

The Sustainability of Educational Initiatives to Empower Women's Leadership in Sierra Leone

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The goal of alleviating gender inequalities and social injustices can be achieved by addressing the inequity of girls' access to education in Sierra Leone and emphasizing the importance of a quality education.

As a result of the civil war in Sierra Leone in 1991, a generation of girls became trapped in a cycle of violence. The outbreak of hostilities between rebel forces and clashes with the government in 1990 sparked an unprecedented period of terror and violence for girls and women in Sierra Leone. An estimated 215,000 to 257,000 women and girls were abducted by rebel forces and forced into slave labor (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

Compared to their male classmates, girls in Sierra Leone face extensive abuse, limiting their access to educational resources. There are very few Sierra Leonean girls who possess even basic literacy skills. Due to the lasting legacy of colonialism, slave re-settlement, and autonomous post-independence governance that left the nation economically stagnant, Sierra Leone has struggled to rebuild its educational infrastructure, exacerbating the entrenched gender disparities in education. Post-war reconstruction is a key opportunity to rectify the discrimination against girls by promoting the protection of their rights.

The objective of this paper is to present a case study of two organizations, the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) and The 50/50 Group, and examine their efforts to implement educational initiatives to empower women and girls to seek leadership positions within their societies. It is crucial to note the extent to which these efforts are successful so that

developing organizations can imitate similar educational programs modeled by FAWE and The 50/50 Group in order to foster women in leadership roles in varying regions of the world.

Introduction

The Sierra Leone Civil War of 1991 imposed numerous barriers and restrictions on girls, most notably their ability to access an education. “This war has made progress impossible for me. I want to go to school. So, I am appealing to the government to support me, and children like me, to return to school,” said a Sierra Leonean girl soldier. While both genders experienced limited access to education due to the Civil War, females were most affected. At all levels of education, female students have consistently lagged behind males following the war, with 39% of girls enrolled in primary school compared to 56% of boys.

When considered in the long term, the educational restrictions imposed upon girls and women in Sierra Leone have profound consequences. Traditional leadership roles in Africa tend to be dominated by men. Women have historically been underrepresented in executive leadership positions compared to their male counterparts, even in the field of education. According to UNICEF, 46% of females aged 15-24 are illiterate, while 72% of males in the same age group can read and write (UNICEF, n.d.). In post-war and developing countries such as Sierra Leone — a country still recovering from a broken economy and an unstable government — unequal access to educational resources only exacerbates gender disparities. Therefore, women in Sierra Leone are much less likely to hold any governmental or societal leadership positions (Maclure & Denov, 2009).

In response to the stark gender disparities that emerged from the war and in an effort to alleviate the pernicious effects on Sierra Leonean girls and women, a multitude of international

and national organizations have prioritized the development and expansion of girls' education in Sierra Leone to foster educational opportunities.

Literature Review

Aside from the educational restrictions that women and girls in Sierra Leone face, research indicates that gender disparities are primarily a result of cultural factors. Traditionally, families and communities view girls as having less value except as housekeepers and wives, while boys are preferred because of the belief that they will take care of their parents (Huisman & Smitts, 2009). Consequently, in Sierra Leone, education is prioritized primarily for boys. According to Holland and Saiud (2012), "Sierra Leoneans believe that education will be the key factor if the nation's women and girls ever are to become more fully involved in decision making and resource mobilization at all levels of society" (p.24). Proper prioritization of women's education has been shown to return significant benefits. Educated women have economic independence and autonomy, which enhances their ability to participate in decision-making (Woldemicael & Tenkorang, 2010). Additionally, educated women encourage their children to remain in school and reach greater levels of achievement (Andrabi, Das, & Khawai, 2012).

Girls' education in Sierra Leone has been an important part of global education policy since 1990 through the Education for All Agenda (UNESCO, 1990). The rationale for the policy emphasis on girls' education has typically been associated with the benefits of women's education in improving family and community wellbeing, health outcomes, poverty, and development (Holland & Saidu, 2012).

