outliers without a valid reason to do so. Nosek et al. (2018, as cited in Haven & Grootel, 2019) noted that in quantitative research, preregistration strengthens the credibility of a study because fellows or peers are enabled to judge whether the researcher carried out the right predictive analyses. In addition, the credibility of a research is strengthened when the analyses form a solid basis for the conclusion that the researcher presents. Likewise, by preregistering qualitative research, it enables other researchers to assess whether the researcher used the right collection methods, the right data analysis methods, as well as whether the interpretation based on the data is convincing. If that is the case (right methods and convincing interpretation), the qualitative study can be said to be credible (Haven & Grootel, 2019).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the generalisability of inquiry. Tobin and Begley (2004, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017) noted that in qualitative research, this concerns only case-to-case transfer. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017) explained that the researcher cannot know the sites that may wish to transfer the findings; however, the researcher is responsible for providing thick descriptions, so that those who seek to transfer the findings to their own site can judge transferability. Transferability is the

extent to which the concepts and theories are relevant to other settings. Researchers can compare their results with studies conducted in different disciplines, regions, or populations. Studies can position their findings with other theoretical frameworks, and describe the study setting and participant characteristics in detail so readers can judge the transferability of the findings to their own context (Tong & Dew, 2016). The topic and focus of this study on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education and the related context is a global phenomenon, which might be easily applied and transferred by other researchers in many other related contexts around the world.

Dependability

Tobin and Begley (2004, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017) explained that to achieve dependability, researchers can ensure the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017) emphasized that when readers can examine the research process, they are better able to judge the dependability of the research. Also, Koch (1994, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017), noted that one way that a research study may demonstrate dependability is for its process to be audited. In addition, Schwandt and Halpern (1988, as cited in Haven & Grootel, 2019) explained that auditing qualitative research is a tool for peers assessing the study's quality by evaluating the outcomes with a set of criteria. Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017), elaborated that dependability regards whether the process of collecting the qualitative data was sound, while confirmability regards whether the analyses of the data was coherent and whether the interpretations based on that data were fair. The research design employed by this study was logical,

traceable, and well documented. The qualitative phenomenology approach, using the semistructured in-depth interview data collection method, and Moustakas proposed data analysis approach were logical, traceable, and documented. In addition, the research process of this study benefited from the rigorous checks of the Walden University IRB and my doctoral committee.

Confirmability

According to Tobin and Begley (2004, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017), confirmability is concerned with establishing that the researcher's interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data, requiring the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached. Also, according to Guba and Lincoln (1989, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017), confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved. Koch (1994, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017) recommended researchers to include markers such as the reasons for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entire study, so that others can understand how and why decisions were made.

Ethical Procedures

I received IRB approvals for all the instruments and participants before the participants were engaged. The IRB is responsible to ensure that all Walden University research complies with the university's ethical standards as well as United States federal regulations. The IRB's ethics review and approval were key requirements before participant are recruited, data collected, or dataset accessed (Walden University, 2021).

This study involved the physical engagement of participants, including vulnerable participants. These vulnerable participants included adolescent schoolgirls and parents of adolescent schoolgirls. I was required to protect the welfare and rights of all participants. Having said that, vulnerable participants, such as those mentioned above required additional protection. Vulnerable participants can be incapable of giving informed consent. Therefore, the researcher must seek informed consent from a legally authorized representative (Øye, et al., 2015). However, this research does not engage minors that require the consents of their parents/guardians. Guidelines are constructed to protect people from misuse of data, including personal sensitive data, and to ensure ethical practice in all research, including qualitative research (Øye, et al., 2015).

According to Baykara et al. (2015, as cited in Head, 2020), and Henderson and Esposito (2017, as cited Head, 2020), ethical issues in educational research goes beyond a matter of compliance with rules, codes, and principles to the complex matter of ethical dilemmas that are organic, dynamic and dependant on context and relationships. Also, to protect the research from my personal bias, I employed bracketing. This is to ensure that my personal biases or experiences do not influence the findings of the collected data (see Gregory, 2019). I ensured the protection of the data collected. I stored all data collected from this research in a password-protected laptop that can be accessed and used only by me (the researcher). I stored a backup copy of the data collected in a hard drive and cloud-based drive.

I was obliged to protect the data collected all throughout the process, which included analysis, reporting, and presenting (see Surmiak, 2018). The identities of

the participants were masked, and data collected be kept confidentially (see Surmiak, 2018). All records of the data collected, and transcripts would be stored for five years in a password -protected hard drive and cloud-based drive. I will discard and disposed this data immediately after the five years stipulated timeframe (see Walden University, 2021).

Summary

This study used the phenomenological research method, which is one of the qualitative research approaches, to explore the experiences and perceptions of the official members of secondary schools, including adolescent schoolgirls on how the COVID-19 outbreak affected adolescent schoolgirls' education and well-being, and the related public policy implications. I chose the phenomenology approach for its flexibility and ease of use to perceive and interpret events happening around the individual in a unique way (see Okur, 2021). This study employed the semistructured approach to collect data, and this data was analyzed and reported.

Chapter 3 discussed the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures. Chapter 4 will discuss the study's setting, participants' demographics, data collection and analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the results and findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone, and the related public policy implications. The codes, subthemes, and themes that emerged from the data analysis of this study helped me describe the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone, and the related public policy implications. This chapter presents the setting of the participants, the demographics of the participants, and the data collection process. In addition, this chapter provides a description of the data analysis and the methods used in this study and addresses issues of trustworthiness to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This chapter concludes with a detailed explanation of the results and a summary of the chapter.

Settings

The study was conducted in two coeducation schools in the Western Area Rural District of Sierra Leone. Interviews were conducted with 16 participants from those two schools. The participants included adolescent schoolgirls, school principals, schoolteachers, school mentors, school quality assurance officers, and parent members of the community teacher associations and parent members of the schools' board of governors. The participants were recommended to me by the principals of the schools. I selected 16 participants from a list of 25 participants who were presented to me by the principals. I selected the participants after I gained permission from MBSSE, which oversees the schools, to select the two schools for this study. MBSSE proposed four

schools. I engaged the principals of all four schools, but I decided to engage the two schools that best fit the selection criteria of the research, which included having teenage schoolgirls who were 18 years old and above. I sent invitation letters (see Appendix A) to all of the participants who participated in this study. All 14 participants from the schools and two school quality assurance officers, who supervise the two schools, agreed to participate in this study. I signed a cooperation agreement (see Appendix B) with the government authority that oversees the schools, and an individual cooperation agreement with each of the two schools (see Appendix C) to allow me access to the schools and the participants. Each of the 16 participants signed a consent form before I interviewed them using open-ended interview questions (see Appendix D – G).

Demographics

The participants for this study were official members of the schools. I used purposeful sampling to guide the selection of the sample size. According to Patton (2002, as cited in Palinkas et al., 2016), purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources. The criteria to participate in the current study were the participants had to be 18 years and above, official members of a rural secondary school in Sierra Leone, and experienced with teaching and learning in rural secondary schools in Sierra Leone. The participants were required to be a school principal, teacher, mentor, adolescent schoolgirl, member of the community teacher association, or school supervisor/inspector. Table 1 details the demographics of the participants.

Table 1*Participants' Demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Position in school
Participant 1	Male	Principal
Participant 2	Male	Mentor and teacher
Participant 3	Female	Mentor and teacher
Participant 4	Male	Parent and board member
Participant 5	Female	Student
Participant 6	Female	Student
Participant 7	Female	Student
Participant 8	Male	Principal
Participant 9	Male	Mentor and teacher
Participant 10	Female	Mentor and teacher
Participant 11	Male	Parent
Participant 12	Female	Student
Participant 13	Female	Student
Participant 14	Female	Student
Participant 15	Male	School quality assurance officer
Participant 16	Male	School quality assurance officer

Data Collection**Recruitment of Participants**

The participants for this study were recruited by entering into a cooperation agreement with MBSSE, which oversees the schools. In addition, I entered into individual cooperation agreements with each of the two schools before I selected the participants and conducted the interviews. The two schools were located in different areas of the Western Area Rural District. One school was located in the main market area of the district, while the other school was located in a more remote area of the district. In addition, purposeful sampling was used to guide the selection of the participants.

