

**Gender and intersecting inequalities in secondary education:
exploring the experiences and outcomes of girls in secondary
schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone**

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Abstract

This study offers novel insights into the interplay between gender, violence, and education in the post-conflict context of Sierra Leone. It focuses on the gendered processes and conditions of learning, including the content of what and how girls learn, and gives an account of how schooling experiences produce and reproduce inequalities in secondary education. This study also explores how gender regimes in these schools regulate and construct gender identities. An intersectional lens is employed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social identities in schools, offering analytical depth for examining the interactions of these identities in sustaining and promoting gender-differentiated schooling experiences and learning outcomes in secondary education in the country. Through a qualitative ethnographic case study methodology, the study draws on fifty (50) individual semi-structured interviews, ten (10) focus group discussions, and sixty (60) classroom observations in four (4) secondary schools to uncover how girls negotiate intersectional identities and are affected by them. This multi-site qualitative research offers school-specific analysis while maintaining broader applicability across the four sites. The rich qualitative data indicate the pervasive and inequitable everyday gender practices within these four schools and illustrate how these contribute to exacerbating inequalities in secondary education. In particular, the findings uncover the complex ways gender intersects with other social inequalities - such as social class, ethnic-traditions, sexuality and location to produce highly gendered and differentiated experiences which ultimately influence girls' performance, retention, and attainment. Finally, the study identifies implications for educational practitioners and policymakers with respect to recognising societal factors, such as early marriage and teenage pregnancy, on girls' educational outcomes, especially in a post-conflict context like Sierra Leone.

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Author's declaration:

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature

Publications derived from work on Doctoral Programmes

Following the conduct of my pilot research, an abridged version of my thesis was published (see first publication below).

- Conteh, O. (2024). Gender and Other Inequalities in Secondary Education in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone: Exploring the Experiences and Outcomes of Girls in Schools. *International Journal of Higher Education Pedagogies*, 5(2), 19-40. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ijhep.v5i2.624>

In collaboration with colleagues, I published the following papers below

- Osborne, A., Yillah, R.M., Bash-Taqi, A. *et al.* A study of vulnerable student populations, exclusion and marginalization in Sierra Leonean secondary schools: a social justice theory analysis. *BMC Psychol* **13**, 263 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02554-x>
- Osborne, A., Yillah, R. M., Bash-Taqi, A., & Conteh, O. B. (2025). Navigating exclusion: school responses to the radical inclusion policy for marginalised students in Sierra Leone. *Discover Education*, 4(1), 67.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

It has been more than two decades since the end of the civil war (1991 – 2003) in Sierra Leone. While the country has made tremendous progress in rebuilding public services, including education, it is still struggling to rebuild an inclusive educational system as a key element of post-conflict reconstruction (World Bank, 2007; GoSL, 2017). During the civil war, women and girls faced extreme and extensive forms of violence and abuse. For instance, thousands of women and girls were systematically abducted and abused by all parties to the conflict (Maclure & Denov, 2009). Rape and other forms of violence were used as 'weapons of war' (Marks, 2013). Thus, my argument is that the conflict created a school system that is vulnerable to gender-related issues that significantly affect girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes. As a result, post-conflict educational reconstruction has been underscored as a '...key opportunity to rectify endemic discrimination against women by fostering the promotion and protection of women's rights' (Maclure & Denov, 2009, p.613). It is assumed that post-conflict educational reconstruction reforms educational institutions and facilitates gender equity. For instance, Hughes and Tripp (2015) suggest that a post-conflict context '...has often provided an impetus to reforming gender relations' (cited in Mitra & Bang 2021, p.153). Further, Maclure and Denov (2009) argued that post-conflict educational reconstruction is seen as a driver for '...contesting gender-related disparities and enhancing the overall status of girls and women' (p.612).

Unlike the above assumptions that post-conflict educational reconstruction ushers in transformative policies that seek to contest gender-related disparities and promote the rights of women and girls, post-conflict educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone has promoted blatant gender disparities and failed to capture the goal of gender equity, because of '...deeply-seated institutional and cultural constraints that persist within systems of education and in the broader social contexts that affect educational structures and processes' (Maclure and Denov p.613). Against this background, this research explores pervasive intersecting inequalities propagated by a gendered school system that

has exacerbated education inequity in post-conflict Sierra Leone and produced adverse effects on the retention, attainment, and well-being of female students in schools. The analysis primarily focuses on the gendered experiences of secondary schooling in the northern and southern regions, and their intersection with other social identities, including socio-economic status (SES), location, ethnic traditions, and sexuality, among others. It examines how these intersections have influenced classroom practices and yielded gender-differentiated outcomes. The opportunity for a secondary level of education cannot be overstated, as it marks a transition to adulthood, during which pupils spend most of their adolescence. This educational life stage is critically important for girls because it is at this level that gender-differentiated practices and behaviour are more profound (Sperando & Kagoda, 2009).

Therefore, a detailed qualitative ethnographic study was conducted in 4 secondary schools from the two regions to explore gendered experiences and their intersecting inequalities in everyday schooling. This aims to understand the gendered institutional life of schools, and where possible, to do so through the voices and perspectives of those within the school, especially the girls. This encompasses a range of institutional conditions and practices, including gender bias in textbooks and teaching practices, the hidden curriculum, school-related gender-based violence, and social norms and practices, as well as the under-representation of women teachers in secondary school education. In concert with other researchers such as Francis (2000), Younger and Warrington (2005), and Dunne (2006), Unterhalter (2010, 2020), I argue that the school is a social institution where teachers and students interact to contribute to the production and reproduction of regulated and normalised gendered practices, power relations, and identities.

1.1 Positionality: Research Rationale

My interest in issues related to gender inequalities in secondary education first arose from my professional experience at the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). I worked as a Field Programme Officer and Project Analyst in both UN agencies. Broadly speaking,

I was involved in programs that sought to create an enabling educational environment for girls and advocate for rights, including sexual and reproductive rights. For instance, at UNFPA, I was involved in programs that sought to reduce teenage pregnancy in collaboration with the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy (NSRTP). I also collaborated with the Ministry of Basic Education to implement the Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) program in secondary schools, aiming to empower girls on their sexual and reproductive rights. Similar programs were implemented with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) geared towards addressing all forms of violence against girls. My role within international development contributes to project implementation that seeks to address gender-based violence and harmful practices like FGM and Child Marriage. Programmes such as Spotlight Initiative, funded by the European Union, seek to address pervasive gender-based violence, including providing quality essential package services for survivors in the farthest communities. Within the education sector, programmes such as the Secondary School Improvement program, rolled out teacher trainings such as code of conduct trainings and Child and Adolescent Health and Life Skills, facilitated to improve gender equality in secondary education. My experience implementing these programmes extended my reflexive positioning in this study.

However, despite the concerted efforts from the government, UN agencies, NGOs and CBOs, issues such as teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence remain a considerable contributor to adverse learning outcomes for girls in secondary schools in the country (Reilly, 2014; DCI, 2015; GoSL, 2020; UNICEF, 2024). I therefore developed an interest in the obstacles affecting girls' schooling outcomes. It is important to point out that working in these institutions made me realise that most of the programmes I worked on and those implemented by the government, NGOs and CBOs have predominantly focused on improving girls' access to school and to some extent creating structures within schools to address challenges girls faced, such as violence in school. These efforts have, to some extent, achieved positive outcomes; however, research has shown that achieving learning outcomes for girls has proven to be more elusive (Pai, 2024; UNICEF,

2024). This is because little attention has been paid to the everyday experiences of girls in school, as well as other factors that affect them.

In terms of positionality, it is also worth noting how being a male researcher from Sierra Leone in this context has specific implications. I do not need to overplay this, but it is clearly a factor where (as I have noted) many girls/women experienced abuse and rape, so they might be more wary. See section 4.10, where I attempted to address this more fully.

My research interest was sparked by these gaps, which reinforced my growing curiosity about the issues affecting girls' secondary education in Sierra Leone. In addition to my professional experience, this research stemmed academically from an essay paper I submitted during my Master's programme at the University of Sussex, which focused on gender inequality in secondary education in Sierra Leone. In my essay, I chose to explore inequalities in secondary education through a single lens: gender. During the process of conducting desk research, I discovered new information that was not fully anticipated. I realised that the problems facing girls' education in Sierra Leone go beyond their gender, but instead, multiple variables are at play.

To further feed my curiosity, I engaged myself with several research studies on inequalities in education, gender and education, and secondary education such as the *Sage Handbook of Gender and Education* (2006); Michelle (1983); Delamont (1990); Francis (2000); Paechter (2002); Dunne et al. (2005); Younger and Warrington (2005); Ombati and Ombati (2012); Conteh et al. (2021); Pai (2024); Osborne et al (2025a, 2025b) among others. A consensus among these researchers is that girls face multifaceted challenges in secondary schooling that continue to influence their experiences and learning outcomes (Skelton et al., 2006). This, therefore, motivated me to embark on research that seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of issues surrounding girls' education in post-conflict Sierra Leone by focusing on exploring the lived experiences of girls using an intersectional lens (see the four analytical chapters) (Unterhalter et al, 2010, 2020; Conteh et al., 2021). I argue that this is a nuanced position. I also argue that, as a Sierra Leonean who schooled and lived in the country for most of my

life, coupled with my wealth of knowledge in issues related to girls' secondary education, I am well-positioned to undertake this research. Therefore, I argue that my research has the potential to offer crucial new insights into the realities of girls' day-to-day schooling experiences in Sierra Leone, as well as how inequalities are reinforced or challenged in these contexts. My strong connections with the Ministry of Education in Sierra Leone, UN agencies, NGOs, and CBOs mean that my work may also have significant policy impacts.

1.2 Perspectives: Research Standpoint and Questions

A considerable body of literature exists on gender equality in secondary education (Dunne et al., 2005; Dunne, 2008; Francis, 2000; Liu, 2006; Parkes, 2015). There is also a lot of research work on constraints to girls' schooling, especially issues of girls' lower participation rate in school (Younger & Warrington, 2005; Renold, 2006; Ombati & Ombati, 2012; Unterhlater et al., 2010, 2020; Conteh et al., 2021; Pai, 2024; Osborne et al, 2025a, 2025b). However, post-conflict context literature is significantly limited and requires further exploration. Existing literature is almost silent on the 'paradox' of post-conflict education reconstruction. Additionally, research on gender and education in a post-conflict context has been criticised for its lack of focus on school-level specifics, such as gender relations, school interactions, school retention, performance, and attainment (Dunne et al., 2005; Maclure & Denov, 2009). Dejaeghere and Vavru (2011) noted that a critical aspect of most national government policies aimed at addressing gender inequalities in schooling is expanding access to education for girls (p.X). I agree with their argument that 'this approach falls short of addressing gendered relations of power in... schooling' (Dejaeghere and Vavru 2011, p.VIII). Furthermore, existing post-conflict literature primarily focuses on access to primary education and the pernicious effects of the war on girls and women, other than the gender relations (Matsumoto, 2011). For instance, in-school research has been 'limited and resolved around formal aspects such as inappropriate curricula, limited subject choices for girls, gender-biased textbooks, poor career choices and the need for more teachers' (Dunne et al., 2005, p.2). Therefore, I argue that this study speaks

to the need for a ' more systematic and larger study of gender relations in schools' and explores the interaction of gender with other social identities (Ibid p.72).

As with most contributions to the study of gender and schooling, scholars' inquiries are predominantly on '...gender as an aspect of identity formation within schools' (Dejaeghere and Vavrus 2011, p.VIII). Little or no attention has been paid to its intersection with other social identities such as socio-economic status (SES), sexuality, region, religion, and ethnic traditions. Furthermore, very little literature has employed an intersectional lens to explore the in-school experiences of female students and teachers. As mentioned earlier, an intersectional lens is important for understanding the 'educational experiences of an increasingly diverse student populace' (Davis et al, 2015, p.8). However, evidence has shown that a research gap exists in the study of intersectionality within an increasingly diverse secondary school population. For instance, Grant & Sleeter (1986) report that attempts have been made to analyse social identities in school separately, but argued that failure to apply an intersectional lens in analysing social identities in educational research 'leads at times to an oversimplification or inaccurate understanding of what occurs in schools' (cited in Davis et al. 2015, p.8). This is reiterated by Dajaeghere and Vavrus (2011), who argued that understanding the intersectionality of gender and other social identities '...has been distinctly missing in the field of international development and is largely absent from global policy agendas about schooling and gender' (p.X).

This research, therefore, tried to address the multiple gaps mentioned above and made important contributions to knowledge. Firstly, the study builds on limited empirical data to enhance understanding of gender and education in post-conflict contexts. This research is among the few studies that have explored the contradictions of educational reconstruction and transformation. Secondly, it extends the research on how the intersection of multiple identities, such as gender, social class, sexuality, culture, and location, influences girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes in secondary school. It gives an account of how schooling experiences produce and reproduce intersecting inequalities in secondary education. This study extends beyond the descriptive analysis of

equality in terms of numbers to focus on the gendered processes and conditions of learning, including the content of what girls learn and how they learn. Thirdly, this study extends the research on the concept of sexuality in schooling. Following Fox and Alldred (2013) and Alldred and Fox (2015), I explored sexuality within and beyond heterosexual relations. Sexuality in this research is precisely reflected in the interaction of students ‘...through gendered sexual expectations and power imbalances, negotiating the lack of female sexual autonomy, compulsory heterosexuality, and the norms that locate girls as objects of male sexual desires’ (Muhanguzi et al., 2011, p.135). I am concerned with the everyday school experiences of pupils and teachers, especially girls. This research has broadened the in-school research knowledge by focusing on investigating the gendered process of learning, as well as everyday formal and informal in-school interactions, cultures, and practices, and the intersection of gender with other social identities, such as sexuality, SES, Location, and Traditions. I intended to track how these new directions of knowledge influence girls' performance, retention, and attainment. Hence, to make the above-mentioned contributions, the study explored three research questions.

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

1.3 Structure of the thesis

To explore these research questions, I have structured this thesis as follows: this introductory chapter provides insights into my research standpoint and rationale, which then informs the formulation of my research questions. Chapter 2: Country

Context provides insight into the country's geographical and social contexts, as well as its post-conflict education system. Chapter 3: Literature Review explores post-conflict educational reconstruction, conceptualising intersectionality and outlining its applicability in educational research in relation to theorised discussions of gender, socio-economic status (SES), and sexuality. This is followed by Chapter 4, which provides a detailed analysis of the qualitative case study methodology and methods adopted, including describing the ethical procedures and the data collection and analysis processes. This chapter provides a systematic account of how I embarked on my fieldwork and the processes I undertook to generate and analyse data, and report the results as research findings. This is followed by four analytic chapters, each of which illuminates a different theoretical and empirical dimension of the study. Chapter 5 outlines how the intersecting gender-based violence has constrained girls' schooling experiences and negatively impacted their learning outcomes. In Chapter 6, I discuss how females negotiate male-centredness in schools and describe how intersecting experiences of classroom interactions and the use of space within and outside the classroom contribute to limiting girls' participation, resulting in adverse learning outcomes. In Chapter 7, I examine gender imbalances in schooling experiences and practices, which lead to gender differences in educational experiences and learning outcomes. In this chapter, I conducted a micro-analysis of the impact of gender structures on the school environment and the role they play in reproducing gender-differentiated educational performance, retention, and attainment. This chapter builds upon Chapter 8, which presents an exploratory analysis of the experiences of women educators and administrators in secondary schools. Chapter 9, "Conclusions," follows, where I draw together overarching conclusions from the study based on my findings. I also reflect on limitations, make recommendations, and identify areas for further research on girls' secondary education in post-conflict contexts.

Chapter 2: Country Context

Sierra Leone is located on the west coast of Africa, covering an area of 27,925 square miles (73,326 square kilometres) that borders Liberia to the South, Guinea to the northeast, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west and southwest. As of July 2017, the country is divided into five administrative regions (North, North-West, South, East, and West) with Freetown as the capital city (GoSL, 2024). It is further divided into 16 political districts, 21 local councils, including 6 City Councils, one Municipal Council, and 15 District Councils, as well as 190 chiefdoms. An estimated 65 per cent of the ethnically diverse population of 7,092,113 reside in rural areas (SSL, 2015).

Fig. 1: The Modern Map of Sierra Leone



In Sierra Leone, it is essential to note that the socio-demographic and macroeconomic context significantly influences an individual's ability to access basic needs, such as education (Stats SL & UNICEF, 2018; Stats SL et al., 2019;

Stats SL & UNICEF, 2019; GoSL, 2020). Hence, the socio-economic make-up of the people is reflected in the following categories: absolutely/extremely poor/economically disadvantaged, medium-income, and wealthy groups (Ibid). According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which measures the intensity of poverty in countries, Sierra Leone scored 59.2%, indicating a high rate of poverty (Stats SL et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2024). The impoverished socio-economic groups comprise approximately 4 million Sierra Leoneans, a group of people living on an income or expenditure below the minimum of USD 1.23 (GoSL, 2019, 2020; Stats SL and ICF, 2014, 2020). In rural districts like Pujehun, approximately 9 out of every 10 people belong to this group, compared to 2 in urban settings, such as Freetown. According to the country's education sector report, students from this socio-economic group are more likely not to access, remain in, or complete school due to their families' inability to support them (GoSL, 2020).

The history of Sierra Leone has been marked by an armed conflict that lasted for eleven years (1991 – 2002), causing an estimated 70,000 deaths and the humanitarian displacement of 2.6 million people from their homes (Kaldor & Vincent, 2006). Consequently, women and girls suffered the most from sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence, including rape and other forms of violence that were used as 'weapons of war' (Marks, 2013; UNICEF, 2024). The UN estimates that approximately 60,000 women and girls were raped during the conflict (UN, 2013). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report notes that 'women and girls were the deliberate targets of sexual violence and rape by all the armed groups during the conflict' (GoSL, 2004, p.167). This is reiterated by Sharkey (2008), who suggested that 'thousands of girls were systematically abducted, forced into slave labour and often subjected to repeated sexual assault and other atrocities' (p.570). As a result, human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch described the systemic raping of women and girls during the war as 'Sierra Leone's silent war crime' (2003, cited in UNICEF 2024, p.175). Following this, the 2014- 2016 Ebola pandemic caused an estimated death of 3,956 people and infected 14,124 people (CDC, 2019). These have all taken place in Sierra Leone's entrenched patriarchal society,

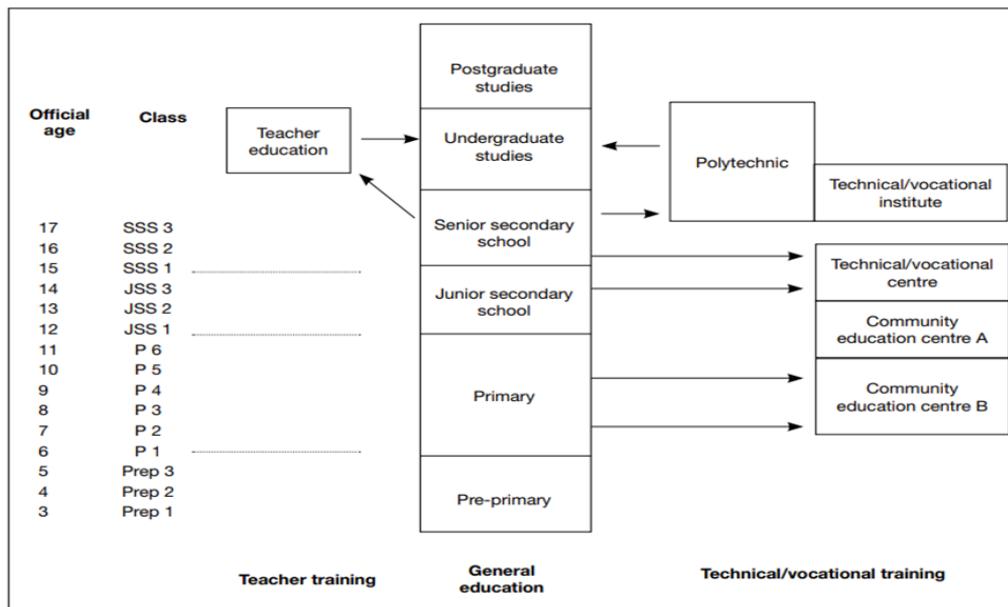
characterised by rigid social and cultural norms. The conflict and subsequent Ebola pandemic affected women and girls severely due to the '...caregivers and economic agents' roles they played during the outbreaks (UNDP, 2015, p.2). In addition, the loss of husbands and relatives due to the conflict and or pandemics has resulted in their increased vulnerability to poverty.

Gender relations within communities promote gender identities and hierarchies that reproduce inequalities within households, communities, and the productive economy (Ani & Osakwe, 2014; Pai, 2024; UNICEF, 2024; Osborne et al, 2025). For example, according to existing data, girls between the ages of 15 and 18 make up 32.1 per cent of out-of-school children, with 16.6 per cent as dropouts, in contrast to boys at 28.7 per cent and 13.5 per cent, respectively (Stat SL & ICF, 2020; UNICEF, 2024). In addition, Elkhaili & Sempijja (2025) in their study of ex-child soldiers in Sierra Leone described the 'multi-layer of discrimination' girls abducted by various factions of armed groups face, amidst the sexual abuse and exploitative situations faced, they are also subjected to stigmatisation from the communities and families in their integration process (p.3). Research has also highlighted the multiple forms of gender violence suffered by girls, including forceful female genital cutting, forced / early marriage, gender-based violence, and high rates of teenage pregnancy coupled with sociocultural biases (Reilly, 2014; DCI, 2015; Leach, 2015; UNICEF, 2024). The country ranks 157th out of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (UNDP, 2022). Post-conflict Sierra Leone has one of the highest incidences of rape and sexual assault in Africa. As a result of the continued high incidences of rape and sexual assault in the country, in February 2019, the President of Sierra Leone declared a state of emergency aimed at pulling government resources to tackle the issues of rape and other forms of gender violence (ADB, 2019). In December 2018, the First Lady of Sierra Leone launched the 'Hands Off Our Girls' flagship programme aimed at banning early child marriage and sexual violence against women and girls (Ibid).

2.1 Sierra Leone Post-Conflict Education System

Sierra Leone currently operates a 6-3-3-4 education system (see Figure 2 below), which was adopted in 1993 in line with other English-speaking West African countries (World Bank, 2007). The system begins with 6 years of primary education, followed by three years of Junior Secondary School, three years of Senior Secondary School, and four years of Tertiary education (Comprising Colleges, Universities, Polytechnics, and Teacher Training) (World Bank, 2007).

Figure 2. Structure of Post-Conflict Sierra Leone Education System.

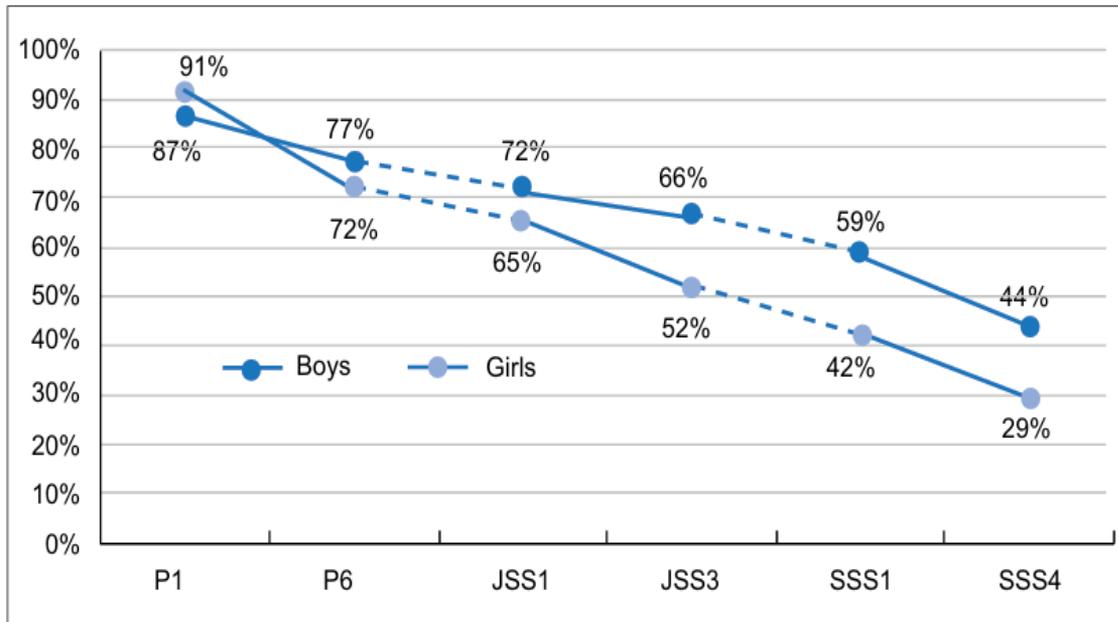


Source: GoSL 2020

Due to the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) emphasis on primary education (Goal 2), gender parity has been achieved at the primary level (Pai, 2016). In contrast, at the secondary school level, gender disparities are evident, as those continuing with their education include 33.2 per cent girls and 39.9 per cent boys (GoSL, 2013). The overall literacy rate in the country stands at 43 per cent, and 62 per cent for women and men, respectively (GoSL, 2020). The country's education status report indicates that only 14.5 per cent of the female population has attained some form of secondary education, compared to their male peers, who account for 33.9 per cent (Ibid). Evidence has shown that in post-conflict

Sierra Leone, girls have higher chances of dropping out of school than boys because their transition and retention rates are significantly low due to socio-economic factors such as poverty, GBV, harmful cultural practices like FGM and child marriage; thus, boys' education is seen as a better family investment (Barnes et al., 2007; GoSL, 2020; Samonova et al., 2020; Divine et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2024). The poor retention rates in education mean that there are high levels of uneducated women/girls in the country, which has been associated with high fertility rates, maternal mortality, teenage pregnancy and child marriage (UNFPA 2016). For instance, in 2019, 451,685 students were enrolled in Junior Secondary School (JSS), comprising 225,526 boys and 226,159 girls. Although this shows a slight increase in girls' enrolment over the boys, that number drastically decreases as they transition to Senior Secondary School (SSS). For instance, in the same year (2019), the enrolment of girls was reported to be 147,943 and boys 157,551. This also does not account for attendance, which is often much lower for girls than for boys at schools (Pai 2016, 2024). Research has shown that Senior Secondary School accounts for the highest percentage of school dropouts (15 per cent), and out of that percentage, girls account for 17 per cent compared to 14 per cent for boys (GoSL, 2020; UNICEF, 2024). This data indicates that more girls are dropping out of school than boys, thereby failing to achieve educational outcomes (Ibid). Figure 3 below shows the trend in the progress of girls through the post-conflict education system.

Figure 3: Trend of Progress in Sierra Leone's Post-conflict Education System



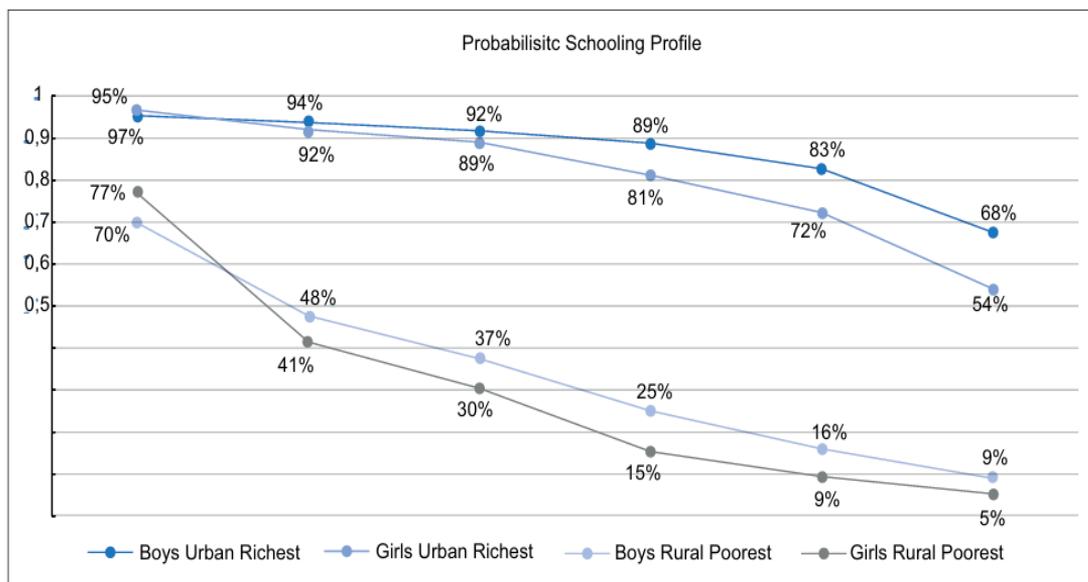
Source: GoSL 2020

The trend above indicates a higher decrease in retention among girls than boys in school as they transition to higher classes. For instance, the data above suggest that 29 per cent of girls are likely to complete secondary schooling compared to 44 per cent of their male counterparts (GoSL, 2020). This analysis means that 'for every 100 boys completing senior secondary school, only 66 girls complete the cycle' (GoSL, 2020, p. xiv). The above analysis suggests two key points: firstly, girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys, and secondly, schooling outcomes for boys and girls in post-conflict Sierra Leone differ, with girls being at a disadvantage (Pai, 2016, 2024; Divine et al., 2023).

Significant disparities in gender, socioeconomic status and location characterise schooling, especially secondary schooling in post-conflict Sierra Leone. According to the country's latest education analysis, the chances of children from rural areas completing senior secondary school (SSS) are 12 per cent, compared to 50 per cent for their urban peers (GoSL, 2020). Similarly, only 7 per cent of pupils from low-income households complete SSS, compared to 60 per cent of their peers from wealthy households (GoSL, 2020).

Similarly, in cases where all these three characteristics intersect, it is reported that only 5 per cent of girls from poor rural households complete secondary schooling, compared to 68 per cent of their peers from wealthy urban households (GoSL, 2020). Figure 4 below illustrates the trend in completion rates based on gender, socio-economic status, and location.

Figure 4: Probabilistic schooling completion rate



Source: GoSL 2020

The data above show that the probability for a girl from a wealthy urban household to complete secondary schooling in post-conflict Sierra Leone is 54% in contrast to 5% for girls from poor rural households. The disparities become exacerbated when comparing the completion rate for boys from wealthy urban households, at 68%, to 5% for girls from poor rural households. The data has shown that the intersection of gender, social class and location has significantly exacerbated inequalities in post-conflict secondary education in Sierra Leone. Therefore, this research has expanded on the categories and probed into understanding girls' secondary schooling experiences beyond a single lens. A critical objective of this study is to provide a nuanced understanding of how complex, intersecting factors such as gender, class, sexuality, ethnic traditions, and location influence girls' schooling experiences, thereby affecting their retention and limiting their completion.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I provide insight into how gender, socio-economic status, ethnic traditions, and sexuality are framed in the study. I have demonstrated how these identities have often been conceptualised as singular and mutually exclusive. In doing so, I have been able to demonstrate that individual identities make a significant contribution to the production of educational inequalities in schools. However, I also illustrate that no single variable is more important than the others, and that the complex ways these identities interact exacerbate educational inequalities. Hence, this section also demonstrates how the concept of intersectionality is framed in the research and how it has been applied in this context. This section provides a rich and nuanced contribution to the discourse on post-conflict education reconstruction. The conceptualisation of these identities establishes a roadmap for addressing unanswered research questions with particular importance for the educational context of Sierra Leone. It is important to note that to better understand the issues of gender inequalities in Sierra Leone, I drew heavily on international literature. My decision to draw on international literature for this research was deliberate because it provides the metrics and framework that Sierra Leone should meet. Secondly, issues of an inclusive and equitable educational system are part of international agreements Sierra Leone has signed up to, such as the Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5 (SDG 4 & 5). Importantly, drawing on international literature gave me the latitude to explore gender disparities and gender relations in secondary schooling using theoretical and analytical frameworks such as Intersectionality. It provided the opportunity for me to undertake a comparative analysis of best practices of international evidence, such as lessons learnt, shared experiences, and unique experiences. For instance, it was clear that there was a huge gap in existing literature for Sierra Leone on issues around classroom talk and interactions; however, international literature on laddish behaviour was well adopted to describe boys' disruptive behaviours in class.

3.2 Education and Gender in Post-conflict Reconstruction

Context

Conflict is a hindrance to a country's education sector. It typically leaves unforgettable scars in the sector due to the devastation it causes (Buckland, 2005; World Bank, 2007; Pherali, 2012). Evidence has shown that conflict leads to the destruction of school infrastructure, a human resource gap, weakening of institutional capacity, poor learning outcomes, overcrowded classrooms, and psychological trauma (Ibid.). Essentially, there is a considerable amount of literature on the impact of conflict on education in Sierra Leone, including works by Sharkey (2008), Matsumoto (2011), and Elkhaili & Sempijja (2025); however, very little literature has explored post-conflict educational reconstruction in sub-Saharan countries. In Sierra Leone, women and girls were the most affected as they were deliberately targeted for sexual violence by all sides of the conflict (Barnes et al., 2007). As has been established (section 2.1), girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys in communities that have experienced conflict (Mitra & Bang, 2021). Using a cross-national analysis, Mitra & Bang noted that conflict '...unambiguously worsens gender outcomes especially secondary schooling' (2021, p.134). Empirical evidence has shown that civil conflict exacerbates gender disparities in education, especially in secondary schooling (Elkhaili & Sempijja, 2025). However, Matra & Bang argue that these disparities can be eliminated if critical institutional reforms are adopted (2021). Therefore, post-conflict reconstruction needs to be effective, aggressive and intentional (Buvinić et al., 2014). Thus, post-conflict gendered schooling requires a broader investigation and perspectives because of the interplay between gender and violent conflict (Ibid). Matra and Bang (2021) suggested that gender inequality is further heightened by violent conflict. As such, Education reconstruction requires the active participation and perspectives of women teachers, as their involvement in peacebuilding and reconstruction promotes girls' education. This study contributes to the field of Development Studies and the Sociology of Education by reconceptualising women teachers in post-conflict Sierra Leone not merely as classroom instructors, but as essential agents of institutional reform. By creating improved educational opportunities and experiences for girls, these teachers

help transform post-conflict educational institutions into spaces for "gender-just peace" (Kirk, 2004).

This research hinges on the imperative need to recognise the role of women teachers in peacebuilding. Firstly, the study builds on limited empirical data to enhance the understanding of women teachers' contributions to development studies and gender and education in post-conflict contexts. While traditional development interventions often focus on improving school infrastructure and providing textbooks, this work asserts that the social composition of the teaching force is another significant determinant of girls' educational outcomes.

Drawing on Kirk (2004) and Miyajima (2008), this research establishes that, in the Sierra Leonean context, the low proportion of women teachers constitutes a structural barrier to gender parity, especially in secondary education. Female teachers provide a "protective effect," creating a schooling environment where girls feel safe from gender-based violence—a critical concern in post-conflict reconstruction. Ultimately, studies have shown that the presence of women teachers is vital for increasing girls' enrollment and retention in school.

On that note, I embarked on exploring post-conflict context education research, focusing on three problematic areas that I argue have hindered the drive for gender equality in post-conflict educational reconstruction.

Firstly, I found it important to explore what Maclure and Danov (2008) described as the 'paradox of post-conflict educational reconstruction and transformation'. The significance of post-conflict educational reconstruction cannot be overstated, as evidence has shown that it often leads to policies and reforms that address gender disparities in education (Buvinić et al. 2013, 2014). Maclure & Danov (2008) view post-conflict education as a process that incorporates new, gender-sensitive curricula and pedagogical practices, strengthening pupils' confidence and self-esteem, especially among girls. Hence, it is widely assumed that post-conflict educational reconstruction serves as a vehicle that drives gender parity and fosters girls' rights in schools. I agree with this notion to some extent because post-conflict educational reconstruction introduces policies and reforms that aim

to address gender-related disparities and improve girls' position within the school system. However, as with Maclure and Danov (2008), I challenged the assumption to be flawed because '...it is far from evident that the goal of gender equality can figure prominently as a central feature in the drive for education reconstruction' (p.613).

My argument aligns with Mitra and Bang's (2021) suggestion that, although post-conflict education recovery significantly improves gender outcomes in secondary schooling, it does not fully restore the expected levels of equality. They argue that post-conflict educational reconstruction 'mitigates most conflict-induced inequalities but not fully' (Mitra & Bang, 2021, p.134). Researchers like Longue (1998); Stromquist (1998) and Colclough et al. (2000) have also argued that even in cases where reforms are made 'such changes are often compounded by deep-seated institutional and cultural constraints that exist within systems of education and in the broader social contexts that affect educational structures and processes (cited in Maclure & Denov 2021, p.613). In other words, post-conflict educational reconstruction tendencies to drive gender-related reforms and policies are undermined by the pre-war institutional status quo.

This conundrum evidently fits the Sierra Leone context because the intended goal to 'serve as a change agent in reshaping the country's priorities' could not be achieved (Commonwealth Education Partnerships 2007, p.61). Matsumoto (2011) also argued that post-conflict reconstruction in Sierra Leone failed to meet its intended expectations because the approach of exclusively focusing on expanding schools, increasing the relevance of schooling, and improving access to schools was inadequate. For example, various education programs were initiated by the government and international partners, such as the World Bank and the UN, following the end of the war. The Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS) aimed to accelerate the enrolment of young people and ex-combatants (Elkhaili & Sempijja, 2025). This was followed by the Rehabilitation of Basic Education Project, also known as the SABABU Education project, which aimed to reconstruct and construct schools, conduct teacher training, and provide teaching and learning materials (Pai, 2024). Another important program introduced was the Girl Education Support Program, aimed at

providing free Junior Secondary School (JSS) education for girls in the north and eastern regions, which was later expanded to all regions in 2010. All these programs were designed to enhance access to education in alignment with the global context of the Education for All (EFA) goals, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Pai, 2024).

Critics may argue that the focus after the end of a civil conflict should be on creating access to resources. I agree to some extent; however, it has been over 20 years since the end of the conflict and even with the introduction of the Education Act of 2004 (now The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act 2023), inequality remains a challenge (UNICEF, 2024). This is not to say post-conflict educational reconstruction has not improved gender-related disparities; my argument is that the concept has fallen short in addressing gender relations in schools. Hence, the post-conflict context should go beyond access. Dunne (2007) argued that limiting gender equity based on access often fails to understand the way school experiences are gendered. Hence, this research extends beyond the descriptive analysis of equality in terms of simple enrollment in education, focusing instead on the gendered learning processes.

A further problem identified by this study in the post-conflict educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone is that the process entirely adopted the Women in Development (WID) approach in formulating gender-friendly educational reforms. The WID approach stresses numbers and rates of enrolment and attainment (Unterhalter, 2006; Cin, 2017). Furthermore, the WID approach pays little or no attention to the gendered process and conditions of learning, which this study focuses on. Cin (2017) noted that the approach was limited to closing the gender gap in relation to 'equality in numbers of boys and girls in education' (p.4). Thus, Unterhalter (2007) and Vaughan (2010) have argued that the approach failed to make a substantive impact in promoting equality.

As mentioned by Unterhalter (2006), most post-conflict education reconstruction approaches have focused on improving school infrastructure, including expanding schooling for boys and girls, employing women as teachers, increasing the representation of both male and female images in textbooks, and

providing free schooling for girls. However, it overlooks gendered learning processes in classrooms and public spaces within the school, thereby establishing a schooling system that is gendered and reinforces gendered practices (Unterhalter, 2007; Vaughan, 2010). Therefore, I argue that WID practices have significantly influenced post-conflict educational policy reforms, yet they have often overlooked the everyday school experiences of girls and women teachers.

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

By contrast, the Gender and Development (GAD) approach focuses on 'gender as a process, part of complex and changing social relations' (Ibid p.96). Unlike the WID approach I stated earlier, the GAD approach examines gender relations within social institutions, such as schools, and how they are reproduced (Vaughan, 2010). Evidence has shown that the approach's interest in gendered processes in classrooms, for example, has had '...some impact on educational practices' (Unterhalter, 2006). Although the GAD writers have not specifically focused their writing on formal education, I argue that the GAD's central element of examining gendered social relations within and outside social institutions makes it an ideal approach to addressing inequalities in secondary schooling, especially in a post-conflict reconstruction context. I argue that the deficit in policy reforms in the WID approach to educational reconstruction has exacerbated

inequalities in post-conflict Sierra Leone. The reconstruction policies have failed to challenge the considerable inequalities that existed before the war. Unlike the WID approach, which stresses 'inequality based on equality of resources,' the GAD approach views equality as the 'removal of the structures that shape gender inequality,' such as unequal schooling processes (Unterhalter, 2006, p. 101). Vaughan (2010) noted that GAD recognises both numbers and gender relations in addressing gender inequality in education. Therefore, this research focuses on examining the structures and processes that have shaped gender inequality in secondary education in Sierra Leone, despite an extensive post-conflict educational reconstruction program.

Lastly, the assumption that 'post-war circumstances are essentially free of violent conflict' has proven to be a 'misplaced perception' (Maclure & Denov, 2009, p.616). Evidence has shown that conflict increases dropouts and repetitions and increases school-based and gender-based violence for women and girls (Herut & Dube, 2022). Although Mitra & Bang (2021) argue about the ambiguity of the 'differential gender impact of conflict', I argue that war affects women and girls more than men and boys. For instance, even though men and boys account for the highest mortalities in a conflict, women and girls assume the mortality burden of the conflict (Buckland, 2004). Conflict-induced violence, such as sexual violence, has had a psychological impact on women and girls (Buckland 2004, DCI 2015, Elkhaili & Sempijja 2025). According to Buckland, 'for girls, getting to and from school becomes even more of a personal safety hazard during periods of conflict and during the instability of early reconstruction' (2004, p.19). This resulted in dropout due to the burden of unwanted pregnancy (Elkhaili & Sempijja, 2025).

Critics have argued that conflict tends to reduce boys' educational attainment than girls due to their being recruited to fight (Swee, 2015). I support the argument that more boys than girls are recruited during conflict; however, in addition to the high number of sexual violence cases girls face, they are also being used as commodities in the form of child marriage in a post-conflict context (Elkhaili & Sempijja, 2025). For instance, the post-conflict context in Sierra Leone is characterised by 'militarised masculinity' induced by the conflict (Maclure &

Denov, 2009; Elkhaili & Sempijja, 2025). This continues to facilitate gendered violence in both private and public spaces, including school classrooms (Maclure & Denov, 2009, p.616). The pre-war context in the country encouraged stark gender disparities. Prior to 2007, husbands were not prosecuted for marital rape because it was encouraged under the customary law of the country (Human Rights Watch 2003). The impact of civil conflict in Sierra Leone exacerbated poverty within households, which reduced resources. These reductions in resources within post-conflict households, combined with patriarchal norms, lead to the prioritisation of boys in the allocation of household resources (UN, 2013; Pai, 2016; Elkhaili & Sempijja, 2025). Hence, boys are preferred to be sent to school since educating a girl is seen as a 'costly investment' (Dejaeghere & Miske, 2009). Amartya Sen (1999), in addressing poverty as capability deprivation, mentioned how the systematic 'boy preference' results in the neglect of girls in family distribution of resources. Mitra & Bang also argued that in post-conflict societies, girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys due to reduced household resources and gender bias that '...leads the household to prioritise boys in its allocation decisions, especially if education is a costly investment (2021, p.136).

3.2.1 Women Teachers and Their Contribution to Gender Equality

The contribution of women teachers to education cannot be overstated, as evidence has shown that they play a significant role in promoting gender equality in schooling. For instance, research has shown that women teachers are critical influencers in improving girls' enrolment and retention (Kirk 2004). Therefore, an increase in the proportion of women teachers in education increases gender equality. In line with the findings of this study, I argue that wider gender disparities in secondary education in post-conflict Sierra Leone are a result of the low proportion of women teachers. Improving the number of teachers has proven to be an effective strategy for increasing girls' confidence, access, and safety. This

is because teachers make girls feel safe in school, encourage and motivate them, are seen as role models, and create an environment that reassures girls (Miyajima, 2008; de Lange et al., 2012). Kirk (2004) argued that women teachers '...make a significant contribution to the long-term processes of peacebuilding and reconstruction' (p.50). I concur with Kirk's argument, and I posit that women teachers' involvement in the post-conflict education reform process, as well as education leadership and management, has the potential to establish an education system that is '...built on the principles of gender equality' (p.50). In Sierra Leone, research has demonstrated that women played a significant role in the peace process (Kaldor and Vincent 2006). For instance, Dyfan mentioned how women 'lobbied all parties to the conflict, pushing the Government and the RUF accountable for its commitment to the international community to move to democratic rule, together with its allies, towards negotiations' (2003:3). My position is that post-conflict Sierra Leone should make deliberate effort to introduce and implement policies that increases the proportion of women teachers in secondary education especially in remote districts. Critics have argued that due to the need to meet patriarchal expectations and gender social norms, women teachers failed to speak out against their male peers, as well as kept quiet in the everyday gendered school practices (de Lange et al., 2012). I agree to some extent, but my position is that because of how gendered the school institution and its leadership are, women teachers lack the authority and power to effect change that is required. Amidst the gender biased treatment women teachers experience in schools, they resort to either keeping quiet or resisting as a coping mechanism (Kirk, 2004; Miyajima, 2008).

3.3 Conceptualizing Gender in this research

The concept of gender emerged to challenge the essentialist notion that understands sex as a 'natural' and 'biological' interpretation of human behaviour (Skeleton, 2001; Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005; Richardson, 2015; Francis & Paechter, 2015). Whereas Judith Butler, among others, argued that gender creates sex, not the other way round, because it is through gender that bodily differences are established and interpreted (1999). Hence, Butler (2006, 2011) conceptualises gender as performative. In other words, gender is understood as '...continuously produced through everyday practices and social interactions' (Richardson, 2015, p.1). Butler's gender is performatively enacted; hence, identities are performed differently in everyday life. What is more often referred to as 'doing gender,' gender in this context is understood in terms of how identities are constituted through their expression and performance. Thus, Richardson (2015) argued that it is through 'doing gender' that we produce...gendered person' (p.15).

It is through these explorations of gender that the discourse on how socially reinforced gender categorisations have shaped the lives of girls and boys in school (Francis, 2006). It is on this note that I explore how the male-female, boy-girl binaries are constructed in secondary schools in Sierra Leone. However, the discourse above about the application of gender as distinct from sexed bodies in education research has been proven to be problematic in empirical work in education, where analysis of 'living' data beyond the body tends to sort gender based on their body. For instance, Hood-Williams suggests that both girls and boys tend to construct femininity and masculinity in the opposite sex (1999). Butler (1990) asserts that there is no need for the sex/gender binary discourse because both terms are the same – they are socially constructed. Therefore, the understanding of gender as a social performance moves the debate beyond the 'either, or (male/female) within the sex/gender binary to multiple gender configurations' (Butler, 1990, p.8). I acknowledge Butler's assertion. Thus, this study explored gender as a conflation with sex. However, this research, like much

other educational research, utilises biological sex differences to inform data collection and analysis (Francis, 2006, 2010; Dunne, 2009).

The understanding of how boys and girls are expected to behave highlights how stereotypes hinder girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes across the country's educational system (Ombati & Ombati, 2012; Pai, 2024; UNICEF, 2024). This has been analysed in this study, as illustrated in the discussion of my findings (see Chapters 5-7). In these chapters, I have discussed the way society understands and practices gender differentiation and how the notion of 'doing' gender is constrained by socially constructed gender stereotypes that have shaped pupils' gender identity views. This study has also illustrated how the above views have had implications for everyday schooling experiences, particularly in relation to interactions, roles, and activities.

As a result, Francis (2006) questioned whether education researchers could analyse gendered classroom behaviour 'without reference to 'girls' and 'boys' that evokes their biological categories' (p.14). My response to her question is that the categorisation of pupils is done in relation to their biological sex identifications, and 'sex duality is in itself socially constructed' (Butler 1990, cited in Francis 2006, p.15). In my analysis of classroom interactions, subject choice, and use of social spaces, I adopted a gender binary analysis, where girls and boys are ascribed to 'do girl and boy' roles (see chapters 5-7). This is consistent with Francis and Paecter's (2015) assertion that the analysis of gender interactions and performance in education continues to be in relation to the binary construction of masculinity and femininity.

Critics may argue that educational researchers' categorisation of pupils as girls and boys leaves little or no room for pupils to identify themselves beyond the binary of boys and girls. For instance, Liu (2006) argues that gender categories have a bearing on the school, as they produce gender differences in interactions, often based on gender stereotypes. At the same time, gender performance and interactions are reduced to the antagonistic gender categories of male and female (Ibid). Thus, it has led to constrained expression of gender identities and has produced 'compulsory heterosexuality' to regulate gender and sexual

relations (Connell, 2002). On the same note, Dunne (2009) suggests that because gender in educational research relies on biological sex differences to aggregate quantitative data, gender analysis has provided little or no space for understanding the social construction of gender. In other words, data from educational research have sustained, naturalised and essentialized gender identities based on biological factors. In their work on the problems of gender categorisation in education, Francis and Paechter (2015) stressed the continued organisation of classroom registers into lists of “the girls” and “the boys”. They also mentioned the boys' and girls' alternative sitting arrangement as well as separate line-ups. Other problems they identified include segregated lavatories, gender-distinct uniforms, and gendered subject choices (Francis & Paechter, 2015).

Despite various attempts to change the status quo of gender categorisation, such attempts have proven to be futile. I argue that trying to move away from the binary understanding of gender in education research can be problematic. This is evident in the Sierra Leone context and consistent with the findings of this study. The collection and analysis of data in this study strictly reflect the binary gender categorisation of participants as male/female or boys/girls (see analysis chapters 5-7). This is also reiterated by Francis and Paechter, who noted that any attempt not to ‘identify and analyse research participants according to gender, the feminist project is rendered inoperable’ (2015, p.783).

In addition to the above conceptualisation of gender, Connell (1995; 2002) asserts that within the male/female or feminine/masculine groups, individuals have personality differences that influence their behaviour. Therefore, she, alongside Francis (2006) and Paechter (2006), has suggested a shift from the sex/gender binary discourse to pluralising femininity and masculinity identities, which should be referred to as femininities and masculinities. They argued that it will diversify individual notions of masculinity and femininity, based on the assumption that there are various manifestations of femininity and masculinity (Connell 1987, 1995; Francis, 2010). For instance, Connell (2002) argued that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is a typical example of diversity within masculinity. The concept is seen as highly heterosexual, and most boys/men do

not correspond to the concept. The model, she said, deliberately subjugated other masculinities. Even though Robinson (2015) argued that most boys/men who do not tend to correspond to the model of hegemonic masculinity are predominantly 'complicit in sustaining it' (p.65).

However, studies such as Francis (2006) and Paechter (2006) have shown that the application of the notion of femininities and masculinities in education, especially in secondary schools, has proven to be very problematic. Francis (2006) noted that the interpretation of gender behaviours is subject to context. She, for instance, mentioned that what is perceived as aggression in a man can just be 'manipulativeness/bitchness in a woman.' Therefore, ascribing behaviours to opposite genders on performativity can be viewed as 'perniciously stereotyping' (p.14). I agree with Francis's position, and I argue that both notions (femininities and masculinities) are oversimplistic, and such an argument tolerates the practice of stereotypical categorising of gender. I also argue that both notions contradict social constructivism because such pluralisation of masculinity and femininity tends to sort these identities in an essentialist way – associating gender with bodies. For instance, Francis (2010) argues that these notions are more challenging in the school context because gendered classroom behaviour essentially relies on the biological sex categories of girls and boys, and therefore, suggests the notion of heteroglossia, which is drawn from Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of monoglossia and heteroglossia.

In her analysis of gender as heteroglossia, Francis (2010, 2012) asserted that girls in school who behave in masculine ways, such as adopting 'tomboy', did not necessarily behave overtly as 'masculine.' The same applies to boys with long hair and feminine features, which does not necessarily mean they are 'doing girling'. Her findings are consistent with the findings of this study, particularly in relation to the disruptive and laddish behaviour of boys in class (see Chapter 6). In this chapter, I found that a small number of boys were displaying such hegemonic masculinity behaviour, while the majority of the boys were quiet. Some girls were also exhibiting this attitude in class. Hence, both boys and girls tended to behave in a manner associated with the opposite gender. Similarly, although some boys acted feminine and some girls acted masculine, they were

quick to identify themselves as boys and girls when I asked how they identified themselves. Hence, I support Hood-Williams' (1999) argument that boys and girls acting in the opposite sex does not restrict education researchers from using biological sex to analyse data because both girls and boys tend to construct femininity and masculinity in the opposite sex.

For instance, research conducted by Francis (2006) among a small group of secondary school pupils in the UK revealed an extreme problem that emerged during the process of using notions of male femininity and female masculinity. Thus, Mooney-Simmi & Lang (2018) described gender construct in educational research as a 'complex phenomenon' that is limited to 'narrow concepts such as gender as differences, stereotypes and sexed bodies' (p.138). Francis (2010), Francis & Paechter (2015) and Makarova & Herzog (2015) reiterated the complexity of gender construct in education, especially the problem of categorisation. As a result, Kedley (2015) noted that these complexities of gender construct are reflected in classroom interactions, teaching materials, texts and the type of discourse teachers employ in the classroom.

In conclusion, gender has been conceptualised in this study in three ways: first, as a social construct that reinforces stereotypes; second, the analysis of gender in this research, like other educational research, is, to some extent, static with the approach of understanding girls and boys as doing 'girling' and 'boying'. Lastly, the plurality of identities does not align well with the overall research and education. In the analysis chapters (5-7), I have attempted to demonstrate these three conceptualisations. In addition to gender, this study has also explored the discourse of sexuality. The section below examines how the discourse of sexuality has been constructed in educational research, particularly in the African context, such as Sierra Leone.

3.4 The Notion of Sexuality in Schooling

The aim of exploring sexuality in this work is to examine how everyday school practices produce heteronormative gender and sexual identities. As defined by Alldred and Fox (2015 and 2019), sexuality is a 'comprehensive constellation of

an individual's sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions, and behaviours toward others and self permeates human experience throughout a person's lifespan' (cited in Ocran et al. 2025, p.2). The topic of sexuality in schooling has been rarely explored in the sub-Saharan African context. It is argued that the concept remains a 'minefield' venture to explore (Humphreys et al., 2008). Studies from both the global South and North have shied away from exploring the concept, and the few that have attempted to explore it have conceptualised it within the framework of heteronormativity (Dunne, 2007; Humphreys et al., 2008). Evidence from Sierra Leone has shown that the British colonial residue, which developed into strict evangelical Christian values, where any deviation from heterosexuality (e.g. homosexuality) is considered a sin and, in some cases, a crime (Leach, 2008). For instance, in Sierra Leone, in the process of creating a 'new Christian identity', the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the 19th century facilitated a secondary schooling that is 'grounded in an ideology of gender differentiation and segregation', central to establishing a two gender-segregated schooling that reinforces heteronormativity (Leach, 2008, p.41). In line with this, the CMS established two gender-segregated secondary schools – the first girls' and boys' schools in the country - to consolidate gender differentiation in secondary schooling (Ibid). Leach (2008) notes that the CMS regulated the sexuality of boys and girls in these schools. In line with Leach's argument above, I must stress that this was a deliberate attempt by the CMS to reinforce heterosexuality.

