



## Rediscoursing the Developmental Experiences of Rural Girl-Children in Zimbabwean Homes and Schools

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative case enquiry attempted to present an analysis of the rural girl-child experiences as she makes efforts to balance between school and home roles. The study is tethered on a feminist notion. Though schools regard the girl-child as a learner, the home also makes frantic efforts to maximize available girl child labour before and after school. Girl-child labour has received great attention by organizations fighting for equality and equity among the human populace. Data were collected through two (2) Focus Group Discussions held in two neighbouring schools with a total of twelve (12) conveniently selected girl children in Manicaland, Zimbabwe. To augment girl-child data, four teachers (2 males and 2 females) were interviewed. The four (4) teachers were purposefully selected because each held an additional professional role as a school counselor. It was evident that inequalities still existed in the ways in which boys and girls were treated at home, school and the rest of the community. Tasks were noted to be varying as each one of the girl children unpacked her ordeal. The girl child responsibilities at home ranged from cleaning, fetching firewood and relish, cooking as well as manning the sick and the aged. The school also expected her to excel in school tasks, as well as other responsibilities such as polishing the classroom floors, cleaning surroundings and any other responsibilities as assigned by school staff and prefects. Therefore, the girl child sails through varying cultural and developmental experiences as she struggles to attain formal learning.

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### Introduction

Children face many challenges, some of which are exacerbated by storms and stresses that they encounter at varying degrees. Some causes could be interpersonal whilst others are intrapersonal. Certain cultural means by which individuals try to rear the children can make them feel angry, fearful and guilt hence they can become isolated (Henriques, 2017). On the other hand, quality and unbiased child rearing practices create a conducive learning environment no matter which gender.

The psychological aspects of being female or male are what is construed as gender by the society. Gender refers to the social difference played out through the culture of male and female roles in society. Others take it to be the social or cultural condition of male and female differences which are not biological but prescribed by society and cultural practices. Many more definitions of the term, 'gender' are prescribed by a particular society, depending on the main social differences between man and women.

During the colonial era in Zimbabwe, settlers, tended to view girls and women in terms of a Victorian image of what

a woman should be like (Mutekwe, 2012). Not much was done to place women side by side with their male counterparts or observing women's actual capabilities and functions in society. Men were taken to be breadwinners and thus they were recruited for highly esteemed and paying technological jobs whilst women stayed in the homes for domestic chores (Goldschider et al, 2015). Thus, it appeared that the construct, *gender*, became an issue but not many were privileged to talk much about it in yester years.

Differences in the ways the society perceives gender varies due to enculturation. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the girl child is groomed to resemble a mother figure in the home whilst the boy child is expected to '*...act like a man...*' no matter what challenges might be besetting them. Acting like a man would entail being brave enough to tackle difficult tasks and excruciating circumstances of life. As researchers, we have observed in our communities that a man's failure to perform as expected in an African cultural setting could imply failure. Our paper sets aside the boy child's fate and chose to unleash the experiences of the black African girl child in homes and schools.

These societal differences led to gender stereotyping and gender disparities in which boys and girls are nurtured to feel different (Mikkola, 2017). In Zimbabwe today, emphasis has been placed upon equality of access to schooling for girls (Tichagwa, 2012). Little attention has been given to research concerning what treatment is experienced by girls within their homes and schools in Zimbabwe (Chirenda, 2012).

Though times are changing and the curriculum follows suite, as researchers we have observed that preferential grooming of most rural girl children is notable. Researchers have confirmed such practices. However, others still feel that the girl child needs to be educated only to an extent in order to tackle domestic chores or to just attain average literacy. In deeper rural sides of the country, some ancient African traditions still feel that too many books for a girl child is the causal factor for hardships that younger couples seem to eventually face in their marriages ( Chirozva, Mubaya and Mukamuri (online); Mesatywa, 2009; Sharma,2015).

On the other hand, boys are to be prepared for employment as family head and breadwinner. Hence, many gender disparities run without much intervention. In Zimbabwe, it appears that the colonial era set the platform for inequality in education and career aspirations between males and females. The trend is being addressed but the pace seems to be rather slow. In some sectors of Zimbabwe gender imbalances or disparities are still rampant though the country now has a gender policy which should be implemented country wide (Chabaya et al, 2009; Evans, 2014; Leach, 2016).

Gender disparities are inequalities which exist in the way boys and girls are treated at home and schools (Lynch, 2016). These disparities usually occur as socially determined behaviour tasks and expected responsibilities for men and women, boys and girls which are based on socially perceived differences between women and men. Consciously and unconsciously, they then define how men and women, boys and girls are expected to act, think and feel (Lynch, 2016).