After the IRB approval, I engaged the participants through recruitment and invited them to meet me at the identified rooms within the two school campuses. Based on the

participants' selection criteria, the principals of the schools recommended 25 participants, and I selected 16 participants (eight participants from each school) whom I sent invitation letters to. I selected only those participants who met the study's recruitment criteria. I excluded participants who were either minors or parents who were not official members of the community teacher association. I met the participants at a quiet and empty room in each of the two schools to discuss the study and the rights and responsibilities of participating in this study. In that meeting, I also issued the participants the consent forms, which they read, signed, and returned before the interviews. All 16 participants agreed to participate in the interviews, and they turned up for the interviews at the agreed venues within the campuses of the two schools.

Semistructured Interviews

Semistructured face-to-face in-depth interviews were used to explore the participants' personal experiences regarding the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls and the related policy implications. The phenomenological approach was employed to ensure the detailed exploration of the participants' experiences (Alase, 2017). I recorded the interviews with all of the participants using an audio voice recorder. The recorded interviews were transferred to a password-protected folder in my personal password-protected computer, and were also saved in a password-protected hard drive as a backup.

The interviews lasted between 17 and 48 minutes. I transcribed the recordings verbatim using the Otter software, and I confirmed the transcripts with each of the

participants. The transcribed data, which I stored along with the audio recordings in my password-protected computer, were the basis for the data analysis of this study.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data with computer software, using Microsoft Word and Excel (see Oswald, 2019). I initially planned to use NVivo qualitative software, but due to the manageable volume of the data to be analyzed, I decided to use Microsoft Word and Excel. I employed Moustakas's structured method of data analysis formula to analyze the data. According to Braun et al. (2019, as cited in Lester et al., 2020), thematic analysis is perhaps best defined as an umbrella term, sometimes designating quite different approaches aimed at identifying patterns across qualitative data sets. Due to its broad and flexible nature, thematic analysis has been widely used in diverse fields including psychology, medicine, health services, tourism, human resource development, and education (Lester et al., 2020). I used thematic analysis to analyze the data collected from the 16 participants. This analysis identified themes, subthemes, and patterns as outlined in the results section of this chapter. The themes, subthemes, and patterns that emerged from this analysis were the basis of the results, the interpretation of the findings, and the recommendations of this study.

As the researcher, I read and reviewed the data collected on multiple occasions. I coded the 16 transcripts from the participants' interviews, and 47 codes emerged. I categorized these codes into 10 subthemes. With further review and analysis of the codes and the subthemes, four themes emerged. The codes that emerged from my coding were

related to the research questions. I outlined some of the codes against the themes in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes and Codes

Theme	Code
Conduciveness of the school environment to support girls' education	Schoolgirls shy to return to schools Sexual and physical violence against schoolgirls Status of the schools' safety structures Shy to return to school Intimidation by other students Support by other students Support from community Teaching and learning issues Schoolgirls engaging in gang and drugs
Extended school closures during the COVID-19 outbreak caused many girls to drop out of schools	Pregnant schoolgirls Early marriage School closure School dropout Support from government and aid organizations
Socioeconomic issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak affected the education of schoolgirls	Schoolgirls become mothers and family breadwinner Poor parenting Good parenting Poverty affecting schoolgirls
Policies that support the education of adolescent schoolgirls during the COVID-19 outbreak	Radical inclusion policy Policies that are available Support from aid organizations Support from government

The following themes emerged from the analysis: conduciveness of the school environment to support girls' education, extended school closures during the COVID-19 outbreak caused many girls to drop out of schools, socioeconomic issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak affected the education of schoolgirls, and policies that support

the education of adolescent schoolgirls during the COVID-19 outbreak. Table 3 provides a detailed description of the themes and subthemes that emerged from this analysis.

Table 3

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Conduciveness of the school environment to support girls' education	Commitment of schools to protect girls and support them to succeed in school Effect of gang and drugs within the school on the education of schoolgirls Schools engaged local communities to support the education of girls
Extended school closures during the COVID-19 outbreak caused many girls to drop out of schools	Many schoolgirls dropped out of school due to pregnancy and social welfare issues during the extended school closures during the COVID-19 outbreak
Socioeconomic issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak affected the education of schoolgirls	Effect of the COVID-19 outbreak on parental support to adolescent schoolgirls' education Schoolgirls become mothers and breadwinners of their families
Policies that support the education of adolescent schoolgirls during the COVID-19 outbreak	Policy formulation and implementation to support girls' education during the COVID-19 period Government and aid organizations supported schools to promote the education of girls

Evidence of Trustworthiness

According to Starks and Trinidad (2007, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017), when conducting data analysis, the researcher becomes the instrument for analysis, making judgments about coding, theming, decontextualizing, and recontextualizing the data. Each qualitative research approach has specific techniques for conducting, documenting, and evaluating data analysis processes, but it is the individual researcher's responsibility

to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. In qualitative research, ensuring the trustworthiness of a study involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Tong & Dew, 2016).

Credibility

According to Tobin and Begley (2004, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017), credibility addresses the fit between respondents' views and the researcher's representation of them. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017) suggested several techniques to address credibility, including activities such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data collection triangulation, and researcher triangulation. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017) also recommended that credibility can be operationalized through the process of member checking to test the findings and interpretations with the participants. To ensure credibility of the current study, I repeated key aspects of the interviews with the participants to clarify and confirm the information they provided. In addition, I conducted transcript review with each of the 16 participants to get them to review and confirm the transcripts of audio recordings of the interviews. Moreover, during data analysis, I triangulated the information provided by the participants to ensure consistency. Most of the information was consistent.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017) explained that the researcher cannot know the sites that may wish to transfer the findings; however, the researcher is responsible for providing thick descriptions so that those who seek to transfer the findings to their own site can judge transferability. Transferability is the

extent to which the concepts and theories are relevant to other settings. Researchers can compare their results with studies conducted in different disciplines, regions, or populations. Researchers can position their findings with other theoretical frameworks and describe the study setting and participant characteristics in detail so readers can judge the transferability of the findings to their own context (Tong & Dew, 2016). To ensure transferability, I probed during the interviews to obtain detailed relevant information from the participants. In addition, in the analysis I presented data samples indicating the relevant views and perceptions of the participants.

Dependability

Tobin and Begley (2004, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017) explained that to achieve dependability, researchers can ensure the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017) emphasized that when readers can examine the research process, they are better able to judge the dependability of the research. In addition, Schwandt and Halpern (1988, as cited in Haven & Grootel, 2019) explained that auditing qualitative research is a tool for peers assessing the study's quality by evaluating the outcomes with a set of criteria. Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017) elaborated that dependability regards whether the process of collecting the qualitative data was sound. For the purpose of the current study, the data collected were well documented and saved in a confidential and protected way. Also, I outlined the research process with details of every step and presented the results of the research. In addition, the research process was supervised and guided by the chair and the other members of my committee and the IRB.

Confirmability

According to Tobin and Begley (2004, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017), confirmability is concerned with establishing that the researcher's interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data, requiring the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached. Also, according to Guba and Lincoln (1989, as cited in Nowell, et al., 2017), confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved. To achieve confirmability in this study, the research and findings of the study were clearly aligned, and they reflected the views and perceptions of the participants. In addition, the entire research process of this study was aligned to the research questions. As the researcher, I reflected on my personal bias throughout the research process. To protect the study from my personal bias, I employed bracketing. I employed bracketing to ensure that my personal biases or experiences do not influence the findings from the data that I collected (see Gregory, 2019)

Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone, and the related public policy implications on adolescent schoolgirls' education during the COVID-19 outbreak. Using a phenomenological approach enables this study to explore the lived experiences of 16 participants of how the COVID-19 outbreak affected the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone and the related policy implications. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What is the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone?
2. How have the members of rural schools in Sierra Leone experienced government policy responses to COVID-19?

The data that I collected from the face-to-face interviews addressed each of the two research questions. As a result of the data analysis, the following themes and subthemes emerged to address the first research question:

Theme 1: Conduciveness of the School Environment to Support Girls' Education

The theme, Conduciveness of the School Environment to Support Girls' Education described the participants' experiences of the conduciveness of the school environment to support the education of adolescent schoolgirls during the COVID-19 outbreak. The conduciveness of the school environment related to the inclusiveness and safety of the schools and the approach to teaching and learning that accommodates the circumstances of adolescent schoolgirls during the COVID-19 period. In addition, this theme described the participants' experiences on how government, aid organizations, and the local communities support the provision of conducive school environment to support the education of adolescent schoolgirls during the COVID-19 period. Analysis of the participants' experiences produced four related subthemes, which are: (a) commitment of schools to protect girls and support them to succeed in school, (b) the effect of gang and drugs within the school on the education of schoolgirls, and (c) schools engaged local communities to support the education of girls.