Humphreys and colleagues argue that the sexuality discourse has been reduced to heterosexual relations and that the few qualitative studies on the concept of sexuality in schooling in sub-Saharan Africa have 'focused on...ways in which institutions help produce gender and sexual identities through a culture of heteronormativity' (2008, p.21). As a result, evidence has shown that schools are highly sexualized, and they are heavily involved in regulating and producing individual sexualities (Alldred, 2020; Fiaveh et al., 2023; Ocran et al., 2025). On that note, Ocran et al. (2025) argued that prevailing socio-cultural norms have inherently restricted young people's ability to express and engage their sexuality. At the same time, Ciftci and colleagues posit that the school serves as a critical

venue where patterns of gender socialisation (the process of meeting culturally scripted gender identities, roles, behaviours, and practices) are enacted and reinforced (Ciftci et al., 2024).

Ciftci and colleagues also reiterated that the school plays a key role in perpetuating heteronormativity through perfecting masculinity and femininity in everyday school practices (2024). Thus, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) posit the school as a social institution that promotes masculinity and femininity by reinforcing heteronormative practices in a way that positions girls as subordinate and boys as superior. It is against this background that this study has attempted to explore sexuality beyond heterosexual relations. Indeed, this study has shown the school as a site where gender and sexual identities are constructed and regulated. Thus, Muhanguzi and colleagues note sexuality to be ‘deeply embedded within heterosexual trajectories’ within the African context (2011, p.135). This is true for the Sierra Leone context. The country is a deeply entrenched patriarchal society where femininity and masculinity are portrayed as the norm in every aspect of society, including school life (Sharkey, 2008; Koissy-Kpein, 2015; Hui et al., 2018; Pai, 2024; Elkhali & Sempijja, 2025).

As mentioned earlier, early secondary schooling in Sierra Leone was founded on Christian notions of femininity and masculinity (Leach, 2008). Secondary school girls were prepared to be ‘responsible wives and mothers’ as well as control their sexuality (Ibid, 2008, p.45). Therefore, heterosexuality was regarded as an ‘...essential value of civilised society’ (Ibid p.46). For instance, compulsory heterosexuality has been normalised and operated as the acceptable institutional practice of schooling, and this has resulted in pupils and teachers becoming ‘complicit in policing the boundaries of acceptable heterosexual femininities and masculinities through their attitude and interactions’ (Humphreys et al., 2008, p.23). This is also supported by Fiaveh et al.’s (2023) findings, which examine gender and sexuality in African discourse. They argue that discourses around gender and sexuality are centred around sustaining and reinforcing gender identities and roles in line with acceptable norms and practices. As with many secondary school-based researchers, the gendered notion of sexuality is often

reflected in regulated and unregulated masculinities and femininities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Therefore, sexuality in this research is precisely reflected in the interaction of students through gendered sexual expectations and power imbalances, negotiating the lack of female sexual autonomy, compulsory heterosexuality, and the norms that locate girls as objects of male sexual desires (Muhanguzi et al., 2011, p.135). These interactions and experiences contribute to gender inequalities in secondary schools, influencing girls' schooling experiences and outcomes. Thus, sexuality in this study is conceptualised in relation to how gender identities are formulated. Gender hierarchies are established within the school setting, with implications for girls' and boys' interactions, gender perspectives, behaviours, attitudes, aspirations, and, by extension, their schooling experiences and learning outcomes (Dunne, 2009; Cin, 2017; Fiaveh et al., 2023). Ciftci et al. (2024) described pupils and teachers as 'active agents' in propagating and reinforcing the gender socialisation process within the school setting.

The existing body of literature has posited that everyday schooling practices, such as segregated school duties, classroom arrangements, roll calls, school uniforms, outdoor activities, and disciplinary procedures, are constructed to regulate gender and sexual identities (Muhanguzi et al., 2011; Unterhalter et al., 2020; Ocran et al., 2025). Consequently, in this study, I draw on the concept of sexuality through the way everyday schooling practices regulate sexual expression and desire. Evidence has shown that girls' sexual expression or desire in secondary schools is often associated with sickness, prostitution, desperation and lack of seriousness. In contrast, boys' sexual expression is often regarded as a manifestation of masculinity (Muhanguzi et al., 2011; Fiaveh et al., 2023; Ocran et al., 2025). Research findings from Uganda showed that dress codes and make-ups were regulated by teachers to 'downplay any notion of sexual attractiveness towards the opposite or same-sex' (Muhanguzi et al., 2011, p.142). Thus, dress codes and make-ups were associated with 'gender appropriateness about bodily appearances' (Ibid.).

Therefore, this study argues that the patterns of gender socialisation within the school setting indicate the need for an intersectional analysis of gender and sexuality, considering its complex interaction with other factors (see Section 3.4, where I have demonstrated how I have engaged with the intersectionality concept). The gendered sexual experiences mentioned above, I argue, cause complex ways of interaction with other social identities to influence the educational experiences and outcomes for students, especially girls. Additionally, these experiences create tensions and contradictions that are reflected in both classroom practices and extracurricular activities (Muhanguzi et al., 2011).

3.5 Socio-economic Status/Economic Disadvantaged and Educational Inequality: A Conceptual Analysis

This research acknowledges that the influence of socio-economic status (SES) perpetuates educational inequalities, especially for the economically disadvantaged pupils (Cole et al., 2020; Osborne et al., 2025). By 'disadvantaged', this work refers to a lack of household income for pupils (Cole et al., 2020). Thus, a 'malfunction of economic rationality' as well as 'a consequence of broader social inequalities' results in educational inequalities (Thompson, 2019, p.2). Therefore, the analysis of socio-economic status in this work is precisely reflected in the household economic status of students, especially girls, including family income and occupation, living in a deprived community, and experiencing poverty (Conteh et al., 2021; Pai, 2024). Socioeconomic status (SES) and economic disadvantage have been used interchangeably for this work. The economic disadvantage analysis in this study illustrates the impact of a lack of material resources on the social and educational development of individuals, thereby reproducing social stratification (Cole et al., 2020; Osborne et al., 2024, 2025). The SES is conceptualised in this work to explore the relationship between students', especially girls', socio-economic status and their ability to transition to a new level or class in school, their ability to participate in classroom and school activities, their ability to be part of social groups and most importantly, their ability to achieve educational outcomes. As a

result, I embarked on interrogating the influence of the concept on girls' secondary schooling experiences and learning outcomes.

To start with, studies such as those by Berger & Archer (2015), Tyler (2015), Easterbrook et al. (2019), Thompson (2019), Cook et al. (2020), and Osborne (2025) have consistently found a strong association between socio-economic status and students' educational achievement. For instance, Croizet et al. (2019) argued that pupils' socio-economic status significantly influences their academic achievement, while Perry and Francis (2010) described SES as the 'strongest predictor of educational achievement' (p.2). Thus, SES inequality continues to affect educational opportunities and outcomes, especially for girls (Unterhalter et al, 2020). Easterbrook and colleagues (2019) have argued that socio-economic status is the 'primary driver of educational inequalities' (p.104). Thus, they suggest that the concept is 'integral to people's understanding of who they are and forms the foundation upon which some of their most meaningful social identities are based' (Ibid p.107). Critics may argue that the above examples are mostly associated with the UK and US; I agree, but evidence has shown that these findings can also be transferable to the African and Sierra Leonean contexts. For instance, a recent study in four African countries (Nigeria, Uganda, Malawi, and Tanzania) by Unterhalter et al. (2020) revealed that the income and earnings of households largely influence educational opportunities and outcomes. Similar findings were reported in Sierra Leone by Shaw et al. (2017), Conteh et al. (2021), Cole (2022), Conteh (2024), and Pai (2024), who noted that inequality in learning outcomes is particularly pronounced among disadvantaged pupils in secondary schools. Therefore, I agree with Berger & Archer's (2015) suggestion that the notion is consistently linked to ranks in social hierarchy because it determines access to material resources, services, and institutions (p. 3). It is on that basis that Schwadel (2016) relates SES to social stratification. Hence, Unterhalter and colleagues defined SES as a relational concept based on 'income and earnings' of households (2).

Based on the above theoretical background, the concept of socio-economic status in this study presents two cases. Firstly, the lack of household income often creates an unfavourable condition for girls' retention in school (Cook et al.,

2020; Conteh et al., 2021; Cole, 2022; Pai, 2024). For instance, I have used SES to explore the transitions from lower secondary school to upper secondary school and from secondary school to high school of pupils. I found that the concept had a significant impact on the retention and attainment rates of students, particularly for girls. This is reiterated by recent studies in Africa, where it was revealed that families with scarce resources often prioritise the education of boys over girls (Unterhalter et al, 2020).

In Sierra Leone, Pai (2024) and Osborne et al. (2025) noted that economically disadvantaged pupils were more likely to drop out of or be withdrawn from school due to financial constraints. In addition, Pai (2024) mentioned that the underlying construct behind parents' decision to withdraw their girls from school in Sierra Leone was their 'inability to pay school costs' (p.30). Hence, boys are preferred to be sent to school since educating a girl is seen as a 'costly investment' (Dejaeghere & Miske, 2009). Similar findings were reported by Dejaeghere and Miske (2009) in their work in Vietnam, where they found that girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds living in rural areas are at a higher risk of dropping out of high school. This is because to meet family needs, girls stay home instead of going to school so '...they can earn income by making textile bags for their fathers to sell for income' (Dejaeghere & Miske, 2009, p.167). These findings from Vietnam can be transferable to the Sierra Leone context because recent studies from Osborne et al. (2024) and (2025) illustrate how rural girls from poor households were much less likely than boys to complete secondary schooling. Similarly, Unterhalter et al.'s (2020) study in four African countries revealed that rural girls from the poorest quintile are significantly less likely than boys to complete secondary schooling due to the high amount of time they dedicate to household work.

Secondly, the socio-economic status of households more often negatively influences girls' secondary schooling experiences, such as classroom interactions, social groupings, subject choices, and participation in classroom and school activities, than it does for boys (Jackson 2010, Cock et al. 2020, Unterhalter et al. 2020, Conteh 2024, Pai 2024). Evidence from this study has shown that the socio-economic status of pupils influences their social cycle,

subject choices and class participation. For instance, findings from Jackson's (2010) research in UK secondary schools suggest that while girls from affluent urban households are popular among their social groups in school, their peers from poorer rural households were not recognised or restricted from joining these social groups. Similarly, Pai (2024) argued that the socio-economic status is a key determinant for limited participation in secondary schooling in Sierra Leone. At the same time, Samonova et al (2021) and UNICEF (2023) noted that pupils from poor SES in rural areas in Sierra Leone are more likely to be taught by unqualified teachers in unapproved schools than their peers from the affluent quintile.

In addition, Werfhorst and colleagues argued that economic and cultural stratification influences students' subject choices in secondary school (Werfhorst et al, 2003). While Thompson (2019) further noted that it is 'certainly true that significant class differences exist in cognitive ability' (2019, p.59). This implies that the educational trajectories of students from different social backgrounds differ in terms of performance and outcomes. Therefore, Perry and Francis (2010) maintained that SES not only stops widening the social gap in society but also acts as an 'impediment to meritocracy and social mobility' (p. 2).

The two cases above have demonstrated how the SES concept is framed within this study. Both cases have illustrated the importance of SES in producing and reproducing educational inequalities. It is in that vein that Thompson described education as crucial, '...both in moulding individual consciousness and in reproducing the structure itself (2019, p.2). The analysis above also revealed that SES is a significant factor influencing educational attainment. However, I am not saying that SES is solely responsible for differences in educational outcomes between social groups because no single variable is more important than the others. I assert that although economic and broader social inequalities are key determinants of educational inequalities, these inequalities are gendered. As a result, my argument is that SES, like other individual identities, can, in one way or another, influence educational opportunities and outcomes, but their complex interactions exacerbate educational inequality. Hence, the following section

illustrates how the concept of intersectionality has been applied in relation to some of the individual identities mentioned above.

3.6 Engaging Intersectionality: The applications of Intersectional dynamics of Gender, Social Class, Ethnic tradition, Sexuality, and Location in this research

3.6.1 Introduction

In the previous sections, I attempted to illustrate how individual identities operate as single axes to oppress and influence inequalities in secondary schooling. In this section, I have illustrated how gender and socio-economic status interact in complex ways with ethnicity, sexuality, and location to produce and reproduce educational inequalities in secondary schooling. This study highlights the importance of understanding how the complex interactions of gender, SES, ethnicity, location and sexuality have shaped girls' schooling experience and outcomes. I have shifted from exploring individual identities, such as gender, in isolation to a more interactional approach that examines how these identities intersect. Therefore, I agree with Davis and colleagues that the interaction or intersection of characteristics of gender and other identities shapes girls' 'educational access, experiences and outcomes' (2015, p.2). To further this discussion, I have structured this section as follows: firstly, I provide a general overview of the concept of intersectionality (see 3.4.2). Followed by how the concept has been applied in educational research (see 3.4.3). Lastly, I have illustrated how I have applied the concept in the study (3.4.4). Furthermore, to better understand the applicability of the approach, I have also extensively illustrated how intersectionality operates in this study in each thematic chapter.

3.6.2 Theorising Intersectionality

Intersectionality is significant in exploring the multiplicity of inequalities. The concept of intersectionality has been widely theorised. It is famously associated with Kimberlé Crenshaw, with other anti-racist feminists also utilising the concept

to explore how gender intersects with other social identities to produce inequality (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; McCall, 2005; Cho et al., 2013). The concept has been theorised beyond its initial gender/race binary; thus, Crenshaw (1991) noted that, aside from gender and race, there are also crucial factors such as class, sexuality, ethnicity, and location that shape individual lives. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her Stanford Review article, argues that to address issues affecting women and girls, there is a need to look beyond gender to '...confront the other multilayered and routinised forms of domination that often converge in these women's lives, hindering their ability to create alternatives to the abusive relationships' (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1245). Therefore, she described intersectionality as 'the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination [...] combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalised individuals or groups.' (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, the concept of intersectionality stemmed from the fact that the intersection of multiple forms of subordination was '...often considered to be separate and mutually exclusive forms of discrimination' (UN, 2000, p.6).

The single-axis mentioned in this research refers to '...where race and gender are seen as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis' (Crenshaw 1989, p.139, cited in Bešić 2020, p.114). Therefore, Crenshaw stressed that failure to incorporate intersectionality in any analysis of the discrimination of women, '...cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which...women are subordinated (Ibid). Hence, she describes the multiple discrimination of women as '...an analogy to traffic in an intersection' where an accident occurs caused by cars travelling from different directions (1989, p. 149). McCall, on the other hand, draws on an intersectionality understanding that recognises categorical complexities and inequalities between and among social groups (2005). The consensus among the existing literature on intersectionality is that intersections of identity marginalise women and girls; thus, in the process of addressing inequalities, there is a need to adopt an intersectional lens to provide an insight into the processes of overlapping variables (Crenshaw 1989, 1991, McCall 2005; Cho et al., 2013; Bešić, 2020; Unterhalter, 2020).

Hence, in this study, I draw on the concept of intersectionality to address dimensions of identities and give a critical understanding of how multiple identities, such as class, gender, ethnicity, etc., operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities (Collins, 2015, p.1). Arguably, I believe the concept of intersectionality is worth adopting when trying to identify the complex interplay of multiple factors that contribute to inequalities in schools. Therefore, intersectionality in this research refers to ‘...understanding of gender as a social construct, which intersects with other social markers such as class, ethnicity, race, caste, sexuality, and religion to create multi-faceted and multi-layered forms of discrimination (Leech, 2015, pp. 31-32). An intersectional concept in this study, therefore, examines ‘...more than one axis of inequality (Davis et al., 2015, p.5). These inequalities, Davis (2008) notes, interact to produce ‘experiences of exclusion and subordination’ (p.67). Having outlined how the concept has been conceptualised, it is essential to note that its application in educational research has proven to be significant. Hence, in the next section, I have explored how the concept has been applied in educational research and its suitability.

3.6.3 Conceptualising Intersectionality in Education Research

Unterhalter and colleagues defined the concept of intersectionality in education research as ‘an expanded understanding of many facets of gender inequality associated with education, and a more nuanced approach to thinking about inclusion in education systems that go beyond equalising the numbers of girls and boys enrolling or progressing’ (2020, p.1). Thus, this study argues that using an intersectional lens to examine gender inequality in secondary education gives a critical insight ‘...to identify the interaction of multiple factors that lead to discriminatory processes in schools towards different student groups’ (Bešić, 2020, p.119). This study illustrates the utility and importance of intersectionality in understanding the experiences and outcomes of girls and female teachers in education, as well as the role of institutional inequality and social structures. Specifically, utilising it as a framework in this study holds the potential to provide insight for educational leaders, policymakers, and school administrators in

addressing social identity disparities in secondary education (Bose, 2012; Richardson, 2015; Unterhalter, 2020; Conteh et al., 2021). This study, like Dunne's (2009), emphasises the need for intersectional research and analysis that aim to 'understand how...multiple disparities are produced, reproduced and resisted' (p. 9).

In addition, Grant and Sleeter (1986) mentioned that attempts have been made to analyse social identities in school separately. However, they argued that failure to apply an intersectional lens in analysing social identities in educational research 'leads at times to an oversimplification or inaccurate understanding of what occurs in schools' (p.197). Therefore, intersectionality has been framed in this study to explore gender inequalities in secondary schooling, looking beyond the numbers of boys and girls, but also considering other social categories. This is reiterated by Unterhalter and colleagues (2020), who argue that examining the consequences of gender inequality in relation to equal enrollment, retention, and attainment rates between girls and boys does not adequately address gender inequalities in education. This is because 'gender inequalities within and beyond education are complex and multi-faceted and not just a matter of the presence or absence of girls in school' (Unterhalter et al., 2020, p.4). I, like Dunne (2009), argue that exploring gender in schooling is very important; however, doing it in the 'absence of other qualifying social categories provides a very blurred lens on inequalities' (p.8).

My selection of secondary education as a framework for intersectionality in this study is deliberate because secondary schooling is undoubtedly seen as a vehicle that drives gender equality and transforms the lives of women and girls. Secondary schooling is seen as a passage to adulthood, and it is where pupils spend most of their adolescent period (Sperando & Kagoda, 2009). According to Sperando and Kagoda (2009), the level is critically important for girls, as it is at this level that gender-differentiated practices and behaviours are more pronounced. It has the potential to transform individuals' behaviour and practices (Dejaeghere & Vavrus, 2011; Dejaeghere & Arur, 2020). In other words, it enables girls and boys to develop critical thinking, confidence, self-esteem, and individual growth (Dejaeghere & Vavrus, 2011). However, secondary schooling

can be seen as an opportunity to circumscribe '...individual development and social change through the narrow content of the curriculum and the policing of gender, race, and class relations by students and teachers' (Dejaeghere & Vavrus, 2011, p. 7). The above assertion can explain schooling as an avenue that perpetuates and reproduces gendered relations, producing and reinforcing identities.

Intersectionality has emerged as an increasingly important theory in educational research, as it addresses issues of social identities in schools and provides an analytical framework for understanding the interplay of these identities within an educational context (Tate, 1997; Davis et al., 2015). In addition, evidence has shown that the 'theory holds great promise for exploring access to educational opportunities, students' in-school experiences, and educational attainment for marginalised groups' (Davis et al, 2015, p.7). Using an intersectional lens advances inclusive theorisation of gender and dismantles the analysis of gender inequalities that '...privilege a homogenous portrayal of what is women's (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008, p.6). This is consistent with my argument that, in exploring inequalities in secondary education, it is necessary to consider different circumstances, as these groups are not homogeneous. The intersectionality concept is well-suited for contemporary analysis of the multiple forms of oppression that women and girls face in social institutions, such as schools. The approach is dynamic, thus shifting from the original focus on race and gender to incorporate other forms of subordination. Therefore, the concept is central to this study because it explores multiple forms of inequalities in schooling. As mentioned by Bose (2012), the concept of intersectionality has 'proved fruitful...in research studies on specific inequalities' (p.68).

As with most contributions to the study of gender and schooling, scholars' inquiries are predominantly on the analysis of '...gender as an aspect of identity formation within schools' (Dejaeghere and Vavrus 2011, p.). Little or no attention has been paid to its intersection with other social identities such as SES, sexuality, region, religion, and ethnic traditions. Furthermore, very little literature has used an intersectional lens to explore students' in-school experiences. As mentioned earlier, an intersectional theory is important for understanding the

'educational experiences of an increasingly diverse student populace' (Davis et al, 2015, p.8). However, evidence from this study suggests that a research gap exists in the study of intersectionality within an increasingly diverse secondary schooling population. Thus, this research attempts to fill in that gap. The relevance of this study highlights a notable omission in the area of international development research. Hence, Dejaeghere and Vavrus (2011) noted that the understanding of the intersectionality of gender with other social identities is lacking in international development research and global policies on gender and schooling. I have provided a detailed insight into how the concept has been applied to educational research and its suitability. In the next section, I discuss how I have operationalised the concept in this study and illustrate why it better suits this study.

3.6.4 Conceptualising Intersectionality in this research

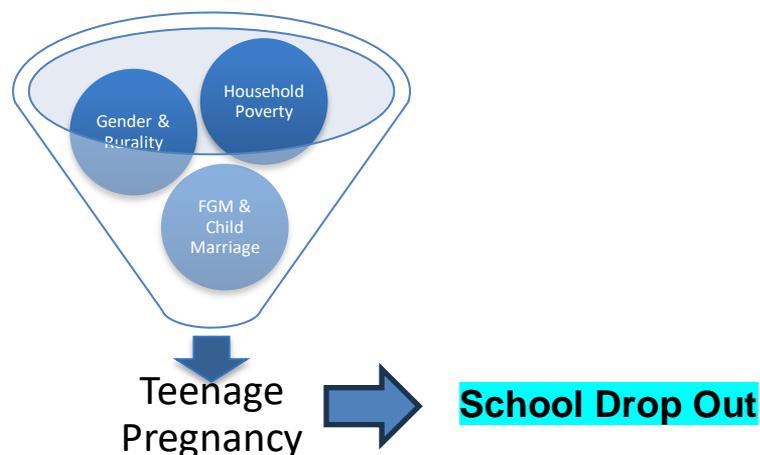
The concept of intersectionality in this study stemmed from my exploration of the intersection of multiple forms of inequalities that girls and women teachers experience in schools. I have shifted from other educational studies that often analyse individual identity as separate and mutually exclusive. This is because I acknowledge the differences that exist among these groups, which result in marginalised differences. Hence, this research does not downplay the differences that exist among girls and women teachers because, as I had mentioned, they are not a homogeneous group. They differ in terms of social class, sexual orientation, location, and ethnic background. It is on that note that the analysis of the intersectional disparities of girls in secondary schooling in this study considers the 'possible differences among girls, and how these differences may evolve' (Eloundou-Enyegue et al., 2009, p.11). As a result of these differences, Samuels & Ross-Sheriff (2008) posit that '...gender cannot be used as a single analytic frame' without exploring other social identities (p.5).

Arguably, I believe intersectionality sits at the top as a theoretical tool that combats the multidimensional marginalisation of girls' lived experiences in schooling. In this research, I aimed to highlight the overlapping and institutionally

reinforced oppressions that girls experience in secondary schooling. This research argues that intersectionality addresses dimensions of identities and provides a critical understanding of how multiple identities, such as class, gender, ethnicity, and others, operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that, in turn, shape complex social inequalities (Collins, 2015, p. 1). I strongly argue that the concept of intersectionality is worth adopting in this study because it identifies the complex interplay of multiple factors that contribute to inequalities in schools. Therefore, intersectionality in this research refers to ‘...understanding of gender as a social construct, which intersects with other social markers such as class, ethnicity, race, caste, sexuality, and religion to create multi-faceted and multi-layered forms of discrimination (Leech, 2015, pp. 31-32).

Drawing on the concept of intersectionality, I recognise the importance of analysing how gender integrates with other identities to influence girls’ schooling experiences and learning outcomes. For instance, using an intersectional lens, I was able to illustrate that in cases where a girl is coming from a poor rural household, that girl is more likely than boys in the same community to drop out of school. Figure 5 below provides a typical illustration of how intersectionality has been operationalised in this research. The figure below also illustrates how intersecting inequalities result in dropping out of school.

Figure 5: Illustration of intersectionality in this study



Secondly, I found that boys are more likely than girls to be prioritised when low-income families are deciding who to invest in with their scarce resources. Lastly, girls in poor rural households are more likely to be initiated into the bondo society (FGM) than their peers in urban areas. What the above examples illustrate is that an intersectional approach allows me to explore the experiences of girls in schools with features of class, sexuality, ethnic-tradition and location. It highlights the significance of recognising how gender interacts with other social identities to shape girls' secondary schooling experiences and outcomes. It provides insight into how the concept has been operationalised in this study. Therefore, I concur with Davis and colleagues (2015) that the intersection of gender and other identities shapes girls' educational access, experiences and outcomes (p.2).

Furthermore, Eloundou-Enyegue and colleagues argued that 'girls in lower socio-economic status groups do not share a common fate with girls in higher SES groups' (2009, p.12). Hence, to address secondary schooling inequality, it is necessary to address gender and social class differences, as well as other categories of identity. The central argument of this research is that being a girl from a poor household residing in rural communities in Sierra Leone is a characteristic that has created power relations of inequality. Similarly, Dejaeghere and Miske (2009), in their work in Vietnam, found that most school dropout girls tend to live in rural areas and come from low-income families (p.146). Hence, they suggested that to achieve full gender equality in secondary school, it is necessary to examine gender in conjunction with other social identities. According to them, aside from the fact that research has shown that these characteristics influence girls' access, retention and attainment, '...few studies have qualitatively examined how the nexus of these characteristics affects girls' schooling opportunities at the secondary level' (Dejaeghere & Miske, 2009, p.146).

For example, they also noted that in poor households in rural communities, girls work twice as many hours as boys due to their caring roles, household chores, and income-generating activities (Dejaeghere & Miske, 2009). In addition, Mairead Dunne and colleagues in their work in Botswana and Ghana, illustrated how the interaction of gender, social class and location perpetuated the gender

gap in secondary schooling attainment. They found that girls from low-income households living in rural areas have a limited chance of participating in and performing well in science-related subjects (2005). The above examples showcase how the intersection of identities influences the schooling experiences and outcomes of girls. Thus, intersectionality in this study emerged as an approach to analyse girls' marginalisation in secondary education beyond its singular focus on gender. I argue that this framework lends meaning to the experiences of girls and female staff in schools, while also contributing to the understanding of how inequalities are institutionally constituted, reinforced, and naturalised.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I outline the various empirical and theoretical perspectives on gender: sexuality, SES and its applicability in this study. I have established how I have engaged the concept of intersectionality in this study. I have problematized the exploration of gender inequality by using a single-frame category. I have argued that using an intersectional lens in education research like mine enhances a holistic approach to addressing gender inequality in education.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a detailed methodological insight into how this research was designed, the process of obtaining ethical approval, and how the data were generated and analysed. This research has been framed within the field of qualitative ethnographic case study research, utilising individual interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Participant Observations. By qualitative research, this study refers to an approach that focuses on 'the processes that drive behaviour and the experiences of life' (Newby, 2010, p.92). In other words, qualitative research explores the lived experiences of people, understanding the meanings they associate with their experiences and feelings (Newby, 2010). In this study, I relied on my subjective responses to gather evidence, providing insight into the data for further interpretation and analysis. Thus, Newby (2010) refers to qualitative research as a holistic, integrated, and soft approach that stems from a humanistic approach.

On the other hand, ethnography refers to an approach that focuses on cultural characteristics, such as everyday practices, shared values, norms, and interactions between students and teachers in a naturalistic school setting, as they relate to inequalities in secondary education (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Similarly, this case study research focuses on providing a detailed account of the four schools and evaluating the transferability or applicability of the data across all four sites (Forrest-Lawrence, 2019). Given that this research explored the behaviour, attitude, and everyday life of the research participants, I adopted an interpretive approach to understand how this has influenced girls' secondary schooling experiences and outcomes (Schwandt, 2003; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). I also employed triangulation as a strategy in this qualitative research to ensure that credible, reliable, and accurate data were produced (Newby, 2010). These multifaceted research tools bring to light the interplay of identities such as gender, sexuality, class, ethnic tradition, and location, which have contributed to negative intersecting schooling and teaching experiences and outcomes for female pupils and teachers, respectively. It is important to note that

this study was piloted to understand the flow and validity of the research questions. The pilot study helped improve the main research project by allowing me to identify gaps and strengths in the methods, as well as reframe or remove questions deemed ineffective.

Hence, to make the above-mentioned contributions, the study explored three research questions.

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

4.2 Situating My Research Methodology

As mentioned, this research employed a qualitative research methodology, utilising an ethnographic case study approach to examine the detailed experiences of secondary schooling among pupils and teachers. By ethnographic case study, I mean a methodology that holistically integrates a soft humanistic approach, that draws on insights and interpretation of lived experiences of participants of one or more sites and allows subjective response to evidence while obtaining data in a natural setting (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Yin, 2009; Newby, 2010; Cohen et al., 2011). I employed these methods because I had sought to address the ‘how’ questions in this study (Newby, 2010). I concur with Hennrick and colleagues that this research approach enables a detailed examination of people’s experiences, identifies issues raised by the studied participants, and understands the meaning and interpretation of the participants’ actions and behaviour (Hennrick et al., 2020). I acknowledge that,

in conducting this study, I was not neutral because I was already influenced by my research concerns, i.e., the consequences of intersecting inequalities on females in secondary schools in Sierra Leone. Thus, I was subjective in my response to the inductively generated evidence. In addition, my methodological focus was to explore the lived experiences of pupils and teachers in a naturalistic school setting, drawing insights into their views and perspectives. A naturalistic setting in this study refers to an environment in which people 'inhabit as part of their day-to-day activities' (Newby, 2010, p. 134).

These approaches and methodological stance adhere to constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemological approaches in qualitative research. This is my methodological positioning in this study, as it understands the meaning of participants' experiences as well as their behaviours (Hathcoat et al., 2019). It underscores the position of Schwandt (2003), who suggested that understanding the meaning of participants' actions is key to constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemological approaches. At the same time, Hiller (2016) argued that for a researcher to adhere to constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemological approaches, they should go beyond understanding 'just in the experiences of participants but in the ways that participants construct meanings from and about their experiences' (p.112). To understand the meanings of the lived experiences of participants in this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews and FGDs with participants (female girls and pupils, boys and out-of-school girls) as well as observed their interactions, actions and behaviours in a natural school setting. In other words, I have attempted to interpret the phenomena of humans within a given context meaningfully and demonstrated how these meanings interrelate with each other.

Therefore, my methodological positioning is shaped by studies from researchers such as (Schwandt, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Parsons, 2010; Denicolo et al., 2016; Hiller 2016 and Hathcoat et al. 2019) who argued that from a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology perspectives, 'all knowledge is grounded in our particular experiences; it is subjective and bound to the natural contexts in which we enact our lives and is thus ontologically relativist (Alvesson &

Sköldberg, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Greene, 2010 cited in Hiller 2016 p.103).

As I have already mentioned, this study took place in natural settings – schools. Thus, I conducted observations of participants in classrooms, staffrooms and playgrounds. I also conducted interviews and FGDs in secured locations within the school premises to socially construct knowledge. These settings enabled me to gain insight into the views and perspectives of these participants on their lived experiences and understand the meaning of the events surrounding them. This is consistent with my constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology stance, as well as that of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Greene (2010), in introducing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative notion of transferability, noted that constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology research should be transferable, detailed and well-articulated, provide a rich description of contextual information and be 'conducted in the natural settings of participants' (p.70). Again, this highlights the positioning of this study and how I have applied the approaches in this work.

Personally, what gave qualitative research its true strength in this study is my ability to combine multiple data sources to produce reliable and valid data. Reliability in this research focuses on the consistency between the data I generated and the actual events that occurred in the schools being researched (see Section 4.8 for my discussion on research integrity). Hence, by reliability, I focused on the 'degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness of coverage' (Bogdan & Biklan, 1992, p.48). Other researchers have construed reliability as dependability, credibility, trustworthiness, and consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Cohen et al., 2011). This is reiterated by the fact that I was able to use in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and participant observations to understand what people were saying individually and as a group, as well as their conscious and subconscious actions. Newby (2010) argued that it is problematic to explore people's behaviour by using just a single approach.

In addition, using qualitative research methodologies provided me with the flexibility to conceptualise the research problem, generate and analyse data, and

conduct data collection in a natural setting—naturalistic enquiry (Ibid., 2010). Hence, I employed qualitative methodologies to understand how the intersection of gender and other inequalities, such as social class, ethnic traditions, sexuality, and location, has shaped the secondary schooling experiences of girls and how they have influenced their educational outcomes. Data generated during the pilot research and the primary research have established that qualitative methods are better suited for this research because they effectively link the research questions, the literature, and the analysis to make new contributions to knowledge in secondary schooling research. The research interest of this study is to understand and document activities, events, behaviours and interactions that take place in a naturally occurring school environment. Thus, adopting an ethnographic quantitative research approach allowed me to observe and listen to the experiences and perspectives of pupils and teachers. Figure 6 below shows the three qualitative methods discussed above that were used in this research.

Figure 6. Qualitative Methods used in this research



4.3 Gaining Access to Case Study Research Sites.

Before I describe how I accessed the case study research sites (see Table 1 for a detailed description of the research sites), I will briefly introduce the case study research methodology, explain why it was adopted, and describe how it has been employed in this study. I refer to this study as an ethnographic case study because, as mentioned earlier, it focuses on cultural practices, such as shared attitudes, interactions, values, and perspectives, among a group of individuals—pupils and teachers (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). I opted for a multi-site case study approach to this qualitative research because it allows for the exploration of participants' everyday experiences across sites, while enhancing the specific analysis of findings in each school, and maintaining a broader understanding of applicability across all schools (Forrest-Lawrence, 2019). Contrary to single-site findings that focus on a single setting, multi-site findings are informed by comparisons between sites, allowing for the identification of similarities and differences, as well as their applicability to other sites (Jenkins et al., 2018). This approach enables me to conduct site-specific analyses of findings while strengthening the empirical applicability across other sites (Ibid., p. 1974).

Regarding how I gained access to the study sites, this was done before any contact with the research participants. To begin, an ethical process was undertaken and discussed in Section 4.10. Once the ethical processes at Lancaster University were completed, I contacted a former colleague who works at the Ministry of Basic Secondary School Education (MBSSE) for an introduction to the Chief Education Officer (CEO) of MBSSE to discuss my study and to grant me access to the districts and schools. Prior to my field trip, she introduced me to the CEO and informed her of my research. The CEO was happy for me to contact her, and we set an appointment to meet and discuss. Upon arrival, we met in her office, and interestingly, she was excited about my research because she had also worked on a similar project for her PhD. During our meeting, she informed me about the process of gaining access to the schools, including going through the MBSSE ethical process and meeting the district's chain of authority. One of the reasons I probably had so much ease in gaining access to the

research sites was my ability to establish good relationships with the CEO, who is directly responsible for the district education offices.

Secondly, my previous experience working in the education sector allowed me to build relationships with the district education offices. In one of our meetings, I recall her calling each district Deputy Director of Education (DD), who oversees the affairs of basic education at the district level, to inform them about my visit and research. Upon my arrival at the district, each DD assigned me an inspector from the school responsible for supervising school activities to introduce me to the principals of the research schools. I was introduced to the principals, and a letter from the CEO, addressed to them, was handed over during an entry meeting. During the initial meetings with the principals, who are also the gatekeepers, one common concern shared by all was the effect of data collected on their school's reputation, especially when issues of sexual harassment and violence are to be discussed with the pupils. I was very quick to reassure them about how the data would be used, as well as my commitment to the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants and schools. I further used that opportunity to share the participant information sheet (PIS) (see Annexe 4) to provide better insight into the research and its guided ethical procedures. I obtained consent from each principal (signed and stamped) to gain access to their school, teachers and pupils. See annexes 1, 2 and 3 for samples of consent forms.

My objective during the research was not to disrupt school learning or the everyday life of the school. Therefore, interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience. Additionally, the FGDs and observations were conducted in a manner that did not affect the observed participants (see Section 4.10, where I provide a detailed account of the ethical issues and my responses to them).

I had a few instances where respondents asked why the interviews should be voice-recorded after they had read the consent form. I explained that it helps me provide data that is consistent with what they have provided. I also mentioned that they have a choice of not being voice-recorded or not participating at all. In

all cases, the participants were satisfied with my response and opted to sign the consent form as well as participate in the research. In two separate interviews, I noticed that these interviewees asked more questions, perhaps more than I did. These two interviews lasted more than the average 45 minutes for all other interviews. They mainly deviated from the questions I asked, instead asking questions unrelated to the research. I paid attention and tried to listen while engaging them in my questions (Newby, 2010). Although I had sight on my intended objectives, I was open to experiences and new information. In other words, my mind was prepared and open to the unexpected. For instance, I noticed that some participants tended to provide misleading information (e.g. a female teacher was telling me that they do not use a cane to discipline pupils, while she was making her statement, we saw a male teacher caning a student in our opposite direction), I still believed that the interviews provided important data for my research. To guarantee the privacy of the participants, I pseudonymised each district and participating school to ensure that no identifying information about them would be revealed. As a result, Themes District was pseudonymised for one of the districts in the Northern Province, and Spring District was pseudonymised for one of the districts in the Southern Province. Mount Secondary School and Castle Secondary School (pseudonyms) represent schools from Themes District, while Spring Government Secondary School and St. James Secondary School (pseudonyms) represent schools from Spring District. In each district, schools are situated in both rural and peri-urban settings. To help provide a clear picture of the schools, I have summarised details of each school in the table below.

Table 1: Participant Schools Details

This table provides a detailed description of each school participating in this research.

Schools	Region	District	School Type	Details
St. James Secondary School	Southern	Spring District	Catholic mission and government-assisted school. It is a co-educational school.	This school consist of both junior and senior secondary schools. It has a total teacher population of 26 (10 JSS & 16 SSS), comprising about 90% males and 10% females. The pupil enrolment for JSS is 378 (199 boys & 179 girls). The pupil enrollment of SSS is 905 (boys: 407 and girls: 498). The school is fenced correctly and is 2 km from the district headquarters town. It consists of four building blocks and serves a large number of surrounding villages. The school is considered one of the district's low-performing schools. The football field is located outside the school fence and situated at the entrance of town. Although the Catholic mission owns the facility, it is funded by the government.

Spring Secondary School	Govt.	Southern	Spring District	Government School. It is a co-educational school.	This school consist of both junior and senior secondary schools. It has a total teacher population of 34 (13 JSS & 21 SSS), consisting of 16 males and four females. Pupil enrolment for JSS is 529 (294 boys & 235 girls). The pupil enrollment of SSS is 1,045 (boys: 477 and girls: 568). The school is not properly fenced, and it is 3 km away from the district headquarters town. It consists of five building blocks and serves a large number of surrounding villages. The school is considered one of the district's high-performing schools. The football field is outside the school fence and located in a small community 3 km away from the town. It is a government-owned entity and receives funding from the government.
Mount School	Secondary	Northern	Themes District	Anglican mission and government-assisted school. It is a co-educational school.	This school consist of both junior and senior secondary schools. It has a total teacher population of 54 (22 JSS & 32 SSS), consisting of 44 males and 10 females. Pupil enrolment for JSS is 415 (218 boys & 197 girls). The pupil enrollment of SSS is 1,215 (boys: 585 and girls: 630). The school is not properly fenced, and it is in the district headquarters town. It consists of six building blocks and serves a large number of surrounding

				villages. The school is considered one of the district's high-performing schools. The football field is located outside the school fence and situated at the entrance of town. Although the Anglican mission owns it, it is being funded by the government. The school is located 3 KM from the town centre.
Castle Secondary School	Northern	Themes District	Muslim mission and government-assisted school. It is a co-educational school.	This school consist of both junior and senior secondary schools. It has a total teacher population of 22 (8 JSS & 14 SSS), consisting of 16 males and four females. Pupil enrolment for JSS is 415 (218 boys & 197 girls). The pupil enrollment of SSS is 1,215 (boys: 585 and girls: 630). The school is not properly fenced, and it is in the district headquarters town of Port Loko. It consists of six building blocks and serves a large number of surrounding villages. The school is considered one of the district's high-performing schools. The football field is located outside the school fence and situated at the entrance of town. Although the Anglican mission owns it, it is being funded by the government. The school is located 15KM from the town centre.

4.4 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select four case study schools in two districts (Themes & Spring). My rationale for selecting these districts is as a result of available data ranking these districts among the worst districts in terms of low retention and achievement rates for girls, as well as a high prevalence rate of school-related violence against girls (GoSL 2013, 2020). Two schools were selected in each district, one from the north and one from the south of the country. In each district, one case was selected to represent a high-performing school and one to represent a low-performing school. Their location largely influenced the selection of schools; therefore, I considered it essential to choose schools with diverse demographics, including those in rural and peri-urban settings. In addition to student respondents and female teachers, out-of-school girls from the case study schools were also included.

The goal of this study was not to measure inequality but to gain a detailed, contextualised understanding of how the interplay of gender and other identities has exacerbated inequalities in secondary schooling in post-conflict Sierra Leone. Hence, purposive sampling was adopted instead of probability sampling. As mentioned by Hennink and colleagues, purposive sampling enables the selection of participants who possess a detailed understanding of the issues being studied (2020). During the recruitment process, brief, structured interviews were conducted to sample participants and identify those who best fit the research criteria. To build rapport and trust with the students and teachers, I engaged participants in small talks, participated in some of their activities, communicated in their local language and initiated contact. This approach helped me to explain the purpose of my visit informally and allowed me to blend into the school setting slowly.

This study targeted a total of 50 participants divided into four groups (25 school-going girls, five female staff, 15 school-going boys, and five out-of-school girls). The empirical justification for the composition of the four groups mentioned is to replicate Dunne et al.'s (2005) research in Ghana and Botswana, as well as to

address participants' characteristics, such as homogeneity among participants (Lloyd-Evans, 2016). The subject of this research comprises pupils and teachers from four secondary schools located in four peri-urban areas of post-conflict Sierra Leone. Out-of-school girls were also subjects of this study. I spent approximately eight weeks in each district, with four weeks dedicated to each school. I tried to spend three days at one school and two days at another each week. A total of fifty (50) interviews were conducted (25 girls, 15 boys, five teachers and five out-of-school girls), and 10 FGDs were conducted (4 for girls, 4 for boys, 1 for female teachers and 1 for male teachers). A total of sixty (60) classroom lessons were observed, 15 lessons in each school. Observations were also conducted outside the classroom, including the staffroom and social activity spaces, particularly during school lunch.

The following were the criteria used to recruit participants for this study;

- At least 10 students identified came from female-headed households. To explore the influence of the socio-economic dynamics of female-headed households
- Seventy per cent of students were drawn from senior secondary school and a small portion from Junior secondary school. The rationale is that students from senior secondary school have had much experience due to the number of years spent in the school, and they could provide sufficient information.
- Each student should have been in that school for a minimum of two (2) academic years in order that they are in a good position to provide an account of their experiences in the school.
- At least 5 student participants should reside 5KM to 10KM away from the school.
- At least 5 of the student participants (girls) should have a brother who is enrolled in school.

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- At least 5 of the student participants (boys) should have a sister who is enrolled in school
 - The four female teachers are all adults and must have taught in that school for a minimum of 2 years.
 - At least one of these teachers should have attained a senior teacher level, including the head of school.
 - I recruited 5 out-of-school girls. These girls must have attended one of the four case study schools.
 - All of these out-of-school girls must have attended these schools for at least 2 years before dropping out.
 - One of these girls should have been from a female-headed household.
 - Lastly, at least one of these out-of-school girls has a brother who is currently enrolled in school

As I mentioned, I understood that the layers of gatekeepers to access the research participants have the potential to negatively influence the data of this study. However, leveraging the trust and rapport established, I guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality for all information shared. The selection process of each participant strictly followed the selection criteria stated above.

Table 2: Participant information

This table provides details of participants

Participant	Details
Purple, Green, Red, Yellow	They are participants who participated in the pilot study. They are girls between the ages of 16 and 18 years.

Girl 1 to 25	Participated in the primary research. They are between the ages of 16 and 19 years.
Boy 1 to 15	Participated in the primary research. They are between the ages of 16 and 19 years.
FT 1 to 5	Female teachers
OoS 1 to 5	Out-of-School Girls. They were students at the participating schools.

4.5 In-depth interviews in this research

Semi-structured interviews in this research have proven to be a valuable data source for gaining an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and exploring critical issues (Nathan et al., 2019; Hennink et al., 2020). They captured data on sensitive topics, generated more ideas, and stimulated in-depth discussions on different topics. A total of fifty (50) interviews were conducted (25 girls, 15 boys, five teachers and five out-of-school girls), and 10 FGDs were conducted (4 for girls, 4 for boys, 1 for female teachers and 1 for male teachers). During the interview process, semi-structured interviews offered ‘a special kind of knowledge-producing conversation’ and greater confidentiality because they focus entirely on one participant at a given time (Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p.128). Hennink and colleagues argued that because interviews are one-on-one, they ‘offer greater confidentiality to discuss personal experiences and sensitive topics’ (2020, p.139). In this study, in-depth interviews provided me with access to detailed, personal-level data on individual experiences, enabling me to explore sensitive topics. I know some researchers have argued that for qualitative data from interviews to be valid, there is a need to ‘minimise the amount of bias as

much as possible' (Cohen et al., 2011). For this reason, I tried to be open-minded, avoided leading questions and became a good listener. I definitely had my preconceived notions that sought to answer my research questions, but I minimised seeking answers in that direction.

I began each interview by introducing myself, welcoming the participant, and expressing my appreciation for their participation. I then provided a broad introduction to the study and its objectives using the participant information sheet (PIS).

The semi-structured interviews were voice-recorded, while I attempted to take brief notes where possible. Before the interviews, I built rapport with the participants; for instance, I visited their classrooms, engaged in small talk, and had informal conversations with them during lunch. I involved myself in some of their outdoor activities, such as watching the boys play football and the girls skip. This strategy helped me to build trust and rapport with the participants. This was evident in the interviews, where the interviewees found themselves very comfortable initiating conversations and asking and responding to questions. For example, one of the participants, before the start of the interview, started chatting with me, "Mr Conteh, it was good to hear that you worked in this district during the Ebola period. After our small talk in class yesterday, I asked my elder brother about you when I went home, and he said he knows you very well and that you were working for UNICEF then". I responded, 'Thank you, yes, I was. I enjoyed my time working here, despite the challenging circumstances. The district people are very welcoming, which is why I am here again. I noticed his broad smile; he felt reassured and comfortable talking to me. For me, establishing and maintaining rapport with the participants was very important. It helped capture the stories of the participants and allowed me to ask follow-up questions as well as probe using short prompting questions and gestures such as 'OK', '*Tell me more about it*', '*Why is that so?*' '*Can you explain,*' '*How did you feel?*', '*When you mentioned...what do you mean?*' '*That is interesting; can you expand on that, if possible, provide some examples?*' 'Hmmm, and head nodding. These questions and gestures indicated that I was listening to their stories and was genuinely interested in them. They felt motivated to share their stories and

thoughts. I sometimes summarised what they said or repeated their last few words and made follow-up questions as a strategy to obtain additional information. This approach is consistent with Corbin and Morse's (2003) suggestion that in-depth, face-to-face interviews are used to:

'Simulate normal conversation in which interpersonal contact helps to discover the participant's feelings, thoughts, and perceptions, builds trust and rapport, and allows observation of and response to non-verbal communication' (cited Westland et al. 2024).

To maintain eye contact and observe the body language of the participants, I ensured that I sat opposite them or at an angle, as chosen by the participant (Nathan et al., 2019). This is also consistent with Westland et al.'s (2024) position, who mentioned that in-depth interviews create a safe environment for participants to freely express themselves, as well as allowing the researcher to respond to distressful emotions that may arise due to the sensitivity of the topics. I was aware of the power relation that existed, especially with the gender differences between the girls and me, and its possible influence on the quality of the interviews. I therefore asked questions like 'Do you want to sit opposite or sideways?', 'Do you prefer the desk between us or not?' 'Are you OK with your seating position?'. My intention with these questions was to create a non-official environment and establish a strong rapport with the participants (Walford, 2001; Nathan et al., 2019). All the interviewees opted for an opposite seating position, and I noticed that it had a positive influence on the quality of the interviews. For instance, the participants felt at ease and had positive body language. One girl participant mentioned,

"When I saw you on the first day in our class, I was not sure if I wanted to participate because I thought you came from Freetown to supervise us and our teachers. However, after the classroom interaction, I felt at ease. The interview was in-depth and interactive; I really enjoyed it".

This illustrates that I was able to mitigate issues of power relations and gender differences through building and maintaining rapport with the participants. During the interview, I faced two main challenges. Firstly, within the first week of the interviews, some participants were initially reluctant to be tape-recorded, even in cases where they had read and signed the consent form, which stated they were

okay with being interviewed and recorded. For example, one woman teacher was initially reluctant to be recorded because she feared that, as the only woman teacher in the school, the data collected would be linked to her. I had to explain to her and stress my responsibility to preserve their anonymity and safeguard confidentiality. Another difficulty was that I had planned to conduct the interviews in English, given that I was to interview secondary school students and English is the formal language for teaching and learning. Unfortunately, most of the student participants were unable to speak fluent English. They instead responded in Krio (a local dialect widely spoken by most Sierra Leoneans), which made my data transcription painstaking. However, as a Sierra Leonean who speaks fluent Krio, I was able to adapt to the changes and conduct the interviews successfully in both English and Krio. My use of English (a colonial language) did not come as a surprise to both teachers and pupils because, as mentioned, it is the official teaching and learning language. I understood my position as a researcher from Freetown could create a complex relationship with some teachers. As a Sierra Leonean who has worked within these communities, I understood the complexity and ways to mitigate the impact on my rapport with these teachers. For instance, I understood that my presence in the classroom has the potential to influence the behaviours of both teachers and pupils. I leveraged the trust and rapport established with every teacher and pupil. I was constantly examining my attitude, thought process, my experiences and biases and reflected on my relationship with the research participants. One strategy I adopted in the field was conducting daily reviews of the interviews I had conducted. It was done to determine whether the interviews were more focused and flexible in incorporating supplementary information. It helped me shape and gauge my interview schedule as well as make changes where necessary.

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted to understand and document the narratives of pupils' and teachers' lived experiences in a naturally occurring school setting. I conducted the interviews in a way that created 'a meaning-making partnership' between me and the respondents (Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2006). For instance, during the research, I ensured that an open framework was used throughout to enable conversational and two-way communication between

me and the respondents. Hennink and colleagues posit interviews as 'seeking information on individual, personal experiences from people about a specific issue or topic' (p.117).

The following extract gives an example of how I used the tactics to probe for more detail;

Researcher: *You mentioned the names of 5 pupils in your class that you think are contributing the most and performing best. Four (4) are boys and only one (1) girl, why is that so?*

Girl 3: *Well, the boys have more time to study at home. Like me, after school I do many house chores'*

Researcher: *You say you do many house chores, does that affect your performance in class?*

Girl 3: *Yes, I suppose if I have ample time to study at home, I will be able to perform well in class.*

This description resonates with the study's aim to understand the gendered institutional life of schools, and, as far as possible, to do so through the actions, interactions, voices, and perspectives of those within the school, especially the girls. Moreover, to also understand the surrounding influences and structures which has led to the practice of gender-differentiated schooling. So, I somehow took a biased stance due to my preconceived notions, but I tried to minimise presuppositions to gain information from my participants. In this way, I set the tone for interactive conversations and bring out individuals' subjective experiences. The interview topics for this research were noted in the interview guide, which was tailored according to the research questions. Due to the flexibility of the interviews, follow-up questions were asked to clarify the participant's viewpoint.

4.6 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in this Research

In contrast, FGDs brought together a group of participants to share their experiences, listen to one another, and engage in a dialogue. I believe that the fact that the participants found themselves in a group environment, 'makes it an

ideal method for seeking a range of views on research issues' (Hennink et. al, 2020, p.139). The composition of the groups was determined in relation to participants' characteristics, such as shared experiences and socio-demographic characteristics, including age and gender, as well as familiarity among participants (i.e., students and teachers are from the same school and share the same schooling level) (Lloyd-Evans, 2016; Ngozwana, 2018). I was convinced that to conduct an effective FGD, there was a need for the composition of participants to be in relation to 'homogeneous socio-demographic characteristics or some degree of shared experience of the discussion topic' (Hennink et al., 2020, p.150). Hence, I primarily grouped the participants according to their biological gender, perceived knowledge about the issue, school level, and school affiliation.

An FGD group of five participants was organised for each group. The principals provided a space within the school that offers quietness, privacy, comfort, and confidentiality. A circle seating arrangement was organised to enable maximum eye contact among participants and with each other, fostering an interactive discussion (Lloyd-Evans, 2016). The participants were recruited based on those who participated in the individual interviews. Participation in the individual interviews had a predefined requirement (see interview section) that participants needed to meet. Therefore, all participants who participated in the interviews were automatically eligible to participate in the FDGs. However, their participation in the FGD was entirely voluntary.

During this research, FDGs complemented in-depth interviews by providing additional comments and insights into issues that were not covered during the individual interviews. Unlike in-depth interviews that focused on individual experiences, FDGs focused on a range of students' and teachers' opinions. The data collected were from the stories of a group of participants' experiences. For example, during the FDGs, I noticed that due to the diverse nature of the groups, the discussions led to dynamic interactions among participants. Hence, these FDGs produced 'multiple stories and diverse experiences' (Carter et al., 2014, p.115). The FDGs were conducted in an enabling environment that allowed participants to express their opinions comfortably. At the beginning of each

discussion, I offered incentives in the form of refreshments, including snacks and soft drinks. This was intended to help participants feel relaxed and at ease while participating (Walford, 2001; Newby, 2010; Lloyd-Evans, 2016).

I started each FGD by introducing myself, welcoming the participants and expressing my appreciation for their participation. I then introduced the study and its objectives broadly. I outlined how the discussions would be conducted and asked if they had any questions or comments. I emphasised the anonymity of each participant and the confidentiality of the data collected. Lastly, I sought consent for their participation and for recording the discussion. As the moderator of the discussion, I ensured that I created a comfortable atmosphere for everyone, regardless of their diverse personalities within the group. I emphasised the importance of everyone's contribution and that, irrespective of what is expressed on an issue, whether negative or positive, it was welcomed. I emphasised that there are no right or wrong answers because they are individual views. I mentioned that it was normal for group members to disagree on issues and that it was acceptable to provide input on others' highlighted issues. I managed the group dynamics by ensuring a level playing field for both members, regardless of their quiet or dominant personalities. This was achieved, firstly, by establishing ground rules such as requiring members to raise their hands to indicate they wanted to speak. Another rule was that when a member is contributing, other members should not interrupt or interject. These rules ensured that every group member felt comfortable in sharing their views (Lloyd-Evans, 2016).

Secondly, I structured the discussions using the guide as follows: the introduction was initiated by a broad opening question, such as 'Let us start by introducing ourselves and tell everyone why you are interested in participating.' My opening question was an icebreaker; it stimulated energy for the discussion. This was followed up by specific questions, such as 'Can you tell me what you understand about violence in school?' As the moderator, I facilitated group interactions to ensure an interactive discussion between participants. I achieved this through promoting probing of each other's views. For example, in one of the FGDs, a

group member probed another member's views on why she believed boys should not sweep in class or cook at home. She stated

'Violet, I disagree with you on this one. Why do you think it is only girls who should sweep or cook?'

