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Left out and let down

A study on empowerment and access to education for young mothers in post-Ebola Sierra Leone

Abstract

Sierra Leone has struggled with high rates of adolescent pregnancy for some time and reports have shown an increase in these figures during and following the unprecedented Ebola Virus Disease outbreak from 2014 through 15. As young girls are impregnated, it has long been customary for girls to drop out of school. When schools re-opened after the Ebola crisis, this practice was formalized as the Minister for Education declared that visibly pregnant girls would not be welcomed back to school. As a consequence of pressure exerted on the government by development partners and human rights activists, non-formal education in the form of learning centres were set up to function as a bridge programme to get affected girls back to school, and 14,500 girls were enrolled. This thesis draws upon empowerment theory and feminist methodologies to explore experiences among young mothers in relation to their access to education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine girls and their stories were analyzed through a thematic narrative analysis centered around their perception of their empowerment and the challenges they face when trying to get back to school. The findings of this study show that while the government's statements formalizing this ban opened a window of opportunity to enable girls to continue their schooling, the main obstacles they encounter have to do with financial constraints, societal neglect and stigmatization. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the design of the learning centres lacked efficient communications and many of the girls expressed disappointment as their expectations were not met.

KEY WORDS: *Adolescent pregnancy, Development, Education, Empowerment, Gender, Non-formal education, Reproductive health*

WORDS: *19,818*

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Abbreviations

BECE	Basic Education Certificate Examination
CEDAW	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women
CRC	The Convention on the Rights of the Child
DfID	Department for International Development (UK)
EVD	Ebola Virus Disease
GAD	Gender and Development
GoSL	Government of Sierra Leone
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994)
JSS	Junior secondary school
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
RMNCAH	Reproductive, maternal, neonatal, adolescent, and child health
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRH(R)	Sexual reproductive health (and rights)
SSS	Senior secondary school
STIs	Sexually transmitted infections
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

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1 Introduction

Empowerment has become one of the most commonly used buzzwords for scholars and practitioners alike in international development, providing a conceptual framework for expanding peoples' abilities to make choices (Kabeer, 1999, p. 436). The intrinsic value of empowerment related to family formation and the right to sexual and reproductive health have long been recognized by governments worldwide. This recognition was codified in 1994 by the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), adopted by 179 governments. These rights are further enumerated and bolstered by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW) in 1979 and a number of other national and global commitments to ensure women's rights to control their own bodies (Klugman, et al., 2014, p. 101).

The rights of the child and the right to education have also been recognized through various international declarations and conventions. Girls' education is both an intrinsic right and a critical route to reaching other development objectives, and empowering adolescent girls through education has become a priority of multiple stakeholders in recent years. Ensuring girls' access to education helps break the cycle of poverty as educated women are less likely to marry early and against their will, less likely to die in childbirth and more likely to have healthy babies and send their children to school (Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016, p. 556). Despite the extensive bodies of international human rights law protecting girls' rights, many countries fail to live up to their obligations. Sierra Leone offers a prime case where both adolescent pregnancy and out-of-school rates are continuously high. Therefore, studying this context can provide valuable insights to the struggles for adolescent girls' empowerment globally.

Sierra Leone has embraced and committed to the effective realization and internalization of international conventions such as CEDAW, and has established various relevant legal frameworks to promote gender equality and women's empowerment (Government of Sierra Leone, 2014, p. 4). However, the country continues receive low scores on international gender indicators (UNDP, 2015). Furthermore, Sierra Leone has been struggling with high teenage pregnancy rates for some time. In 2013 the country ranked among the ten highest in the world, with 28% of girls aged between 15-19 years being pregnant or already having given birth at least once. Although the seriousness of the issue was recognized long before the Ebola outbreak, research points to a drastic increase in these rates due to the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) crisis and the emergency measures put in place to respond to it (Denney, et al., 2015, p. 5). Teenage pregnancy is recognized as a widespread health risk for adolescent girls as well as a global development concern and a complex and highly context-dependent issue. Most adolescent pregnancies occur in developing countries. Of

the annual 13.1 million births to girls aged 15-19, only 680,000 occur in developed countries (UNFPA, 2013b, p. 13)..

Teenage mothers are twice as likely to die from pregnancy related complications as women over 20. Furthermore, babies born to adolescent mothers face a substantially higher risk of dying than those born to women aged 20-24 (WHO, 2014). In addition to health risks such as maternal death, illness and disability, obstetric fistula, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) etc., adolescent pregnancy holds socio-economic implications. It impacts girls' education, often interrupting formal education or leading to lost opportunities, or other compromising economic situations such as exclusion from paid employment or livelihoods and the loss of human capital (UNFPA, 2013b, p. 18). Teenage pregnancy and school dropout are thus closely associated. According to recent studies conducted in Sierra Leone, teenage mothers have reported that school dropout is one of the most stressful outcomes of becoming pregnant. In addition, data suggests that the continuation of school during pregnancy is not seen as the social norm (Lai & Towriss, 2014, p. 47).

As schools reopened in April 2015 after having been closed for nearly a year during the Ebola crisis, government statements formalized the practice of sending girls home because of pregnancy, leaving thousands of girls outside the formal education system. With support from development partners, the Ministry for Education, Science and Technology (MEST) introduced a bridge programme to support more than 14,500 pregnant and recently pregnant adolescent girls to continue their schooling in 330 learning centres across all the 14 districts of Sierra Leone (Musa, 2016).

Formalizing such practices through official government statements while at the same time promoting girls' empowerment and the importance of education raises questions on how gender equality and empowerment are perceived in this context. The concepts of *gender* and *empowerment* will be discussed in depth in the theoretical framework of this thesis and subsequently applied to the empirical data collected during a field study conducted in Freetown, Sierra Leone during the fall of 2016. How gender and gender equality are understood among the stakeholders facilitate a more in-depth analysis of opportunities and challenges young mothers face in their pursuit of education.

1.1   Purpose and research question

This study takes a closer look at the effects of teenage pregnancy on girls' access to education in Sierra Leone. It explores issues at the intersection of government policy, reproductive rights, and the right to education, with a special focus on gender roles and empowerment. By researching the narratives of young mothers in post-Ebola Sierra Leone, the purpose of this study is to better understand their situations, wants and needs related to access to education. The study draws on the

academic literature on empowerment and gender by Kabeer, Murphy-Graham and Lloyd, Scott and others. Insights to the stories of the girls participating in this study may in turn assist scholars, policy makers and development practitioners tailor programmes and interventions to better meet those wants and needs, and in turn further empower young mothers.

> The research question this thesis aims to address is;
> *In light of the recent Ebola crisis, what are the implications of adolescent pregnancy on girls' access to education?*
> which in turn leads to the sub-question;
> *What are the challenges and opportunities young mothers face in terms of re-entering schools?*

While conducting the study, a number of guiding questions have helped frame the data collection. These relate to how the respondents identify and understand underlying social structures with implications for their situation as teenage mothers – what are the taboos related to adolescent pregnancy in their homes and communities? What challenges do they face at the learning centres? What kinds of support do they receive from their communities, government and other networks? How are the agendas of stakeholders supporting or hindering girl's access to education? For a more comprehensive overview of questions posed during the study, interview guides are included in the appendix.

1.2   Delimitations

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, the research undertaken is focused on analyzing how the girls perceive their educational opportunities and linking that to their perception of empowerment. This study does not attempt to analyze the quantitative outcomes of the learning centres, nor does it make any claims regarding the content of the curriculum taught at the learning centres. Thoughts regarding the curriculum has however come up in the participants' stories, and those stories inform this thesis as they're relevant for the discussions of the girls' perceived empowerment. It is also important to recognize that the issue of early pregnancy often goes hand in hand with, and promotes, child marriage. Because the focus of this thesis is on educational opportunities, child marriage is not discussed in depth.

In terms of numbers, this thesis builds on nine interviews with young mothers, and observations from focus groups with a total of 80 girls participating. The study is further informed by conversations and interviews with government representatives and development partners working on the ground on issues related to adolescent mothers and their educational opportunities. It was

surprising to learn that there are no project documents available to the public that could serve as primary source for a text analysis of the learning centres. This will be further discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

2   Setting the scene

To ground the theoretical framework guiding this study, this chapter will outline the specific case study of Sierra Leone, offering relevant background information required to delve into the complexity of adolescent pregnancies and young mothers' access to education in the country. This chapter captures the issues both at a global policy level as well as elaborates on the case study presently at hand.

2.1   Global commitments

In order to properly understand the context of Sierra Leone, and to not risk the pitfall of treating Sierra Leone as an isolated case, one must first take a step back and understand the broader, global issues of adolescent pregnancy and girls' right to education. The concept of sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), was coined and incorporated as part of the human rights agenda at the ICPD in 1994. SRHR is intrinsically linked to gender equality and emphasizes the agency and ability of both men and women to shape their lives. It is now well known that health is deeply rooted in the socio-economic conditions in which people live and work, and in the political settings in a country or region where they reside. Reproductive health and fertility rates amongst youth, can thus be seen as a conflation of socio-economic and political circumstances that define women's reproductive rights (Safaei, 2012, p. 139).