Commitment of Schools to Protect Girls and Support Them to Succeed in School

Most of the participants shared their experiences on the commitments of schools to protect girls and support them to succeed in school after the disproportionate challenges girls faced during the COVID-19 outbreak. This includes the commitment of the school principals, teachers, and mentors to ensure that the school is conducive, safe, and teaching appropriately to support the education of adolescent schoolgirls during this COVID-19 period. Many school environments were flexible to accommodate the special needs of girls that were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Participant 9 explained that “most girls, after they have given birth, they feel shy or feel marginalize, mostly perhaps, in their communities, pointing fingers at them, that makes them not to come to school again.” However, some participants mentioned that they were supported by the school, when they returned to school after giving birth. Participant 5 explained that “when I came, the principal called me and asked me if I am pregnant, and I say yes. He said ok, no problem. He said don’t be shy to come to school, come to school every day. My friends always encourage me; they don’t laugh at me.”

In addition, most of the participants expressed that the school had some safety structures to improve the conduciveness of the schools to support the education of girls and other marginalised groups of students during the COVID-19 period. In addition, even though many participants stated that they were not aware of sexual abuse against girls, some stated that they were aware of physical violence. Participant 2 explained that “I am aware of physical violence, but not sexual violence, where a teacher flogged a girlchild and the teacher was given a warning letter by the principal.” The common physical abuse

that many participants reported was caning of students by teachers, which was banned by the MBSSE. Participant 7 stated that “sometimes the teachers use canes because of the students’ issues. The teacher will say stop, but some students will be standing and saying something else.” However, some participants mentioned that sexual abuse against schoolgirls was common within the schools, and little was done to reprimand the suspected perpetrators even when these cases were reported to the appropriate authorities. Many school based sexual abuse cases were often compromised by the interference of local leaders. Unfortunately, the abuse and related compromises of sexual abuse cases against schoolgirls were exacerbated during the COVID-19 outbreak. Participant 15 explained that “a teacher impregnated a girl; these are all abuses we recorded. We investigated to bring out the issue; we report it. You send the report to your authority. we don’t know what comes after. But there are interferences from the external, and they will tamper with justice and begin to make negotiation.” On a related note, participants discussed how the school is not also conducive for children with disabilities. The situation is more challenging when disabled girls attend school during the COVID-19 period. These students face all the challenges that both girls and disabled students are facing, which are significantly worsened by the COVID-19 outbreak. Most schools are not constructed to accommodate disabled students, many teachers are not trained to be inclusive to accommodate disabled students, and there is lack of assistive devices to support the education of disabled students. Participant 15 explained that “pupils with disability, there are some forms of discrimination, because they don’t have the facilities to handle this disability.”

Furthermore, participants explained that schools lacked medical aid or resources to support pregnant girls who returned to schools after the extended school closures for the COVID-19 outbreak. The medical aid was particularly important for pregnant girls who needed extra medical support to enable them to continue their education. Participant 3 mentioned that “the other challenge, particularly pregnant girls, is the fact that they need medical attention.” Another notable challenge with most schools was the inadequacy of female teachers to motivate and support girls, particularly during this COVID-19 period when schoolgirls were disproportionately facing many deterrents to continue their education. Participant 1 explained that “our school is largely girls. And out of 43 staff, we have about seven female teachers, so there is need for female teachers.” Furthermore, some participants mentioned that due to the extended school closures during the COVID-19 outbreak, most students, particularly girls lagged in completing the syllabus in preparation for school and public exams. Participant 1 explained that “due to the COVID-19 outbreak, that 7 months lapse (school closure) has affected the pupils greatly in terms of completing the syllabus. Some of them were promoted, even when we have not completed the syllabus.” Another challenge with girls’ education during the period of the COVID-19 outbreak was that some of the schoolgirls who returned to schools after being dropped out of school faced challenges focusing on their education. This was more so for girls who were already cohabiting with their partners and married, or engaged in other socioeconomic activities, such as petty trade. Participant 8 mentioned that “imagine when a girl child got married and come back to school as a school pupil;

they have that perception that they are now matured. So, they are given teachers a hell of problems, in terms of discipline.”

The following data samples support this subtheme:

- “Most girls, after they have given birth, they feel shy or feel marginalize, mostly perhaps, in their communities, pointing fingers at them, that makes them not to come to school again.” (Participant 9)
- “When I came, the principal called me and asked me if I am pregnant, and I say yes. He said ok, no problem. He said don’t be shy to come to school, come to school every day. My friends always encourage me; they don’t laugh at me.” (Participant 5)
- “I am aware of physical violence, but not sexual violence, where a teacher flogged a girlchild and the teacher was given a warning letter by the principal.” (Participant 2)
- “A teacher impregnated a girl; these are all abuses we recorded. We investigated to bring out the issue; we report it. You send the report to your authority. we don’t know what comes after. But there are interferences from the external, and they will tamper with justice and begin to make negotiation.” (Participant 15)
- “We have gone through trainings on gender-based violence in schools. The teachers were engaged, and even the heads of schools.” (Participant 16)
- “Pupils with disability, there are some forms of discrimination, because they don’t have the facilities to handle this disability.” (Participant 15)

- “Our school is largely girls. And out of 43 staff, we have about seven female teachers, so there is need for female teachers.” (Participant 1)
- “Imagine when a girl child got married and come back to school as a school pupil; they have that perception that they are now matured. So, they are given teachers a hell of problems, in terms of discipline.” (Participant 8)
- “the other challenge, particularly pregnant girls, is the fact that they need medical attention.” (Participant 3)

Effect of Gang and Drugs Within the School on the Education of Schoolgirls

Participants described their experiences of students, including schoolgirls involvement in drugs abuse and gang violence within the school environment during the COVID-19 period. The extended school closures had driven many students to be involved in drugs and related violent gangs that disrupted the progress of their education and led them to drop out of school. However, most participants reported that even though they experienced some schoolboys involving in drugs abuse and gang violence, they had not experienced schoolgirls involving in drugs abuse or gang violence. Participant 15 explained that “I supervise most of the big schools in this district, you will not see girls in drug abuse or get complained about drug abuse.” In addition, participant 8 stated that “the high rate of this clique issue in this area has grown up in a way that anytime you want to organise a program in school you have to call the military, because the gangs will attend. Some of these girls admire gang members; they love them.”

The following data samples support this subtheme:

- “I supervise most of the big schools in this district, you will not see girls in drug abuse or gets complained about drug abuse.” (Participant 15)
- “The high rate of this clique issue in this area has grown up in a way that anytime you want to organise a programme in school you have to call the military, because the gangs will attend. Some of these girls admire gang members; they love them.” (Participant 8)

Schools Engaged Local Communities to Support the Education of Girls

Most participants agreed that the schools engaging the local communities, including the parents helped many girls who dropped out of school during the extended school closures for the COVID-19 outbreak to return to school. The engagement between the schools and the local communities enhanced the return and retention of girls in schools during the COVID-19 period. Participant 4 explained that “there is also 4 classroom building (being constructed by the community). Also, when it comes to matter of whatever the school need, we have philanthropists around the community to help.” However, some parents were not interested in reciprocating the school engagement to provide education for their children. Participant 10 mentioned that “even when they did something in school, maybe you invite the parents, the parents will even want to beat the teachers.” However, many participants agreed that communities were increasingly interested and supportive to the education of girls, especially after the disproportionate challenges girls faced to continue their education during the COVID-19 period. For instance, participant 15 mentioned that “Now when you go to the schools, there are more girls in the schools than boys and girls are performing better than boys. The community is

supporting girls to be in school.” Schools engaged local communities to support girls who dropped out of school due to the COVID-19 outbreak to return to school. Participant 10 mentioned that “we educate the parents, we call them, we talk to them, we tell them the importance of girl child education. And if you educate a girl child, then you educate the community.”

The following data samples support this subtheme:

- “There is also 4 classroom building (being constructed by the community). Also, when it comes to matter of whatever the school need, we have philanthropists around the community to help.” (Participant 4)
- “We educate the parents, we call them, we talk to them, we tell them the importance of girl child education. And if you educate a girl child, then you educate the community.” (Participant 10)
- “Even when they did something in school, maybe you invite the parents, the parents will even want to beat the teachers.” (Participant 10)
- “Now when you go to the schools, there are more girls in the schools than boys and girls are performing better than boys. The community is supporting girls to be in school.” (Participant 15)

Theme 2: Extended School Closures During the COVID-19 Outbreak Caused Many Girls to Drop Out of Schools

This theme focused on the experiences of the participants on how and why schoolgirls dropped out of schools due to the COVID-19 outbreak in Sierra Leone. Many participants reported that the 6months closure of schools led to many schoolgirls to drop

out of schools, and most of them did not return to schools when schools reopened.

