CHAPTER 12

'Children have the right to be controlled by their parents'

Children's voice in rural Sierra Leone

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INTRODUCTION

Children's and young people's participation has become a central issue for childhood and youth studies (Punch et al., 2012). Scholars have shown that children, through exercising agency, can participate in social, political and economic life and bring changes in the world around them (Ansell, 2014; Hart, 2008; Rye and Vold, 2019). Although early studies in this field are often criticised for giving little consideration to young people's embeddedness in social relations (Ansell, 2014; Huijsmans et al., 2014), there is a growing body of literature that focuses on the relational aspect of children's agency (Allen, 2016; Gallagher, 2019). However, there is still a knowledge gap about the links between children's participation and intergenerational relationships in the Global South. This chapter aims to extend our knowledge in this field by examining children's participation through the lens of intergenerational relationships in rural Sierra Leone.

Around 42% of Sierra Leone's 7.5 million population is under the age of 15 (World Bank, 2019). For centuries, Sierra Leonean society has been described as a gerontocracy, with elders atop the social hierarchy (Richards,

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1996). Traditionally, elders were responsible for decision-making, controlled access to resources and determined bride price for women in the kin. Youth, in turn, were supposed to respect and obey elders (Bolten, 2012; Ferme, 2001). However, these relationships were challenged during the civil war, which broke out in 1991 and lasted 11 years. This civil war is sometimes described as a 'crisis of youth' (Abdullah, 1998; Peters, 2011; Richards, 1996), as several scholars showed that the war was caused not only by macro factors such as poor governance and corruption but also by marginalisation of young people, which 'occasioned by failed education, unemployment, and patrimonial politics' (Abdullah, 1998: 38; see also Richards, 1996). Scholars argue that collapsed public services and the lack of access to land and labour which were controlled by elder elites flued the conflict (Hoffman, 2011; Peters, 2011; Richards, 1996). Through their participation in violence, young men destroyed existing social patterns and created their own network of power, which excluded elders and instead put themselves atop the hierarchy (Richards, 1996).

Although that conflict did not fully eliminate the existing social order, and a significant number of young people did not join the armed forces and rebel groups, instead continuing their lives within the existing network of relationships (Bolten, 2012), it did contribute to the fundamental transformation of the relationship between youth and elders. Further social changes – such as the growth of the school enrolment rate, the introduction of new legislation on children's rights and gender equality and the increased mobility of the population – also contributed to these transformations (Bolten, 2018; Wessells et al., 2012). This chapter examines how these changes affect child-adult relationships with regard to young people's participation in everyday decision-making processes in rural Sierra Leone.

METHODS

The chapter draws on qualitative data from a mixed-methods study of gender relations, schooling and well-being of children in one of the poorest rural districts of northern Sierra Leone (Devine et al., 2021). This longitudinal study took place in four case study communities over three years, from 2018 to 2021. The selected communities illustrate the ethnic diversity of the region, as the sample included the three main ethnic groups living in the northern part of Sierra Leone (Themne, Kuranko and Limba). The data was collected during four extensive fieldtrips (of eight weeks, two weeks in each study community), which took place in 2019, 2020 (on two occasions, from February to March and in November) and in 2021.

In each community we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews and group discussions with schoolteachers, principals, students and members of school management committees, parents of children enrolled in schools and other community members (including elders and youth). We also used classroom observations and participatory methods such as child-guided village tours and photovoice (Samonova et al., 2022). These participatory methods provided insights into children's perspectives on social relations in their communities. For example, photovoice enabled children to share their experiences with corporal punishment and opened up a discussion about its role in education and upbringing of children. In total, we conducted more than 300 interviews with our core study families and children, who were interviewed annually.

The research followed the ethical procedures approved by the University College Dublin human ethics research committee as well as by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Welfare of Sierra Leone. Before starting the research, all participants (including children) were informed about its purpose, and we sought consent for their participation. All participants were informed they could opt out of the research at any time. All interviews were translated into English and analysed using MAXQDA qualitative software that allowed us to identify such themes as obedience, the value of education and respect to elders.

