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## Gendering childhood(s) and engagement with schooling in rural Sierra Leone

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### ABSTRACT

In spite of widespread initiatives to improve access to education for girls, substantive concerns remain. While there is a rich and growing body of literature on gendered experiences of school in majority world contexts, absent is a focus on how this intersects with children's out of school lives. Further, research with children in rural communities is limited, including those who are in the earlier years of their schooling. This paper addresses these gaps, focusing on gendered dynamics in the everyday lives of children in five rural communities in Northern Sierra Leone. Drawing on Bourdieu, it explores the dialectical interplay between gendered and generational structures, understood as the gendered habitus, in a wider context of structural poverty, uneven and fragile post-colonial restructuring and development. This sets the groundwork for children's gendered dis/positioning, and ultimately capacity to engage with schooling.

### KEYWORDS

Gender; generation;  
childhood; schooling;  
Bourdieu; Africa

In spite of widespread initiatives globally to improve access to education for girls, substantive concerns remain. Significantly, priority is placed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2030) on the empowerment of women and girls, and the inclusion of their voices in matters that affect them. There is a rich and growing body of literature on gendered experiences of school in majority world contexts (Dunne 2008). Absent however is a focus on how this intersects with children's out of school lives. Yet it is their social positioning in the community that has a significant influence on children's capacities to engage with schooling. Further, research with children in rural communities is limited. This paper addresses these gaps, focusing on the intersection between generational and gendered dynamics in the everyday lives of children in rural Sierra Leone, in a wider context of structural poverty and neo-liberal global capitalist development.

Sierra Leone is known for its extensive natural resources as well as an unprecedentedly brutal civil war (1991–2002) and most recently an Ebola outbreak (2014–2016). The country remains one of the poorest in the world: about 57% of the population lives below the poverty line and in rural areas this number reaches 72.4% (Government of Sierra

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Leone 2019, vii). Gender equality is a persistent challenge with high rates of gender-based violence and discrimination in employment, education and political participation (Schneider 2019; GoSL, 2019). Consistently research highlights the devastating impact of a patriarchal system on women during periods of crisis and the brutalising impact of trauma in war, on the reinforcement of hegemonic femininities and masculinities in the society at large (Schneider 2019). While this is reflected in Sierra Leone's ranking of 150 out of 160 countries on UN indicators of gender inequality (UNDP 2018), women exercise limited power through the seniority system in their position as elders, as well as through their participation in the Bondo and Sande secret societies. These latter are a parallel system of social organisation that have significant capacity to mobilise (and regulate) women's everyday lives (Day 2015; Bosire 2012).

This paper considers the gendering of childhoods in five rural communities in Northern Sierra Leone, among the poorest of regions in the country. Drawing on Bourdieu, it explores the dialectical interplay between gendered and generational structures, understood as the gendered habitus, in this wider context of structural poverty and uneven and fragile post-colonial restructuring and development. This sets the groundwork for children's gendered dis/positioning, and ultimately capacity to engage with schooling.

### Childhoods, generation and gender

The field of gender research with respect to the majority world is a contested space (Connell 2014; Manion and Shah 2019). Critiques arise in relation to a perceived disjunction between the colonial 'gaze' of the Northern hemisphere and how visions of cosmopolitan social justice may undermine local cultures and traditions (Dunne 2008; Unterhalter 2008). Central to such critiques are concerns about the essentialisation of both African culture as well as the experiences of 'Third world' women in deficit terms (and by implication the 'girl' child), without sufficient attention to differences within and across countries and regions (Ntarwangi and Massart 2015; Oyewumi 2005). Scholarship has also focused on masculinities within African contexts (Crivello and van der Gaag 2016; Ntarwangi 2012), and the multiple versions that arise including resistance to hegemonic forms.

A particular focus to emerge is the interconnection between kinship and lineage (over and above gender) in social positioning (Fennell and Arnot 2008). Of note is the importance of the status of 'mother' with respect to women, and the role of seniority and positioning as 'elder' that demarcates status within the household and local community. Understood as generational orders, these frame not only a highly collectivist orientation within traditional rural communities that are underpinned by a series of obligations and duties, what Kabeer (2000) refers to as the inter-generational contract. Children's contribution to such collective orientations is central, realised through complex processes of social and inter-generational re/production in which they play an active role (Qvortrup, Corsaro, and Honig 2009). Indeed, scholarship based on studies of African childhoods has been to the forefront of critiquing idealised 'western' constructs of childhood, documenting the essential role played by children in family livelihood strategies (Abebe and Ofusu-Kusi 2016; Bolotta and Vignato 2017; Imoh 2016). Further, such analyses locate changing generational dynamics within the wider context of glocalisation in post-colonial contexts, altering the very definition of what it is to be an 'adult' and/or a 'child' (Huijsmans 2017). Previous analyses (Devine et al. 2021) have

highlighted how tensions between preservation of established generational orders with absolute authority of elders, sit alongside transformations – the push and pull of the forces of ‘modernisation’ and neo-liberal marketisation. The introduction of compulsory schooling is both a catalyst for and symbol of such change, altering the generational landscape (Ansell 2017): adults work, children play and learn (Devine et al. 2021). This is not a seamless process. The prioritisation of education as central to a ‘good’ childhood involves tensions and negotiations between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, individual and collective values. These are especially challenging in contexts of abject poverty and high mortality where family survival and livelihoods are at stake.<sup>1</sup>