Participants' experiences on this theme brought out the following subthemes: (a) Many schoolgirls dropped out of school due to pregnancy and social welfare issues during the extended school closures during the COVID-19 outbreak

Many Schoolgirls Dropped Out of School Due to Pregnancy and Social Welfare Issues During the Extended School Closures During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Most of the participants explained that many schoolgirls got pregnant during the extended school closures during the COVID-19 outbreak. Many of these pregnant schoolgirls included teenagers. Due to pregnancy, many schoolgirls dropped out of school and did not return to schools when schools reopened after the extended period of closures. Many participants mentioned that the schools realized that many schoolgirls dropout of school when schools reopened after the 6 months of closure. In some schools hundreds of girls did not return to school, and in other schools, tens of girls did not return. Participant 1 mentioned that “when schools reopened, we realized that most of our girls were affected. Some were pregnant, some entirely lost interest. Even when they were pregnant, we tried as hard as possible to see how best they can return to school, especially when it is a government policy to allow pregnant girls to school.” Due to the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of girls, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion policy, which among other things is to support pregnant girls and other vulnerable students to return to schools and stay in schools. Participant 2 stated, “some girls returned to school because of the introduction of the Radical Inclusion Policy by the Ministry of Education.”

Many participants mentioned that in addition to pregnancy, many other girls did not return to school because during the extended school closures during the COVID-19 outbreak they gave birth and have to take care of their children. In addition, some girls involved in early marriage, cohabitation with a male partner, engaged in petty trade, and some entirely lost interest in attending school. Most of the participants mentioned that tens and hundreds of schoolgirls per school dropped out of school because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Participant 10 stated that “let’s say between 15% to 20% of the girls’ population in this school (dropped out of school). We are talking of hundreds of girls who dropped out of school from this school.” In addition, some participants explained that due of the long period of staying at home during the COVID-19 outbreak, many schoolgirls lost interest in education and engage in some other socioeconomic activities. Participant 15 stated that “I don’t want to call them parents because they have not yet given birth, but they take care of the home, and you see them going to the markets to sell. When you say, why are you not coming to school. They will respond that after these nine months or seven months, I have no interest in school anymore. A man has put money as dowry for me. She is already attached to a man. She’s attached to a home.”

The following data samples support this subtheme:

- “Many girls involved into so many problems, some of them encountered teenage pregnancies. As a result, some of them dropped out of school. This is because some of them got pregnant, and due to these problems, their families cannot support them to attend school.” (Participant 4)

- “When schools reopened, we realized that most of our girls were affected. Some were pregnant, some entirely lost interest. Even when they were pregnant, we tried as hard as possible to see how best they can return to school, especially when it is a government policy to allow pregnant girls to school.” (Participant 1)
- “The COVID-19 outbreak affected my education because most of we the girls have been suffering for a long time. Some of us have become dropouts because of COVID-19 outbreak, and we are staying at home. Some girls are pregnant because of COVID-19 outbreak. So, we are at the house because we no longer go to school. I know about 16 girls in this school who got pregnant, only five returned.” (Participant 12)
- “The COVID-19 outbreak affected me because I gave birth to a son. From that time, I remained in school. I did not get any support, since I lost my mother. That is why I give birth to a son, but still, I will not give up because I like school.” (Participant 13)
- “About 65 girls were absent from one school (when schools reopened). We found out that some of the girls got pregnant, some of them are now doing business (petty trade), some of them are already mothers.” (Participant 15)
- “Let’s say between 15% to 20% of the girls’ population in this school (dropped out of school). We are talking of hundreds of girls who dropped out of school from this school.” (Participant 10)

- “I don’t want to call them parents because they have not yet given birth, but they take care of the home, and you see them going to the markets to sell. When you say, why are you not coming to school. They will respond that after these nine months or seven months, I have no interest in school anymore. A man has put money as dowry for me. She is already attached to a man. She’s attached to a home.” (Participant 15)
- “We have 1000 students; about 200 were affected and they were not coming to school after the school reopened. About 50 girls returned, which is not much. And we got information through their colleagues that this person is pregnant, and she’s not coming to school again. This person is now married, she’s not coming.” (Participant 3)
- “The impact of the COVID-19 on the adolescent girls in our school, it was a problem, and it discourages most of them (the girls) not to come back.” (Participant 1)

Theme 3: Socioeconomic Issues Exacerbated by the COVID-19 Outbreak Affected the Education of Schoolgirls

Many participants explained their experiences of the impact that socioeconomic issues, especially poverty, had on the education of adolescent schoolgirls during this COVID-19 period. The subthemes that came up in this theme are: (a) the effect of the COVID-19 outbreak on parental support to adolescent schoolgirls’ education and (b) schoolgirls become mothers and breadwinners of their families.

Effect of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Parental Support to Adolescent Schoolgirls'

Education

Participants discussed their experiences on how the COVID-19 outbreak affected parental support to the education of adolescent schoolgirls. Many participants explained that in recent years, many parents valued the education of adolescent schoolgirls. Despite the COVID-19 outbreak, parents were keen on the education of their children. Participant 4 explained that “in this 21st century parents know the value of education. Because they were not privileged to be exposed to education, they are now supporting their children to be educated. Many parents are committed in seeing their girls go to school.” Having said that, some participants explained that with the socioeconomic challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak some parents prioritized the education of boys over girls. Participant 11 mentioned that “nowadays, some parents are encouraging their girls to attend school, but still pay premium of the education of boys over girls.” However, most participants described their experiences of how poverty, which is exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak, undermined the support that the family provided to the education of girls during the COVID-19 period. Participant 10 stated that “looking at this school environment, it’s very deplorable and vulnerable. Many parents here cannot afford to support their kids’ education. Many kids are here because of this Free Quality Education. And when it comes to the parents, some of them are selling, doing petty trade to take care of the home. So, to send their kids to school is very difficult for them.” Unfortunately, some participants described how some parents forced and encouraged their daughters to enter into early marriages or cohabitation with men due to the economic hardship that is

exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak. This is mostly because the parents are unable to take care of their daughters or even expect their daughters' male partners to meet some of the family's economic needs. Participant 11 explained that "during the COVID-19 outbreak in this country, there was no school, and all the children were at home. What most of the parents did was to give these children to men for married. So, it leads to early marriage."

To stress the effect of poverty on the education of girls, many participants emphasized how increased poverty due to the COVID-19 outbreak affected the education of schoolgirls. Participant 2 stated that "their parents are poor and when the Coronavirus struck, one year ago, their parents found it difficult to feed them. So, what they did, they went to the streets, they find boys that can give them money, little money, that can be able to feed them. So, at the end the boys also need something in return, that is sex. These motorbike riders, they can give them money every time they go to them." Some participants explained that during the COVID-19 outbreak some schoolgirls returned to their homes in remote villages. Many schoolgirls stayed with guardians in the major towns and cities to access secondary schools, which were limited in remote communities. Participant 9 explained that "some girls did not return because most of them live with guardians, wherein their parents are in the villages. Due to hard times and difficulties, they prefer to go to their parents and then be with them, help them in certain domestic work to improve on their standard living. Being here with their guardians, even their guardian may not afford to continue looking after them, given the high cost of living."

The following data samples support this subtheme:

- “In this 21st century parents know the value of education. Because they were not privileged to be exposed to education, they are now supporting their children to be educated. Many parents are committed in seeing their girls go to school.” (Participant 4)
- “But even when they (parents) don’t have, they go the extra mile to educate their girls. Some of them are petty traders, they sell at the markets to make sure that they meet the educational needs of their daughters. They invest in it because they have seen the value of girl child education. And if a girl child is educated, the blessing that individual bring into the family.” (Participant 7)
- “During the COVID-19 outbreak in this country, there was no school, and all the children were at home. What most of the parents did was to give these children to men for married. So, it leads to early marriage.” (Participant 11)
- “Nowadays, some parents are encouraging their girls to attend school, but still pay premium of the education of boys over girls.” (Participant 11)
- “Their parents are poor and when the Coronavirus struck, one year ago, their parents found it difficult to feed them. So, what they did, they went to the streets, they find boys that can give them money, little money, that can be able to feed them. So, at the end the boys also need something in return, that is sex. These motorbike riders, they can give them money every time they go to them.” (Participant 2)
- “Some girls did not return because most of them live with guardians, wherein their parents are in the villages. Due to hard times and difficulties, they prefer

to go to their parents and then be with them, help them in certain domestic work to improve on their standard living. Being here with their guardians, even their guardian may not afford to continue looking after them, given the high cost of living.” (Participant 9)