Basing on such a discussion, we then decided to scrutinise the developmental experiences that affect the girl child most. Getting it from the affected girl children became the major task in this phenomenological case enquiry.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In this enquiry we focus more on the experiences of the rural girl child in Zimbabwe. The major research question was simply;

- *What are the developmental experiences of girl children in their homes and schools?*

### **Conceptual Framework- Feminism**

This enquiry is tethered on liberal feminism, which conceives freedom as freedom from coercive interference. It holds that women, as well as men, have a right to such

freedom due to their status as self-owners (Stanford Encyclopedia, 2013). Some equity feminists see a nonpolitical role for feminism, helping females to benefit from their freedom by developing beneficial character traits or strategies for success.

According to some authorities, equity feminists are socially conservative and argue that, while the state should not enforce them, traditional values function as bulwarks against state power and produce independent and self-restraining citizens (Baehr, 2007, 2013). It seems to us that a people's culture to a great extent affects socialization of individuals in it. Hence, *Cultural libertarian feminists* are classical-liberal who hold that the culture of societies is patriarchal and a significant source of oppression of women. They hold that the patriarchal culture and the state are complementary systems of oppression. Any systems of oppression are usually skewed more to the weaker gender in the particular community. According to Baehr ( 2013 online), Classical liberalism holds that women and men are self-owners capable of acquiring property rights over things. As such males and females equally have the right to freedom from coercive interference with themselves.

This right to freedom from coercive interference consists of freedom of conscience and expression, freedom to control what happens to one's body, freedom of association, freedom to acquire, control and transfer property, freedom of contract, as well as the right to compensation when rights are violated (Donegan, 2018). Even the rural girl child expects this freedom at home and at school. Many a times, cultural norms and values do interfere with this freedom.

It is the duty of all responsible authorities to protect citizens from coercive interference by protecting their rights, especially the rights of girl children. According to Baehr (2013), research holds that the right to freedom from coercive interference has powerful implications for female lives. It implies that women, young and old, need the right to freedom.

### **The Research Methodology (Approach and Design)**

A qualitative phenomenological case study was used in which participants are perceived as the actors in the situation under investigation. This gender related phenomena involved experiences of the rural girl-child in homes and schools. The researchers were therefore concerned with the lived experiences of the school children, rural teenage girls in particular.

Groenwald (2004), Ganga (2013), Davidsen (2017) and Manen(2017) all emphasises that phenomenology demands that one gets information from those involved or people who were involved with the issue that is being researched. The qualitative phenomenological research is holistic, in the sense that it attempts to provide a contextual understanding of the complex interrelationships of causes and consequences of some psycho-social experiences of young girls as they try to balance between school and home

demands. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (Pietkiewicz, 2012) was employed to treatment of data, all in an effort to examining how young girls make meaning of their life experiences

The study was carried out in a selected district of Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. The research targeted girl child/learners who were attending lower secondary school in the rural sector of the selected district. Girl-child labour has received great attention by organizations fighting for equality and equity among the human populace (United Nations, October, 2011).

### Instrumentation and Sampling

Data were collected through two (2) Focus Group Discussions held in two neighbouring schools with a total of twelve (12) conveniently selected girl children in a selected district in Manicaland, Zimbabwe. FGD were found to be quick and convenient way to collect data (Nyumba et al, 2018) from several girl children simultaneously.

To augment girl-child data, data triangulation was engaged where four teachers (2 males and 2 females) were

interviewed. The researchers made use of structured in-depth phenomenological interviews described by Bryman (2010) as a way of getting data about people by asking them rather than observing and sampling their behaviour. The four (4) teachers were purposefully selected because each held an additional professional role as a school counselor. Therefore they tended to know more about gender related issues at the school and within the community.

### Ethical Considerations

Permissions to conduct the study was secured from the Education authorities in the province. Further permission was sought from the parents of the selected learners through signing of assent forms. The participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the research if they were not comfortable. Participants were also assured of anonymity in the research report, hence we coded their responses.

### Findings and Discussion



Fig 1: Pictorial Presentation of Findings from the Girl Children and Teachers

It was evident that inequalities still existed in the ways in which boys and girls were treated at home, school and the rest of the community. Tasks were noted to be varying as each one of the girl children unpacked her ordeal. The girl child responsibilities at home ranged from cleaning, fetching firewood and relish, cooking as well as manning the sick and the aged. The school also expected her to excel in school tasks, as well as other responsibilities such as

polishing the classroom floors, cleaning surroundings and any other responsibilities as assigned by school staff and prefects.