FINDINGS

Traditional child-adult relationships in rural Sierra Leone

Relationships play an important role in Sierra Leonean sociality (Bolten, 2012; Jackson, 2011). As in many other African countries, childcare in Sierra Leone is a collective social enterprise (Twum-Danso, 2009) in which both parents and other family members are involved. While parents are still seen as primary caregivers, other relatives often step in and offer their support when needed. Family dynamics are rooted in the concepts of respect towards elders, reciprocity and mutual exchange: adult relatives look after children until they become economically independent, and in return, children look after their elderly relatives. These reciprocal relationships are not a one-way process but rather a complex network of constant negotiation of duties and responsibilities that happens during childhood and adulthood. Our study shows that children do not solely rely on adults' support but are also expected to contribute to the household according to their age and abilities. As Bolten (2012) notes, in Sierra Leone, 'useless' is one of the most serious insults, and children are visibly proud of their 'usefulness' to their family. That is why doing certain types of household or farm work, which benefits the whole family, is often understood by children as a way to manifest their usefulness and value (Devine et al., 2021).

The importance of these reciprocal relationships is reflected in the image of a 'good' child. All participants of our research agreed that a 'good' child is hard-working, obedient and respectful. Kaidutu, a single mother of five, gives her view on how children should behave:

> When you meet the kid and you said this kid looks well, then you greet her, and she answers. That is it, when you send the kid somewhere he/she would go and when you say this is what we are going to do he/she agrees, so you, as mother or father, that is what you would do in turn because you are happy with her, you would dress her very well so that people would be amazed.

It is not only adults who have these perceptions. As our interviews show, younger children share these views. Ibrahim, a seven-year-old boy enrolled in class 1, frames his relationships with his family in such a way:

> I like them, that's why I draw them, I sweep for them, and they always send me around and they give me food, and at night, my father will buy chicken and give me…

While parents expect obedience from their children, they also believe that children are 'naturally stubborn' and should be trained to become good community members. The ability to control children's behaviour is also seen as a marker of good parenting practices. Such control is often exercised through corporal punishment:

> To me, flogging is not good somehow but in the other way round is good also because there are some children, when they do bad things or they misbehave, somehow you can talk and talk and talk, and they won't listen. But when you use a cane and flog them, you will notice that they won't do it again.

That quote, which comes from Ibrahim's grandmother, shows that adults have ambiguous attitudes towards corporal punishment, which is seen as necessary to make sure that children do not misbehave. At the same time, interviews reveal that parents make a clear distinction between 'severe' flogging – which is harmful to children and should not be applied – and 'light' punishment, with one or two strokes perceived as necessary discipline to keep 'naturally stubborn' children 'under control'. A father of six from Karanba village expressed this idea in the following way:

> It is not good to flog children, if you used to flog the child whenever you are talking to that child, he will be so much afraid of you that he will not understand what you are telling him he will just shivering with fear. But flogging of the child when he commits a crime is different, flog for

> a tangible reason and it should not be rampant. Even in school you can flog the child, but it should not be too much.

Corporal punishment as a control mechanism aims to ensure a kind of upbringing that would guarantee that children act in socially acceptable ways and become respected members of the community. From this perspective, care becomes inseparable from control, and proper training is through the means of corporal punishment. A good and caring parent is expected to apply certain control measures and make sure that the child is trained to respect and obey elders, according to custom and tradition and unwritten social rules.

Although the ability to control children is seen as an integral part of any good parenting practice, such practices are highly gendered. Interviews revealed that girls are perceived to need more control than boys, which is often linked to girls' sexuality and the risk of teenage pregnancy, which is widespread in the region. During the group discussion with class 6 students (their age ranges from 12 to 15 years), one boy explained these fears in detail:

> The reason why teenage pregnancy is rampant in the community is that the children are stubborn, and they are just giving birth the way they want. Also, some parents are widows, and she [a widow] cannot control the child well. But if the child is in the big town, where control is strong, the child will be prevented from such activities.

This quote clearly shows that teenage pregnancies – rather than being seen as a by-product of gender-based violence, poverty and gender inequality – are instead explicitly linked with parents' (and especially mothers') inability to control their daughters and to girls being 'stubborn'. Our analysis reveals that blaming girls for their 'failure', which supposedly happens because girls are unwilling to listen to their parents, is common among adults and children (especially boys) alike. In group discussions with young women aged from 17 to 24, we see similar gendered perceptions:

Interviewer: Why do you think that now children get pregnant so early?
Respondent 1: They don't want to be guided.
Respondent 2: When you try to stop them, they challenge you.
Respondent 3: It is because of disobedience. After coming from school, they will take excuse from us, saying that 'mum, our teacher said we should go for evening classes', and you, as parent, you won't understand her plans and when she leaves home, she goes directly to her boyfriend.

