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Factors Affecting School Completion by the Girl-child in Binga Rural District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Despite the plausible increase in the enrolment rate of girls, progress in education among rural girls at global, regional and local level has been impeded by high influx of school dropouts. The objectives of the study were to assess factors that prohibit girls from completing their formal education in Binga rural district in Zimbabwe and to explore the policy and community effort used to deal with the problem of low school completion rate among girls. The study was qualitative in nature. A sample of eleven girls was selected using convenience sampling while key informants were selected using purposive sampling. In addition, in-depth interviews were utilized to get information from the participants. Findings revealed that poor school completion rates in Binga rural district were influenced significantly by the combination of interdependent factors that include teenage pregnancies and early marriages, financial constraints, distance being travelled to attend school, perceived value of girl education, lack of career prospects and absence of female role models. The study came up with recommendations with emphasis on flexible girl-child friendly policies, comprehensive social security, community sensitizations and provision of career guidance services for girls in rural areas in Zimbabwe. The study concluded that a collaborative link between school authorities and parents was crucial in order to create conducive conditions for girl education in remote areas.

Introduction

The concern to end illiteracy and the belief that education is an investment capable of improving individual and societal lives made it imperative for countries globally to adopt the policy of universal education (Mazivise, 2011). Although it is a global notion that has been adopted by many countries including Zimbabwe, the country encountered some major draw backs in achieving education for all school going children. This manifests itself in the low pass rate, poor performance and high levels of school dropouts by girls in rural areas of Zimbabwe (Kanyenze et al., 2012; Kanyongo, 2005). UNICEF (2010) points out that there were millions of girls worldwide who were out of school despite the concerted efforts to push the cause for girl education forward. It can be noted that at global, regional and local level school enrolment has increased tremendously in recent years but school completion rate by the girl-child in remote areas remains a great concern. The concept of education is also a human rights based approach that has gained a priority at the global stage, with attention to gender dimensions as enshrined in the Millennium Development Goal Number 3 and Article Number 11 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child which calls for equal access to basic education for all school going children. Due to multiplicity of economic, social and institutional constraints militating against the girl-child in rural areas, school completion by the girl-child, compared to the boy child, has remained a dream (Shoko, 2010). It is against this background that this research was carried out in order to investigate factors that influence school completion rate by the girl-child in rural Binga district.

The BBC News (2014) reported that access to education, retention, dropout, equity, enrolment, quality and achievement were key components of education domains which have affected girls in the countryside. It was therefore observed

that rural areas were exposed to aforementioned elements. Like any other rural communities in Zimbabwe, upon independence access to education increased enormously in Binga as a result of the government's relentless effort in building education centres. In Zimbabwe, goals of universal primary education are to make everyone literate, numerate and to acquire basic scientific skills (UNESCO, 2001). According to the World Bank (2012), educational achievement is realized, among other attributes, when pupils complete their learning programme and attain a pass mark. However, in rural areas general observation shows that school completion rate is lower compared to urban areas. Therefore, the incidence of children who drop out of school or repeat a grade level in the countryside, whatever the cause, has been noted to be higher among female children.

A significant proportion of households and families in Binga depend on subsistence rural agriculture and informal fishing in the Zambezi River as their main sources of livelihoods. Households within the district are considered extremely vulnerable as indicated in the Human Development Index (HDI) Report of 2011. Inevitably, the general assumption is that the majority of families are struggling to get basic needs for survival. According to Human Development Index (HDI) Report of 2011, Zimbabwe's value in 2011 was 0.376 in the low human development index, a situation that translates to poor living conditions for people in the remotest areas in the country.

Research design and setting

The study was conducted in Binga district, Ward 1, located in Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe. From the qualitative orientation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were employed to gather data from key informants and girl-child participants. This was done to enhance thorough

discovery of people's feelings and perceptions with regard to school completion rates by the girl-child. These respondents provided detailed opinions, experiences, attitudes and aspirations of the group under the study. Qualitative methodological orientation was therefore opted for its strength in providing in-depth understanding of unseen explanations of social variants regarding the education of girls.