Societal shifts and behavioral patterns intensified by developmental vulnerabilities create a combination of factors that place adolescents at heightened risks for poor health outcomes, and although progress has been made since the ICPD in 1994, SRHR remains a sensitive and controversial issue in many parts of the world. Furthermore, adolescents continue to be disproportionally burdened by threats to their sexual and reproductive health. It is also a fairly new notion to regard people in their second decade of life as a unique group, especially when it comes to health risks and health services. Despite their significant differences in terms of physical maturity, cognitive capacity, behaviors and social skills from both children and from adults, health services for adolescents have not traditionally been differentiated. Unmarried adolescents have been offered services as part of child health care, and married girls have been offered the same reproductive care as adult women (Bearinger, et al., 2007, p. 1220).

The full enjoyment of rights is central to adolescents' transition from childhood to adulthood. Research and history has proven that fully engaged, educated, healthy, informed and productive adolescents can help break multigenerational poverty and contribute to the strengthening of their communities (UNFPA, 2013b, p. 58). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provides governments and societies with rules regarding the basic elements for the protection of girls and boys until they reach adulthood. In the CRC, it was agreed upon that government and societal actions concerning children should be guided by the principle of non-discrimination. This was illuminated by promoting the best interest of the child; supporting the realization of their rights to life, survival and development; and respect for their views. The provisions of the CRC and the ICPD with its outcome document remain the most all-encompassing global commitment to reproductive health and rights. Both the CRC and ICPD also make guarantees to eliminate harmful practices such as child marriage. Sierra Leone has signed and ratified the CRC and has established national mechanisms for implementing and tracking its progress. The CRC specifies, in article 28, all children's right to free primary education highlighting the child's right to freedom from physical or mental violence, abuse or neglect in schools. High value is placed on education in the CRC, and it states that young people should be encouraged to reach the highest level of education of which they are capable. Article 29 further declares that education should foster each child's personality, talents and abilities and encourage respect of others, human rights promotion and help children to live peacefully (United Nations, 1989).

The ICPD put substantial emphasis on supporting the needs and aspirations of adolescents worldwide, through expanding their capacities. It urges governments to end child and forced marriages, and it calls for action to "encourage children, adolescents and youth, particularly young women, to continue their education in order to equip them for a better life, to increase their human potential, to help prevent early marriage, and high-risk child-bearing and to reduce the associated mortality and morbidity" (UNFPA, 2013a, p. 2). This represents a strong global commitment to the empowerment of youth and adolescents. Empowerment as a concept was first introduced in the 1980's and became central to the work of both scholars and development organizations, and it holds a central role in this thesis. The Programme of Action of the CRC calls for greater and more active involvement of adolescents and youth participation in the planning, implementation and evaluation of development activities that directly effect on their daily lives such as information, education and communication activities, and services concerning reproductive and sexual health, including the prevention of pregnancies before age 18 (UNFPA, 2013a, p. 2).

The ICPD enumerates two distinctive objectives related to the reproductive health needs of adolescents: a) to address adolescent sexual and reproductive health issues including unwanted

pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and STIs, through the promotion of responsible and healthy reproductive and sexual behavior; and b) to substantially reduce adolescent pregnancies (UNFPA, 2013a, p. 3).

On 25 September, 2015, world leaders gathered at the UN General Assembly in New York to adopt a new set of sustainable development goals to guide development priorities and efforts to achieve a better world for all by 2030. The outcome document, "Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", concluded the most inclusive consultation process in the history of the UN, requiring more than three years of planning and negotiations. It also marked the beginning of new partnerships and a reaffirmed joint aspiration to reach development results (United Nations, 2015). Historically, issues concerning gender equality and women's rights have been placed on the global policy agenda by women (Connell, 2005b, p. 1801) and have received varying degrees of attention over the past 40 years. In the previous set of global development goals, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls were incorporated through goals on promoting gender equality (MDG 3) and improved maternal health (MDG 5). The targets for MDG 5 were to reduce the global maternal mortality rate by three quarters and to achieve universal access to reproductive health by 2015. Indicators included proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel, contraceptive prevalence rate, antenatal care coverage, unmet need for family planning and adolescent birth rate (United Nations, 2000).

The new set of goals, detailed in the 2030 Agenda, builds on the progress and goals initiated with the MDGs, and further emphasizes the rights and needs of women and girls. It is stated that the new goals seek to "realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls" (United Nations, 2015, p. 2). The new agenda is much broader than the MDG Agenda and outlines 17 goals replacing the previous eight. The 17 goals consist of a total of 169 targets. SDG 5, which is to *achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*, references and builds upon the outcomes of the ICPD from 1994 and the Beijing Platform for Action from 1995 (United Nations, 2015, p. 18). SDG 3, concerning *ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages,* also specifies that by 2030, there should be universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services (United Nations, 2015, p. 16). The new agenda correspondingly includes a goal for education, reaffirming the rights of the child from the CRC. SDG 4, to *ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,* states that by 2030, all girls and boys should complete primary and secondary schooling. Targets also include to completely eliminate gender disparities and ensure equal access to all levels of education (United Nations, 2015, p. 17).

During the General Assembly in New York in 2016, presidents, ministers, and UN and World Bank representatives met to strengthen their commitments to Africa's youth. As part of the investments needed to boost the continent economically it focused on youth empowerment and reaffirmed global commitments to ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health care, including voluntary family planning, and the overall empowerment of women and girls (UNFPA, 2016).

2.2   Sierra Leone and adolescent pregnancy

Against the backdrop of the prior mentioned global commitments to strengthen sexual and reproductive health and rights among all peoples, and among adolescents in particular, as well as commitments to ensuring every girl's right to education, this case study focuses on the progress and obstacles in pursuing these goals in Sierra Leone. Since the conclusion of the civil war in 2002 there have been considerable achievements in consolidating peace, building democracy and improvements on several development indicators, yet Sierra Leone remains among the poorest countries in the world. The country ranks 181st out of 187 countries on the 2015 Human Development Index list. Over 77.5% of the population live in multidimensional poverty, life expectancy at birth is as low as 50.9 years and the mean years of schooling is 3.1 (UNDP, 2015, p. 210).

On 31 July 2014, President Koroma declared a state of emergency, several months after the first case of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) was recorded in late May 2014. 464 days later, on 7 November 2015, the World Health Organization officially declared the end of the outbreak in Sierra Leone. A couple of flare-ups with individual cases were detected in early 2016. According to the WHO, over 8,700 cases were detected and almost 3,600 people lost their lives during the outbreak in Sierra Leone (WHO, 2015). The Ebola crisis devastated both the private and public spheres and health systems at all levels, and women and girls were disproportionally exposed to the virus. A majority of the front line workers – individuals who served as nurses, midwives, sanitizers, hygienists, laundry workers in clinics, hospitals or other care facilities – were women. Women are also the primary care-takers in the private sphere, putting them at greater risk of contracting the virus (UNDP and partners, 2015, p. 96).

In addition to death and illness caused by Ebola, and other impacts related to access to health care services, the crisis has had significant socio-economic impacts on women and girls. Market closings, decreases in fruit and vegetable production and restrictions of movement due to the outbreak had direct implications on women's economic empowerment and livelihoods. Moreover, the consequences of the EVD crisis have been reported to contribute to exacerbating family and community stress, which in turn may have led to increased gender-based violence and sexual violence in the region (UNDP and partners, 2015, p. 96). As mentioned in the introduction to this

thesis, research also points to a surge in adolescent pregnancy rates following the crisis. An increase in female headed households following daughters losing their parents and assuming the role of caretakers. raising their siblings, or wives losing their husbands to Ebola has exacerbated and created larger vulnerable groups, many of whom are at risk of becoming victims of violence or early pregnancy (Bornstein, 2016). Due to insufficient data and lack of statistical capacity in Sierra Leone, the estimates of exactly how many girls became pregnant during the crisis vary. Save the Children estimated around 20,000 teenage pregnancies (IBTimes, 2016), while some UN agencies have reported 14,000 (UNICEF, 2016a). A rapid assessment conducted in 2015 by UNFPA revealed that over 18,100 girls between the ages 10 and 19 had become pregnant during the Ebola outbreak. Out of these girls, over 10,000 had been enrolled in school at the time of school closure (UNICEF, 2016b). Either way, this represents a significant increase with substantial implications for girls and women. Findings from a government assessment made in May 2016 display a lack of knowledge related to the process of conception. This is a key risk factor for teenage pregnancy. Additionally, findings suggest that sexual education is virtually absent in schools and homes (National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy, 2016, p. 62).