This led to an interesting discussion among members; I emphasised that it was reasonable for members to disagree on issues due to their differing perspectives. I also stressed that there are no wrong or correct answers; therefore, each contribution is as important as any other. For me, it produced richer data because it uncovered unforeseen issues and provided a deeper understanding of these issues.

Furthermore, to encourage those members with quiet personalities, I ensured the active members did not dominate the discussions. I achieved this by not overlooking the quiet ones, I maintained eye contact with them, and I tried to probe further when they made short responses. I tried to motivate them to contribute and understand that their contribution is as important as that of any other group member. For example, I used statements like,

'Thanks, Blue, you made a perfect point. Red, Green and Violet, what do you think about the issue just mentioned by Blue?'

The above illustrates that I acknowledged the contribution made by Blue, and I encouraged others to share their thoughts on her contribution. In one case, I noticed that a girl who was very outspoken during the individual interview was reticent at the beginning of the FGD. To break the ice and motivate her to contribute, I asked everyone if I could provide snacks, and we took a 5-minute break. During that period, I was able to engage the girl, and she responded that she did not want her colleagues to feel she wanted to dominate the discussion. I assured her that the discussion would be moderated in a way that would allow everyone to feel comfortable expressing their opinions. I achieved the result, as she became very active in the discussion.

Lastly, as the moderator, I also had to manage members with dominant personalities so as not to monopolise the discussions (Lloyd-Evans, 2016). I

achieved this by not cutting them short while they made their contributions; I acknowledged their points but also tried to involve others in the conversation. For example, '*Green, thank you, you are absolutely on point. Does anyone share the same views as Green or have a different opinion?*' The strategies highlighted above helped me manage the group dynamics and discussions in an environment that was comfortable for everyone to express their views freely. In other words, I managed what Hennink and colleagues referred to as 'difference effect' (2020).

Using FGDs during this study, I learnt that participants who were uneasy during the interviews overcame their inhibitions and contributed with confidence. The group effect enabled participants to interact with one another and discuss unforeseen issues (Lloyd-Evans, 2016; Ngozwana, 2018). I exerted myself and set the tone and atmosphere of the discussions. I adopted an active listener strategy to demonstrate interest in the decision. I tried not to interrupt; I used gestures like nodding my head and wearing a broad smile to show my interest in the discussions. By listening attentively, I was able to capture the body language and facial expressions of the participants. I probed to gain a deeper understanding of the issues, which prompted me to ask follow-up questions about the prominent issues highlighted. The discussions were audio-recorded. To minimise distractions, I did not video record the discussions, but I managed to capture the non-verbal communication with field notes. It was challenging to moderate, observe body language, and take field notes simultaneously; however, I successfully managed to multitask at each session. At the end of each day, I reviewed the field notes and recordings from each session to corroborate the data. One thing I tried was to prevent participants from divulging personal information. Since we were in a group environment, I tried not to let them divulge personal information. Hennink and colleagues argued that FGD does not entirely represent individual perspectives because the data collected are the 'product of interaction between group members which may influence the contribution of individual participants' (2020, p.139).

4.7 Participant Observations in this study

For me, participant observation is an ideal method that corroborates evidence from interviews and FGDs. Observing participants' activities, events, behaviours, and interactions generated more reliable and valid data than what they said (Seim, 2024). I used this method to thoroughly observe and record the everyday behaviours, actions and interactions in a naturally occurring social setting. I watched, listened and recorded various aspects of the research participants' everyday life. Walford (2001) argued that what pupils and teachers do may be likened to a spoken word that describes the context of naturally occurring classroom activities. Writing about his research experience in Dutch religious schools, Walford states:

"I do not understand Dutch, so I have had to observe what is going on in the schools without focusing on the meaning of words...I am more aware of body language, the use of certain images and the way in which spatial factors influence and structure interactions...I still use interviews, but with greater care" (p.97).

The above example illustrates that, regardless of your language, participant observation can be conducted, and accurate data can be collected.

In this study, observation added value to the data collected and identified some contextual discrepancies that may not have been voiced in the interviews and FGD. In addition, Busetto and colleagues (2010) mentioned that observation allows the researcher to discover key issues that may not have been captured during the interviews and/or the FGDs. Hence, observation in this study complemented in-depth interviews and FGD, and I addressed discrepancies between what the study participants said during the interviews and FGD and their actions (what they did or did not do) through participant observation (Paradis & Sutkin, 2017; Seim, 2024). I had to multitask during the observation, as I was systematically observing the actions and interactions of the studied participants while listening to their conversations and taking note of every aspect of the activities they performed or did not perform. In addition, through observations, I probed into the expressions, actions, interactions, and behaviours of students and teachers. The observations were planned to last for 2 hours per day during

school lessons. Because this is a participant observation, I was part of the observed setting. This helped me to build rapport and trust with the research participants (Seim, 2024). It also enabled me to integrate into the school setting slowly, and I observed their daily activities with ease (Ibid, 2024).

Each school was observed for at least three weeks during the study period. Field notes were taken for everything around me. However, I sometimes tried not to write field notes during teachers' lessons to avoid being perceived as supervised by the teachers. Busetto and colleagues noted that taking field notes during observation in a classroom lesson may lead the observed teachers to perceive that they are being supervised and assessed (2020). Therefore, field notes were written at the end of each lesson.

To undertake a systematic and detailed account of the school setting, interactions and activities, I adopted these strategies in line with studies such as Walford (2001), Newby (2010), Hennink et al. (2020) and Seim (2024).

- The use of spaces: my observation focused on how boys and girls use walkways, the classroom, and who does what and why in the recreational fields. For example, in one of the schools, I observed that the girls were restricted to a small space within the fenced school compound. They were not allowed to go outside the fence to play, while the boys used the open field outside the fence to play football.
- Interactions: I observed and tried to understand what students' and teachers' behaviour is in and outside the classroom. I observed how student interacts with teachers and their colleagues. How teachers interact with students as well as their colleagues. The actions of students and teachers were also observed.
- The school as a social setting: I observed school activities and tried to interpret them. I also observed the social dynamics of the school. For example, socio-cultural norms and values that are covertly practised. I observed that when girls encounter a teacher along a walkway, they tend to prostrate/bow down to greet, while the boys do not.

The participant observations were designed to assign each participant a unique number, facilitating data triangulation. Each observation session lasted about 40 minutes, and during each session. In cases where a teacher feels they are being supervised, I make notes after the lesson. The observation tool was designed to capture seating patterns, types of interactions, feedback mechanisms, questions, answer sessions and sources of interactions. To better understand how the classroom observations were conducted, I categorised the observations into three groups. Therefore, I used the total number of instances of each category as a variable. This approach was adopted from Morse and Handley's classroom interaction or observation plan (1985). The table below lists the categories of observations and activities, along with the observations made in each category.

Table 2: Categories of Observations and Activities

Category	Activity	Observations Conducted
Source of Interaction	Teacher to Student Student to Teacher Teacher to Teacher Student to Student	I observed what students and teachers do or do not do I observed how teachers and students interact in and outside class I observed their behaviours, body language and actions
Type of Interaction	Direct Question Call out to an indirect question Who answered? Was the question correctly answered? Unsolicited response	I observed the participation and contribution of students, especially girls, in the classroom. I observed the challenges girls face in participating in class. Took note of the disruptive, bullying and provocative behaviour of the boys.

	<p>Solicited response</p> <p>Social</p> <p>Class authority</p> <p>Disciplinary</p>	<p>I observed how boys and girls interact when there are no teachers in the class.</p> <p>I observed how the class prefect discharged their duties.</p>
Feedback	<p>No feedback</p> <p>Simple acknowledgement</p> <p>Restate the answer or the question</p> <p>Prompt</p> <p>Praise</p> <p>Clarification</p> <p>Correction</p>	<p>I observed the way teachers provide feedback to students.</p> <p>I observed ways in which teachers create a classroom environment that is either conducive or hostile to girls' participation.</p> <p>I observed the different forms of disciplinary action taken towards the boys and the girls.</p>

	Dismissal Criticism or disciplinary The teacher's answer to the student's question Elaboration Questions Answers	I observed teachers' responses to the questions asked by girls and boys in class. I observed teachers' reactions to wrong answers from girls and boys.
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Source: Newby 2010

During the lessons observed, I tried not to pay attention to what was being taught. Instead, I concentrated on the interactions between individuals, for instance, teachers and pupils, pupils and pupils, and teachers and teachers. I did not fall into what Walford described as 'student mode' (2001). In other words, I did not allow myself to be carried away by the content of the teaching but rather by the actions and interactions that took place in the classroom. To build trust, I ensured that I participated in most of their classroom outdoor activities, including physical education classes. I ensured that observation took place at any given time and location. I observed various aspects of the classroom and outside the classroom. One thing I observed is that during school, there was a lot of wasted time. Although it allowed me to conduct my interviews without disrupting class, I felt disappointed that the pupils were not getting enough face-to-face contact time.

I observed that gender imbalances are prominent in secondary schooling. Two prominent gender imbalances I observed are that male teachers head all four schools and that school committees considered very important are predominantly headed by male teachers. Male teachers outnumbered female teachers at every secondary school. In one of the schools, there is only one female teacher. I took deliberate action to immerse myself in the school environment to add knowledge and obtain more information. At the beginning of the observation, I asked a few questions to gather information.

4.8 Research Integrity

This type of research is often associated with an interpretive research method because it explores the behaviour, attitude and lived experiences of the research participants. Thus, it is argued that using an interpretive approach hinders the validity and reliability of the data collected because there are high chances of inconsistencies in the data collected (Gahima, 2012). It is on that note that Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested an alternative auditing procedure to achieve reliability and validity. It is in line with the above suggestion; I adopted data triangulation as an auditing procedure to ensure that the data collected is consistent and reliable. This proved critical in generating high-quality data during my interviews, group discussions, and observations at exchanges. It is in this

vein that I opted to combine the three data sources through the process of triangulation. Triangulation in this research is referred to as the multiple use of qualitative research methods as data sources to ‘...develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena’ (Patton 1999, cited in Carter et al. 2014, p.545). I therefore employed triangulation as a strategy in this qualitative research to ‘...ensure credibility, reliability, and greater scientific accuracy’ in the data produced (Santos et al., 2020, p.655).

During Interviews and FGDs, I noticed that some of the data provided was problematic because respondents tend to provide inaccurate and biased information. For instance, in one of my interactions with a female teacher, as mentioned earlier, I asked her about corporal punishment, specifically regarding the use of corporal punishment, such as caning. She started establishing the fact that it is illegal, and while trying to deny the use of a cane to enforce discipline in her school, a male teacher at the opposite end of the school was caning some students. I also observed that even though we were in a safe and private space within the school, the presence of teachers and the principal in the school prevented some girls from speaking freely and accurately. Their mere presence in the school could serve as a deterrent for the pupils to speak freely. Therefore, I opted to address this by adding participant observation as a third data source and used the process of triangulation to corroborate data generated from the three qualitative data sources. Thus, I posit that using multiple data sources eliminated ‘gross errors’ that tend to occur when using a single method like interviews (Walford, 2001). The way triangulation was implemented in this study is by corroborating evidence from interviews and FGDs with participant observations. As Newby pointed out, such corroboration eliminates false conclusions in cases where the interview and FGD participants conspire not to be forthcoming with the researcher (2010). Therefore, triangulation in this research eliminated false conclusions by demonstrating the reliability and validity of the data collected through the process of corroboration of evidence from the three sources highlighted above.

Critics may argue that the weight of the data collected may differ among them. For instance, Carter and colleagues argued that data derived from one FGD of 6

participants may not carry the weight as data derived from one interview (2014). Whilst the argument that data derived from each of these three methods differs, I agree with Kaplowitz and Hoehn's (2001) argument that no single data source is better than the others; instead, combining them provides different perspectives. One important element I learnt during this research is that using these three qualitative research methods addresses inconsistencies among the participants, as I was also able to observe their actions and interactions in and outside the classroom. Elsbach (2000) and Walford (2001) both criticised the use of a single qualitative data source as the sole or primary data-generating method, arguing that it is essential for researchers to consider not only what respondents say but also what they do, especially in a naturally occurring school environment.

The three data sources were used with the same participants to address inconsistencies that may have existed in each. In establishing information-seeking behaviour during the research, three reasons were identified, based on data derived from multiple triangulated data sources. Firstly, I noted that the data derived from the three sources allowed for a comparison of the data collected to assess which method explored the phenomenon more deeply (Walford, 2001). The second reason is that the combined data derived can lead to 'an enhanced understanding of the context of the phenomena' (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008, p.546). Lastly, I argue that the 'convergence of data enhanced the trustworthiness of findings' (p.546). Walford (2001) and Morse (2009) reiterated my reasons, which merited the combined use of the three qualitative methods as an ideal approach that captures different perspectives that might have been ignored or overlooked. Hence, mixing qualitative methods like interviews and FGDs with Participant Observations increased the validity of the study findings through a triangulated process. The three methods of data sources allowed me, as the researcher, to triangulate the data collected, analyse the data, identify differences and similarities, and perform quality checks on it. I could compare data collected from each method and describe how the data derived were synced into the overall study results. Carter and colleagues concluded that data sources

triangulation' results in a broader understanding of the phenomenon of interest' (2014, p. 546).

The evidence above seeks to validate the combined use of Interviews, FGDs, and Participant Observations for generating data in this research. I am not suggesting that using a single data-generating method is invalid or produces entirely invalid or inaccurate data; my argument is that the combined use of these three qualitative data sources gives a richer picture of the accuracy of what the participants are saying and what they are actually doing.

For Freebody (2003), the combined use of multiple qualitative data sources provides 'some triangulation on the social realities of the setting and the people' (p.57). Below I have mapped out appraisal questions and quality indicators using Newby's 'Quality indicators for qualitative research' table to illustrate the processes I considered in making the data generated in this research credible, dependable, transparent, transferable and consistent.

Table 3: Appraisal Questions and Quality Indicators

Appraisal Questions	Quality Indicator
How credible are my findings and conclusions?	<p>In this research, I focused on the question of</p> <p><i>'How were the findings and conclusions reached?'</i></p> <p>Hence, I ensured that the data generated illustrates validity and reliability, producing findings and conclusions that make sense. My sound methodological process (evident analysis and interpretation of the data that provided information that addresses the research questions) has enabled me to establish how I arrived at my findings and conclusions.</p>
What likely contribution to	The indicators to this question are as follows

<p>knowledge has this research made or extended?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Is there existing literature on the issues?</i> • <i>How does this research's likely contribution to knowledge fit into existing literature?</i> • <i>Do findings illustrate new insight into the issues?</i> <p>I ensured that a constructed analysis and interpretation of the data provided information that contributes to the existing literature and offers new insights.</p>
<p>What is the rationale for the research design?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Is there a rationale for adopting a triangulated research design?</i> <p>This is illustrated by how multiple qualitative data collection methods (Interviews, FGDs & Participant Observation) were used to produce credible, reliable and valid research data.</p>
<p>How well was the data generated?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Number of tools used for data collection and the rationale for these tools</i> <p>An audio recorder was used to capture interviews and FGDs</p> <p>Field notes were used for capturing nonverbal communications during interviews and FGDs</p> <p>Observation Journal and field notes were used to record the actions and inactions of participants</p>
<p>How clear are the links between data, findings and conclusions?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Is there a link between how the conclusions were derived and the actual data collected?</i> • <i>Is there an explanation on how the data were analysed and interpreted to reach the findings and conclusions derived?</i>

Source: Newby 2010

4.9 Piloting the research instrument

I needed to conduct a pilot study to understand my research better and evaluate the effectiveness of the interview questions. The pilot provided me with the opportunity to experience and understand the research tool, as well as build greater confidence in its use. The primary objective of the pilot study was to assess whether the semi-structured interview questions I had developed were clear, unambiguous, and easily comprehensible. Therefore, with the pilot study, I tested every aspect of the research methods, including interviews and interview guides, observation and observation tools, and field notes (Busetto et al., 2020). I used voice recorders to assist with the interviews and, in some cases, to take notes during the interviews. Each interview was scheduled to last a maximum of thirty minutes. Before embarking on the pilot study, I sought ethical approval from the University of Lancaster and the Ministry of Basic and Secondary School Education of Sierra Leone. The pilot study did not start as scheduled because both ethical approvals came in late, so I had to adjust the start date of the fieldwork. Prior to my trip, I shared the tool with two friends (Both have relevant expertise in schools or research) as well as my supervisor to provide critical feedback. They were able to critique the tool and provided feedback that helped me to adjust and rework some of the questions.

Upon entering the field, I met with the Deputy Director of Education in the district and the principal to brief them on my research. I did not encounter any resistance, possibly because I had met with the Chief Education Officer in Freetown, who oversees the district's affairs. During my meeting with the DDE and the principal, I emphasised my responsibility to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the research school and its participants. One important element I learnt from my pilot was that some of the questions were leading the interviewees to provide straightforward or sometimes biased answers. For example, I asked questions like "Can you tell me which girls and boys perform well in your class?". I realised that such a question leaves little room for the interviewees to think and provide valid answers. Therefore, during the main research project, I rephrased the

questions to enable the interviewees to provide informed answers. For instance, I was now asking probing questions like “*Can you tell me the names of 5 pupils who participate and contribute more to the class?*” The way I reframed this question allowed the interviewees to provide answers for better performance between boys and girls without knowing.

The pilot helped improve the main research project because it allowed me to identify, adjust, reframe or remove ineffective interview questions. It also helped me understand the flow and validity of the research tool, which helped me become better prepared for the main research project. As mentioned by Malmquist and colleagues (2019), undertaking pilot research improves the research instrument, such as the interview schedule, resulting in the collection of quality data. The pilot research helped shape and refine the research design of the substantive study. Hence, Kim (2011) posits that a pilot study is an important process that enhances the reliability and validity of substantive research.

A three-way consent approach was adopted in this pilot research. Consent was obtained from the school for the use of their institution. Second consent was obtained from the students for their participation. Third consent was obtained from the parents where necessary (see chapter 4.11.1 for details on its possibility here). Every effort was made to ensure that they had the time and opportunity to access support in their decision-making; for example, students were allowed to review both the PIS and consent forms thoroughly. This was achieved with an open mind, curiosity, empathy, and flexibility. To manage the fear of retaliation or victimisation by adults who suspect that their behaviour is being reported, ALL interviews were conducted in a safe and conducive space. Before data collection, I requested a designated safe space within the school from the school authorities, ensuring confidentiality and privacy.

Respondents within the case study school were offered similar levels of confidentiality and anonymity. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used for all schools and respondents. In cases where respondents disclose data that will make them identifiable, I ensured that such data is not reflected in this research. Recordings of such data were also deleted from all tools used to collect it. I

transcribed the interviews and stored them in the university's secure storage facility. The data was encrypted and password-protected. The field notes were typed up on a password-protected computer.

4.10 Ethical considerations

To conduct this research, I obtained ethical approval in accordance with the University of Lancaster's ethical procedures, ensuring the safety of both the participants and me as the researcher. Similarly, I also had to obtain ethical approval from the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MBSSE) in Sierra Leone. In both cases, based on an individualistic assessment, I had predicted possible ethical issues I might encounter. I also established my commitment to be guided by values and general principles of ethics in this ethnographic fieldwork. This formed the basis of my ethical approval process. However, as Iphofen and Tolich (2018) mentioned, 'ethnographic fieldwork inevitably follows the social contours of the chosen setting' (p.8). I was often subject to the control of the participants, i.e. the setting and actions of the participants sometimes influenced the fieldwork. As argued by Kutrovatz, 'obtaining formal approval is not enough for managing unpredictable situations' (2017, p.71). I, however, ensured that my responsibility to preserve the values and principles of this study was not compromised. Careful consideration was given to the values and principles outlined below, which were derived from studies such as Newby (2010), Kutrovatz (2017), Allan (2019), Goyal et al. (2019), Willows (2019), and Westland et al. (2025).

- That the research does not harm the research participants or me. I ensured that neither the participants nor I were involved in any situation in which we might be harmed.
- That their privacy is guaranteed. Consequently, I guarantee that the data collected will be anonymous, with no identifying information about them being revealed in this research.

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- That the information they have provided to me as the researcher will be treated confidentially. Consequently, the data collected will not be shared with anyone else.
 - That the participants should understand the nature of the study and what they are participating in, and be in an informed position to consent to participate voluntarily. Consequently, the participants are aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.
 - That I have a responsibility to ensure that I establish rapport and trust with the participants to feel comfortable participating. I should create an environment that is free from hostility.

Hence, this section provides a detailed account of the ethical issues that arise when conducting fieldwork. Below, I have illustrated how ethical problems and dilemmas in this research were addressed concerning Interviews, FGDs and Participant Observation.

4.10.1 Ethical Issues around In-depth Interviews

The issue of obtaining informed consent from children is considered a central dilemma in ethnographic fieldwork. The research participants in this study are primarily young people aged 16 to 18 years old. As a result, it was accompanied by numerous ethical problems and dilemmas. During the ethical approval process, I identified three potential ethical issues that I anticipated encountering during the fieldwork.

- The chances for the data to be significantly affected because informed consents were to be obtained from parents as gatekeepers of the participants.
- Unequal power relations between the students and me as the researcher. Gender differences were a concern, as about 60 per cent of the students were adolescent girls.

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- The potential of causing distress and discomfort to participants because of the sensitivity of the topics discussed in this study

Below, I have provided a detailed illustration of how I responded to these issues.

To start with, Thomas (2023) defined children as 'anyone under 16' (p.48). In that case, one may argue that none of the participants in this study (all of whom were over the age of 16) is a child and does not require a gatekeeper's (parent's) consent. Creane and Broome (2017), on the other hand, argued that adolescent boys and girls have 'demonstrated the ability to understand the essential elements of research'; thus, obtaining informed consent from them for their participation in research is 'valid and important' (p.8). However, I found myself in an ethical dilemma: to obtain informed consent from parents in addition to the one obtained from the students, or to risk the chance that my data might be influenced. For this research, I opted for a three-way consent approach. Consent was obtained from the school for the use of their institution. Second consent was obtained from the students for their participation. Third consent was obtained from the parents where necessary.

Each participant was handed a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) written in English (given that English is the official language in schools). Every effort was made to ensure they had ample time to read, understand, and consider the study and the reasons for their participation in the research. I outlined how the discussions would be conducted and informed them of their right to quit the interview at any point or not answer any question they felt was uncomfortable or did not want to discuss. I asked if they had any questions or comments. This was achieved with an open mind, curiosity, empathy, and flexibility. It is essential to note that consent was not obtained from parents for participants aged 18 years and above.

Secondly, the option to obtain consent from the parents of students between the ages of 16 and 18 was entirely based on the students' decision. One reason for adopting that approach was that some students had moved from their villages, where their parents reside, to a big town for secondary schooling. Hence, most

of these students are living independent lives and taking care of themselves. There were cases of orphans who were also living independently to fend for themselves. Some students were staying with guardians and objected to the idea of their guardians providing consent on their behalf. It is also important to note that the three aforementioned scenarios are predominantly associated with girls. Langhinrichsen-Rohling and colleagues (2006) argued that obtaining informed consent from parents influences students' participation in school-based research. During the university ethical process, I indicated that I was going to adopt a three-way consent process. I also point out backed by research evidence that seeking parental consent has the potential to undermine the research study. I stressed that, given that 16 to 18-year-olds are considered children, consent will be required from their parents. However, I mentioned that in cases where a 16 – 18-year-old participant is living independently or vehemently refuses consent to be sought from their parent or guardian, I will proceed with the interview with 2 consents from the participant and the principal. Similar information was also indicated during the ethical process for the MBSSE. Given that both ethical processes were approved, I assume they were happy for me to drop the parental permission requirement where necessary.

Another ethical concern that existed was the unequal power relationship between the students and me. I was aware that such power relations tended to influence the information provided by the participants (Lahelma et al., 2000; Kutrovatz, 2017). So, I understood I found myself in a powerful position as an adult male researcher because of the disparities that existed between me and the researched participants, such as educational level, gender, SES and age. As Marsh and colleagues suggested, such power inequalities between the researcher and the researched can make the researcher feel intimidated (Marsh et al., 2016). For instance, Kutrovatz argued that due to my position of power and the fact that we live in an adult-centred society,

Participants may try to impress the researcher by providing answers which they believe will be viewed positively. This can significantly influence the data (2017, p. 72).

The above relationship becomes more of a problem because of the sensitivity of the topics factored in the discussion, and the fact that adult men were often the perpetrators of sexual violence among this group. I addressed this ethical concern in two ways. Firstly, I ensured that the students had sufficient information about the nature of the study, as well as their ability to choose whether to participate or not. I provided informed consent because I believed it gave the students the ‘...right to decide about their participation’ (Kutrovatz, 2017, p.73). I noticed that it enhanced comfort and trust among the students, especially the girls. I guaranteed the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the data generated. In addition, I built trust and rapport through the various ‘gatekeepers’ that granted me access. This is important because it provides some form of reassurance to the participants, especially when those I am engaging are young people (Marsh et al., 2017). For instance, Westland et al. (2025) noted that gatekeepers can be overprotective, especially when it involves a sensitive topic that has the potential to cause distress and discomfort to the participants. Therefore, they suggested that a proper engagement with the gatekeepers be undertaken and a suitable introduction to the studied sensitive topic be provided. This, they argue, would allow gatekeepers to grant the researcher access to the participants, as well as provide reassurances and comfort to the participants, enabling them to participate freely. The above argument is consistent with the procedures I undertook in this study, as illustrated in section 4.3.

During the interviews, I was mindful and sensitive to any sign of discomfort or distress. To alleviate some of their fears, I tried to reassure them and informed them about their rights to discontinue or take a break at any given time without reason. Although no incident was experienced during the study, I was still cognisant of the consequences of power inequalities between myself and the girls, as well as the topics discussed. This strategy mitigated power inequalities and gender differences by enhancing the empowerment of students.

One more important ethical concern I had to deal with as a male researcher was engaging girls in sensitive topics around FGM, child marriage, and gender/sexual violence. There would be an understandable reticence for them to open up or worry about how data might be used. Firstly, I acknowledge that some of the

topics or subjects discussed in this study are sensitive, and I was dealing with mostly adolescent girls. So, I understood that it brings greater responsibility and challenges, and I understood that I cannot absolutely alleviate these concerns. Therefore, I tried to minimise the risk associated with their physical and mental well-being. I tried to navigate through this sensitive and complex situation by making practical choices to address both anticipated and unanticipated ethical concerns related to this. One such practical choice was adopting the reflexivity approach. Firstly, studies such as Rix et al. (2014) and Marsh et al. (2017) have demonstrated that an approach is necessary to mitigate power inequalities, class, and cultural differences that may arise between the researcher and the researched. Secondly, it has been proven effective in mitigating issues that may arise when researching sensitive topics with vulnerable groups, such as girls. This is because it requires me to examine my 'attitude, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudice, and customary actions' (Doyle 2007, cited in Marsh et al. 2017, p.68). In addition, the reflexive approach allows me to explore myself, my experiences, and biases, and reflect on my relationship with the research participants. Therefore, Cunliffe (2010) suggested that to adopt a reflexive stance, one needs to look beyond oneself and attempt to understand one's influence on the outcome of the research data. As a result, I did not allow my preconceived ideas to cloud my sense of reasoning. So, I was open-minded to new ideas and information. I maintained positive body language, i.e. smiling and sitting in a relaxed position. I avoided showing surprise or shock expressions.

4.10.2 Ethical Issues around Participant Observation

One prominent ethical issue I encountered was obtaining informed consent from the participants being observed. Newby (2010) noted that it is unrealistic to obtain informed consent from a large group of participants in a setting such as a school. Observing pupils in school is like observing shoppers in a shopping centre, thus making it very unrealistic (Newby, 2010). However, I ensured that consent was obtained from the same participants for the interviews, FGD and observation, and I also obtained consent from the principals who are the gatekeepers of the schools. Although the observation was done in classrooms and social activity

areas, I focused on participants who had already participated in the interviews and FGDs and consented to all three research methods. However, to mitigate ethical issues surrounding the obtaining of consent for all pupils in the school, I adopted a strategy of not identifying individual participants in the data collected during the observations. Anderson and Corneli (2018) argued that informed consent is not required when individual participants are not identifiable in the data collected. As a result, I tried not to engage in discussions that would elicit identifiable responses. The observations were entirely based on the actions and inactions of pupils in classrooms and social activity areas. According to Li (2008), this strategy poses minimal risks to the anonymous informants (p. 103).

An ethical issue I encountered that I did not fully anticipate was the change in behaviour of the observed participants, as they believed they had been watched. The initial disclosure of my research immediately raised suspicious thoughts in the participants, resulting in changes in social relationships and behaviour, such as distrust and acting out. These changes in social relationships and behaviour, I knew, had the potential to influence the data collected, rendering it invalid in a negative way. I could not have adopted a covert observation approach, which some researchers argued reduces the chances of individuals not changing their behaviour. The covert observation method is deceptive, as it invades participants' private spaces and is conducted without their consent. Moreover, Newby argued that even if a covert observation was adopted and the researcher decided not to be actively involved in the social activities of the observed participants, '...by just being there...can affect what happens' (2010, p.380). Therefore, I adopted an overt observation approach, because there was always a possibility that I might affect the behaviours of the observed. Thus, I presented myself as the researcher and explained the research objective to the participants being observed. How did I mitigate this ethical dilemma? Firstly, by leveraging the rapport I had established with the participants. I reassured them that they were not being spied on and that their privacy and anonymity were protected, and that the data collected was highly confidential. I stressed the need for them not to change their behaviours and characters. I was able to employ a naturalistic observational technique that

allowed me to observe and document detailed, contextualised data on classroom and social activities of pupils, while mitigating key ethical issues.

4.10.3 Ethical Issues around Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in this research

FGDs in this study provided a wide range of data, allowing me to explore and understand new issues. However, like any other ethnographic research, this qualitative method presented ethical dilemmas that threatened the validity and reliability of the data collected. Two key ethical issues were faced in the field: ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected and minimising the risk of harm to the participants and myself. One ethical dilemma I encountered was my inability to guarantee the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected. I realised that I did not have control over what participants may subsequently disclose outside the group discussion. It is argued that there is a high possibility that the confidentiality of data can be compromised because anonymity is not assured. This is a result of the possibility of an individual disclosing personal information that was discussed with a third party (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). To mitigate the risk, I limited the individual disclosure of personal information, especially sensitive topics, in cases where the ground rule on this was not adhered to. For instance, during a discussion around the sex for grades topic, one of the girls wanted to narrate a personal incident, and I interjected and responded,

'Blue, I believe you have already narrated this incident to me during the interview. Could you please make your contribution without this information?'

The above remarks illustrate my prompt response to discourage participants from disclosing personal information. Additionally, due to my inability to control what participants may subsequently disclose to third parties, the potential risk of harm to some participants was also an ethical concern. Warwick (1982) argued that a lack of assured anonymity and guaranteed confidentiality may result in social, physical or psychological harm to some group participants. Personal information subsequently disclosed by another group member to a third party:

'May lead to embarrassment, shame, stigmatisation, discrimination, disruption of existing social relationships, or adverse employment consequences, and in some cases, participants may face legal action as a result of information that is made public' (Warwick 1982, cited in Sim and Waterfield 2019, p.3011).

As already stated, I minimised this risk by limiting the disclosure of personal information. Lastly, obtaining informed consent is a central ethical concern in FGD research. Sim and Waterfield noted that issues of consent in FGDs arise due to the degree of disclosure made in front of their peers. Thus, the importance of obtaining informed consent is stressed because participants find themselves in a vulnerable situation, as they are not only persuaded by skilled facilitators to disclose intimate views but also to do so in front of peers (Green and Hart 1999: p. 31). To ensure that every participant consented and felt confident participating in the group discussions, I emphasised their right to revoke their consent at any point during the discussions. Meaning they can withdraw their participation without providing any reason. To ensure some level of anonymity, I have omitted any information that could potentially link or identify participants.

4.11 Data Analysis

4.11.1 Data Organisation, Transcription and Management

The data collected took the form of words through interviews and FGDs, and the reflections on behaviour through naturalistic observation and interpretation of actions, inactions, and physical appearances. At the beginning of data analysis, I felt completely overwhelmed with the various sources of data generated. I had transcripts from a large volume of audio recordings, field notes and handwritten notes to capture observations. One strategy that likely helped me navigate this was effective data management. The Lancaster University OneDrive was used to store data in an organised way. For example, the list of speakers for each audio recording was saved using pseudonyms such as Girl 1, Boy 1, or Woman Teacher 1 (WT1), and so on. The observations were organised by numbers, such as OoS 1 or OoS, which referred to out-of-school girls.

The data transcription process took me by surprise, although I was expecting some interviews to be conducted in Krio. I had hoped it would account for only 20 per cent of the interviews. However, it turned out that 80 per cent of the interviews were conducted in Krio. This created extra work for me to translate and transcribe the exact words or meanings in English. For instance, when asked about her experience in terms of challenges during her time as class prefect, Girl 4 stated

“Wae ar write posin ihn name bcus dem mak noise na class, some of dem dae treaten me say den go beat me wae we off frm skul”

I then had to rewrite it in English as follows.

‘When I write someone’s name because they are making noise in class, some of them will threaten that they will beat me after school.’

This process was time-consuming and painstaking (a minimum of a 25-minute interview took about 5 hours to transcribe). It is important to note that because I was personally responsible for transcribing the data and transforming it from English to Krio, it allowed me to engage with data, an insight into the meaning and structure of the data, as well as extract information that addresses the research questions (Braun et al., 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Therefore, I employed a mixed approach of summarising and interpreting issues highlighted by individuals and groups interviewed, as well as capturing the exact words of individuals verbatim. I concur with Ball (1990) and Bowe et al. (1992) that using a lot of verbatim data ‘can be immensely rich in data and detail’ (cited in Cohen et al. 2011, p.559). I sought to organise and analyse the data using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) tools. For instance, Microsoft Word was used mainly to transcribe audio files. The transcripts were then exported to NVivo for efficient data analysis, including the creation of nodes and codes. In using NVivo, I employed manual coding. A list of nodes (themes) was compiled, followed by corresponding codes (data). It is essential to note that I undertook a systematic process of refinement to link the codes to the overarching themes (see the section below on theme development). This was done mainly by comparing the coded data and categorising the nodes

to establish the similarity of characteristics that could be grouped. I must also point out that the themes of this research were not entirely predetermined but rather emerged from my engagement with the data. Establishing standard features in codes on NVivo facilitated the creation of a category array, also known as themes, in this research. However, I ensured that individual responses were quoted verbatim across themes, while also attempting to summarise some issues from various accounts to limit the amount of verbatim data (Cohen et al., 2011). I was mindful of identifying individuals to their exact responses because, as argued by Newby, it is important to be 'faithful to the exact words used' by the participants (p.539)

4.11.2 Coding and Development of Themes for Analysis

The purpose of the data analysis exercise is to make sense of the generated data and, thus, translate it into the information needed to answer my research questions in this study (Cohen et al., 2011). Hence, I embarked on filtering the data generated using processes (generic and specific approaches) that produced information that addresses the research problem. One such approach adopted in this study is Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2013, and 2019) reflexive thematic analysis. This is because, in my interpretive process of making meaning from the data generated, I was 'creative, reflexive and subjective' in my thought process (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591). In the interpretive process, I constantly reflected on my positionality as a Sierra Leonean, my preconceived ideas (stemming from my research questions), my personal biases, and my experiences in shaping how the data were interpreted. I did not allow the data to speak for itself entirely (Borg & Gall, 1997). I agree with Braun and Clarke's (2019) argument that self-awareness is a strength because it provides a richer understanding of the underlying themes as well as considers the participant's experiences.

As I reflect on making meaning from the data generated, I have considered how my research questions relate to the themes and how each theme or category contributes to answering these questions.

Additionally, during the coding process, I took into consideration Silverman's (2000) four-point approach, which includes coding (attaching meaning to the data by labelling it), keeping memos (noting new information and ideas while coding), abstracting data, and comparing data. This process proved helpful for me because I was able to formulate what Strauss and Corbin (1990) referred to as 'categories'. Hence, themes were generated through 'patterns of shared meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.591). For example, issues mentioned regarding violence in school I categorised as 'Intersecting gendered violence', whereas specific violence related to canning or unsolicited touching I sub-categorised as 'corporal punishment' and 'sexual violence' respectively. This process resonates with Braun and Clarke's (2013) and Braun et al.'s (2014) notion of 'central organising concept'. A concept aimed at capturing the 'diversity of meaning in relation to a topic', formulated under a broader meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.594).

The analysis of this research is grounded in the data generated. Although this study is not grounded in Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory, the data generated and analysed are inductive. By inductive, I mean the coding process is '...rooted in what the data is telling...' me (Cohen et al., 2011, p.488). For instance, using NVivo, I tagged the data with code names, mapped out nodes (themes) and better established an interrelation between the data generated and the codes and themes created. Below is a sample of how I tagged the data code names for participant observations;

Classroom Activity Codes

- Classroom talk (verbal behaviour and interactions)
- Teacher-student interactions (verbal and physical behaviour and interactions – positive, negative, gender affirming)
- Student–student interactions (verbal and physical behaviour and interactions – positive, negative)
- Use of classroom space and time

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- Space and sitting arrangements
 - Student classroom activities (pairing and grouping; disruption in the classroom and tasks)
 - Teacher classroom activities (position in the class, voice, feedback, use of questions, and teacher talk time)

Extra Curricular Activity Codes

- Use of play space (free play)
- Participation
- Parallel play (social class dynamics; gender dynamics)

Reactional Codes

- Verbal (Positive, negative, and neutral talks)
- Non-verbal (cooperative, non-cooperative and social involvement – students who stood out/drew much attention)

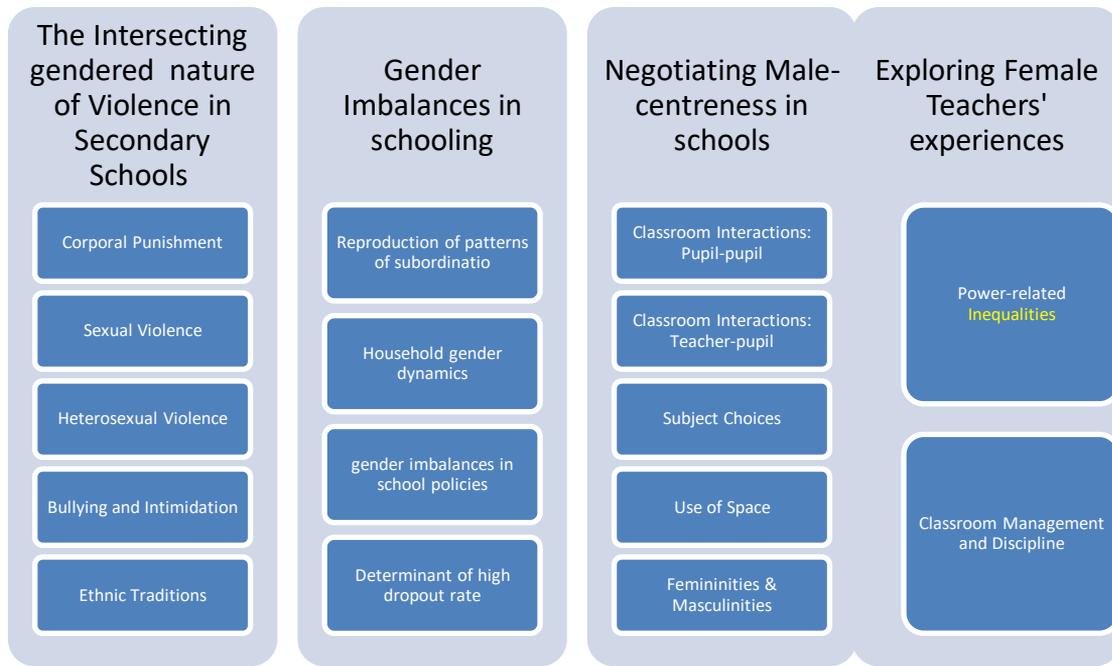
In analysing the observation data (observation notes and sheets), I employed an inductive approach, i.e., constructing meanings attributed to the actions and inactions of individuals (Cohen et al., 2011). For instance, I attempted to interpret the meaning of classroom interactions between teachers and students by reflecting on what they did or failed to do in the classroom. Hence, observation sheets were analysed based on events that occurred.

One key question I kept asking myself while thinking through my data was ‘Where does the intersectional theoretical framework fit in this analysis?’. This question guided my interpretation and analysis of the data.

The figure below shows a table of coding and sub-coding of themes done using NVivo. It also illustrates the data analysis process I undertook in selecting the qualitative themes and sub-themes of this study. This figure also illustrates the

interrelationships between themes, with some sub-themes indicating a flow from one to another.

Figure 6: A table of qualitative themes and subthemes



4.12 Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, I have provided the qualitative methodology used to explore the research questions of this study. I have also outlined the qualitative research tools used to collect data. I have outlined the potential ethical issues I envisaged and how I addressed them. I have used this chapter to outline the coding and thematic analysis approaches adopted to make sense of the data, which are further elaborated upon in the four subsequent analytical chapters.

Chapter 5: The Intersecting Analysis of the Gendered Nature of Violence in Secondary Schools in Post-conflict Sierra Leone

5.1 Introduction

This is the first of four analytic chapters. In this chapter, I will explore how school-related violence has exacerbated intersecting inequalities in secondary schools, thereby contributing to the production of differential schooling experiences and learning outcomes for girls in post-conflict Sierra Leone. In the following chapter, I will examine how negotiating male-centredness in classrooms influences girls' learning, followed by another chapter that explores the gender dynamics in schools. In the final chapter, I will examine the experiences of women teachers in schools.

Violence in school is a process to sustain gender inequalities (Leach, 2015). The importance of gender analyses of violence in schools as social institutions cannot be overemphasised. Violence in schools, as referred to in this study, is a 'intersectional, multifaceted and complex global phenomenon that impedes gender equality and transformation, disrupts learner progress' (Mulqueeny et al., 2020, p. 2). Recent studies have highlighted the prevalence of gender violence in schools, and they often tend to focus on the gendered nature of violence and its impact on girls' learning outcomes (Leach & Machakanja, 2000; Leach et al., 2002; Dunne et al., 2006; Leach & Humphreys, 2007; Humphreys, 2008; Leach, 2015; Altinyelkan & Le Mat, 2018; Evans et al., 2023). However, minimal research, such as Unterhalter (2020), and Conteh et al. (2021), has attempted to explore the intersection of identities in everyday school practice in the Sub-Saharan Africa context. Therefore, I have employed an intersectional lens to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social identities in schools and an analytical framework to examine the interplay of these identities in sustaining and promoting school-related violence within an educational context. The discourse on the intersecting gendered nature of violence in secondary schooling in Sierra Leone provides a substantive insight into girls' school experiences. It is important to point out that all forms of gender violence mentioned during the interviews are based on gender relations. Therefore, the term 'gender violence'

is used in this study to acknowledge the fact that all forms of violence in the school are gendered (Dunne et al., 2005; Dunne et al., 2006; Leach & Humphreys, 2007; Reilly, 2014; DCI 2015; Dunne et. al, 2021; Unterhalter et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2023). For this research, gender violence constitutes physical harm, verbal and physical harassment, sexual acts, coercion and transactional relations, bullying and intimidation, and psychological/emotional abuse (Ibid).

It is essential to note that, although the GBV concept has been predominantly used in this study, the Gender-Related Violence (GRV) concept by Alldred, (2013); Alldred & Biglia (2015); Fox & Alldred (2022); Cooper-Levitan & Alldred, (2022); Alldred (2023) was also considered. This is because, unlike Gender Based Violence (GBV), which explores gender inequality in relation to any form of violence against women and girls (VAWG), GRV explores GBV as well as multiple forms beyond the gender binary and norms. Like this study, GRV also explores intersecting inequalities of gender and sexuality (Ibid). However, the GBV concept was adopted more fully in this study because my focus was to look at violence against women and girls. Like GRV, this study addresses issues affecting women and girls beyond gender; however, given that Sierra Leone is a highly heteronormative society where LGBTI+ practice is illegal, and rights are not recognised, the case study schools practice heteronormativity, where it was highly less likely for homophobia to be problematised because it is seen as a practice that does not conform to the acceptable norms. Taking into consideration the context, the concept of GRV was not fully helpful in this study because, as noted by Alldred (2023), the GRV concept ‘can make a valuable intervention...’ in a context where VAWG and homophobia are both problematised (p.1).

This study, like Concern Worldwide (2010) and Conteh et al. (2021), has shown that gender-based violence in Sierra Leone does not operate in isolation; it has always had complex ways of interacting with other social inequalities like social class, sexuality, ethnic traditions and location that have continued to perpetuate gender-differentiated schooling experiences and learning outcomes. Therefore, my data (see chapter 5.2) suggest that the issues of violence in secondary schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone go beyond just gender relations but rather interact in complex ways with other social identities to influence girls’ schooling

experience and learning outcomes negatively. Thus, I argue that although all secondary schooling girls in post-conflict Sierra Leone are vulnerable to all forms of school-related violence, due to interrelated factors like economic status, location, sexuality and ethnic-tradition, some girls are more vulnerable than others. My argument aligns with Concern Worldwide's (2010) and Pai's (2024) findings in Sierra Leone, which revealed that economically disadvantaged girls were more likely to drop out of school or attend irregularly due to financial constraints. Similarly, Dejaeghere and Miske's findings in Vietnam also revealed that most secondary school dropouts are girls and that they mostly '...tend to live in rural areas and come from low-income families (2009, p.146). In addition, a recent study by Unterhalter and colleagues (2020) and Evans and colleagues (2023) in Africa revealed stark differences in school attendance between girls from poor rural households and boys from the same households as well as their peers in urban areas due differential levels of household work such as fetching water and fuel, cooking, assisting their mothers and caring for their little ones.

As mentioned by Sardar (1998), using a single-axis gender relations framework to explore school-related violence might be construed as a decision from more important social justice issues (cited in Dunne et al., p.77)

A recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on violence against children identified violence in school as a global issue that needs to be addressed (2024). To achieve quality education as stipulated in the SDG, there is a need to improve the learning conditions (Ibid). The school, as a social institution, should be a safe, violence-free, and conducive learning environment. Reilly (2014) suggested that, in addition to 'the curriculum, learning opportunities and outcomes, teaching and teachers', there is a need for child-friendly environments that are safe, violence-free and conducive for learning for all children irrespective of gender, class or location (p.14).

However, schools in Sierra Leone are not immune to gendered violence. Girls are systematically targeted as a strategy to subjugate them to male dominance (Bernes et al., 2007; Maclure & Denov, 2009). For instance, Maclure and Denov (2009) suggested that gendered violence in post-conflict Sierra Leone schools is

because of 'the lingering militarised masculinity induced by the civil war (p.616). Hence, Elkhaili and Sempijja (2025) suggested that the conflict in Sierra Leone has shaped the minds of boys to feel often the need to perform violent masculinities to meet social expectations, which often tend to complicate their interactions with girls. To a large extent, I may want to agree with them, although it is over two decades since the end of the war and little or none of the current enrolled secondary pupils participated in or experienced the war; I agree that the conflict instilled violent attitude and behaviour in their fathers and some male teachers who frequently commit gendered violence as a form of exercising their masculinity authority (Elkhaili & Sempijja, 2025). Boys tend to act the same way because they think it is normal behaviour. Thus, I argue that to better understand the impact of school-related violence on girls' learning outcomes, we must move beyond a simplistic and single-framed analysis of the issues and adopt an interrelated approach that evaluates the multiplicities of people's circumstances (Tefera et al., 2018).

Existing scholarly literature on how the intersectionality of gender, class, sexuality and location has sustained and promoted violence in secondary schools in Sierra Leone is very limited. Leach's (2005) study, "The Schooling of Girls in Early 19th Century Sierra Leone," employs an intersectional lens to demonstrate how poverty and ethnic traditions intersect with and perpetuate gender inequality in secondary schools. Her research fell short in terms of exploring other variables like location and sexuality, as well as a lack of focus on the everyday experiences of girls. What this thesis has done is to use the data generated to demonstrate how the interaction of gender and other identities has established a gendered nature of violence in secondary school, thereby influencing girls' schooling experience and learning outcomes. This argument is reiterated by Leach (2015), who mentioned that the intersection of gender and other identities creates complex and deeply rooted patterns of violence in schools (p.32). Research undertaken by Sperandio and Kagoda in Uganda also suggested that the secondary school environment can be both unsafe and unfriendly for girls because of the 'risks presented by male teachers and classmates' (2009, p.110).

This chapter is linked to research question 1 (RQ1): *How are schooling experiences and outcomes differentiated by gender, ethnic traditions, SES, sexuality, and region in post-conflict Sierra Leone?*

As such, this chapter addresses the sub-questions to contribute to providing answers to RQ1,

- *How are school-related violence experiences differentiated by gender, ethnic traditions, class, and location in Sierra Leone?*
- *What role does school-related violence play in limiting girls' classroom participation, interaction, and performance in secondary education in Sierra Leone?*

To answer the above questions and illustrate how they contributed to the overarching research question (RQ1), I have covered this chapter focusing on the following:

- The discourse on the gendered nature of violence in secondary schooling and its effect on girls' school experiences
- The various forms of violence in school
- The interplay of gender and other identities in exacerbating violence in school.

5.2 The Differentiation of School-Related Violence Experiences by Gender, Ethnic Traditions, Class, and Location in Sierra Leone

5.2.1 Introduction

The findings of this study have corroborated the argument that secondary schools are an unsafe learning environment, especially for girls. For instance, in one of the interviews, I asked a female teacher whether, based on her

experience, she thinks the school is a safe environment for girls, and she responded:

FT 1: *No, I do not think so.*

Researcher: *Why is that?*

FT 1: *Because of the disruption, harassment, violence, intimidation, bullying and provocation caused by the boys, in some cases, male teachers.*

The school is seen as a site where knowledge is discovered, and learners internalise knowledge for individual development. However, the school structures and practices have facilitated the performance of masculinities and femininities that are regulated and negotiated to reproduce gender regimes that normalise school-related violence (Dunne et al., 2005; Connell, 2006; Humphreys, 2008). I agree with Liu (2006) that the school reflects the wider socio-cultural aspects of society. Thus, societal practices and behaviours influence individual acts and inactions in schools. This is because 'schools do not exist in a vacuum' (Liu, 2006, p.426). Findings from my interviews, FGDs and observations revealed that wider patriarchal norms have dedicated gender relations in everyday schooling practice. For example, when asked how she deals with the issues of violence against girls in school, a Junior Secondary School (JSS) woman teacher responded;

"I do try to talk to them (the girls); I sometimes feel my authority in the class is undermined because I am a woman teacher. Unfortunately, there are few female teachers, and the male teachers seem to overlook the actions of some of the boys. They have tried to normalise it".

The above remarks show the school reflects the patriarchal structure of Sierra Leone communities, where women's authority is limited or subjugated, while male authority is seen as supreme authority. The above also shows how little or no actions are taken to address school-related violence against girls because it has been normalised (Sharkey, 2008; Parkes & Heslop, 2011). Sharkey (2008) in her study described schooling in Sierra Leone as a 'site of an ethos of punishment and violence against girls' (p.576). Thus, Paechter (2002) suggested that male teachers tolerate these acts of violence because they believe in the

notion of girls and women to be the 'sexual others'. The experiences of girls' schooling are affected by the intersection of other social markers that have created unequal gendered experiences in the school environment. It is reported that the classroom and public spaces are used by boys and male teachers as a site for verbal and physical harassment, especially targeting girls from poor rural households. Therefore, I have illustrated how the interaction of identities is facilitating differentiated school-related violence.

Leach and Humphreys (2007) argued that the gendered nature of violence in school is because of 'unequal and antagonistic gender relations which are tolerated and normalised by everyday school structures and processes' (p.1). On that note, I posit that the school as a social institution has been characterised by asymmetrical power relations that have normalised violence, especially against girls. Moreover, because of the asymmetric power relations that exist in secondary schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone, school-related violence is perpetuated through interrelating factors of gender relations, socio-economic status, location, sexuality and ethnic-traditions (Dunne et al., 2006; Denov & Maclure, 2006; Bernes et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2023). For clarity, I have used the term gender violence because, as mentioned earlier, this study posits that all school-related violence is gendered. In one of my focus group discussions with five girls from one of the case study schools, I attempted to enquire about their perspective on the link between violence and girls' attainment in school. Below are some of their responses, which provide insight into how interrelated factors contribute to girls' dropping out of school, thereby limiting their educational outcomes.

Researcher: What will you say contributes to girls' school drop-out?

FGD1G4: Poverty, which leads to early marriage. Some girls who cannot afford extra school expenses or whose families struggle to make ends meet often give their daughters to an older man who can provide financial support for the family. These girls are likely to drop out of school.

FGD1G3: I agree with speaker 4. I want to add that FGM also pave the way for early marriage, which leads to school dropout. Most families see a girl who has been initiated as ready for marriage and motherhood, and as a result, they welcome bride price from financially strong men. I will say girls from the villages who are poor are mostly vulnerable to these issues.

FGD1G1: Maybe I will add that girls who want financial and academic benefits fall prey to male teachers, okada guys and order men, who will get them pregnant. They will then drop out of school as a result.

The above quotes exemplify the different kinds of violence, such as sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, FGM and child marriage. A study by Parkes and Heslop (2011) in three African countries suggested that girls face an array of violence in secondary schools, such as harassment, sexual advances, exploitation and corporal punishment. Hence, Evans et al. 2023 argue that one of the reasons for girls' limited school attendance is their exposure to forms of violence from teachers and their peers.

To better understand the gendered nature of school-related violence and how it intersects with other social identities to influence girls' secondary schooling experiences and learning outcomes negatively, this chapter explores the practices of corporal punishment, the experiences of sexual violence, bullying and intimidation and socio-cultural practices

5.2.2 Corporal Punishment as an Intersecting Gendered

Practice

The discourse surrounding corporal punishment in secondary schools has primarily focused on its impediment to human rights advancement within the school environment (UNICEF, 2014, 2024; Lakot et al., 2020; Cuartas, 2022). Much of the research has focused on mapping the human rights violations associated with the practice against pupils (Humphreys, 2008). Researchers such as Leach (2003), Dunne et al. (2006), Leach and Humphreys (2007),

Lansford et al. (2016), and Lokot et al. (2020) have demonstrated that corporal punishment is a form of violence used by teachers to discipline students. In addition, existing literature has also argued for the discourse around corporal punishment to go beyond human rights violations, but rather how it is gendered. Researchers like Humphreys (2008) have argued that corporal punishment is a gendered practice geared towards exercising the performance of masculine authority. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines corporal punishment as “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light” (UNCRC 2006, para 11). Straus (1994) defined it as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for correction or control of the child’s behaviour” (p. 4). In this study, corporal punishment refers to ‘any form of physical and/or psychological punishment used against children in the home or school environment’ (Lokot et al., 2020). To elaborate on the gendered nature of corporal punishment as a form of physical violence pupils experience, I have stated the following argument;

Firstly, I acknowledge corporal punishment is an act of school-related violence used by teachers to enforce discipline. Thus, a human right violation of pupils within the school environment (UNICEF, 2014). Secondly, I acknowledge the argument that boys are more susceptible to corporal punishment than girls. However, this study aims to look beyond the traditional notion of corporal punishment as a mechanism for enforcing discipline. I also agree with Humphreys (2008) that corporal punishment is a gendered practice that facilitates male masculine authority within the school environment. However, an important nuance put forward by this research based on its findings is that corporal punishment is a gendered practice that intersects with other identities like sexuality, class and location to constrain girls’ learning experiences and outcomes. Thus, this study goes beyond the argument of corporal punishment as a human right issue, a gendered practice, and its presumed traditional aim of enforcing discipline, but rather an intersecting gendered practice that certainly negatively influences girls’ educational outcomes. By this I mean, the practice is influenced by the intersection of gender, class, sexuality and location and has

further constrained girls' learning experiences and outcomes. For instance, Humphreys suggested a link between corporal punishment and the regulation of girls' sexuality. She argued that the practice has been used to regulate girls' perceived sexual activities (2008, p.528). Fiona Leach (2003) also suggested that corporal punishment and sexual abuse are linked. She stated that;

“a girl who grants sexual favours to a teacher will expect to avoid being beaten, whereas a girl who has turned a teacher down might risk being singled out for beating or other forms of victimisation” (p.389).