Generational orders do not operate in isolation then but intersect with those related to gender and (social) class. The alteration of constructs of what is ‘good’ or expected in and for children (and by implication adults), may play out differently for boys and girls. In other words, generational orders are gendered – they are embedded not only in norms that define what it is to be a child and an adult, but also what it is to be ‘good boy’ and ‘good girl’ (and by implication ‘good’ woman and ‘good’ man). As with generational orders, the introduction of compulsory schooling can also rupture the gendered landscape. There is considerable research that highlights the challenges for girls in the Global South in both access to and participation in education (Dunne 2008; Fennell and Arnot 2008; Froerer 2012). Pimlott-Wilson (2011) refer to inter-generational family ‘chains’ in gendered work practices and roles that younger children aspire to, influencing their engagement with schooling. Further, aspirations for education are governed not only by the collective and gendered orientations within the kinship group but also by the opportunity structures for schooling and work in the local community. While the literature consistently highlights essentialist gendered constructs that foreshadow the opportunities especially for girls, the inter-relationship between norms around marriage/fertility, work and extended schooling is complex and can play out differently for boys and girls depending on social and cultural context (Akram, Mathilde, and Denk 2020; Boyden, Porter, and Sharkevich 2020; Froerer 2012).

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is useful in highlighting some of the dynamics at play in the constructions of a ‘good girl’ and a ‘good’ boy. The concept of habitus draws attention to identity in embodied form, ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 72), ‘of standing, speaking, walking and therefore of thinking and feeling’ (Bourdieu 1990, 170). This is not to say that individuals are determined by the habitus into which they are socialised, but the habitus provides the ‘logic of practice’ (Bourdieu 1990) that orients individuals to act in particular ways. Habitus has both a collective as well as an individual dimension. It is the ongoing ‘sum’ of the inter-relation between the collective and the individual, mediated by the wider context of power and access to resources in a constant stance of re/formation. Change in the social context of interaction (the ‘field’) and its associated power can challenge the ‘logics of practice’, giving rise to transformations ‘as agents know the social world’ (Bourdieu 1990, 252). Importantly, habitus is not the outcome – a fixed end point, it is a *process* of continuous engagement that has both conscious and unconscious elements.

Applied to change in the gendered habitus, such analyses preclude both a ‘deficit’ and overly deterministic view of gendered positioning, locating gendered *practices* in the context of both structural and agentic influences that are themselves embedded in relations of power. Such perspectives also align with social constructivist accounts of gender identity formation, a form of ‘doing’ and situated social practice (West and Zimmerman 1987), performed in

response to norms and expectations in relation to 'self' and 'other' (Butler 1990). The very act of 'doing' reproduces identities in a dialectical inter-play of action, re/action and social dis/positioning. In the context of Sierra Leone identities are also invoked through relations with ancestors, spirits and living nature – an inter-dependent process of re/action between human and non-human constellations of (often ritualised) relations (Shaw 2000). These become embodied in taken for granted ways of 'doing' and 'being' (habitus) that becomes the gendered script for everyday life.

Taking these strands together the re/formation of the gendered habitus is a cyclical process (a dialectical interplay) of continuous re/structuring. It arises at the intersection of gendered, generational and socio-economic orders and policy developments in the wider society, including for example the introduction of compulsory schooling; the practices that ensue in the local community; and the individual (child's) responses to those practices. Power is central both in the process of re/action as well as the capacity/resources to do so. Habitus is not fixed – it is a generative process dependent on the re/configuration of power dynamics in any given field. Hybrid and counter hegemonic identities can evolve depending on the context and movement across different spaces and places. However, while identity can take hybrid forms, identity making is embedded in relations of power and access to resources (Devine 2013). Bourdieu refers to these resources as capitals – economic, social, cultural and symbolic, access to which dictates levels of influence within any given field of interaction. Within a gerontocratic patriarchal/patrilineal system, there is clear gendered differentiation in access to such capitals, with marriage (for women) central to the acquisition of both symbolic as well as economic and social capital. Access to capitals is also contingent on glocal development processes, which can simultaneously alter not only the relative weighting of capitals but their distribution across actors in the field. Changes in opportunity structures – through for example the introduction of compulsory schooling or the opening up (or closure) of new labour opportunities impact on the strategies employed by both children and adults alike. This is all the more so in contexts of strong collective orientation.

In this paper, these ideas thread through our analysis of the gendering of childhood(s) in rural Sierra Leone. We consider the inter-connectedness between gendered and collective generational orders – how the formation of a gendered identity is intimately tied to this wider collectivist orientation. Importantly we do so within a context of significant 'rupture' to traditional generational orders (and opportunity structures) brought by processes of development (including compulsory schooling) and neo-liberal modernisation, in a context of deeply embedded structural poverty.