Organization 1: The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)

The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) is a national organization that was founded by five African women Ministers of Education. These women recognized the need for restorative educational policies and advocated for an increase in female participation and performance in Sub-Saharan Africa. The organization's mission is to promote the rights and welfare of African women and girls through education. The program's objective is to reform the school system and provide training in informal educational settings for girls in Sierra Leone. By working with the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, FAWE has been able to enact and organize vocational training for girls in non-traditional skills, such as media communications and information technology. FAWE has also combined programs in health awareness and HIV/AIDS prevention with seminars outlining women's civil rights (FAWE, 2003). Additionally, countering the surge in sexual and domestic violence exacerbated by the Civil War, FAWE provides resources to support rape victims and the rehabilitation of female sex workers and has campaigned publicly for legal sanctions that address violence against women. FAWE is subdivided into three levels of membership:

- Full members (women ministers who participate and vote in all the deliberations of FAWE)
- Associate members (ministers, donors, and organizations who form a strategic partnership with FAWE and girls' leadership)
- FAWE national chapters (individual chapters that implement FAWE's mission by drawing in their own membership from varying levels and sectors of education).

The FAWE Annual Report 2003 indicates that the organization has four strategic goals and objectives: influencing policy to enhance the educational achievement of girls, promoting

awareness of the social and economic advantages of education for girls, demonstrating how to achieve better outcomes for girls, and influencing mainstreaming of best practices into national education policy and practice (FAWE Annual Report 2003).

FAWE encompasses a variety of sustainability principles to address the lack of educational priority for girls in Sierra Leone. Models that FAWE has developed and continually improved upon include Gender Responsive Pedagogy (GRP), *Tuseme* “Let’s Speak Out,” Mother’s clubs, Centers of Excellence (COE), TVET, Mentorship, and STEM. In 2020, FAWE used these models to address various and complex issues such as low enrollment of girls in STEM subjects, gender insensitive or biased pedagogy, lack of life skills and 20th-century skills, and violence in and around schools.

One of the most effective models FAWE utilizes to promote girls’ education in Sierra Leone is the *Tuseme* model, an empowerment framework that FAWE has used over the years to enhance young people's social and psychological skills. The *Tuseme* model focuses on enhancing their self-confidence through the performing arts. The *Tuseme* project is a school-based theater initiative that aims to empower girls to understand and overcome problems that can hinder their academic and social development. It also gives them a voice to speak out and express their self-identified problems while finding solutions and taking the initiative to resolve them through the *Tuseme* girls support clubs, newsletters, workshops, and festivals (“*Tuseme* Project, The Entertainment-Education Network”). Through the *Tuseme* clubs, students engage in debates, roundtable discussions, music, dance, drama, public speaking, outreach activities, guidance, and counseling. During the period under review, a number of *Tuseme* clubs were established among FAWE’s network, including 45 in Tanzania, 25 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 161 in

Namibia, and 5 in Zimbabwe. The Tuseme model has contributed to a significant reduction in truancy, school dropout rates and improved school performance.

One of the major features of the Tuseme project is the Girls Support Club, which helps to foster empowerment activities at school and serves as a mobilizing agent. Led by students who are elected by the club's members, the clubs are a functioning student-based management system. The sponsors of each club are two art teachers who have been nominated by the head of the school and have received special training in theater, development and facilitation skills. By providing students with a platform to discuss their academic and social problems and participate in individual consultations, peer support, and group discussions, the Tuseme model is quite successful in utilizing theater as a way to empower young girls (Tuseme Project).

Another model that FAWE employs is the Gender Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) model Scale-up. The GRP model aims to equip educators with gender-responsive pedagogical skills in order to promote gender equity in education in Sierra Leone. Through its international network, FAWE is able to popularize the model among partners and educators for adoption, adaptation, and replication. In 2020, FAWE advocated gender mainstreaming in the education system by offering to train select master trainers, teachers, tutors, and lecturers on GRP in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. FAWE in Tanzania and Zimbabwe also collaborated to train teachers and Ministry of Education representatives. The effects of FAWE's GRP model are clear: an improvement in girls' retention and performance, greater participation of girls in the classroom, and improved gender relations within schools were noted (FAWE Gender Responsive Pedagogy).