In addition to both arguments on the interplay between gender and sexuality, the findings from my research also revealed that poverty and location play a key role in the application of corporal punishment (Parkes, 2015). Evidence from this research has shown that girls from urban, wealthy households are less likely to be targeted for sexual favours using corporal punishment because some of the male teachers receive financial favours from the parents of the girls. On the contrary, girls from poor rural households are more likely to be swayed by the threat of corporal punishment and give in to the sexual advances from these teachers (Concern Worldwide 2010). Some of the girls seize the opportunity as a guarantee of protection from unfair corporal punishment, as well as financial and academic favours (Ibid.). For example, Girl 9, in her responses to my enquiry of how male teachers abuse the practice, stated;

“A very close friend of mine, who shares the same seat in the class, had serious issues with a teacher whom she broke up with. The teacher asked her out, and due to her parents' financial situation, she accepted. After a while, she decided to cut ties with this teacher. The teacher entered the classroom and mercilessly beat her in front of everyone without any reason. She was humiliated. Since then, she stopped attending that teacher's classes. Her participation in class became very limited”

The above exemplifies so much - coercion, sexual violence against a girl, physical violence and the fragile male ego. This finding is consistent with those from Concern Worldwide (2010), Hui et al.'s (2018) studies in Sierra Leone, and Parkes and Heslop's (2011) findings in three African countries. They all agreed that girls face violence perpetrated by male pupils and teachers. For instance, Parkes and Heslop (2011) noted that girls are faced with sexual harassment and exploitation (sex for grades or financial assistance) from male teachers. As a

result of the above, Leach (2003) suggested that money plays a key role in sexual relationships between girls and male teachers. The example above buttresses my argument that the intersection of gender, class, sexuality and location makes girls more vulnerable to corporal punishment.

Similarly, when asked what she dislikes about her school and what causes absenteeism among girls in her class, Girl 13 stated:

“The caning. The teachers here, especially the male teachers, often beat us. Secondly, they threaten to beat us a lot if we do not accept their sexual advances. This has caused some students, especially girls, to be absent from school”

The above remarks show that male teachers widely use caning (corporal punishment) as a pretext to exercise forms of control and coercion (UNICEF, 2024). This is reiterated by Dunne, who noted that in Botswana and Ghana, corporal punishment was used as a replay of male teachers’ ‘...physicality to masculinities’ (2007, p.508). In addition, Holdsock (1990) suggested that the practice has been used for sexual gratification by male teachers. Thus, this research argues that male teachers use corporal punishment, which is part of daily school practice, to engage in routine bullying and intimidation of girls, especially girls from poor rural households who may want to stand against their sexual advances (Devine et al., 2023).

It is essential to note that the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act 2023, Part 9 (72) of Sierra Leone, clearly prohibits all school staff members from engaging in or threatening to administer corporal punishment and all forms of degrading punishment (GoSL, 2020). However, evidence from interviews and observations in this study has shown that most staff members, especially male staff members in the case study schools, engaged in and/or threatened to use corporal punishment. See below my discussion with one of the girls interviewed.

Researcher: What is it about this school you dislike?

Girl 14: I will say beating. The teachers, especially the male teachers, often beat us.

Researcher: Why do you think they beat you guys a lot

Girl 14: Sometimes, because we come to school late. However, for some of us, the girls, we are targeted by certain male teachers because we may have rejected their sexual advances. They will beat us for the slightest thing you do

The above remarks give a snippet of the intersecting gendered nature of corporal punishment in secondary schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone. The evidence above demonstrates how gender intersects with sexuality to reinforce gender violence in school and its implications on girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes (heterosexuality being literally disciplined) (McClanahan, 2015). Humphreys (2008) noted that corporal punishment is geared towards the regulation of girls' sexuality. It has emerged as 'crucial determinants of classroom behaviour and constraints on learning' (Humphreys, 2008, p.530).

Corporal punishment is a significant influencer of classroom behaviours and participation for pupils, especially girls. It is reported that its applicability instils fear of being beaten or humiliated, thus deterring most girls from contributing to classroom discourse (Humphreys, 2008). Evidence from my interviews and observations revealed that everyday school practices (gender regimes) like corporal punishment work in ways that deter girls from voluntarily contributing to classroom discourse. The fear of being beaten or humiliated negatively influenced girls' classroom participation and affected their level of confidence. This is consistent with Cuartas's (2022) argument that 'corporal punishment relates to an array of detrimental learning outcomes that often result in behavioural problems and cognitive inabilities.

When asked about the effect of corporal punishment on their schooling, Girl 2 replied

"It affects us a lot. It reduces our participation in the class. It presents an opportunity for the boys to assume control over the class because they think they are the brightest students".

Similarly, Girl 12 noted that the threat of corporal punishment makes some girls stay away from school. These remarks are supported by Humphreys, who argued that the practice hinders girls' voluntary participation in the classroom because of the '...fear of being beaten' (2008, p.537). She reported that the practice has

constrained girls' learning opportunities and has maintained a '...masculine authoritarian disciplinary system' (Ibid). In addition, I noticed during the observation that the practice was used to monitor and regulate students' behaviour. Those perceived to have deviated from established norms are punished. It is seen as a mechanism to correct behaviour and instil discipline. In this way, corporal punishment is used as a very overt and direct means of policing behaviours (Leach & Humphreys, 2007).

Evidence has shown that targeted bullying and intimidation of poor rural girls has caused limited participation and poor performance among them, which has resulted in adverse educational outcomes. My argument is that although corporal punishment is sanctioned in Sierra Leone schools, it has been abused by male teachers to seek sexual favours from girls. The example below with Girl 3 further buttresses my above-mentioned argument that the practice has been used to bully and intimidate girls who reject their sexual advances

Researcher: *Can you share your experience of any case related to sexual harassment and advance*

Girl 3: *In my current class, there is this girl whom a teacher approached for a sexual relationship, and she refused. Every time that teacher enters the class, he will cane that girl or ask her to leave.*

Researcher: *Is this common practice in this school? If yes, how does it affect the girls?*

Girl 3: *Yes, it is common, and it does affect girls a lot. They (male teachers) usually target girls from the villages. As I mentioned in the case, the girl has been missing classes due to the teacher's actions.*

Researcher: *Are you saying the act of sexual harassment, advances and relationships with male teachers affects mostly girls from poor households and the village?*

Girl 3: *Yes. Male teachers are predominantly targeting girls who cannot afford lunch in school and are from the villages. They realise they are highly vulnerable to attack.*

As these quotations suggest, some male teachers have been involved in unnecessarily beating and humiliating girls in the classroom because they

refused their sexual advances. As reported by many of the girls interviewed, these acts have caused depression, anxiety, fear and disinterest in continuing schooling among girls. It is important to point out that some of these girls were born from sexual violence, such as rape, during the civil war. Their mothers were ostracised, stigmatised and shamed by their families and communities because they became pregnant by the rebels and became 'rebel wives' (International Alert, 2007). For instance, Girl 19 mentioned that she does not want to suffer the same fate as her mother, who suffered sexual abuse during the war and was stigmatised and marginalised by her family and the community. Thus, fears that routine sexual harassment and advances from boys and male teachers have left her worried about the safety of the school environment.

In addition, it was reported that boys, through the everyday practice of the prefect monitoring system, unfairly reported girls for wrongdoing to teachers because they rejected their sexual advances. This is consistent with the behaviour of male teachers seeking sexual favours. So, I would say that this is about boys learning behavioural norms from their male teachers and reproducing these. For instance, Girl 9 and Girl 10 stated that some boys who are class monitors tend to use their position to ask for a sexual relationship or threaten to report to a male teacher for caning. Aside from physical punishment, it was reported and observed that teachers used verbal punishment to discipline students. Humphreys noted that female teachers were '...more likely to use verbal reprimands or abuse' (2008, p.534). I agree with Humphreys' argument; however, based on my observation, verbal punishment was used by female teachers as an alternative to physical punishment against male students, who most often resist corporal punishment from female teachers. The position of this study goes beyond female teachers' use of verbal punishment, but rather the unfair application of verbal punishment by male teachers to question girls' self-esteem and how it affects their level of confidence to participate in class. For instance, I asked Girl 5 the question, "Why do you think girls in your class are not participating in class at the same level as the boys?" and she replied.

"For me, I think it is the way the teachers relate and teach in the classroom. Most of the time, their tone of voice towards girls is not appropriate."

Especially, if you are a girl who has refused a male teacher's sexual advances, and you failed to answer his question in class. He will use demeaning language towards you while the boys laugh".

The remarks above revealed that teachers, especially male teachers, have used corporal punishment as a form of retribution against girls who refused their sexual advances. Hence, Humphreys argued that the practice has constrained girls' learning opportunities and has also maintained '...a masculine authoritarian disciplinary system' (537). For instance, when asked what the repercussions they faced in cases where they vehemently refused sexual advances from male teachers, all the girls reported unnecessary caning, name-calling, belittling and insults.

Another downside of male teachers' use of corporal punishment as a mechanism to enforce discipline in school, based on the findings of this research, is that it has caused discord between boys and girls in class, resulting in bullying, intimidation and sometimes physical attack from boys against girls (Leach & Humphreys, 2007). The evidence from this research noted that male teachers disproportionately caned some boys because they are perceived as rivals to girls. This resonates with Dunne's findings in Botswana and Ghana, where boys felt girls were given preferential treatment when it comes to corporal punishment by male teachers because '...they wanted sexual favours' (2007, p.508). For example, when asked about the applicability of corporal punishment, Boy 4 stated that it is unequal and that teachers give preferential treatment to some girls whom they are seeking sexual favours from. He stated;

"When it comes to caning, we, the boys, always receive the most. Some girls are favoured because these teachers want them".

As a result of the above, critics have argued that boys are marginalised and that implementing gender equality in schools feminises the school environment, thus favouring girls (Skelton, 2001). I, like Younger and Cobbett (2010), argue that such an argument is aimed at masking and silencing girls' experiences in schooling. It may well be that the notion of male marginalisation also treats both boys and girls as two homogeneous groups. I strongly agree with Liu (2006) that such an argument downplays 'the effect of other variables, such as social class

and ethnicity, which in effect, often mediate gender in education' (p.427). I also agree that this is a deliberate attempt to shy away from the reality of girls' experiences of schooling, which continue to be marginalised in a dominant male space. In addition, Acker (1994) argued that there is a wide range of gender issues that have disadvantaged girls' learning, such as the 'weaving of gender differentiation into the very fabric of school life' (p.91).

The findings of this study also revealed that male teachers used the practice of corporal punishment as a strategy to produce performance of masculinity (Paechter, 2007). It was observed that both boys and girls feared male teachers. They are regarded as the most disciplined. For instance, when asked why he named all-male teachers as the most disciplined in their school, Boy 3 replied;

“Because they are the ones students fear the most. We have only one woman teacher, and she only talks and does nothing else. We mostly fear the presence of these male teachers”

Evidence from my observation has shown that women teachers often take boys they deem disruptive and indisciplined to male teachers for punishment. Dunne noted that boys' performance of masculinity 'often attempted to challenge women teachers' authority in refusals to accept punishment from them' (2007, p.504). Dunne et al. (2005) and Humphreys (2003) argued that such acts from boys are geared towards subjugating female teachers, aligning with wider societal norms and practices in school authority. According to Connell (1987), the practice of corporal punishment is facilitated by violent hegemonic masculinities. Dunne and colleagues noted that female teachers themselves contribute to reinforcing sustained subordination in the gender hierarchy by using 'their male colleagues to administer corporal punishment on their behalf' (2006, p.83). Evidence also shows that corporal punishment is perceived positively among parents/teachers: Reilly (2014), in the case study FGDs, some teachers and mothers complained that children's increased knowledge of their rights is making children disrespectful, and they stressed the need for corporal punishment to maintain discipline. Several mothers claimed that flogging was an African way to discipline children and that it was a teacher's responsibility to enforce such means of

discipline. Some teachers felt they would lose control and respect of their classes if they were not allowed to use the cane.

During the interviews, both male and female students reported an unfair application of corporal punishment. The findings, as shown above, also revealed how the practice is gendered and how it interplays with other social identities, negatively limiting girls' schooling outcomes. It is no secret that corporal punishment is largely abused; this is mainly expressed by girls from poor rural households who argue that they are primarily targeted. This finding resonates with Humphreys' finding in Botswana and Ghana, which revealed that pupils from rural schools were more likely to be caned than their urban school peers.

5.2.3 Differentiating Experiences of Sexual Violence

The school should provide a safe environment for all pupils, regardless of gender, class, or sexual orientation. However, evidence from this research shows that secondary schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone are not immune to sexual violence, which boys and male teachers mostly perpetrate (Denov & Maclure, 2006; Barnes et al., 2007; Pai, 2016). Data collected suggests girls at the secondary school level in Sierra Leone are faced with sexual harassment, unsolicited physical touches, inappropriate sexual jokes and comments, coercive or transactional sex, sexual advances, bullying and cross-generational relationships with teachers or older men. This research was able to identify three main perpetrators of sexual exploitation of secondary school girls. First are the male teachers who mainly demand sex for grades and provide preferential treatment and lunch. Second are okada riders (motorcycle riders) who offer free transportation to and from school as well as financial support to the girl and her parents. Lastly, are the older men often referred to as 'Sugar Daddies'. They provide financial support to the family and the girl. Sexual violence has emerged as a critical determinant of the safety of the school environment (Denov & Maclure, 2006; Barnes et al., 2007; Concern Worldwide, 2010; UNICEF, 2024). Hence, during this study, when asked about the safety of the school environment, all the girls described the school as an unsafe environment for girls to learn in.

For example, when asked if she could consider the school as a safe learning environment for girls, one of the female teachers responded.

FT 4: *It is not safe. With all these incidents of sexual harassment or economic and academic influence by teachers, I can say that the school is not 100% safe for girls.*

As mentioned earlier, sexual violence has proven to be critical to gender violence, creating an unsafe learning environment for girls. For this study, sexual violence constitutes the following: sexual harassment; sexual abuse (rape); coercive or transactional sex; rejected sexual advances; and cross-generational relationships. Secondary school-based studies have suggested that public spaces outside the classroom (such as toilets and playgrounds) are not safe for both girls and female staff (Dunne et al., 2005). As mentioned earlier, the mothers of some of these schoolgirls are survivors of sexual violence experienced during the war. Moreover, some of these schoolgirls are products of unwanted pregnancies from their mothers being raped. The psychological and physical trauma of sexual violence experienced by them during the war has a significant negative influence on these girls. Therefore, any form of sexual violence in school will result in absenteeism or dropout.

Thus, this study emphasises that the intersection of gender and other identities exacerbates sexual violence in schools. For example, evidence from this research shows that male teachers are highly likely to direct sexual harassment at girls from poor rural households. They (girls from poor rural households) are more susceptible to these acts than their peers from urban, affluent households. This argument is consistent with Dajaeghere and Miske's (2019) argument that male teachers see poor girls as poor learners and thus do not deserve to be in school. They direct sensitive and prejudicial comments against girls' class status and sexuality. For instance, in Vietnam, when asked about girls' secondary schooling, a male teacher replied, 'they are slow learners and learn so badly that it would be better if they would stay home and get married' (Dajaeghere & Miske, 2019, p.78). Below, I have provided detailed insights on how intersecting sexual violence has had a negative influence on girls' secondary schooling experiences and learning outcomes.

5.2.3.1 Sexual Harassment and Sexual Advances Impact on girls' Secondary Schooling experiences and learning outcomes

One example of the interrelation between gender and other social identities is sexualized forms of violence, such as harassment, sexual advances, sexual jokes, and comments. Dunne and colleagues described this form of violence as explicit gender violence relating to 'overtly sexualized encounters' (2006, p.76). For instance, evidence from this research has reported that boys and male teachers use the public space as a site for verbal and physical harassment. Female pupils interviewed expressed frustration about the attitude of boys while trying to use the toilets. When I asked two of the girls about their experience using common spaces, such as the toilets in the school, and whether they get proper privacy, they replied

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

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

The remarks above illustrate the gender dynamics outside the classroom, which suggests that boys dominate the physical space due to male privilege. Based on the Commonwealth Secretariat's manual on combating 'gender-based violence' (GBV), such behaviour by the boys constitutes sexual violence by extension, gender violence. The above finding resonates with Gautam's findings in Nepal, which reported that girls indicated 'being harassed by male students and subjected to inappropriate touching by male teachers, including on the buttocks and breasts (cited in Dunne et al, 2006, p.86). The Key evidence revealed by this research is how boys and male teachers have normalised and trivialised explicit sexual violence, such as unsolicited physical touches, inappropriate remarks and jokes in everyday school practice. In all the interviews and FGDs with girls in case study schools, sexual violence posed a significant challenge to girls' learning because it was deliberately used to limit girls' participation in the class.

It was observed that these acts were performed to exercise male authority in the schools. This is reiterated by Paechter (2002), who found that boys as well as male teachers use forms of verbal and physical bullying such as name-calling, sexual joking and sexual harassment to limit girls' active participation in the classroom. For example, in one of my conversations with one of the boys, he admitted that boys are involved in making sexual jokes and comments, but argued that because the girls do not complain about it, it means they like it. So here, the violence is less overt but still coercive and more psychological (watching, words, etc). See conversation below;

Researcher: *What would you say to the claim that boys in your class are in the habit of making sexual jokes and remarks about girls?*

Boy 4: *(Smiling) Yes, it does happen. We usually make jokes and remarks about girls' bodies when they pass by.*

Researcher: *Why do you guys engage in such acts?*

Boy 4: *We believe that when we make these comments, they will feel beautiful.*

Researcher: *In other words, you are assuming they will like it. What if they do not like it?*

Boy 4: *Yes. Most of them do not complain.*

Similarly, when asked, Girl 2 thought about the issues affecting girls' classroom participation and performance. Girl 2 replied

Girl 2: *Inappropriate touches and jokes. There is this particular boy in our class who always hits my buttocks in school and sometimes outside the school. I felt harassed and intimidated by him, even when I made a complaint; no action was taken. In our classroom, boys use hitting our buttocks as a strategy to exclude us from their cycle.*

Researcher: *How does this make you feel?*

Girl 2: *I do feel terrible. I stopped reporting them because I know no action will be taken against them. We have only one female teacher in this school, and she is often overwhelmed with these kinds of complaints. The male teachers view these actions as usual and do not require any intervention.*

On the contrary, when asked about the claims girls made about boys in their class, in the habit of unsolicited physical touches such as grabbing or hitting girls' buttocks, Boys 4 and 5 responded respectively.

Boy 4: *Yes, it does happen, but it only happens when they try to disturb our serious conversation. We do it as a way of driving them away from us. We know that by hitting their buttocks, they will leave us and go to their seat.*

Boy 5: *Yes. It is the only way they cannot come and join or interrupt us. They try to distract us when studying, so we hit them on their buttocks so they will not come over.*

What the above remarks from the boys have shown is that sexual violence against girls is seen as usual among them in schools. Secondly, they assume it makes girls feel good because they have unfortunately accepted the status quo. Lastly, they use sexual harassment as a strategy to deter girls from interacting with them. The above remarks also draw attention to boys' harassing behaviours as a means by which they can establish and maintain their masculine authority at the top of the social order of masculinities and femininities (Epstein, 1997; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Jackson, 2002; Paechter, 2007; Martino et al., 2007; Jackson et al., 2010). Martino et al. (2007), in their work, also noted how boys try to assert their masculine power through sexist practices of denigrating girls

However, in a focus group discussion with a group of 5 girls, they lamented their experiences of sexual harassment and its consequences.

Researcher: *Have any of you experienced issues of sexual harassment, unsolicited physical touch, or sexual jokes and remarks?*

FGD1G3: *Yes, I have. The other day, I was trying to enter the class, and a boy inappropriately touched my buttocks.*

Researcher: *What did you do?*

FGD1G3: *I reported the issues, but nothing significant came out of it. Most of us, unfortunately, have accepted this kind of behaviour from boys because it seems as if the teachers have normalised it.*

FGD1G5: *In my case, when I reported the boy, the teacher responded saying I will talk to him, but this is not something you should be reporting because it is common and they mean no harm. They are just joking with you guys.*

Researcher: *Does such an act have any impact on your schooling participation and performance?*

FGD1G2: *Yes, it does. It affects us psychologically. It makes us feel unsafe in school. It also affects our level of concentration in class, as well as our confidence in effectively participating in class. In some cases, we do not report because of fear of retribution.*

The above discussion provides an insight into the challenges girls face in school and how these challenges have limited their participation and affected their schooling experiences and learning outcomes. It is also about girls' powerlessness (see Iris Young 2014), in that they have no capacity to change this - there is no one to report to who will alter the behaviour. The above quotation also indicates girls' inability to mediate or negotiate participation, sexual rights and autonomy over male pupils and teachers because of systemic factors embedded within the school institution that can often lead to girls feeling powerless in their everyday schooling (Young, 2014). What this study is saying is that, unlike the widely assumed notion that girls' lack of classroom participation is due to shyness, this study believes it is due to 'oppressive gender regimes' (Renold, 2006). As mentioned by Renold (2006), the use of sexual joking by both male secondary school teachers and boys is a way of establishing relationships with girls, irrespective of how these girls feel.

Secondly, evidence from this study indicated that male pupils and teachers' sexual advances have caused anxiety, depression, fear, lack of confidence and sometimes desertion from school (Concern Worldwide, 2010; UNICEF, 2024). The evidence revealed that male teachers used classroom participation as a pretext to humiliate, intimidate, embarrass and belittle girls who refused their sexual advances. For example, when I asked a female pupil to tell me about her perception of the male teachers in her school, Yellow responded.

"Well, some of the male teachers fall in love with girls in the school. For instance, I know of cases where male teachers continuously punish female students because they refuse to be with them. In cases where a

female student refuses sexual advancement from a male teacher, that student faces continuous punishment from that teacher. Whether she is late or not, he punishes her until she gives in. Some female students will start absenting themselves from school, especially if they know that the teacher will be teaching them that day."

Similarly, and surprisingly, the boys acknowledged that male teachers used their position to seek sexual favours from girls, and if they refused, they were harassed, threatened and humiliated. They said this has negatively impacted girls' participation and performance in class. See conversation below;

Boy 2: *There was a case in our class where a teacher made sexual advances on a girl, and the girl refused; that teacher deliberately failed that girl. She had to protest and bring the issue to the principal's attention. He was investigated, and it was found that he had manipulated the girl's grades.*

Boy 4: *Some male teachers in this school sometimes use their position to seek sexual favours from girls. However, there are cases where some girls will stand firm against their advances. My sister had such an issue; she rejected 3 times sexual advances from a male teacher, and that teacher deliberately failed her. She contested her result; she took all her papers from other teachers to the principal. After review, her paper was remarked, and she passed.*

As these quotations indicate, female pupils daily encounter violence and harassment in the school, a place where they should be the safest. The quotations above reiterate my initial point that girls often feel powerless in relation to males who seem to hold power within the school (Young, 2014). Ombati & Ombati (2012), in their work *Gender Inequality in Education in sub-Saharan Africa*, point out the challenges girls face from boys and male teachers when they reject their sexual advances. For instance, in Guinea, they reported that boys were '...very aggressive towards girls and that they use physical force, threats and tease girls to silence them in class' (2012, p.129). They also reported that 'Teachers also prey on girls, threatening to fail them, or publicly humiliate them, to prod them into sexual liaisons' (Ombati & Ombati, 2012, p.129). As a consequence, all the girls I asked about their decision between male and female teachers, with whom they were more comfortable discussing the above issues, responded by saying they were more comfortable with female teachers.

Girl 4: I will report to a female teacher because I feel more comfortable talking to one about it. I will not be afraid to tell her everything that happened, and she is likely to act. A male teacher is likely not to act because he will try to protect the perpetrator if he is his colleague, a male teacher, or tend to dismiss it as normal boys' stuff if it is done by a boy, especially if it is harassment.

Girl 20: *If a boy harasses me, I will go and report that boy to a female teacher. Because if that boy touches me inappropriately in a sensitive part, for instance, if a boy touches me on my buttocks, maybe I will be ashamed to stand in front of a male teacher to say a boy slaps my buttocks. However, when I say it to a female teacher, I will be so bold as to tell her what a boy has done to me. So, I will be bold enough to say. I will not be shy to tell her."*

Girl 21: *It is the female teachers. A female teacher listens to me, she encourages me, and we talk about very sensitive issues without fear."*

On the contrary, one of the female teachers argued that female pupils do not tend to report cases of sexual advances from male teachers because they are happy to enter into a sexual relationship with a male teacher, due to the academic benefits. As she stated below;

Researcher: *What do you say about the claims of sexual advances from male teachers on girls?*

FT 3: *I believe it does happen, but the girls do not report it to me. A girl can be in a sexual relationship with a male teacher and cannot discuss it with me. They are mostly happy when male teachers make sexual advances at them.*

Researcher: *So, why do you think female students are happy when male teachers make sexual advances at them*

Firstly, they receive academic preferential treatment and support. They do not need to study hard to pass, and they are mostly exempt from being beaten. Secondly, they get financial support, such as lunch at school.

The remarks above by the female teacher relate to Snider's (2018) story, "Why Didn't She Walk Away," specifically the story of "Grace". The teacher's assertion that female students are happy when male teachers make sexual advances at them is 'almost tantamount to blaming the victim' (Snider, 2018, p.763). What this teacher failed to acknowledge is girls' experiences of coercion and fear of

violence that keep them from voicing desire (Snider, 2018; Ellis, 2019). To some extent, I argue that some girls often adopt the above strategy as a self-protection mechanism to enhance their academic success (Jackson, 2002). I will also argue that some girls adopt this strategy to mitigate the 'negative consequences...attached to feelings of failure, such as shame, anxiety and withdrawal' (Jackson, 2002, p.41). Although the concept of self-worth protection strategy has been widely associated with underachieving boys using laddish behaviour, I agree with Francis (2010) that the 'notion of gendered learning styles and innate sex differences' in the classroom lacks basis and is ineffective (p.29). Thus, I argue that while boys use the strategy to assert masculinity, girls use this strategy to succeed academically.

A similar blaming the victim claim was reported by Humphreys and colleagues, who mentioned that evidence from Botswana and Ghana indicates that female students were 'actively seeking sexual relationships with teachers to gain better grades, help with assignments or financial assistance for the family' (2008, p.25). As I had mentioned, what this evidence from Botswana and Ghana has failed to mention is that power relations asymmetrically drive such sexual relations (Ellis, 2019). As argued by Dunne and colleagues, 'the school is a social arena marked by asymmetrical power relations that are enacted not only through gender but also through age and authority, as well as through additional social distinctions around socioeconomics and ethnicity...' (2006, p.78). A typical strategy male teachers used is demanding sex for grades and providing preferential treatment and lunch. This is also revealed in Osborne et al (2025a and 2025b) when they found that economically disadvantaged girls were more likely to have experienced sexual exploitation in the form of sex for grade and financial assistance. The evidence from this research reveals that the above strategy primarily targets girls from poor rural households. The overlapping social identities of these girls paved the way for a transactional relationship with male teachers. This is reiterated by my Girl 3 when responding to my question about male teachers' sexual advances.

Girl 3: They (male teachers) usually target girls from villages who come from poor households. As in the case I mentioned, the girl is missing classes due to the teacher's action.

Researcher: Are you saying the act of sexual harassment, advances and relationships with male teachers affects mostly girls from poor households and the village?

Girl 3: Yes. Male teachers are predominantly targeting girls who cannot afford lunch in school and are from the villages. They realise they are very vulnerable to being targeted.

Thus, Hunter (2002) noted that sexual relationships between male teachers and female students are for girls to have access to power and resources. Parkes and Heslop (2011) suggest that such an asymmetric relationship is a form of violence that results in early/child/forceful marriage or teenage pregnancy, subsequently limiting girls' ability to achieve educational attainment.

Evidence from this study also noted that the conscious neglect of the issues of sexual harassment and advances meant girls are left with the option of either not reporting and getting involved with male teachers or facing unfair corporal punishment, as discussed above. My argument resonates with Gautam's evidence from Nepal, where it was revealed that girls who refused sexual advances from male teachers, sometimes boy prefects, were subjected to bullying, intimidation, embarrassment and humiliation in class. For instance, when asked about the repercussions for rejecting a male teacher's sexual advances, Girls 3 and 6 responded respectively.

"In my current class, there is this girl whom a teacher approached for a sexual relationship, and she refused. Every time that teacher enters the class, she will cane that girl or ask her to leave the class".

"If you reject their advances, you will be unnecessarily disciplined. Unfortunately, many girls have refused to report because no action is taken".

One thing that stood clear during the interview is that girls lack confidence for good reason in the redress mechanisms of sexual violence in schools. They are not comfortable and do not have confidence in discussing issues of sexual violence with male teachers. For instance, Girl 12 mentioned she does not report

cases of sexual violence to male teachers if a female teacher is absent because, as she put it, “they tend to trivialise the issue”. Similarly, when asked why she prefers to report cases of sexual violence to female teachers, Girl 4 replied;

“Because I feel more confident talking to a female teacher about it. I will not be afraid to tell her everything that happened, and she is likely to act. A male teacher is likely not to act because he will try to protect the perpetrator if he is his colleague, male teacher, or tend to dismiss it as a normal boy’s play if it is done by a boy, especially if it is harassment”

Unfortunately, what makes it even more difficult for girls is that in all case study schools, male teachers make up 90 per cent of the teaching force. They are left with little or no choice in reporting sexual violence issues. For instance, Girl 2 mentioned she has had repeated cases of boys touching her inappropriately, but stopped reporting the cases. When asked the reason behind her decision, she replied.

“I stopped reporting them because I know no action will be taken against them. We have only one female teacher in this school, and she is often overwhelmed with these kinds of complaints. The male teachers see these actions as normal and do not need any action”.

The remarks above suggest that girls lack access to redress and also distrust relationships in school. Girls’ confidence and expectations could not be met, which significantly affects trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, 2003; Van Houtte, 2007). Their feeling of distrust is demonstrated by their decision not to report incidents of sexual violence. The remarks above also show that sexual harassment and advances in schools have gone unrecognised. The acts are tacitly condoned by the school, most often by male teachers, or they themselves are complicit in the very acts (Renold, 2006). Thus, she noted that girls do not report these cases of sexual harassment and advances because of ‘... broader cultural issues around denial of young girls’ sexuality (Ibid p.444). I absolutely agree with Renold; it was observed that teachers, especially male teachers, were hastily dismissive of boys’ improper physical touches and jokes. For instance, Girl 3, when asked why she prefers a female teacher over a male teacher, replied.

“I feel more confident sharing such an issue with a female teacher because she is a woman, she will listen to me and take the issue seriously. A male teacher is likely not going to listen or act because the act may have been done by one of the male teachers or will tell you it is nothing serious; it is a normal thing with boys if a boy did it”.

The above response indicates that sexual harassment and advances are not just condoned but also normalised. Girls' claims to unsolicited physical touches and sexual jokes are highly likely to be dismissed when reported to male teachers (Hui et al., 2018). It is clear from all the girls interviewed that they feel more comfortable talking to female teachers about claims of sexual harassment and advances because they believe they will listen to them, understand their complaint and take the necessary action. However, even in the cases of female teachers, these expectations might not be met. Firstly, as mentioned, these schools are dominated by male teachers. In one of the case study schools, there is only one female teacher out of 27 teachers. This limitation sometimes led to girls not reporting (Reilly, 2014). Secondly, some female teachers may tend to remain silent about an issue relating to a male colleague. This is reiterated by De Lange and colleagues, who argue that due to patriarchal influence, female teachers find it especially difficult to comment negatively on male colleagues' behaviour (cited in Leach 2015, p. 34). Similarly, Altinyelken and Le Mat (2018) in their study in Ethiopia found that female teachers were hesitant to criticise or confront sexual behaviour of male colleagues because of the patriarchal nature of societies and socio-cultural norms and conditions that do not allow women to speak out. This constraint, they argued, ‘...impede female teachers' determination and capacity to address sexual violence in their schools' (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018, p.659).

Findings from this study show that sexual violence is embedded and multi-dimensional. Gender inequality, SES, sexuality, ethnic-traditions, and location are all contributing factors to sexual violence (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018). Hence, I have demonstrated, as shown above, that the combination of these interrelated factors makes some girls more vulnerable to sexual violence in school. Therefore, I argue that intersecting identities exacerbate violence in schools in Sierra Leone, hence, negatively affect girls' learning experiences and

outcomes. Lastly, it was observed that teachers, especially male teachers, were in the habit of constantly demanding money and other illegal expenses for “other school-related expenses” from students as a ploy to sexually harass and coerce girls who cannot afford to pay into sexual relationships with them, the male teachers (Pai, 2024). It was also reported that some girls are forced to engage in transactional sex with okada boys (motor bike riders) or older men to meet teachers' demands for money if they wish to stay at school (Osborne et al, 2025a and 2025b). Thus, Reilly stated that in Sierra Leone, ‘poverty is inextricably linked to sexual exploitation, girls who cannot pay for school-related expenses...are particularly vulnerable’ (2014, p.21). I agree with Reilly (2014 and Altinyelken and Le Mat 2018) that poverty plays a compelling role in contributing to sexual violence in school.

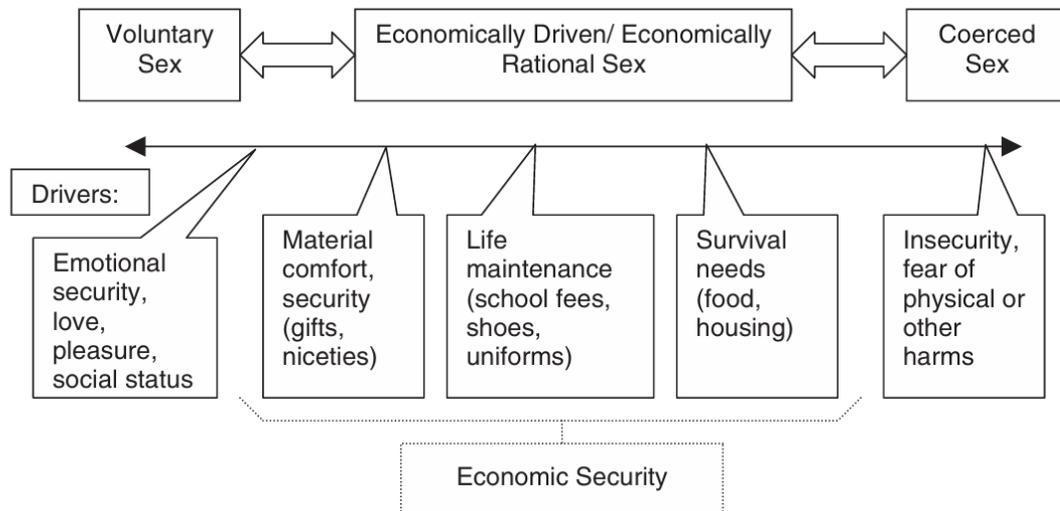
In a patriarchal society like Sierra Leone, most transactional or cross-generational sexual relationships are usually perceived to be consensual. This is reiterated by Bajaj (2019), who suggested that society most often blames the victims (girls). For instance, they blame it on girls' fashion choices, such as wearing trousers that are too short and tight. However, findings from this research suggest that most cases of transactional or cross-generational relationships are coerced. Secondly, the above comments on girls' mode of dressing not only try to blame girls but also to regulate their sexuality and sexual desires. For example, Female Teacher 2 believes girls are coerced into these types of relationships due to their low-income status. She noted;

“Yes, it has to do with improper approaches and sexual relationships. For example, some of these girls come to school without even having lunch. So, when they go close to these male teachers, at times they give them lunch. Moreover, they will expect something in return. So, in the end, you see them having sexual relationships with these teachers for financial support”.

Therefore, Leach (2015) questioned the blurred notion between consensual sexual relations and that of coercive sexual relations; however, he acknowledged how ‘poverty complicates definitions of gender violence’ (p.32). I agree with Leach, but based on the findings of this study, the complication does not only stop at poverty or gender inadequacies, but also the influence of other factors

like sexuality and location further complicates gender violence in schools. Figure 6 below illustrates the drivers of transactional or cross-generational relationships.

Figure 7: Drivers of transactional or cross-generational relationships



Source: Baker 2009

My position on transactional sex, based on my data, is tied to the power relation between male teachers and female students. I argue that girls are sexually exploited irrespective of their age or consent. Male teachers are using their position of power to seek sexual relationships with girls who are most often vulnerable and poor. These teachers most often trade sex for grades. They also provide academic and financial assistance for sex (Bajaj, 2009). For example, Boy 2 presented one case of power asymmetries in his school.

“Well, another important thing is poverty; some of these girls may have initially refused, but these teachers will go to their parents and influence them with money. The parents will put pressure on these girls to accept these teachers. They believe it will save them from poverty”.

Humphreys and Leach (2007) argued that families of girls who have been harassed or sometimes impregnated by a teacher, or a boy, most often opt for financial arrangements with the teacher or boy. This is consistent with the findings of this study, which revealed that in cases where a male teacher gets a school-going girl pregnant, there are high chances that the family of that girl will go into a financial agreement with the teacher instead of pursuing legal actions

because of their economic status. Leach and Machakary (2000) believed that 'money played an important part in these demonstrations of male sexuality' (p.4). On the other hand, I reiterate the argument that girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not share the same fate as those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, below is a conversation with Girl 12 on dealing with sexual advances from male teachers.

Researcher: In your years in this school, have you experienced any form of sexual advance? If yes, from whom? Explain.

Girl 12: Yes, I have from a male teacher. We dated, but this was mainly because I needed financial help in school. As I told you, I have lost both parents, so I needed support when the NGO Street Child ended their funding.

Researcher: Do you think male teachers are taking advantage of girls who are in dire need?

Girl 12: Yes, they do. Most of us are from villages and come from poor households. We could not afford lunch, so these teachers will provide lunch and sometimes academic help, hoping to get sexual favours in return. If you refuse, they will retaliate very harshly.

Likewise, Girl 3 also reported that male teachers predominantly target girls from poor rural households because, as she puts it, "they see them vulnerable to target".

Thus, the above practices and behaviour do not equate to equal schooling outcomes. Female Teacher 3 noted several reasons why girls are not performing as well in class as boys. She argued that;

Girls are faced with issues like transactional relations, pressure from okada boys, and sometimes male teachers. Moreover, because they often require financial support, they are frequently deterred from entering into these relationships. While the boys always concentrate on their books,"

My data suggest that although all secondary girls in post-conflict Sierra Leone are vulnerable to transactional or cross-generational sexual relations, due to interrelating factors like economic status, sexuality, ethnic traditions, and location, girls from low-income status from rural communities are more

susceptible to it than their peers from middle- and higher-income status in urban areas.

5.2.4 The Intersection of Gender and Sexuality: Male Dominance through Heterosexual Violence

Another explanation of the intersection of gender and other social identities, such as sexuality, revealed from this research is girls' gendered expectations to conform to acceptable norms and practices, such as heteronormativity. Evidence from this research has shown that girls lack sexual autonomy because of pressure to meet gendered expectations. This is reiterated by Muhanguzi (2011), who argued that pupil-pupil interactions are characterised by 'power imbalances with deep-seated lack of female sexual autonomy' (p.716). For example, evidence from the interviews conducted shows that girls mentioned being beaten by male teachers sometimes because they were not behaving in a 'girly' manner, i.e., being obedient, timid, and passive, and that their dress code did not conform to the expected 'decent girls dress' (Muhanguzi, 2011, p. 716). In a few instances, I observed that some male teachers target and humiliate girls they deem their dress was 'too short,' or 'too revealing.' In one instance, one of the male teachers targeted one female student in class because he said her dress was indecent. He said;

"That is not the way to dress, or do you think this is your village where you dress anyhow you feel? Get out of this place."

It was observed that girls were compelled to dress 'appropriate' in line with the acceptable male 'gaze' or risk being humiliated by a male teacher or a boy. Results from this showed that girls are often referred to as 'sluts' and subjected to verbal harassment for failing to dress 'appropriately.' Thus, I agree with Delamont on the notion that adolescent girls in secondary school often try to act and behave in ways that are aligned with expected gendered behaviour. They carefully tried to '...maintain their reputation as 'nice' girls and avoid being labelled as 'slag' and sluts'. (1990, p.50). What I observed is that girls were particularly concerned with being labelled as 'sluts' because of their dress code,

or expressing their sexual desire, or their interest in contraceptives. They are being policed/disciplined into acting in specific ways, even when it is in their best interests (to avoid pregnancy where they are at risk of rape). For instance, Girl 18 stated;

“In this school, there is an NGO called Marie Stopes that comes to sensitise us on family planning, sex education and the use of contraceptives. Most male students and teachers will comment that we want to expose ourselves to prostitution if they see us talking to them.”

The quotation above is consistent with Delamont’s suggestion that girls in school could not engage in conversation about the use of contraceptives in the presence of male students and teachers because ‘they will be labelled as ‘tarts’ and treated accordingly’ (1990, p.50). What this means is that male students and teachers engaged in a systematic effort to regulate and police the sexuality of girls in schools. Therefore, I agree with Dalley-Trim (2007) that male teachers and pupils employed ‘sexualized language practices...which allowed them to exercise power over the girls’ and commented on ‘girls’ bodies, and thus police their feminine sexuality’ (p.207).

Similarly, visibly pregnant girls and child mothers were reportedly subjected to high levels of verbal bullying, humiliation and marginalisation by boys and teachers, especially male teachers. In an interview with one of the girls who dropped out because of pregnancy and has returned to school, she mentioned that her experience back to school has been a mixed feeling because while she was excited to be back and was welcomed by her colleagues, she mentioned she often faced embarrassing and humiliating remarks and comments from some male pupils and teachers. She noted;

“There is this male teacher who, whenever he sees me, he would comment like, You rejected me just for you to get pregnant for an okada (commercial motor bike) boy, you should be ashamed that you are still in SSS1”

In another example, I observed that in one of the schools, there was a girl in JSS3 who was impregnated by a male student at the same school. She was still attending school. On one occasion, she was outside with friends having lunch

when a male teacher (the vice principal) attacked her with humiliating and embarrassing remarks in front of other students. The teacher said,

“Go and bring the boy that got you pregnant, you fool, you do not sleep at night but chasing boys.”

That was an embarrassing scene for me to watch as well. I had wanted to speak with the girl to find out how she felt, but I wanted to wait for a day or two. Unfortunately, she stopped coming to school. I enquired with friends, but I was told she lived in one of the villages. I spoke with the boy who impregnated the girl. He said

“That vice principal is just angry that the girl rejected him for me”

The above is a typical example of how the actions of male teachers and pupils have led to unequal schooling experiences and learning outcomes for girls. Such an action disadvantages girls and favours boys because they continue schooling despite being responsible for the pregnancy. What the above quotation reveals is that the school is unsafe for girls and that male performance of masculinity facilitates sexual harassment and the regulation of girls' sexuality.

5.2.5 Differentiating Experiences of Bullying and Intimidation

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

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

It is argued that this form of violence limits girls' classroom participation and performance. For example, when asked if she had had a scenario where she felt very embarrassed and had to report to somebody? Green replied;

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

The quotation reflects the traditional socio-cultural paradigm of male superiority and female inferiority. Although not every girl conforms to gender stereotypes, some girls employ several strategies to assert their power and prevent marginalisation (Paechter, 2002, p. 26). These girls who tend to resist male domination and authority are seen as 'deviant' and 'tarty' and considered as 'discipline problems' by both male teachers and boys (Robinson, 1992; Paechter, 2002; Renold, 2006). Furthermore, research has shown that those girls who do not conform to gender stereotypes, are competitive and have assumed leadership positions in school, also have to deal with boys who challenge their authority. Green had this to say when asked about her experiences as a class prefect, particularly maintaining discipline when there are no teachers present.

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

I observed that bullying and intimidation had a particularly significant impact on classroom interactions. Data collected suggested that girls from poor households and rural communities were more prone to this form of violence. For instance, I observed that verbal bullying was often based on a student's physical characteristics, their perceived poverty, their academic weakness, or their marginalised status, such as having a disability or being an adolescent mother

(Osborne et al. 2025a and 2025b). In the classroom, researchers such as Younger and Warrington (2005) have demonstrated that boys tend to out-talk girls. They deliberately disrupt and disturb girls' classroom contributions to assert their masculine dominance in classroom performance and interactions (see Chapter 5). In that regard, Maclure and Denov (2009) argued that boys' systematic targeting of girls as a strategy to subjugate girls to male dominance is a direct reflection of wider societal influence. Hegemonic patriarchy is embedded in every aspect of the Sierra Leonean community, which has been replicated in schools. A girl noted.

“They provoke and laugh at us whenever we miss an answer. In some cases, they even shout and laugh at us to sit down, as if we know nothing. This has really affected our class participation. Most of us do not talk in class because we are ashamed and scared of being provoked and laughed at”

The above remarks reinforce our point mentioned above that boys systematically target girls to assert their masculine dominance in both the physical and verbal space. As a result, I conclude that boys use intimidating and bullying tactics to dominate both the physical and verbal space in the classroom to limit girls' active participation in the learning space.

It was reported that many girls face a combination of sexual harassment and bullying by boys and male teachers, which results in girls feeling discontent in school and, in some cases, dropping out. For example, Girl 12 reported that.

“There is this boy who sits right behind me, on multiple occasions, he has shut me down when I try to contribute to class. He does it even when a teacher is in class. This hurts my confidence to participate in class.”

Similarly, in a discussion with Girl 4, she lamented her challenges as a class prefect. One example of how gender intersects with SES and Location is where girls coming from the more remote villages faced physical and verbal bullying from peers, including insults regarding their appearance, poverty or way of speaking. The hostile environment has limited their participation and performance in class. In addition, girls who have attained leadership are reported

to be more vulnerable to bullying and intimidation. For instance, Girl 19 reported that.

“Most of the boys, when you write their names for causing trouble in class, they become arrogant and use abusive language. Some will threaten to beat me after school.”

Lastly, the data analysed showed how male teachers and boys persistently used verbal abuse and personal comments directed at girls who they perceived lacked academic capabilities or who they thought were poor and from rural communities. In some cases, girls who have refused the sexual advances of a teacher are humiliated in front of the class. This is usually done in the form of using personal comments to exact discipline. Pregnant girls were particularly targeted with insulting comments by male teachers and boys. In an interview discussion with two out-of-school girls, the following responses were provided to the question, “What are the challenges pregnant girls who have given birth face when they return to school?”

OoS 1: *Provocation from male teachers and boys. This has led to many leaving school for the second time. Those who continued were unable to participate effectively in class.*

OoS 2: *You have cases where a male teacher would humiliate these girls, especially if he had made sexual advances but was rejected, and that girl later got pregnant.*

I want to state that a key finding, which applies to the above two themes, is that the research participants in this study were quite diverse in character (social class, location, ethnicity, and gender); thus, their understanding of the gender issues mentioned above was very different. For instance, my interactions with girls from poor rural households and their peers from wealthy urban households revealed that their ability to display understanding and awareness of gender issues is different. Based on my interviews with girls from poor rural households, most of them understood gender issues like sexual harassment or exploitation from teachers as an opportunity to gain access to academic and financial benefits. On the other hand, they viewed boys' unsolicited touches as a regular part of everyday school practices. On the contrary, girls from middle and upper classes understood these issues to be incidents of gender violence. They made

direct references to the issues of gender violence and inequality. In one of my focus group discussions with a group of girls, I mentioned I had observed boys trying to touch and grope girls while passing through one of the school corridors and asked them what their take was on such sexist behaviour from boys. One of the girls was quick to defend their action;

“They were making fun of us...they are harmless”.

However, her response was rebuked by another girl who, until two years ago, had been schooling in Bo (an urban city). She is from a middle-class family. She replied

“I do not think we should call that fun; it is a form of harassment, and it needs to be reported”.

Similar results were revealed in four co-educational secondary schools in the UK. They reported that, unlike girls from lower-class schools who displayed less understanding of gender issues, rich urban girls displayed an awareness of their rights relating to gender issues, and an ability to name gender inequality...’ (Lynch & Lodge, 2002, p.125). The point I am making here is that girls from poor rural households are more susceptible to gender issues like gender violence because they evidently lack the ability or awareness to make direct references to incidences of gender issues or have inherently accepted these issues as usual or a coping mechanism to continue schooling. These girls either lack the general awareness to understand or articulate these gender issues, or have considered them as everyday school practices.

5.2.6 Differentiating Experience of Ethnic Traditional Practices

The data collected has shown the negative impact of ethnic traditional practices on girls’ secondary education. Two key issues were prominent in all the discussions, i.e. FGM and Child marriage. Research has shown that both practices have significantly influenced girls’ schooling experiences and learning outcomes (Leach, 2008; Dejaeghere & Miske, 2009; Ombati & Ombati, 2012; DCI, 2015). For instance, Ombati & Ombati (2012) mentioned that the ethnic

traditional practice of FGM makes ‘girls feel grown up, and they have no qualms having sexual relations and the community also views them mature and ready for marriage’ (p.123). At the same time, Dejaeghere and Miske (2009) argued that the practice of child marriage has facilitated a high rate of school dropout among girls. This limits girls’ opportunities to attain secondary education.

Both FGM and early/child/forced marriage are important aspects of violence against girls that induce gender inequality in schools (Koissy-Kpein, 2015; Farouki et al., 2022). However, the data from this study suggest that the implications of these practices extend beyond gender, encompassing other circumstances such as ethnicity/ethnic tradition, SES, sexuality, and location. A study by Koissy-Kpein (2015) in Sierra Leone and other African countries revealed that girls from low-income households have higher chances of being subjected to FGM and early/child/forced marriage. A considerable amount of literature has suggested that these practices are more prevalent in rural communities (Dejaeghere & Miske, 2009; Daniyan et al., 2018; Conteh et al., 2021; Nzinga et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2023). In addition, the education of parents, especially the mothers, has been suggested to have a direct bearing on the decision to subject girls to these practices (Ejukonemu, 2021). These points stressed the importance of intersectional analysis in addressing FGM and child marriage as part of GBV in schools. Thus, to better understand the implications of these practices on girls’ schooling experiences and learning outcomes, I have demonstrated below how these construct violence against girls in schools, thereby producing intersecting inequalities in girls’ schooling outcomes.

5.2.6.1 The Cultural/Traditional Practice of Female Genital Mutilation

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines FGM as ‘all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs, whether for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons’ (1998, p.5). To emphasise the adverse effect of socio-cultural practices on girls, I would like to mention a particular case in December 2018 that resulted in the death of a ten-year-old girl while undergoing FGM. This led to the government placing a ban on

all secret societies in the country, but this ban was not effective because it was not legally binding (Batha & Dayton, 2019). To further highlight how complicit the government has been on the issue of FGM, the Sierra Leone parliament, in enacting the Child Rights Act 2025, deliberately refused to criminalise the practice despite criticisms from human rights advocacy groups. In a press release dated July 7, 2025, the Parliament clarified that the new law awaiting Presidential Assent “*neither criminalises FGM nor prescribes a fine for individuals found guilty of circumcising girls under the age of eighteen.*” (Sierraloaded, 2025).

The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL) described the decision as ‘troubling and disappointing, arguing that it allows for the continued suffering of underage girls subjected to harmful cultural practices (2025). Another human rights organisation, the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law in Sierra Leone (CARL-SL), criticised the government's decision. It noted that failure to criminalise FGM is ‘...deeply troubling, given the harmful and long-lasting effects of FGM on girls and women (CARLSL 2025). On a similar note, in a landmark case brought before the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice by Kadija (a survivor of FGM who was forcibly subjected to FGM in 2016), with the support of 31 movement partners from the Forum Against Harmful Practices (FAHP) and the feminist organisation Purposeful, the court ruled in July 2025 that the Government of Sierra Leone violated the rights of women and girls by failing to criminalise Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), describing the practice as “one of the worst forms of violence against women” that meets the threshold for torture (Owlpress, 2025).

In Sierra Leone, research has shown that patriarchal socio-cultural norms are predominantly practised in rural districts like the two case study districts in this study (Conteh et al., 2021). Gender relations in these settings are regulated and policed by culturally expected norms that require women and girls to accept them. For instance, the initiation of girls into the Female Genital Mutilation (FGM also referred to as the bondo society, is viewed as an act to instil acceptable social behaviours as well as regulating and policing their sexual pleasures and desires (Conteh et al., 2021). FGM is entrenched in the socio-cultural fabric of the Sierra Leonean community, framed within sexual, moral and religious notions. Rights

groups and organisations have campaigned against it because of its potential physical harm to girls and also abuses their sexual rights (Concern Worldwide 2010). Farouki et al. 2022 suggest that FGM not only violate women's and girls' human rights, but it is also an 'extreme form of gender inequality' (p.1). In addition, Nzinga et al. 2021 mentioned that the practice of FGM leaves life-changing effects on the affected girls. The practice serves as a nurturing ground for girls to transition into womanhood and is associated with morality (DCI 2015; Farouki et al., 2022). It is argued that the practice paves the way for the high rate of teenage pregnancy and early marriage among girls, which has resulted in increased out-of-school girls (Ombati & Ombati, 2012; Concern Worldwide, 2010). For instance, when asked about the role FGM plays in girls' schools, Girl 1 replied;

"FGM contributes to both early marriage and early pregnancy. As soon as girls return from the initiation, they are viewed as ready for marriage".

Findings from the study show that the practice of FGM not only has the potential to harm girls or abuse their sexual rights, but it is also geared towards sensuality by extension of their sexuality to meet the needs of the family and community. The assumption is that girls who have experienced FGM are sexually responsible and have control over their sexual desires, whereas girls who have not experienced FGM are sexually irresponsible (Anis et al., 2012; Ismail et al., 2017). Hence, Henry Armas noted that FGM, for instance, is '...an overt attempt to eliminate girls'/women's sexual pleasure' (2007, p.11). I therefore agree with Dejaeghere and Miske that girls' inability to make choices about their sexual relationships affects both their 'bodily integrity and health & mental integrity' (2009, p.175).

