



## Challenges faced by secondary school girls who stay far away from schools in Gokwe south district

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### ARTICLE HISTORY

Published online, 2022

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores, and shares, sorrowful circumstances school girls walking long distances to school in Gokwe South are exposed to. The article provides some insights on the challenges faced by school girls to access schooling in Gokwe South District of Zimbabwe. The article is a reaction to the rising concerns over the challenges bedeviling rural school girls and education. Three secondary schools out of nine with girl learners who walk long distances were purposively selected. The school heads of those schools automatically qualified as participants of the study. Six teachers out of 36, two from each school, (one male one female) were purposively selected to take part in the study. Six rural girl-learners, out of 32 rural girl learners who walk long distances to and from school each day, were randomly selected using the hat system. The qualitative research method was used with phenomenology being chosen as the research design. Interviews were used to collect data from the school heads, teachers and the girl learners. Observation and document analysis were also used for data triangulation. A number of findings emanated from this study. It was noted that rural girl learners mostly arrive at school tired and dirty and are ever absent at school. The study also found out that sexual child abuse was common to which the girls are exposed to along the way, to-and-from school resulting in unwanted pregnancies. The study concluded that the community in general, and parents of affected girls in particular, the government and other responsible authorities, including the girls themselves should collaborate to address the challenges. The study recommended that funding should be availed towards construction of satellite schools in Gokwe South District in Zimbabwe.

**KEYWORDS:** Education, rural schools, girl-learners,



## **Introduction**

**E**ducation is one of the most critical areas of empowerment for women. However, in an attempt to gain this empowerment, attending school has remained a very hard task for many girl learners who walk long distances to school in Gokwe South District. The aim of the study is to show, in greater detail, the challenges facing school girls who walk long distances to school in Gokwe South District. Although the life of the school girls is a matter of concern at global level, limited research in this area motivated the researcher to unveil the hidden issues surrounding the experiences of these girls. Given that education is a key development driver, when children's growth gets disturbed, the development of the country is also demobilised. The concern is that if firm action is not taken on challenges resulting in girls walking long distances to school the depressed and desperate girls will find themselves out of school and plunged further into the cycle of poverty

## **Background**

**M**ost schools in rural Gokwe South are not child friendly as they are situated far from homes, exposing the girls to dangers when they walk to-and-from school (Mangwaya, 2015). This leaves parents, most of whom are too poor to afford boarding schools for their girl children, hence left with few, if no options at all. Either the girls do not go to school as such grow-up with limited opportunities for the future, thus, perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty; or they just have to go through the dangerous and tiresome journey of having to walk long distances to access education.

**I**n 1990 the World Summit for Children identified girls' education as a tool for development (UNICEF, 2015). Universal education for all children for both females and males was adopted as part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child (UNICEF, 2015) However, the chances of girls dropping out of school because of walking long distances continue to be greater than that of boys because of their physical make up (Mubika & Bukaliya, 2011).The priority should ensure that even the most vulnerable and disadvantaged girl has access to school close to her home, a school that meets her most basic needs for safety, privacy and cleanliness.

**I**n Zimbabwe, there is a policy which states that schools should be built within a radius of 5 km from the learner's residence. However, despite the prioritisation of the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) effort to build enough schools

in all provinces of the country some remote areas, like Gokwe South, still do not have enough schools, especially secondary schools (Ngwenya, 2015). Most schools are located far from the villages that most girl learners are forced to walk long hours and distances along the way facing with so many challenges. On the other hand, one of the Zimbabwean Government's Vision 2030-2050 goals guarantees accessible education and infrastructural development by 2030 (Mangwaya, 2015).

**E**ven-though the Zimbabwean policy states that schools should be built within a radius of 5 km from the residence of the school learners (Mubika & Bukaliya, 2011), this is not the case in most remote areas in Zimbabwe. Some learners walk for over 20 km to-and-from schools in the country against the desired 5km radius the government wishes. This reflects that schools are not being built at the rate at which the population is growing (Mubika & Bukaliyo, 2011). In this case the social class to which one belongs becomes a factor when it comes to accessibility to education. The rich can afford to send their children to boarding schools whilst children from poor families struggle with the long distances and harsh realities along the way.