### Experiences in the Homes and Access to Education

In line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal number 4 (The Sustainable Development Goals 2015 – 2030), we noted in this enquiry, that the girl children in the

area we studied were afforded an opportunity to access formal education just like their male counterparts. They however, faced academic boundaries in as far as academic levels they were supposed to attain. For instance, one of the young girls lamented saying;

*Isu tinoenda kuchikoro asi atipfuuri grade 7 kana form 2 nekuti tinonga togona kunyora (We only go to school just as far as Grade 7 or upto form 2 because at that level we should be able to read and write). Apana anoti usachaenda kuchikoro kwete, vanongoti fees atichina (Noone actually says we should stop going to school, but they just stop paying fees for me saying they no longer have money for my fees). Zvove izvi bhudhi avanetseki. Vanobhadharirwa fizi. My brother however, does not face such challenges. His fees are always paid.*

Confirming such gender discrimination practices, literature reviewed has claimed that quite a substantial number of girl children still fail to access formal schooling in some rural worldwide (Sharma, 2015). In various schools, it has been noted that a higher percentage of girl-children do not have access to education unlike the boy children. From the above assessment, it clearly shows that the majority of the girls do not go to school yet the country’s population has more females than males (Rice, 2011). This is a clear testimony that equality of educational opportunities is far from being attained let alone equal access to education by both sexes. It was also noted during the interviews that girl child class attendance was most of the time disturbed due to some discriminating practices at home and at school.

In another negative response, we were advised that culturally the girls were denied access to education by some families due to the notion that if a girl was formally educated, there would become too clever that they would end up in *prostitution* and temptations on *use of drugs*. As such, many people in primitive communities preferred sending boy children to higher levels than the girls. Boys would then remain encouraged and performed much better than the girls in school tasks.

Eventually the girls would leave school. They would be confined to the homes until they were eventually lured into *early marriages* caused by discouragement from home. Once the girl child left school completely, it appeared that aunts and even some mothers were concerned more about girls becoming sexually ready for marriage the moment they went out of school. Responding to some of our interview questions, another young girl said;

*Ko zvimwe zvatingaita zvingave zvii kana chikoro chisisiko? Tinotoona kuti kuroorwa nekkukasika kunotova nane. What else can we do if school is over? We would rather get married early enough.*

This statement is in line with an earlier research by Miller (2017), in which girl children expressed dismay over failure to continue with school at primary school age. In other

instances however, we were informed that If by chance they were allowed to stay in school, mothers were found to be very strict with their daughters so that they always controlled their peer groups with the aim of preventing early marriages and unwanted pregnancies. In line with Tsvere (2010) research findings, we noted that some religious sectors were reported as often disadvantaging the girl children by engaging them in early marriages during adolescence. As the young girls married older man in the community, boy children would continue with education.

Where some family resources were scarce, boys were given first preference to go to school while girls helped the mother to work for money that would be used for the family’s upkeep and to pay fees for the boy child (Goldscheider et al, 2015).

It was also reported that, parents in some communities we visited, would keep the girl child at home in order to protect her from possible dangers of abuse like rape. Some researches have since confirmed that many rural communities believed that the girl child was much more prone to various forms of abuse than by males than vice versa (Karakurt and Silver, 2013).

In another finding, we were informed that some communities regarded, girl children as family assets that were crucial in bring in bride prices through marriage. This confirmed another finding by UNICEF (2010) that girls are groomed for their marriage roles whilst setting aside the aspect of attending school to boys (Tsvere, 2010). Here is a vignette expressed by a teacher we interviewed;

*Muno matiri vamwe vabereki vanototi kana wabereka mwanasikana watova nepfuma yawedzerwa. Saka vanoti ungadireyi kumusvitsa kure nechikoro. Unondopfumisa achamutura. (Some parents believe that once you give birth to a girl child you would have added on to your family assets. As such not many would want to send them to school for too long, lest you waste resources on a girl who eventually will become an asset for another family).*

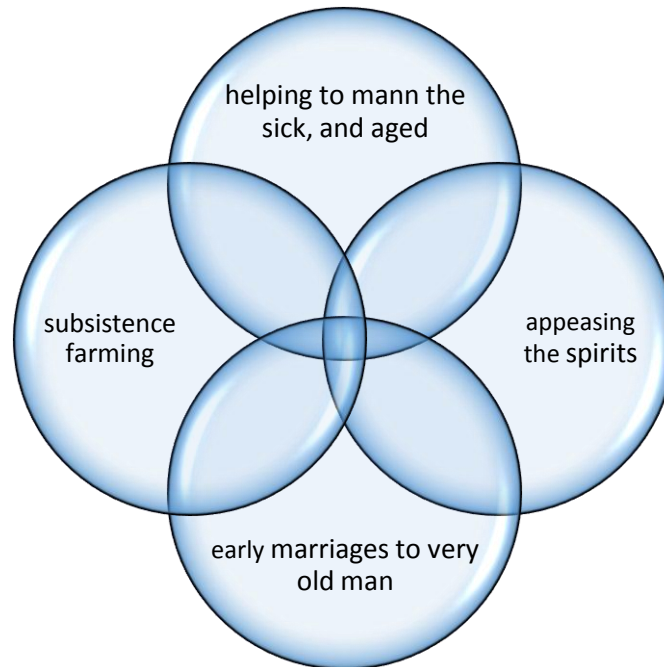
Many more reasons were raised as to why the girl child was denied prolonged school access in some communities.