Secondly, the influence of location and ethnicity is key in determining the vulnerability to the practice. Research has shown that girls from rural settings belonging to a particular ethnic group are more likely to have experienced FGM than others in urban areas (Miller et al., 2005; Koissy-Kpein, 2015; Daniyan et al., 2018). This is the case in Sierra Leone, where the Mende and Temne ethnic groups in rural districts predominantly practise FGM. In contrast, the Krio ethnic group, who are predominantly residents of Freetown and the surrounding

communities, do not practice FGM (28TOOMANY 2015). This point highlights the significance of intersectional inequalities that girls face, as well as the importance of this concept in the study. As mentioned above, the findings from this study have shown that girls from poor rural households are more likely to undergo female circumcision than their peers from urban wealthy households because, aside from their gender, the practice is 'enshrined in cultural and traditional beliefs' (Daniyan et al., 2018, p.3). Their vulnerability to FGM also necessitates their vulnerability to teenage pregnancy and child marriage. This is consistent with Eloundou-Enyugue and colleagues' argument that when it comes to cultural practices like FGM and child marriage, 'girls in lower socio-economic status groups do not share a common fate with girls in higher status groups (2009, p.12). Below is a conversation I had with one of the female teachers in an interview on how ethic-traditional practices negatively influence girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes

Researcher: *How will you describe the impact of socio-cultural practices on girls' secondary schooling?*

FT 1: *The FGM lays the foundation for dropout among girls. Typically, you will notice that a girl has not been coming to school for 3 to 4 weeks, only for you to inquire and be told she has been initiated into the Bondo society.*

Researcher: *So, how does it lay a foundation for dropout among girls?*

FT 1: *Many parents see FGM as a rite of passage for marriage and motherhood. The moment these girls return from the initiation, they will start having male suitors enquiring about their hand in marriage. As I had mentioned, most of these girls come from poor households in the villages; they walk 5 miles every day to school, hence, their families will give them out as a financial bailout for the family.*

Researcher: *Have you encountered cases where girls refuse to get married, even when their parents have agreed to the marriage?*

FT 1: *I recently had a case of a girl in JSS3 who was under tremendous pressure from her parents to get married, but refused. I called her and asked her, and she said she is not ready to get married; she wants to further her education.*

Researcher: *OK. So, what happened? Did she get married?*

FT 1: *No. She was able to stand firm against her family. She is currently in school, preparing for the Basic Education Certificate Examination.*

Researcher: *I can imagine the impact this may have had on her in school.*

FT 1: *It affected her a lot. She struggled to concentrate in class. The sad part of all these is that most of these girls have their brothers coming to school unhindered. Even in cases where the household lacks resources, the boys are also provided for to continue their education, while the girls are often used as commodities for the family.*

The above remarks from a female teacher revealed two key issues: firstly, FGM is perceived by the Sierra Leonean society as a 'beautiful' thing that personifies womanhood and motherhood (Lionello, 2015). Secondly, it contributes significantly to girls dropping out of school due to early marriage and teenage pregnancy. Lastly, poverty plays a key role in pre- and post-initiation. Because it is primarily prevalent among girls from low-income households, it often leads to early marriage, which can bring financial benefits to the family.

How does the socio-cultural practice of FGM affect girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes? Or what cultural practices influence girls' everyday schooling? These were the questions I posed to both girls and boys, as well as female teachers, on this topic. Below are some of the responses I received,

Girl 1: *Because when we are initiated in this practice, we spend 3 weeks, sometimes a month. It is done mainly during the school term; we therefore miss classes. We miss teaching while the boys are in class learning.*

Girl 8: *As a victim of FGM, I will state two key ways this practice continues to affect our schooling. First, we are taken away from school, disrupting our classes. It is not easy to catch up when we return to school. Second is that most of us are coming from poor households, but most of the time our parents use the little resources to sponsor the FGM. After the initiation, they are unable to meet our schooling demands, which leads to many girls either dropping out to get married or being involved with male teachers or older men.*

Boy 2: *Let me say FGM practice. Some of these girls, as soon as they return from the FGM practice, society portrays them as ready for motherhood. Their parents often express willingness to give their daughters to men for financial upliftment.*

FT 3: *I will say bondo initiation. Because it leads to absenteeism and is a key factor in girls dropping out of school, for instance, I recently noticed that one of my female students had not been attending classes for about two weeks. I tried to reach out to the parent, but to no avail. I sent another student to enquire, and he told me she is in the bondo society. She has missed a significant part of the teaching term.*

A key tenet of FGM is to regulate girls' sexual pleasure, which is problematic because it denies sexual rights. It is argued that girls who have not experienced FGM are promiscuous in behaviour because it is suggested that the clitoris induces sexual pleasures (Ejukonemu, 2021). Therefore, the reason for FGM against girls is to 'reduce as well as prevent promiscuity among young girls and women' (Ibid p.232). This, in a broader context, demonstrates how gender intersects with sexuality to exacerbate inequalities in schools. In another discussion, it was revealed that FGM affected girls psychologically, thereby affecting their level of concentration in class. Girl 27, while responding to my question on the effect of the practice of FGM on girls' classroom participation and performance, she noted;

"For some girls, the moment they have learnt they will be initiated, they will be psychologically disturbed. They will become anxious, depressed and scared. This situation affects their participation and performance".

The above remarks indicate the adverse consequences of FGM on girls in school. Like the findings above, Ejukonemu 2021 and Farouki et al. 2022 suggested that the practice of FGM affects girls' self-esteem and sexual confidence. Hence, the implications of intersecting inequalities cannot be overstated, as this study argues that they have adverse consequences for girls' classroom participation and performance.

5.2.6.2 The Cultural/Traditional Practice of Early/Child/Forced Marriage

Existing literature on child marriage in Sierra Leone noted that the practice has been primarily used as the 'safest way of controlling a girl's sexuality' (Leach, 2008, p.46). In a focus group discussion, I asked a group of five girls to share

their thoughts on what they believed was driving the high dropout rate among girls in their school. See some of their responses.

FGD2G4: *Poverty, which leads to early marriage. Some girls who cannot afford extra school expenses or whose families cannot make ends meet give their daughters out to an older man who can support the family financially. These girls are likely to drop out of school.*

FGD2G3: *I agree with G4. I want to add that FGM also pave the way for early marriage, which leads to school dropout. Most families view a girl who has been initiated as ready for marriage and motherhood, and as a result, they welcome a bride price from financially strong men. I will say girls from the villages who are poor are mostly vulnerable to these issues.*

FGD2G2: *Maybe I will add that girls who want financial and academic benefits fall prey to male teachers, okada guys and order men, who will get them pregnant. They will then drop out of school as a result.*

The above remarks illustrate how both FGM and child marriage have contributed to girls' secondary schooling dropouts, thus limiting retention and completion. Most importantly, it demonstrates how the intersection of gender and other social identities negatively influences girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes. Below, I have further discussed how both practices continue to affect the everyday school life of girls in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

On the other hand, child marriage is mainly linked to '...enhancing family and community welfare and short-term economic opportunities' (Dejaeghere & Miske, 2009, p.168). It has been argued that the social-cultural practice of child marriage has mediated the '...age of marriage and choice of partner' which is a strategy to regulate girls' sexuality (Heward, 1999, p.6). One thing that stood clear during my interviews is that due to a lack of financial and material resources, some parents used girls as commodities. Coercive sexual relationships, such as child/early marriages, between schoolgirls and older men, were facilitated by parents. Resisting girls often endure pressure and ostracism, being expelled from their homes and communities for defying their parents. For instance, when asked what some of the factors are that limit girls' performance in the class, Yellow had this to say;

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

Similarly, Girl 14 recounted an event that happened to a classmate

“There was this girl in my previous class whom an elder man from Freetown expressed a marriage proposal to, and the family accepted. She initially refused, but pressure from the parents made way for her to get married, and she dropped out of school”

The data indicate that marriage is used as a coping mechanism for poor parents. It is also used as a tool to police girls' sexuality (Leach, 2008). In Sierra Leone, early secondary schooling was founded on Christian notions of femininity and masculinity. Secondary school girls are prepared to be 'responsible wives and mothers' (Leach, 2008, p.45). Studies, such as those by Liu (2006), have demonstrated the significant role of schools and the broader society in shaping the minds of pupils. What I found is that some girls believe they do not need to excel in school because they are likely to get married before finishing their education. What clearly came out is that parents from poor households use their girl child as a commodity in exchange for financial resources. For example, in a focus group discussion, one of the girls mentioned the role that the lack of resources in the family plays in facilitating early marriage among girls in her school. She noted;

“Poverty, which leads to early marriage. Some girls who cannot afford extra school expenses or whose families cannot make ends meet give their daughters out to an older man who can support the family financially. These girls will end up dropping out of school”.

The above remarks resonate with studies from Unterhalter et al. (2010, 2020) in African context; Koissy-Kpein (2015) and UNICEF (2024) in Sierra Leone and Dejaeghere and Miske's (2009) research findings in Vietnam, where they found that the social practice of early or child marriages is often related to low-income status for families from deprived and poor households in rural communities. Families of girls they interviewed argued that girls' education is 'not a cost-effective strategy for their immediate well-being or future livelihood. They argued

that 'educating a... girl will not result in economic returns for her birth family (2009, p.168). In one of their interviews, a girl recounted her reason for dropping out of school: "I did not want to marry, but my family is too poor and accepted their (the boys' family) gifts" (Ibid., p. 169).

To conclude, the findings from this theme have illustrated that cultural attitudes towards girls have inevitably shaped gender relations in secondary schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone. The gender structuring in schools is influenced by structural relations established within the household. For instance, Davidson and Kanyuka argued that culturally expected behaviours and norms drive the incidence of early marriage and teenage pregnancy because the cultural imperative is that '...girls should become wives and mothers' (1990, p.4). Alongside poverty and location, data from this research have shown that ethnic-traditions/cultural practices make girls more vulnerable to school dropout than their male peers, thereby contributing to poor school experiences and learning outcomes.

5.2.7 Conclusion

This section outlined the intersectional nature of violence in schools and its adverse effect on girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes. Based on the data analysed and my findings, I argue that girls have been targeted with violence in school to limit their participation and performance. I have been able to illustrate how gender intersects with class, sexuality, ethnic traditions and location to facilitate a gendered nature of violence in secondary schooling in Sierra Leone. I have also been able to demonstrate how discriminatory gender norms have served as a vehicle for the sexual harassment, violence and bullying experienced by girls in school. The findings have showcased that school-related violence is a direct reflection of wider patterns of gendered inequality and violence in Sierra Leone society. The findings have also been able to establish that deliberate effort should be made to adopt an integrated approach in addressing school-related violence. It is important to note that gender violence, as mentioned above, contributes significantly to unequal experiences of schooling that most times result in dropout, teenage pregnancy, and early

marriage. Hence, the investigation of school-related violence cannot be conducted appropriately with a single-axis framework but rather an intersectional framework to understand the effects of overlapping identities in facilitating a gendered nature of violence in school and how it has shaped girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes. The findings from the data analysed show that the asymmetrical gender relations in secondary schools in Sierra Leone have portrayed gendered violence as a normal phenomenon. Hence, girls tend to have accepted it as an inevitable part of daily school life. I found out that although girls are vulnerable to violence in secondary school, due to some interrelated factors, some girls are more susceptible to school-related violence than others. Therefore, this research acknowledges the role gender and other identities play in promoting gendered violence in secondary schooling in Sierra Leone.

Chapter 6: Negotiating Male-centredness In Schools: An Intersecting Analysis of Experiences of Classroom Interactions and The Use of Space Within and Outside the Classroom

6.1 Introduction

Sierra Leone, as a highly patriarchal society, has male-centeredness entrenched in every aspect of its institutions, including schools. Classroom micropolitics and microcultures significantly contribute to the gendered nature of schooling experiences (Liu, 2006). Classroom observations and interviews conducted revealed that male pupils and teachers were actively involved in maintaining masculine control over girls within and outside the classroom. As such, Connell (1996) suggested the school as a site where masculinity is socially constructed. By masculinity, this research refers to 'the exercise of power, as power over' (Kuzmic, 2000, p. 119). As Liu (2006) noted, the classroom is the most evident site in the school, where male-centeredness appears to be most pronounced (p. 427). As such, the classroom is believed to be a mechanism through which school culture or gender regime mediates masculinities and femininities (Liu, 2006). Thus, I agree with Liu's argument that classroom dynamics are 'deeply gendered' (Ibid p.427). It is a site that promotes heterosexual regimes and where gender relations are constructed to portray male domination and female subordination. Therefore, Rycroft-Smith and Andre argued for an equal classroom space because they believe that 'sexual harassment, sexist language and gender stereotyping are commonplace in school settings' (2017, p.3). It is against this background that this research argues that the intersection of gender and other social identities, like sexuality, has contributed to girls' inability to participate better in class due to male domination and control over classroom space and time, resulting in negative schooling experiences and learning outcomes. I agree with Younger and Cobbett (2012) that inequitable power dynamics within the classroom have led to girls' doubts about their ability to participate actively in classroom discussions.

This study's findings have established an imbalance in classroom interactions between boys and girls. It was observed that boys had greater control over the

use of space and time within and outside the classroom. As such, this section focused on exploring the presence of male domination within and outside the classroom and provided insight into how girls negotiate and contest male domination. It also explores the performance of male masculinity to regulate and police girls' sexuality. The central argument of this section is that in a bid to exert their masculine control over classroom space and time, male pupils and teachers acted in ways that are anti-female, which has harmed girls' secondary schooling experiences and learning outcomes in post-conflict Sierra Leone, especially for girls from poor rural households. Therefore, evidence from this research suggests that male domination of space, both within and outside the classroom, contributes to the intersection of inequalities in secondary schooling. Thus, Mandel and Shakeshaft argued that male-centeredness is pervasive in the classroom because of the male performance of masculinity, which controls both physical and verbal space (2000). The findings of this study are also consistent with Mandel and Shakeshaft's (2000) argument that the presence of male dominance within and outside the classroom has affected the way girls interact within the class as well as socialise outside the class because, as they put it, 'schooling is one of the most important socializers in our society' (2000 p.75). To help understand male domination within and outside the classroom and its impact on girls' schooling, two emerging issues have been explored: classroom interactions (including students' interactions, teachers' interactions, and teacher-pupil interactions) and the use of space (both within and outside the classroom).

6.2 Understanding the Intersectionality of Classroom

Interactions

The notion of student-centred learning has placed the classroom at the centre of teaching and learning practices. However, it has been revealed in this study that this form of learning has favoured boys and disadvantaged girls. Renold (2006) described the classroom as a 'powerful and intimate social site in which the micro politics of social relations between teachers and students...charged with a range of formal and informal gendered meanings' (p.439). This study extends beyond the exploration of classroom relations based on 'hierarchical power struggles

between teachers and pupils', instead examining the interactions between teachers and pupils (p. 440). To explore the gendered interactions within and outside the classroom, it is necessary to look beyond the gender relations in teacher–pupil interactions and pupil-pupil interactions, and understand the intersecting interactions between females and males, as well as how they contribute to gender stereotypes and gender differentiations in participation and performance in class. For instance, it was observed that in an attempt to control the verbal space of the classroom and influence lesson attention, boys talked over, interrupted and jeered girls who attempted to make contributions in class. This has resulted in the classroom being an 'abusive and dangerous space for many pupils' (Renold, 2006). In most of the interviews conducted with girls, it was reported in this study that boys used less visible violence, such as jeering, name-calling, and provocation, to distract or silence them in class. For instance, in a focus group discussion with a group of 5 girls, we discussed issues affecting girls in classroom interactions. Although one of the girls was assertive about female active participation, the other girls believed the boys dominated because they felt superior.

Researcher: What other issues would you say have contributed to girls' limited participation in classroom interactions?

FGD2G5: When a girl misses an answer in class or mispronounces a word, she is mocked by pupils, especially the boys, and some teachers are also in the habit of using that scenario to humiliate girls or provoke them. It dampens the girl's confidence in participating in classroom discussions.

Researcher: What would you say about the notion that boys dominate the classroom

FGD2G2: I disagree with the statement; in our class, we see ourselves as equals and that both the boys and girls dominate classroom discussion.

FGD2G3: I disagree with G2 and agree with the notion that boys dominate the classroom. In our class, the boys think that because they are physically stronger than we are and assume they are more intelligent than we are, they should be in control of the class. They often used bullying and intimidation tactics to assert their superiority in the class.

FGD2G4: I agree with G3. In my case, I feel those boys who are a few grades above us, like in SSS3, always think they are superior to all the girls in the school, including girls who are in the same class as them.

Another example of male dominance in secondary schooling is through the enforcement of discipline over pupils. It was observed that female teachers see the school as very masculine. They most often render their authority to male teachers when it comes to disciplining pupils, especially boys. It was revealed that boys, and in some cases, girls, believe male teachers are in charge of the day-to-day running of the school. It was evident in their responses to who they considered the most disciplined teachers in their schools. See a conversation with one of the boys below;

Researcher: I asked you to name five teachers you consider the most disciplined, and you named all-male teachers. Why is that?

Boy 5: When it comes to disciplining students, male teachers are the ones assigned to do so. If a female teacher wants to punish a student, especially male students, they takes us to one of the male teachers.

Researcher: What are you telling me is that male students do not obey the authority of a female teacher?

Boy 5: Some boys tend not to, but sometimes the female teachers themselves always shy away from disciplining male students; they would rather take us to male teachers. So, most boys are afraid of male teachers than female teachers.

Liu (2006), in her classroom observation, suggests that teachers are primarily to blame for their role in reinforcing patriarchal norms that subordinate girls and prioritise boys. However, Acker suggested that teachers should not be blamed for problematic classroom interactions with pupils because teachers find themselves in an already hegemonic school process that normalises gender differentiation. According to her, the actions of teachers are '...rooted in tradition and common sense rather than malice' (Acker, 1994, p.93). To some extent, I agree with Acker (1994) that teachers are 'victims' of the school's hegemonic processes; however, I argue that to a large extent, teachers contribute to reinforcing these processes because they often do not challenge them, instead encouraging and reinforcing them. Secondly, since a large number of teachers

are male teachers, and they come from a wider society that practices gender differentiation, these male teachers are complicit in the hegemonic school process because of their desire to assert their male authority among girls and female teachers.

Having established some factors relating to male domination of the physical and verbal space of the classroom, this study believes girls from poor rural households are more likely to be subjugated and distracted by male disruption and bullying. For instance, it was observed and reported by some of the girls interviewed that girls from rural households were systematically targeted through name-calling and jeering, reflecting their physical appearance. For instance, Girl 21 mentioned;

Most of the boys relate well with some of the girls who are chief children or girls they think come from an affluent background. However, for us, coming from the villages, they call us names like muku (uncivilised).

Another girl (Girl 27) noted that they (girls from rural households) sometimes feel their social gatherings are often targeted and disrupted by boys because they know they are timid to challenge their actions. The findings of this research suggest that while girls from affluent urban households are popular among their social groups in school, their peers from poor rural households are not recognised or are restricted from joining these social groups. Evidence like this indicates how the physical and verbal space of the classroom is deeply gendered. It also points to the fact that the intersection of gender and other social identities like class, location, and sexuality limits girls' participation and performance in the classroom. Thus, Lynch and Lodge (2002) suggest that the intersection of identities seriously disadvantages girls from low-income households because they 'frequently lack the money, transport, time and sometimes even knowledge' to participate in classroom discussions (p. 183).

In order to establish the contributions of male domination in classroom interactions to gendered secondary schooling, this study has covered these three areas: Classroom Leadership; Classroom Talk (Pupil-pupil Interaction); Teacher-pupil interactions; Teachers' gendered perceptions and expectations; Subject

choices (Paechter, 2002; Michelle, 1983; Liu, 2006; Renold, 2006; Swann & Graddol, 1994; Wamahiu, 1994; Dunne, 2005 & 2006).

6.2.1 Classroom Talk: Pupil–Pupil Interactions

Classroom talk in this study refers to the ability of both girls and boys to actively participate in and contribute to classroom discussions, whether in mixed-gender groups or with teachers (Paechter, 2002; Younger et al., 1999; Thompson et al., 2024). According to UK research, classroom talk is significantly 'central to the teaching and learning process' (Paechter, 2002, p.24). However, evidence from studies such as Thompson et al. (2024) on fieldwork in Australian secondary schools and Francis (2000) on fieldwork in UK secondary schools has shown that girls have not had equal access to classroom talk, a crucial learning practice. The findings of this study confirmed this. Classroom observations and interviews conducted revealed that girls are disadvantaged and marginalised in classroom talk, a significant aspect of teaching and learning. The evidence from this research is consistent with the findings of Luke (1994), Younger et al. (1999), and Renold (2006), which indicate that boys are three times more likely to out-talk girls in the classroom because they have dominated the classroom space.

Conducting this qualitative research, I found that boys tend to dominate classroom talk by talking over or provoking girls, causing them to ignore or override their ideas and participation in class. In addition, Dalley-Trim (2007) mentioned that within the classroom, boys like male teachers were constantly engaged in practices that 'served to ridicule, silence and exclude the girls from classroom talk' (p. 207). For example, when asked which of the boys or girls participate or contribute more to the classroom, all respondents replied that it is the boys. One of the girls had this to say;

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

The remarks above illustrate how boys dominate discussions in class throughout by trying to control topics, interrupt, disrupt, and talk more aggressively, especially targeting girls whom they think are vulnerable. In another interview, I asked one of the girls to describe her experience with classroom talk. See her responses below;

Researcher: What do you say about classroom talk?

Girl 1: I believe that because boys dominate classroom talk, they are outshining us in class

Researcher: So, have you had cases in the class wherein you want to talk, and they interrupt you?

Girl 1: Yes, the other day I stood up to talk, and they started calling me names and provoking me, telling me to stop talking. Sometimes I cry.

Researcher: You have had cases where you had to cry? Can you describe a situation that moved you to tears?

Girl 1: I was making a point when one of the boys said I should keep quiet. Moreover, said, "Look at your face like a monkey".

The above remarks support the argument of this research, which suggests that classroom talk inequality is more evident in Secondary Schooling. More literature has illustrated how boys dominate discussions in class throughout by trying to control topics, interrupt, disrupt, and talk more aggressively, especially in mixed-sex groups. When girls attempt to make contributions, they are often overlooked and ignored. Both girls and boys regard the boys' contributions as more accurate and important. I agree with Liu (2006) that this notion reflects the traditional socio-cultural paradigm of male superiority and female inferiority. Furthermore, it was observed that boys were primarily interested in conversing with each other in mixed-gender groups. Thus, this illustrates ways girls are marginalised by their peers in classroom participation and discussions. To better understand the processes of unequal classroom talk, its impact on girls' schooling experiences and learning, and how it has reinforced and reproduced intersecting inequalities in secondary schooling, this study has examined two issues: classroom disruptive behaviours and Classroom Leadership.

6.2.1.1 Understanding the influence of Classroom Disruptive Behaviours on Girls' Secondary Schooling Experiences and learning in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone

One way boys have exerted dominance and control over the classroom is through disruption. Jackson (2010) described boys being disruptive in class as '...performance of laddish masculinities in schools' (p.509). By laddish performance, this study refers to boys' group behaviours, including their attention-seeking behaviours, unruly and competitive approaches in class, disruptive behaviours, and a lack of respect for authority (Jackson, 2010). Evidence from this research has shown that boys dominate classroom lessons by demanding attention from teachers through disruptive behaviours. By disruptive behaviours in schools, I refer to talking over or being shouted down, interruptions, making sexist comments, and being loud, perpetuated by males against females in and outside the classroom (Younger et al., 1999; Jackson, 2002, 2010). In this study, it was observed that teachers spent more time and attention addressing disruptive behaviours of boys, thereby diverting classroom lessons to boys at the disadvantage of girls. This is consistent with the views from teachers in British schools who viewed laddish behaviours among boys as 'attention-seeking behaviour' to exercise hegemonic masculinities (Jackson, 2010, p.508).

As evident in the work of Younger et al. (1999), Younger and Warrington (2005), and Beaman et al. (2006), disruptive behaviour by boys was revealed to be a source of impediment to girls' learning outcomes. This research confirms this. A consensus that emerged from the girls I interviewed was that boys often attempt to be disruptive in class when they fail to take notes in the previous class, are unable to make contributions to group discussions, or girls are making more input in classroom discussions, or they seem not to understand the lesson being taught. Younger and Warrington (2005), in their work in UK schools, reaffirmed the above points made by the girls I interviewed. In their work, it was revealed that boys adopted laddish or disruptive behaviour as a strategy to 'protect their

macho image and their social self-esteem' (p.25). Thus, they, as well as Jackson (2002 and 2010), suggested that boys used laddish behaviour to avoid failure in class or as a defence mechanism.

Further results from this research showed that within the classroom, the girls were 'constantly interrupted, 'shouted down, and rendered silent...boys set and policed the rules of classroom interaction (Spender, 1982, cited in Dalley-Trim, 2007, p.207). In addition, it was noted that girls' contribution to classroom discussions was largely 'unwelcome and read as unworthy, trivial, and open to mockery' (Ibid). In an interview with one of the boys, he admitted their actions had negatively impacted girls' confidence and ability to participate in classroom talk. See his response below;

Researcher: As a class prefect, what will you say are the challenges girls face in your class when it comes to classroom talk?

Boy 6: They are most scared to speak because when they mispronounce, the boys will start laughing and provoke them.

Researcher: What other challenges?

Boy 6: Some of the girls lack the confidence to speak up in class.

Researcher: But don't you think the act of provoking and laughing affects their confidence level?

Boy 6: Yes, it is a significant factor in their lack of confidence

Thus, Michelle noted that 'boys receive the lion's share of teachers' attention and regard' (1983, p.37). However, in cases where girls tend to demonstrate unruly and disruptive behaviour, they are treated with harsh criticism and sometimes punishment (Paechter, 2006). Some teachers argued that it is natural and understandable for boys to act with aggressive behaviour, but such behaviour does not meet the expected gender behaviour of girls. Classroom observation and interviews revealed that boys employed classroom disruption tactics to 'claim more time and attention,' which ultimately skewed the lessons in their favour at the disadvantage of girls (Michelle, 1983, p. 21). Most girls expressed a deep resentment at the amount of time teachers spent addressing boys' disruptive

behaviours instead of teaching. Evidence from this research revealed that to quell boys' disruptive classroom behaviour, teachers spent a significant amount of time reprimanding them through corporal punishment (Younger et al., 1999). As mentioned by Mensch and Lloyd (1998), the amount of time spent by teachers reprimanding boys...is the time lost to teaching. This practice usually works to the disadvantage of the girls. For example, all the female teachers interviewed noted that addressing indiscipline behaviours perpetrated by boys is their biggest challenge in the class and that it warranted more attention than actual teaching. The conversation below points to the fact that boys not only get much attention from teachers, thereby disrupting teaching, but they also perpetrate violence against girls during teaching.

Researcher: Now, let us say you are teaching in your classroom. How will you describe order and discipline in the class during teaching?

FT 2: The boys often disturb and disrupt a lot. They disrupt the class a lot.

Researcher: OK. How do they disrupt?

FT 2: For instance, while teaching, you will see a boy who does not have a pen go directly to a girl and forcefully take her pen from her.

Researcher: OK. Are these kinds of disruptions always targeted at girls?

Teacher 2: Yes. Sometimes, in cases where a girl refuses, a boy will physically assault the girl. The boys often think that after the teachers, they are in control of the classrooms.

This is also evident in Jackson's (2010) findings in British schools, where both male and female teachers voiced that laddish behaviours by boys were more problematic for female teachers. For instance, one of the male teachers mentioned that they 'encounter less problematic laddish behaviours than women because they understand it better and just chew it off' (p. 511).

Evidence from classroom observation suggested that male teachers had good interactions with boys and directed most of their questions to them. Thus, I agree with Younger and Cobbett (2012) that the gendered assumptions of these teachers drive this practice of teachers tolerating boys' domination of teachers'

attention, that girls are generally 'easier to teach, more compliant and less challenging in classroom management terms, and boys' behaviour necessitating a more authoritarian approach' (p.7). In responding to my why, she mentioned that boys are participating and performing better in class than the girls. Girl 9 stated;

"For example, when a girl is trying to contribute to a discussion, they also talks over us, sometimes shouting at us and asking us to sit down, claiming we do not know anything. In some cases, they laugh at us if we miss an answer. These acts have deterred many girls in our class from participating, including me."

On that note, Clinton Allison (1995) argued that boys receive more attention from teachers than girls because 'when boys call out answers and comments in class, teachers tolerate or encourage it' (p.162).

Researcher: Who will you say teachers pay more attention to in your class?

Girl 13: As I mentioned, the boys in our class are very undisciplined and disruptive, so most teachers pay more attention to them

Similarly, it was observed that boys' disruptive behaviour not only demands teachers' attention but also limits girls' recognition in the class. In one instance, it was observed that teachers often try not to recognise hands raised by girls because they are deemed not competent. This is reiterated by Boy 6 when asked, based on his experience, what he thinks are the challenges girls face in class. He replied.

Boy 6: Another challenge girls face in our class is the lack of encouragement from our teachers. For instance, when they ask a question and a girl raises her hand, she will be dismissed to sit down and instead be asked to ask a boy to answer. This has affected girls' confidence in participating in classroom discussions.

Researcher: Are you saying the teachers encourage boys to speak more in your class than girls

Boy 6: Yes, I believe so.

Fisher (1994) argued that this act has profound implications for girls' self-esteem and confidence in participating actively in class, as well as their overall academic

performance. It was reported that the performance of aggressive masculinity through classroom disruptive behaviours resulted in girls doubting their ability to contribute to teaching or discussions. I argue that classroom disruption by boys means they dominate both the physical and verbal space in the classroom and limit girls' active participation in the learning space. Therefore, my data concurs with Paechter's (2002) suggestions that girls are marginalised in two forms: the ability to learn through collaborative discussion in mixed groups and the ability to participate in classroom discussions with teachers. This, she emphasised, is a crucial aspect of learning contexts. The example below reiterates Paechter's two forms of learning marginalisation girls face in relation to classroom talk.

Researcher: How will you describe classroom interactions, such as classroom talk and participation

Girl 14: It is absolutely dominated by boys. They always try to interrupt us when we want to talk. There is a boy who talks nonstop. We girls do not quite participate.

Researcher: Can you explain further how they interrupt you, the girls?

Girl 14: If a teacher has asked a question, let us say, "What is economics?". If a girl stands up to answer, they will start shouting that it is a lie and that the girl should sit down. So, most girls do not participate.

Researcher: How does the teacher deal with such cases

Girl 14: Some teachers will step in and admonish them, but some see it as standard practice.

In a bid to express their masculinity, it was observed that inside and outside the classroom, boys often tried to collect things that belonged to girls forcefully. During the interviews with the girls, it was reported that some boys would forcefully collect books, pens, and sometimes lunch from the girls. In some cases, they do it to disrupt the social gathering of girls. It was observed and reported that girls who tried to confront their actions were either ridiculed or sometimes physically assaulted. For instance, in a conversation with one of the female teachers on boys' classroom interactions with girls, she noted boys' classroom disruptive behaviours and violence towards girls. She mentioned;

FT 2: For instance, while teaching, you will see a boy who does not have a pen go directly to a girl and forcefully take her pen from her.

Researcher: OK. Are these kinds of disruptions always targeted at girls?

FT 2: Yes. Sometimes, in cases where a girl refuses, a boy will physically assault the girl. The boys always think they are in control of the classrooms after the teachers.

In all of these, it will seem that the school management and the teachers recognised this as standard practices of everyday schooling. Given the unequal treatment of girls in classroom interactions, it is no surprise that teachers facilitated male-centeredness within and outside the classroom. I agree with Dunne's argument that boys engage in widespread bullying and intimidation in an attempt to '...control and discipline the girls' (p.509). For instance, it was observed that teachers would make boys with disruptive behaviours in class sit with the girls because it is assumed they will exhibit their best behaviour and remain quiet when sitting among girls. In other instances, disruptive boys were compared to girls to ridicule them. This evidence is consistent with Abraham's (1989) fieldwork in comprehensive schools in South England, where she mentioned that 'disruptive boys would be made to sit with girls on the assumption that that would keep the boys quiet' (p.70). Similar findings were also reported by Jackson (2010). This assumption further reiterates my point that gendered perceptions by teachers have reinforced male-centeredness within and outside the classroom. This qualitative research has provided evidence that the classroom can be an unsafe and dangerous space for both girls and female teachers (Parkes, 2015; Evans et al., 2023; Pai, 2024, etc.). I argue that both male teachers and boys deliberately adopt verbal and physical harassment to assert male authority in the classroom and staff room. This reflects socio-cultural notions of normative masculinities.

6.2.2 Classroom Leadership: Teachers' and Students' perceptions and behaviours

Many secondary school-based studies have explored teachers' gendered perceptions and expectations of girls' and boys' classroom behaviours. Renold (2006) argues that teachers tend to associate children's social and cultural identities, such as 'girls' and 'boys', with their academic abilities as pupils. This relationship assumption often creates an unequal characterisation of girls, because teachers' gender perceptions and expectations mirror the way teachers view pupils' academic abilities. Thus, it affects classroom interactions with girls, thereby reinforcing gender divisions. I observed that most leadership roles related to coordination, discipline and representation within the schools are dominated by boys. For instance, when it came to supporting games and sports, the committee (which is dominated by male teachers) in coordinating these activities, I observed that boys were most often asked to provide support to teachers in these schools. The same can be said when it comes to supporting the Health and Safety Committees in these schools in coordinating cleaning exercises and the safety of the school environment. This is to affirm male dominance and superiority over girls.

Another classroom observation revealed that male prefects had more authority, respect and control over their classes than their female counterparts. In classes where female prefects were in charge, their authority was often challenged by their colleagues, especially the boys. All the female prefects interviewed highlighted the challenges they faced in instructing and controlling the boys. For instance, when asked about her main challenge faced as class prefect, Girl 13 replied

“The boys think I should not control them, so they always undermine my authority in the class. They think they should be in control of the class. It did not make my role pleasant at all”.

Similarly, when asked about her experience as a class prefect, Girl 7 responded;

Girl 7: *They do not abide by the rules I have established in the classroom. There is this boy who will vehemently refuse any duty I assign to him. I have reported him several times, but it seems like the male teachers have tolerated his behaviour.*

Researcher: *Do you think it is because you are a girl that they are not obeying your authority?*

Girl 7: *Oh, yes. In our previous class, a boy was the class prefect, and he was in complete control. The boys and girls respected him. Moreover, because he came from a wealthy home, he had many boys and girls wanting to associate with him.*

Remarks such as this indicate that girls' position in the gender hierarchy is undermined even in situations where they find themselves in leadership positions. This evidence also resonates with Dunne's research in Zimbabwe, where it was reported that female prefects had problems instructing or controlling male students; hence, their role was best suited to 'domestic duties such as overseeing classroom and office cleaning' (Dunne, 2006, p. 506). Dunne argues that the classroom's explicit gendering is a result of the nuanced gender differentiation of duties facilitated by the school institution (2006).

Another explanation for boys asserting male dominance in the classroom is their tendency to take on the role of teachers when they are absent or running late. Classroom observations and interviews revealed that boys often acted as teachers to maintain control over the class. For instance, Girl 8 provided an example of how classroom interactions typically work in their class when a teacher is absent.

Researcher: *How will you describe classroom interactions among yourself in the absence of teachers?*

Girl 8: *We interact very well. For example, when there is no teacher in the class, the boys tend to step in by going to the front of the classroom and teaching us areas that the teachers taught but we did not understand, especially subjects like mathematics and physics.*

Researcher: *So, the boys will always act like teachers in the class. What is your personal take on that?*

Girl 8: Well, for me, *I think such interaction helps improve us girls in subjects that we are not good at. It provides us with the opportunity to understand and excel in science subjects.*

Another girl reiterated the above discussion by corroborating the argument put forth by this study that boys assumed a leadership role in class because they believed masculinity entailed control over girls in both public and private spaces (Dunne et al. 2006).

Researcher: In a case where the teacher is not in the class, who dominates the classroom more?

Girl 4: It is the boys. Usually, if a teacher is not in class, the boys will stand up and go in front of the class to teach us mathematics, physics, and chemistry. They cover subject areas because they recognise our weaknesses in these areas.

Researcher: So why do boys take the place of teachers to teach you girls?

Girl 4: Because they feel they are more intelligent in the class.

Researcher: And what do you say?

Girl 4: Yes, they are intelligent (with a smile).

What the above remarks illustrate is that student-led classes or tasks were more likely to be dominated by male students. Furthermore, I observed that student-led classes initiated by boys had a higher chance of achieving their desired goal. On the contrary, those initiated by girls are either more likely to be shut down by boys at the initiation phrase or disrupted at the execution phrase. My classroom observations reinforced the perceptions highlighted by the girls above. For instance, gendered assumptions held by pupils and teachers are that girls are soft, passive and submissive, and boys are aggressive, innovative and competitive (Younger & Cobbett, 2012). Critics may argue that the examples above show that boys positively impact girls' schooling by supporting them in science subjects. To some extent, I agree with that statement; however, based on my classroom observations, girls faced challenges in assuming that role equally because the boys thought girls could not teach them. In cases where a girl attempts to do the same, she is shouted at and asked to sit down. It was observed that girls were subjected to a 'critical and coercive gaze' (p.22). Simply

put, girls are not given the same space to support the class in areas where they are also proficient. There is a combination of perceived inferiority and likely resignation that they might not complete their education anyway among girls.

Therefore, this study posits that male domination of the physical and verbal space of the classroom contributes to girls' low self-esteem, especially girls from poor rural households, because they lack personal assertiveness in such an environment. This has reinforced gender imbalances in secondary schooling in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

In another instance, it was observed that some teachers assigned boys to step in and assume authority to control and maintain order when they were leaving the class. For example, I asked a female teacher why she left her class in charge of two boys while the class prefect (a girl), who should be in charge, was in the class. She responded;

“These boys can better provide discipline and order in this class in my absence than the class prefect (a girl) because their male colleagues, as well as the girls, respect and adhere to their authority. The class prefect most often could not provide the required leadership because most of the boys do not abide by her authority” (FT 4)

Similarly, in one of the classes, a female class prefect was asking one of the boys to help her maintain order in the class. In an interview, I asked her why she often asks this boy to help her maintain control over the class. She replied.

“Most of the girls are afraid of boys. So also, his male peers. So, if I ask him to help me maintain control, the classroom will have order and quietness” (Girl 6).

Remarks such as these indicate that even in cases where girls hold leadership positions within the class, their authority is often challenged by boys. It also indicates that physical strength/masculinity is most valued (Paechter, 2007). What this research has revealed is that classroom leadership is characterised by a power imbalance with deeply seated masculine control over girls. Hence, this study argues that the lived experiences of girls in secondary schooling are characterised by gendered expectations and patriarchal norms that promote masculinity (Pai, 2024).

Another way the school reinforces male dominance is through class and school representation. It was revealed through interviews and classroom observations that girls were less likely to be selected to represent their class or school in academic competitions within and outside their schools.

6.3 Teacher–Pupil Classroom Interactions

Gender biases are deeply rooted in teacher-student relations, textbooks and curriculum materials that present women and girls stereotypically. Allison (1995) and Thompson et al. (2024) posit that gender biases in teacher-student relations facilitate boys to actively participate in class and perpetuate disparity for girls as they receive significantly less attention. Evidence from my classroom observations suggested that male teachers had good interactions with boys, directed most of their questions to them, and provided more encouragement. It was observed that in cases where a girl gave a wrong answer, she was vilified by the teacher, most often male teachers. For instance, in one case, a male teacher directed a question to a girl, and she gave a wrong answer, then he berated, ‘Some of you girls are not serious, all you do is go after boys or male teachers for free marks.’ As recounted by Girl 16 below;

“For example, there was a time in the classroom when the teacher asked me a question, and I gave the wrong answer. That teacher embarrassed and humiliated me using insulting remarks and name-calling me while the boys laughed. I felt bad. Because of that, I am scared to talk in class even if I know the answer”

The above quotation highlights the fact that teacher–pupil interactions have often had a negative impact on girls’ self-esteem, as well as their ability to contribute confidently to classroom discussions. I agree with Dunne’s suggestion that class participation is used as an alternative tool to ‘marginalise, embarrass, or degrade the girls’ (2006, p.508). However, in a similar instance where a boy was asked a question and replied with the wrong answer, he (the male teacher) negatively compared him to the girls in the class. It was observed that teachers, especially male teachers, used girls as examples to motivate boys to do better in class by

negatively comparing them to presumably 'not so smart' girls. For instance, they will say,

'Even Girl 6, who does not speak in this class, can probably answer this question', 'even the girls can solve it', 'all the girls are taking note, and you are sitting doing nothing.'

The above findings are consistent with Delamont's (1994) findings in her analysis of sex stereotyping in the classroom. She mentioned that in an attempt to motivate boys to do well in class, teachers compare boys to girls.

It is not surprising at all that male teachers often facilitate a male-centeredness in the classroom, as their teacher–pupil interactions are frequently characterised by gender stereotyping (Liu, 2006). As suggested by Michelle (1983), boys consistently 'stand out' in classroom participation and performance. They (male teachers) interact primarily with boys because they think boys are comfortable with competitive conversations and girls are less comfortable (Dunne, 2006).

Existing Literature has linked classroom talk to learning. Thus, researchers have argued that the impact of learning in school is directly linked to the type of classroom talk practised (Thompson et al., 2024). For instance, Bernes (1979) mentioned that rigid and restricted classroom talk limits pupils' opportunities to interact effectively with teachers, thereby affecting their learning. This research observed a deficit in classroom talk and interactions in all case study schools. Firstly, it was observed that teachers in the case study schools practised the Initiative-Response-Feedback (IRF) as a form of classroom talk across all classes (Dillon, 1988; Sedova et al., 2016; Alexander, 2020). A teacher characterises this teaching practice-led approach with little response from pupils and subsequent teacher feedback. As a result, most teachers, especially male teachers, employed a competitive approach in their lessons. My research findings revealed that teachers' competitive approach does not favour girls but their male peers. I observed male teachers deliberately require a competitive approach to assert male-centeredness in the classroom. For instance, in two of the physics classes I observed, I noticed the teacher (male) was asking or making gender-differentiated questions or statements. Questions or statements like,

'We should have one answer from the boys and one for the girls', 'We have had two responses from the boys, let us have another two from the girls', 'Can we now get an answer from any girl?', 'Girl 2, you have not been paying attention. What did Boy 4 say? 'Boy 3, put your hand down, it is time to hear from the girls. '

Some may argue that such remarks promote equal opportunities for girls to contribute to classroom discussions. I agree to some degree, but the findings of this research also show that male teachers have used such approaches as retaliatory tactics to humiliate and embarrass girls who have refused their sexual advances (Dunne et al., 2006; Leach et al, 2007; Reilly, 2014; Leach, 2015).

Secondly, such an approach is especially not favourable to girls from poor rural households who are not confident enough to speak because of fear of bullying and provocation. It is important to point out that these girls already face negative social interactions with female peers and boys. Observations in these schools revealed that these boys often make derogatory remarks about their appearance because of their torn uniforms and inability to go out for lunch. According to Sperandio and Kagoda (2009), this approach especially disadvantages girls from poor rural households because it discourages them from participating in class due to their 'lack of personal assertiveness and family support and understanding needed to persevere' (p.110). This is reiterated by Lynch and Lodge (2002), who suggest that the intersection of identities seriously disadvantages girls from low-income households because they 'frequently lack the money, transport, time and sometimes even knowledge' to participate in classroom discussions (p. 183). Therefore, I agree with Sperandio and Kagoda (2009) that a secondary schooling environment that practices a competitive approach puts the learning experiences of girls from poor rural households at risk of not achieving learning outcomes. See below my discussion with Girl 12

Girl 2: The boys always think they are the smartest and our protectors, so they always try to exert control over the class, especially in terms of teacher-pupil interactions. For instance, one girl in our class during the first term stood up to answer a question, but her English was not good, and she was provoked and laughed at by her classmates. She stopped participating in class, and in the following term, she stopped coming to school.

Researcher: What is the role of the teachers in all this?

Girl 2: Some teachers do intervene and admonish the boys, especially female teachers, but some male teachers will laugh about it and act as if it is a normal thing to do."

The above remarks suggest that a gender imbalance is evident in classroom teacher-pupil discussions. For instance, my classroom observations also noted that female teachers avoided dealing with boys because they tended to harass them sexually. In contrast, male teachers tend to interact more with boys because they believe boys are more comfortable with competitive conversations, while girls are less comfortable (Renold, 2006). Although boys have been mostly portrayed as disruptive and active, while girls have been portrayed as passive and subtle, it is important to note that these gendered groups are not homogeneous; hence, there are differences of social class, location, masculinities, and femininities within these groups (Renold, 2006). Firstly, evidence from this research corroborates Liu's argument that the teacher-pupil relationship is influenced by social class. It was noted that girls from higher socio-economic classes had 'good interactions' with teachers (male and female) and are often considered the 'teachers' favourites' (Liu, 2006, p.430).

Unlike their peers from a lower socio-economic class who faced punishment, intimidation, harassment, and non-recognition, girls from a higher socio-economic class were mainly exempted from punishment, harassment and intimidation because of the financial benefits teachers get from their higher social class families, such as...?. For example, it was observed that they were appointed in leadership roles as well as 'often dominant in class interaction with teachers' (Ibid). On that note, this study emphasises the need to consider the 'possible differences among girls and how these differences may evolve' when analysing classroom interaction inequalities (Eloundou-Enyegue et al., 2009, p. 11).

Similarly, evidence from this research has revealed that social class influences teacher-pupil interactions in relation to classroom talk and participation. For instance, it was observed that girls from the upper and middle classes in urban

areas had higher levels of communication competence, hence ‘...were far more nonchalant about being consulted by teachers about their learning’ (Arnot, 2006, p.417). In contrast, girls from poor rural households it was noticed to be ‘polite to teachers’ to avoid competitive conversation with them because of their low levels of communicative competence (Ibid). Based on the above-mentioned evidence, I argue that inequalities in classroom interactions between teachers and pupils cannot be fully explored using a single-axis identity analysis, but instead require an intersectional lens. The above-mentioned evidence illustrates how gender interacts with social class and location to influence girls' everyday experiences of schooling.

There have been reports of confrontations between male teachers and girls who attempt to assert their power by challenging an idea in class or questioning the teacher's knowledge. However, boys who exhibit the same behaviour are often ignored or accepted as usual. For instance, it was observed that teachers, especially male teachers, were primarily interested in boys' ideas and contributions. Thus, girls' contributions to classroom discussions are often overlooked, which can negatively impact their confidence and ability to participate in class. Evidence from this research has revealed that boys are three times more likely to be praised, listened to, and asked questions than girls (Younger et al., 1999). In every class observed, I noticed boys were more prominent and active in classroom discourse than girls. Thus, Michelle (1983) described the classroom as a

‘Place where boys are the focus of activity and attention...particularly in the forms of interaction which the teacher initiates...while girls are placed on the margins of classroom life’ (p.38).

Additionally, it was observed that teacher-pupil interactions in class were influenced by the subjects or lesson topics being taught. For instance, it was observed that male teachers directed more attention to boys when teaching subjects, they deemed traditionally ‘masculine,’ such as Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry. While female teachers and, in some cases, male teachers who handled subject areas such as Home Economics, English, and Government, which were deemed ‘feminine’, paid more attention to girls. Thus, Liu argued that

teacher–pupil interactions can be ‘affected by the subject area being handled’ (2006, p.430). Therefore, I argue that teacher–pupil interactions in the class are constructed to reflect gender stereotypes

6.3.1 Stereotyped Teaching Practices

Researchers such as Spender, (1982); Whyte, (1986); Davies, (1989) and Thorne (1993) have argued that the gendered nature of classroom behaviour is facilitated by the ‘ways boys tend to monopolize space in the classroom and playground and how girls tend to draw less attention to themselves than do boys’ (cited in Francis 2000 p.31). My findings confirmed the argument above. My findings are also consistent with those of Younger et al. (1999) and Jackson (2010), which show that boys dominate the classroom verbal space by making more noise, thereby attracting more teacher attention during class teaching than girls. However, in addition to the gendered behaviour of pupils in the classroom, evidence from this study revealed that stereotyped teaching practices by male and female teachers reinforced gender stereotypes in the classroom, thereby disadvantaging girls, especially girls from poor rural households.

As with Delamont’s (1994) analysis of sex stereotyping in the classroom, this study found that both male and female teachers were guilty of promoting gender stereotypes. While it was observed that male teachers were much more aggressive in their promotion of gender stereotypes, female teachers promoted them more subtly. For instance, it was observed that some male teachers expressed disdain for boys they saw behaving femininely, such as always socialising with girls during lunch. They argued that these types of boys have deviated from the ‘desirable stereotypical masculine norm’ (Delamont, 1990, p.77). Findings emerging from this research revealed that ‘masculine’ girls and ‘feminine’ boys were often singled out and verbally targeted by teachers. In one of my classroom observations, one male teacher scolded a girl who behaved like a ‘tomboy’.

“This is how you start practising lesbianism, influencing other girls”

The above remarks indicate that it is not just about teaching practices but also about gendered attitudes, which serve to reproduce / police specific regimes in schools (Leach & Humphreys, 2007).

Another male teacher discussed one of his male students in the classroom with other colleagues in the staffroom.

“I do not understand that boy...He is 18, a boy, and he is always among girls. He behaves and acts like a girl. Yesterday I asked him to join the football team to play against SSS3 Science, but he could barely kick the ball. He is as lazy and weak as the girls”.

Delamont (1990) suggested that most male teachers and, in some cases, female teachers are apparently upset about pupils who they deem have deviated from generally accepted norms and behave like [a boy who is] ‘effeminate’ or a [girl who is a] ‘tomboy. Another example I observed is when a female teacher commented on the appearance of a girl.

“You should always look tidy and modest because you are in the presence of boys’ (FT 5)

What this teacher is doing is policing how girls dress to meet the accepted appearance that boys desire. I argue that these types of remarks are problematic because it is a form of regulating girls’ sexuality to meet boys’ sensuality. Secondly, in my observations, I noticed that both male and female teachers appeared to be dealing with girls and boys differently in relation to interaction in class and taking disciplinary actions. I recorded several incidents on this (about 15 incidents). For instance, on one occasion, a female teacher and I walked into a classroom and met a few boys kicking a football around while the others argued about Arsenal FC and Manchester United. She was quick to call the class to order and directed this comment to two of the boys.

“You two should be ashamed of yourselves because you both repeated in this class instead of reading your books, you are here playing. Are you not ashamed of the girls doing better than you?” (FT 4).

In another instance, I observed a Home Economics lesson, during which a classroom discussion focused on cooking skills. The female teacher showed

more interest in the girls, directing most of the questions to them. At one point, she noticed I was observing her interactions, and she commented;

“Can we hear now from the boys? You should also be contributing because you must learn how to cook in the event your wife is sick and unable to cook” (FT 3).

As a result of my observation of the above lesson, during an interview, I asked FT 3 why she was directing most of her attention in class to the girls. She replied:

“The boys outperform the girls when it comes to overall classroom performance, but when it comes to the subject I teach – Home Economics, the girls do better than the boys”

I further asked what the reason was behind that, and she responded.

“They (boys) see Home Economics as a female subject; they tend not to be interested. The few boys that may appear to be interested are sometimes laughed at”

Comments like that illustrate that cooking, by extension, has been stereotyped as a girly role and subject in home economics. Her comment concludes a pattern of practice that I observed in all four participating schools, where both male and female teachers appeared to be responding differently to girls and boys. This is consistent with Namatende-Sakwa's (2018) suggestion that ‘teachers and students appropriate textual meaning is shaped by their own cultural understandings of gender relations’ (p.610). For instance, in one of my observations in a maths class, a male teacher appeared to expect boys to be proficient in solving problems, hence he directed all the questions to the boys. The boys, on the other hand, seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed the moment. They were actively responding to questions while the girls looked on. At one point, the male teacher directed a question to a girl;

“Girl 19, you should be able to answer this question. It is something I taught last week”

When the girl could not answer the question, he commented:

“Mathematics is not for you people; you should concentrate on the English Language and Home Economics”

On the other hand, one of the boys could not solve one of the problems on the board, and he commented;

“This is a good try; you have to put effort into knowing your multiplication”

The above comments give an insight into the role teachers play in promoting and perpetuating gender stereotypes in secondary schools. My findings are consistent with Lynch and Lodge’s (2002) findings in UK schools, where it was revealed that ‘teachers seemed to be anxious’ to include boys in ‘feminine’ subjects like Home Economics classes because of the small number of boys interested in the subject (p.120). This extra attention means teachers would have to pay more attention to boys to the detriment of girls. Therefore, Francis (2000) suggests that because teachers respond to and relate with girls and boys differently, pupils’ behaviour in secondary schools is ‘strongly gendered’ (p.32).

6.4 Subject Choice

Gender and Schooling researchers have also suggested that teaching methods and practices have contributed to making school gendered (Dunne et al., 2005). They highlighted the language of textbooks as a means of learning and teaching in school as problematic. For instance, Michelle (1983) provided examples of how the language of teaching presents men as ‘inventors’ and ‘protectors’, and women as passive and dependent. Examples like ‘*inventors and their wives*’, ‘*primitive men discovered fire*’, or ‘a scientist must devote his everyday waking hour’ convey to boys and girls that men are superior to women (Ibid). For instance, at a Junior Secondary School in Botswana and Ghana, it was discovered that girls had lower results in assumed ‘masculine’ subjects, such as science, mathematics, and technology, and achieved good marks in assumed ‘feminine’ subjects, like home economics and religious education (Dunne et al., 2005).

On the other hand, Oladejo and colleagues in exploring concept difficulty in secondary school Chemistry in Nigeria and Ghana found that gender difference 'may not be a significant factor in difficulties experienced in learning chemistry concepts'. However, they reported gender differences in individual concepts, with girls expressing more difficulties in five concepts (2023, p. 266). In this study, in order to ascertain girls' interest in science-related subjects and their perceptions on their subject choices as compared to their male peers, I asked each student (girls and boys) to tell me two (2) subjects they considered the best and two they considered the least interesting. In their responses, I noticed that most of the boys selected science-related subjects, while the girls selected humanities and social science subjects. Below are some examples;

Researcher: What is your best subject/s?

Girl 4: English language and Biology.

Researcher: Which subject do you dislike?

Girl 4: Physics and Mathematics

In contrast

Researcher: What is your best subject/s?

Boy 15: Chemistry and Physics.

Researcher: Which subject do you dislike?

Boy 15: Home Economics and English

To probe further, I asked about the reasons behind their choices in science-related subjects, and they provided their responses.

Boys' responses to why they overwhelmingly chose and considered science-related subjects as their best choice of subjects (Boys 3, 6, 8, and 11) respectively.

-
- *My teacher said they are the most important subjects for getting good jobs, especially for boys*
 - *My parents asked me to choose it because they want me to become a doctor or an engineer*
 - *Our teachers make science-related subjects easy*
 - *They are taught by my male teachers, who encourage us to participate more enthusiastically*

Girls' responses to why they overwhelmingly dislike and consider science-related subjects as their least favourite subjects (Girls 7, 11, 12, and 15) respectively.