Sample and profile of the respondents

A sample of 11 girl-child participants aged between 12 to 17 years was purposively selected through use of school registers. Of this number, 6 were no longer going to school and 5 were still going to school. The rationale behind this was to understand the reasons that led to the abandonment of school, at the same time establishing the problems facing girls who were still at school. The responses were needed to establish better understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry. Key informants consisting of 5 parents, 4 school heads and 1 health representative from the local clinic were targeted to provide information for the study. The identification of children was done and traced through the use of school registers which enabled easy location of these girls in their community.

The study sample of this study was drawn from children from 4 strategic schools in Binga district, Ward 1. Of the 11 girls, 6 were out of school while the other 5 were still going to school. Identity documents confirmed that 8 of the girls were aged between 12 and 15 years, while 3 of them were aged between 16 and 17 years. Of the 11 girls, 5 of them already had babies either through illegitimate means or traditionally approved means of marriage union. Upon probing it was established that most girls who had left school were orphans. It

was also interesting to find out that 4 girls left early secondary school aged between 15 and 17. Of the 5 parents, 3 were married, all in polygamous unions while one was widowed and the other one was divorced. Of the key informants, 3 school heads were aged between 30 and 45 years, while one school head was aged 28 years. Of the 4 school heads, 2 had diplomas in education and the other 2 had first degrees in education. The representative from the local clinic was aged 25 years with a nursing diploma as their highest qualification. All the school heads had more than one year's experience staying in the community under study.

Ethical considerations

For ethical considerations, the researchers ensured that data collected from the respondents was handled professionally by upholding the principles of confidentiality and maintaining privacy and anonymity. The names of the participants were excluded from data collection tools. The researchers obtained consent from respondents before their participation after informing them of the purpose of the study. Permission was also obtained from the District Education Office of Binga granting the researchers permission to conduct the study in the purposively selected schools.

Data presentation: Factors affecting school completion rate by girls in Binga rural district

Financial challenges

It was observed that most parents cited lack of finance due to unemployment in rural areas as the chief reason for withdrawing girls from schools. Participants noted the situation was aggravated by sole dependence on poor agricultural outputs which at times even fail to meet subsistence needs. The following were

shared by the respondents during interviews:

“Bazyali bangu bakabulikwa mali yakuninkisya anembo achikolo”. (My parents did not have enough money to send me further with my education).

“Nziyumu yawe kwendesya basimbi anembo alwiyo nkaambo nzibayanda nzingii kwindi basankwa”. (It is difficult to educate a girl-child further because their requirements are many compared to those of boys).

Lack of adequate financial support and other educational materials support resulted in parents ignoring or pushing their children out of school. It was also noted by school heads that some parents had difficulties in paying school fees for their daughters.

Economic hardships

It was noted that most of fees were paid by parents or guardians who faced some difficulties in raising fees for their children. Though some of the fees were paid by government under the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) programme, donors and community well-wishers, parents were the main source educational support for girls. This indicated that parents were responsible for school fees for their children. This had implications on girls' education as parents indicated that they were facing challenges in meeting school fees for their children in the face of unemployment and poor rural agricultural outputs. However, some of the school heads noted that sometimes finance was no longer a big factor as some children left school while on donor support. In this case cultural influences, apart from finance, were noted as the other of the main factors.

Early marriage and teenage pregnancies

Key informant interviews done at the local health centre showed that the number of pregnancies that were attended to during the labour or gestation period of young girls were above those of adult women. The health officer and one school head reported that:

“There are many cases of teenage pregnancies that we receive here which are now common and they are more than those of adult women”.

The above was in tandem with sentiments from one school head who echoed that:

“I have been teaching here for the past 3 years and I have observed that most of girls are getting married at a tender age. They have given more value to marriage than education because some of the girls are on educational sponsorship but still they leave school”.

Observed from the study was that some of the girls did not admit this as a cause of school dropping out of school. However, girls reported that they got pregnant after leaving school. Despite this argument, records from the local clinic indicated that most registered pregnancies and births were of females who were aged between 15 and 22 years, showing dominance of teenage pregnancies in the remote rural area of Binga.