Progress had been made in Sierra Leone to improve sexual and reproductive health over the decade following the end of the civil war, between 2002 and 2012. The data collected in 2013 revealed that teenage pregnancies had decreased from 34% of adolescent women age 15-19, to 28%. Unfortunately, reports show that the Ebola crisis compromised those achievements (UNFPA, 2015, p. 1) and, weakened already poor health systems. The crisis reversed some progress made in recent years in improving reproductive, maternal, neonatal, adolescent, and child health (RMNCAH). An assessment conducted by UNFPA and partners on the RMNCAH service utilization shows a shift in how people seek and receive health care following the Ebola crisis. It reveals a lack of readiness to provide adolescent and youth-friendly services in many facilities, and that health service utilization has dropped as a result of those factors. The UNFPA report further compares the RMNACH outcomes during the Ebola outbreak to a hypothetical situation without the outbreak. The findings suggest that with Ebola, Sierra Leone saw higher rates of maternal mortality, new-born deaths and higher burden of unplanned pregnancies. The assessment links these implications to adolescents' having more time to spend recreationally, less interaction with school-based SRH programmes, and more transactional sex (UNFPA, 2015, p. iii).

2.3   Strategies and interventions to reduce teenage pregnancies

Despite vastly different circumstances and patterns in adolescent reproductive health, and despite the broadly agreed upon notions that this issue lacks a one-size-fits-all-solution, some common elements can be found in preventative strategies and health initiatives utilized worldwide. These

include three primary categories of interventions; clinical services, sex education programmes; and youth development strategies (Bearinger, et al., 2007, p. 1225). Because the challenges are great and complex, and because of the many underlying causes of adolescent pregnancy, this issue requires a holistic approach. Experience shows that many of the actions of governments, civil societies and international organizations that have been most effective in preventing pregnancy were not originally designed for that purpose. Rather, multidimensional interventions that aimed to develop girls' human capital, focusing on their agency to make decisions about their bodies and sexuality, and promote gender equality and human rights, have yielded documentable impact on preventing pregnancies as well (UNFPA, 2013b, p. 80). Previous research and findings of this kind offers a starting point for the field study at hand, placing empowerment and agency at the centre.

A study launched in rural Zambia in 2016 with approximately 4,900 girls participating, aiming to measure the effect different interventions have on early childbearing rates, including interventions such as economic support to the girls and their families and combining such support with community interventions to enhance knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and supportive community norms. Such a trial can provide further insights to what may have positive effects on girls' empowerment related to adolescent pregnancy and the girls' equal right to education (Sandøy, et al., 2016, p. 13). Similarly, recent research conducted in Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, shows that interventions such as supporting adolescent girls and young women economically and building their business skills strengthen their empowerment. Other successful approaches include helping to foster girls' positive relationships within and outside the family and working to shift social norms as well as working with the institutions. These interventions can build girls' social, economic and psychological resources and in turn facilitate their empowerment. Most importantly, the findings from the study in Kinshasa show that the starting point for all interventions should be to ensure they are aligned with adolescent girls' own realities, priorities, and aspirations. Most of the participants had an acute awareness of the risks and opportunities they faced and how to navigate these (McLean & Modi, 2016, p. 489). These findings show that studying the experiences of girls should be of value to governments and development partners as they develop and implement interventions to address the complex issues of adolescent pregnancy, and their efforts' effects on young women.

In 2013, President Koroma commissioned the National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy in Sierra Leone in an effort to combat the detrimental impacts early pregnancy has on girls in the country. The strategy recognises the problem as a multi-sectoral issue and brought together several government ministries (Health and Sanitation; Education, Science and Technology; Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs; Youth and Sport; and Local Government and Rural

Affairs), UN agencies and national and international NGOs. The strategy clearly states that "in Sierra Leone, early childbearing and teenage pregnancy is one of the more pervasive problems affecting the health, social, economic and political progress and empowerment of women and girls" (Government of Sierra Leone, 2013, p. 5). While there was high-level support for the strategy, it was unclear if the government had the resources, tools and political will across all ministries to operationalize and realize the strategy. Challenges in terms of government capacity to implement have only deepened with the Ebola crisis diverting both attention and resources (Denney, et al., 2015, p. 9). A new strategy is being developed in 2016 to replace the current one.

A common approach to reducing teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone has been to establish safe spaces for girls and children. These child-friendly spaces provide a platform for them to spend time, talking with their peers and receive information from trained personnel. They can be set up and operated slightly differently in different fora, such as in connection to health facilities, at schools or so called girls' clubs (Denney, et al., 2015, p. 15). Interventions often include supporting life skills trainings which offer girls and boys practical skills and knowledge that will promote employment. However, these efforts tend to be focused on specific topics and not all-encompassing and well rounded (Musa, 2016). Among the interventions to reduce teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone, much of the focus has been on awareness-raising and sensitizing related to sexual and reproductive health knowledge or women's rights. Awareness-raising around teenage pregnancy and sexual and reproductive health has also been included in public education in different ways, albeit not with great impact nor oversight. Assessments have shown that promoting SRH knowledge is seen as particularly important due to the lack of accurate information received by most teenagers at home and at school. The National Secretariat on Teenage Pregnancy and numerous NGOs have used campaigns as a method to improve knowledge around various aspects of teenage pregnancy, for example ending child marriage and early pregnancy, encouraging condom usage, educating on HIV and AIDS, combating sexual exploitation in schools, and promoting awareness of legal rights (Denney, et al., 2015, p. 18).

Interventions including support to central government institutions constitute another area of interventions, where focus in Sierra Leone has been on providing skills, knowledge, resources and management capacities. However, this support has been limited in comparison with capacity building support in other sectors of central government institutions. Some research suggest that this may relate to the fact that the GoSL is not always seen as having the requisite political will to act on the issue of teenage pregnancy (Denney, et al., 2015, p. 19).

Lastly, initiatives engaging men and boys in efforts to reduce teenage pregnancy exist, but few organizations are actively working with men and boys around these issues. Similar to efforts to engage men and boys around HIV-prevention and reducing gender-based violence, the work being undertaken has been seen to largely focus on providing individuals with knowledge and skills to change their behavior (Denney, et al., 2015, p. 19). The UN Women led HeforShe campaign which engages men and boys to become champions in the protection of women's and girls' human rights including prevention of sexual harassment and abuse and supporting girl child education, is slowly taking root in the country (Okumu, 2016).

The interventions put in place in Sierra Leone for preventing adolescent pregnancy outlined above are aligned with current scholarly contributions to the discussions on best-practices. For example, Bearinger et al. argue that "whereas strategies must be tailored to the developmental needs of this age group and their social contexts, effective approaches are multifaceted. All adolescents need access to quality youth-friendly services provided by clinicians trained to work with this population. Sex education programmes should offer accurate, comprehensive information while building skills for negotiating sexual behaviors" (2007, p. 1220). However, it has been noted that an overwhelming focus of much programming on reducing early pregnancy is about changing girls' behavior through getting girls to use family planning, abstain from sex, stay in school etc.; "While this might make intuitive sense, it ignores the fact that girls' behavior is the outcome of the context in which they find themselves and their ability to turn these well-intentioned messages into practice is always mediated by that context" (Denney, et al., 2016, p. 23).

2.4   Excluding visibly pregnant girls from schools

As the number of Ebola cases declined in March 2015, the GoSL announced that schools would reopen and the education system would resume. The reopening of schools, and plans to conduct exams, including the Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE exams) which are essential for children to get into higher learning institutions, was seen as a landmark moment as it implied that people could start getting back to their normal lives (Amnesty, 2015, p. 14).

However, as was briefly mentioned in the introduction, the head of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Minister Bah, made various public statements in media as the plans to reopen schools progressed, declaring that pregnant girls would not be allowed back to school or to sit exams. The subsequent ban implemented applies to "visibly pregnant" and lactating girls and was legitimized by the idea that their "presence in the classroom would serve as a negative influence to other innocent girls" (Ebola Deeply, 2015). In a press release from the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, the policy to exclude these girls from school is deemed discriminatory against

women and girls. The Commission stated that this pattern of stigmatizing pregnant young women would increase their marginalization and vulnerability. The policy represents an implicit violation of their economic, social and cultural right to education, livelihood, adequate standard of living and their rights to participate and contribute to nation building (Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, 2015).

The former Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affair, Minister Kaikai, told Amnesty International in 2015 that Sierra Leone "cannot have pregnant girls sitting alongside normal girls in normal schools" as it would "send the wrong message and encourage other girls in the class to get pregnant". "During the Ebola outbreak, children were given clear instructions: do not touch… These girls could not even comply with basic rules and there must be consequences for their actions", he continued (Amnesty, 2015, p. 17). In line with the Human Rights Commissions statement on the ban, the UN Country Team, representing all 17 UN agencies present in Sierra Leone, stated that the ban is in direct violation of human rights law and reminded the government that education is a fundamental human right that Sierra Leone has committed itself to uphold (United Nations in Sierra Leone, 2015).