- *They (male teachers) give boys more attention because it is perceived that they are masculine subjects*
- *Male teachers dominate the subject area; they therefore encourage boys to participate more and make it less interesting for us*
- *Science-related subjects are difficult*
- *We are less interested*

What the above remarks indicate is that schooling experiences in the co-educational secondary school system in post-conflict Sierra Leone practice a more sex-stereotyped choice of subjects and careers. Studies have shown that sex-stereotyped choice of subjects at secondary school has shaped pupils' expectations of the type of jobs or career that awaits them in the labour market (Namatende-Sakwa, 2018). Michelle (1983) noted that the nature of secondary schooling is similar to the '... organisation and production in Capitalist societies' (p.14). She argued that the outcome of girls' output in the labour market has been constrained by how schooling has shaped the minds of pupils. The reproduction of inequality in the working lives is created by a school system that invests in pupils' gendered thoughts and practices required for the labour market (Ibid). To fully grasp the similarity between capitalist society and schooling, it is necessary to understand the impact of schooling in shaping the minds of pupils to focus on masculine and feminine subjects and careers. It was observed that girls were mostly encouraged to go into stereotypical feminine jobs like teaching and

nursing, as well as to engage in the reproductive economy (unpaid care work). In contrast, boys were encouraged to envisage their future in the productive economy (productive labour market). For instance, most of the girls interviewed indicated they wanted to become a nurse, and when asked why, I got responses like

“I want to care for other people’s health and wellbeing” (Girl 10)

“So, I can take care of people” (Girl 13)

On the contrary, boys expressed career choices such as engineers, Doctors, Economists, and Computer scientists. Similar findings were reported in Botswana, where boys were encouraged to pursue stereotypically masculine jobs, such as doctors, Engineers, and Lawyers (Dunne et al., 2005). Textbooks, teaching materials, and class discussions tend to depict ‘Heroes and Heroines’ only to males (Ibid).

The results show that the school as a social institution has systematically configured and reinforced gender stereotypes of girls as carers and boys as providers and produced and reproduced gender differentiated schooling outcomes. My argument is that subject take-up and career choices go beyond gender relations. However, the influence of other social identities like class, sexuality, ethnicity, and location has negatively impacted girls’ perception of science-related subjects as well as career choices. For instance, Mairead Dunne and Leonie Rennie (1990), in their investigation of the influence of gender, ethnicity, and rurality on Fijian students’ perceptions of science, revealed that subject choices ‘...can be attributed to relationships with gender, ethnicity, and rurality’ (p.63). Similarly, findings from this research have demonstrated that subject choices have been attributed to interactions of gender with social class, sexuality, ethnicity, and location and have significantly influenced girls’ ability to take up subject areas and career choices they desire.

In addition, since academic progression is merit-based, and higher educational attainment is determined by social class, I argue that girls from low economic classes in rural communities are discriminated against in transitioning into their

career choices, even in cases where they had opted for a science-related career. Thus, I agree with Easterbrook and colleagues that meritocratic selection sometimes produces and reproduces inequalities in schooling attainment (2019). Evidence from this study has shown that the interplay of gender, social class, and location is a key determinant of limited secondary schooling achievement and educational attainment. This study suggests that school experiences have socialised girls to avoid competing with boys in school and in the labour market upon graduation. This is because schooling has conditioned girls to internalise household responsibilities and accept subordinate roles.

UNICEF (2024) observed that boys had more positive attitudes than girls towards science-related subjects because both the teachers and students perceived science-related subjects as masculine subjects. Unlike primary schooling, where the gender gap in the selection or teaching of subjects has significantly improved between boys and girls, secondary schooling subject take-up inequality is adverse. For instance, the evidence from this study reveals gender patterning in the take-up of elective subjects, as Mathematics, Science, and English are compulsory. Boys may opt for PHE, Technology, or Physics, while girls will select Food and Nutrition, Childcare, and Home Economics. This is more evident when they transition from junior secondary school to senior secondary school. At the senior secondary school level, most girls will transition to humanities, social science, and management faculties, while most boys will be in the engineering, technology, and science faculties. Furthermore, Ciftci et al. (2024) suggested that in mixed-gender secondary schools, stereotypical subject choices were to differentiate between the boys and the Other, in this case, girls and boys who failed to conform to masculine roles.

Engaging girls in science has proved to be gendered and problematic. Although girls have made tremendous progress in developing a deep understanding of science-related subjects, the continued influence of boys and men in the field means that boys and men remain overwhelmingly in charge in fields such as technology, engineering, and physics. In contrast, girls often enrol in courses related to caring or household activities, such as food preparation, nutrition, and nursing (Barton & Brickhouse, 2006). In some of the interviews conducted, a few

girls showed interest in science-related subjects but expressed frustration about teachers' gender perceptions, which often depicted these subjects as masculine. One of the girls noted

"I think a lot of other girls and I are interested in these subjects, but it is an area dominated by male teachers; in this school, only male teachers teach them at the SSS level. They (male teachers) encouraged boys more than us because they perceived these subjects as difficult for girls."

The above remarks suggest that the lack of female teachers in the field is a disadvantage to girls, as they are often motivated by male teachers. In addition, it also indicates that male teachers play a significant role in influencing pupils to make stereotyped subject and career choices (Paechter, 2002; Namatende-Sakwa, 2018). Therefore, I agree with Paechter (2002) that teachers, especially male teachers, collude in the formation and perpetuation of gendered perceptions of these subjects and career areas (p. 28). In a discussion with one of the female teachers, she seemed to reinforce the gendered perception of male and female subjects. See our conversation below;

Researcher: So, in terms of the overall performance in the class, who performs better?

FT 1: The boys. However, when it comes to home economics and cleanliness, the girls tend to do better.

Researcher: So, don't you think the boys see home economics as a feminine subject?

FT 1: Maybe they see it as a female subject because they do well in all science subjects, but on average, in home economics. I learned about this because I am also the class master. The girls find my subject very interesting. Some of them say they want to be like me.

Researcher: OK. So, you pay more attention to the girls when it comes to home economics, because you think it is also a female subject?

FT 1: No. I also talk to the boys and tell them who also cooks. I explained to them the benefits of doing the subject.

Similarly, classroom observations revealed that the pupils themselves were actively engaged in making subject and career choices that 'reinforced gender boundaries through their perceptions of certain subjects as being male or female'

(Riddell, 1992, cited in Paechter, 2002, p.29). Paechter (2002) noted that schooling has treated girls as the 'deficient Other' because of their weak performance in science, which portrays an 'overwhelming masculine image'. She argues that instead of the school system addressing the masculinity of school science in textbooks, curriculum, and teaching practices, the emphasis is on girls' deficiencies. This is despite girls performing well in verbal and reasoning subjects. In conclusion, I want to reiterate my argument, aligning with Carrie Paechter's (2002) assertion that girls have been categorised as 'Other' in schools, despite their increasing academic success. Therefore, I agree with Huang (2009) that in addition to gender disparity, pupils' subject choices and career pathways are influenced by their 'home socio-economic and ethnic background as well as by place of residence' (p.351).

6.5 Negotiating Male-centeredness in the use of space

(Outside the classroom)

Outside the classroom is highly gendered. The gender dynamics outside the classroom suggest that boys dominate the physical space, such as recreational areas, due to male privileges. Dunne (2006) noted that the use of space outside the classroom reinforces gender segregation and male dominance. Classroom disruption is also replicated outside the classroom, such as in recreational areas. Secondary Schools are the predominant site where this disruptive bullying is evident because of the presence of older girls. For instance, this study reports how boys walk through the playing spaces of girls to disrupt and bully them. Evidence from this study has shown that although boys occupied a lot more playing space for football and other physical activities, they also engaged in disrupting social gatherings and activities of girls.

Girl 5: One common practice among the boys is that they will meet us, talk and make fun, they will hit or touch you inappropriately, and if you try to confront them, they will physically assault you. This does not make me feel happy at school.

Girl 23: If they (the boys) finish playing football and meet us skipping rope, they will walk through and disrupt us. They do it all the time, but when they are playing, we avoid their playing area.

The above remarks reiterate Paechter's findings, which show that girls often tend to walk around boys' playing areas to avoid disrupting their games. However, when girls are playing, 'boys walk through, thus disrupting whatever is going on' (2002, p. 22). My argument is that this is a way boys exert masculine dominance and control over girls outside the classroom.

Boys also tend to determine the organisation of the recreational sites, seating patterns in the classroom and lines for assembly. During breaks, boys and girls perform their heterosexual identities, and while girls occupy the periphery to play, the boys occupy an ample space for their games (Dunne, 2006). For instance, in two of the case study schools, I observed that girls were not allowed to leave the school fence to play during lunch. However, boys were allowed to go out and play. Hence, I discussed this with one of the girls to get her take on why that was the practice.

Researcher: I observed that the boys are playing outside the fence, while the girls are within the fence. Why is that?

Girl 7: During lunch, girls are not allowed to go beyond the fence because the principal said we are likely to go home, but the boys are allowed to play football outside the fence.

Researcher: So, does that mean the boys will not go home when they are outside?

Girl 7: (Smiling), they actually tend to leave school earlier than the boys. I feel we are just unfairly treated. We are confined in a small space while the boys are outside playing freely.

Similarly, I consulted with one of the female teachers to relay the unfair treatment and experience mentioned above by one of her female students and to gather her opinion. She responded as shown below;

Researcher: OK, so do you agree with me that girls' experiences in school are different from boys?

FT 2: Definitely

Researcher: So why do you say it is different?

FT 2: For example, during lunch, you will see the boys in their different playing fields. Others go to the volleyball court, and others go to the football field; they feel very comfortable. In contrast, the girls are squeezed in the corner, as if they are hiding.

Researcher: Are you saying the boys occupied more space than the girls during outdoor activities?

FT 2: Yes. The girls are restricted to playing in an enclosed space.

Remarks like these indicate that the use of space for socialising during breaks is gendered. The above examples also suggest that boys are often given larger playing spaces, while girls are often confined to smaller spaces. The gendered use of space also facilitated intimidatory tactics that sometimes led to gender violence, such as physical assault and sexual harassment. I observed that girls from poor rural households or who do not conform to the gendered expected behaviours were more vulnerable to these tactics of intimidation. Such findings of this study are consistent with Dunne's work in Botswana, where it was revealed that boys used violence and intimidation to exercise control over social space to affirm their masculinity. It was also observed that boys who do not join other boys to play football and primarily interact with girls face verbal harassment. As stated by one of the boys;

"The other boys, when they see me among the girls playing with them, they refer to me as 'girly,' or 'unmanly.' They do not allow me to socialise with them; they will say I should go join my fellow 'girls' to play." (Boy 5)

Secondary school-based studies, such as those by Francis (2000) and Dunne et al. (2006), have suggested that public spaces outside the classroom (toilets, playgrounds, etc.) are also not safe for both girls and female staff. It is reported that boys and male teachers use the public space as a site for verbal and physical harassment.

Similarly, female teachers during the interviews reported gender imbalance in the use of the staff room. It is important to note that in all the case study schools, male teachers comprise 95 per cent of the teaching population. Gender relations

within the staffroom constitute power relations that ‘impinge upon what is sayable and doable’ (Orner, 1992, p.81). The staffroom, like the classroom, is a site where masculinities and femininities play out. In one of my discussions with a female teacher, she mentioned that most male teachers engaged in talks that sexually objectify girls. She further noted that this is also replicated within the classroom by these teachers and boys. She stated;

“In the staffroom, male teachers predominantly dominate the space; there are only three female teachers in this school. In the staffroom, if they (male teachers) are not talking about football or politics, they are engaged in sexualized topics that position females as sexual objects”. (FT 4)

Similarly, another female teacher mentioned the following in our discussion.

Researcher: How will you describe the staff room in this school?

FT 3: It is a male-dominated space, and most of the time, they engage in conversations that I am not interested in, so I tend to leave the space

Researcher: Can you give me an example of topics you are not interested in?

FT 3: They predominantly talk about football, something I know nothing about.

Researcher: Don't you feel excluded?

FT 3: As I mentioned, it is a male-dominated space, so I feel very excluded. I most of the time go out of the room when they start having conversations.

Considering the above remarks, I agree with Dalley-Trim that the staffroom, like the classroom, is a site where masculinity and femininity are produced and reproduced (2007). Results from this study showed that boys and male teachers, in order to assert control and power over girls and female teachers, respectively, engaged in using sexualized and misogynistic practices to ‘enable them to objectify and humiliate girls’ (Dalley-Trim, 2007, p.207).

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the problems and inequalities that girls continue to face in the school system. These problems and inequalities, such as male domination of the classroom, staffroom social spaces, and their impact

on girls' continuing low self-esteem; boys' masculine assertive approach to seek teacher attention and continued teachers' gendered expectations, have contributed to the gendered nature of schooling.

6.6 Negotiating Femininities and Masculinities in Secondary

Schools

The notions of masculinity and femininity tend to reflect how teachers relate to boys and girls. It is expected that boys should conform to masculinity by being, competitive, and extroverted (Paechter, 2007). On the other hand, girls are expected to be timid, passive, dependent and introverted to conform to gender stereotypes (Ibid). Michelle (1983) noted that teachers regard boys as more enthusiastic, logical, and competitive and can acquire new concepts quickly. However, girls are often viewed as less competitive and are perceived as suitable for roles such as wife and mother. Both in the playground and inside the classroom, I observed that girls and boys were expected to conform to traditional gender roles. For instance, boys who could not demonstrate that they are 'real boys' or doing boy' through having the effrontery to walk and talk to a girl or actively participating in physical sports like football are 'targets for bullying and abuse' (Mellor & Epstein, 2006, p.386). Mellor and Epstein (2006) pointed out in their research in the UK that some boys tried very hard to meet gendered expectations in order to avoid being labelled as 'gay' (p.386). On the other hand, girls should maintain a 'moral' attitude and behaviour while expressing their sexual desires and attractions. Girls who tend to be sexually active or dress in a way deemed 'too attractive' are labelled as 'slut' or 'slag'.

However, not every girl or boy conforms to gender stereotypes (McClanahan, 2015); for instance, some 'girls use several strategies to assert their power and prevent marginalisation' (Paechter, 2002, p.26). These girls, who tend to resist male domination and authority, are often perceived as 'deviant' and 'tarty', and are considered 'discipline problems' by both male teachers and boys (Robinson, 1992; Paechter, 2002, 2007; Renold, 2006; Jackson, 2010; McClanahan, 2015). In contrast, boys who act or behave in feminine ways are categorised and

personified as subordinated masculinity. They face marginalisation from boys who exert hegemonic forms of masculinity (Paechter, 2002; Ciftci et al., 2024). The example below provides an insight into how boys who are perceived to be behaving femininely are subjugated and intimidated by boys who want to maintain hegemonic masculinity in and outside the classroom.

Researcher: So, what about other boys who are not your friends? Do *they participate actively?*

Boy 14: *Yes, some do. We only intimidate, bully and provoke boys who are always among girls doing girly activities. We call them female names when they want to speak and ask them to sit down.*

Researcher: *OK. Why do you call them female names and bully them?*

Boy 14: *Because they do not behave like boys. They are consistently among the girls. Even at home, they cook and sweep. Jobs that are meant for girls.*

Researcher: *So, do you think cooking and sweeping are girls' jobs?*

Boy 14: *Yes, I think so. Even if I want to do it, I will do it when I know my friends are not around to see me.*

Similarly, another boy mentioned how he has been excluded from social groupings because he does household chores that are stereotypically associated with girls.

Researcher: *You mentioned that you cook almost every day; however, you face challenges from the other boys because they keep provoking you.*

Boy 2: *Yes. They say I am always in the kitchen and that I do not go to play football. So, they always refer to me as a girl because I cook and sweep.*

Researcher: *How does that make you feel?*

Boy 2: *I feel bad. They most of the time exclude me from their social cycle. Even in cases where I opt to join them, they will refuse and ask me to go to the kitchen.*

The above remarks are consistent with my observations in and outside the classroom. It was observed that boys and girls who do not conform to expected

gender norms are often excluded from social groupings. This is consistent with Lynch and Lodge's (2002) argument that the groups that are more likely not to be recognised or misrecognized in schools are those boys and girls who do not conform to acceptable heterosexual norms. It was also observed that boys who do not enact maleness or are always among girls are perceived to be homosexual. In these schools, every student is expected to conform to compulsory heterosexuality, so boys like that are considered subordinate in the masculinity grouping (McClanahan, 2015). Although it may not be an explicit homophobic attack, it was observed that a few boys were verbally targeted for their association with girls and their feminine characteristics. It is important to note that although this group of boys are subordinated, they may still exert dominance over girls, especially girls in the same socially marginalised groups (Paechter, 2002). Another point worth noting is that the above remarks reiterated my argument that the interplay of identities such as gender, sexuality and class reinforces gendered schooling.

More studies on secondary school-based research have shown that teachers perceive girls as 'fragile'; therefore, girls are expected to behave well, remain quiet, and maintain their passive classroom roles (Cin, 2020). Gender stereotype perceptions and expectations seriously implicate girls' academic performance. In her work, *Gendered Classroom Experiences*, Renold (2006) suggests that the enduring image of girls as cooperative, obedient, and hardworking is highly gendered, thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes and gender differentiations in the secondary schooling experience. However, some class prefects reported that a few girls proved to be very aggressive and indisciplined, characteristics typically associated with boys. For instance, see an account from one of the female prefects.

Researcher: How will you describe order and discipline in your classroom among your peers?

Girl 23: In that direction, I had a lot of challenges with the girls. They are always rebellious against my leadership and do not respect me. You have two girls who usually challenge me and even challenge some of the boys. I had a hard time maintaining order among the girls.

Researcher: Why is that the case? Is it because you are of the same gender?

Girl 23: Initially, I thought that was the case, but there was one week when I was absent for three days because I was sick, and my deputy, who was a boy, stepped in, but faced a similar fate from the girls.

Similarly, it was observed that some girls were very competitive in class, even in science-related subjects. In one instance, I had to ask one of the girls, who was very competitive, to understand her experience and how she handles boys in her class. She had this to say,

Researcher: What is your strength in this school? Can you describe your typical day in the classroom?

Girl 3: One thing I have done over the years is to use my academic excellence in the classroom to survive.

Researcher: Can you explain?

Girl 3: I come from an impoverished household, and my parents most of the time could not afford to provide me with lunch, so sometimes some teachers use incentives in the form of providing lunch to pupils who answer their questions. I always look forward to such opportunities, so can I have lunch?

Researcher: So, in a classroom with boys, how do you challenge them to win the lunch incentives?

Girl 3: I know it is difficult, but I do not get intimidated. Some of the boys in our class are not smart, but rather bullies. So, I study hard and challenge them, as it is one way of getting lunch for me. I have won most times (with a smile).

Another girl had this to say about her performance in mathematics and the feedback she received from some male teachers.

For instance, if a girl like me solves a math problem on the board, our mathematics teacher will say to the boys, You should be teaching the girls, but it seems like the girls are more serious than you guys. (Girl 5)

In addition, at one of the schools, it was observed that a girl consistently presented herself as a 'tomboy' and was very athletic. She was mostly seen among the boys and sometimes participated in their social activities. I had a conversation with her about her experience at school. She replied

“I am not going to lie; at the beginning, it was challenging to associate with the boys, but with time and persistence, they allowed me into their circle. I am still labelled as a ‘Lesbian’ by some boys, teachers and girls. I identify myself as a girl, I like to dress and appear this way (masculine), and I like to be competitive in sporting activities. Some boys and girls often marginalise me because of the way I dress and appear”. (Girl 19)

The point of this study is that girls can exhibit aggression, be boisterous, competitive, and extroverted. Francis's (2010) findings reiterate that girls in school who behave in masculine ways, such as adopting the ‘tomboy’ identity, do not necessarily behave overtly in a masculine manner. The same applies to boys who plate their hair and other feminine features, which does not necessarily mean they are ‘doing girling’ (2010). Secondly, as mentioned by Girl 3, she needs to be academically excellent in the classroom to get lunch due to her poor background. This encompasses my argument about the contribution of the interplay of identities in limiting girls’ classroom participation.

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the experiences of girls in negotiating male dominance within and outside the classroom. Subsequently, I have looked at classroom interactions, subject choices, the use of social spaces and boys’ and girls’ deviance to compulsory heterosexuality. In this chapter, I aimed to explore the various perspectives surrounding classroom interactions. I have detailed gender relations in terms of classroom talk, boys’ laddish or disruptive behaviours, and the need for girls and boys to negotiate femininities and masculinities in schools. Overall, however, in these discussions, I identified issues that impede girls’ learning and the interrelated factors that necessitate these issues.

I have demonstrated how the gender differentiated approach adopted by teachers in classroom interactions has resulted in gendered classroom behaviour among pupils. Thus, I have argued that the construction of gender identities, such as boys as assertive, aggressive and strong and girls as passive, caring and timid, is problematic and has resulted in an increase in gender differentiated schooling experiences and learning outcomes. Additionally, the construction of

heterosexuality in schools has contributed to the regulation and policing of pupils' gender and sexuality (Mellor & Epstein,2006). Therefore, my findings support the argument that the intersection of social identities such as gender and sexuality has contributed to negative experiences of schooling for girls, especially girls from low-income rural households.

Chapter 7: Gender Imbalances in Schooling: An Intersecting Analysis of Gendered Secondary Schooling Experiences and Practices

7.1 Introduction

This theme attempts to partially answer the research question: How are schooling experiences and outcomes differentiated by gender, ethnic traditions, SES, sexuality, and region in post-conflict Sierra Leone? The broader research on gendered experiences of secondary schooling has established the school as a highly gendered environment where gender differentiations and gender-stereotyped behaviours are perpetuated (Michelle, 1983; Paechter, 2002; Dunne et al., 2005; Cin, 2020; Ciftci et al., 2024). Evidence has shown that these gendered experiences constrain the learning opportunities, particularly for girls (Dunne et al., 2005, p. VII). Literature on contexts in the Global South has highlighted how schools are gendered in ways that influence the experiences and outcomes of education, especially for girls (Dunne et al., 2005; Dunne, 2007; Humphreys et al., 2008; Durrani & Halai, 2020; Cin, 2020; Ciftci et al., 2024). For instance, Dejaeghere & Vavrus (2011), when analysing gendered experiences of schooling in local contexts, stated that 'experiences of schooling by girls...create unequal gendered experiences in the classroom' (p.vii-viii). Evidence from this study has established the unequal experiences girls faced and how these experiences have resulted in adverse schooling outcomes for girls. The results of this study show that both teachers and pupils are engaged in stereotyped, gendered roles that reflect societal expectations. Evidence has shown that schooling has the potential to transform lives and shape the minds of pupils, enabling them to develop critical thinking and self-esteem (Paechter, 2002; Ciftci et al.,

2024). For instance, in all the interviews conducted and classroom observations, one thing that became central to girls' inability to participate and perform in class is that they tend to be circumscribed by domestic obligations.

Exploring the lived experiences of girls in post-conflict Sierra Leone secondary schools provides insight into the everyday schooling experiences of girls and their influence on retention and attainment. Evidence from this study shows that inequalities of gender, class, ethnic-traditions, and sexuality account for gender differences in schooling experiences and outcomes. Thus, I strongly agree with Liu (2006) that girls are not a homogeneous group and that such an assumption downplays 'the effect of other variables, such as social class and ethnicity, which in effect, often mediate gender in education' (p.427). The experiences of girls' schooling are affected by the intersection of other social markers that have created unequal gendered experiences in the school environment. Thus, I argue that using a single variable to explore girls' experiences of schooling is a deliberate attempt to overlook the reality of girls' experiences of schooling, which continue to be marginalised in a dominant male space.

For example, during the interviews, I asked the participants being studied if being in school is different for Girls and boys. Green, for example, responded.

“You mean if my experiences as a girl are different from those of boys? Yes, of course. What I go through, boys do not go through that. I, as a girl, can see my menstrual period, and a boy cannot see it. I, as a girl, am vulnerable to a teenage pregnancy, but the boys are not. I sometimes experience so much pain while on my period. Boys do not have to go through that. That is why things are different between boys and Girls.”

In addition, a female teacher had this to say about the unequal experiences of girls in school.

Researcher: *Do you agree that girls' experiences in school are different from those of boys?*

FT 1: *Yes, the girls have more challenges in this school than the boys.*

Researcher: *So, what are these challenges?*

FT 1: *Sometimes girls come to us and say I am not feeling bright. My stomach is aching; it is my menstrual period, and I want to go home. Since we do not have sanitary pads, we allow them to go. They will miss the lesson while the boys are in class. Some girls, because of painful menstrual cramps, will either stay away from school or not pay attention while in class. All of these factors affect their schooling.*

The remark by Green and FT 1 indicates unequal experiences of school between girls and boys. The findings of this study have revealed that the challenges of the menstrual period and pain can sometimes lead to absenteeism or inability to participate in class. To further understand the nexus between the lived experiences of girls' everyday schooling and their ability to achieve educational outcomes, this study has explored the following: firstly, the impact of sustained gender roles on girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes, with a specific focus on sex stereotyping within the classroom. Secondly, I investigated the role of household gender dynamics on girls' secondary schooling. Followed by evaluating the impact of gender imbalance in schooling policies. Lastly, I investigated the key determinants that drive high levels of school dropout among girls.

7.2 Reproduction of patterns of subordination constructed through a sexual division of labour within the school institution

7.2.1 Introduction

Existing literature on sustained and reproducible gendered roles in secondary schooling has primarily focused on gender stereotypes associated with textbooks and curricula (Stromquist, 1997). Other studies have focused on issues of subject and career choices (Paechter, 2002). However, as mentioned by Humphreys and colleagues (2008), most of the aforementioned issues have been addressed, including revisions to the curricula and textbooks. It is against this backdrop that this study has opted to explore sustained and reproducible gendered roles in secondary schooling beyond stereotypical textbooks and curricula and demonstrate how everyday gender relations in schools have reproduced patterns of subordination constructed through normative school practices that have resulted in adverse schooling outcomes for girls. All four (4) schools that participated in this research were observed to be actively engaged in activities that produce and reproduce the gendered division of labour. Thus, Kessler and colleagues argued that the school as a social institution is actively engaged in constructing and re-constructing gender through 'stereotyped expectations' and 'powerful masculinising practices' (1985, p.42). Data collected has subsequently indicated that the institutional life of the school has constructed gender inequality through normalised forms of gendered behaviours and interactions. This has been achieved through the role of gender regimes. It is an approach that scrutinises 'the school as a whole for the motifs and models of masculinity and femininity' (Acker, 1994, p.92). Therefore, the concept of gender regime in this research focuses on 'the pattern of practices that construct various kinds of masculinity and

femininity among staff and students...in terms of prestige and power and constructs a sexual division of labour within the institution' (Kessler et al., 1985, p.42). Thus, Dunne (2006) suggested that gender regimes are constructed institutional practices that attempt to 'construct and regulate everyday life and normalise unequal power relations' (p.502). The interview data and observation notes from this study suggest that schooling shapes the minds of pupils. Therefore, schooling has significantly contributed to shaping girls' mentality to occupy subordinate positions, ceding priority to boys. Available data also shows that schooling processes and practices perpetuate gender stereotypes. Thus, Connell (2006) notes that gender regimes regulate every aspect of the schooling experience. Furthermore, it is believed that boys and men largely benefit from the practice because, according to Connell (1995), 'it reflects hegemonic masculinity'.

The central argument of this research is that schooling, particularly secondary schooling, facilitates the reproduction of inequalities through the perpetuation of gendered roles. This has contributed to stereotypical and gender-differentiated schooling experiences and learning outcomes. Firstly, the findings of this research revealed that wider societal practices and behaviours reflect everyday schooling practices in post-conflict Sierra Leone secondary schools, informed by 'dominant patriarchal ideologies that create and maintain gender hierarchy...patterned by cultural forms of masculinity and femininity (Tamale, 2003; Ezumah, 2004, cited in Muhanguzi, 2011, p.721). Secondly, the findings of this research are consistent with those of Dunne et al. (2006) and Muhanguzi (2011), who suggest that secondary schooling habituates and shapes girls' consciousness of subordinate roles, thereby legitimising the gendered division of labour. In addition, this research revealed that girls from poor rural households are more likely to be habituated in these gendered roles compared to their peers from wealthy urban households or boys. Thus, the

intersection of gender-specific roles with social class, sexuality, ethnic traditions, and location exacerbates negative schooling experiences and learning outcomes for girls.

7.2.2 Gender Stereotyping in the Classroom

The production of patterns of subordination through sustained gender and sexual division of roles is evident in the assignment of classroom chores. For instance, teachers often assign responsibilities closely related to domestic or clerical tasks, such as sweeping, cleaning, collecting garbage, and fetching water, which girls frequently do (Dunne, 2007). These roles are assigned to girls by teachers' assumption that girls' primary role and ambition is to be wives and mothers (Davison and Kanyuka, cited in Liu, 2006, p. 429). Findings from the data suggest that even in situations where girls are assigned leadership roles in the class, they tend to assign traditional feminine roles to their colleagues. Thus, Delamont (1990) argued that assigning roles to one sex results in 'forcing the two sexes into different, stereotyped roles' (p.46). During this study, boys and girls widely reported that it was inappropriate for boys to sweep and clean the class, hence all female prefects removed male students from the sweeping roster because either they have repeatedly refused to do it or they have accepted the notion that male students should not undertake duties like sweeping and cleaning the class or followed the 'normative gendered discourses' that they (the boys) could not do it properly (Dunne, 2007). Some female prefects admitted they did it to sustain the accepted gendered practice or gender order, while others noted they removed boys from the rosters. After all, they would eventually refuse to do it anyway, because they often claim it is a 'girl job.' This is evident in my discussion below with some of the female class prefects; For example, Green (Female & 17) has been a class prefect for 3 years and in all those years, she has assigned roles to girls

that reflect the wider society's unequal distribution of roles, even when authority is in her hands.

Researcher: Tell me about your experience as a class prefect

Green: Like in my class, I do not ask boys to sweep.

Researcher: Why aren't you asking boys to sweep?

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

Researcher: Why do you think girls need to sweep?

Green: Because we are the ones who take care of the house, the man cannot take care of the house. The girls take care of everything. So, girls need to clean and tidy up the place, you know. So, the girls are supposed to cook. Boys cannot cook, and we do not expect a boy to come and sweep the class.

Similarly, Girl 14 had this to say

Researcher: How do you assign roles in your class?

Girl 14: I assign the cleaning and sweeping of the classroom to the girls.

Researcher: Why just girls?

Girl 14: Because the boys have refused to do it. Initially, when I was creating the roster for cleaning and sweeping, I had a mixture of boys and girls, but the boys consistently refused to participate. So now I only write girls' names.

On another note, Girl 3 reiterated societal expectations regarding the female subordinate position, emphasising household duties.

Researcher: Can you tell me about your experience as a class prefect during this period?

Girl 3: I ensured I assigned duties such as sweeping the class, fetching water, and cleaning the blackboard, coordinated with teachers on the classroom timetable and maintained order in the classroom

Researcher: OK, how do you assign duties and why?

Girl 3: For example, sweeping is assigned to the girls because, as girls, we should learn how to sweep, cook, and do laundry. When we get married, it is our responsibility to take care of the home, and we have to do all this.

Researcher: Does it mean boys should not do the things you mentioned?

Girl 3: It is not their role to do it. If at home, we are responsible for doing these jobs.

Remarks like this suggest that girls' consciousness has been shaped to accept subordinate roles and duties as a natural part of their schooling. Thus, Mensch and Lloyd (1999) suggested that girls performing more domestic-related duties in school than boys reflects their '...presumably greater responsibilities in the home' (p.174). In addition, Jones (1974) argued that assigning specific roles to just one sex creates a polarised and stereotypical schooling environment, thereby reinforcing 'crude stereotyping' in schools (cited in Delamont, 1990, p.46). It was observed that girls were primarily assigned home or domestic-related roles because they are perceived to be timid, while boys are often assigned leadership roles and are perceived to be aggressive. According to Delamont (1990), such a stereotyped existence of roles effectively presents girls as preordained for domestic roles and boys for public roles. My argument is that negotiating between household chores and school domestic duties increases the burden on girls, thereby reducing learning time and limiting their ability to study or concentrate in class.

Critics may argue that female class prefects, having broken the glass ceiling and assumed authority, should act in ways that promote gender equality. My response here resonates with Acker's suggestion that these types of girls find themselves in an already hegemonic school process that normalises gender differentiation. Accordingly, the actions of these girls and even teachers are '...rooted in tradition and common sense rather than malice' (Acker, 1994, p.93). I argue that the institutional practice of gender-specific roles in schools is due to the overwhelming masculine image of the school. In one of the focus group discussions, a group of 5 girls discussed the question, "How will you react if you see a boy in your class sweeping and cleaning the class?"

Girl 5: I will see it very funny

Researcher: Why is it funny?

Girl 5: It is very hard to see a boy sweeping in our class. I think they should not be sweeping or cleaning the classroom because it is meant for the girls to do.

Girl 2: I disagree with Girl 5; we are all equal. I do not believe there is a specific duty for boys or girls. We can all take on any role assigned by the teachers or class prefect. One of the reasons we are not performing as well in class as the boys is that we are overwhelmed with domestic-related duties both in school and at home. We cannot study well.

Girl 3: Since I agree with Girl 2, I, however, believe that, because in most of our homes, our parents discourage the idea of boys sweeping or cleaning the house, such practices are reflected in the school. We, the girls, tend to replicate the status quo in our homes and at school.

Girl 4: In my opinion, there are specific roles for both boys and girls. These roles are typically performed in our homes and should also be replicated in schools. For instance, we cannot brush the farm because we lack the strength, and similarly, boys

cannot sweep because it is traditionally considered a task for girls.

Girl 3: Brushing is an easy job. I can do it, so can my mother.

The above discussions revealed three issues: firstly, that 'schools do not exist in a vacuum,' hence, the school is a direct reflection of the wider socio-culture of the society (Devine et al., 2023). Secondly, societal socio-cultural practices have influenced the behaviours, actions, and interactions of individuals in schools (Ibid). As one of the girls mentioned, stereotypical roles such as sweeping and cleaning classrooms have been assigned to replicate the status quo in their homes. This has led girls to assume that these roles are inevitably meant for them to do. Lastly, balancing school duties and household chores has had a negative impact on girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes. One thing that became clear during the interviews and observations is that girls made little or no resistance to explicit gender roles like sweeping and cleaning, while boys most often resisted. Therefore, I agree with Dunne (2007) that gender-differentiated schooling roles and responsibilities are 'explicitly sustained by the management and teachers through the involvement of students in gender-specific roles' (p.505). Below is an example of how girls have accepted an explicit, sustained gender-specific role

Researcher: If you are given the role of a class prefect in your class, how do you delegate duties?

Girl 6: Sweeping and cleaning of the classroom will be done by the girls, and the boys will help me maintain control of the class

Researcher: OK, why is that?

Girl 6: The girls will be getting married, so they need to learn how to sweep and clean the house. For the boys, most of the girls are afraid of the boys, so if I ask them to help me maintain control, the classroom will have order and quietness.

The remarks above indicate that both boys and girls have engaged in maintaining 'strict segregation of duties...to avoid ridicule' (Dunne et al., 2006, p.47). What this also tells me is that both boys and girls have engaged in policing and regulating themselves, thereby enforcing strict gender boundaries and maintaining the normative gender discourse and order. They have played through segregated duties; thus, Dunne (2007) described it as pupils' collusion with the 'institutional gender differentiation' (p.27). In another interview with boy prefects, they mentioned the following in response to the question, 'As a class prefect, how do you assign classroom duties?'

Boy 14: Initially, both boys and girls were responsible for sweeping and cleaning the classroom and keeping the drinking bucket. However, I was told by my class master (a male teacher) that it is a girl's duty and that boys are not supposed to do it; moreover, he stated that boys should clean the board and go to the staff room to notify a teacher about their lesson.

Boy 5: During the first term, I wrote the names of both boys and girls on the roster for sweeping and cleaning the class. However, our class teacher said that sweeping should be done only by girls, as they are responsible for doing so in their households. I stopped including boys on that roster.

The data point to the fact that teachers play a critical role in maintaining strict gender segregated duties. As mentioned by Dunne (2007), alongside students, teachers were also engaged in policing gendered duties. Classroom observations in this study revealed that teachers tolerated and reinforced mutually exclusive gender roles that reflected traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. It was also observed that the actions of teachers shaped the minds of pupils, especially girls, to conform to stereotypical gender roles. In that regard, I argue that this act has contributed significantly to girls receiving huge workloads of classroom responsibilities while boys get more academic attention from teachers.

When asked about their perspectives on assigning or undertaking gender-specific roles, some of the pupils stated the following;

“Well, in my household, I do all the sweeping and cleaning of the house. It is very awkward to see my brother sweeping. So, this also applies in the classroom” (Girl 24)

“She is a girl, and her traditional role is to cook, clean and take care of the house. I can only support her where needed. She will be getting married, so she needs to know how to cook” (Boy 6)

Some girls interviewed think the boys need to pay more attention in class because they will get married and be taken care of. For instance, when asked what their take is on teachers giving more attention to boys than girls, Yellow (female and 17) replied;

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

I argue that the outcome of girls' educational attainment has been constrained by how schooling shapes the minds of pupils. The reproduction of inequality in daily school lives is created by a school system that invests in pupils' gendered thoughts and practices. The findings from this study have demonstrated how conventional sexual distribution of labour in households has reflected everyday school practices and behaviours, which have reinforced sustained subordination of girls and gender differentiation in girls' secondary schooling achievements. This is reiterated by Michelle (1983), who argued that 'educational process brings life and sustains sexual divisions' (p.14).

Above, I have illustrated how classroom roles are gender-specific and how gender regimes within the school contribute to gender-differentiated classroom outcomes. However, this study argues that everyday assignment of school roles and duties undertaken by pupils goes beyond gender specifics but also includes socio-economic status and location. As mentioned earlier, this research has revealed that girls from poor rural households are more likely to be habituated in these gendered roles compared to their peers from wealthy urban households or boys. For instance, it was observed that girls from the villages were more likely to be selected to undertake miscellaneous duties or personal tasks for teachers in the classroom. Thus, this study argues that the intersection of gender and other social identities, such as class and location, has acted as a significant interrelated factors that limit girls' participation and classroom performance. For example, one of the girls narrated her experience in undertaking school duties.

“When it comes to general cleaning of the school, such as cleaning offices, the staff room and toilets, fetching water and weeding, we (girls from the villages) are most often selected to participate because, according to our principal, our parents did not financially contribute to the school development fund” (Girl 17).

The above remarks align with Dunne and colleagues' findings in Ghana and Botswana, where they found that pupils from low-income families were most often required to provide 'family labour' because their parents could not afford to make the necessary financial contributions (2006). It was revealed that girls were mostly affected because they are often expected to take on domestic roles, such as cooking and cleaning. Findings from this research also revealed that career choices and expectations are usually aligned with the conventional division of labour. For instance, 20 out of the 25 girls interviewed indicated that they chose their careers because they needed to care for others. This narrative aligns with the conventional role

of women as caregivers. For example, when asked what they want to be in future and why, three girls responded;

Girl 8: A nurse. I want to be a nurse to help those who are sick.

Girl 10: A doctor. So, I can take care of people.

Girl 13: I want to be a nurse. I want to care for the health and well-being of others.

The remarks above suggest that girls tend to envision themselves and their future in terms of motherhood, caregiving, and meeting family commitments more often. This means that schooling structures and processes promote gendered roles. Hence, it is a significant site for reinforced sexual division of labour. My argument is that the complex interaction of the above-mentioned identities has exacerbated gender inequalities and influenced girls' educational outcomes.

7.3 Household Gender Dynamics and Girls' Secondary Schooling

7.3.1 Introduction

The Household has been approached in diverse ways, as a unit of cooperation and conflict, as a unit of welfare maximisation and as an altruistic decision-making unit with undifferentiated interest (Kabeer, 1994). Sen described the cooperative and conflict approach as a 'social arrangement regarding who does what, who gets to consume what, and who takes what decisions...' (Sen, 1990, p. 129). Gender roles and the position of males and females in the household are characterised by their different responsibilities, privileges, and unequal control of resources, which point to the power difference between them (Lipman-Blumen, 1984). Neoclassical economic theories have assumed the household as a unitary

model (a typical nuclear family) comprising the man as the head and breadwinner and the wife in charge of the children and welfare of the family (Agarwal, 1994). The household is assumed to operate as a solitary unit where all resources are pooled (Kabeer, 1994). Feminists such as Agarwal (1994) and Kabeer (1994), however, have argued that 'the household, in the established economics, is essentially a disguise for the exercise of male authority' (Galbraith 1974:36 cited in Kabeer 1994:101). According to Kabeer, altruistic decision-making within the household does not eliminate welfare differentials, as those who produce more may have a greater claim on household consumption and decision-making (Kabeer, 1994, p. 100). For instance, evidence from this research indicates that household decision-making is not gender-ascriptive but rather a bearer of gender due to the social stereotypes associated with masculinity, authority, and what is men's work and women's work (Wodon & Ying, 2010; Bardasi & Wodon, 2020; Samonova et al., 2020; Devine et al., 2023).

Despite the difference between household and family, for this study, they are used interchangeably. Thus, I define the household as a "commensal and residential unit, and/or units of joint property ownership, production, consumption or investment, or they can constitute some intersection of these dimensions" (Agarwal, 1994, p.53). The 'institution' of the family/household serves as the model for broader society (an old understanding of patriarchy in society as based on the patriarchal household). According to Chopra and Zambilli, gendered division of labour is "strongly essentialist, naturalising women's responsibilities for care" (2017, p.18)

Findings from this study have shown that girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes are constrained by gendered household decision-making and the balancing of domestic duties and schooling (Bardasi &

Wodon, 2020; Samonova et al., 2020; Devine et al., 2023). It is against that background that I embarked on showing how intra-household inequalities have influenced girls' ability to participate and contribute better to classroom interactions, resulting in unequal gender schooling experiences and learning outcomes. To further provide insights on this topic, I initially attempted to examine gender roles within the context of how power and relationships between males and females operate within the household. I examined the intersecting inequalities in the household as a private sphere and its impact on girls in public spaces, and explored girls' lived experiences of balancing schooling and domesticity. In doing so, I analysed the gendered division of labour within the household and the double burden faced by girls within the household, which influences girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes.

7.3.2 Double Burden of Girls and its impact on girls' secondary schooling: Balancing domesticity and schooling

The school system is designed so that pupils invest considerable time in homework, socialising, and studying to participate in and perform well in class (Jackson, 2010). However, research has shown that girls cannot meet these demands because they also have to balance them with domestic responsibilities (Delamont, 1990; Dunne et al., 2005; Jackson, 2010). For instance, in her research on secondary pupils in the UK, Jackson (2010) noted that girls reported being constrained by the need to balance schoolwork, socialising, and domesticity. She noted that, unlike boys who did not report any involvement in domestic duties, girls reported that, alongside demands to do homework and socialise with friends, they also had to 'perform domestic duties such as look after family members or undertake household chores (Jackson, 2010, p.162). Similar studies in

Sierra Leone have found that the time girls devote to household work affects their ability to fully engage in their schoolwork (Wodon & Ying, 2010; Bardasi & Wodon, 2020; Samonova et al., 2020; Devine et al., 2023).

Evidence from this study has shown that gender relations within the household positioned boys and girls differently in relation to household duties. Gender power relations are evident in the division of household labour, with men assuming their socially ascribed breadwinner role and women reproducer and carer role. This has resulted in a pervasive power imbalance in the distribution of roles between boys and girls (Lipman-Blumen, 1984). This study has attempted to analyse the gender distribution of roles within the household, and thus found that in post-conflict Sierra Leone, rigid social norms dictate the appropriate distribution of roles within households, which invariably restrict girls' ability to participate well in school (Koroma, 2014). The division of labour between boys and girls within the household is neither uniform nor balanced (Kabeer, 1994).

In this section, I have critically argued that the double burden of girls, i.e. balancing domestic duties and schooling, has limited girls' participation and performance in school. In this study, the concept of double burden is understood to refer to the labour of women and girls that involves performing domestic and care tasks, as well as earning a living or attending to schooling (Kabeer, 1994). In Sierra Leone, women and girls are expected to be responsible for reproductive roles (caring and domestic work), while men's and boys' roles are not defined in the reproductive work. However, they tend to assist in domestic work (UNICEF, 2011). Evidence from this research has shown that girls are constrained by the need to balance domestic duties and schooling. While boys have leisure time to play football and watch films after school, girls are often preoccupied with collecting water, cooking, and caring for their younger siblings (UNICEF,

2011; Devine et al., 2023). Below is an example of what one of the girls had to say about balancing household chores and schooling;

Researcher: Based on your experience, what would you say are some of the reasons girls are not contributing or participating actively in class?

Girl 7: One main thing is the amount of household chores girls are expected to do. This is especially prominent for us, given that we come from low-income households. For instance, when I close from work, I help my mom with selling, and in the evening, I will then go home to cook. By the time I finish, I will be exhausted and sleepy. I do not have time to read.

Similarly, another girl had this to say when asked about her experience on the same topic.

Researcher: Can you give me an example of how this is affecting girls' schooling

Girl 12: I have lost both parents, and I am staying with my uncle. I have many household chores in the morning before leaving for school, and unfortunately, I sometimes arrive late. These teachers will beat me severely for coming late. I sometimes return home if I know I am late, so I cannot be beaten.

The above remarks were reiterated by one of the boys when asked why they are doing better than the girls in class.

“I will say household chores limit their time to study. Unlike many of the boys, some of these girls immediately after school will go shopping to prepare dinner for the family and by the time they are done, it is late and they are tired” (Boy 4).

Remarks such as this indicate that domestic obligations circumscribe girls. They devote a greater proportion of time than boys to doing household chores. All the girls interviewed mentioned that due to increased domestic

responsibilities, they are constrained in their ability to do their homework, have less time to study, sleep less, and mostly arrive late to school. This is consistent with Mensch and Lloyd's (1999) suggestion that the amount of time girls spend on household chores may reduce the time devoted to learning (p. 174). Therefore, I agree with Bardasi and Wodon (2020) that time poverty has a significant impact on girls' schooling.

Another finding from this study is that girls from affluent urban households had the most social power and were recognised by their female peers. Social groups were often driven by these popular girls, with girls from poor rural households being most likely to be excluded from these social groups (Osborne et al., 2025b). Unlike girls from poor rural households, who are often targeted with negative comments about their appearance, girls from affluent urban households were popular, fashionable, and influential in all four participating schools. In her study in the UK, Jackson (2010) found that popular girls had the 'most social power and were able to influence and police acceptable ways of doing girl within their (heteronormative) school communities' (p.158).

Further findings from Sierra Leone (Samonova et al., 2020; Devine et al., 2023) support the findings of this study, indicating that girls from poor rural households are more susceptible to domestic obligations than boys from the same households or girls from affluent urban households. This study argues that girls' participation in school has been affected by the fact that they must balance both domestic and caregiving roles with their schooling. This combination of roles increases the levels of drudgery and contributes to the depletion of girls, thereby limiting their participation in the classroom (Chopra & Zambilli, 2017). Therefore, I concur with Jackson (2010) that girls who have access to a range of resources, such as economic resources, are better positioned among their peers and reduce their

chances of balancing domestic duties and schooling. For instance, Jackson argued that girls who have access to resources such as computers facilitate quick and effective home study practices (Ibid p.162).

Thus, I argue that the increase in the levels of drudgery and the depletion of girls is primarily facilitated by interrelating factors like gender, sexuality, class, ethnic traditions, and location. Therefore, my position aligns with Wodon and Ying (2010) and Bardasi and Wodon (2020), who argue that balancing domestic responsibilities and schooling has increased girls' time poverty due to the amount of time they spend caring for children and the elderly, fetching firewood, collecting water, and cooking. In one of the interviews, I asked a female teacher why she thinks boys are performing better than girls in her classroom and in her school overall. She stated:

FT 2:

Well, most of the time, the girl child has been subjected to housework in their various homes. At times, they arrive at school feeling very weak and late, and struggle to articulate themselves well in class. Before this time, we called on one of the girls who usually comes to school after 9:00, and then we interviewed her. She said that after school, she had to go to the village to sell medicines for her aunt. Then she will come back late in the evening. Moreover, in the morning, she has to fetch water, sweep, and wash the dishes, which makes her come. Because the aunt will think she has been reported, and she will punish her severely. So, we decided to encourage her to arrive at school earlier.

Similarly, one of the girls gave an account of her challenges with managing domestic responsibilities.

Researcher: You mentioned that you do many household chores; do you think this affects your schoolwork?

Girl 12: Yes, it dramatically affects my participation and performance in class. Before I leave for school, I must wake up very early to clean the house, prepare my aunties' children for school, and drop them off at school. By the time I am done, I am exhausted. In class, my concentration level is very low. When I get out of school, I must do household chores till late in the evening, leaving me with little or no time to study. While my aunt's eldest son, who is in the same class as us, is allowed to study.

Researcher: So, do you think your experience in schooling is different from that of your auntie's eldest son?

Girl 12: It does. For instance, I actually dropped out of school while her son remained in school. I was rescued by an NGO called Street Child. They re-enrolled me in school and paid my fees. Currently, Street Child no longer have funding, so I am paying my fees on my own.

Apart from the above reaction, classroom observation also revealed inconsistent attendance for some of these girls. Another point I would like to make is that because of the gender norms about the father being the head of the family, decision inevitably favours boys in every aspect because of the performance of masculinity. Thus, the power relationship in the allocation of labour and time, as well as the distribution of resources such as income within the household, is influenced by who produces more and to whom those resources are allocated (Kabeer, 1994). My argument is that girls' contributions to the household are economically undervalued due to the assumption that girls are 'daughters of other people,' resulting in the belief that only boys should be allowed to attend school (Dajaeghere & Miske, 2009, p. 168). Additionally, I asked another girl about the double burden and its impact on her educational experiences and learning outcomes. She had this to say;

Researcher: You mentioned you do household chores; can you explain what chores you do and how they affect your schooling performance?

Girl 2: *After school, I fetch water, cook, clean the house, and take care of my little ones. Most of the time, I do these chores until late in the evening. I become exhausted afterwards and am unable to review my notes. Most days, I tend to sleep in class while teaching is going on because I get exhausted.*

Evidence from this study has shown that girls are engaged in domestic activities, such as cooking, caring for siblings, doing household chores, hawking goods, and fetching water. Thus, they tend to work twice as many hours as boys (ADB, 2011)

Koroma (2014) referred to Sierra Leone as a 'hierarchical ordered society with notion and status conditioning social relations' (p.198). My argument resonates with Chopra and Zambelli's assertion that girls' lived experiences of balancing unpaid care work and schooling result in depletion and deepen their time poverty (2017). For example, in rural and peri-urban communities in the country, boys after school congregate to play or watch football matches and sit at popular gathering spots, where they exchange knowledge and information on schoolwork and sports news (UNICEF, 2011). Girls, however, are expected to prepare dinner for the family, collect water and fuel (Ibid.). Nussbaum describes this act of balancing as "double day" (2000). She emphasised the fact that the burdens of navigating between unpaid care work and schooling result in girls 'lack of opportunities for play and for the cultivation of their imaginative and cognitive faculties (Nussbaum, 2000, p.1).

Another point that supports my claim that intra-household inequalities lead to unequal schooling participation is that the amount of time spent by girls on caring and domestic work restricts their chances of studying and participating more effectively in classroom discussions (Fälth & Blackden, 2009). In Sierra Leone, girls spend a considerable amount of money per week on domestic work in rural areas, compared to girls in urban areas and

boys (Wodon & Ying, 2010). Despite the significant contribution girls make through unpaid care work in the household, their schooling is often neglected, unacknowledged, and devalued. The distribution of roles in gender relations is unequal and determined by social norms (Koroma, 2014; UNICEF, 2011; ADB, 2011; Devine et al., 2023). This undermines girls' ability to participate in the class and subsequently affects their learning outcomes. It is my argument that due to the naturalisation of domestic and care work for girls, they have considered themselves suitable for household chores, even in school, more so than boys. They suffer from 'false consciousness,' which has led to an increase in drudgery and a decrease in class participation (Agarwal, 1994).

7.3.3 Gendered Household Decision-making

Evidence from this study has also shown that household decision-making processes have failed to value and recognise girls' schooling and their educational contributions to the household; instead, they operate in ways that disadvantage girls' schooling and favour boys. This research viewed the household as a gendered institution structured by norms, perceptions and practices working at the intersection of sexuality, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Swainson and colleagues (1998) suggested that to understand further gender differentiated schooling experiences and learning outcomes in secondary schools, there is a need to understand the '...complex web of relations between household, community, and school' (cited in Sperandio and Kagoda 2009, p.95). Researchers such as Liu (2006) and Dajaeghere and Miske (2009) have argued that the household decision-making processes and practices are gendered, and that it has been reflected in everyday schooling practices. I agree with the above argument that

decision-making processes and practices have influenced everyday schooling practices; however, I further argue that the analysis of decision-making processes and practices extends beyond gender relations. Evidence from this research has shown that household poverty, ethnic traditions, rurality, and masculine authority are inextricably linked to girls' schooling outcomes. For instance, this study has shown that girls from low-income rural households are more susceptible to dropping out of school than boys because of household decision-making processes and practices. I found out that boys were highly likely to be favoured to continue schooling in cases where households' resources are limited. This is reiterated by Mitra and Bang (2021), who argued that in post-conflict societies like Sierra Leone, girls are more susceptible to losing out to boys in cases where the family needs to prioritise due to reduced household resources (Devine et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2024). What this means is that in cases where the following characteristics, such as gender, class, location, ethnicity, and sexuality, are intersected, girls from poor rural households are highly likely to drop out of school. Rigid social norms have dictated resource allocation on schooling, which most often prioritises boys' schooling over girls and appropriates the gender division of labour within the households, which restricts their participation and performance in the classroom (Ibid).

It is essential to acknowledge that patriarchal norms largely shape the above decision. In Sierra Leone, social hierarchical order has institutionalised men/boys' masculine authority and considers women/girls to be in an inferior position (Koroma, 2014; UNICEF, 2011). For instance, to explore their opinion on the decision-making processes and practices on prioritisation of schooling in reduced household resources, I asked all the participants through interviews and FGDs a scenario-based question about who is likely to drop out of schooling in a case where their parents have to

prioritise who is to and who is not to continue schooling due to limited resources. The following responses were provided;

Firstly, a group of 5 girls had this to say in a focus group discussion

Researcher: In your various households, if resources are limited, who do you think your parents will prioritise to send to school?

FGD2G3: It will definitely be the boy child.

Researcher: Why did you say so?

FGD2G3: My parent will say I am at risk of getting pregnant or will get married at any time. So, investing in the boys will yield them benefits in the future. They see girls' education as not a worthy investment because we will get married soon.

FGD1G2: I think it is the girls. Compassionate girls are likely to support their households more than boys.

FGD2G4: I disagree with FGD1G2. I believe this is not about who is compassionate, but who our parents are likely to send to school with limited resources. They will always prioritise the boys because of the notion that boys will take over the father's responsibility.

FGD2G5: I agree with FGD1G3 and 4; the decision will always favour the boys, especially in cases where we have to walk 5km to school. They are scared of the tendency to be sexually assaulted on our way, so the boys are sent.

Remarks such as this indicate that gendered perceptions of girls as good wives and mothers have resulted in girls themselves ceding priority to boys when it comes to schooling decisions within the household. Secondly, the above remarks indicate that low-income households do not view girls' schooling as a promising investment that benefits the household. This point resonates with Dejaeghere and Miske's findings in Vietnam, where low-

income households argued that ‘the costs of educating a... girl will not result in economic returns for her birth family (2009, 168). The Vietnam findings above are consistent with my findings, as mentioned by one of the girl dropouts interviewed.