Consequently, increased parental control is perceived as the only way to prevent girls becoming pregnant. It is widely believed that once girls refrain

from certain activities, they will be protected from themselves and their sexual desires. In a group discussion with girls enrolled in class 3 (aged between 10 and 12), one argued that a good girl should 'always be at home so that bad things will not happen to her', while her classmates added that girls should 'not go closer to men or even play with men or boys'. This narrative of staying home and avoiding 'bad' (male) friends was very common in our interviews, showing that these gendered perceptions effectively limit girls' freedom of movement and their ability to make their own decisions about friendships and activities during any free time they may have.

This discussion on girls' 'stubbornness' and 'disobedience' illustrates deep-rooted perceptions on the supervisory social position of (male) adults and obligations of children and young people to obey them. Such social positioning of children makes their meaningful participation in any decision-making processes almost impossible; as children and young people are expected to obey elders, their voices are largely considered as unimportant and are thus muted.

In our discussions with children, they admitted that they mostly avoid talking to their parents and teachers if they have any suggestions for school improvements, for instance. A group of boys enrolled in class 3 in Karanba explained their reluctance to share their thoughts with adults:

> We have never told teachers anything concerning that [changes in school]. We are just afraid, as children, to talk to any of them.

In this way, social norms and values in Sierra Leone discourage children's participation through the cultivation of an image of a 'good' child as respectful and obedient, while at the same time reinforcing these perceptions through the means of control and violent punishment.

These traditional dynamics are reinforced by current economic situation of endemic poverty and underemployment among young people: according to the latest data about 33% of all young people in Sierra Leone is not in education, employment or training, while the vast majority of the rest the youth population has precarious low paid jobs in informal sector and agriculture (World Bank, 2022). All research participants agree that one cannot earn enough money with agriculture today and that there are only few work opportunities outside agriculture in rural areas. This lack of opportunities motivates many young people (especially young men) to migrate to other areas in search for better jobs. However, the lack of education and professional training as well as the high level of job insecurity in the whole country often means that young people's dreams of a better life remain unfulfilled. As a 13-year-old boy from Taroko mentioned in our group discussion:

> Young people in this community have no job and are stranded. They want to leave the community but where will they go.

Young men in their 20s agree with him: many of them travelled across Sierra Leone and neighbouring countries in hope of finding well paid jobs but did not succeed and returned home to Taroko village. One of the young men describes his experience in the following way:

> When you go out in search of money and you don't succeed, you come back to settle here with your people.

Good relationship with 'your people' or members of the kin are seen as an essential part of the survival strategy, which, in turn, means that economic and social independence of young people is delayed, and they have to follow the rules established by chiefs and other elders who have leading roles in their communities.

While these traditional social structures that support the power of elders are still prevalent in the rural society, recent social, economic and political changes opened up new spaces for children's participation. We now discuss these transformations in more detail.

Social transformations and children's participation

Traditional social structures in Sierra Leone require obedience to elders and restrict participation of young people in decision-making processes in their family and community. However, as already explained, recent social and economic changes have challenged this existing social order and brought a degree of uncertainty into the traditional framework of child-adult relationships. During our interviews, many parents and teachers reflected on these social transformations and claimed that children have changed and do not follow the old social rules anymore. They linked these trends with modern developments such as increased school enrolment and literacy among children, and the introduction of new legislation. While many adults acknowledge that to some extent these developments brought positive changes to their community, they expressed their fears that such transformations would challenge the social order and destroy traditional social networks.

Education is one of those processes that while bringing significant benefits to families may also bring uncertainties or encourage individuals to challenge established social relations. Formal education is highly valued within the framework of reciprocal adult-child relationships; education is seen as the best way out of poverty and parents expect that educated children will be better able to support their family in the future. This perception of education as the 'end of suffering' for the whole family is a powerful motivation to send

children to school despite the high costs associated with schooling (Samonova et al., 2021). At the same time, education means that children gain knowledge that their parents do not have. While elders are still seen as bearers of important knowledge that is transmitted via traditional channels of initiation, young people arise as bearers of new 'Western' knowledge, which requires literacy skills and understanding of modern developments. During a group discussion in a Naytikiwo village, one of the women commented that:

> When we were with our parents, as soon as we went to the farm, they would ask us to work and we would enter the maize farm to work, we were unable to write one [word]. But the kids of today know how to write and even when we are given a note, our children will teach us how to read them correctly when we are doing it wrongly. Even when we are given some money, we won't be able to count it, but our kids can.

During the fieldwork, we observed the processes that this woman was talking about. Many parents are illiterate and have to rely on their children when dealing with official documents, bills and community initiatives. We observed a good example of this shift in children's social status in Taroko village, where secondary school students were actively involved in the negotiations between their community and a development company that planned to build a dam nearby. Children's ability to read English documents was a valuable resource that allowed the community to negotiate both their involvement in the construction process and compensation for lost land.