Value of education

The participants reported that the value of girl-child education in Binga District was still undermined compared to that of boys. From focus group discussions, the following was shared:

“Tiboonse pe bazyali babona bubotu hwachikolo kubana

basimbi, amwi bayeya kuti tukulila kukwatwa pesi”. (It is not all parents who value our education, may be they think that when we grow up we will get married). “Kuzwa kale bana basimbi tako ncibayita alwiyo inga kwaba kusowa mali kubayisys, balombe bazi bumi bwajunza”. (From the beginning girls produce nothing from school, so it's wasting money to educate them, while boys know the value of school education in their lives).

What emerged from these sentiments was that the value of investment placed in the girl-child education was very limited compared to that of boys' education. It was further echoed that girls accessed more primary than secondary education due to the asymmetrical attention given to the girl-child's education.

Sexual reproductive health factors

The impact of health factors in influencing education of the girls in rural areas remains underestimated by government, parents and other stakeholders. From this study, it was established that girls in remote areas have limited access to sexual reproductive health services compared to those in urban areas. The key informant from the local clinic echoed that sexual reproductive health services needed to be given adequate attention in the education system so as to reduce poor school attendance by rural girls. The health officer noted that:

“Access to contraceptive methods and lack of reproductive education is one of undermined topics in the education curriculum which is very critical, especially for rural girls who in turn get affected in their education. I think at times girls have knowledge of birth control methods but cannot access or use them, even when they know they can access them at the local clinic. They fear being identified by relatives working there and being labeled as prostitutes as this could ruin their prospects of getting married”.

It was also observed that in this rural area, girls do not have access to adequate family planning methods or contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. What emerged also was the issue of girls in the area failing to access information on sexual and reproductive health education. This was reportedly compounded by lack of knowledge of family planning methods leading girls to resort to unreliable natural methods of preventing pregnancies or uninformed methods of terminating unwanted pregnancies.

Distance travelling to and from school

The long distances travelled by rural children are detrimental to the girl-child's education and health. The distances travelled by girls in the area impacted negatively on their motivation to continue with their education. It was noted that most of schools were located between 6km and 10km from the villages where most of the children live in Binga rural district. The shortest distance which girls travelled to attend the nearest school was reported to be about 5km. With harsh terrain and the wild animal infested bushy rural environment, girls faced motivational problems to walk such distances. The following was shared by one of the girls concerning distance they travelled to attend the nearest school on a daily basis:

“Ngendo nzitwenda kuya kuchikolo nzilamfu as ma Primary alafwifwi, ma secondary ngali kulamfu zyakutu tweenda 14 km abuzuba”. (The distance to secondary school is not good for us girls but there is no problem with primary schools. We walk 14 km to the nearest secondary school).

The participants further reported that such distance was unfriendly to girls who, despite being exhausted after travelling long distances to and from school, have to attend to domestic chores after school hours. Therefore, the location of rural

schools has been a de-motivating factor for girls. This is because they face “double disadvantage” of walking long distances and performing household duties after school, leaving very little or no time to rest or for doing homework (school assignments).

Lack of career guidance

Most girls confessed that they just attended school without knowledge of what to do with their education in future. The issue of career guidance was compounded by lack of role models for emulation and motivation. All girls who participated in the study admitted that they lacked female role models to imitate or seek advice from. It was also observed that the careers of most successful females from the area were limited to the police force, teaching and the army. This was because these occupations were the most advertised and required minimum educational qualifications for entry. Some of the participants noted that:

“Twiiya kupela asi tatuze pe mulimo yakucita amwii kuba mwiyesi kumbe kapokola”. (As girls we just learn without knowing other existing jobs except to be a teacher or a police officer). “I also think that girls in rural areas learn without some advisors to guide them in the career journey. This is worsened by poor access to media, career books and other successful female role models in rural areas”.