## Methodology

The paper draws on data from a mixed methods study of gender, literacy, well-being and schooling of primary school children in rural Sierra Leone (Samonova et al. 2020). We draw on case studies in five villages, mostly Temne speaking, situated in a northern district of Sierra Leone, one of the poorest in the country. Seasonal subsistence farming predominates that can also include palm oil production – an increasingly strategic sector within Sierra Leone. Another source of income is artisan gold and chromite mining. Children live in extended families and poverty is experienced as an everyday reality. Low levels of parental literacy predominate.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnographic immersion in each village of between 4 and 6 weeks was conducted over a period of two years. Each village case study comprised four intergenerational families (20 in total), consisting of in-depth interviews with children (2 boys and 2 girls who were in Class 1 or 2 in school, and aged typically between 5 and 12 years),<sup>3</sup> their parents/guardians, an older sibling (in teen years) and grandparents. Additionally, research involved individual interviews with schoolteachers and headmasters along with small focus group discussions with children in classes 1 and 2 and a sub sample of youth and elders in each of the study villages. The sample is reflected in Table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Outline of interviewees across each case study community.

Community	Children	Parents	Elders	Youth	Siblings	Teachers	Total
<i>Gbantrani</i>	24	4	2	2	4	2	38
<i>Karanba</i>	34	8	4	3	3	3	55
<i>Naytikiwo</i>	34	8	4	2	4	2	54
<i>Mabonoma</i>	34	8	5	3	5	4	59
<i>Taroko</i>	34	8	5	3	4	5	59
Totals	160	36	20	13	20	16	265

The research followed the ethical procedures approved by the University human ethic research committee, including obtaining informed consent to participation.<sup>4</sup> All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded with the assistance of a qualitative analysis software (Maxqda).<sup>5</sup> Coding followed an iterative process of open, axial, and selective coding and inter-coder reliability between members of the research team.

### The intersection of generational and gendered orders in children's everyday lives: doing 'boy' and 'girl'

In our research, gendered work of the children was interspersed with the wider context of both gendered and generational orders in each village. With respect to younger children, gendered differences were not so easily articulated, expressed by Abubakarr when he said 'We are all the same'. Yet in practice, differences exemplified in physical strength and capacity to work on the farm, underpinned normative assumptions about gender differences (and in/equalities) more widely in our case study villages:

*What my husband does with one hand I use my two hands to do it . . . those that are saying 50/50 they don't know what they are saying* (Alpha's mother, Mabonoma community)

*If you are the boy child of the family, you should be ready to take the responsibilities of the family except if the eldest child is a girl child, then she can help until the boy child is strong enough to take care of the family* (Tenneh's father, Gbantrani community)

These perspectives permeated the narratives of younger children. For boys, their core constructs of masculinity drew on this discourse of physical strength and family responsibility construed as being 'in charge'. As young boys their role was one of assisting (mainly) their fathers with farm work, and helping to bring food home for their family:

R- The girls are not good. The boys are better than the girls.

M- So what do the girls have to do to be good?

*R- They should be in the kitchen to help cook and the boys go to the farm. (Mustapha, boy, class 1, Karanba community)*

Boys have more responsibilities when they are fully matured . . . the parents look up to them (Alusine, Taroko village)

I will like giving birth to male child . . . Male child work very hard than female child, they are very strong. (Marie, girl, Class 1, Naytikiwo)

While gender roles were relatively ‘fixed’, as reflected in Tenneh’s father’s comments, they were also mediated by the size and make-up of the family, including siblings, wives and number of boys or girls. Children’s roles and contributions in other words were assigned according to need and increased progressively as children got older. They formed part of a system of rules, responsibilities and reciprocal obligations – an inter-generational contract (Kabeer 2000), that underpinned children’s social positioning within clearly defined and understood generational as well as gendered structures. Initiation was a central element in these social formations. In West Africa, across different ethnic groups, initiation into adulthood is gender-specific, with some exceptions (Day 2015), and ritually performed within men’s Poro and Gbangani and women’s Bondo or Sande ‘secret societies’. These societies constitute a hidden and parallel social reality, what Fermé (2001) has described as ‘the underneath of things’.<sup>6</sup> Initiation, moreover, ties children to a particular clan, family, and locale, increasingly important in Sierra Leone given the post-war and post-Ebola mobility of people (Scheppler 2014).