A recent study carried out in Zambia at Cornell University of Law School Avon Centre for Women and Justice (2012) revealed that Zambian rural school girls are vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence while walking long distances to-and-from school. In a related study, Kim and Rector (2010) posit that early sexual activities are associated with higher risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), lower academic achievement and teen pregnancy. They also state that, it is a long-term healthy risk for youths. Findings by Kim and Rector also show that the girl-learners who walk long distances are sometimes sexually abused by their male counter parts. Mulkeen (2005) also argues that parents in the rural areas are less unlikely to be educated themselves and so have less ability to provide support for their children.

**B**ullying is another serious problem among learners who walk long distances. Kim and Rector (2010) posit that students who are bullied record low academic outcomes as well as more absenteeism, low completion rates and feel disconnected from school. This paper, therefore, attempts to reveal the reality of what many girls walking long distances to school go through in search of education.

## **Methodology**

The researcher adopted the qualitative approach as it draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of participants in the study. Three secondary schools out of nine secondary schools with girl learners who walk long distances were purposively selected. The purposive selection of schools was done in such a way to include three secondary schools from different settings of Gokwe South. The school heads of these schools automatically qualified to take part in the study. Six teachers out of the 36 teachers two from each school (one male, one female) with girl learners in their classes, who walk long distance to school, were purposively selected to take part in the study. The selection of the teachers was done in such a way that only teachers with at least five years' experience at that school were selected. Six girl learners out of 32 girl learners (two from each school) who walk long distance to and from school each day were randomly selected using the hat system. The girls were randomly selected for accurate representation of the larger population and to avoid bias.

The purpose of the research was clearly explained to the respondents before their consent was sought. The respondents were also assured of confidentiality. Patten (2009 p. 25) is of the view that "researchers have an obligation not to disclose the information to others." Sieber (2009 p. 117) concurs and states that "confidentiality is an extension of the concept of privacy." In other words, it concerns data about the person and an agreement as to how the data is to be handled in keeping with the subjects' interests in controlling the access of others to information about themselves. These views have an implication on data storage and information dissemination. The researcher ensured that data (the tapes) were stored in a secure place which was not accessible to any other person other than the researcher. The findings of the research were used for the purposes of the study only.

Unstructured in-depth interviews were then used to collect data from the school heads, teachers and the girl-learners. The use of interviews is based on their flexibility when collecting data as the researcher can probe data and seek detail as compared to other methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Confidentiality was prominently observed during the interviews with respondents told not to give their names. The purpose of the research was clearly explained to the respondents before their consent was called for in the interview.

The observation method was also used to collect data from the learners. This included the time they arrived at school, how active they were at school especially during sports time and the time they left school. Document analysis was also used for data triangulation to enhance credibility of data (Hall, 2011; Trochim, 2006; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2007). In this case the researcher analysed pass rates, registers and record books.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the challenges faced by school girls who walk long distances to school in Gokwe South District?
- What are the causes of the challenges faced by these school girls?
- What are the measures that can be employed to curb the challenges faced by school girls who walk long distances to and from school?
- What could be the solution to the challenges faced by school girls walking long distance to and from school every school day?

## Results

### *Challenges facing school girls walking long distances to school and their causes*

Abuse is one of the common challenges met by the secondary girls walking long distances, sexual abuse being the common one. One secondary school girl sadly provided that:

*Lack of strong girl protection in Gokwe area because of male dominance enables males to sexually abuse girls and get away with it, I personally blame our culture (Interview, Girl-Learner 3).*

Muchenje, (2012) pointed out that; within any culture, there is a body of knowledge that people use to solve life issues. Culture encompasses the knowledge form of people. One girl appeared disturbed when she pointed out that:

*The distance is too long that a girl like me needs a male figure to protect me along the way" (Interview, Girl-Learner 2).*

It was further indicated that "if that male figure is not around inyaya futi (it becomes another story) (Interview, Girl-Learner 2). This means the girl will be in trouble if not escorted because that is when other males take the opportunity as well as advantage to abuse her. Thus, the scenario involves power dynamics

where a girl child has no other resort but rather go for the sexual relations. This, therefore, puts the girl child at risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV / AIDS.