Through formal education, children and young people are being slowly recognised as useful community members who bear important knowledge. However, while this process challenges the traditional inferior position of children and young people in their community, it does not give them an equal position in the social hierarchy; elders are still seen as the main decision-makers, while children and young people are expected to respect them and obey their decisions.

While formal education is generally considered a positive change that brings benefits for the whole family, other social changes are less welcomed by adults. For example, new legislation, including on children's rights and prohibition of corporal punishment, is often seen as a threat to the existing social order. The grandmother of a seven-year-old boy compared life in the past with life today, lamenting that parents are no longer freely able to flog their children as it would now be considered a crime:

> Yes, in those days there was control over children, but now there is no control over them. The children in those days had home training, but nowadays children do not have home training. In those days, you

> would flog your child as you like, but now, they will take you to the police station.

Such new legislation challenges the ability of parents to control their children, and parents express fears that without such control, children will not be able to become respected adults in future. Adults' perspectives on children's rights are especially interesting in this regard. Most adults recognise the importance of certain rights such as the right to food, shelter and education, but many feel that the general concept of children's rights, which frames children and adolescents as independent beings, may have negative consequences for children's future as they may become 'out of control'. A father of four explicitly argued that children's rights may harm children's future:

> My understanding on the rights of children, sometimes it will disturb them. They say if you want to do anything you need to consult your child and you should be able to take good care of him because he didn't force you to give birth to him. If you are to follow the rights of the child, that child will not be a better person in the future. But if you follow what God says on how to train up your child, he will grow up to be a better person in the future and you will reap its benefits.

Other parents acknowledged that some aspects of children's rights might be useful as long as they do not challenge the authority of adults:

> I think it is a good thing for us to be aware of our children's rights. Children have the right to be educated, and they also have the right to be controlled by their parents.

This 'right to be controlled' still seems to be a foundational feature of child-adult relationships in Sierra Leone. Looking at recent social transformations, adults often feel frustration, but still insist on the importance of parental control and children's obedience.

Children and adolescents, in turn, while still speaking in terms of the traditional framework of respect and obedience, argue for more inclusive social relationships in which they can share their ideas with elders and influence certain things in their surroundings. In the discussion on children's rights with class 3 children, many agreed with the view that:

> Our rights are hardly fulfilled here, because the elderly people and our parents don't listen to our ideas.

Girls and boys both agreed that children and adolescents can sometimes have 'brilliant' ideas, but adults are reluctant to listen to them or follow their suggestions. The children tend to think that this happens because of negative

adults' attitudes towards children. In the same group discussion (class 3), all participants agreed that children's ideas are blocked by adults:

Respondent 1: They will not listen to us because they think we are very young, and we don't have that experience.
Respondent 2: They will not listen to us even if it is a good idea.
Respondent 1: No, they hardly listen to us. They always say we are too young to bring up good ideas.
Respondent 2: No, they will never listen to us. I believe that they are not listening to us because they considered us as children and that we don't have better knowledge.

However, while children believe that they can develop good ideas and make valuable suggestions, they are often not ready to raise their voices due to the fear of punishment and confrontation with elders. In our discussions, many children argued that they had never tried to bring certain issues to adults' attention because they feared confronting adults. In this way, there are certain contradictions in children's narrative of participation: on the one hand, they want to participate in school and community life as they are convinced that education and familiarity with modern developments will equip them with new types of knowledge that their parents do not have. However, on the other hand, being raised in such a hierarchical social context means that children and adolescents tend to internalise ideas of obedience and respect and are reluctant to take action to promote their ideas and potentially confront adults.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter aimed to demonstrate the social processes related to children's and young people's participation in rural Sierra Leone. We have shown that Sierra Leonean society is undergoing major social transformations. The traditional social order, rooted in notions of obedience to elders and control of children, has been shaken by modern processes such as the expansion of education and the introduction of children's rights legislation. Children arise as bearers of new types of knowledge, based on Western-style formal education. New legislation that prohibits corporal punishment and promotes children's rights is challenging the traditional authority of parents and teachers (Bolten, 2012), which was based on control and obedience. These developments have significantly changed the social image of childhood and are challenging the social hierarchy itself, as children and young people are included in public spheres that were previously closed to them. At the same time, adults are not ready to radically transform the social order and still believe that traditional

child-adult relations provide the foundations for a good future for children and their families. Adolescents, in turn, express the desire to gain more voice in decision-making processes, but still frame themselves within the traditional image of obedient and respectful child, and are often not ready to actively challenge the social order and claim more participation.

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