- “Looking at this school environment, it’s very deplorable and vulnerable. Many parents here cannot afford to support their kids’ education. Many kids are here because of this Free Quality Education. And when it comes to the parents, some of them are selling, doing petty trade to take care of the home. So, to send their kids to school is very difficult for them.” (Participant 10)

Schoolgirls Become Mothers and Breadwinners of Their Families

Most participants described their experiences of how some schoolgirls were combining attending school, taking care of their children, and being the bread winners of their families during the COVID-19 period. Participant 7 stated that “I was doing business; I was selling boil eggs when schools were closed for the COVID-19 outbreak.” In addition, participant 13 stated that “in the morning I sell. In the afternoon I come to school. I sell Mondays to Fridays; Saturdays I come for extra lessons, and I don’t sell on Sundays.” Moreover, some participants explained how some schoolgirls became bread winners for themselves, their children, and their families during the COVID-19 period. Participant 9 mentioned that “there are some kids here who are fending for the family. They are catering for the family. They do business, they engage in other things for the family to survive.” Many participants mentioned that due to being engaged in multiple socioeconomic activities (childcare, petty trade), schoolgirls were finding it difficult to

concentrate in school. Participant 8 explained that “some schoolgirls are given teachers a hell of problems, in terms of discipline, in terms of punctuality, because some of them have to take care of their kids, their babies. They don’t come to school the normal way. They are normally absent and sometimes they come to school late. They have that perception of being mature now and being responsible.”

The following data samples support this subtheme:

- “I was doing business; I was selling boil eggs when schools were closed for the COVID-19 outbreak.” (Participant 7)
- “Some schoolgirls are given teachers a hell of problems, in terms of discipline, in terms of punctuality, because some of them have to take care of their kids, their babies. They don’t come to school the normal way. They are normally absent and sometimes they come to school late. They have that perception of being mature now and being responsible.” (Participant 8)
- “In the morning I sell. In the afternoon I come to school. I sell Mondays to Fridays; Saturdays I come for extra lessons, and I don’t sell on Sundays.” (Participant 13)
- “There are some kids here who are fending for the family. They are catering for the family. They do business, they engage in other things for the family to survive.” (Participant 9)

Theme 4: Policies That Support the Education of Adolescent Schoolgirls During the COVID-19 Outbreak (Research Question 2)

Many participants shared their experiences of how the implementation of policies formulated by the government of Sierra Leone impacted on the education of adolescent schoolgirls. Some of these policies were formulated in response to the COVID-19 outbreak while others had been in existence to support the education of girls and other vulnerable students. The experiences that the participants shared in relation to policy formulation and implementation brought out two subthemes and they are: (a) policy formulation and implementation to support girls' education during the COVID-19 period and (b) government and aid organizations supported schools to promote the education of girls

Policy Formulation and Implementation to Support Girls' Education During the COVID-19 Period

Talking about their experiences on policy formulation and implementation to support girls' education during the COVID-19 period, many participants shared their experiences of how the government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion Policy to support the education of vulnerable groups, include girls, children with disability, students from poor and marginalized backgrounds. This policy was formulated in response to the negative impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of girls and other vulnerable students. Participant 2 explained that "some girls returned to school because of the introduction of the Radical Inclusion Policy by the Ministry of Education." The Radical Inclusion Policy is a national law that requires all schools to allow all girls

(including pregnant girls and schoolgirls with children) to return to school and complete school. In addition, participants explained their experiences on how the government's FQSE policy was supporting the education of girls during the COVID-19 period. The FQSE policy provided for the nonpayment of school fees for all students and the provision of some safety and teaching and learning materials for students in all government schools. These policy provisions enabled many girls to continue their education during the challenging COVID-19 period. Participant 11 stated that "the government is helping in the education of girls in a way. With the government policy, Free Quality Education, schools don't collect school fees from girls (and boys). The government pays their fees and provide learning materials." Also, participants mentioned that the FQSE policy banned schools from collecting any forms of payments from students, which in some cases resulted in extortion of parents by schools. Participant 11 mentioned that "government has policies against extortion of money by schools from parents. So, that alone is a help for we the parents."

The implementation of the policies formulated to support the education of schoolgirls is a serious challenge during the COVID-19 period. The socioeconomic challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak means that the government focused on other priorities, such as health and economic stability and recovery, instead of implementing policies to support the education of schoolgirls. However, participant 8 stated that "we always have orientation when schools reopens. We educate girls about their own rights, and also their obligations. We also always educate the teachers during staff meetings to educate the teachers well, because they have to be talking to the pupils during

orientations.” Some schools conducted weekly teacher learning cycles (a school safety structure) to educate teachers and share experiences to improve school safety for girls and other vulnerable students. Regular trainings and reminders of the teachers on the provisions of the school safety policies was important for the implementation of the policies by the school to keep girls safe in schools, especially during the challenging COVID-19 period. Participant 10 stated that “we have what we call a teacher learning cycle every Wednesday. We talk to the teachers, we mentor them, we tell them the importance of helping girls to be safe in the school environment and they should be a priority to us.”

The following data samples support this subtheme:

- “Some girls returned to school because of the introduction of the radical inclusion policy by the ministry of education.” (Participant 2)
- “The government is helping in the education of girls in a way. With the government policy, Free Quality Education, schools don’t collect school fees from girls (and boys). The government pays their fees and provide learning materials. It is a policy that girls enjoy; they enjoy those facilities.” (Participant 11)
- “The pandemic has really created a negative impact. As a result of the radical inclusion policy, which is encouraging every girl to get access to Free Quality Education. The students were encouraged to come back to school to attend. Because the radical inclusion policy is preaching to every child, every parent

that they must go back to school. And there must be no barriers to education.”

(Participant 16)

- “Government has policies against extortion of money by schools from parents. So, that alone is a help for we the parents.” (Participant 11)
- “We always have orientation when schools reopens. We educate girls about their own rights, and also their obligations. We also always educate the teachers during staff meetings to educate the teachers well, because they have to be talking to the pupils during orientations.” (Participant 8)
- “We have what we call a teacher learning cycle every Wednesday. We talk to the teachers, we mentor them, we tell them the importance of helping girls to be safe in the school environment and they should be a priority to us.”

(Participant 10)

Government and Aid Organizations Supported Schools to Promote the Education of Girls

Many participants explained their experiences that during this COVID-19 outbreak schools got lots of support from aid organizations, complementing the efforts of the government, supporting the implementation of government policies to ensure that the school environment is conducive for the schoolgirls to be safe in school and learn.

Participant 11 mentioned that “government have started paying the school fees, that is not enough, because what is left is more than school fees. If we can help with a pair of uniform, bags and maybe notebooks, that will be better for the schools.” To complement the efforts of the government, aid organizations provided wide range of support to the

schools to improve the safety of school and improve teaching and learning for all students with emphasis on the education of schoolgirls. The support from aid organizations to schools and schoolgirls increased during the COVID-19 outbreak to help the education sector, including schools and schoolgirls recover from the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak and resilient against future outbreaks and pandemics. Participant 4 mentioned that “during the period of COVID-19 lots of humanitarian organizations had come to aid learning for our kids.” In addition, aid organizations provide school safety and hygiene kits for schools and teaching and learning materials. In addition, participant 8 stated that “we are getting support from partners, NGOs. Like sanitary pads, we have them now. Any girl child that experienced her menstrual cycle in school, we supplied her with a pack.”

The following data samples support this subtheme:

- “Government have started paying the school fees, that is not enough, because what is left is more than school fees. If we can help with a pair of uniform bags and maybe notebooks, that will be better for the schools.” (Participant 11)
- “During the period of COVID-19 lots of humanitarian organizations had come to aid learning for our kids.” (Participant 4)
- “We are getting support from partners, NGOs. Like sanitary pads, we have them now. Any girl child that experienced her menstrual cycle in school, we supplied her with a pack.” (Participant 8)

Summary

This chapter presented a snapshot of the lived experiences of official members of rural schools in Sierra Leone. The aim was to understand the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural areas of Sierra Leone. The participants in this study explained their experiences of how the COVID-19 outbreak has negatively impacted on the education of adolescent schoolgirls, including how the COVID-19 outbreak resulted in school dropout, pregnancy, early marriage, loss of learning, and socioeconomic issues. for many adolescent schoolgirls. Findings from this study revealed that the COVID-19 outbreak caused many socioeconomic challenges to the education of adolescent schoolgirls as outlined above. This chapter provided detailed description of the results of this study, which was based on the subthemes and themes that emerged from the data analysis of this study. Chapter 5 includes detailed interpretations of the findings of the study. In addition, this chapter also includes application of the conceptual framework, limitations of this study, recommendations, implications, and conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I explored the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone, and the public policy implications on adolescent schoolgirls' education during the COVID-19 period. As part of this study, I engaged 16 participants in two schools through face-to-face interviews to explore their lived experiences regarding the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone, and the related public policy implications. This chapter includes a discussion of the findings, recommendations for stakeholders and future research, and the implications for social change.