As thousands of girls became victims of teenage pregnancy during the Ebola crisis, they were left out of the education system as the ban was immediately put into effect. Although the responsible ministries had promised that the girls were assured a place in school after giving birth, there were no provisions developed to ensure their continued education. Despite written commitments to "provide skills and basic knowledge in parenting", as well as "training and basic knowledge in literacy and numeracy", no detailed plans were provided for how the continued schooling of girls during pregnancy would be implemented. It is important to note that the practice of excluding pregnant teenage girls from schools was not a new phenomenon and had been practiced for many years, but this ban turned an informal practice into government policy which formalized and exacerbated the issue (Amnesty, 2015, p. 20).

Following the government's articulation of the ban on visibly pregnant girls from schools, pressure was exerted on the government to design and implement a plan for the out-of-school girls affected. The programme was launched in November 2015 to offer classes and resources to the pregnant teenage girls who are prohibited from attending school, and it continued through September 2016. With funding from the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) and Irish Aid, the GoSL and the UN supported more than 14,500 pregnant and recently pregnant girls in learning centres and through school radio programmes while at home (UNICEF, 2016a). The programme ran for one school year and the centres offered classes for upper primary (primary 5 and 6), junior

secondary school (JSS 1-3) and senior secondary school (SSS 1-4) depending on the demand from girls in the particular centre. Classes were held for two hours, three afternoons per week in the four core subjects (English, Mathematics, Social Studies and Integrated Science). 2,297 teachers were selected and trained by MEST to facilitate and support the bridge education programme (UNICEF, 2016b).

This bridge programme represents an effort to empower young girls and ensure their continued schooling since they were affected by the ban and left out of the formal education system. The concept of empowerment concerns expanding individuals' ability to make choices, and for the case of Sierra Leone and adolescent mothers, the learning centres implies introducing options that were previously not available to them. Furthermore, this study offers supporting arguments to previous research linking gender norms' to girls' access to education, rather than just suggesting that the phenomenon of school drop-out is a cultural practice (see for example (Wolf, et al., 2016; Chisamya, et al., 2012; Subrahmanian, 2005)). The concepts of empowerment and gender will be further elaborated in the theoretical framework

Sierra Leone had some 40 non-formal learning centres like these before, but the new policy lead to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology establishing almost 300 more across the country, to make room for the young girls affected by the ban. In January 2016, 5,072 of the 14,500 girls returned back to school, and the remaining girls were to go back to school between August and September of the same year. In November 2016, the project for pregnant out of school girls was replaced by the Girls' Access to Education (GATE) project, which targets all out-of-school girls, and not just those who are out of school due to pregnancy (Musa, 2016).

3   Theoretical framework

To frame the Sierra Leone case, the following chapter discusses the theoretical framework which will guide the analysis. This study relies on theory related to gender, development and empowerment, with an emphasis on access to education. These and other key concepts are important in seeking to understand the key puzzle of this thesis which is the implication of teenage pregnancy on girls' right to education in post-Ebola Sierra Leone. Moreover, this framework will enable a critical analysis of the outcomes of the field study. This chapter begins with a section discussing the conceptualization of gender, followed by an overview of feminist theory in the field of development, providing the context within which this case study is situated. Thereafter, a capabilities approach to empowerment, which will be central to the analysis, is discussed, as well as how it relates to education.

3.1   Introducing gender

Gender, in this thesis, is to be understood as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on 'perceived' differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power", as defined by Joan Scott (1986, p. 1054). Scott contends that gender as a term first emerged among American feminists who wanted to insist on the fundamentally social quality of distinctions based on sex. Gender was therefore a term offered by those who claimed that women's scholarship would fundamentally transform disciplinary paradigms. Feminist scholars pointed out early on that the study of women would add new subject matters as well as force a critical re-examination of the premises and standards of existing scholarly work where gender was not taken into account across the social sciences. The concept introduces a relational notion to the analytical vocabulary, as opposed to only focusing on terms as *sex* or *biological difference*. This position entails that that women and men are defined in relation to one another rather than separately, and no understanding of either of the categorizations can be achieved by studying only one of the two. As Natalie Davis suggested in 1975, and cited by Scott; "it seems to me that we should be interested in the history of both women and men, that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus entirely on peasants" (Scott, 1986, p. 1054). Gender equality is also an important principle in understanding and establishing human rights. It is consequently vital for grounding this study, situating it amongst discourse on the rights of adolescents to reproductive health and to education.

Employing gender as a concept also entails that there are characterizations that define the relational aspects of gender. Masculinity refers to the various ways manhood is socially defined across historical and cultural contexts. It delineates the power differences between specific versions of manhood. The concept of *hegemonic masculinity* formulated in the mid-1980's has had considerable influence on recent thinking about men, gender, and social hierarchy. This concept has been widely used, debated, and redefined over the years (Jewkes, et al., 2015, p. 113). Just as gender is to be considered relational, neither masculinities nor femininities are constructed and performed in a vacuum. They cannot exist without one another. The concept of hegemonic masculinity was originally formulated in tandem with a concept of hegemonic femininity, which was soon renamed *emphasized femininity* to acknowledge the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). Both of these concepts are to be understood as the patterns of practice and not just a set of role expectations or identity, which allows gender hierarchies to live on. Emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity are distinguished from other forms of femininity or masculinity as they are normative and embody the "currently most honored way of being" a man or a woman at a given time, and require all other men and women to position themselves in relation to it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 833).

Although this thesis does not focus on men and masculinities, the notion of certain patterns of practice enabling gender hierarchies is useful for understanding how girls in Sierra Leone perceive their roles in society as they get pregnant and how they and society react to their exclusion from schools.

Based on previous research on adolescent pregnancies referring to gender roles and other underlying structural inequalities as some of its fundamental causes, this thesis has taken into account gender, masculinities and femininities as expressed in the narratives of the respondents. These concepts are useful to comprehend the experiences shared in this study because they enable a critical analysis of – and provide a blueprint for – understanding the gender roles and local, current masculinities or femininities in this context. Gender and how the respondents understand these concepts play into the situation for adolescent mothers in their homes, communities and, particularly significant for this study, the learning centres. How are these roles manifested, and how do they affect the girls' access to education? Do they? As this thesis focuses on the experiences of the girls, and because some of these experiences are distinctively gendered it is important to look at the case study through this gender lens. It is also valuable to apply this lens to avoid reproducing any preconceived notions or stereotypes.

3.2   Feminist theory in development

It was not until the 1970's that gender equality gained attention within international development research and cooperation. Insights from western women's movements were fed into the thinking and practice of development aid, resulting in various approaches to include gender in development work and analysis (Arnfred, 2001, p. 73). In line with the abovementioned understandings of gender and gender roles, the *Gender and Development* perspective, originated in the mid-1970's and introduced more commonly in the 80's, looked at the category women in relation to men and the ways in which relations between these categories were socially constructed. Such research is based on the premise that gender must be understood by analyzing the categorizations of men and women as being socially constructed and reinforced. In other words, that gender is constructed and reinforced through gender identities and roles along binaries so that men are assigned certain roles, and women others. This approach takes into account how such categorizations lead to different needs assessments and actions by development practitioners (Peet, 2009, p. 298). The GAD approach (as compared to previous approaches which only took into account *women*, rather than the social constructions and relational view of the genders), made visible the aspect of power in gender relations. It became clear that changing gender relations was bound to be contested as they were

likely to be perceived as threatening male privileges – in both the global North and South (Arnfred, 2001, p. 75).

As the GAD initiatives aim to challenge the effects of gender inequality, it is important that the role of men as a group are not overlooked in these efforts. By disregarding the complexities of male experience and by characterizing men as 'the problem', development initiatives that aim to be gender-aware can fail to effectively address inequality and other related issues. To engage all stakeholders in the promotion of gender equality, and to make it everyone's business, strategies are required that account for the complexities of difference, and that gender relations are fundamentally power relations. This notion is also the basic premise on which the approach is founded (Cornwall, 1997, p. 8). Criticism against the GAD approach has focused on the danger of the term gender being used as a neutral term, referring to both women and men, which could undermine the intentions of highlighting gender hierarchies. It is important to ensure that the hierarchy between the groups is not forgotten. "A problem with the concept of gender is that it can be used in a very descriptive way, and the question of power can easily be removed" (Baden and Goetz (1998) as cited in Amfred (2001, p. 75)).

Different approaches at the intersection of gender studies, political science and development studies, can be linked to the discussion on the production of knowledge within social sciences and politics. One of the advantages of the GAD approach is that thinking in terms of gender relations points to the epistemological aspects of male dominance (Arnfred, 2001, p. 75). Raewyn Connell proposes that "academic historical writing has of course, always been about men – at least, about rich and famous men" (Connell, 2005a, p. 27). Previous assumptions in politics and history have been that the subjects studied are men, or as Connell exemplifies with the studies of labor markets; being the breadwinner was considered a core part of masculinities. As social change occurred, it became clear from such studies that definitions of masculinity were deeply entangled in the history of institutions and of economic measure (Connell, 2005a, p. 29). As a result of social change, women and girls have also been introduced as agents to theories of development, thus changing the production of knowledge within the field. In this spirit, this study places girls at the centre, and by doing so, it seeks to gain deeper understanding of their experiences, striving to help development practitioners better tailor interventions to meet their wants and needs.