Patriarchal traditions at home and school

During focus group discussions, the girls noted that the home and school culture was patriarchal. It was revealed that at school boys dominate in most school activities such as sports, discussions and debates. Similarly at home, girls reported that boys did not participate much in domestic activities like cooking and sweeping rooms and the yard. One of the participants shared the following:

“We are socialized differently; sometimes we don't attend school due to agricultural activities. Boys are always encouraged to go to school because they are told to be the future of the community. In the end, girls don't see the purpose of going school”.

This shows patriarchal gender discrimination as a factor that excludes most of the girls from finishing their education.

Discussion of findings

The challenge that concerns school completion rate by rural girls in Binga district hinges upon numerous factors considered herein and that these factors are manifested in the low school progression of the girl-child. Supporting ideas from gender theory of cultural deprivation portrays that the school culture including policies, the education system and home environment all account for the poor advancement in education by girls in rural areas. The school community and society itself define some of the cultural characteristics that are capable of influencing ability, self-esteem and achievement of the pupils (Mazivise, 2011). The school climate, socio-economic situation, motivation, value of learning process, distances and students career prospects were major conditions determining the progress with education by the girl-child in Binga district.

One interesting finding of the study was the correlation between age and school completion rate by the girls in remote areas. Most of the girls in rural areas attend school at a late age and have high school repetition rates. Some of the girls who participated in the study left their primary school aged between 10 and 17 years as indicated from the research outcomes. The fact that large numbers of children left school primary school aged around 15 years suggests that they started school late or repeated grades due to various disruptions. Late school

entry and grade repetitions are source of difficulties for students, school teachers and administrators (Sabetes et al, 2010). Longitudinal studies at the global scale consistently show that the older students perform poorly at school and have difficulties in coping with life challenges. UNESCO (2012) reflects that older girls at school in remote areas often come under pressure to meet cultural obligations such as marriage. Therefore, the problem of late starters and grade repetitions is a common phenomenon among rural girls and this hinders them from continuing with their education. The view is supported by the findings from studies in South Africa which showed that girls between the ages of 12-18 were at risk of unplanned pregnancies as they were in the phase of sexual initiation (Martellelo et al., 2008). However, though late school entry is a critical factor in education of girls, it is vital to point out that these cases are not always universal as children pass through different physiological and psychological processes.

Research findings from in-depth interviews confirmed that orphans faced some challenges to progress throughout primary education. Abu-Ghaida and Klasen (2013) noted that there was an increasing movement towards emphasizing completion rates for primary and secondary education, but simple school enrolment figures mask problems surrounding the importance of education and problems with school progression for orphans. This is particularly true for those who are interested in education of orphaned rural girls, as it is them who are more likely to drop out after enrolment. Such observation leads to a conclusion by Plan International (2012) that orphanhood of the girl-child is an insignia of double disadvantage in society as it increases inadequacy of resources including human and material ones. A study by Nyakubega (2009) indicates that orphaned girls constitute large number of females who are facing sexual, physical and emotional challenges. Since these girls are encountering unmet life needs, they are susceptible to exploitation especially to unwanted pregnancies which ultimately leads to school withdrawal. In remote communities like Binga district, both orphaned and non-orphaned girls are

victims of low school progression. However, the study found that orphans leave school earlier than other children in the community.

The major argument put forward by the participants as major forces inhibiting school progression by the girls in remote areas hinged upon financial and material resources. Noted from the study was also the diverging explanation from both parents and children with regards to the issue of advancement in education. As noted earlier that the most pressing problems emanated from transitional aspect in which progress from primary to secondary education remains a major issue. In the study, parents argued that financial and other school needs that are demanded at school are difficult to acquire considering their poor rural economy exacerbated by rural unemployment. In this case, it can be noted that the financial challenge is a major factor considering also that there are other additional material needs (like sanitary pads, bras,) that girls require in their education than boys. This validates the argument already put forward by human capital theorists who hold that education is an investment that has both financial and material demands (Mazivise, 2011; Todaro and Smith, 2012). The critics to this view point out that deficiency of material support to enhance the investment through better education can potential harm the rural girl-child who is exposed to a systematic cultural and gender discrimination (World Bank, 2012). This leads to a conclusion that financial demands have more effect on girls than boys because they have extra material needs than boys.