Children in our case study communities were aware of the importance of initiation for social acceptance and belonging. For boys, initiation through the male societies was perceived as core to learning how to be a ‘good’ boy in preparation for adult male responsibilities, including as Tenneh’s grandmother stated ‘*being good people in the community*’. Central to this ‘doing’ of masculinity is the collectivist orientation which prescribes loyalty and duty to the family – a patrilineal system with authority vested in males, but within a wider seniority system of power and control by elders. Inter-generational continuity was central here and informed by the pervasive risk of premature death. Men were expected to take responsibility for decisions in the family with care for all family members paramount<sup>7</sup>:

*When the children are taken to the **gbanika** (The secret society bush of the **Poro** men) . . . they are taken there for training so that if the father dies one day, the boy (s) in the house will be able to take control of the house just like what the father has been doing. (Group discussion with elders, Gbantrani)*

With respect to girls, core constructs of femininity emphasised care and domestic responsibilities related to food preparation, pounding rice, cleaning and minding children. ‘Doing’ girl was consistently connected with maintaining family reputation in terms of obedience and respectfulness, clearly articulated by a young girl in Class 2, Gbantrani and by Jaward’s grandmother in Taroko village:

*A good daughter is trained by her mother to cook, sweep and do other domestic work and everywhere that child goes she will go with that training, so people will say that this child was raised up properly (Girl, Class 2, Gbantrani)*

*A good wife should listen to what her husband commanded her to do. She follows her husband to the farm and does other domestic work. (Grandmother of Jaward, Taroko community)*

While the primary focus of male responsibilities rests on taking care of his wife(s) and children, women are often additionally responsible for supporting their own parents and relatives even after marriage. This division of duties in regard to their families was evident in all our case study communities:

*Well for some male children . . . they are not well bothered about their parents more especially if he has already got his own wife and children. For the girl child, they mostly have sympathy for their parents so they are always there to seek their interest. (Ramatu's father, Mabonoma)*

As with boys, initiation was perceived as a key element in gender formation for girls, through the women's Bondo society. This was seen to confer status and a sense of strong belonging for girls within their local community, evident through the ritual celebration of the child once initiated (Coulter 2005; Schepler 2014). While children in class 2 and 6 were reluctant to speak about this 'secret' process, the elders were more specific, outlining the importance of the Bondo society in framing the sexuality of girls, and preventing early pregnancy:

*When the women take the girls to the **Bondo** society, they talk to them, advice them and tell them things that they will be afraid to have sex early (group discussion with elders, Gbantrani)*

Not all girls we interviewed wanted to or were enabled to participate in the Bondo society. Mariama for example in class 2 Gbantrani, was not 'allowed' to participate until she is 18 years, and her father provides the payment necessary.<sup>8</sup> This caused some difficulties for her with her peers as she was excluded from many social activities saying:

*They normally treat me bad. Because if we go somewhere, they will say, a **gburaka** (people that are not members of the society) should not follow us . . . I have nothing to do because I am not a member.*

Mariama does not appear to question her father's decision, incorporating his preferences into her gendered habitus, saying 'I will do whatever my father asks me to do'. Yet it would be a mistake to perceive women as powerless within our study communities. Previous research notes the power of the 'Digba'<sup>9</sup> in the local community, and how core decisions related to girls' standing, particularly through initiation are decisions made and enacted by women (Bosire 2012). Secret societies are also key locales where women benefit from the advice of experienced elders about marriage, child rearing and 'proper' behaviour of a wife. They were also central in supporting community efforts to overcome the recent Ebola epidemic. Kandiyoti (1988) refers to the 'patriarchal bargain', where women exercise power (and gain access to important networks of power) within the confines of their own designated spaces that do not undermine (in fact support) the overall patriarchal system in their communities at large. There are then contrasting discourses of femininity which position women as relatively silent within public spaces, yet with their autonomous spaces of power and hierarchical control.

Along with initiation, marriage (be it an official registered marriage or a common law marriage) is a central event in women's life that confers status, strongly interconnected with the capacity to bear children and contribute to the husband's household. As Beoku-Betts (2008) notes, the protection marriage affords to women highlights not only power



invested through the patrilineal system (and the associated mobilisation of symbolic, social and economic capitals) but also the risks for women and their heightened vulnerability without a male protector:

*If you are married people will fear you because of your husband and respect you, but if you are not married, they will not fear you. (group discussion with female youth, Naytiwiko)*

Yet ruptures to traditional generational orders were evident across our case study communities, with consequences for gendered dynamics within them. Processes of modernisation and individualisation in a wider context of severe poverty, a brutal civil war, disease and post-colonial restructuring were reshaping values and aspirations, as well as familial and community interdependencies (Devine et al. 2021). While women's roles remained traditionally rooted within the domestic sphere, evident also was increasing time being spent by women (and children) in petty trading, reflecting trends noted also by Bosire (2012) in the post war context. While some attributed this to a growing 'irresponsibility' among young men, also evident were those who felt gendered roles were changing and welcomed the autonomy for girls:

*Most of the women establish petty trading as a source of their income, While the husband will be busy feeding the house they are busy making money (Tamba's father, Mabanoma)*

*Whatever profession she becomes in the future I will be happy for that. Be it lawyer, politicians or nurse. I will be there to advise her about relationships with coworkers and people outside. (Sia's grandmother, Taroko community)*

Tensions in the preservation of traditional ways of 'being' and 'doing' strongly rooted in power vested in the elders (including control over a decreasing supply of scarce resources) were also evident in a context of changing opportunity structures for children and young people. For elders, this resulted in perceptions regarding the need for tighter control over the behaviour of youth (through the secret societies), to ensure continued respect for elders:

*If you respect people, nothing will be done to you but if you disrespect elders and the elders report you ... you will be taken back to the gbanika for punishment. (Tenneh's father, Gbantrani community)*

These tensions emerged especially at the points of transition to 'adulthood' and the expectations of relative autonomy by young people. This was signalled predominantly through bearing children – a key signifier of status and manliness for young men, evident in the comment of one young boy:

*"If you make a woman pregnant, the people will say you are a 'big' man now" (Class 2 boy, Gbantrani)*

Yet in a wider context of abject poverty, an ambiguous fatherhood prevailed (Ntarwangi 2012) given the challenges for younger men to provide (also a key marker of masculinity) for a growing family. Simultaneously marriage (including early marriage) was a buttress against the reputational risk of teenage pregnancies, the latter associated with a lack of 'control' over girls. Such pregnancies are widespread in rural Sierra Leone and a significant locus of concern for elders and parents, who derogatorily referred to such girls as 'street wives'. Perceived as rule breakers who did not adhere to the prescriptive gendered habitus of 'good' girl and 'wife', such

girls/young women were critiqued for prioritising individualistic desires of money, pleasure and freedom over and above schooling:

*The girl child is a big problem for us. I don't know what is disturbing them, some say it is poverty, some say it is love of money or the life they live do not allow them to be educated, some get pregnant and drop out from school (Stepfather of Abubakarr)*

While pregnancy was deemed to be especially negative for younger women, children signalled potential risk also to young men, and spoke dramatically in our interviews with them of the threat of prison/punishment. Yet tensions that arose with respect to marriage and pregnancy were symptomatic of ruptures to generational and gendered orders within a wider context of fragile glocal development. These crystallised in changing opportunity structures with respect especially to schooling, as families struggled to ensure attendance, while maintaining their immediate family livelihoods.

### Gendered opportunity structures and schooling

Universal education was introduced in Sierra Leone following independence in 1961, yet remained relatively under-developed in rural areas. In recent years while under-resourced, education has gained renewed focus, with school enrolment growing significantly (Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) 2019). Combined with developments in agriculture and mining and the move towards a cash based literate economy, the opportunity structures for both boys and girls were changing. This required a purposive refocusing of familial strategies for both present as well as long-term survival (Devine et al. 2021). Yet this was a risky endeavour given the uncertainty of any long-term return for investment in education in the present. It was especially risky in contexts of extreme poverty and hardship, where children's contributions through their work at home and on the farm, was a requirement for familial survival. Combined with the payment of school fees a double cost was experienced (including the loss of children's labour at home and on the farm) in a wider context of economic fragility and uncertain futures. Questions arise in relation to the re/generation of the gendered habitus and how it is framed, in this changing social and cultural context.

In spite of significant gender differences in expectations and role, our fieldwork confirmed that parents (with some misgivings by elders) valued the education of both their sons and daughters, expecting that this would help alleviate poverty into the future. Yet sacrifices were required in the present:

*Today if we see improvement coming to our communities is due to the educated people. It is also the reason why poverty is increasing because the young people who are strong and fast to work, they are all in the school and the old people who are slow and weak, are the ones working now in the farm (Elders Gbantrani)*

*Well as a father, I do pay her school fees, buy her books, get her shoes, bags and whatever she needs as a child to go school ... so as to encourage her to go to school. (Karanda parent 3)*

Some parents stressed that education may be more important for girls than for boys. On the one hand, education was increasingly perceived as a route for women and girls to gain

higher status/ranking in society. Girls spoke about becoming ‘brilliant’ and cited examples of women in leadership: politicians and school principals for example, for reference:

*For example, Madam [female principal of a secondary school], not everybody will play tricks on her. Also if you are educated you will be highly respected. In the village you will be the first point of contact. (group discussion with class 6 girls, Taroko)*

Older siblings who had successfully transferred to secondary school, commented on the liberatory potential of schooling for all children, but especially girls, commenting on increasing confidence and speaking in public:

*School is important both for the girls, and boys as well . . . It reduces shyness away from people who are not used to public speaking. School . . . it opens up the doors of opportunity. (Karanda, female, Sibling 3)*

This emphasis by these young women resonated with the comments of younger girls in primary school who queried assumptions around the ‘brilliance’ of boys and the culturally embedded patterns of silence of girls in public spaces:

*The only problem is the girls are always afraid to speak in class but we are all the same in terms of school performance, The boys are always outspoken while the girls don’t want to talk, they are not bold (Naytikwo girls class group, Class 6)*

Yet these traditional modes of ‘being’ (habitus) of girls while queried, sat simultaneously alongside deeply rooted expectations of the role that girls would continue to play in supporting their families in the longer term. Education was thus perceived as a route through which a girl may acquire better opportunities and thus provide better support to the family:

*When a girl is educated and she succeeds in life, when she gets married the husband will be like a son to the woman’s family so he gives more to the wife’s family than his. For me it is the women that gives more to the family than the men (Mustapha’s granduncle, Karanba)*

