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# *Akara, Ampe<sup>1</sup> and Fine Girls*

## LESSONS FROM GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS IN SIERRA LEONE, LIBERIA AND GHANA

Empowerment and leadership programs are becoming increasingly popular in development work. However, the gender aspects of these programs are often underplayed. I narrate my experiences as an activist and international NGO worker in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ghana to explore the effects of these empowerment and leadership programs upon teenage girls. My narrative highlights that education and empowerment go hand-in-hand, and that such programs need to be specifically targeted at the particular needs of young girls.

In July 2013 I am standing in front of sixty girls aged 12–18 at a school in Nkwanta, a town in eastern Ghana. All the girls have very short hair and bright neon green uniforms. I explain that I am in Nkwanta to gather information from them on their knowledge of leadership, human rights and economic rights. It is over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and my colleague and I stand in the burning hot sun urging the girls to take a leadership survey. We gather the completed surveys, bid farewell to the group of girls and return to our office to compile and analyze the data. At this point, we have collected data from around 300 girls in ten schools across the region.

The surveys we are conducting are part of the Young Girls Transformative Leadership Program. This program was funded by UN Women's Fund for Gender Equity between March 2013 and January 2015, and seeks to build the leadership capacity of girls in the Nkwanta region, a district in eastern Ghana. The program aimed to develop and implement a series of leadership training workshops focusing on economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive rights and human rights. The funding also supports the development of a community peer mentor scheme. The Nkwanta region has high rates of illiteracy among girls, an all-time high rate of teenage pregnancy and an increased prevalence of harmful traditional and cultural practices targeted at young women. These practices include female genital mutilation and *Trokosi*, a traditional practice, now banned in Ghana, where girls are sent to shrine lords to work as servants and slaves. Furthermore, the region has few

female leaders in government. These concerns brought me and my team to this community, and we were inspired by a similar model successfully implemented in Liberia seven years ago.

Even after I have completed my work in Ghana, I think about the girls in Nkwanta and what I learnt from them. There was the girl who told us about early marriage of young girls in her community. The girl pleaded with us that she really needed help, as she lived with a relative who was likely to send her to live with an older man as his servant and slave. Another girl, with bold yellow stud earrings and a wonderful gap in her teeth, smelling of burnt oil and flowers, had whispered in my ear:

What's next? After you talk to us, what is next? Will you help us stay in school, so our parents don't make us get married early? Will you help our friend who goes all the way to the city to prostitute herself on the holidays not do this anymore?

Reflecting upon these stories, I wonder about the connections between educational opportunities and the empowerment of girls in various African countries. In development work I have found that these two issues are sometimes framed as separate. However, in my experience and work in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Liberia, I have found that they are interrelated: advocacy for girls' leadership and empowerment cannot be separated from advocacy for girls' education. How can we provide leadership training to the girls in one of the poorest regions in Ghana *and* also help them stay in school? This can be difficult. We find out that to help their families survive, girls may sleep with older men for money, which can increase their likelihood of becoming pregnant early and subsequently dropping out of both school and leadership training. Our project was responsible only for training and implementation of community projects for the girls; scholarships and economic incentives for the girls and their families were not included under its remit. And yet, educational opportunities should have been a key component. For me, leadership, education and economic empowerment go hand in hand: one should not be separated from the others.

In December 2012, six months before my trip to Ghana, I was in Sierra Leone. I was in the capital, Freetown, with five other activists to launch the first annual Girls Empowerment Summit Sierra Leone (GESSL).<sup>2</sup> During the summit, a shy 14-year-old girl named Bintu looks at me and out of nowhere gives me a big hug. "Sister! You're like a sister to me, Sister Moiyattu. Can we have this empowerment summit every year with more girls?" GESSL is an annual event held in the capital for girls aged 12–16 from all over Sierra Leone. The girls participated in workshops on self-esteem and leadership, sexual health, reproductive rights, technology and innovation and community development. They also engaged in mentorship activities with women mentors. The Summit is the first of its kind to bring young girls together.