It is important to note, however, the limitations of FAWE's policies to further girls' leadership through education in regard to its sustainability. Despite the high-impact policies that

FAWE enacts and its efforts to gain international influence, research has indicated that sustaining these commitments has become a major challenge. Since FAWE is heavily associated with ministerial appointments and other senior government positions in sub-Saharan Africa, any instances in which these governmental positions reshuffle can tremendously impair the effectiveness of FAWE's mission and its partnerships with other governmental organizations. In certain aspects, the extent of the organization's influence can be quite limited due to interference from external governmental policies.

Organization 2: The 50/50 Group

Similar to FAWE, the 50/50 Group strives to achieve full gender equality through educational reinforcement. However, the 50/50 Group places much more emphasis on the country's political system and focuses on equipping women with the skills to become actively engaged in political processes at all levels. Originally, the organization emerged as a group of women interested in gender equality in politics, but it soon developed into a nationally recognized administration. Its goals remain clear: to elect a female president; increase female representation in Parliament, local government, and decision-making positions to 50%; and establish a substantial network of empowered women who are available to support other women aspiring for leadership positions. To achieve these goals, the 50/50 organization primarily works through its members and targets organized groups such as networks of women, NGOs, media organizations, religious leaders, and local governments.

To address women's leadership, 50/50 takes a different approach than FAWE. In 2002, the 50/50 Group provided training to assist female candidates in articulating gender issues and compiled a list of legislative priorities for women's rights that soon became known as the Sierra

Leone Women's Manifesto, which recognized the importance of meeting the needs of women in all sectors of development and established a strong foundation upon which to set priorities for a future legislative agenda ("The 50/50 Group of Sierra Leone: Electing and Empowering Women"). As a result of the efforts imposed by the manifesto, Sierra Leone saw an increased participation in female politicians: 18 women were elected to Parliament, three times the number who were elected in the previous national election of 1996. It is also important to recognize the efforts made by the 50/50 Group to not only directly influence women's participation in political activity but also educate the general public regarding these issues. The organization supports a year-round talk show devoted to educating the general public on women's issues from both political and legal standpoints. By utilizing popular media, the 50/50 Group has examined cultural prejudices, economic barriers, and political impediments that continuously undermine women in Sierra Leone.

Nemata Majeks-Walker, Founder of the 50/50 Group, discusses the mission of her project in her interview with Radha Friedman: "Whenever rules are passed, whatever laws are passed, they do not reach the people for whom they are designed for. For example, in Sierra Leone, we have about 70% of illiterate women in the provinces," she says. To address this, the 50/50 Group "[translated] the laws in the four major languages in the country, did oral translation and put it on CDs through the media and, in particular, radio" (Interview: 50/50 Project, Sierra Leone).

Discussion

One of the most effective ways in which the 50/50 Group addresses women's empowerment in Sierra Leone is through media integration. For example, as Nemata Majeks-Walker emphasized, inspiring and influencing the lives of women through resources

such as radio can have a profound impact on the future of women. As Sierra Leonean women are highly illiterate in English, adopting methods of communication that embrace their native languages can have a long-term impact.

One of the best examples of using media to engage female listeners is Purposeful, an African hub for girls' activism and leadership. Purposeful creates girl-centered radio programs to enhance the livelihoods of women. The radio show reinforces messages relating to bodily autonomy, community, and sisterhood through weekly discussion guides, videos, and a feminist life-skills curriculum.

The organization has produced two radio shows—the talk show Karo Kura Konnection and the drama series Karo Kura Kompin—co-created with girls and community allies that focus on telling their stories. Both are broadcast twice weekly on local and national radio stations and transmitted via cell phones to the Purposeful network of more than 600 young women mentors working with over 15,000 out-of-school girls.

Purposeful's approach to empowering their female listeners differs from that of FAWE, as FAWE primarily engages with governmental organizations and ministerial members to enact change. However, FAWE lacks sustainability in these efforts due to its governmental vulnerability, as mentioned before. Thus, considering the profound influence that radio has had on organizations such as the 50/50 Group and Purposeful, using media could be a more sustainable path for FAWE.

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