“The reality is, in my community and my household, they believe in investing in boys’ education than girls.” (OoS 2)

Thus, to understand the complexities of girls’ secondary schooling experiences and learning outcomes, this study explored how interrelated factors, such as gender, class, location, sexuality, and ethnic traditions, have limited girls’ schooling outcomes.

On another note, a female teacher had this to say

FT 2: I believe in household poverty. Most parents send their girls to school without even giving them lunch, which prevents them from concentrating. This is most common among girls from the villages. At times, we provide our own funds to them, and we even purchase uniforms.

This research has demonstrated the complexities of gendered relations that exist within the household, fuelled by poverty, socio-cultural practices and patriarchal norms that reinforce masculinity. This interplay has contributed to either limited participation in the classroom or dropping out of school. One clear example of the intersecting gendered nature of household decision-making processes is highlighted below by one of the girl school dropouts interviewed.

Researcher: You dropped out and are now married. Why was the reason?

OoS 2: My parents refused to support me because they said I got pregnant, and instead gave me in marriage to a businessman.

Researcher: How do you feel about such a decision?

OoS 2: *I felt bad because my brothers and friends are in school while I sit at home doing house chores and taking care of my husband. I deserved a second chance, especially when I had lost the child. Secondly, my elder brother, who is currently in school, impregnated a girl, but was allowed and supported by my parents to continue schooling.*

Researcher: *Why do you think your parents are supporting your brother to continue school even though you both have done the same wrong?*

OoS 2: *I think they believe my brother's education is more important than mine. Before I got married, my father would often say that I would soon get married and have children, so there was no need for him to invest in my education.*

Researcher: *OK. What do you make of his statement?*

OoS 2: *I think to some extent he was right (with a smile). I eventually got married and started a family. My brother needs to be educated to protect the family from poverty.*

As mentioned earlier, remarks such as this indicate that parents from rural households see girls' schooling as 'not a cost-effective strategy for their immediate well-being or future livelihood' (Dajaeghere & Miske, 2009, p.168). With fathers often being the primary contributors to the household, which automatically accorded them the final decision-making authority, girls' schooling was often not prioritised. Given the interplay of identities in the above remarks, I argue that the intersection of gender and social class with other social identities, coupled with patriarchal norms, has influenced household decision-making processes on schooling, resulting in boys being prioritised over girls. I agree with Connell (1995) that boys primarily benefit from this practice because such decision-making reflects hegemonic masculinity.

Another decision-making practice that disadvantages girls within the household and negatively influences their secondary schooling is the act of

giving girls out too early marriage as a 'means of coping with the challenges of poverty' (Ani & Osakwe, 2014, p.34). Most of the girls interviewed reported that in cases where household resources were limited, parents would likely prefer to give their daughters in marriage in exchange for supporting their sons to continue their education. Because, according to one female teacher,

"Parents would prefer to give their girls to men who present economic benefits that will meet their household needs and educate the boys" (FT 3).

I argue that 'money played an important part' in household decision-making for schooling (Leach & Machakanja, 2000, p.4). Some female teachers also reported that some girls tried to resist their parents' decision to drop out of school and get married because they did not want to get married early, and faced tremendous pressure. It was reported that some parents threaten to disown their daughters. But as stated by one of the teachers below;

"Some of these girls will try to resist, but due to the pressure from the parents and their recognition that they are doing it to alleviate the economic and social well-being of themselves and their families, they tend to give in" (FT 1)

Comments like this resonate with Dajaeghere and Miske's (2009) findings in Vietnam, where they found that girls who initially resisted their parents' decision to get married and drop out of school would later cede their position because 'they recognised it as a negotiation between the economic and social well-being of their families, and their own well-being' (p.169). In another study, Fiona Leach's research in Sierra Leone found that early marriage was used as a tool to control girls' sexuality (2008).

Secondly, the girls reported that their parents believe removing them from school to arrange their marriage provides the family with ‘short-term economic opportunities’ that will support the family and the boys in school (Dajaeghere & Miske, 2009, p. 168). Lastly, female teachers interviewed indicated that parents often decide to keep their girls from school because of what they viewed as a culture of violence in schools. They fear their girls are vulnerable to getting pregnant by a teacher, a boy or a guy outside the school while going to school. As stated by one of the teachers

“Some parents are very concerned about sexual violence in schools; they see the school as an unsafe site for girls. They think girls are more vulnerable to getting pregnant while in school. They usually say instead of their daughter to bring shame to the family; they will keep them away from school and instead help with household chores and hawking for the mother” (FT 4)

Similarly, Female Teacher 2 has this to say in response to my question: What are the factors that contribute to the dropout rate of pupils in this school, especially among the girls?

In most cases, we see the girls dropping out of school because their parents had to keep them away from school. Most of our girls come from the villages, and they have to walk 5 miles to and from school every day. Some parents are concerned about the safety of their daughters, while others would prefer for their girls to support themselves in the market. Yeah. At the end of the day, after JSS1 and 2, you will no longer see them. They will not come again (FT 2)

The key point to emerge from this section is that intersecting gendered decision-making processes and practices within the household have limited girls' schooling participation and sometimes increased dropout rates among girls. These decisions have marginalised girls in favour of boys' schooling. This research has shown that gendered household decisions are facilitated by asymmetrical power relations enacted to construct and reinforce femininity and masculinity. The research has provided a nuanced

understanding of the nexus between the school as a public space and the household as a private space.

7.4 Intersecting gender imbalance in schooling policies

The post-conflict Sierra Leone governments have made political commitments to address gender inequalities in secondary schooling. However, its inability to effectively enforce gender parity-driven policies and disciplinary measures, primarily due to patriarchal norms, has contributed to unequal schooling experiences for girls, resulting in adverse learning outcomes. Although strong policies, programmes, and reforms have been introduced to address equality in education in post-conflict Sierra Leone, most of these policies have maintained and reinforced gender-differentiated policies in the everyday life of schools. Such policies promoted practices that are geared towards regulating and policing the sexuality of girls. One of the policies adopted that exacerbated gender inequality in secondary schooling was the ban on visibly pregnant girls from attending school. On the 2nd of April 2015, the government of Sierra Leone introduced a policy paper which stated that ‘visibly pregnant girls were not allowed in the school setting’ (GoSL, 2017, p.9). Although advocacy from civil societies and non-governmental organisations led to the revision of this policy recently, evidence from this research revealed that girls continue to be asked to leave school and, in some cases, are subjected to embarrassment and humiliation. For example, in one of the schools, there was an incident involving the vice principal of the school and a visibly pregnant girl in JSS 3. The vice principal humiliated the girl in front of the many students and asked her to leave school. He said,

“Go and bring the boy that got you pregnant, you fool, you do not sleep at night but chasing boys.”

The above example clearly demonstrates the unequal treatment girls face in schools. This policy failed to exclude school-going boys responsible for impregnating these girls. They were instead allowed to continue school as usual, while girls were asked to stay away. I asked Girl 3 about her experience on this issue, and she replied.

Researcher: Have you had cases in this school where a boy in the same class as a girl got pregnant and that girl stopped coming to school, but the boy continued to come to school unhindered?

Girl 3: It is a widespread practice in this town and in this school. The boys will always continue their schooling without any restrictions. For instance, when we were in SSS1, a girl in our class who got pregnant by a boy in the same class dropped out while the boy was still in school. The boy's father is wealthy, so they agreed with the girl's parents that they would take care of the pregnancy.

Similarly, a female teacher narrated below an example in her school where she advocated for an equal outcome for a girl who got pregnant in her school by a school-going boy, but her advocacy proved futile.

Researcher: Can you tell me about the most recent case of a girl dropping out and what led to it?

FT 4: One of my students was impregnated by a boy in a neighbouring secondary school; she dropped out while the boy was going to school. I tried to advocate for him to stop, but to no avail.

Researcher: Why did you want to stop the boy from attending school?

FT 4: Because society and even the school keep frowning on the idea of allowing visibly pregnant girls to attend school, while the boys who impregnate these girls are attending school unhindered.

What the above remarks indicate is how the interplay of gender, poverty, sexuality, and location has led to inequalities in schooling, reinforced and maintained by ineffective or deficient government policies. School policies requiring pregnant schoolgirls to leave school, while boys are rarely asked to leave when they are implicated in impregnating a schoolgirl, bring to the fore the institutional inequality of the school (Dunne et al., 2006)

7.5 Understanding the Determinants of High Levels of Dropout among Girls

Evidence from this study has revealed that girls are more susceptible to dropping out of school than boys, especially girls from poor rural households.

In post-conflict Sierra Leone, teenage pregnancy is seen as one of the most pervasive problems affecting girls' secondary schooling (UNFPA 2011). According to data from UNFPA, 62 per cent of girls are married before age 18 and 25 per cent of girls start sexual relations before age 15 (2011). In this research, teenage pregnancy has emerged as a significant driver of high levels of school dropout among girls. Results from this study have shown that teenage pregnancies have significantly constrained girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes. It has been proven to have a profoundly positive impact on girls' ability to remain in school. It is also argued that girls from poor rural households are more likely to get pregnant while in school than others (DCI 2015). Household poverty emerged as one of the key determinant factors that drives teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone schools, especially in the provinces. It is against this background that I argue that the interplay of gender and other factors like socio-economic status, location and ethnic traditions has contributed to the prevalence of teenage pregnancy among girls. This has resulted in high

levels of dropout and has had adverse consequences on girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes. Data from UNFPA reported that approximately 63 per cent of teenage mothers reside in rural communities, compared to 38 per cent of their urban peers (2011).

Firstly, nearly all the participants interviewed, including boys, indicated that household poverty was a key determinant factor responsible for high levels of teenage pregnancy. This thereby limits girls' ability to stay in school and achieve educational outcomes. This is reiterated by UNFPA's findings in Sierra Leone, which mentioned that due to limited household resources, parents encourage their daughters to seek assistance from men, who in turn will assist with sexual favours (p.24). For instance, below I asked a female teacher about her opinion on what issues affect girls' schooling in her school, and she replied

"It is a teenage pregnancy. Most parents, especially those from villages or low-income households, often encourage or overlook their girls' involvement with older men because of the financial contributions they make to the household. So, when these girls get impregnated by these older men, they drop out and get married" (FT4)

The remarks indicate that transactional or cross-generational relations are key factors in facilitating high levels of teenage pregnancies that eventually lead to high dropout rates. Evidence from this study revealed that girls were pressured to enter cross-generational relationships with older men either for their educational and financial needs or to meet the short-term needs of the family. Thus, Bajaj suggested that cross-generational relations are motivated by the need to 'help offset the financial costs of secondary schooling' (2009, p. 129). Because these girls enter these types of relationships as adolescents, it often results in them finding themselves in a position 'where they may lack the power to negotiate safe sex' (Bajaj,

2009, p.135). The consequence of such unsafe sex often results in early pregnancy and subsequent dropout from school. For instance, in an engagement with one of the girls who has dropped out of school due to a teenage pregnancy, she had this to say;

Researcher: *What will you say contributed to you dropping out of school?*

OoS 1: *I will say poverty. I got pregnant because I was left to fend for myself. It is challenging to be in school if you are a girl from a poor household in a village. Older men, male teachers and these bike riders will also take advantage of us through financial incentives. In most cases, our parents will pressure us to accept these men because of the financial assistance they provide.*

Researcher: *This is well pointed out. So, do you think the girls in your class from wealthy urban households do not face such a situation?*

OoS 1: *I am sure they do not. Because in my previous class, the smartest girls were girls from wealthy urban households. Even FGM, it is we girls from poor households living in villages who are most likely to be initiated.*

I also engaged one of the boys to get his perspective on what he thought affected

girls' schooling

Boy 1: Firstly, I would like to mention *teenage pregnancy*. *Girls in this school are mostly from poor homes and are easily distracted by material things, which will result in male teachers, older men and biker riders getting them pregnant. They will then drop out of school.*

Remarks like such buttress my argument that gender intersects with other social identities like SES and Location to produce adverse educational outcomes for girls. Thus, girls from poor rural households are more

susceptible to teenage pregnancies and subsequently dropping out of school than their peers from affluent urban households.

Another explanation for high levels of teenage pregnancies in secondary schooling, as revealed by my findings, is girls' inability to get proper knowledge in sex education. This is reiterated by Bajaj's findings in Zambia, where it was found that there was a 'strong social taboo around parents talking with their children about sex' (2009, p.135). For instance, when I asked about sexual education, including contraceptive use, it was revealed that girls faced backlash from male pupils and teachers, labelling them as prostitutes. Many of the girls interviewed revealed that they were sometimes socially ostracised by teachers and boys if they saw them interacting with Marie Stopes (an NGO that advances family planning) staff. One of the girls gave an account of the reaction from one of the male teachers when he saw her talking to Marie Stopes.

"It is because you want to have sex with different boys that you want to take prevention" (Girl 19).

This is also mentioned by Delamont (1990) that in the eyes of the male teachers and pupils, girls' knowledge and experience in contraceptive use means they are sluts. Therefore, to maintain their reputations and avoid being labelled as sluts, girls do not reveal their contraceptive interest or refuse it. I agree with Delamont's findings that 'in the girls' eyes, it is socially reasonable to risk pregnancy rather than be labelled a tart' (1990, p.50). Thus, I argued that the low contraceptive prevalence rate among secondary school girls in Sierra Leone is a result of male policing of girls' sexuality that has subsequently led to high rates of teenage pregnancies.

Similarly, the results of this study show that girls from poor rural households were less likely to return to school after pregnancy than girls from wealthy

urban households, who are more likely to return and continue their education. Below is an account from one of the dropout girls interviewed about why she is not back in school after giving birth.

OoS 4: *I got pregnant while preparing for the basic education certificate examination. I took the exams, but could not continue after the results were out, even though I had given birth.*

Researcher: *OK. What was the outcome of the exams?*

OoS 4: *I did not pass because I was unable to study effectively. I was overwhelmed with the pregnancy. After giving birth, I had wanted to return, but my parents said the resources in the household are limited. My father said I should allow my brothers to continue because I am at risk of getting pregnant again, and that I should think of getting married.*

Remarks such as this indicate that the interplay of gender with other identities has significantly influenced learning outcomes for girls.

In addition, the findings from this study have shown that even in cases where they (girls) have returned to school after giving birth, they are constrained from effectively participating in class. For instance, Purple is a victim of a teenage pregnancy and explained her experience returning to school and the impact of dropping out of school because of a teenage pregnancy.

Returning to school, I initially felt a sense of disorientation, as all my previous classmates were now ahead of me. I was, however, embraced well by both boys and girls. I did not receive any negative comments from anybody. Teenage pregnancy has affected me greatly. I struggle to read well at home because I have to care for my child. I have also lagged in school.

Another girl had this to say,

Researcher: You mentioned that *you dropped out of school because you got pregnant. Now that you are back in school, how will you describe your experience?*

Girl 6: *To be honest, I felt discouraged. My peers are now two levels ahead of me. That has affected my performance because I feel unmotivated and has affected my ability to participate in class.*

Researcher: *Have you had cases of hostile reception from teachers and pupils?*

Girl 6: *So far, nothing like that. I feel overwhelmed with taking care of my child and attending school. I sometimes cannot pay attention because I am exhausted.*

Purple's and Girl 6's accounts highlight the institutional inequality of the school. As explained by Purple, this action usually has adverse educational outcomes for girls.

Secondly, nearly all participants interviewed mentioned traditional practices such as FGM and child marriage as another determining factor that has contributed to high levels of teenage pregnancies, by extension, high dropout rates.

Researcher: *So, in your opinion, what causes dropout among girls in this school?*

Girl 3: *Number 1, teenage pregnancy. Most girls tend to stop coming to school when they get pregnant.*

Researcher: *Why is that?*

Girl 3: *They are either ashamed to come because of negative comments from teachers and pupils, especially male teachers and boys, or they lack the confidence to come to school. Often, society frowns upon it, so the school tends to do the same.*

Researcher: *Why did you drop out of school?*

In concluding the interviews, I asked some of the study participants to share with me, based on their experiences, what factors they believed affected girls' performance, attendance, retention, and attainment in this school. Below are five responses from each participant.

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

Yellow: *Number one is teenage pregnancy. Most female students who get pregnant drop out. Those who may want to come could not pay attention in class.*

Blue: *Mostly because of teenage pregnancy and poverty, which leads to early marriage*

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

Boy 15: *I know one girl; she was my classmate. When we entered SSS1, she was attending, and as time passed, I asked her why she was staying home. She told me that she lacked a uniform and other school materials. Then she said that no, she would not come again.*

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined gendered schooling experiences and practices. Subsequently, I have explored sexual division of labour in schools, the double burden of girls in managing household chores and schooling, unfair household decisions and school policies and key determinants of high dropout rate among girls. The findings have illustrated how interrelating factors like gender, class, location, and ethnic traditional practices have contributed to adverse schooling outcomes for girls. Another important point that emerged from this section of the interviews is that negative

household decisions and schooling policies, as well as overwhelming household work, have contributed to limiting girls' potential and opportunities to attain their educational goals.

Chapter 8: Female Teachers' School Experiences: An Intersectional Analysis of Female Educators and Administrators' Experiences in Secondary Schooling

8.1 Introduction

Despite the Sierra Leonean government's introduction of the Free Quality Secondary Education (FQSE) policy, the recruitment of trained and qualified teachers remains a challenge (GoSL, 2020; UNICEF, 2024). This is primarily a significant challenge for secondary schools in peri-urban and rural areas (Ibid). In addition to the recruitment problem, 64 per cent of teachers do not receive salaries because they are not on the government payroll (they are mostly community and volunteer teachers) (GoSL, 2020). Additionally, significant disparities exist in teacher distribution by location. For instance, while Bo City accounts for 66 per cent of the senior secondary level teacher share, Falaba district, a rural district, accounts for only 13 per cent share of the same level (Ibid).

Furthermore, data also indicate that significant disparities exist in relation to female teachers teaching STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). For instance, it was observed that approximately 95% of the teachers involved in STEM education in the four participating secondary schools were male. In comparison, female teachers mainly taught Home Economics, Food and Nutrition, Religious Education, Social Studies and Business Studies. Data from the country's education sector analysis show that at the central level (the ministry), education administration is dominated by men, with few women occupying positions of responsibility. Research conducted in Sierra Leone by the government and its partners revealed that out of 105 individual administrators, 95 are men occupying senior manager positions, while only

10 women hold positions of responsibility – 3 senior and seven mid-level managers (GoSL, 2020; UNICEF, 2024).

At the four (4) participating schools in this research, it was reported and observed that the everyday life experiences of male and female teachers are different. Lisa Smulyan (2006), in her work on *Constructing Teaching Identities*, defined teaching as ‘an arena in which gender can be learned, defined, renegotiated, and contested’ (p.470). In brief, this study, like Smulyan (2006), posits that teaching is a gendered profession. Both the teachers and their teaching are constructed to produce gender differences (Ibid). Evidence has shown that inequalities exist in career progress and prospects, use of space within the school, and teaching practices. For instance, in all four schools, I found that the organisational management was male-centred. Despite a considerable number of female teachers at the JSS level, they were poorly represented at all levels of management. Female teachers in all four participating schools make up 10 per cent of the teaching workforce, with only 3 per cent occupying leadership and management positions. It was observed that more female teachers were teaching at the JSS level than at the SSS level. In three of the schools, no female teacher was teaching at the senior level, while only one taught in the other school. In addition, only one female teacher held a management position (to maintain confidentiality, her position will not be disclosed). Similarly, in the UK context, Delamont (1990) argued that male teachers were more likely to be promoted or have an opportunity for career growth in most secondary schools than female teachers. I agree with Delamont’s argument and would like to add that these inequalities go beyond gender relations. Evidence from this study shows that female teachers in rural school settings are more susceptible to negative teaching experiences than their peers in urban areas.

The data from this study are consistent with those from a government education sector report (2020), which indicated a significant gender imbalance among teachers at every level of the Sierra Leone education system. The report noted that women make up only 28 per cent of the teaching workforce (although this is not surprising, given that historically, girls have been underrepresented in the MDG/SDG). Secondly, women make up a significant proportion of students at the pre-primary and primary school levels, at 87% and 30%, respectively. However, these numbers drastically decrease at higher levels, such as Junior Secondary School (JSS) and Senior Secondary School (SSS). For instance, women comprise 13 per cent of the secondary level teaching workforce; out of that percentage, 16 per cent teach at the JSS level and 9 per cent at the SSS level. I agree with Acker that female teachers become ‘increasingly scarce as they transition to higher levels of the schooling system’ (1994). Acker’s assertion is consistent with the Sierra Leone Education Sector Analysis report, which argues that female teachers are mostly opting for lower levels (Pre and Primary) because they view those levels as a ‘soft option,’ reflecting the stereotypical notion that childcare is an appropriate role for women. The senior levels are viewed as ‘more serious for female teachers (GoSL, 2020, p.217).

This research argues that the uneven distribution of teachers is characterised by gender, location, sexuality, ethnic traditions, and socio-economic disparities. I opted for peri-urban and rural teaching experiences because most of the literature has focused on priorities in urban education (Burton et al., 2013). Data from Sierra Leone indicate that schools in peri-urban and rural districts are more susceptible to numerous challenges, including staff shortages, high levels of poverty, untrained and unqualified teachers, and staff not on government payrolls (GoSL, 2020). Thus, this research has demonstrated that the experiences of female teachers in

these settings differ from those of their female peers in urban settings and from those of male teachers in the same settings. They find themselves in a unique position where they are more likely to deal with negotiating male dominance, balancing family responsibilities and teaching, prejudice and the need to play feminine in school than their male colleagues or their female peers in urban settings. For instance, all the female teachers interviewed in this research noted that leadership tapping by school boards dominated by men has limited their ability to be promoted or compete for leadership positions.

The purpose of this chapter is to present investigative findings on how the interplay of teacher identities, such as gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and location, has produced asymmetric power relations between male and female teachers in post-conflict Sierra Leone secondary schools, thereby contributing to unfair and unequal teaching experiences experienced by female teachers. To bring forth the intersecting unequal experiences of female teachers in secondary schooling, this study embarked on illustrating how they (female teachers) negotiate everyday gender relations within and outside the classroom. The role of the school in constructing femininity and masculinity identities that also reflect stereotyped roles and leadership style. In addition, I showcase how the school's normalisation of compulsory heterosexuality practices has regulated and policed female sexuality by dominating male performance of masculinity. This study assumes that female educators and administrators face intersecting inequalities that have negatively impacted their teaching experiences, their work performance, and limited their ability and opportunities to assume leadership roles in secondary schools. It is essential to note that my findings are based on observations in my staffroom and classroom, as well as interviews and interactions with teachers (women) and pupils. No recruitment process was observed, nor did I interview school board

members or school management to gather information on their recruitment processes. There are tendencies that some aspects of my findings may be flawed; however, similar findings were revealed in UK schools by Delamont (1990). Thus, I argue that although the contexts are different, consistency confirms my findings

8.2 Power-Related Inequalities: An Intersecting Analysis of Female Teachers' Teaching Experiences in Schools

8.2.1 Introduction

Evidence from this study has shown that power-related inequalities in schools are facilitated by the interplay of social identities such as gender, sexuality, class, ethnic-tradition, and location. Lynch and Lodge (2002) argued that power is a fundamental issue of equality in schools. They suggested that 'power relations are deeply imbricated, therefore in the fabric of school life' (p.187). Therefore, Lynch and Lodge (2002) concluded that women and girls who experience inequality do not experience it in singular terms; they also experience it in terms of their...social class, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.' (p.189). Based on my observations, I noticed that the way power relations between male and female teachers are exercised, it is most likely for female teachers to complain or claim they are unfairly and unequally treated, and that they feel powerless in the school organisation (Robinson et al., 2017; Moyo, 2022). Therefore, I agree with Lynch and Lodge's (2002) suggestion that power relations in school, both between teachers and pupils and between teachers themselves, pose an equality problem. As a result, they argued that female teachers are 'disproportionately over-represented in the posts where power is less concentrated, that is, in non-promotional posts' (Lynch & Lodge, 2002, p.189). With that said, I argue that institutional practices and norms have

inherently discriminated against female teachers. This is reiterated by Acker (1994), who suggested that the school system creates an environment that promotes male leadership more than female, especially at the secondary level. Thus, what I have done is to broaden the discourse on how institutional intersecting inequalities have contributed to female teachers being undervalued and unrecognised; how the disproportionate distribution of responsibilities has limited female teachers' authority, hindered their ability to influence decision-making processes in their school, influenced their self-perception on assuming leadership roles, and negatively influenced their teaching experiences. To further elaborate on power-related inequalities in schools, I will narrow the discussion to the following points. Firstly, I have explored the teaching experiences of female teachers and their experiences in accessing leadership and power. This is followed by a demonstration of how the hierarchy of importance in schools has resulted in the non-recognition or misrecognition of female teachers. Thirdly, I examined the role of sexism and domestic responsibilities in limiting female teachers' access to leadership.

8.2.2 Unfair and Unequal Teaching Experience

Research conducted in UK schools on equality concerns among teachers found that issues of gender discrimination were identified as the top concern, resulting in unequal treatment experienced by female teachers in schools (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Coleman, 2007). For instance, one of the female teachers interviewed as part of their (Lynch & Lodge, 2002) study mentioned that she felt unfairly treated in her school because she was reprimanded because her 'opinion does not coincide with that of the powers that be...' (p.170). In another interview, a female teacher noted that little is communicated to them about the happenings in the school. In contrast, another teacher mentioned she felt

unfairly treated because she realised that ‘some teachers’ opinions are listened to and others are ignored or treated as being insignificant’ (Lynch & Lodge, 2002, p.170).

The above examples of negative teaching experiences of female teachers are consistent with the findings of this study. In my interview with a female administrator, she noted that female teachers are often not consulted, or their opinions are either ignored or treated as insignificant when it comes to important decision-making in the school. Another female teacher told me that;

“When it comes to representing this school in workshops and trainings, the inner circle (all men) decides who to send. Unless the request required a female representation, but they are more likely to send a male teacher to represent the school”. (FT1)

Researchers such as Lynch and Lodge (2006) and Gaskell and Mullen (2006) have argued that women and men experience access to power in schools differently. For instance, Gaskell and Mullen (2006) argued that although teaching is designed for teachers to assert power and authority over pupils as well as vertically over other teachers, women are subordinated and marginalised because they do not enjoy the same level of power and authority as men do in schools (pp.463-464). My observations are consistent with the above argument, and they went further to reveal that, aside from the fact that female teachers' experiences teaching power and autonomy differ from those of male teachers, some female teachers commanded more power in the school because of their socio-economic status and location (Lynch & Lodge, 2006). They enjoyed greater power than their peers from a lower-class status. In my interview with one of the female teachers, she indicated that her interaction with a female colleague

from one of the secondary schools in Bo (an urban setting) revealed how her colleague enjoyed greater access and voice in her school management than she did. She mentioned;

“The reality is that in this district, female teachers have little chance of leadership and decision-making. Men often dominate opportunities such as training and participation in key roles. My friend in Bo City often tells me that, although disparities existed in their school, they have more access to opportunities and contribute to their school management meetings. Even last month, she was in Freetown for a training, while here, only male teachers went”.

Another teacher mentioned she was likely to have been appointed to a position on the finance committee in their school because of her relationship with the Paramount Chief (traditional leader).

“I expressed my interest in the position to the principal, but was at first reluctant to commit to giving me the role, even though I was qualified for the role and there was no woman representative on the committee. I had to speak with my uncle, who is the paramount chief of the chieftom and board chairman of the school. So, probably I was appointed to it because of his influence. Unfortunately, that should not be the case. Female teachers should be given important roles in the school, irrespective of their status”.

The above remarks resonate with Lynch and Lodge’s (2002) argument that teachers have access to power within the school in different ways. Moreover, some teachers have greater access to power as a consequence of belonging to a higher-status group within the school (p. 166). As a result, this study argues that due to the hierarchical order created by the school's everyday practices, female teachers find themselves in a situation that results in unequal recognition and representation with superordinates and peers (Lynch & Lodge, 2002, p. 167). My observation further revealed that hostile power relations led to male dominance in the staffroom's verbal and physical spaces. In one of the staffroom interactions I observed, a female teacher had to interject and make the statement below;

“Can you guys allow us to have a conversation too; we can barely hear each other talk. All you do is talk football, politics and women”. (FT2).

8.2.2.1 Hierarchy of Importance: Devalued and Unrecognised Teaching Experiences of Female Teachers

Both interviews and observations revealed a degree of hierarchical importance to specific subjects and the teachers who taught them. For example, it was revealed through my observations that in the staffroom and classroom as well as my interactions with pupils and teachers, that teachers in charge of science related subjects like mathematics, physics, chemistry and technology commanded higher respect and status in these schools than teachers teaching home economics, food and nutrition and business studies (Lane et al., 2012; Makarova & Herzog, 2015; Mim, 2022). In all four participating schools, male teachers were in charge of these perceived important subjects, while female teachers were in charge of the perceived irrelevant or ‘feminine’ subjects. Thus, I observed that male teachers teaching these subjects attracted considerable attention from peers and pupils (Makarova & Herzog, 2015; Mim, 2022). These findings corroborate Lynch and Lodge’s (2002) findings, which mentioned that ‘there was a hierarchy in terms of how subjects were perceived’ in the schools where they conducted their research (p. 172). They found that home economics and Arts were ‘most often regarded as low status...subjects’ (Ibid). Thus, they mentioned that during their research, the ‘most comments and claims of unfair treatment...were made by female teachers’ (Ibid, p.175).

Another finding that resonates with Lynch and Lodge’s findings is the decision-making process surrounding the development of teaching and exam timetables. I discovered that perceived important subjects taught mainly by male teachers were prioritised in both the teaching and exam

timetables. Two of the female teachers noted that during exams, they feel unfairly and unequally treated when it comes to invigilating and allocating slots in the exam timetable. One of them had this to say;

“The exam timetable always has core subjects as the first exams to be taken with maximum invigilation. Our subjects are always the last set of exams with minimal invigilation. They (the exams office), comprising all men, seldom ask us about our opinion on the drafting of the exams timetable” (FT 2)

The other teacher made the following comments;

“Last month, there was training organised by an NGO called Leh Wi Lan in Bo City. I was left out because the principal said the training is for teachers who teach ‘core’ subjects. However, I asked my colleague, who teaches the same subject as I do, and she confirmed that she was selected. I felt bad and unfairly treated”. (FT 3)

Similarly, Lynch and Lodge (2002), Gaskell and Mullen (2006) and Coleman (2005, 2007) research in UK schools found that a female teacher complained that her subject (Art) was excluded from the exams timetable because it those not find itself in the category of been regarded as ‘more highly valued subjects’, while another female teacher pointed out that felt unfairly and unequally treated because she was not consulted for her opinion on the exams timetable.

The remarks above draw attention to the fact that the hierarchy of importance on subjects in secondary schools reinforces intersecting inequalities against female teachers. Based on the data generated in this study, female teachers from peri-urban and rural school settings were more likely to be unfairly and unequally treated in relation to the importance of subjects and other aspects related to subjects.

As mentioned by researchers such as Gaskell and Mullen (2006), teaching is heavily gendered (p. 454). However, this study goes beyond the gendered nature of the teaching profession to expand knowledge on the contribution of interrelating factors, such as gender, sexuality, class, ethnic tradition, and location, in producing intersecting inequalities against women in the teaching field. What this study suggests is that gendered hierarchies in teaching and teaching practices disadvantaged female teachers, but as mentioned by Gaskell and Mullen (2006), female teachers from low-income peri-urban and rural school settings are the 'most disadvantaged by this dynamic' (p.453)

8.2.3 Female Teachers' Experiences in Accessing Leadership and Power

The prevailing argument is that women tend to have lower aspirations for leadership and management roles. However, evidence from this study revealed a stark gender imbalance in institutional processes and practices that has reinforced masculine authority/patriarchal norms (Addi-Raccah & Ayalon, 2002; Gaskell & Mullen, 2006; Coleman, 2005, 2007; Shaked et al., 2018). My interactions with both female and male teachers revealed that promotion chances for women within the school structures were less likely than those of their male counterparts. A related argument put forward is that female teachers lack the intellectual abilities to assume a top leadership role (Shakeshaft, 2006; Makarova & Herzog, 2015; Mim, 2022). It is argued that due to limited education among female teachers, fewer female teachers are involved in teaching at higher levels, such as the secondary level. For example, below I have mapped out responses from four female teachers from the four participating schools on their opinions about women's chances of promotion and career growth in their respective

schools. I ought to point out that I have only selected one response from each female teacher among the many provided.

FT1: *They (male teachers) believe they are better teachers than we because they teach science-related subjects. Unfortunately, the pupils, both male and female, prefer these male teachers over us. As a result, promotion and career opportunities have been skewed in favour of male teachers at this school. It is doubtful for a female teacher to be selected for critical committees in this school.*

FT2: *We are constrained from making career progress because training opportunities are not sufficiently extended to us. They make excuses and assumptions that we have family responsibilities.*

FT3: *We are constrained to assume leadership roles because they assume we are less qualified, so we do not want to be promoted to administrative positions.*

FT4: *They limit our participation in training opportunities because they assume they need the training and the financial benefits associated with it more than we do, because they are the breadwinners.*

These assumptions put forward against women as mentioned above have been criticised by Acker (1994), describing them as a deliberate attempt to disrespect and 'if not outright contempt, for their intellectual abilities' (p.81). Acker's view is consistent with that of the female teachers I interviewed. For instance, I went further to ask these women who had shared their opinions earlier whether the assumptions against them that they had pointed out are correct or flawed. Each responded accordingly.

FT1: *I do not believe they are better teachers than we are. Teaching science-related subjects does not make someone a better teacher. I think they portray the hierarchy of importance for subjects to claim superiority and dominance.*

FT2: *We indeed have to balance family responsibilities and teaching, but prejudice against us because of that restricts us from benefiting from teacher training opportunities aimed at building our capacity to become better teachers and make career progress.*

FT3: *It is not correct; we are as qualified as they are. We tend not to apply for promotion to administrative positions because we are constrained by a patriarchal institutional practice that prioritises men over women in leadership positions.*

FT4: *I do not believe that is true. I know that most of us lack the confidence and persistence to apply for leadership positions. Nevertheless, this is mainly due to continued stereotypical perceptions about women, especially in a district like this, where even the communities believe in male leadership.*

Acker (1994) went further to point out that existing literature, such as Hilsum and Start (1974), has argued that 'men do a lot better: they are promoted faster and further' (p.79). However, in addition to the above remarks made by the female teachers, what these researchers failed to point out is that men find themselves in a privileged environment that stereotypes women's ability to do well in leadership and management positions. For instance, my enquiries about the composition of the school boards, which are charged with selecting senior managers among other responsibilities, revealed that they are mostly made up of men who most often select men based on stereotypes. This is consistent with Delamont's (1990) findings in the UK secondary schools, where a 'substantial part of the selection involves committee members matching candidates against stereotypes' (p.82). For instance, one female teacher noted that when it comes to contributing to staff meetings and selecting teachers for important roles in the school, it is always dominated by male teachers. She had this to say

"On several occasions, I have expressed dissatisfaction with how the meetings are managed, but no action has been taken. Last week, when they were selecting teachers to invigilate the WASSCE exams, they selected all males. I had to protest to the principal that he consistently prioritises male teachers over us when it comes to important roles. I had to do it because it is not the first time, they always do it" (FT 4)

In an interaction with one of the male principals, he tried to justify why almost all important roles were undertaken by men. He argued that women teachers were underrepresented in the school and often shied away from taking on challenging roles. I may want to disagree with the above argument because research has shown that even in cases where female teachers have large numbers, they are under-represented (Gaskell & Mullen, 2006; Shakeshaft, 2006). For instance, UNICEF (2024) reported significant gender differences in leadership and management roles among female teachers in secondary schools in Sierra Leone. Another study conducted in the UK revealed that, despite the large number of female teachers at the secondary school level, female teachers are 'greatly under-represented in positions of management' (Shakeshaft, 2006, p. 499). A similar study in 10 European countries revealed that the 'majority of school managers are men, while the majority of teachers are women' (Ruijs 1990, cited in Shakeshaft 2006, p.499). Hence, I support Delamont's argument that the assumption that female teachers are less qualified than men, lack the required educational ability to compete with men, or lack self-confidence and ambition, or that women have household responsibilities, are myths that have had significant consequences on the everyday life of female teachers (1990). I further agree that the above assumptions have created a 'convincing mythology to hinder the promotion of women in the occupation (Delamont, 1990, p.84).

In addition, evidence from this research revealed that female teachers are unable to break through the leadership ceilings in these schools because they have been monopolised by male teachers, creating a masculine environment that limits their chances of promotion (Makarova & Herzog, 2015; Dominguez & Diez, 2022). For instance, teacher training is designed to enhance teachers' capacity to acquire new skills and knowledge, thereby improving the quality of their work output (Cole, 2002; Coleman, 2005,

2007; Dominguez & Diez, 2022). It is an important activity that enhances female teachers' participation and advancement to school leadership, as it is a learning experience that builds their confidence and enhances their self-esteem, enabling them to compete with male teachers for leadership positions (Cole, 2002; Coleman, 2005, 2007; Okumbe, 2007). However, evidence from this study has shown that female teachers have been discriminated against in the process of selecting participants for these trainings. All the female teachers interviewed expressed dissatisfaction about their non-involvement in most of these trainings. Female Teacher 2 mentioned how male administrators used a sexist approach to discriminate against female teachers' representation in teacher trainings. She had this to say;

“If the training or workshop organised by an NGO or Ministry of Education is within the township, they tend to select us because it carries a small financial benefit for participation. However, if it is conducted in Freetown or any other city outside this township, they will most likely nominate male teachers because it comes with a huge financial benefit. When he (the principal) and his inner circle (all men) want to eliminate us, they will mention that we have family responsibilities”. (FT2).

Another teacher from another school had this to say;

“The principal always nominates his close buddies for this training. He and his all-male inner circle rotate participation in these trainings among them. I was lucky to be selected last month for a training in Freetown because female representation was required”. (FT 5).

In addition to male dominance in teacher training representations in these schools, it was also reported in this study by female teachers that men dominated both verbal and physical space, resulting in their opinions being ignored. For example, in an interview with one of the female teachers, she noted male dominance of verbal space in her school.

“In this school, the only voice that matters and we listen to is that of our bosses, the principal and vice principal (both male). They do not allow us to speak; in fact, they do not listen to us (females) even in cases where things are not good, and we want to raise concerns. They listen more to the male teachers”

Another teacher expressed her frustration at the gendered selection of teachers for important roles, regardless of their length of service in the school. She noted;

“I have taught in this school for 24 years, but when you see how school committees such as the exams committee, management committee, sports committee and disciplinary committee, they are all dominated by male teachers”.

The above remarks illustrate that the schools’ everyday practices were highly gendered. Female teachers faced discrimination in teacher training, representation, and access to power within schools, as male dominance existed in both teacher relations and school management. Another example of male-centeredness at all levels of management was also narrated by the only female teacher in a management position; she had this to say:

“Female teachers in this school are not valued. We are constrained because almost all of us teach at the JSS level, with just me teaching at the SSS level in this school. As a result, most of these male teachers, especially those teaching at the SSS level, view us as lacking the educational ability to occupy leadership or management roles. This is somehow different from what our colleagues in Freetown experienced. For instance, when I went for the teacher training last month, some of my colleagues noted that they were involved in management roles and participated more often in workshops and trainings amidst male dominance” (FT 4).

The power-related inequalities identified in this study reinforce my argument that everyday school practices have perpetuated inequalities in

leadership and management in secondary schools. This study has shown that gender differences exist in leadership style between male and female managers. This finding is consistent with studies by researchers such as Shakeshaft (1995), who also argued that there are leadership style differences between male and female managers. For instance, she noted that women managers can be 'attentive to the social and emotional development of students', while men managers, on the other hand, place emphasis on 'organisation structures and to avoid conflict' (1995, p.146). Evidence from observations conducted in this study revealed that the female administrator adopted a more collaborative and participatory approach with pupils and colleagues. In contrast, her boss, the principal (male), adopted a more disciplined and authoritative approach. As a result, pupils fear the principal more because he is viewed as hard-handed. Therefore, it is important to point out that observations conducted in this study are consistent with Shakeshaft's (1995) argument.

However, it is essential to note that female teachers in rural school settings are more likely to be in lower positions than their female peers in urban areas. Although nationally (Sierra Leone) female teachers are less represented at the secondary school level, it is worse for female teachers in rural settings. This study argues that female teachers teaching in rural areas have fewer chances of occupying leadership or management role than their peers in urban areas because they are highly likely to be excluded from key learning activities like teacher training or taking part in key decision-making processes in their schools due to their gender or ethnic-traditional norms or social class or location or a combination of two or more characteristics. For instance, it was reported by the female teachers I interviewed that ethnic traditional practices and norms have adversely affected their role as teachers in the school. One female noted:

“You know, in this part of the country, women are expected to conform to acceptable traditional practices. Having authority over men is often seen by the community as inappropriate. The community believes in male leadership over women in schools. They usually say we have family roles to deal with” (FT 1)

The above remarks highlighted the negative attitudes of the school and the community towards women's leadership. This is reiterated by Cook (2007), who argues that cultural practices hinder women's ability to assume and exercise leadership positions because 'the cultural identification of women as caring, domestic and implicitly of lesser importance' has contributed to the negative teaching experiences of female teachers (p. 32). The remarks also demonstrate how the intersection of social identities, such as gender, location, and ethnic tradition, has negatively influenced women's leadership roles in the school. Thus, I reiterate my point that the intersection of gender and other social identities, such as location, has exacerbated inequalities in the teaching experiences, management, and roles of female teachers. Therefore, I agree with Fitzgerald (2003) that to better understand the factors contributing to gender imbalance in female teachers' experiences, leadership, and management roles, it is necessary to recognise that female teachers are not a homogeneous group. Thus, it is essential to analyse the issue taking into consideration various circumstances, such as ethnicity/social class/location (p. 432).

8.2.4 Gendered Roles, Sexism and Domestic Responsibilities as a deterrent to women's leadership in schools

Footnotes: This section focused on how roles are assigned to female teachers and their experiences in dealing with these roles in the school. It also examines the experiences of female teachers who face sexism in schools and how it impacts their teaching practices. To start with, I explored

the views of both male and female teachers on sex roles and how they act upon them. This researcher observed that the segregation of sex roles in all four schools was common and strong. The findings from this study support Acker's suggestion that division of sex roles in teaching 'appears to place women in a disadvantaged position' (1994, p.76). This study is also consistent with research conducted in British schools, which revealed that male teachers were strict in maintaining segregated sex roles in school because it reflected their households' practices; thus, they would 'cling especially firmly to their childhood ideas of separate sex roles' (Delamont, 1990, p.70). In addition, the female teachers I interviewed reported that their school management was more willing to assign stereotypically feminine roles, such as counsellor, event planner, and welfare officer, to them than management roles. I support Shava and colleagues' (2019) suggestion that school practices like gendered roles assignment have recreated 'patriarchal ideologies that are oppressive to women' (p.31). In line with the above argument, it was observed that the female administrator in one of the schools primarily provided support to both the pupils and her colleagues. When I asked her how she would describe her role as different from that of the principal, she replied.

"Well, as an administrator, I always provide support to the students, my boss and other teachers. I am mostly assigned to help new teachers settle in well at the school. I do not command the type of power the principal has because all the teachers respect his authority. For me, sometimes I have problems in exercising control over male teachers because they seem not to respect my authority"

The above remarks suggest that women managers are often assigned roles that reflect stereotypical household duties, such as being caregivers who empower others. Thus, Marshall pointed out that female principals were more attuned to teaching and taking motherly responsibilities

(1995). Researchers have argued that, unlike male leadership that tends to exercise 'control with power over others, hierarchy and individualism', female leadership are more likely to exercise control or power 'through others or with others' (Blackmore 1999 cited in Oplaka and Atias 2007, p.43). On the same vein, Delamont (1990) suggested that the reason for men teachers' firm approach to segregated gender roles in schools is a result of their childhood upbringing in homes that perpetuated these ideas. To some extent, I agree, but some male teachers use these gender roles ideologies as a pretext to display their hegemonic masculinity. They have held to the traditional belief that men should dominate and women should be subordinate. My observations revealed that gender roles were assigned to female teachers to reflect such patriarchal norms as 'women make better mothers' (Delamont, 1990, p.72).

The women teachers I interviewed expressed concerns that they often do not apply for leadership positions in their school or seek management positions because they do not want to be seen as holding 'too much power' or viewed as 'too intellectual', 'too disciplined', and 'too emancipated'. They stated that society will be prejudiced against them for not being 'wife material' (not meeting the traditional perceptions of a good wife). This was Teacher 1's opinion on this issue.

"In this part of the country, you do not want to be seen as acting too masculine, like seeking a leadership position or disciplining students for misbehaviour through corporal punishment, getting married will be difficult. Men will say you cannot be controlled or subjugated. Most of us value being wives and mothers than seeking career growth"

What the above quotation indicates is that women's career growth is viewed as a deterrent to marriage; thus, they (female teachers) accept subordinated roles in schools that reflect household work. Similar findings

in UK schools were mentioned by Delamont (1990). She found that female teachers who deviated from conventional feminine behaviours or who tend to challenge feminine gender roles, like classroom decorations, are 'likely to be much more heavily punished' or 'would themselves be in an untenable position in these schools' (p.75). Like other studies (e.g., Delamont 1990), this study found that the staffrooms were 'hostile to feminism' (p. 75).

Another evidence revealed by this research is that the promotion of women to top leadership or management positions in all four schools was constrained by a sexist approach in the school processes and practices. Researchers such as Lees (1993) argued that the secondary school environment fosters 'compulsory heterosexuality and the sexist objectification, surveillance and regulation of girls and their sexuality' (cited in Francis 2000, p.35). Female teachers I interviewed noted that sexist behaviour, comments and attitudes were directed at them by male administrators and colleague teachers in order to discriminate against them. All the female teachers interviewed mentioned that the school leadership (in cases of assigning management roles) or school boards (for teacher recruitment) have consistently expressed concern about how they will balance school roles and family responsibilities, or about using marital status to determine leadership responsibility and commitment. One female teacher had this to say;

"When it comes to promotion or assigning management responsibilities, they (principal and vice) will talk about how they do not want to overwhelm us with schoolwork because they know we have household responsibilities too. In a case where you are not married, they will view you as unfit to take up management roles"

I further asked her why she thinks they are making these excuses, and she replied.

“I think they often use these excuses as an approach to discriminate against us. I have taught in this school for 12 years, longer than most of the male teachers holding important positions, but in all those years, I have only been assigned a class master role and a school mentor role”

The above evidence is consistent with Brown and Ralph's (1996) findings in Uganda, where it was found that female teachers were not promoted or assigned management roles because they were unmarried. Thus, they argued that gender disparities are prevalent within school management because 'power relations within educational institutions are hierarchical' (Brown and Ralph 1996, cited in Shakeshaft 2006, p.500). Below, I have also demonstrated how sexist behaviour, comments and attitudes employed by men in schools have limited female teachers' access to opportunities like training, career growth and promotion chances. To start with, I found strong evidence that revealed visible sexist practices among teachers and pupils went unchallenged. Both classroom and staffroom observations revealed pervasive sexist behaviour targeted towards females, predominantly girls. Silence on these issues was evident. The examples below show two female teachers from two different schools asserting how they have been targeted with sexist behaviours and how it has been discriminated against.

Female Teacher 3, on the other hand, indicated that she was not selected for training in Freetown due to her family status or attachment. She was told that her baby was too young to travel, while Female Teacher 5 had this to say.

“I had applied for the role of an examiner for the ongoing WASSCE examinations, but I am sure I was passed over because I was on maternity leave”

Similarly, female teachers from Lynch and Lodge's research in UK co-ed secondary schools expressed similar dissatisfaction about male teachers' use of sexist comments and behaviour towards them. For instance, one of them admitted she felt unfairly treated by two of her male colleagues because of their sexist comments directed at them (female teacher): "This school has *gone to hell since women teachers came*". (2002, p.176). Another female teacher noted that such sexist comments and behaviour by these male teachers were perceived as reinforcing the sexist behaviour and attitudes of students (Ibid). While the other female teacher mentioned she missed out on a promotion because she was on 6-month maternity leave. What the findings of this study and Lynch and Lodge's findings have demonstrated is how decision-making is highly gendered and sexist and has contributed to negative teaching experiences of female teachers, resulting in intersecting inequalities.

The above equality concerns also reiterated my argument about how the interplay of identities like gender, sexuality and location contributes to negative teaching experiences of female teachers. For instance, I observed that sexist language was prevalent in the staffroom. On more than four occasions, I observed male teachers objectifying girls and making comments like

"That girl is self-aware of her body (buttocks), that is why she likes her uniform skirt to be tight and short"

In one of my Staffroom observations, I observed that male teachers' staffroom talk was mainly focused on objectifying a girl's body. On that occasion, a female teacher had to interject when one of the male teachers made this comment.

“That girl is looking very beautiful, see how curvy her waist is, I like the fact that she does not mingle with boys’

The female teacher responded.

“You should stop talking about girls like that”.

However, when asked about sexualization and sexual harassment from male teachers and pupils towards them (female teachers), all five female teachers interviewed were quick to dismiss such action from male teachers against them, but indicated that boys tend to do it to them. Teacher 3 had this to say when asked about sexualization and sexual harassment from male teachers and pupils.

“I have not experienced such behaviour from a male teacher directed at me, but I have seen them sexualizing female students in the staffroom, and I have also received reports from female students on sexual harassment from male teachers and boys. With regards to male pupils, when I joined this school at first, I had a case where a boy made a sexualised comment about my appearance. I had to admonish him strongly, and since then I have not had such an experience with any other boy”.

Another female teacher from another school mentioned that both male teachers and pupils were in the habit of objectifying females. She recounted;

“I have not directly experienced it from them (male teachers and pupils), but I have received complaints from junior female teachers as well as girls about sexualizing comments about them, such as ‘The girl has big buttocks’, ‘That teacher is too beautiful to be single”.

The above remarks are consistent with findings from Canada and Finland, where it was found that sexualization and sexual harassment were ‘not an

uncommon practice for male students to make loud comments about women teachers' bodies, their clothes and their ways of moving' (Lahelma et al., 2000, p.465). It is important to point out that in all the schools, dominant masculinities and compulsory heterosexuality were used to police and regulate females' spaces and sexualities. For instance, as mentioned in Chapter 2 of this study, girls who tried to resist sexual advances from male teachers were targeted with physical or verbal punishments.

8.3 Classroom Management, Discipline and Gendered Use of Space

Maintaining order and control over students in the classroom has been identified as a gendered issue. It is a teaching and learning practice that establishes a safe, disciplined, and effective learning environment for students. It also explores the interactions between teachers and students, and how teachers' strategies have shaped the minds of students, as well as ensuring that classroom rules are observed (Oplaka & Atias, 2007). Evidence from this study has revealed that male teachers were most involved in ensuring that classrooms and, by extension, the school's rules are adhered to through the enforcement of disciplinary actions, such as corporal punishment. During my informal discussions with male teachers during observations, they indicated that corporal punishment is the most effective way to tackle students' misbehaviours in their schools. They argued that, although it is against school policies, they claimed it enhances positive behaviour among pupils, thereby creating and maintaining an effective and conducive learning environment, because they perceived school discipline as an 'outcome of schooling' (Oplaka & Atias, 2007, p. 49). A key finding from this study, based on classroom observations and interviews, is that gender differences exist in relation to discipline

enforcement and classroom management. By classroom management, this study refers to 'activities and strategies undertaken by teachers to maintain order in their classes' (Oplaka & Atias, 2007, p.42). On the other hand, disciplinary enforcement is geared towards curtailing 'student misbehaviour and disruptive activities' (Wragg 1993 and Burden 1995 cited in Oplaka and Atias 2007, p.42). Thus, this study has explored gender differences in classroom management and discipline through the following aspects. Firstly, students' views on classroom management and discipline by male and female teachers, including the difference between male and female teachers in addressing students' disruptive and misconduct behaviours. Secondly, teachers' opinions on classroom management and discipline are important.

An explanation of power imbalance experienced by female teachers is through the 'apparent autonomy and relative power of teachers in classrooms' (Jackson 1968, cited in Renold 2006, p.440). In line with much classroom research, such as Renold (2006), this study found that teachers enjoy some form of autonomy and power over pupils within and outside the classroom. For instance, the teaching method employed by all the teachers observed in this research is one in which teachers are positioned as holders of knowledge and pupils as receivers of that knowledge. The teacher–pupil interactions in class are managed by the teachers, which, in most cases, demand 'pupil passivity and obedience' (Renold, 2006, p. 440). Teachers, it was observed, were charged with enforcing discipline when official and in some cases unofficial school rules were breached. However, one issue that emerged from this research was that female teachers and pupils were positioned differently from male teachers and pupils in relation to teacher autonomy and power. For example, in one of my interviews with a female teacher, she noted her difficulty in exerting control over her class, especially with the boys.

Researcher: How will you describe your experience as a female teacher during your time in this school?

FT 3: It has been challenging, especially managing boys in class. The boys...they are very disruptive and inconsiderate. Sometimes, I think they are careless about what I say to them. To some extent, I will say it is because I am a woman. After all, they fear male teachers.

What the above remarks indicate is that although teachers have autonomy and control over the pupils, female teachers do not enjoy ‘the same power within the school and education system generally’ (Coffey & Delamont, 2000, p.16). This is evident in many of my interviews with boys. They mentioned that they tend not to exhibit laddish or disruptive behaviours during lessons being taught by male teachers because they (male teachers) adopted a very aggressive and assertive mode of discipline, also described by Jackson (2010) as ‘...to-the-point, ‘masculine’ mode of disciplining’ (p.511). What the above remarks indicate is that male teachers have been effective in confronting boys’ laddish or disruptive behaviours in school because they adopted a teaching style (masculine) that is in conjunction with boys’ laddish, masculine behaviours. A teacher in Jackson’s (2010) work mentioned that they have been effective in addressing boys’ laddish behaviours because they are ‘speaking their language’ (p.511). On the contrary, this teacher reported that women teachers adopted a teaching style less effective in confronting boys’ laddish or disruptive behaviours because they attempt to ‘appeal to their better nature’ (ibid.). In relation to teacher–pupil interactions, as mentioned in Chapter 2, classroom interactions are often gendered, with a skew in favour of boys. Evidence suggests that teachers interact more with boys than with girls. It was observed that teachers were quite receptive to boys who offered different viewpoints or disagreed with them. They viewed it as ‘an active and enquiring mind’, while they viewed girls who displayed similar

behaviours as a 'direct challenge to teacher authority' (Renold, 2006, p.442).

What emerged from this study is that disciplinary actions, such as corporal punishment, are gendered. For instance, it was observed that male teachers used it to correct misbehaviours and, in some cases, to exploit sexual favours from female pupils (See Chapter 2). Therefore, this research agrees with Oplaka and Atias's (2007) argument that male teachers use school discipline measures as a means to exert their masculine authority and control over pupils and female teachers. For instance, the caning of pupils is viewed as a performance of masculinity. Oplaka and Atias (2007) noted in their findings that male teachers see school discipline as an 'adequate control of a class...a prerequisite to achieving institutional objectives' (p.49). I observed that boys were mainly disruptive during lessons taught by female teachers. Interviews with female teachers in this study reveal that they face constraints in maintaining order and discipline in their classes. As mentioned by one of the teachers;

"Some of the boys become more disruptive during my period. I most often send for the mathematics teacher (male) to come to my aid because some tend to resist me" (FT 5)

In another engagement with another female teacher, she had this to say.