The participants described how the COVID-19 outbreak had exacerbated the poor conditions of safety and teaching and learning in schools, which led to many schoolgirls dropping out of schools. The outbreak also exacerbated the socioeconomic conditions of schoolgirls and their families and led to the government of Sierra Leone enacting a comprehensive policy framework to support the education of adolescent schoolgirls and other vulnerable students. In this chapter, I discuss and interpret the findings of this study, the application of the conceptual framework, and the limitations of the study. I also present recommendations, implications, and a conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

All 16 participants seemed to agree that the COVID-19 outbreak in various forms impacted negatively on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone. The literature review indicated how the 2014–2015 Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, which led to the closure of schools for 6 months, also negatively impacted the education of

adolescent schoolgirls, including over 15,000 schoolgirls being impregnated during that period (Menzel, 2019). The findings of the current study indicated that schoolgirls faced similar challenges during the COVID-19 outbreak and the Ebola outbreak.

Conduciveness of the School Environment to Support Girls' Education

The literature review indicated that poor countries are more prone to instabilities and disasters, and in many cases, there are few or no safeguarding structures to protect women and girls (Oxfam Intermón, 2019). This poor safeguarding structure includes the school environment, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak. Most of the participants mentioned that, despite the COVID-19 outbreak, many schools had some of the recommended school safety structures, which included the school safety committee, the suggestion box, school mentor, boys' and girls' clubs, and murals to inform students of the school-based violence referral pathway. In addition, many participants stated that many schools had school safety policies, and schools conducted regular safeguarding awareness raising and trainings for their teachers and students. Participant 16 explained that "we have gone through trainings on gender-based violence in schools. The teachers were engaged, and even the heads of schools."

Despite many schools having safety policies and structures in place, most participants explained that these policies and structures were not protecting girls enough during this COVID-19 period. Implementing the policies in schools to enhance the safeguarding of girls after the issues posed by the COVID-19 outbreak on girls' education was the challenge. Participant 15 stated that

a teacher impregnated a girl; these are all abuses we recorded. We investigated to bring out the issue; we report it. You send the report to your authority. we don't know what comes after. But there are interferences from the external, and they will tamper with justice and begin to make negotiation.

The situation reported by Participant 15 resonated with the experiences of many participants during the COVID-19 period that incidents of violence in schools against girls were not adequately investigated and the perpetrators are in most cases were not punished. Linked to this, there were few female teachers and mentors to guide and support schoolgirls. Participant 1 stated that “our school is largely girls. And out of 43 staff, we have about seven female teachers, so there is need for female teachers.” As shared by this participant, it is well documented for girls to be more confident to confide with female teachers than male teachers. The lack of female teachers in the schools was one of the reasons why girls did not feel confident to report the abuses they faced in schools. Schools need more female teachers to help build the support and confidence of schoolgirls and improve the conduciveness of the schools to mitigate some of the challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The introduction of the Radical Inclusion Policy enabled many pregnant girls and girls with children to return to schools during the COVID-19 period. However, the schools were not conducive for many of these girls. Participants reported that some girls who returned to school with pregnancy or after having given birth were shamed by their fellow students. In addition, schools lacked basic medical aid to support pregnant girls.

Participant 3 report that “the other challenge, particularly pregnant girls, is the fact that they need medical attention.”

Extended School Closures During the COVID-19 Outbreak Caused Many Girls to Drop Out of Schools

As noted in the literature review, the extended school closures during the Ebola outbreak in 2014–2015 left about 15,000 schoolgirls impregnated (Menzel, 2019). All current participants explained that many schoolgirls dropped out of schools during the 6-month closure of schools during the COVID-19 outbreak. The school dropout situation for girls during this COVID-19 outbreak was a similar situation to that of the Ebola outbreak. Participant 10 explained that “let’s say between 15% to 20% of the girls’ population in this school (dropped out of school). We are talking of hundreds of girls who dropped out of school from this school.” In addition, Participant 3 mentioned that

we have 1000 students; about 200 were affected and they were not coming to school after the school reopened. About 50 girls returned, which is not much. And we got information through their colleagues that this person is pregnant, and she’s not coming to school again. This person is now married, she’s not coming.

All 16 participants confirmed that the COVID-19 outbreak negatively impacted the education of adolescent schools in one way or another. As during the Ebola outbreak, this extended school closure of schools during the COVID-19 outbreak eroded the minor protections that schoolgirls had by being in school. As Sierra Leone and many parts of the world grappled with the socioeconomic implications of the COVID-19 outbreak, the protection of adolescent girls became a lesser priority. Girls were exposed to many

challenges that left many of them dropping out of school. Participant 1 stated that “the impact of the COVID-19 on the adolescent girls in our school, it was a problem, and it discourages most of them (the girls) not to come back.”

Effect of Gangs and Drugs Within the School on the Education of Schoolgirls

Some participants reported that gang violence and drugs were increasingly a problem in secondary schools among the students during the COVID period. However, most of the participants mentioned that both gang violence and drugs were more common with schoolboys than schoolgirls. In fact, participants explained that they had not experienced girls abusing drugs or being part of violent gangs in schools during the COVID-19 period. Participant 15 mentioned that “I supervise most of the big schools in this district, you will not see girls in drug abuse or gets complained about drug abuse.” However, many participants emphasized that boys were increasingly involved in consuming drugs and were involved in gang violence that disrupted their education, particularly during this COVID-19 period. Participant 8 explained

the high rate of this clique issue in this area has grown up in a way that anytime you want to organize a program in school you have to call the military, because the gangs will attend. Some of these girls admire gang members; they love them.

Government and Aid Organizations Supported Schools to Promote the Education of Girls

As was explained in the literature review, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the FQSE program to provide free and quality education for students in all public primary and secondary schools. The implementation of government policies is

largely funded by the international aid partners (Kargbo & Sen, 2014). This policy supported the implementation of Sierra Leone's president flagship education program. The implementation of the FQSE program enabled many girls to return to school after the extended school closures during the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak. Participant 11 mentioned that

the government is helping in the education of girls in a way. With the government policy, Free Quality Education, schools don't collect school fees from girls (and boys). The government pays their fees and provide learning materials. It is a policy that girls enjoy; they enjoy those facilities.

In addition, many aid organizations are complementing the efforts of the government by supporting the implementation of the FQSE program and many related policies that supported and promoted the education of adolescent schoolgirls during the COVID-19 period. Participant 4 mentioned that "during the period of COVID-19 lots of humanitarian organizations had come to aid learning for our kids."

Schools Engaged Parents and Local Communities to Support the Education of Girls

In the literature review, Hague (2002, as cited in Umelaila & Chohan, 2013) noted that the role of the parent is significant in the education of their children as they make decisions that affect the future of their children. This point was confirmed by some of the findings of the current study. Schools engaged parents and local communities to ensure girls who dropped out of schools during the COVID-19 outbreak returned to schools, and the girls who were in schools were retained in the schools. The participation of the parents and the local community was significant for the continuous learning of girls.

Participant 10 explained that “we educate the parents, we call them, we talk to them, we tell them the importance of girl child education. And if you educate a girl child, then you educate the community.” Even though some participants reported that some parents were responsive to the schools’ engagements with them, others ignored the schools and this ignorance in most cases negatively affected the education of girls during this challenging COVID-19 period.

Many Schoolgirls Dropped Out of School Due to Pregnancy and Social Welfare-Related Issues During the Extended School Closures During the COVID-19 Outbreak

All 16 participants confirmed that many schoolgirls got pregnant during the COVID-19 outbreak, and this led them not to return to school when schools reopened after the extended closures. Participant 15 stated that “about 65 girls were absent from one school (when schools reopened). We found out that some of the girls got pregnant, some of them are now doing business (petty trade), some of them are already mothers.” This pattern of many schoolgirls getting pregnant during extended periods of school closures during the COVID-19 outbreak was similar to the Ebola outbreak. Participant 1 explained that

when schools reopened, we realized that most of our girls were affected. Some were pregnant, some entirely lost interest. Even when they were pregnant, we tried as hard as possible to see how best they can return to school, especially when it is a government policy to allow pregnant girls to school.