Research done by Kim and Rector (2010) showed that early sexual activities are associated with higher risk of (STIs). The thinking presented is that children are tomorrow's future and if they are 'killed' today it means there won't be any tomorrow. One teacher eluded that:

*...we are facing a challenge of our school girls who walk long distances as they are raped by community members (Interview, Teacher 4).*

Much blame was put on parents, and the girl children themselves, as they sometimes withdraw the case when reported to the police. In the African context, a culture of taboo and silence surrounds matters such as sexuality, sex and reproductive health, making it difficult for the girl child to get accurate knowledge on how to protect herself.

One female teacher sounding very emotional pointed out that:

*...most very brilliant girls' at times, drop out of school due to unwanted pregnancies resulting from rape or sexual abuse which actually occurs along the way (Interviews, Teacher 6).*

As a result, most girls who walk long distances to school are dropping out of school and getting married at a tender age. One advanced level learner blamed the responsible authorities for not taking stringent measures against the perpetrators of child abuse. Sounding very depressed, the advanced level girl said:

*...our parents due to lack of child protection intervention and access to state policies and regulations, they fail to make follow ups to cases of abuse (Interview, Girl-learner 3).*

However, reporting of abuse cases are minimised by close relationships between the perpetrator and the victims. Mulkeen (2005) argues that parents in the rural areas are less likely to be educated themselves and so have less ability to provide support for their children. One School Head pointed out that:

*Girls are not physically fit as compared to boys, that most of them cannot walk long distances every school day. As a result, they end up living nearby the school in 'bush boarding facilities' which is yet another big challenge as these premises lack adult supervision. Most girls are at risk of being sexually harassed and exploited in those premises (Interview, School Head).*

The school has no jurisdiction over this form of boarding arrangement and children are not supervised or taken care of by adults. A worse scenario was a reported case in the press where a learner from a secondary school living in an informal boarding facility was raped and murdered (Mangwaya, 2015). Further, observations also showed that children's hygiene in these premises is very poor and making the girls susceptible to diseases.

All Heads of Schools who participated in the study were worried about the low pass rate. Document analysis showed the majority of schools understudy had recorded zero five-subject passes, as officially recognised for girls at ordinary levels as compared to boys for a period spanning ten years. Document analysis also showed that absenteeism is prevalent. Most of these girls are ever absent due to several reasons such as bad weather and flooded rivers. However, further analysis showed that absenteeism was also caused by fear of being abused along the way especially if escort-relatives or parents were away, ill, engaged in other activities and so on. One class teacher pointed out that:

*...these girls are ever absent from school, if they do come, they are ever late, tired and sometimes dirty (Interview, Teacher 1).*

Most teachers felt that punishing these girls for late coming or absenteeism may demotivate them. However, some felt they should be punished as this might cause chaos at the schools. One girl in a shy voice said:

*...at times I absent myself during my menstruation period. Menstrual hygiene and the long distance I walk, aaaaa hazvibude, (Aah! It is unhealthy) worse walking the long distance feeling period pain (Interview, Girl-Learner 1).*

Most girls indicated that taking orthodox pain-stop medication is against their culture. They believe that if one takes pain killers during menstrual period, it will affect their fertility. Observation also showed that all the schools studied have a challenge on educational attainment of these girls. Most of them end up dropping out of school. One Form 2 girl revealed that:

*I take two hours to get to school walking alone by foot every school day avoiding snakes and potential kidnappers. Even-though I don't enjoy the journey and sometimes find it scary, I am willing to do whatever it takes for me to get a good education (Interview, Girl-Learner 5).*

Most of these girls showed that notwithstanding the long distances, they really want to be educated and get out of the vicious cycle of poverty. Hunger is also another challenge the girls face as learners cannot concentrate in class if they are hungry. One Form 1 girl revealed that:

*I live far from here that's why I cannot go back home to have lunch like other learners, I will eat in the evening when I get back home. In the morning I do not take anything (Interview, Girl-Learner 6).*