Yet it was this very strong domestic role for girls that could undermine these expectations, especially when their families depended on them for domestic and agricultural labour. Gendered orders intersected then not only with generational patterns of interdependence, but also the structural dynamics of poverty. This was reflected in patterns of attendance and work activities of children as young as seven in our village communities. Our findings confirmed that by the end of the first year in primary school (class 1), it was girls in the poorest families who were most likely to be missing from school (Samonova et al. 2020). It was also such girls who were shown to spend more time on family domestic chores. The gendered dynamics at play were evident in that even in families who were less poor, it was boys who were more likely to be in attendance at school. The time poverty (Bardasi and Wodon 2010) associated with girls’ significant family workload, negatively affected their capacities to fully engage with their schooling, especially study after school. This was reflected in Sia’s commentary below:

*Sia: the boys do study at home while the girls do not.*

*Interviewer: so what do girls do at home? Why not study?*

*Sia: When day breaks the girls sweep the compound, fetch water, wash the dishes before school, and after school they will do the cooking at home. The boys just fetch water in the morning and then go to school, after school they will just be roaming about or some will rest and then study. (Sia, female class 2 student, female Mabonoma village)*

Of course, as Boyden, Porter, and Sharkevich (2020) notes, gendered time use by itself cannot be taken as an indicator of disadvantage – it must be contextualised with reference to the opportunities girls (and boys) have for alternate courses of action. In the case study villages, these were mediated by the structural conditions of children’s lives. The complex dynamics of gender and generation come into play here, in terms of ‘suitability’ for marriage as well as continued obedience to elders within existing generational orders. There was then the simultaneous circulation of contrasting gendered discourses, creating a complex network of inter-dependent relationships that simultaneously supported and undermined girls’ opportunities for education. Elder women were key, providing important gateways and/or restraints for girls in attendance at school, encouraging or discouraging as recounted by a youth we interviewed in Gbantrani<sup>10</sup>:

*For my wife, her grandmother disturbed her education. When it is time to go to school, the grandmother will cover my wife . . . when her parents ask about her the grandmother will say she is sick. So, that was how my wife now was unable to continue to go to school.*

Yet ruptures were occurring to these gendered inter-generational orders suggesting changes to the gendered habitus. While marriage remained a central event in women’s lives, girls and younger women we interviewed sought it as an addition to their lives, *once* they were educated. Repeatedly the younger generation highlighted their preference to delay marriage in order to complete their schooling. While the age range for marriage in our study communities was from 25 years, the general preference was for marriage to occur when a girl was in her mid-twenties.

*It is important for a woman to get married but if you are going to school, I advise completing your school and getting employment before getting married . . . [this] is better than getting married earlier. (Idrissa’s sister, Naytikiwo community)*

However, delayed marriage had a double cost and required a shift in the generational (and kinship) contract – extending the dependence of the girl on her father’s family (for her continued schooling etc.) given that marriage, within the patrilineal system, signalled the ‘handing over’ of responsibility to the husband for his wife’s care and survival. This becomes especially significant in contexts of extreme poverty. Traditionally, early marriage not only guaranteed the ‘respectability’ of girls and hence the reputation of kin, but was an important source of income relief for families as girls’ husbands contributed to the household and care needs:<sup>11</sup>

*M: Why did the girls not go to school?*

*R: I didn’t send them to school because I don’t have money to pay their fees. Also, they are girls they can get married to some men and the men will take care of their responsibilities. (Sia’s grandmother, Mabanoma)*

Children’s agency in this context was reflected not only in their expectation that they would attend school (and be supported by parents to do so) but also in their efforts to balance competing demands of work and study:

*For us here our parents have very little or no time to provide for us. Soon as day breaks we have to cater for ourselves. (Class 6 focus group, Naytikiwo)*

*Mining is one of the challenges, when they do not get support for their education, they will take their shovel and go to the mining area for them to get support for their fees' (Ferenkay, Grandmother)*

In so doing the children (and youth) asserted a positive vision of their futures, independently of traditional gendered and generational orders. They operated within a set of constrained yet inter-dependent agencies influenced not only by the immediate challenges of everyday life but the vagaries of glocal development. Structural patterns (related not only to gender, but generation, class and poverty) in the wider society set the context for the 'logics of practice' and 'choices' girls and women made. The pervasive trajectory of financial struggles and need to seek alternate sources of (often exploitative) support, teenage pregnancy, school dropout and early marriage contributed to a continuing cycle of inter-generational poverty that was widely evident:

*The problem is when the girl child wants to [be educated] and her parents do not have the money to pay her fees . . . some will go to a man and that man will later impregnate her and no sooner it happens there will be the end of her school (Group discussion with female youth, Karanba)*

Teenage pregnancies had a dramatic effect on the whole life of girls. Visibly pregnant girls were not allowed to go to school and the chances that a girl would return to school after childbirth were very low. Some of these ended with customary marriages, however, many pregnant girls remained with their parents. The need to travel to urban centres for progression to secondary education was an additional challenge, resulting in further loss of control by parents/elders. With the burden of responsibility placed on girls, it was the girl and her family that were most affected:<sup>12</sup>