Diane Elson discusses similar issues in the context of development in her book "Male Bias in the Development Processes" (1995). She argues that a male bias operates in favor of men as a gender and against women as a gender. Social and economic structures have historically created a bias where men enjoy (most of) the advantages from development projects. While men as a group can

reap the benefit of development initiatives, women's productivity is often lowered which in turn reduces their total output in comparison with what could have been achieved if resources were allocated free of gender distortion. Elson writes that male bias hence is a "barrier to the achievement of development objectives", and she also poses the question of why men don't show more eagerness to overcome male bias. Overcoming male bias does not mean the disintegration of pooling and sharing of resources between men and women, but rather it means a disintegration of unjust gender asymmetries (Elson, 1995, p. 7).

Men still hold substantial advantages over women worldwide, and Connell contends, in slight contrast with Elson's question on why, that it is clear that globally, men have a lot to lose from pursuing gender equality because men, collectively, continue to receive a patriarchal dividend. However, she also argues that gender equality benefits all as she resembles inequality to a balance sheet. The balance sheet accounts for disadvantages as conditions to the advantages. Connell exemplifies by stating that men cannot be the beneficiaries of women's domestic labor without many of them simultaneously losing intimate connections with their young children (Connell, 2005b, p. 1809). With this as the back-drop, researching and discussing girls' equal access to education is significant in order to understand women's empowerment and gender equality. In the case of Sierra Leone, where girls are excluded from schools as they get pregnant, the balance sheet is skewed already in early ages as girls and boys face different obstacles related to access to education. Bearing in mind arguments such as the ones proposed by Connell and Elson, can help frame the testimonies told by the participants in this study since analyzing their stories includes understanding how they relate to gender roles and gender equality in a development setting.

Since the mid-1980's, post-colonial feminism has gained awareness and increasing criticism has been voiced against Western feminism for being ignorant of the global South and experiences of non-white women. There was a tendency to assume a commonality in the forms of women's oppression worldwide and Western feminists assumed that their political project was universal (McEwan, 2001, p. 97). Chandra Mohanty has been recognized for having shined a light on the under- (and also miss-) representation of women from the global South in the feminist debate. At the core of her critique is the production of, what she used to call, the "Third World Woman", as identified in her 1986 essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" and other early work. She argues that this production has been highly Eurocentric and has come from 'Western developmentalist discourses' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 10). Mohanty underlines how women in the South have been constructed by Western feminists as a single story, always victimized and oppressed by 'their' patriarchal practices and cultures. Her aim was to discover and articulate a critique of Western feminist scholarship on non-Western women via the discursive colonization of

their lives and struggles. In her work on decolonizing feminism, Mohanty argues for the recognition of the low-income world not just through oppression but also in terms of historical complexities and the many struggles to change these oppressions. Post-colonial feminist insights are important when seeking to conduct research among adolescent mothers and understand their struggles as well as their successes in Sierra Leone.

The critiques and thoughts on epistemology and knowledge production interwoven in these feminist theories (as well as their direct relevance to my own situatedness within privilege) will be explored further in the methodology chapter. The GAD approach and post-colonial feminism in development theory and practice provide useful frames within which this case study is situated. The understandings of gender (including gender roles such as masculinities and femininities) and the concept empowerment employed in the analysis as well as the feminist theories along with its criticism are important for any conclusions drawn in this study to not become ahistorical.

3.3   A capabilities approach to empowerment

There are a range of definitions of and approaches to empowerment used by different actors. To some, empowerment is a political concept that involves a collective struggle. To others, it refers to the consciousness of individuals, and the power to express and act on one's desires. Interestingly, the term does not translate easily or equally to other languages (Luttrell, et al., 2009, p. 3). The notion that empowerment is an unfolding process of changes in consciousness and collective power has been central to the concept (Cornwall, 2016, p. 343). In contrast with other debates in feminism, which are dominated by Northern thinking, much of the writing on empowerment and gender emerged from the South. The *empowerment of women* became an important part of the work for gender equality and development. It was further propelled by feminist critiques of development. Empowerment was very much connected to the GAD approach as it emerged, with its associated actor-oriented and bottom-up methods. Although empowerment as a term often refers to women and gender equality, it is not only a gender issue. It concerns marginalized groups, and could be applied to a range of social differentiations – either separately or intersecting – such as caste, disability and ethnicity (Luttrell, et al., 2009, p. 3).

Amartya Sen, a key contributor to the theoretical attention on women's empowerment, describes it as 'one of the central issues in the process of development for many countries in the world today' (Sen, 1999, p. 202). He recognized women as *active agents of change* and empowerment is the acquisition by women of agency and voice (Sen, 1999, p. 193). Some criticism has been raised against his approaches to capabilities and agency saying that they do not sufficiently focus on gender or suggest how subjects can gain agency in their lives. The capabilities of individuals

(meaning the aggregate of resources and human capital as prerequisites to agency) are silent on the capability to exercise freedom. Moreover, feminists have long argued that empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women, but rather it is when women recognize their power within and act together with other women to exercise power that they gain power to act as agents (Cornwall, 2016, p. 356).

Another prominent thinker, Martha Nussbaum, builds on Sen's writing on capabilities and identifies concrete aspects of social life that are essential for the conception of a decent life for all. She writes that those central capabilities and factors in life such as the "double day" with both taxing employment and childcare or housework duties, or differing legal rights to those of men, create unequal social and political circumstances. These unequal circumstances give women unequal human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 1). Nussbaum does however not consider conditions that affect women in particular and, like Sen, she doesn't elaborate on how women are to gain agency (Stromquist, 2015, p. 308). Today, the capabilities approach, or the human development approach as it is also called, is the theoretical paradigm in the development and policy world (Nussbaum, 2011, p. x), making these notions vital for a study on young mothers' empowerment in post-Ebola Sierra Leone. What are people actually able to do and to be, and what real opportunities are available to them? These are questions relevant to ask when applying a capabilities approach to empowerment, and well aligned with the purpose and aim of this study.

This thesis, in line with Naila Kabeer's writing on the topic, builds on the notion that women's empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability (Kabeer, 1999, p. 435). At its core lies concepts of *power* in terms of ability to make life choices, and to be disempowered thereby implies to be denied those choices. In other words, empowerment includes the process of change. In the broader category of strategic life choices, or first-order choices as Kabeer refer to them, we find choices which are critical for people to lead the lives they want, such as choices to do with livelihoods, whether and who to marry and whether to have children or not. Second-order choices have to do with choices that may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters. Kabeer outlines three inter-related dimensions of power that can help us understand the concept of empowerment: *resources*, *agency* and *outcomes*. (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). In the case of this thesis, these dimensions are important to analyze the educational opportunities for young mothers in Sierra Leone with greater depth.

Resources, or pre-conditions, include both material resources in the more conventional economic sense, but also the various human and social resources which enhance individuals' ability to choose.

In its broader sense, resources are acquired through several social relationships in the various domains in society. Decision-making authority within particular institutions (such as heads of families or chiefs in a community) place people in certain positions of power within those institutions. The resource dimension of power is, as will be discussed further in the analysis, crucial to the individuals' own understanding of their empowerment.

The second dimension of power relates to agency, or the ability to define goals and act to reach them. This dimension is about more than observable actions, it also includes the meaning, motivation and purpose that urge individuals to act – their *sense* of agency or, as Kabeer puts it, their 'power within'. Agency can take more forms than decision-making. It can manifest itself through bargaining or negotiating, through subversion and resistance as well as more intangible processes of reflection and analysis. Agency is in other words a process through which a person decides to act (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Agency stands for the freedom of the contingently acting subject over and against the constraints that derive from enduring social structures (Loyal & Barnes, 2001, p. 507). Agency is particularly pivotal to this study because adolescents in Sierra Leone are yet to be adequately organized in a systematic way to pursue their agency as a social category. Looking at agency and young mothers' experiences regarding their ability to make choices related to pregnancy and their education become necessary to be able to address these issues. In other words, to empower girls and reverse negative trends, one must identify where they are being disempowered.

Resources and agency together constitute *capabilities*, meaning that the potential people have to live the lives they want, and to achieve valued ways of "being and doing". The achievements, or outcome, dimensions of power are not relevant where the lack of success in reaching goals is due to for example incompetence or individual priorities. It is when the failure to achieve one's goals reflects a deeper constraint on the ability to choose that it can be a manifestation of disempowerment (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). For the case study at hand, the outcomes desired is the reintegration into the formal school system after giving birth, and subsequent access to further empowerment through education.