Pregnancy is one of the major causes of school dropout even during normal periods. As stated in the literature review, according to UNFPA (2015, as cited in Denney et al., 2015), teenage pregnancy has long been a problem in Sierra Leone. In 2013, the country ranked among the 10 highest in the world, with 28% of girls age 15–19 years pregnant or already having given birth at least once (Denney et al., 2015). This situation was worsened by the COVID-19 outbreak, with many of the safeguarding measures that protect adolescent girls and retain them in schools weakened or compromised. Participant 4 explained that

many girls involved into so many problems, some of them encountered teenage pregnancies. As a result, some of them dropped out of school. This is because some of them got pregnant, and due to these problems, their families cannot support them to attend school.

To remedy the situation of schoolgirls dropping out of school due to pregnancy, in April 2021 the government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion Policy to provide a supportive and protective learning environment for girls and other vulnerable groups of students (MBSSE, 2021). The policy lifted a ban on pregnant girls attending schools and required schools to accept and support pregnant schoolgirls in schools. Because of this policy, some girls were courageous and committed enough to return to schools. As was reported by Participant 13,

the COVID-19 outbreak affected me because I gave birth to a son. From that time, I remained in school. I did not get any support, since I lost my mother. That is why I give birth to a son, but still, I will not give up because I like school.

Many participants reported that most of the pregnant girls were unable to return to school. Those who returned faced many challenges and needed support. Participant 3 reported that “the other challenge, particularly pregnant girls, is the fact that they need medical attention.”

Socioeconomic Issues Exacerbated by the COVID-19 Outbreak Affected the Education of Schoolgirls

In the literature review, Ali and Buzdar (2011, as cited in Umelaila & Chohan, 2013) argued that parents are aware of the significance of their daughters' education, but resources restrict them from engaging their daughters in education. However, even parents in rural areas want to educate their daughters (Umelaila & Chohan, 2013). This situation as reported in this literature was confirmed by many participants in the current study. Many participants explained that many parents were committed to the education of their daughters even in the challenging times when the COVID-19 outbreak was having significant implication on their livelihoods. Participant 7 explained that

but even when they (parents) don't have, they go the extra mile to educate their girls. Some of them are petty traders, they sell at the markets to make sure that they meet the educational needs of their daughters. They invest in it because they have seen the value of girl child education. And if a girl child is educated, the blessing that individual bring into the family.

Despite many participants reporting that parents were committed to the education of their daughters, there were those who were not committed. The poor socioeconomic status of some families affected the education of their daughters. The poor socioeconomic

conditions of parents and families were made worse by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Participant 11 stated that “during the COVID-19 outbreak in this country, there was no school, and all the children were at home. What most of the parents did was to give these children to men for married. So, it leads to early marriage.” Some of the parents who gave their daughters to marry early did so because of their poor socioeconomic status. Some parents even expected their daughters’ husbands or partners to help run their families. Many participants reported that some schoolgirls were engaged in petty trade to support themselves, their children, and their siblings and parents. Engaging in multiple socioeconomic activities compromised the education of schoolgirls and, in most cases, led girls to drop out of school. Participant 9 explained that “there are some kids here who are fending for the family. They are catering for the family. They do business, they engage in other things for this family to survive.”

Policies That Support the Education of Adolescent Schoolgirls During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Since 2018, education has been the flagship of the government of Sierra Leone. The literature review indicated that in 2018, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the FQSE program to provide free and quality education for students in all public primary and junior and senior secondary schools. On April 27, 2021, the government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion Policy, which focused on creating an inclusive environment that eradicated stigma, harassment, intolerance, and exclusion of any type (MBSSE, 2021). The Radical Inclusion Policy was enacted by the government of Sierra

Leone in response to the COVID-19 outbreak to support the education of girls and other vulnerable students.

The government of Sierra Leone with support from the aid community is supporting the education of girls by implementing the Radical Inclusion Policy and the FQSE policy and other related policies during the COVID-19 period. Government and aid organizations are helping to improve the learning and safety conditions in schools to accommodate girls, including pregnant girls, teenage mothers, disable girls, girls from poor and marginalized backgrounds, and other vulnerable students. Many of the girls in schools needed to be supported to continue their education during the challenging COVID-19 period. This support included the provision of trainings and safety materials to create awareness among policy makers, school leaders, teachers, and students to improve the safety and learning conditions of the schools. Also, provide teaching and learning materials, and safety materials for students, especially girls. Participant 16 explained that

the pandemic has really created a negative impact. As a result of the radical inclusion policy, which is encouraging every girl to get access to Free Quality Education. The students were encouraged to come back to school to attend.

Because the radical inclusion policy is preaching to every child, every parent that they must go back to school. And there must be no barriers to education.

Conceptual Framework Applied

The conceptual framework of this study was based on the feminist theory, the punctuated equilibrium theory, and Heidegger's phenomenological theory because

phenomenology was the research design of this study. The following paragraphs describes how the conceptual framework of this study is applied throughout this study.

The feminist theory for this study focused on gender educational empowerment. Feminist theory is a change-oriented scholarly practice, challenging oppression and working towards justice (Ferguson, 2017). The feminist theory is rooted in and responsible to movements for equality, freedom, and justice (Ferguson, 2017). All the participants in this study shared their experiences of how the COVID-19 outbreak affected the education of adolescent schoolgirls. This approach of understanding the challenges that impacted the education of adolescent schoolgirls and in some cases proposed solution to those challenges was empowerment for girls and women. Participant 15 described that “now when you go to the schools, there are more girls in the schools than boys and girls are performing better than boys. The community is supporting girls to be in school.” Despite the challenges that girls faced to continue their education during this COVID-19 outbreak, they were still keeping pace with boys. Studies showed that schoolgirls were closing the gender gap in both number and performance.

From the public policy formulation and implementation perspective, this study relied on the punctuated equilibrium theory. This theory states that policies would adapt incrementally over time (Flink, 2019). However, policies would also be subject to periodic large changes called punctuations. This theory recognizes the balance public policy must keep between promoting stability and maintaining flexibility to meet changing demands in the environment. In addition, punctuated equilibrium theory states that policy changes are mostly small, incremental alterations to existing policy (Flink,

2019). Most participants shared their experiences of how policies formulated and implemented by government and partners supported the education of girls. Participant 16 stated that “the pandemic has really created a negative impact. As a result of the Radical Inclusion Policy, which is encouraging every girl to get access to Free Quality Education. The students were encouraged to come back to school to attend. Because the Radical Inclusion Policy is preaching to every child, every parent that they must go back to school. And there must be no barriers to education.” The government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion policy in April 2021 complementing the FQSE program, to support girls and other marginalized students who are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak.

The current study was based on the qualitative phenomenological approach from Heidegger’s interpretive tradition. According to Cohen (1987 as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004), one scholar who modified and built on the work of Husserl was Heidegger (a student of Husserl) who challenged some of his assumptions about how phenomenology could guide meaningful inquiry. Heidegger’s ideas in this respect comprised the interpretive, or hermeneutic, research tradition (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The research for this study is based on the human experiences of all the 16 participants, that goes beyond mere description of core concepts and essences to be embedded in common life practices. The research of this study focused on a hermeneutic inquiry, which refers to what the participants experienced rather than what they consciously know.

Limitations of this Study

The research of this study was conducted through face-to-face interviews with official members of the schools, who were the source of information for the study. Some of these participants might circumvent the truth by not telling the truth not to tarnish the image of their schools or their professions. Even though information from a participant or a category of participants was corroborated with information from other participants, the trustworthiness of the information provided still depended on the honesty of the participants. Another limitation was that I limited my interviews to adults, excluding minors. Schoolgirls, who were minors might have different perspectives from the participants that I engaged in this study. In addition, even though I interviewed girls who dropped out of school and later returned to school, girls who were unable to return to school would have provided other perspectives from the participants that I interviewed. Finally, I conducted the interviews in two schools in one rural district. Even though I can argue that the sample size involved participants that were knowledgeable about and experienced with the phenomenon of interest, the findings from this research cannot exhaustively represent all the schools in all the rural parts of Sierra Leone.

Recommendations

Even though this study brought out some unique findings about the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls, some of the findings were similar to the findings from previous studies in the literature review of this study on the effects of the 2014 – 2015 Ebola outbreak on girls in Sierra Leone. This study showed that many of the issues schoolgirls faced during the Ebola outbreak reemerged during this

COVID-19 outbreak. Issues such as long periods of school closure, girls dropped out of school, schoolgirls being pregnant, schoolgirls being mothers were all common phenomenon between the Ebola outbreak and the COVID-19 outbreak.