*It will not take long before you see she became pregnant and her education has moved behind and the parents have suffered for nothing. But for boys, they will still continue their so the parents of the girl have the loss (Marie's father, Naytikiwo community)*

Some of these challenges presented in the case study of Mariama in Gbantrani community. Her father recounted the support he received from his parents to enable both he and his pregnant girlfriend to remain at school. The efforts that were required to do this (including permission from the Chief) were vindicated in their subsequent success at school. Mariama's grandparents now reaped benefits, not only through their son's financial support from his job as a secondary school teacher, but also the contribution Mariama could make to caring for them in the household. Significantly, this highlights the importance and new zone of impact of education for the inter-generational contract (Kabeer 2000), where investment in the present yields benefits for the future – especially important for the continued support of elders:

*Grandmother: People were condemning me that I should not have supported the education of the mother of Mariama, but I told them that I am doing this because I want my grandchild to be educated . . . we are managing to grow her up so now she is able to do work for us at home*

*Grandfather: When I was a little boy a family member wanted to help me to be educated but he passed away at a very early stage. That is why I do not want my children to go through what I went through. (Mariama's grandparents)*

The counter example of Adama, elder sister of our case study girl Kadiatu, shows the crucial importance of parental/elder support/lack of support in the case of a teenage

pregnancy. In contrast to the case of Mariama's parents, Adama's parents and grandfather – a village Chief, did not allow her to return to school after giving birth:

*I was thinking to go back to school after my delivery but Ibrahim [the Chief and granduncle] asked me to do tailoring. He took two of us to the centre as he said we should not disappoint our family again.*

In the case of Mariama, her father was clearly ambitious for her and wished to see her complete her education and become a doctor. His greatest fear was that she would become pregnant, hence his plan that she would come live with him when she reached grade 6 so he could monitor her:

*My only fear presently is, as soon as she reaches form one or two, she will be impregnated. But really I want her to be educated . . . She is staying with her grandparents right now . . . When she reaches class six (6), she will transfer in my place.*

The cases of Mariama and Adama highlight the relational aspect of habitus and the dialectical interplay of both gendered and generational structures in a wider context of structural poverty, and children's expected contribution to livelihood strategies. Mariama's grandmother had memories of being prevented from going to school, and aspired for something different for her children, supporting her son and his pregnant wife to remain in school. The relative autonomy granted her daughter in law (Mariama's mother) and Mariama herself was already being repaid through the contribution Mariama was making at home, in addition to the expected contribution she will make in later years through her extended education. Yet there was tight control over Mariama and a determination to keep her within the family through her fathers' rearing as she moved into adolescence. As we saw earlier there was some cost to Mariama for this. She was not allowed be part of the Bondo society until she was 18 years but it was a price she appeared willing to pay in deference to her parents' wishes.

Possibilities for 'action' were also mediated by the capitals available. While boys' lives were not affected by teenage pregnancies so dramatically, they also faced serious educational constraints that were usually linked to the costs of education. Jaward in Taroko lived with his mother, siblings, uncle and his family. His father passed away five years ago. Of eight siblings, he was the only one at school. His older sister dropped out of school when the sibling supporting her became sick. Jaward's own opportunity for schooling in the last year, was a result of monetary support from his uncle who lived in Europe, and the practical support of his aunt. Jaward was happy to attend school because '*when I am grown my mother will not suffer*' yet his mother was concerned that:

*People are saying that Jaward should be educated. So, if I am struggling to take care of his education now in primary when it is not too expensive, what about the time he will go to high school, will I be able to afford such money?*

The problem of high school costs was regularly raised by parents and children. In the case of Jaward, his aunt and uncle decided to support a boy only, while his sister Hawa, had to leave school early in the absence of an older sibling's support. On the one hand, this may indicate a greater preference for the education of sons in this family. On the other hand, this choice was also linked to the fact that Jaward's sister had already attended school for some period, which may be deemed sufficient to improve her life, while Jaward had never

been to school. In this respect, the opportunity structure of schooling was itself deemed a 'rationed' resource to be distributed across siblings. The attendance patterns noted previously suggest when choices were made between siblings, age order as well as gender came into play. While education and schooling may be recognised as important for boys and girls, considerable structural restraints continued to undermine the capacities of girls, especially though not exclusively, in the poorest families.<sup>13</sup>

## Concluding discussion

This paper foregrounded the gendered dynamics at play in the everyday lives of children in rural Sierra Leone. Critical events such as the civil war and the more recent Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone are part of a longstanding historical narrative of communities and societies in Africa, through colonial and post-colonial orders. Competition over scarce resources in a society rich in natural minerals is testament to the longstanding trajectory of structured inequalities and abject poverty of the communities we visited. Poverty however is not only material – it is also relational (Akram, Mathilde, and Denk 2020). It frames the context in which power dynamics, both generational and gendered become operationalised. The need to maximise opportunities for survival is key, alongside the protection of kin in a system of collective and reciprocal expectations and entitlements.