FT 2: The boys often disturb and disrupt a lot. They disrupt the class a lot.

Researcher: OK. How do they disrupt?

FT 2: For instance, while teaching, you will see a boy who does not have a pen go directly to a girl and forcefully take her pen from her

The remarks above are reiterated by another female teacher who expressed her challenges in maintaining classroom discipline. She emphasized;

“I can talk to the girls and they listen to me, but the boys are very stubborn. The boys are very difficult to deal with. The girls are disciplined. The boys are disruptive. Very disruptive” (FT1).

As a result, most female teachers often asked male teachers to help enforce discipline in their classes, especially against the boys. Researchers like Robinson (2005) have argued that male teachers' enforcement of school discipline is seen as a performance of hegemonic masculinities because they are 'rewarded with power and popularity...in schools' (p.22). Hegemonic masculinity goes beyond dominant control or position of power, but it is the 'expression of the privilege men collectively have over women' (Connell, 1996, p.206). The female teachers I talked to mentioned that they are most effective in a teaching environment that is calm and receptive. I agree with Oplaka and Atias (2007) that to reduce disruptions in class, female teachers often adopt a preventive technique that focuses on the 'display of positive emotions' (p. 50). For male teachers, to effectively manage the classroom, there is a need for a 'strong, assertive, determinant and purposeful approach to be adopted' (Oplaka & Atias, 2007, p.55). Female teachers, on the other hand, adopted a soft power approach, such as verbal punishment or focusing on caring, considering and diagnosing (Ibid p.54). Remarks like this indicate how the school is constructed to maintain dominant masculinity. Thus, Renold (2006) argued that at secondary school, male teachers prove their masculinity by constructing themselves as authority figures and disciplinarians (p.445). Renold's argument reflects how some of the boys interviewed viewed female teachers. Below are two responses from two boys from 2 different schools

“In this school, we only have one female teacher; some of my colleagues are in the habit of talking even when she is in class. So, most times, she will ask a male teacher to come discipline these boys” (Boy 12).

“In this school, female teachers shy away from dealing with boys. They will refer us to male teachers if we do something wrong” (Boy 9).

What the above remarks show is that boys, through their performance of masculinity, tend to undermine the authority of female teachers. In another discussion with a female administrator, she noted that, despite her position, most of the male teachers in her school tend to be more responsive to the principal (also male) than to her. She noted;

“I sometimes feel challenged by the behaviour of some of the male teachers. They tend not to take directives from me; they would rather receive them from the principal. In one instance, I had to ask the principal to intervene and admonish one of the male teachers”

Based on her ordeal, I agree with Renold (2006) that male teachers view female teachers as socially passive and subordinated to male authority, irrespective of their position in the school.

Addi-Racah and Ayalon (2002) suggested that ‘when teaching becomes a ‘feminine’ occupation, men preserve their dominance and hegemony by moving to positions of leadership, leaving women as simple teachers’ (p. 173). This research aligns with the views of researchers such as Francis and Skelton (2001), Skelton (2001, 2003), Haase (2008), and Jackson (2010), who suggest that men's demonstration of control and discipline in school is linked to their enactment of masculinities. For instance, Jackson (2010) argued that male teachers adopt this strategy to ‘prove their masculinity and to offset the feminine association of teaching...’ (Jackson, 2010, p.512). As a result, both female and male pupils see them (male teachers) as ‘effective disciplinarians...’ (Ibid). The male and female pupils

I interviewed share a similar characterisation of male teachers as effective and aggressive disciplinarians in their schools. However, the female teachers I interviewed mentioned that they were constrained from being effective in enforcing discipline because of patriarchal cultural norms and practices. One of the female teachers I spoke to mentioned that male teachers appeared to reflect their home roles as head of household in charge of maintaining control and discipline. She noted;

“I always refer stubborn and disruptive boys to one of the male teachers because they can discipline them well”

I further asked why that was the case, and she replied;

“Men like the father at home are more respected by the pupils because they can teach them very well. In my class, the moment I mention I will send for Mr Y, serenity will prevail”

Another female teacher had this to say;

“Traditionally, we are seen as mothers who should care and show compassion for our children, so we cannot be seen as canning pupils. It sends the wrong signals to the community about us. The community, people, and the pupils will start making negative comments about us. They will say No wonder she does not have children, or she is not married because she is too wicked”.

The above interview extracts revealed three issues. Firstly, men and women are positioned differently in terms of discipline and control over pupils. While male teachers are described as effective disciplinarians for maintaining discipline and control in class, female teachers who attempt to enact the same level of disciplinary measures are described as wicked. Secondly, while men are credited for maintaining order in classrooms, women who attempt to do the same are targeted with sexist comments. Lastly, patriarchal norms in households are also reflected in how school

discipline is practised. This last point is reiterated by Kirk (2004) in his study in Pakistan, where it was found that women's work as teachers was 'incorporated within patriarchal culture' (cited in Gaskell and Mullen, 2006, p. 462). This illustrates the double standard and sexism, and the influence of patriarchal ethnic-traditional practices in everyday schooling practices.

Thus, an established nuance revealed in this study is that female teachers are constrained to be effective in maintaining order and control in classrooms because of the double standard and sexism in everyday schooling practices. Evidence from this study suggests that a negative attitude towards women's leadership was prevalent, particularly in the communities where the teachers I interviewed reside. Patriarchal norms were deeply entrenched in these communities; thus, they viewed women's leadership as a departure from traditional norms. This finding is consistent with Cubillo and Brown's (2003) study in nine countries, where they found that female teachers and their work were devalued due to 'patterns of stereotypic expectation and socio-cultural expectations' (p. 501). A similar study conducted by Brown and Ralph (1996) in Uganda found that female teachers were underrepresented and devalued because of 'patriarchal patterns and male privilege (p.501).

8.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has highlighted three key issues that drive negative teaching experiences among female teachers, resulting in intersecting inequalities in secondary schooling in Sierra Leone. Firstly, it has been established that unequal access to power and autonomy experienced by female teachers has resulted in unfair and unequal treatment in accessing promotion and career opportunities. My findings demonstrate that teacher power and autonomy in secondary schools are

asymmetrically distributed, with male teachers generally benefiting more. Although teachers have the power to exercise authority within and outside the classroom over pupils, their powers are subject to vertical authority (i.e., authority over them). It has been established that men most often exercise these vertical powers because they occupy senior positions, thereby finding themselves in positions that allow them to exercise power over female teachers, who are placed in a lower-status gender hierarchy. Hence, it has been demonstrated by this study, like other studies, that male teachers were predominantly responsible for dealing with ‘...issues of discipline, especially corporal punishment’ (Dunne, 2007, p.505). Secondly, I have been able to demonstrate how power relations in staffroom interactions between male and female teachers are asymmetrical, favouring men. It has been established that a hierarchy of importance was established through teacher identities, including gender, class, sexuality, and location. This study has shown how women are discriminated against through the employment of sexist behaviour, comments and attitudes by men in the school. The hierarchy of subject importance, as illustrated, has resulted in female teachers being devalued and unfairly treated. Lastly, this study has been able to establish that the female teaching workforce is not a homogenous group; thus, it is influenced by class, sexuality, ethnicity and location. Hence, I have been able to demonstrate how the intersection of gender and other social identities has led to negative teaching experiences for female teachers, especially those from low-income backgrounds, in peri-urban and rural school settings. The evidence presented in this study has shown that these female teachers are more likely to be subjected to unfair and unequal treatment, such as policing and regulating sexuality and controlling verbal and physical spaces in schools, than their female colleagues from rich urban school settings.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Thesis overview

This study has demonstrated intersecting inequalities in secondary education in Sierra Leone, which are evident in all aspects of school practices and at all levels of education. At the same time, I have framed this exploration within a context informed by intersectionality research (Crenshaw). This research aimed to provide answers to the research question: *How are schooling experiences and outcomes differentiated by gender, ethnic traditions, SES, sexuality, and region in post-conflict Sierra Leone?* Hence, this study aimed to explore how gender intersects with other social identities and how this interplay of identities influences girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes in Sierra Leone. Based on the qualitative analysis of this triangulated ethnographic case study, it can be concluded that girls face interrelated factors that constrain their secondary schooling experience, thereby impeding their learning outcomes. The findings of this study suggest that the complex interplay of identities has influenced girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes in post-conflict Sierra Leone. The subsequent analysis of findings from this study demonstrates realistic gendered practices such as violence, sexism, masculinities and laddishness that continue to constrain girls' schooling achievement. Throughout this work, it was observed that the interaction of these gendered behaviours with other identities further sustains these practices, making the issue even more complex. Hence, I argued that to address secondary schooling inequalities, there is a need to look beyond gender and adopt an intersectional approach.

9.1 The Discourse on Sierra Leone Educational Reconstruction and Transformation

From the start of this study, I have problematized post-conflict educational reconstruction and transformation approaches. The failures of the approach have been so clearly disclosed in this study, raising profound questions about its feasibility in addressing the issues of inequality in Sierra Leonean education. This research is among the few studies that have explored the contradictions of educational reconstruction and transformation. Thus, I embarked on extending the limited research on understanding gender and education in post-conflict contexts, such as Sierra Leone. This study has demonstrated that the country's post-conflict education approach has predominantly focused on increasing access to schooling for boys and girls, thereby narrowing the gender gap. However, as shown in the evidence above, the approach has failed to address stark inequalities in schools because it has failed to address in-school gender relations and the individual experiences of girls. As mentioned in the literature review (Chapter 3), post-conflict reconstruction policy and research should not be limited to expanding access to primary schools. It should be limited to an equal number of girls and boys in schools. However, instead, it should adopt a simultaneous WID and GAD approach that examines not only quantity and structures but also gender relations in schools. Therefore, I stress the importance of policymakers, governments, and NGOs to tailor policies and programmes that seek to address everyday schooling practices that tend to reinforce gendered classroom behaviours.

9.2 Understanding the Empirical contributions of this study

The text of the literature review illustrates the prevailing circumstances in which girls find themselves in relation to their everyday secondary school

experiences and their impact on learning outcomes. While this study brought to the surface the prevailing global picture, the Sierra Leone context is much more peculiar due to the unprecedented circumstances the country has faced, including a brutal Civil War, Ebola, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Women and girls find themselves in an unprecedented circumstance as a result of the incidents described (the impact of the conflict and pandemic is stated in Chapter 3.1). This, alongside deeply rooted patriarchal norms, ethnic-traditional gendered practices, and poverty, has further rendered women and girls vulnerable to inequality. This study has shown the overarching effects of the Freetown vs Rural districts element on girls' education. Education inequality, it has been revealed, looks different in Freetown than in rural districts. The concentration of resources, teachers, and infrastructure is in Freetown, thereby receiving a disproportionate share of educational resources at the detriment of rural districts. The intersecting inequalities faced by women teachers and girls in Freetown it has been are different from those in rural districts. For instance, girls in Freetown have access to trained and qualified teachers on government payroll, short distances, and good infrastructure, while their peers in rural districts heavily rely on untrained and unqualified community teachers. They walk long distances to school, making them more vulnerable to sexual violence. These issues have shaped the teaching and learning practices of schools to the disadvantage of girls.

This study has also shown that gender equality issues in schools in Sierra Leone primarily focus on improving access to school through statistical gender balance. One example of gaps in existing studies and policy approaches in girls' education in Sierra Leone is the over-reliance on gender gaps in the analysis of data on school retention and attainment. For instance, the country's education sector report analysis of data on school attainment predominantly focuses on gender gaps (GoSL, 2020). This is

not the same as understanding the gender regimes in schools. Thus, I have argued that to mitigate gendered experiences in schools, it is necessary to understand how the intersection of identities contributes to gender inequality in schools. In contributing to the existing literature while addressing this issue, this study reinforced the point made in the literature review that, in addressing inequalities in secondary schooling, there is a need to recognise both gender gaps and gender relations to make a substantive impact in promoting equality. Furthermore, as alluded to in Chapter 3.5 of the literature review, this study stresses the need to recognise the overlapping and intersecting nature of social identities when addressing educational inequalities. Therefore, this study emphasises the need for educational programmes to adopt an intersectional lens, recognising that one-size-fits-all approaches can be limited.

Remarks from women teachers and girls have indicated that in-school violence issues, such as corporal punishment, sexual harassment and violence, bullying and intimidation, were among the common issues highlighted that affect girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes. Girls drew attention to intersecting gendered violence concerns in schools and how they influenced their everyday classroom interactions with peers and teachers. For example, I found that the daily practice of corporal punishment was not just a violation of individual human rights and official school policies, but also an intersectional, gendered practice that rendered girls from poor rural households more susceptible to the practice.

Although I found strong evidence that girls experienced incidences of gender violence, such as sexual harassment and exploitation, it was revealed in this study that diversity in character reflected how they responded to these issues (see 5.3.2). For instance, while girls from wealthy urban households displayed awareness and understanding to

make direct references to incidents of gender issues like inappropriate touches and groping, girls from poor rural households appeared to display a lack of confidence to articulate these issues or awareness to make direct references to these issues or the ability to challenge these behaviours. What was evidently a form of harassment was considered standard practice in the school. For example, sexual exploitation by male teachers was considered mainly by most girls from poor rural households as an opportunity to gain access to academic and financial benefits. As such, they inherently accepted these issues as usual or a coping mechanism to continue schooling.

It was evident that girls, for good reasons, stopped complaining about issues of sexual harassment, sexist remarks, and physical and verbal violence because, as illustrated in section 5.2.3, teachers and school leaders have failed to address these issues. This is reflected in their explanations. Consequently, this study reported on how it affects girls' self-esteem, confidence, mental health, their ability to socialise and participate in class, and, in some cases, drop out (see Chapter 6). As such, this study emphasises an urgent need for a comprehensive analysis of school-related violence, including socio-cultural practices, its intersecting nature, and its impact on girls' everyday schooling experiences and learning outcomes.

Household poverty, however, has been illustrated in this study as an influential impediment to girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes in Sierra Leone. This is because the indirect costs have led to households with limited resources to prioritise boys' education over girls. Girls from poor rural households are more likely to be withdrawn from school in cases of scarce resources. According to data presented in this study, girls from poor rural households are more susceptible to gendered violence than their female peers in rich urban areas. They are also more

susceptible to dropping out of school than boys in the same circumstances. Some of the girls interviewed, who mentioned they were from villages, drew my attention to how boys teased and ridiculed them based on their appearance. They suggested that this is a means of subordinating them because boys, especially the popular ones, see them as not meeting their standards of acceptable femininity (looking pretty with good clothes and body).

One significant takeaway from this analysis was that everyday schooling practices worked in ways that promoted gendered behaviour and expectations, producing differential teaching and learning experiences. This study underscores the significance of understanding how the intricate interplay between gender and other identities impacts girls' educational experiences and learning outcomes. Therefore, nuanced intersectional thinking was adopted to illustrate the complexity of inequalities in secondary schooling beyond single-framed categorical analysis. This study has shown that overlapping identities exacerbate inequalities for girls, resulting in negative schooling experiences and learning outcomes.

9.2.1 Classroom Interactions

One of my key arguments has been that the working of gender regimes in secondary education is limiting and constraining girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes. One could say classroom interactions need to be 'gender neutral'. What I mean is that classroom interactions should not be 'sexualised' but constructed in ways that reflect all pupils irrespective of gender, class, ethnicity and location. Thus, this research emphasised its focus on problematizing classroom interactions in educational settings. This study has explored the impact of interrelated

factors on the everyday lived experiences of girls and women. In doing so, the gendering of classroom interactions was explored. Classroom interactions, as illustrated in this study, are highly gendered. It is essential to note that in all the schools I observed, a consistent gendered pattern of interactions was observed. This was evident in every aspect of the school culture, including classroom talk, staffroom conversations, the use of social spaces, classroom time, and any on-task interactions. Girls interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with boys' domination of classroom interactions through laddish or disruptive behaviour that often attracts much attention from teachers. They mentioned that the time taken to address such behaviour by teachers disadvantages them.

Gendered classroom behaviour, such as laddishness, and its negative impact on girls' learning have been highlighted by many researchers (e.g., Francis, 2000, 2002; Younger & Warrington, 2005; Jackson, 2006, 2010). Like this study, they all suggest that boys use laddish behaviour as a strategy to disrupt classroom interactions. As a result, this study has demonstrated ways in which gendered classroom behaviours, such as laddish or disruptive behaviour, emerged as an impediment to girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes. This study has demonstrated that the time teachers spend addressing boys' disruptive behaviours at the expense of their learning hurts their learning. This point is also reiterated by Francis (2000) and Younger and Warrington (2005), who argued that the amount of time teachers spend disciplining boys' disruptive behaviours results in girls being deprived of achieving learning objectives. Thus, I argue that everyday schooling practices such as laddish or disruptive behaviours by boys have been used as a strategy to attract more attention from teachers at the detriment of girls, resulting in the production and reproduction of gender differentiated schooling experiences and learning outcomes for girls.

However, I ought to point out that classroom observations revealed that not all boys were engaged in hegemonic masculine behaviours, such as being laddish or disruptive. Actually, as mentioned in Chapter 3, it was found that a small number of boys were engaged in such behaviour. I agree with Lynch and Lodge's suggestion that 'male dominance does not mean by all males of all females' (p.128). Consistent with these views, I observed that some girls were assertive, while others were reticent in class. What is problematic is that the time allocated by teachers in addressing the laddish or disruptive behaviour of this number of boys to the detriment of girls impedes their schooling experiences and learning outcomes. This study concludes that male dominance in classroom interactions in secondary schools has an adverse effect on girls' retention and achievement in school, as it has resulted in a lack of interest in schooling among girls (see Chapter 3), which translates into a high rate of dropouts among girls. Such abandonment means gender differences in schooling experiences and learning outcomes. In their argument, Lynch and Lodge mentioned that boys dominated classroom interactions because they are 'more visible in class through their assertive and disruptive learning styles' (123).

Another significant finding revealed by this study is that classroom interactions are designed to promote boys' educational advancement. Evidence from my classroom observations, revealed that teachers adopted gendered teaching styles such as providing extra attention to boys, assigning leadership roles to boys (in some cases asking boys to step in their roles when they are not in class), comparing boys to girls as motivational tactics for boys to perform well and encouraging male dominance in class; all geared towards improving boys' educational attainment levels in school. Most teachers, especially men, were perceived as being obsessed with boys' educational achievement, mainly due to traditional, stereotypical expectations. For instance, it was observed that

teachers responded and interacted with male and female pupils differently. It was evident that teaching practices sought to promote appropriate gender behaviours among pupils in the classrooms. It is on this basis that this study argues that the practice of a gendered pattern of on-task interactions within and outside the classroom has produced and reproduced gender differences in schooling experiences and learning outcomes for girls, as well as teaching experiences for female teachers. These findings are consistent with Francis's (2010) suggestion that schools in the UK introduced 'strategies designed to raise boys' achievement' (p.22). She further noted that these strategies not only improve boys' educational attainment but also have a negative impact on both girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes (Francis, 2010).

Furthermore, data shown in this study revealed that, in addition to everyday schooling practices being deeply gendered, their interplay with other social identities has exacerbated inequality in school. To conclude, I would like to suggest that gender regimes in schools could be mitigated by incorporating gender-equitable practices into school policies and procedures. Any understanding of gendered classroom behaviour, gendered violence, etc., in post-conflict Sierra Leone schools needs an important transformation in everyday schooling practices. Thus, a key challenge I identified for policymakers, NGOs, and researchers is how to explore and understand the intersecting gendered nature of institutional school practices, while identifying ways that schools can de-naturalise institutional inequalities against females. My findings, as suggested in other studies (eg, Michelle (1983), Paechter 2002, 2007), Francis 2000, 2006, 2010, Jackson 2006, and Younger and Warrington 2005), reveal that gender differences in classroom interactions evidently favoured boys.

This study emphasises the need for teachers and school leadership to work more collaboratively on common approaches to supporting girls' classroom participation and learning, mitigating classroom disruptions and promoting collaborative teaching and learning methods.

9.2.2 Construction of Gender Identities

This study has questioned the state of play of gender relations between females and males in schools because everyday gender regimes in these schools have constructed gender relations in ways that reinforced the performance of femininity and masculinity. It is essential to note that the construction of identities, such as femininity and femininities/femininities and masculinity/masculinities, in this study reveals two key viewpoints: first, that the construction of these identities aims to reinforce dominant norms, including compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity. Secondly, pupils who do not conform to these dominant norms or who deviate from the dominant construction of identities often strive to resist it as a survival strategy, or risk being excluded from social circles within and outside the classroom. Additionally, data have shown that the construction of identities in schools most often reflects the identities found in wider society (Paechter, 2006).

Boys and girls, as illustrated in Chapter 2, are positioned to conform to acceptable gender and sexual conceptions. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that the association of behaviours with either femininity or masculinity has proven to have sustained inequality through stereotypes and male dominance in classroom and playground interactions. For instance, evidence from this study has shown how physical sports, science-related subjects, competitive attitudes, and aggressive behaviours have been constructed as masculine. In contrast, passivity, caring, and not being

sporty have been constructed as feminine. Therefore, this study suggests that teachers should adopt strategies that seek to deconstruct gender in the classroom over a sustained period.

Furthermore, whereas the school is seen as a site where knowledge is discovered and minds are shaped for individual development, it has also been established by this study that everyday school practices have attempted to regulate and police sexuality, especially for female pupils and teachers, to reproduce gender identities. Thus, this study has established that secondary schooling in post-conflict Sierra Leone plays a pivotal role in shaping and regulating the gender and sexual identities of students and teachers.

9.2.3 Gender Segregated Schooling

My research shows that gender segregation remains a significant part of post-conflict Sierra Leone secondary schools. This is reflected in the types of games pupils engage in, their behaviour in class, and what is expected of them. Secondary schooling is pivotal in the educational system. It is a site where pupils spend a significant amount of time learning about and navigating their gender identities. This empirical research on secondary schooling has explicitly demonstrated that the construct and configuration of school structures, especially in mixed schools, have adopted gender segregation in their administrative practices, such as seat allocation, queuing, division of labour among teachers, stereotypes in textbooks and examination materials, and classroom activities. Thus, this study concludes that everyday school practices are deeply gendered and that it sought to construct relations that reflect male dominance and female subordination. This study has shown how gender segregation has influenced the everyday school life of pupils, especially girls. Liu (2006) described gender

segregation in the classroom as 'invisible but real boundaries that exist in many classrooms' (p.428). Furthermore, gender segregated schooling in Sierra Leone, as shown in this study, has created an environment that strengthened gender stereotyped behaviours. For instance, evidence provided by this study has shown how girls and boys are compelled to conform to the demands and expectations of stereotypes such as hegemonic masculinity for boys and passivity for girls. To gain access to or be part of a social group, both boys and girls need to meet established standards of behaviour and status. The extension of gender roles within the household to the school also indicates the role of entrenched patriarchal communities' contribution to exacerbating gender disparities in schools. During my observations and interactions with pupils and teachers, I found that students have normalised and internalised gender differentiations in the classroom. Both pupils and teachers do not see it as problematic, but instead as natural and desirable. Institutionalised gender stereotyping was evident in the subject taught, roles assigned, timetabling, training opportunities, etc. The evidence provided by this study reiterates my argument that the institutional practice of gender-specific roles in schools is geared towards presenting an overwhelming masculine image of the school. I agree with research findings from Thorne (1993) and Jordan (1995) in the US and Australia, respectively, where it was revealed that gender segregation was more prominent in schools than outside the schools. However, I also strongly agree with Delamont's (1990) argument that 'pupils are strongly influenced by their homes and neighbourhoods' (p.2).

9.2.4 Power-related Intersecting Inequalities in Teaching and School Leadership and Management

This study has problematized power relations between teachers in relation to unequal access to power and the asymmetrical distribution of power between female and male teachers. Although it has been stated that all teachers are presumed to have autonomy and control over their classrooms, evidence from this study concludes that male dominance, through vertical power (the position of authority they hold) and literal power (the power exercised between colleagues), has resulted in sustained female subordination within the school. In addition, this study has also demonstrated how the hierarchical order created by the school's everyday practices has resulted in female teachers being unfairly and unequally treated. The same hierarchical order as revealed by this study has produced unequal sex roles and reinforced subordinate roles through stereotypical roles assigned to girls and women in school. These interrelating factors were observed to result in some female teachers being unequally recognised and represented in leadership and management roles in schools.

To demonstrate how teaching and school management are gendered and how this has resulted in intersecting inequality in schools against female teachers, two lines of argument were adopted. First, this study has illustrated that the assumptions mentioned in the analysis chapter (8), such as the notion that men are better teachers, female teachers are less qualified, and women cannot effectively lead due to family responsibilities, are problematic. They are put mainly forward to justify male dominance. For instance, the argument that family responsibilities inhibit the ability of female teachers to perform their roles as school managers has been contested in this study. Indeed, female teachers are most often involved in

balancing teaching and family responsibilities; however, evidence from this study and Shakeshaft's (2006) suggests that there is no evidence to support the notion that family roles diminish women's ability to perform managerial roles.

The literature on gender differences in access to power, classroom management and discipline is consistent with my findings. One of the findings revealed in this study was gender differences in teaching and leadership styles, as well as power-related inequalities in role assignments and taking disciplinary actions against laddish or disruptive boys.

The evidence from this study has shown that the everyday teaching experiences of male and female teachers differ. A male secondary school teacher is highly likely to gain a promotion, participate in capacity-building training, make career growth, take on a management or leadership position, and be recognised more than their female peers in the same school. Power within the school is asymmetrically distributed. Findings from this study have shown that female teachers' experiences of power in school were determined either by their position of authority or social identity. This study, along with that conducted in the UK by Lynch and Lodge, revealed that gender and other social identities served as key determinants of exercising authority and control in school. In a few instances, the female teachers I interviewed expressed concern about the way power is exercised in their schools. Thus, like other studies, such as Lynch and Lodge (2002), I argue that the pattern of power relations in schooling has proven to be a springboard for intersecting inequality in secondary schools.

This study has demonstrated how the intersection of gender and other identities has exacerbated gender imbalances in teaching and school management at secondary school levels. Subsequently, I embarked on

identifying ways to correct these conceptual gender imbalances. Thus, I stress the need to scrutinise the composition of the school board selection process and adopt an intersectional lens when addressing promotion and career growth issues in secondary schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

9.3 Methodological/theoretical contribution

This multi-site qualitative study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of female pupils and teachers in post-conflict secondary schools in Sierra Leone. I thus adopted a complex and multifaceted research design that highlights how the interactions of social identities have contributed to intersecting inequalities affecting girls and women in the participating schools. In doing so, I conducted semi-structured interviews, listened attentively, observed, took field notes, and facilitated focus group discussions with research participants within the school setting. This research sought to gather views and perspectives from a cross-section of female pupils and teachers, out-of-school girls, and boys within the school setting to understand how interrelated factors constrained girls' secondary schooling experiences, thereby impeding their learning outcomes.

Reflecting on my initial sampling thoughts, I realised that the differing demographic districts yield differences in pupils' and teachers' schooling and teaching experiences, thus, presented varying views and perspectives. Moreover, such differences became apparent when I analysed data on rural and peri-urban school settings. Throughout this study, I have emphasised like many other researchers such as Francis (2000), Younger and Warrington (2005), Dunne et al. (2005), Renold (2006), Jackson (2010), etc. on the gendered nature of schooling; but this study further argues that it is more nuanced than that because of the intersection of other identities.

A contextual analysis also informed this study of Sierra Leone's post-conflict educational system, as well as available research on girls' secondary schooling. Results from this study have demonstrated that girls' experiences of secondary schooling remain a significant problem in the drive to achieve gender equality in Sierra Leone's education. I have particularly attempted to investigate a relatively unexplored area of research in girls' secondary education. As a result, this thesis makes contributions to filling gaps in our understanding of gendered school experiences with a focus on how the interplay of social identities has exacerbated inequalities in secondary schools. The overarching objective of this study was to explore how everyday schooling practices have negatively affected girls' secondary schooling experiences and learning outcomes. To achieve this objective, I therefore attempted to address the multiple gaps mentioned above and make the following important contributions to knowledge. Extended the research on how the intersection of multiple identities, such as gender, social class, sexuality, culture, and location, influences girls' schooling experiences and learning outcomes in secondary school. As Dejaeghere and Vavrus (2011) mention, understanding the intersectionality of gender with other social identities has been lacking in international development research and global policies on gender and schooling. Therefore, like this research, Dunne (2009) expressed the need for an intersectional research and analysis aimed at 'understanding how...multiple disparities are produced, reproduced and resisted (p.9). Thus, this study provides an account of how schooling experiences contribute to and perpetuate inequalities in secondary education. This study illustrates the utility and importance of intersectionality in understanding the experiences and outcomes of girls and female teachers in education, as well as the role of institutional inequality and social structures. Specifically, using it as a framework holds

the potential to provide insight for educational leaders, policymakers, and school administrators in addressing social identity disparities in secondary education.

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

9.4 Recommendations

This research clearly illustrates that the interface of gender and social class, ethnicity, sexuality and location exacerbates gender inequalities. However, it also raises the question of the school's role in perpetuating gender differentiation. The data from this study suggest that inequality in secondary schools is rooted in differences between groups. Hence, I have directed my recommendation toward two groups: Group One consists of school leadership, management, and teachers, and Group Two comprises policymakers and researchers.

To start with, I suggest that schools consider boosting girls' aspirations to achieve academic success. This approach is crucial for girls to develop a sense of self-esteem and self-worth, which can lead to a stronger sense of agency and a more profound sense of belonging. To also consider engaging girls more inclusively in classroom interactions by valuing their contribution, respecting and acknowledging their participation. Their class participation should be approached without prejudice and stereotyping. The

schools should put on concerted efforts in addressing gendered classroom behaviour, such as disruptiveness and laddishness, perpetuated by boys. This effort enables girls to develop assertiveness in class and enhance their self-image.

Having demonstrated the influence of intersecting inequalities on girls' and women's learning and teaching experiences, I would stress the importance of government and NGOs to consider the implementation of positive action gender and education programmes that goes beyond tackling access but also focusing on shaping girls' consciousness that enables them to have self-confidence, self-esteem and self-worth to confront sustained sexual division of roles and enabling their confidence to engage in science related subjects. Secondly, I would stress the importance of the school institution in creating an enabling environment that tackles intersecting gendered violence in schools. I would also suggest programmes that target school leadership on confronting sexism within the schools. Overall, I would stress the importance of policymakers and NGOs considering the development of policies and programmes that seek to address gender inequality in schooling, especially secondary education, using an intersectional lens. This study suggests that secondary schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone should engage in or adopt strategies that seek to address or change the dominant construction of gender, i.e. expectations to conform to feminine and masculine behaviours. Like Francis (2000), I argue that addressing gender construction in schools can mitigate gender differences in schooling and teaching experiences.

I understand that addressing these issues would be challenging, considering how entrenched patriarchal norms are in everyday school practices in Sierra Leone secondary schools. However, I agree with Francis (2000) that teachers need to start interacting with girls and boys equally,

such as devoting equal time to girls and boys during classroom discussions and promoting anti-sexist behaviours in class. I also agree with Francis (2000) that teachers should consider adopting robust education (including disciplinary) measures to tackle sexual harassment and abuse against girls. Boys who engage in such acts or behaviours should be disciplined and made aware of the reason for their discipline. Lastly, I agree with Salisbury and Jackson (1996) that teachers need to make a deliberate effort to mitigate gender bias in teaching practices, such as eliminating gender-segregated practices by promoting mixed-gender social grouping and class working grouping, and eliminating sex-biased terms in teaching materials. It is my suggestion that teachers should encourage girls who are interested in participating in 'boys' sports like football.

To conclude, I would suggest that policymakers, NGOs, and civil society organisations should consider the following when assessing the degree to which everyday gender relations and practices in schools are gender equitable for all pupils and teachers. Firstly, teachers should step back and examine whether they are treating their students differently. Secondly, there is a need to introduce materials and training opportunities for teachers to learn about gender-equitable schooling practices. Lastly, teachers should work with pupils to institute gender-equitable practices in classroom activities and behaviours. Thus, this study concludes that schools should make deliberate efforts to confront stereotypes in order to achieve gender equality.

9.5 Future Research

To further understand the implications of the results highlighted above, future research could be used to address additional aspects of inequalities in secondary education. There is scope for further research into girls'

education and to analyse how this informs policies and programmes geared towards addressing gender inequality in schools. There is a need, for example, to undertake more systematic and comprehensive research on how gender relations in schools are effectively reflected in national policies, programs, and decision-making bodies—an analysis of how these policies and programs address the adequacy or inadequacies of everyday school practices.

As mentioned earlier, this study did not directly study the management practices and policies of these schools. The results presented in this study primarily relied on the interviews with female teachers and my observations in the staffroom and the school's practices. As a result, I suggest a more systematic and larger study on leadership and management practices in secondary schools in Sierra Leone. This may help explain and address the asymmetric gender relations in school management, including recruitment, promotion, access to training, and governance, in relation to addressing gender issues. However, it also examines the steps taken by school management to promote the effective representation of female teachers in school management and decision-making bodies.

Further research may also focus on exploring boys' attitudes and behaviour towards schooling. My study does not posit that negative schooling experiences and learning outcomes in secondary schools in Sierra Leone relate only to girls; such an assumption is problematic because boys also have problems related to retention and attainment. My research only argued that girls are overwhelmingly affected. I have been able to illustrate that boys are challenged in engaging in hegemonic masculinities. In contrast, others expressed dissatisfaction with conforming to expected gendered behaviours and dealing with other boys' gendered behaviours.

Therefore, I suggest a study that explores the multifaceted issues affecting boys' retention and achievement.

Other areas of future research may focus on a much larger sample size, extending beyond the four schools and two districts I have studied. I suggest that further research incorporate more schools and districts to understand the adequacies and inadequacies of efforts to address issues affecting girls' education. Further research may also focus on lower levels of education, such as pre- and primary schools. All or any of these studies would help address gender inequalities in education in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

Lastly, I suggest researching the applicability of multiple identities in educational research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The Consent Form

**Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School
Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC)**

ETHICS APPLICATION FORM FOR STAFF and PhD STUDENT

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Gender and intersecting inequalities in secondary education: exploring the experiences and outcomes of girls in secondary schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone

Name of Researcher: O'bai Conteh

		Please Tick
1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated _____ for the study mentioned above. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have these answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary. If, for any reason, I wish to withdraw from this study during its period, I am free to do so without providing any reason. I understand that my contributions to the research activities will be included in the data collected for this study, and that our anonymity will be ensured. I give consent for all the contributions I make to be included in the research and/or quoted in this study.	

3.	I consent to the audio recording of classroom and outside-the-classroom observations.	
4.	I consent to my interviews being audio recorded.	
5.	I understand that the information I provide will be used for a PhD research project, and the combined results of the project may be published. I know that I have the right to review and comment on the information I have provided.	
6.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

Name of Participant:

Name of School:

Signature

Date

Appendix 2: Sample of Participant Information Sheet

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School
Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC)

ETHICS APPLICATION FORM FOR STAFF and PhD STUDENT

Title of Project: Gender and intersecting inequalities in secondary education: exploring the experiences and outcomes of girls in secondary schools in post-conflict Sierra Leone

Date: _____,

Dear Participant,

I want to invite you to participate in my PhD thesis research with the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

Before deciding whether to participate, you need to understand why the research is being conducted and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Feel free to discuss the study with others if you wish. Please ask me if anything is unclear or if you would like more information. Take a moment to decide whether you want to participate.

This document includes:

- Information about the purpose of the study (what I hope to find out).
- Information about what participation means and how to withdraw when and if you wish (what you will be doing).
- Details of what notes, recordings and other sources of information may be used as 'data' in the study - for the group and with you as an individual.
- Information about how this data will be secured and stored.
- Information about how any quotes will be used and how you will be involved in checking, agreeing and consenting to their use.
- How the information will be used in the thesis and for other purposes, such as conference presentations or publication.

The purpose of the study

This research is part of my PhD thesis, which I undertook under the supervision of the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

My research aims to explore and illustrate the everyday experiences of girls in secondary schools in Sierra Leone. Rich qualitative data will be generated on the gender regime of the school, highlighting the often-overlooked perspectives of female students and staff. The findings will provide fresh insights for policymakers, programme developers, and school leaders in addressing the persistent challenges of girls' education in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

The analysis focuses predominantly on gendered experiences of schooling in the northern and southern regions and their intersection with other social identities, such as socio-economic status, ethnic Traditions, sexuality, and region, to shape classroom practices. This study argues that, unlike the assumption that post-conflict educational reconstruction ushers in transformative policies that seek to contest gender-related disparities and promote the rights of women and girls, post-conflict educational reconstruction in Sierra Leone has promoted blatant gender disparities and failed to capture the goal of gender equity, because of deeply-seated institutional and cultural constraints that exist within systems of education and in the broader social contexts that affect educational structures and processes. This research aims to explore the intersection of gender and other forms of inequality in everyday schooling. This encompasses a range of institutional conditions and practices, including gender bias in textbooks and teaching practices, the hidden curriculum, school-related gender-based violence, and social norms and practices, as well as the under-representation of female teachers in secondary school education.

What participation involves and how to withdraw if you no longer wish to participate

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited because your opinions on this project are essential. Your participation will help provide insight into the intersecting inequalities that girls experience in secondary schools in Sierra Leone.

You have been chosen to participate in this research because it is a secondary school for girls and boys with female staff residing in either the northern or southern provinces of Sierra Leone. Your selection for this study is deliberate because your school has pupils who have either gone through secondary education or you are currently enrolled as a student or female staff member. The

location of your school (outside of the cities of Freetown, Bo, Makeni, and Kenema) makes you an ideal candidate for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No, your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, please let me know. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form – if applicable). By signing it, you are telling me that you:

- Understand what you have read
- Consent to take part in the research project
- Consent to the use of your information as described.

If you do not wish to be observed or recorded, please indicate this. Every effort will then be made to ensure that your data/voice is removed from recordings by editing out where possible or excluding such data from any transcription.

You can withdraw before and during the interview, and there is absolutely no obligation on your part to continue. Additionally, there is no penalty for withdrawing. Your related data (recordings, notes) can be destroyed, and all references removed at the earliest indication of withdrawal, in this case, up to 2 weeks after your participation. After this period, your data will be used in the study.

What would taking part involve for me?

Participating in this project involves dedicating a portion of your time for a period of 2 years. The research will include interviews, observations, and participation in focus group discussions. The indicated period also includes follow-ups that I will conduct. This project will target a total of 40 participants divided into four groups (20 school-going girls, five female staff, 10 school-going boys and five out-of-school girls). A total of four secondary schools will participate in this project.

What will I have to do?

Given that your pupils are young people aged 16-18, I am required to provide you with sufficient information to enable you to give your full consent for them to participate in research independently. If you are under 16, I am required to provide counsel to ensure you have a sufficient understanding of the nature, purpose, and likely outcome of this research. You, however, have the right to seek consent from your parents or guidance.

Your students will be sharing their thoughts about their everyday school experiences. I would be interested in knowing what happens in the classroom, on the playground, and in familiar meeting places. I will also ask them questions about your household and community. They, along with your colleagues, will participate in a peer group discussion. However, in the event they disclose any safeguarding issues, they will be referred to the appropriate bodies (teacher mentor) to provide you with the required support, such as anonymous counselling.

As a female teacher, they will be sharing your thoughts on your experiences of interactions in the classroom and staff room. I would be interested to know the gender dynamics of the school and the staff room.

As an out-of-school girl, I would like to know about your experiences in school. Your reflection on what caused you to drop out of school. I would like to know how society received you. As a way of providing you with the required support, in the event you disclose any safeguarding issues, you will be referred to the appropriate bodies to support you. In this case, I will refer you to the Social Welfare Directorate and the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police.

Protecting your data and identity

What will happen to the data?

'Data' here means the researcher's notes, survey results, workshop outputs, audio recordings, and any email exchanges we may have had. The data may be securely stored for ten years after the successful completion of the PhD *Viva*, as per Lancaster University requirements. After this period, any personal data will be destroyed. Audio recordings will be transferred and stored on my personal laptop and deleted from portable media.

Identifiable data (including recordings of your and other participants' voices) on my personal laptop will be encrypted. With devices such as portable recorders, where this is not possible, identifiable data will be deleted as quickly as possible. In the meantime, I will ensure the portable device is kept safe until the data is deleted.

You can request to view the field notes or listen to the audio at the end of the interview. Any parts you are unhappy with will be deleted or disregarded from the data. Data may be used in the reporting of the research (in the thesis and then potentially in any papers or conference presentations). Please note that if your data is used, it will not identify you in any way or means, unless you otherwise indicate your express permission to do so.

You have the right to request that this data be destroyed at any time during the study, as well as have complete protection via the UK Data Protection Act. The completion of this study is estimated to be by 2024, although data collection is expected to be completed by 2026.

Data will only be accessed by me and my supervisor.

The research may be used for journal articles and conference presentations.

How will my identity be protected?

A pseudonym will be given to protect your identity in the research report, and any identifying information about you will be removed from the report. All pseudonyms will be securely stored and kept by me.

Who to contact for further information or with any concerns

If you would like further information on this project, the programme within which the research is being conducted or have any concerns about the project, participation, or my conduct as a researcher, please contact:

Professor Paul Ashwin – Head of Department

Tel:+44(0)1524594443

Email: P.Ashwin@Lancaster.ac.uk

Room: County South, D32, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YD, UK.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

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Section B: About your parents /guardians

1. Which of your parents are alive?

Mother only

Father only

Both Parents

None of them

2. Who do you live with most of the time?

Father and

Mother

only Mother only

Other relative or person

Elder brother or sister only

Younger sister and brother

only Alone

Grandmother or Grandfather only

3. How far did your mother go in school?

Never been to school

Unfinished primary

Finished Primary

Unfinished Secondary

Finished Secondary

University

Other (specify) 333

17. How far did your father go in school?

- Never been to school
- Unfinished primary
- Finished Primary
- Unfinished Secondary
- Finished Secondary
- University
- Other (specify)

18. How far did your Guardian go in school?

- Never been to school
- Some primary
- Finished Primary
- Some Secondary
- Finished Form 5
- University
- Other (specify)

19. What is your mother's job? Describe where she works and what she does in her job.

20. What is your father's job? Describe where he works and what he does in her job.

21. What is your Guardian's job? Describe where they work and what they do in their job.

Section C: Your Chores at Home

17. Put a tick in one of the boxes for each of the following chores to show how often you do that chore.

Household Chore	Everyday	Sometimes	3 times a week	2 times a week	Weekend only	Never
Cooking						
Fetching water						
Looking after your brothers or sisters						
Cleaning the house						
Assist in the shop or store						
Hawking of goods						
Sweeping the yard						
Taking care of the garden						
Washing laundry						
Other (mention them)						

18. This year, how many times have you missed school because your parents / guardian needed help?

Several times every school term

Once or twice by now

Never

19. This year, how many days have you missed school? _____

20. This year, how many times have you missed school for each of the following reasons?

My parents / guardian needed my help at home I had no

development fees or school uniform

I was sick

I did not want to go to school

Individual Student Interview

Section

School	Date	
Name	Sex	Age

1. What do you think about schooling?
2. Can you tell me about your experience in this school? How will you describe your experience?
3. Do you enjoy being in this school?
4. What do you like most about this school?
5. What do you dislike most about this school?
6. Have you been assigned any leadership role in your classroom or school? If yes, what was the role and what was the role about?
7. What are some of the key issues faced during your role? How did you address them?
8. Which subjects do you like? Why?
9. How do you perform in these subjects?
10. What would help you perform better?
11. What prevents you from performing better?
12. Can you tell me the names of 5 pupils in your class who participate or contribute (speak) more in the classroom? Why is that so?
13. Which of the pupils (Names) is asked the most questions by the teacher in your class?
14. Can you tell me the names of 5 pupils who speak the least in your class?
15. Can you name three teachers you consider the best in this school? Why?
16. Can you name three teachers you consider the least liked in this school? Why?
17. Name five teachers whom you would describe as the most disciplined both in and outside the classroom. Why is that so?
18. How do activities and decisions within the household affect your performance in school?
19. Have you had a situation in the household where your parents needed to decide on an issue between you and your brother or sister? What was the problem? How did you feel about the decision that was made?
20. Who is likely to drop out of schooling in a case where their parents have to prioritise who is to and who is not to continue schooling due to limited resources?
21. In your class, who do teachers pay the most attention to in the classroom? (Please state the

names.) Why is that so?

22. In your view, what would you say are the major issues affecting girls' participation and performance in the classroom?
23. During your time in this school, have you heard or known students who have dropped out of school? If yes, do you know why they dropped out?
24. What cultural or traditional practices affect girls' attendance, retention, and achievement in school?
25. How do cultural or traditional practices influence girls' attendance, performance, retention and attainment in school?
26. Can you name five pupils who have dropped out of school since you entered this school? Can you tell some of the reasons why they dropped out?
27. In your view, what are the significant problems that deter girls from continuing schooling?
28. Are there certain traditional practices that influence girls' schooling experiences and outcomes?
29. Relate an incident that embarrassed you (or another student) the most in school.
30. Have you experienced any form of gender-based violence during your time in this school (in and outside the classroom)? If so, please describe the incident.
31. Can you please tell me how you reported incidents of violence, bullying and verbal or physical harassment?
32. Have you experienced or does someone you know in your class or the school experience incidents of violence/bullying/harassment? If yes, can you explain how it was reported and what action was taken?
33. Do you think appropriate action was taken for the incident?
34. Have you ever reported an incident of verbal or physical sexual harassment or bullying by boys to a male teacher? If yes, what was his response?
35. How will you describe his response to the incident?
36. Have you ever reported an incident of verbal or physical sexual harassment or bullying by boys to a female teacher? If yes, what was her response?
37. How will you describe his response to the incident?
38. Can you say being in school is different for Girls and boys? If yes or no, why?
39. Who among the teachers are you more convenient to discuss issues of sexual violence and harassment with?

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40. Can you tell me some of the issues you face at home or at school that may discourage you from schooling?
 41. How much lunch do you bring to school? Why is that?
 42. How many school uniforms and shoes do you have? Why is that?
 43. Have you found yourself in a situation where you feel, or you are forced to, meet the needs of the family? If so, please explain the situation and how it was addressed.
 44. Have you found yourself in a situation where you feel, or you are forced to meet the sexual needs of a boy or male teacher? If so, explain the situation and how it was addressed.
 45. Can you say the school is a safe learning environment for girls or boys? Explain your reasons.
 46. Was this school your first choice when you were taking the NPSE or BECE? If not, why did you end up attending here?
 47. What do you want to be in future? Why?
 48. Relate an incident that pleased you (or another student) the most in school

Focus Group Interviews Section

School	Date
Number of respondents	Sex

Names:1. _____ 2. _____
3. _____ 4. _____
5. _____ 6. _____

1. What do you think about schooling?
2. Is schooling important to you?
(Do you enjoy school? Do you enjoy being in this school?)
3. What do you like most about this school?
4. What do you dislike most about this school?
5. Do you think that being in school is different for girls and boys? How?
6. How would you react if you saw a boy doing a girl's job /activity or a girl doing a boy's job /activity?
7. How are your grievances addressed in the school?
8. If you have a grievance, who would you tell about it?
9. *Have any of you experienced issues of sexual harassment, unsolicited physical touch, or sexual jokes and remarks?*
10. Do you think that either boys or girls perform better in school?
Why? In which subjects?
11. What do you think of your male and female teachers?
What do you think about how female and male teachers treat you? Do you think that teachers treat boys and girls similarly / differently?
12. How do girls and boys relate to one another?
What do girls talk to girls about, and what do boys talk to boys about? What do boys and girls talk to one another about?
13. Do your interactions/experiences with teachers influence your performance, attendance, and behaviour?
How? Give examples.
14. Do your interactions/experiences with other students influence your performance, attendance, and behaviour?
How? Give examples.

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1. Do you know of any boys or girls who have dropped out of school? What were the reasons for dropping out?
 2. What will you say contributes to girls' school drop-out?
 3. How will you describe classroom interactions among yourself in the absence of teachers?
 4. Have any of you experienced issues of sexual harassment, unsolicited physical touch, or sexual jokes and remarks?
 5. What is your attitude to students who are re-admitted to school after dropping out?
 6. What do you think seriously affects girls' attendance, retention, and achievement in schools?
 7. What cultural or traditional practices that affects girls' attendance, retention, and achievement in school?
 8. How does cultural or traditional practices influence girls' attendance, performance, retention and attainment in school?
 9. Can you tell me some of the issues you face at home or at school that may discourage you from schooling?

Focus Group Interviews Section

School	Date
Number of respondents	Sex

Names: 1. _____ 2. _____
 3. _____ 4. _____
 5. _____ 6. _____

1. What do you think about schooling?
2. Is schooling important to you?
(Do you enjoy school? Do you enjoy being in this school?)
3. What do you like most about this school?
4. What do you dislike most about this school?
5. Do you think that being in school is different for girls and boys? How?
6. How would you react if you saw a boy doing a girl's job /activity or a girl doing a boy's job /activity?
7. How are your grievances addressed in the school?
8. If you have a grievance, who would you tell about it?
9. *Have any of you experienced issues of sexual harassment, unsolicited physical touch, or sexual jokes and remarks?*
10. Do you think that either boys or girls perform better in school?
Why? In which subjects?
11. What do you think of your male and female teachers?
What do you think about how female and male teachers treat you? Do you think that teachers treat boys and girls similarly / differently?
12. How do girls and boys relate to one another?
What do girls talk to girls about, and what do boys talk to boys about? What do boys and girls talk to one another about?
13. Do your interactions/experiences with teachers influence your performance, attendance, and behaviour?
How? Give examples.
14. Do your interactions/experiences with other students influence your performance, attendance, and behaviour?
How? Give examples.
15. Do you know of any boys or girls who have dropped out of school? What were the reasons for dropping out?
16. What will you say contributes to girls' school drop-out?

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1. How will you describe classroom interactions among yourself in the absence of teachers?
 2. Have any of you experienced issues of sexual harassment, unsolicited physical touch, or sexual jokes and remarks?
 3. What is your attitude to students who are re-admitted to school after dropping out?
 4. What do you think seriously affects girls' attendance, retention, and achievement in schools?
 5. What cultural or traditional practices that affects girls' attendance, retention, and achievement in school?
 6. How does cultural or traditional practices influence girls' attendance, performance, retention and attainment in school?
 7. Can you tell me some of the issues you face at home or at school that may discourage you from schooling?

Sample interview questions for out-of-school girls

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and why you are not in school?
2. Given the chance, can you go back to school?

In your view, do you think education is important? Give reasons

4. What would you say are the major problems that stop girls from continuing their education in general?
5. Do you think that you were encouraged to go back to school??
6. In your view, what do you think should be done to encourage girls to remain in school, and who do you think should do it?

Teacher Interview Section

Teacher	School
Date	Time:

1. Introductory questions – Personal background
2. What are your impressions of how females and males relate to one another generally in this school?
3. What will you say about the influence of girls on performance in school?
4. What was your first impression of pupils in your class? So far, which students have stood out? Which students are struggling?
5. Which of your students (5 names) participate actively in class? Who are the students you consider very dull or inactive (5names)?
6. How will you describe the academic performance of boys in your class? What subjects will you say they do very well on?
7. How will you describe the academic performance of girls in your class? What subjects will you say they do very well on?
8. Can you tell me the names of pupils you are academically attached to and those for whom you have concern? Why the attachment? What are your concerns?
9. How do you pair or organise group work? Who are often the leaders of these groups? How will you describe the performance of boys and girls in these groups?
10. Who speaks the least in your class?
11. In terms of order and discipline, which between boys and girls would you say are very disciplined during teaching? Why is that so?
12. How do you address cases of disruptive and indisciplined behaviours in class during teaching?
13. What do you understand about violence in school? Describe two incidents of violence in school.
14. What violence against girls that are frequently reported?
15. As a female teacher, have you experienced cases of inappropriate jokes or touches, sexual harassment, sexual advances, and sexual violence by male students or teachers?
16. How have you been able to address or channel some of these issues?

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17. As a female teacher, have you had cases of female students reporting cases of inappropriate jokes or touches, sexual harassment, sexual advances, and sexual violence by male students or teachers? How did you deal with these cases?
 18. Do any specific problems arise from how girls and boys relate to one another?
 19. How and why do cultural factors influence performance, retention / drop out, and behaviour by gender?
 20. What are the cultural or traditional practices that you will say influence girls' attendance, retention, and attainment?
 21. Does gender influence the way staff interrelate with each other, the school management, the community, and the students?
 22. How will you describe the staffroom space in terms of equal voice, access, and movement?
 23. Do you agree that girls' experiences in school are different from boys? If yes or no, why?
 24. Can you say the school as a social institution is a safe environment for girls? If yes or no, why?

What kinds of interactions are there between girls and girls, boys and boys, and between boys and girls (intimidation, bullying, friendly, teasing, name-calling)?

How physically close are those interactions?

- **Additional Notes**

Critical incidences (examples: sex-differentiated behaviours, expectations, language, abuse, etc.) Quotes

- **School Observations**

These should focus upon presence and absence of the different sex groups in the use of space

Who dominates the recreational areas

student-student interactions, teacher-student interactions, teacher-teacher interaction, incidental conversation, critical incidents

Staff room

Playground / Sports field

Non-classroom-based activities, other school routines

School Profile

Performance and curriculum

- Examination results (previous 3 years) by gender
- Retention rates (previous 3 years) by gender
- Destinations of school leavers by gender
- Range of curriculum subjects available

Locality, community, and history

- Establishment/founding (location, when, by whom, what level)
- Size of local community
- Range of parental occupations/income sources
- Local community support (Parent Teacher Association, Board of Governors) Socio-economic grouping (predominantly)
- Average earnings

School Conditions

- Number of Classrooms
- Physical condition of buildings
- Furniture
- Learning resources availability (books, teaching aids)
- Toilet facilities
- Other facilities (eg labs, library, church, sports ground)

Teaching Staff

- Number of teachers by gender and subject
- Staffing structure, ie available posts of responsibility
- Teachers with responsibility by gender (including the principal, etc), History profile of the school principal (previous two incumbents)

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- Length of service (years)
 - Length of service in current school, Qualifications and in-service experiences, In-service opportunities, academic study
 - Promotions (over the last 3 years within the school and by teachers)
 - Absenteeism and Punctuality

Students

- Number of students (over the previous 3 years) by gender
- General appearance of students
- Absenteeism by gender
- Punctuality
- Resources (pens, books, bags, etc.)
- Socio-economic status of pupils (through a brief questionnaire of the year group)
Demographic information (living with whom, family income, etc, as above)

School policy/rules and practices

- Staff promotion policy and practices
- Staff discipline and procedures
- School policy and practice on corporal punishment by gender
- School policy and practice on other punishments by gender
- School admissions
- School uniform
- School rules
- Fees/contributions policy and practices
- School community/parents inter-relations
- School clubs and participation by teacher leader, student gender and year School activities/routines (eg assembly, cleaning)