Kabeer further qualifies the notion of choice in a number of ways to make it relevant to the analysis of empowerment. For choices to be meaningful, she writes, there have to be alternatives and the possibility to have chosen otherwise. This includes material resources that enable women to choose, but also has to do with women's apparent compliance with or at least failure to protest against, norms and values which assigned them an inferior status to men in their society. Where women are economically dependent on those with power, attempts to question the status quo can undermine

their primary source of survival and security (Kabeer, 2012, p. 218). Although this thesis does not focus on men and boys, it is important to note that empowerment can be equally applied in work with men in order to break down gender barriers and achieve behavioral change. It is often easier to resist change and remain cushioned by the comfort of familiarity. Shifts in behavior can raise all kinds of anxieties and threats, especially when identities might be compromised. In other words, men can be empowered to resist masculinity norms that hinder women's empowerment (Cornwall, 1997, p. 12). This is relevant to mention in order to highlight how the empowerment project is not a burden only resting on women's and girls' shoulders. For the analysis, the girls' perception of their own empowerment will be in focus, but their stories inevitably include the boys who impregnate them.

So how does the empowerment concept relate to sexual and reproductive health and rights? As emphasized in the 2012 World Development Report, being able to decide whether, when, and with whom to have sex; whether, when, and whom to marry; whether or when to have children and how many children to have, are all expressions of agency (The World Bank, 2011, p. 150). Large shares of women and girls are constrained, unable to exercise agency over the domains of family planning and sexual health. There are many different manifestations of women's lack of sexual and reproductive agency such as high rates of early pregnancy and the challenges of accessing health services. Studies have shown that social norms and laws are important drivers of agency, especially when it comes to sexual and reproductive decisions (Klugman, et al., 2014, p. 102). There are also some established factors that affect women's and girls' agency in these matters, such as lack of education and its effect on risks of violence and early pregnancy, and the ability to negotiate within a sexual relationship. Evidence also suggest that economic and political opportunities play a role (Klugman, et al., 2014, p. 103). For this thesis, the concepts of empowerment and agency will be valuable for the analysis of the narratives shared by the young mothers regarding their experiences with teenage pregnancy and their exclusion from formal education. As will be demonstrated in the analysis, the capabilities and empowerment of the girls are central to understanding the issue of early pregnancy, and to the choices (or lack thereof) related to their schooling.

3.4   Education as empowerment

As this case focuses on young mothers' educational opportunities, some remarks on education as a source of empowerment are valuable. It has been widely argued by scholars that education is central to empowerment and to increasing agency and resources. According to Sen (1999), adequate social opportunities like public education can effectively shape individuals. Basic education, especially female schooling impacts societies both in terms of employment and health, and in terms of strengthened agency among women which in turn can enable them to influence public discussions

on a variety of social subjects. Sen argues that female schooling thus empowers women who in turn can help change positions regarding for example acceptable fertility rates, women's participation in education or politics and environmental priorities (Sen, 1999, p. 193). Kabeer's conceptualization of empowerment is, as noted by Nelly Stromquist, sensitive to the need for subsequent action. Empowerment as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic choices in a context where that ability was denied to them before implies that education can play a major role in gaining such abilities (Stromquist, 2015, p. 308).

Although schooling alone cannot foster social change, formal education enables women and girls to obtain better jobs through which they can support the economic dimensions of resources and empowerment (Stromquist, 2015, p. 313). Formal education fosters knowledge and, indirectly psychological dimensions of empowerment by increasing students' self-esteem, efficacy, and future life aspirations. A large body of empirical evidence demonstrates that educated women tend to engage in better decision-making about their private lives. Stromquist further notes how young girls tend to not yet be affected by political and economic dimensions of women's lives, but that education is still empowering through, for example, strengthened human and social resources. She argues; "Although formal knowledge can introduce key aspects regarding gender awareness – such as women's rights to protection from domestic violence and rape and to goods enjoyed by men such as access to property, land, and credit –, it must be recognized that this knowledge remains abstract for many girls. It is mainly as these young people move through life that they feel the impact of structural constraints." (Stromquist, 2015, p. 314).

As noted by Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2016), empowering adolescent girls through education has become a priority goal of multiple stakeholders, including government, aid agencies, NGOs, foundations and corporations. This can be seen in the 2030 Agenda and other global commitments, and it is also the case in Sierra Leone. Simultaneously, compounding evidence point to poor quality of many schools in developing countries. As most countries have achieved or are approaching universal primary enrolment and gender gaps at primary level are narrowing, attention has shifted to secondary school-age – adolescent – girls. Efforts are made to improve and broaden girls' range of competencies through education to reduce special risks they face during adolescence and to enhance social and economic assets as adults. Much of the earlier research and theory on empowerment (including that of Kabeer and Sen) has focused on adult women. Therefore, Murphy-Graham and Lloyd argue that some of the ways in which empowerment is conceptualized is not entirely relevant for adolescent girls. They offer a conceptual framework focusing on how education can promote adolescent girls' empowerment (Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016, p. 557). For the purpose of this thesis, and for the case of Sierra Leone, Kabeer's notions on empowerment is still applied in the

analysis but this framework adds to it as it puts emphasis on the educational opportunities of adolescent girls.

Murphy-Graham and Lloyd contend that they, "aligned with previous research, (…) recognize that the potential of education to promote empowerment is 'entangled with the sociocultural reality'", and in line with Kabeer, they argue that agency is an integral component of empowerment (Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016, p. 558). Non-formal programmes, such as the learning centres in Sierra Leone, targeting adolescents vary in their design, but generally one can say their purpose is to address the social isolation of these girls by building their social and personal competencies along with basic educational competencies. In the case of Sierra Leone, the centres are also established to function as a bridge for girls to re-enter the formal education system.

The conceptual framework suggested by Murphy-Graham and Lloyd consists of three core conditions which must exist for education to support girls' empowerment: 1) the physical, material, and socio-cultural environment must be conducive to learning; 2) empowering education for girls should foster the recognition of their dignity and equal worth with others; and 3) empowering education requires action, or learning, by doing (2016, p. 561). Out of these three, the second, which they also refer to as *value formation*, holds particular relevance to this study as it addresses the girls' equality and sense of equality with others in schools and in society at large. How does a school system wherein visibly pregnant girls are not welcome promote the recognition of these values?

Experiences from other contexts show that it is crucial to ensure the education of marginalized children and youth in order to reach goals of education and gender equality. In addition to categorizations such as age, class, sex and ethnicity, DeJaeghere and Lee (2011) argue, based on their research in Bangladesh, that other discriminatory conditions and norms that perpetuate inequalities contribute to defining inequalities. Feelings of safety, support from family and community, and gender norms are examples of what was found to have an impact on the children's capabilities (DeJaeghere & Lee, 2011, p. 39). They write that from a capabilities approach, marginalization is not only related to whether one receives an education, but the approach allows us to examine how the process and practices of being educated can foster well-being. In other words, empowerment depends on the quality and relevancy of education (DeJaeghere & Lee, 2011, p. 28).

The role of knowledge in women's empowerment is crucial, not only as it prepares them for the labor market, but also for understanding and challenging their social world. Needless to say, this requires formal education to address issues related to that social world, such as gender norms, and this is not always the case. For schooling to contribute to the questioning of gender relations, there

must be access to gender-related knowledge and classroom/school experiences that validate girls' identities and support an understanding of the asymmetrical conditions affecting women and men. Curricula should therefore be designed to bring relevant gender issues to the consciousness of both girls and boys and deal with deeper understanding of the functioning of gender in society. This includes sex education, information about family planning, the formation of masculinity and femininity and early marriages (Stromquist, 2015, p. 314).

While this is important to bear in mind when doing research on the empowerment of young mothers in Sierra Leone, this thesis makes no attempt to evaluate the content of the curriculum in formal schools, nor produce an overall assessment of the curriculum in the learning centres. The notions raised above regarding curricula and their impact on empowerment have however proven useful to understand the narratives shared by the girls in this study regarding their perceived empowerment. In this study, the girls' agency is reflected in their aspiration for education, their awareness and knowledge of rights and constructions of gender, as well as how they act on these rights.

4   Methodology

Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, this study has been conducted as a qualitative, descriptive case study with data collected in Freetown, Sierra Leone. To answer the research questions on what implications adolescent pregnancy has on girls' access to education and what challenges and opportunities young mothers face in re-entering the formal school system, a set of participatory methods and techniques were used, primarily semi-structured interviews. This section will outline those methods, and includes considerations related to epistemology, knowledge production, the role of the researcher and ethical considerations. The aim is to explain and justify the methods employed while conducting this field study.

4.1   Epistemological basis – what is knowledge?

The epistemological basis for this study is derived from post-colonial feminism, as outlined in the theoretical framework, and from feminist methodologies such as feminist standpoint theory. This section will provide an overview of the perspective from which this study has been conducted. The goal is to clarify how knowledge and knowledge production are approached in this study and how this has guided the data collection and analysis going forward.

As debates over positionality and reflexivity have grown within social sciences among researchers conducting field work, many have suggested that positionalities are inclusive of the researchers' race, class, gender, sexuality, age, disability and life experiences. This is also referred to as *the*

reflexive turn which took place in the 1980's and 1990's when researchers began to take into consideration the power and gendered relationship between the researcher and the researched (O'Reilly, 2008, p. 187). O'Reilly describes reflexivity as "the requirement to think critically about the context and the acts of research and writing" (O'Reilly, 2008, p. 178).