The study findings confirmed that cultural factors influence school completion by the girl-child in rural areas. However, some parents laid blame on girls themselves rather than on financial demands. This was because it was reported that some girls left school for marriage while receiving support from organizations that support girl-child education. Such a response points out to a

view that despite help received from sponsorships in education, cultural influences also override such help resulting in school drop-outs among rural girls. While investment is done to promote education of girls in remote areas, there were some reported cases of early marriages and pregnancies in Binga District. Therefore, continuity in education remains an elusive dream as some of girls get married before getting into secondary school. During in-depth interviews participants noted that there were no culturally arranged activities that disturb children's education though traditionally such events were done for girls and boys before arrival of formal education in the district. However, some parents remained adamant by pointing at cultural influence as major causes arguing that girls were encouraged by their grandparents to get married early because they rarely perceived the value of western education. This view is consistent with findings from other studies which showed that continuous investment in girl-child education is disturbed by tolerance to certain cultural activities in some societies (Matelelo et al., 2008).

Key informant interviews with personnel from the local health centre showed that the numbers of pregnancies that were attended to during the labour or gestation period were more of young girls than adult women. Such scenario provides two fold problems among school going age girls, quitting school and taking family responsibilities as young mother. This observation is true to the extent that all girls who get pregnant fail to get back to school both as a result of existing education regulations and family duties as a result of marriage. Yet some studies found that girls who were sexually active at a young age were more likely to leave school early, resulting in cessation of their education careers. It can therefore be argued that getting pregnant and giving birth were significant forces influencing school completion by the girls. However, these factors were dependent on the effects of each other which covariate

simultaneously. Additionally, child care is often a fulltime job which is incompatible with schooling in the current school system and environment, and this contributes to student mothers' dropout (Chigona & Chetti, 2007). In concurrence, Nyakubega (2009) observes that girls in developing countries' rural communities remain invisible to current education programmes such as after school learning programmes. In this view, one can note that girls who leave school in rural communities rarely get the second chance to progress with their lost education.

The argument put forward by the human capital theory holds that education is an investment that gives both social and private benefits with anticipation of increasing their income and productivity in future (Todaro & Smith, 2012). The implicit debate of the study was that the value of education for both parents and children is viewed in diverging perspectives. The study deduced that girls in rural areas were also in appreciation of education for the future, though school progression remained a stumbling block to realize potentials brought by education to them. Despite the fact that girls liked attending school, they viewed both parents and society as not appreciating the value of girl-child education compared to that of boys. In this case, parents and community as a whole lacked the culture of taking responsibility of promoting the education of the girls. Some of the girls noted that despite putting personal effort to attend and complete secondary school, they failed because parents concentrated on paying fees for their advanced level boy child. Although the protagonists of human rights perspective found their opinions worth by considering education for the protection of human rights, as a tool to socio-economic development and political stability but girls in remote rural areas feel that justice is not being done by parents and community as whole.

From the study, there was strong suggestion from parents that their success and strength was centred on education of many boys in the society. It was argued by parents that girls attended school with low expectations from education as compared to boys who felt they had to take responsibility in future. Butler (2006) argues that communities and policy makers made mistakes by assuming that girls in the society were a group of individuals with common characteristics and interests, therefore needed to be treated in isolation from boys. As a result, this separated the girls from boys from all social, economic, political and technological patterns of life which affected them in the society. Anort and Gubb (2001) assert that biology is destiny for gender identity and inescapable, however, girls and boys must not be treated separately. Rural communities have ignored the interests of girls even in school by advancing the worth of boys. Therefore, parents mentioned that they had expectations from girls but got disappointed because girls were said to consider school as not an important agenda in life. Learnt from this was that parents blamed their daughters for irresponsibility in education while girls blamed their parents for lack of care for their education. In such scenario, one might be tempted to conclude that both parents and girls lacked amicable relationship in valuing girl-child education.