### **Measures employed to curb the challenges**

For the challenges facing Gokwe South girls walking long distances to school, there are solutions suggested by Heads of School and Teachers to abate them although the success is questionable. To curb the problem of walking long distances, the school authorities lobbied for the establishment of more satellite schools in Gokwe South District or that learners stay in vetted informal boarding facilities near the schools. Regarding informal boarding facilities, one School Head confirmed that:

*...those parents who can afford their children to live in those facilities may take turns to come and supervise their children. The possibility of this solution is very questionable as parents mostly are also busy with their work elsewhere (Interview, School Head 2).*

To curb the problem of sexual abuse a teacher pointed out that:

*...the parents themselves need to be educated so that they do not withdraw cases of sexual abuse if reported to police (Interview, Teacher 1).*

The girls who are targeted due to their innocence and ignorance are the ones who will suffer the consequences. According to Kim and Rector (2010) men use rape and forced pregnancies to degrade and humiliate the girls. In South Africa for example, studies reveals that nearly 33% of men report raping a woman during their lifetime (Kim & Rector, 2010). During the study, a female teacher pointed out that:

*the girls should know that the strength of the abuser lays in their fear so they should be taught not to be afraid of telling their story to anyone until they are heard (Interview, Teacher 3).*

An A 'level girl-learner in a very strong voice pointed out that:

*to curb the issue of impregnating these young girls and cover-up by marrying them, the law should take its course. A formal or informal union before the age of 18 is a form of Gender-Based Violence as it robs girls of their right to childhood, health, education and security (Interview, Girl-learner, 5).*

In 2014, State of the World Population notes that every day 39, 000 girls become child brides. Commenting on the issue of some of these girls' early pregnancies and early marriages a Head of School pointed out that:

*The adult environment of a child be the main focus of presentation approaches (Interview, School Head, 1).*

This means that, the adults in the society need to be educated in matters of child abuse to prevent these issues in a sustainable way. Regarding hunger in schools all the school heads under study suggested that the government re-introduces the Feeding Programme into the schools.

The findings to the study are so clear that one may not downsize the suffering that these girls walking long distances to school endure in a bid to attain their academic education. The challenges are undoubtedly a drawback that acts as a necessary evil that straps the girls' access to basic quality education. Findings henceforth call for solutions that this research gives as the recommendation in a bid to attain sustainable development in rural areas of Gokwe South in Zimbabwe. Failure to address the challenges poses an impact to the efforts to fulfil the UN mandate on the SDGs that are due 2030 to 2050.

## Conclusion

This study identified a lot of challenges facing school girls who walk long distances to and from school in Gokwe South District in Zimbabwe. The diversity and complexity of the challenges call for local initiatives and other interventions for all stakeholders in the education system and in development work. Commitment for the community in general and parents of affected girls together with the government and other responsible authorities including the girls themselves should intertwine to address the challenges.

## Recommendations

The Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013 suggests that all children should have access to appropriate education and training (section 19 subsection 2 paragraph d). This includes girls walking long distances to and from school in remote areas of Zimbabwe. Measures should be taken by the parents of the affected girls and the whole community to standardize the living conditions for the girl child who comes from far away areas. The responsibility for the protection of minors from abuse is in the hands of adults. Members of society should be encouraged to work against sexual and other forms of abuse.

The focus on presentation was to expand from individual and family level to societal level. This was done during traditional gatherings such as political meetings notably *mukwerera* and *nhimbe*.

Cases of sexual abuse should be reported to organisations such as Child Line. More funding should be availed to build more schools even satellite schools to start with in Gokwe South District in Zimbabwe. An appeal is made to the government to reconstruct damaged bridges and to construct new bridges where necessary so that learners are enabled to attend school during rainy seasons in Gokwe South District of Zimbabwe.

Various stakeholders in Gokwe South should join hands and construct at least one standardized boarding facility for both boys and girls to reduce risks of informal boarding facilities and travelling long distances to school. The government should facilitate programmes that sensitize school staff and communities on the re-entry policy for teenage mothers so that they finish their studies. The school heads and the teachers should revisit the issue of corporal punishment to fully promote child friendly schools. Such current issues, therefore, need to be shared on a global scale for the duty bearers to turn their attention to these school girls walking long distances in rural area of Gokwe South in Zimbabwe.

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