- Learned women are difficult to control
- They expect too much from their husbands
- They become too clever
- They will disobey by-laws centered on the female gender.

With this we noted that gender disparities still existed within the home. Our findings confirmed earlier findings by UNICEF (2000) that gender imbalances were still rampant, for they found out that 50.6% of the pupils in primary schools stages were girls and in the upper primary level 43.3% were girls. This meant that as the girls approached adolescence, most of them dropped out of school.

When resources were limited, poor families often chose to educate the sons instead of daughters. Whilst the boys attended classes, the girl children remained home helping in household chores and income generating activities like selling vegetables and fees for the boy child (Pankurst et al, 2014)). Though not so common, at times it is the girl child

who is offered as tribal goods to appease spirits (kuripa ngozi) and such children were not given access to education (Tsvere, 2010). Represented Summarised below are more responses that came from the girl children explaining more encounters in homes.



**Fig 2:** More Girl Child encounters in the homes

On a positive note, we were met with few girl children whose parents believed that that it is better to send girls to school because they are the ones who take care of aging parents the most (Makufa et al. 2001). If someone in the home is sick, parents would ask the girl child to stay at home, and taking care of the sick while the boy child attends school.

**Gender Disparities in School Set- Ups**

At school, girl children experience same gender disparities like those from home. A girl child we interviewed explained common trends at most rural schools.

Take for instance visitors come to our school. The ones to cook, serve and clean are the girl children. Mathematics and Science subjects are emphasized for boy children here at school and also in some homes. Such practices make my friends fear Mathematics and Science, hence develop negative attitudes and at last fail the subjects.

A teacher also expressed same sentiments;

The negative attitudes expressed at school seem to be developed from the society where sometimes some school leavers intimidate girls that Mathematics is not for girls but for boys

It follows therefore that if boys and girls are given equal exposure and opportunities to learn and like certain subjects

they will develop and display equal proficiency in those subjects to a level only limited by their physiology (Chirenda, 2012). Because the opportunities to develop certain talents are usually unequal between boys and girls, children become better in certain learning areas than others (Fatima, 2010). Thus child socialization based on gender, at home and school, can end up leading children to different competencies and attitudes in school work. According to Sprinthall, Sprinthall and Oja (2010), gender differences in attitudes appear to be more serious than those related to cognitive achievement.

Feeney, et al (2001) says that girls believe they are not as strong, intelligent, capable of thinking and concentrating as boys and that they lack certain innate abilities .Therefore, girls are more seriously disadvantaged attitudinally as compared to boys. Chirenda (2012) research on levels of confidence and self esteem in boys and girls, confirmed the same. This has serious implications for girls since it creates a vicious cycle in which their negative attitudes affect their cognitive achievements which in turn negatively affect their self esteem and career aspirations.

Schools transmit a lot of stereotypes about females and males through stereotyping teaching methodologies, roles, curriculum, language and management (NASH, 2000). Through the curriculum, gender stereotypes are perpetuated in subject choices. Boys take subjects like technical

drawing, woodwork, building studies which girls take Home Economics, Fashion and Fabrics and secretarial skills.

Girls play netball and boys soccer, rugby and other competitive games than girls. This has a great effect on girls as they will grow up thinking that hard and challenging things are for boys and not for them (Tsvene, 2010). Teachers reinforce the gender stereotypes learnt at home. In some schools girls were made to sweep and scrub the classrooms, offices and sweep the yard, while the boys were given opportunities to play soccer as they waited for the school day end.

### Conclusions

Gender stereotypes negatively affect girls education as they always would succumb to the inferior position in which they are placed by gender stereotyped learning and teaching materials used in schools. Gender stereotyping is rampant in the homes, schools and society. According to MoESAC (2000) education should be viewed as a process by which individuals gain knowledge insight and develop attitudes and skills needed to enter adult society and participate in it fully.

Though gender disparities affected children's academic attainment, it seemed the girl child is at a greater disadvantage than the boy-child. Therefore, the study recommended that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education takes a further empathetic scrutiny into the daily routine of every rural girl-child.

For all children to achieve academically, they need to be afforded the opportunity to attend school, where both teachers and parents do not discriminate. The teachers should always instill positive attitudes to both boys and girls. Education is a process of socialising the young and so all children need to be afforded the same opportunity.

Schools are a means for solving national problems and securing national welfare as entailed in their central mission of educating the young. Chirenda (2012) adds that schools share with the family on the responsibilities of transmitting those aspects of culture essential for competent social participation. Therefore homes and schools should remain conducive environments for all children to play and learn.

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