At the end of the Summit, I was overwhelmed with everything the girls told me during one particular workshop. One had contemplated suicide in the past

because a relative had made her feel bad about her body. Another girl talked about how it is better to be sexually violated by a teacher than to get bad grades. These girls – all fourteen of them – became my “little sisters” for the two days of GESSL, but I wanted more for them. I wanted someone to be by their side every day, going to school along with them to protect them from the teachers who would try to harm them. Sexual abuse is a widespread practice in Sierra Leonean schools and universities, according to a Save the Children report released in 2014. The report highlighted poverty as a driver of transactional sex, and a subsequent cause of public health concerns such as teenage pregnancy and early marriage. The report also showed that, “Girls in Freetown engage in transactional sex not only just for material goods but also to access a range of other amenities and merits including, for example, school grades – in the aptly termed ‘sexually transmitted grades’” (Lai 2014, 5, 18). The impact of this is that some girls end up pregnant and, even worse, drop out of school. Teachers may also use sexual assault and rape, coercing girls for sex in exchange for a passing grade.

A year later, in December 2013, we expand GESSL because, through word of mouth from their peers, we find that more and more girls want and need the program. This time there are thirty-four beautiful, Vaseline-covered faces staring back at me. One catches my eye – a tiny little one, very mouthy, her hair braided in a popular style called Americana, where some of it is braided to the front and the rest tossed to the back. She tells me that she is in Form 1 at school and wants to be a teacher one day. Then she challenges me to a game of Akara and we play for about five minutes. She defeats me the first round, I win the second time, we laugh and she declares victory, saying, “Sister Ah don beat you!” (Sister! I have beat you!). I laugh and I feel good inside but I want more for her. I want her to stay in school and I want courses throughout the year for her, and her parents as well – courses on parenting, supportive family relationships and how to support the self-esteem, leadership and education of their teenage daughters.

Many of the girls attending GESSL are at risk of teenage pregnancy and prostitution, especially those who are living in extreme poverty. This is true of many of the girls across Sierra Leone. According to the World Health Organization, adolescent child bearing is most prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, where more than 50 percent of girls give birth by age 20 (WHO n.d.). The main issue is poverty. Research has shown that empowerment programs for girls can make a real difference. However, past youth empowerment programs have been primarily targeted at boys (Government of Sierra Leone 2013).

While doing another project, this time in Liberia, we drive past a group of ten little girls, ranging in age from 5 to 9, walking in a line along the road in the rural provinces. They have no tops on and their little bodies are adorned with beautiful colored beads and marked with a white powdery substance that looks like chalk. I ask the driver if they are coming from the Sande Society, and the driver nods, replying that this is common year-round in this part of the country.

The Sande Society in Liberia, like Sierra Leone's Bondo Society, carries out what is known in many western contexts as female genital mutilation (FGM). Sierra Leone is one of twenty-eight countries where FGM is practiced, and it entails the removal of all or some of the external genitalia as part of traditional initiation rituals or marriage preparation. The ritual is meant to instill morality and virtue, and marks the transition from childhood to womanhood alongside a series of cultural practices such as teaching of domestic skills like cooking and sewing (IRIN News 2008). The ritual of FGM is seen as a cultural rite, but in reality it is an infringement on the voices of these little girls, detrimental to their sexual and reproductive health and ultimately destroys their sexualities as women. According to the WHO, every year two million girls are at risk of being subjected to the practice, sometimes also called female genital cutting or female circumcision. The practice results in a variety of physical and psychological traumas for the women concerned.

My own father banned anyone from sending me to the Bondo Society as a child. So patriarchal was my society at the time that, even though both of my parents were educated, it was my father's ban within our home that was respected. None of my female relatives recounted pleasant memories of their initiations, but even so I can remember my grandmother still asking my mother if I was going to be sent to join the Bondo when I was 21 years old. I chuckled at her question because, needless to say, that ship had sailed a while ago.