Feminist standpoint approaches are sometimes used across the divides of different strands of feminism but have their roots in socialist and Marxist feminism, and partly in radical feminism. As it emerged in the early 1980's, it became a method for naming the oppression of women, grounded in the truth of women's lives. One of the fundamental notions of standpoint theory revolves that knowledge is defined as something particular rather than universal and it seeks to abandon the idea of the neutral observer that is traditionally employed in modernist epistemology. It concerns that the dominant group's perspective of reality is 'partial and perverse' while the perspective of the oppressed is not (Hekman, 1997, p. 343). In other words, these approaches can be regarded as a reaction to more masculinist definitions of knowledge production and methods often employed in Western science (Hekman, 1997, p. 356).

Standpoint approaches have made major contributions to feminist theory by creating more useful ways of thinking about the production of knowledge. They hold a central focus on power and are in many ways unique from other theories of science as they spring from activism, and carry normative claims. Feminist standpoint theories recognize that knowledge and power are inseparable and that therefore knowledge is political (Harding, 1997, p. 382). Feminist approaches can help researchers to overcome some methodological hurdles such as how we can study power and identify ways to mitigate its abuse in the real world when we, as researchers, also participate in powerful projection of knowledge in this world (Ackerly & True, 2008, p. 694). For the purpose of this thesis, standpoint theory helps as it aims to analyze the issues of teenage pregnancy from the perspective of the teenage mothers themselves. It sets out to tell their stories and to give voice to their experiences, based on the assumption that society at large has not been adequately responsive.

Bearing this in mind, it has been important to carefully consider the power relations that inevitably exist between the researcher and the researched. In that process, the awareness of so-called *situated knowledge* has proven helpful. Donna Haraway focuses on the problem of objectivity and proposes situated knowledge as a solution to the problem. By this, she refers to knowledge placed within a certain context, and that the specificity of that context allows us to engage and develop a more complete understanding of it. She posits; "feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (Haraway, 1998, p. 583). Situated knowledge is also

about respondents as actors or agents, as opposed to as merely resources – never as a "slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of 'objective' knowledge" (Haraway, 1998, p. 592). Situated knowledge is presented as a view on objectivity that does not claim to be all-encompassing. By implication, it departs from experiences to create a partial perspective which is objective but always considers the specific time and place of that perspective.

This thesis has been conducted and framed by these feminist methodological approaches. Careful considerations have been made to not reproduce or perpetuate any stereotypes or preconceived notions, but rather give voice to the girls participating in this study and it has been important to strike a balance between reflexivity, subjectivity and objectivity throughout. Studying empowerment and applying feminist methodologies calls for a reflection on the situatedness of the author and the required humility and sensitivity vis-à-vis the participants. Like for other researchers, it has been central to keep in mind the vast differences in privilege between the researcher and the participants. The girls participating in this study have all grown up in a poor environment and can be considered to be in vulnerable situations as young mothers in a society where they're deprived of their rights. To critically reflect on the situatedness as a young highly educated woman, with a background working for the United Nations and who has the material and social resources to travel to Sierra Leone alone, and to approach the girls and other respondents with great humility and gratefulness, has been crucial for both ethical and practical reasons. While it is impossible to separate myself completely from the analysis offered in this study, telling their stories, as unfiltered and truthfully as can possibly be done within the scope of this thesis has been first priority. This is their stories, and their lives and realities.

4.2   Research design

This thesis has been conducted as a qualitative case study in Freetown, Sierra Leone over the period from 16 September to 11 December, 2016. The case study design has been suitable for this study as it enables the research to focus on a particular case and study it in depth. As described by Burnham et al., this approach has more of a qualitative than a quantitative nature as it generates a wealth of data relating to one specific case. The data should not be seen as generalizable or universal but rather, particular for this specific case and time. The approach has had considerable influence in social science research and the attractiveness of it is that a relatively complete account of the phenomenon, in its specific setting, can be achieved (Burnham, et al., 2008, p. 66).

The case at hand, is indeed unique given the post-Ebola setting, the government decision to ban teenage mothers from schools, and the establishment of learning centres set up to function as an interim school system for the affected girls. To my knowledge, a similar case of this context does

not exist elsewhere. I also note that all conclusions drawn in this thesis may not have bearing in a different time or place. This thesis does however offer an interesting example where government policy intersects with reproductive health, the right to education and development interventions. Therefore, the findings of this study can provide new insights into contexts where girls are deprived of their rights to education. Furthermore, this study contains interpretive qualities, which are suitable for the case study design and the methodologies employed. An interpretive study is, as defined by Mikkelsen, a study where the study subjects make up the dominant perspective and where narratives, and interpretations of them are given a central place (Mikkelsen, 2005, p. 126).

GOING TO THE FIELD

There is an abundance of literature on fieldwork and field research. Using fieldwork as a method must always be accompanied by thoughtful considerations, both ethical and moral, and with regards to themes such as responsibilities, representation and power. Needless to say, the fields in which one can do research differ greatly and levy different demands on the researcher. This section discusses themes related to fieldwork more generally. The themes discussed below are to a large extent all intertwined in practice and can be hard to isolate from each other. In an attempt to break down the exercise of fieldwork in components, this section describes these themes separately and focuses on the ones which have been the most relevant for the field study at hand.

Going into the field and conducting research is at many times chaotic, and the task is to order this chaos so that it is possible to draw conclusions from it. As Blommaert and Jie posit, fieldwork can contain long periods in which nothing happens, and then suddenly all sorts of things co-occur rapidly and seemingly without structure or patterns (Blommaert & Jie, 2010, p. 24). But if chaos is the normal state of things, it become important to find strategies for overcoming disorder and one strategy to do so is to remember what was set out to do, namely to describe and analyze complexity. Being in the field is inevitably a learning process, and not only a way to collect data.

The first step in a fieldwork process is to gain access to the field. Although it may seem a simple point, as O'Reilly writes, it is actually a crucial first step to take with great consideration. For example, decisions need to be made, though often tentatively, regarding whether to be open with what the project entails, what role to have in relation to the field and research subjects, and the presentation of self (2008, pp. 5-14). For this case study, gaining access to the field was thankfully helped by close contacts and colleagues locally who work within the UN system and NGOs on issues related to women's empowerment and adolescent pregnancy. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, it has been important to be as transparent as possible about the project at hand when approaching potential respondents and stakeholders.

Moreover, researchers need to critically reflect on their emotions in the field. In Davies and Spencer's anthology, emotions in the field are being investigated by a number of researchers with the aim to help retrieve emotion from the methodological margins of fieldwork. It raises questions regarding how emotions can be used to inform how situations, people, communities, and interactions are understood (Davies & Spencer, 2010, p. 5). As Ghassan Hage contends, emotions are located at the intersection of the individual and the collective, the personal and the public, the psychological and the social (Davies & Spencer, 2010, p. 131). He notes that it is important to examine and reflect on the emotions generated in the process of fieldwork and by keeping these issues in sight, hope is to avoid certain pitfalls and recognize potential limitations. Reflecting on emotions in the field goes hand in hand with reflexivity and how it is crucial to ground emotional identification in the existing relations of power, and in one's location within and to these relations (Davies & Spencer, 2010).

Interacting with young women in hardship can easily, and has indeed done so, evoke emotions in the individual researcher and it has been important to reflect on this throughout the field study in Sierra Leone. For the interviews, it has been of value to both prepare thoroughly and to conduct debriefing sessions with colleagues in the field working on the topics raised during interviews. One of the challenges in interview situations with girls, who are only a few years younger than myself, has been to uphold the role of the researcher while still striking the balance of keeping interviews conversational and comfortable for the girls. The notions of power relations and situated knowledges have offered a strategy to deal with these challenges, but it would be untrue to claim that the task has been carried out without becoming emotional.

RESPONDENTS AND VERBAL DATA

This study is based on a number of interviews with respondents from two different groups. First, and most importantly, with the primary stakeholders or beneficiaries of the bridge programme, namely young mothers and pregnant girls. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine girls who were enrolled in the learning centres during 2016. These interviews were supplemented with interviews with government representatives and development partners from the UN system and NGOs, as they hold invaluable insights to the politics behind the establishment and implementation of the learning centres. A complete list of data collection activities, outlining the interviews conducted, is provided in the appendix.

An overall goal of using verbal data through interviews is to "reveal existing knowledge in a way that can be expressed in the form of answers and so become accessible to interpretation" (Flick,

2009, p. 160). Participatory methods have contributed to making interviews more conversational while still controlled and curated. The interviews being semi-structured in nature allows for topics and some initial questions to be predetermined, while many questions are formulated during the interview (Mikkelsen, 2005, p. 169). As a general rule, interviews require a high level of knowledge from the researcher in order to understand the complex issues and processes underpinning the case at hand. It inevitably becomes necessary to ask the relevant follow-up questions and to probe further when needed (Flick, 2009, p. 168). For this reason, all interviews took place during the second half of my stay in Freetown, to ensure adequate time to prepare and steep myself in the issues at hand.