The participation of the health representative from the local clinic discussed some sexual reproductive issues that affected school going age of girls in Ward 1 of Binga district. Apart from the reported cases of early marriage and pregnancies of teenagers in this community, the respondent from the clinic noted that there was a gap between the needs of girls in school and national health policies. It was argued that high cases of pregnancies among young girls implied many issues which included: poor access to contraceptive methods, lack of reproductive education in rural areas and a seemingly deliberate move

by the government not allow girls from accessing contraceptive methods in school. In another view it was noted that girls might also be having fear to get **contraception in public in trying to maintain in their social face though in return they got costs beyond their management.** In confirmation, some of the girls interviewed were shrewd to agree that during school days they did not get access to sanitary facilities that affected their attendance in school resulting in persistent school absenteeism. Without statistical estimation, one could be still convinced that the issues of reproductive health for the rural girls remained hidden in most academic agendas as sponsors run to school fees, stationery and uniforms as the main school needs for the girl-child. However, such important miss-calculated area of attention has paid nothing except girls leaving school because of other unattended educational needs such health concerns.

Critical in education was that both **quality and progress** was a component of career guidance which is a source of **inspiration and motivation** among the children (UNESCO, 2012). In this case the issue of career guidance is critical together with exposure to proper role models within the area of girl-child education. Most of participants noted that there were no concrete career guidance services being offered in school as students just learnt without knowing what they could do in life. To be a teacher or police officer were the only common career prospects though some girls were aware of other professions but argued that it took a lot time to achieve them. According to the social learning theory, human beings have potential to emulate other people and work towards achieving such modeled aspects of life. The situation of girls in Binga was exacerbated by lack of female role models to emulate in pursuit of their life goals as young women. Resultantly, there was lack of motivation and inspiration to continue with schooling. Thus the value of education for girls was unsupported to the extent that when life problems affected them, they left school.

Zimbabwe's adoption of the socialist ideology soon after independence in 1980 spurred the pursuit of strategies favourable to the provision of equal access to social services with the major focus being on education and health sectors (Sifuna, 2007). Despite the fact that this policy tremendously increased the number of schools in the country, the rural areas remained unfortunate as distance to school is still a pressing issue. Interviewed girls admitted that distance to school from home was not favourable for their education continuation. It could be established from this study that travelling distances to school especially secondary school was a factor to note as far as the education of girls was concerned. Although government was currently considering the policy of satellite schools, the expansion rate of these schools was far behind to the solution of walking distance to schools. It was also observed that the situation was very bad during the rain seasons, when most girls left school because of violent weather conditions. Observations in Nigeria by Dimbiso (2009) reveal that girls who left school during the rainy season rarely went back to school at the end of the rains. The problem of school distance is further compounded by participation of girls in domestic core duties. It was observed that girls in remote areas were more involved in day to day duties at home than boys. As a result, this gave them little time to rest and do school work after travelling long distances during hours of the day. De-motivation, low pass rate and poor educational achievement become inevitable for girls. These in return give girls an option of leaving school before the end of the educational cycle.

Review on national policies and community effort

Despite the continuum of efforts at global, regional and national level to curb the problem school dropouts in rural areas, this study established that communities in rural areas lacked defined clear strategies to help girls. At national level policies such as Second Chance education have been pioneered but without

worthwhile returns in Zimbabwe. Participants from the study indicated that there was no clear community solution to help girls to go back to school after withdrawal. Girls noted that effort at family level had been minimum, only extended to boys where steps were taken to ensure they completed their secondary school. Of community effort, it was reported that sometimes parents sold their livestock's to raise school fees but sometimes nothing happened. Such measures were part of supporting girls to go back to school if they had dropped out. However, such provisions were not comprehensive as parents needed to meet other demands such as food for the families apart from school fees. This signifies the inadequacy of Zimbabwe's formal social security systems. Kaseke (1993) argues that Zimbabwe did not have a comprehensive social security system, only few rudimentary and fragmented services available to designated categories of people. It was further established that some of the girls had to catch fish in the Zambezi River to fund their education, an act which girls could not afford to do continuously. Such efforts have resulted in serious child protection issues such as child labour, sexual abuse and consistent absenteeism from school.