There is then a dialectical interplay between gendered and generational orders – between the expectations and entitlements for 'adults' and 'children', and within these for boys and girls and the expected contributions they must make to family survival strategies. Both are given outward expression through everyday practices in local communities, and symbolic expression through membership of the secret societies. Bosire's (2012) reference to the patriarchal bargain is apt in highlighting the inter-dependence of the gendered habitus for men and women, providing spaces for female autonomy and power that does not detract from overall patterns of patriarchal control. Yet the generational contract may also be construed as a generational bargain – embedded in a series of duties and obligations in return for care and support provided by parents in the early years. These wider dynamics frame how children 'do' 'boy' and 'girl'. Constructions of gender structure both the life trajectories and opportunities for both. These in turn are mediated by the material conditions of family life. Younger children in our case study communities spoke about gender in relatively fixed terms yet observations indicated some fluidity in their out of school roles that may be related to their mainly pre-initiated status. Their discourses however in general reaffirmed essentialist interpretations of gender that underpinned the higher status of boys/males in several fields of the gender order.

Yet the habitus is open to transformation in response to wider opportunities and developments in the field. The introduction of compulsory schooling is one such opportunity structure. At the level of discourse, there was evidence that aspirations towards education were part of the narrative for both boys and girls, incorporated as a necessity for alternate futures and imaginings of collective benefit for the family as a whole. Opportunity structures are bounded however within the wider system of structured inequalities (from extreme to more moderate levels of poverty) that demarcate the 'logics of practice' and possibilities for action of those involved. Our findings suggest that it is girls in the poorest families who are most likely to be absent from school and girls generally who struggled with the time bind of combining schoolwork with family

responsibilities. Hybrid identities were emerging with evidence of some girls incorporating livelihood roles with the relative autonomy of continued attendance at school. However, expectations regarding schooling were conditional on an expected return of investment in line with the generational bargain and ultimately kinship survival.

Simultaneously, schooling, especially of girls, was perceived as a potential threat, not only to traditional gender orders (and perceptions of relative incapacity to ‘control’ girls) but also to the authority of elders in their growing sense of lack of control over young people in general who were attracted to opportunities and ways of life that differed from ‘old ways’. Counter hegemonic identities of ‘the good’ wife/‘street wife’ dichotomy were being played out in the early pregnancy/stay at school conundrum that was complicated by the traditional inter-relationship between (early) marriage, family reputation and pregnancy. Our data also highlighted incidences where counter hegemonic actions could lead to change – as in the case for example of Mariama’s grandparents going against the grain of opinion (but seeking the consent of the Chief) to keep their son and his girlfriend in school in spite of early pregnancy. In such cases, the capacity to bargain was paramount, while leaving traditional patterns of power intact.

Further, children were also contributing to gendered re/configurations through their assertion of the importance of schooling to their lives and their (often independent) efforts to seek alternate sources of funding (petty trading, mining) to support their continued attendance at school. Older girls, who had successfully transitioned to secondary school spoke of the confidence instilled through education and their desires to delay marriage to enable continued progression. Their individual aspirations intersected with collective expectations of their families in a context where risk was ever present. Such risk was mediated by policies and practices beyond the immediacy of the local community. The under resourcing of the already fragile school system in their communities; the continued dependence on some children’s parents/elders to pay fees; the fragility of the Sierra Leone economy within the wider context of neo-liberal global capitalist development are all central here. What is also central, especially for girls, is sponsorship from within the patriarchy – an elder/father/boyfriend/husband or uncle that was willing to advocate for their continued attendance at school.

## Notes

1. This refers to the *practices* involved in collective cultures.
2. 60% of heads of households in our case study communities had never gone to school (Author et al).
3. Age ranges of the children are subject to variation owed to fragmented school attendance and do not necessarily correspond to typical age ranges for that class level.
4. Community leaders were informed about the research prior to the fieldwork. Consent was obtained from parents/guardians. Child assent was sought by explaining the purpose/methods of the study using child friendly and age appropriate language.
5. Fieldwork was conducted by the researchers alongside Sierra Leonian fieldworkers.
6. Bosire (2012) notes the continuing impact on processes of (gender) socialisation, economic and political life.
7. McFerson (2012) notes how the context of repeated crises have further marginalised and disempowered women, while at the same time opening up spaces by necessity for survival by women in single parent families to engage in economic activity outside the home.



8. Payment is required for membership of the secret society, often to the Chief (McFerson 2012). For Mariama' father, it appears to be connected to his own desire for her to be fully educated before full initiation and marriage.
9. Digba is the woman who conducts the initiation on behalf of the secret society.
10. In many instances, elder women were the main care-givers and decision-makers in the family, in light of high mortality rates.
11. Especially prominent are unregistered marriages of young people when a girl gets pregnant.
12. At the time of writing the Ministry of Education announced that the ban on pregnant girls attending school was to be lifted.
13. Students of approved primary schools do not pay school fees, but cover school related costs such as uniform and learning materials. In schools that are not approved school fees still persist.

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