Other studies might build on this study focusing on what the government of Sierra Leone, the aid community, and schools need to do to prepare the education and school system to be resilient against future pandemics or other related emergencies. Since 1990, Sierra Leone has seen major emergencies that required global attention. These emergencies included a decade long rebel war, between 1991 and 2002, the largest Ebola outbreak in living memory, between 2014 and 2015, and the COVID-19 outbreak. This trend indicated that it will not take long for Sierra Leone to be struck by the next emergency. Therefore, a study that may inform the decision makers of the education sector of Sierra Leone to prepare the education system to mitigate the impact of future emergencies and protect girls from the brunt of the negative impacts of these emergencies is a laudable social change.

Implications

The findings of this study concerned how the COVID-19 outbreak had impacted on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone and the related policy implications. I will provide the key findings of this study to the MBSSE, the schools, and all the other participants from the schools. The study may inform MBSSE, aid organisations, and schools of the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone. With this information, these institutions may respond to address the challenges of schoolgirls' education that were created or

exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak. MBSSE may work with aid organisations and schools to engage communities and parents to support girls to return to school and retain girls who are in school. In addition, MBSSE and aid organisations can support schools to make the schools more conducive for schoolgirls. From this perspective, this study has the potential to create social change at a national and global level that might benefit girls in many parts of the world.

Conclusion

The results of this study clearly showed that the COVID-19 outbreak had a significant negative impact on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural parts of Sierra Leone. Like the Sierra Leone rebel war in 1991– 2021 and the Ebola outbreak in 2014 – 2015, schoolgirls were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Among many other issues, this study indicated that because of the COVID-19 outbreak many schoolgirls dropped out of schools, got pregnant, cares for their babies and wider families, and generally became distracted from focusing on their education.

The government of Sierra Leone introduced the Radical Inclusion policy. This public policy provided for the removed all infrastructural and systemic policy and practice impediments that limited learning for any child. This policy focused on creating an inclusive environment that eradicates stigma, harassment, intolerance, and exclusion of any type. This policy particularly emphasized the inclusion of historically marginalized groups, such as pregnant girls, parent learners, children with disabilities (MBSSE, 2021). MBSSE and its development aid partners were working to implement this policy to support girls and other vulnerable learners in schools. This study indicated

that to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the safety and education of adolescent schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone, the Radical Inclusion policy and the FQSE policy (which was introduced in 2018 as the flagship of the Sierra Leone President) should be effectively implemented. Therefore, I concluded that, the government of Sierra Leone, including MBSSE and the schools, with support from development aid partners need to continue prioritizing support to adolescent schoolgirls' education. This support should be focused on implementing the priority public policies of the government of Sierra Leone, which are the Radical Inclusion policy, and the Free Quality Education program.

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Appendix A: Sample Invitation letter

Date.....

Invitation to participate in a face-to-face interview for a study on how the COVID-19 outbreak impact adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone.

Dear (names of target participants),

I am conducting interviews as part of a research to understand the experiences of members of (name of school) on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education in rural Sierra Leone and the related public policy implications.

This research is part of completing my dissertation to fulfil my Ph.D. programme with Walden University.

The engagement with you will be through in-depth interviews with the researcher that will last up to an hour. The interviews will be conducted within your school compound at a place that is private and free from disruptions and interactions. Moreover, I am planning to conduct these interviews between (date for the interviews) and will be at your school between (time period that I will be at the school).

Please contact me at my mobile telephone numbers (Insert Phone Numbers) either by direct calls or whatsapp for clarifications on this request. I am happy to return your calls, if you send me a message requesting me to call you.

Kind regards,

(Name of Researcher)

Appendix B: Sample Letter of Cooperation From Government Authority (Research
Partner)

Community Research Partner Name

Contact Information

Date

Dear (Researcher's Name),

Based on our discussions about your study, I introduce you to the school principal to enable you conduct the study entitled How COVID-19 has Impacted Adolescent Schoolgirls' Education in Rural Sierra Leone: Implications for Public Policy within the Insert Name of Community Partner. As part of this study, I permit you to work with the school principal to conduct this research. This school will recommend participants who are formal members of this school to participate in your studies. When the report of this study is ready, you should provide feedback to this office and the school on the key findings of the study. The participation of individuals in this study will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organisation's responsibilities include recommending appropriate schools that will allow you to conduct your research for this study and ask the school

principals to support you to conduct this study in their schools. The participants that will be recommended to you for this research shall be formal members of the school, and they will all be 18 years and above. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I understand that you will not be naming our organization in the doctoral project report that is published in Proquest.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely,

Authorization Official

Contact Information

Appendix C: Sample Letter of Cooperation from a School (Research Partner)

Community Research Partner Name

Contact Information

Date

Dear (Researcher's Name),

Based on our discussions about your study, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled How COVID-19 has Impacted Adolescent Schoolgirls' Education in Rural Sierra Leone: Implications for Public Policy within the (Insert Name of Community Partner).

As part of this study, I authorize you to identify participants who are formal members of this school to conduct in-depth interviews for your study, and later you should provide feedback on the key findings of the study to this school. Also, you should provide feedback to the individual participants when the report of the study is ready. The participation of individuals in this study will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our school's responsibilities include to recommend appropriate members of this school to participate in this research and provide appropriate space within this school for the interviews to be conducted. The participants that will be recommended to you for this research are all formal members of the school, and they will

all be 18 years and above. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I understand that you will not be naming our school in the doctoral project report that is published in Proquest.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the school's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely,

Authorization Official

Contact Information

Appendix D: Sample Interview Questions for Adolescent Schoolgirls

1. What are your experiences of the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on your education?
2. What are your experiences of the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of other schoolgirls?
3. Tell me about a situation in which you feel that you (as an adolescent schoolgirls) are treated differently in the school community?
4. Tell me about your experience regarding the prejudice and discrimination displayed by members of the school community against you or other adolescent schoolgirls?
5. Can you tell me how you feel about the school community's support to you and adolescent schoolgirls' education?
6. What is the available legal and policy framework that support the education of adolescent schoolgirls?
7. Tell me about your experiences of how functional is the legal and policy framework to support the education of adolescent schoolgirls in this school?
8. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in the interview. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me that you feel is important for me to know?

Appendix E: Sample Interview Questions for School Principals, Teachers, and School
Mentors

1. What are your experiences of the impact of COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in this school?
2. Tell me about a situation in which you feel that adolescent schoolgirls are treated differently in the school community?
3. Tell me about your experience regarding the prejudice and discrimination displayed by members of the school community against adolescent schoolgirls?
4. Can you tell me how you feel about the school community's support to adolescent schoolgirls' education?
5. What is the available legal and policy framework that support the education of adolescent schoolgirls?
6. Tell me about your experiences of how functional is the legal and policy framework to support the education of adolescent schoolgirls in this school?
7. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in the interview. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me that you feel is important for me to know?

Appendix F: Sample Interview Questions for Parent Members of the Parent/Community

Teacher Association

1. What are your experiences of the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in this school?
2. Tell me about a situation in which you feel that adolescent schoolgirls are treated differently in the school community?
3. What is the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the support that parents provide to the education of adolescent schoolgirls in this school?
4. Tell me about your experience regarding the prejudice and discrimination displayed by members of the school community against adolescent schoolgirls?
5. Can you tell me how you feel about the school community's support to adolescent schoolgirls' education?
6. What is the available legal and policy framework that support the education of adolescent schoolgirls?
7. Tell me about your experiences of how functional is the legal and policy framework to support the education of adolescent schoolgirls in this school?
8. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in the interview. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me that you feel is important for me to know?

Appendix G: Sample Interview Questions for School Quality Assurance Officers

1. What are your experiences of the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the education of adolescent schoolgirls in this school?
2. Tell me about a situation in which you feel that adolescent schoolgirls are treated differently in the school community?
3. Tell me about your experience regarding the prejudice and discrimination displayed by members of the school community against adolescent schoolgirls?
4. Can you tell me how you feel about the school community's support to adolescent schoolgirls' education?
5. What is the available legal and policy framework that support the education of adolescent schoolgirls?
6. Tell me about your experiences of how functional is the legal and policy framework to support the education of adolescent schoolgirls in this school?
7. What your office (i.e., The Ministry of Education District Education Office) is doing to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education?
8. What are the responses of the central government, through the Ministry of Education and other appropriate agencies, (planned or activities currently happening) to mitigate against the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent schoolgirls' education?

9. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate in the interview. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me that you feel is important for me to know?