From health perspectives, it was established that there were no national health provisions for the teenage girl to access health services at convenient places. Apart from understaffed rural health centres together with meagre resources, access to sanitary facilities and other health services were not available for girls in remote areas. Alika and Egbochuku (2009) observed that in rural areas there were unfavourable school environments which disadvantaged girls by limiting their access to essential services such as sanitary services while at school. This problem manifested itself through absenteeism, poor academic performance and ultimately low levels of educational attainment, all which affected the human capital development for girls. The participant health officer noted that

measures which had been introduced by both community and government were not effective in reducing challenges faced by school going girls in rural areas. Anti-child abuse campaigns had also been identified as another strategy to deal with the problem of early pregnancies and teenage marriages. This study showed that such campaigns remained ineffective due to lack of education, effective communication and cultural tolerance towards teenage pregnancies. Dixon (2012)'s study in South Africa attributed the continuity of early pregnancies and child bearing in remote areas as due to society's tolerant attitude towards early initiation of sexual intercourse and pre-marital childbearing. Anti-child abuse campaigns as a strategy to curtail abuse cases of tender age girls are faulty as recurrence of the abuse continued to increase its toll on the girl-child. It might be also argued that the exacerbation of such problems is a reflection of the decay of the communities' wide social and reproductive values. Interviewed school heads noted that there were no follow-ups available for those who had left school as there was no collaboration between parents and schools to solve the problems facing girls. The findings of the study revealed that child abuse campaigns were conducted regularly involving Community Child Protection Committees in order to fight against early pregnancies. However, the greatest challenge was that there were no collaborative relationships between parents, community child protection committees and schools. Anti-child abuse campaigns were carried out but on irregular basis. The existing child protection or traditional approaches were relaxed in fighting against girl-child abuse cases.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations to improve school completion rates by the girl-child:

- Flexible policies that guarantee the continuation of schooling for

children who drop out in case of pregnancy and/ or child birth or other reason should be adopted and implemented. This could help reduce permanent school withdrawal by the girls in rural areas.

- Community-wide information campaigns should be conducted to sensitize and conscientise children, the girl-child and the community on child protection and rights issues.
- There is need to adopt a flexible schooling system to accommodate pregnant and student mothers to give them another chance to continue with their education.
- There is need to improve the socio-economic life of poor households to wean them from viewing girl-child marriage as a source of wealth (through bride price). Programmes of rural development through irrigation agriculture could help improve rural incomes in the area.
- There is need to increase access to schools throughout the year. Strategies such as siting schools in or closer to the population settlements (say a maximum travelling distance of 4kms to school) could greatly assist other measures of improving school completion rate by girls.
- In consultation with the girl-child, there is need to make provision for other unmet needs (such as sanitary ware, etc.) to encourage them to remain in school longer.
- There is need to engage in collaborative interactions between school teachers and parents in discussing the issues pertaining to children's particularly girl-child education.
- There is need to provide information on career guidance and exposure to female role models to encourage the girl-child to strive to attain highest possible goals in their careers.
- The exposure to information technology through provision of gadgets

and supportive elements could enhance the girl-child's interest and chances of aspiring to attain high levels in education and careers.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the benefits of universal primary education that includes access, literacy and numeracy in Zimbabwe, challenges to achieve educational attainment for girls in these expansion programmes posed threats to their success in rural schools. In Zimbabwe universal education policy prompted the expansion of education to rural communities culminating in increased access to learning by all eligible pupils. Despite these successes, it was unfortunate to note that the educational progression of girls in rural areas still remained an elusive dream. The influx of high school dropouts of girls is one of the main challenges impeding the attainment of the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education and increasing participation in secondary education was noted in this study. It can therefore be concluded that the poor school completion rates in rural areas by girls was dependent on many inseparable factors. Contained in these two interdependent factors are cultural, economic, political and personal forces.

The study showed that many children got pushed out of school and it seems that there is a deliberate underestimation of the numbers of such children by official sources for various unspecified reasons. It was noted that many children, before leaving school, had irregular attendance, temporary withdrawals and later many joined others in the community. Perhaps, it is critical to note that no single measure can be used to solve the problem of low school completion rate in rural areas as factors contributing to this problem are interdependent though unique to each child.

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