I am in the Liberian capital, Monrovia, to run a training workshop aimed at teenage girls. The workshop seeks to help them gain computer skills and become more employable. One girl explains to me that they have to walk at least an hour to come to the workshop, in the hopes of gaining workplace-relevant skills and eventually getting a job that would help them learn about the world. I sigh, not because I have given up but because they matter, each one of them, with their school crests carefully affixed to their blue uniforms. I think about the plight of girls in Liberia, and how, like in Sierra Leone, due to a civil war from which the country is still recovering, girls and young people remain the most disadvantaged.

## CONCLUSIONS

In rural areas, girls are even more vulnerable than in cities. Rural girls face greater rates of FGM, child marriage and teenage pregnancy. Girls growing up in cities may face different concerns, including transactional sex resulting from extreme poverty and an influx of comparatively wealthy foreigners; working alongside attending school to help earn income for their families; and dropping out of school due to pregnancy and other pressures. Based on my experience, however, it seems that living in rural and poor areas exposes girls to greater discrimination. Rural areas are more heavily impacted not only by poverty, as mentioned above, but also by cultural norms and traditional practices that continue to be entrenched in the fabric of various

African societies. The issues rural girls experience in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone are strikingly similar, and there are barely any domestic laws protecting them against harmful practices such as FGM.

The patriarchal nature of the systems in place leaves girls at a far greater disadvantage than boys. FGM affects only girls, but its controversial nature in Liberia and Sierra Leone – and across the region appears to have discouraged governments from taking decisive action to outlaw the practice. To date, only sixteen African countries have introduced legal measures to ban FGM – Liberia and Sierra Leone are not among them – and even existing legal restrictions leave much to be desired. In Ghana, for example, the law states that those who carry out FGM can be prosecuted, but not the family or community members who may pressurize or force a young woman to undergo FGM. Thus, the practice continues in regions such as Nkwanta, Ghana (UNFPA *n.d.*).

The lessons from these three countries demonstrate how patriarchal structures continue to disqualify girls from being the best they can – for themselves and for their societies. Cultural systems and societal expectations for girls put them on an uneven playing field, rendering them drop-outs from school, married while still adolescents and cut off from educational opportunities, all of which prevent them from contributing meaningfully to the development of their nation. It is my belief, based on the experiences I have related here, that programs targeting girls must be holistic and comprehensive in their approach. They also need a feminist lens through which to understand systems that have historically disadvantaged girls, and engage communities in a mission to change these paradigms.

Gender discrimination continues to shape girls' access to education, social services and human rights. These issues transcend borders: from harmful cultural practices, to adolescent marriage, teenage pregnancy and sexual assault, these problems are not unique to girls in Sierra Leone, Liberia or Ghana; rather, they have an impact on girls across Africa. For girls to meet their fullest potential, they must first recognize their power, gain skills through empowerment programs and be supported to attend school and complete their educational goals. A recent Plan International report states that each additional year of education can increase a woman's income by 10–20 percent – a significant step on the road to breaking the cycle of poverty (2009, 9). The same report outlines that girls also are more likely to invest money they earn in their families: women reinvest 90 percent of their income back into the household as compared to men's 30–40 percent. Looking at the global scale of social and economic impact, it is clear that these voices must not be left out of the development agenda. Girls have a huge amount of influence that could change the world for the better.

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## Notes

- 1 *Ampe* and *Akara* are outdoor games played in Ghana and Sierra Leone, usually by primary-school-age girls.
- 2 See <http://www.girlsempowermentsummitsl.org/> for full project details. Accessed 6 December 2014.

## Notes on contributor

Moiyattu Banya is an African feminist writer, a lecturer in Women's and Gender Studies at Temple University in the United States and the co-founder of Girls Empowerment Summit Sierra Leone (GESSL). She has over five years of practical, on-the-ground experience in West Africa with young women and girls. She writes on social justice issues relating to African feminism, and young women leaders, specifically in post-conflict societies, via her social media platform Women Change Africa as well as other venues such as Open Democracy, the African Women's Development Fund Blog, Brittle Paper, and African Feminist Forum.

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