

Shifting the Power:

Advancing
Girl-Led Research

Report summary



This report is a girl-led research conducted by teenage girl researchers across Nigeria (Abuja and Jigawa) as well as in Sierra Leone (Freetown). This project emphasizes the importance of adolescent girls leading projects on girls: Their own participatory action research shows their experiences and challenges while contributing to solutions that affect their lives. The research highlights the need for a decolonial research framework that recognizes girls' collective knowledge as both a resource and a source of power and the colonial root of many of the issues faced by girls in different contexts. The report aims to shift the narrative around girls in the majority world (Global South) from being passive subjects needing rescue to active agents of change with knowledge, strategies and solutions.

Methodology

The research employed an intersectional feminist participatory approach, prioritizing girls' voices in defining research questions, data collection methods, and analysis. This methodology aimed to foster a decolonial knowledge approach, recognising multiple ways of knowing while nurturing girls' leadership skills.

Girls Priorities And Challenges In Nigeria:

A. Findings from the girls in Jigawa

1. **Girls' issues viewed as insignificant:** Girls' concerns are often dismissed or overlooked, reflecting a societal perception that undermines their importance and agency.
2. **Education:** While girls and women generally recognize the importance of education for girls' futures, significant barriers persist, including poverty, child marriage, and entrenched gender norms.
3. **Menstrual health:** The girls reported that frequently the community pressures parents to remove menstruating girls from school or encouraging parents to marry off their daughters.
4. **Child marriage:** Perceptions of child marriage vary but girls voiced that child marriage typically results in the loss of educational opportunities and other childhood experiences, limiting girls' future prospects and overall well-being.
5. **Access to and control of money:** The girls view access to money as a means for independence and meeting personal needs, however negative views in their communities impede this from happening.
6. **Safety and freedom from violence:** Girls face various forms of violence at home, in the community, and at school, including physical abuse, harassment, and sexual violence, with men identified as the primary perpetrators. Survivors of gender-based violence experience significant stigma and discrimination, often being blamed and isolated.
7. **Mental health and well-being:** Signs of mental health concerns in girls include isolation, frequent crying, and persistent anger. To address girls' mental health issues, suggestions include active listening and support from mothers and families, as well as government involvement in facilitating access to gender responsive public education and mental health services.

B. Girls priorities and challenges in Abuja

1. **Education:** The girl researchers identified corporal punishment, school-related sexual violence, and teenage pregnancy as major barriers to girls' education. They also highlighted challenges related to menstrual health, including the high cost of pads and limited menstrual hygiene education.
2. **Digital access and safety:** Members of the community held negative perceptions about girls using digital devices. Girls emphasized the internet's potential to benefit them, if they are taught safe and productive usage.
3. **Gender stereotypes and socioeconomic exclusion:** The girls reported feeling excluded from potential leadership roles, decision-making processes, and land ownership due to entrenched gender stereotypes, while also facing disproportionate burdens such as household chores and limited leisure time compared to men.

Girls Priorities And Challenges In Freetown, Sierra Leone

1. **Impact of financial difficulties on girls' wellbeing and education:** Economic hardship in Sierra Leone significantly impacts girls' well-being and education, pushing many into exploitative situations such as transactional sex and child marriage, while also hindering their access to schooling. Girls from marginalised communities, especially those in single-parent households or without parental support, face even greater challenges due to intersecting forms of oppression, leading to a cycle of poverty and limited opportunities for education and prospects.
2. **Educational disparities:** Girls face significant educational disparities in Sierra Leone, with enrolment rates dropping sharply at higher education levels and literacy rates showing a concerning gender gap.
3. **Drug abuse:** Sierra Leone is facing a severe drug crisis, particularly with the widespread use of kush among young people. The girl researchers in Sierra Leone highlighted the complex impact of kush addiction on girls, including health problems, increased risk of exploitation and violence, school dropouts, and engagement in criminal activities.
4. **Child marriage, adolescent pregnancy and social and health related consequences:** Child marriage remains a critical issue in Sierra Leone, driven by multiple intersecting factors such as poverty and patriarchal norms. Girl researchers found that pregnant teenagers face severe social and economic challenges, including coerced marriages, expulsion from homes, stigmatization, school dropouts, and poverty.
5. **Gender roles, cultural norms and agency:** Deeply rooted patriarchal systems in Sierra Leone, impose significant burdens on women and girls, resulting in unequal distribution of household responsibilities and limited opportunities for education and personal development.
6. **Menstruation and girls' needs:** Menstrual health management is a significant challenge for adolescent girls in Sierra Leone, particularly those in lower socioeconomic contexts, as poverty limits access to proper sanitary products, forcing many to use unsanitary alternatives like rags, which lead to health risks and discomfort. This lack of resources disrupts education through school absenteeism, increases vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.
7. **Realities of orphans and girls not living with parents:** In Sierra Leone, a significant number of adolescent girls live apart from their biological parents, often with relatives or family friends, facing challenges such as exploitation, domestic abuse, and educational disruption. These girls frequently endure mistreatment, excessive chores, and physical abuse, leading to educational setbacks and a cycle of poverty, while also struggling with conflicting emotions of gratitude towards their guardians and frustration over their lack of opportunities.

These are what girls are demanding from decision-makers:



Poverty and Economic Injustice:

Implement targeted economic interventions to alleviate poverty, such as providing financial support to families and creating income-generating opportunities for women and girls. Ensure access to basic needs, including menstrual hygiene products and healthcare, to reduce economic barriers for girls.



Gender Norms and Biases:

Challenge harmful gender norms through community education and awareness campaigns. Promote gender equality by engaging men and boys as allies in dismantling patriarchal structures.



Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy:

Enforce laws prohibiting child marriage and provide support systems for teenage mothers, including access to education and healthcare. Raise awareness about the impacts of early marriage and pregnancy on girls' health, education and future opportunities.



Drug Abuse Crisis:

Address the rising issue of drug abuse among adolescents through targeted prevention programmes, counselling services, and community engagement.



Perceptions of Girls' Issues:

Improve understanding of the challenges faced by girls by removing barriers and meaningfully including them in decision-making processes. Encourage community dialogue to shift perceptions about girls' roles and rights.



Educational Challenges:

Increase investment in education infrastructure to improve access, retention and quality for girls. Provide scholarships, mentorship programs, and other incentives to keep girls in school, especially those at risk of dropping out due to poverty or pregnancy.



Violence and Exploitation:

Strengthen protective measures against sexual and gender-based violence by improving access to justice and survivor support services. Train law enforcement agencies on handling cases involving violence against girls sensitively and effectively.



Girls' Resilience and Agency:

Support girl-led initiatives that centre adolescent girls as agents of change within their communities. Provide platforms for girls to share their experiences, advocate for their rights, and influence policies at local, national, and international levels.

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