With the consent from organizing partners, observations from the focus group discussions during the *Adolescent Girls Symposium: Invest in Girls for Progress in Sierra Leone: Improving Data for Girls' Empowerment,* have further informed this study. The focus groups were facilitated by trained local social workers, and approximately 80 girls participated. Observations made during the day along with notes and observations made by the facilitators have provided valuable insight to the experiences of the girls enrolled in learning centres. Thanks to the facilitators expertise and their closeness to the local situation in Sierra Leone, some ethical barriers that inevitably arise when an outside researcher enters the field, could be overcome.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS – TELLING THEIR STORIES

Studying stories within social sciences dates back some time. Stories have been said to mediate reality and construct political space and are critical constitutive forces in public policy making (Feldman, et al., 2004, p. 147). Narratives are useful data because individuals often make sense of the world and their place in it through narrative form. As noted by Feldman et al., people distil and reflect a particular understanding of social and political relations by telling their stories. Stories are a common, habitual method to communicate and generally, the job of the researcher is to interpret the stories people tell (2004, p. 148).

So what is a narrative and what is a story? For the analysis, this study relies on the distinction used by Feldman et al., where a story is a subset of narrative. The narrative is the grand conception that entertains several themes and the stories make up these narratives. The stories describe a sequence of actions and experiences and they provide rich data that expresses movement, interpret ideas, and describe from the storyteller's perspective how things are (Feldman, et al., 2004, p. 149). In other words, narrative analysis is about making sense of what the respondents say, how they say it and, consequently, what they don't say (Wiles, et al., 2005, p. 89). As this study focuses on the girls' experiences, the narrative analysis is a useful method. What are the stories of the young women in Sierra Leone today who were banned from schools after becoming pregnant? How can these

narratives help us understand the gender roles and social norms or structures that impact their lives? How can the concept of empowerment help us analyze their stories? And, ultimately, how can their stories help us understand the broader theme of empowerment and girls' access to education?

Using narratives and telling their stories can potentially provide policy makers with some insight into the reality of those they want to affect – as told by themselves. As Wiles et al. recognize; "narrative analysis offers a powerful way to connect the intimate details of experiences, attitudes and reflections to the broader social and spatial relations of which they are a part" (2005, p. 98). Using narrative analysis also aligns well with the feminist methodologies and the concept of situated knowledges. For reading purposes and, more importantly, to have a systematic approach to the overall narratives shared, the presentation of the findings of this study will be divided according to the major themes identified in the interviews. Identifying similarities and differences in the narratives enables a structured way to critically analyze what challenges and opportunities the girls encounter in their endeavor to resume their education.

4.3   Ethical considerations

When conducting field research, it is important to take into consideration ethical aspects, not least with regards to the people involved in the study. As defined by Barnes (1979) and cited in Burnham et al., ethical problems are "those that arise when we try to decide between one course of action and another not in terms of expediency or efficiency but by reference to standards of what is morally right or wrong" (2008, p. 283). Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, it has been of utmost importance that this study was conducted with respect and attentiveness to the respondents' emotions and vulnerabilities. Aligned with the epistemological basis and the research design for this study, the *feminist research ethic* is "a commitment to inquiry about how we inquire". Ackerly and True argue that this ethic involves: 1) the power of knowledge; 2) boundaries, marginalization, and silences; 3) relationships and their differentials; and 4) our own situatedness as researchers. The application of feminist methodologies has facilitated overcoming some of the ethical risks of this field study as feminist theory has challenged empirical work by revealing the politics in every aspect of the research process. (Ackerly & True, 2008, p. 695).

A challenge that has required attention is the risk of raising expectations among girls in vulnerable positions as they're asked to share their stories although there are no tangible outcomes for them as a result of their participation in this study. The strategy used to avoid raising such expectations has been to be as transparent as possible regarding my position as a master's student. The anonymity of all girls was ensured before the interviews took place, and the content of the interviews as well as the purpose and scope of the study were carefully explained before interviews started. For ethical

reasons, all girls participating in this study are above the age of 18, as girls below that age could be considered particularly vulnerable subjects. Some of the girls interviewed left school already before the Ebola crisis, but they have all been enrolled in the learning centres during 2016.

Another ethical consideration that has been taken into account is how issues in this thesis are presented. Although this research was undertaken in the post-Ebola context, it is important to note that the Ebola crisis does not explain all the development challenges facing Sierra Leone. The country had high prevalence of both poverty, inequality and teenage pregnancy before the crisis. It is therefore worth emphasizing the danger of seeing this issue exclusively through an Ebola lens. This short-sighted post Ebola reflection is a challenge for the development community in Sierra Leone at large given the influx of humanitarian actors, many of whom have little pre-Ebola experience of Sierra Leone. The danger is, as noted by Denney et al. that Sierra Leone gets treated in an ahistorical manner in which Ebola is the starting point (2015, p. 7). With this in mind, the post-Ebola setting is to be seen as the context and not an explanatory factor.

5   Analysis

The following chapter discusses the outcomes of the interviews and focus groups, linking them to relevant theoretical concepts in an attempt to critically analyze the implications of teenage pregnancy on girls' access to education and the girls' strive to return to school. The chapter is divided according to the major themes identified in the interviews and aims to answer the research questions of this thesis;

> *In light of the recent Ebola crisis, what are the implications of adolescent pregnancy on girls' access to education?*
> and its subsequent sub-question;
> *What are the challenges and opportunities young mothers face in terms of re-entering schools?*

5.1   Pregnancy and school drop-out

Isha, 23 years old, from Freetown, has grown up in a family of five, with one older and one younger brother. She became pregnant at the age of 16 and dropped out of school. She had been given birth control pills by an older girlfriend but with no information about how the pills work, or how often to take them, she only took the pill monthly, leaving her pregnant within a couple of months. The baby's father did not react the way Isha had hoped, and after a very hostile initial reaction, blaming

her for the pregnancy, he proceeded to try to convince Isha to have an abortion. As the young couple sought help at the hospital, they learnt the pregnancy was too far gone, eliminating the option of abortion.

> *"I was immediately depressed, because I had tried to avoid becoming pregnant, then tried to end the pregnancy, but failed at both. And now the boy did not want to speak with me".*

Isha (2016)

At the core of the empowerment concept is the ability to choose. In the context of this case study, the ability to choose is relevant both in terms of power over the decision to become pregnant or not and the decision to drop out of school or not. For the agency dimension of empowerment to be qualified, meaning for the girls to be empowered in their process through which choices are made and exercised, two conditions must exist. There must be alternatives or the ability to choose differently and also, those alternatives must be perceived as existing (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). This section will reflect the data collected regarding agency and resources related to the girls becoming pregnant, followed by the data related to them leaving school.

One of the most prominent themes in the data collected was a distinct feeling of powerlessness among the girls over these decisions. Isha's story was not unique among the respondents. The interviews revealed a strong consensus regarding the girls' perceived negotiating power related to pregnancy. Many of the girls said they had little to no information regarding contraceptives or abortion. Similarly, Sarah, from Waterloo, described how she had been given birth control pills but had no knowledge of how often they were to be taken, and therefore chose to use condoms instead. Unfortunately, her partner at the time refused to use protection and shortly, Sarah, then 15, was impregnated with her first child. Their stories provide support to arguments by Klugman et al. regarding girls' disempowerment taking the form of lacking ability to negotiate within a sexual relationship (2014, p. 103).

Resources, in Kabeer's definition of empowerment, represent both material and social resources and function as preconditions for how agency can be exercised. In relation to getting pregnant, the empirical evidence in this study suggests that the perceived negotiating power was low among the girls when it came to birth control and condom use. In other words, many of the girls experienced that they did not have the knowledge of how to negotiate or that it wasn't in their right to demand that condoms were used. Material resources in the case of getting pregnant, also refers to access to contraceptives, and the correct knowledge of *how* to use these contraceptives. Isha's and Sarah's

story underlines the importance of adequate family planning education, or sex education. As part of the project, UNFPA provided a comprehensive package of life skills support (including SRH information) and services, as well as psychosocial support and counselling (UNICEF, 2016b). These efforts were implemented to essentially strengthen the resources among the girls, and equip them with enough knowledge and tools to avoid further pregnancies.

Once pregnant, it is not accepted for girls to remain in schools. Despite it not being a written law, and even prior to the government decision to formalize the practice, this is the overwhelming perception among both girls and adults. But without exception, all girls participating in this study have expressed their strong and passionate aspiration to return to school, finish their schooling, and move on to higher education. In sum, it has become clear during the interviews and focus groups that a strong sense of powerlessness prevails among the girls who have been or are pregnant and out of school, as they are being deprived of an education they desperately want. As agency, or the ability to define goals and act to reach them also concerns their *sense* of agency (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438), the feeling of not having adequate negotiating power or even the right to negotiate both contraceptives and whether or not to continue schooling represents a pivotal dimension of empowerment unfulfilled.

5.2   Learning centres as a potential way back

Pregnant girls not being allowed in schools was already a reality prior to the Ebola crisis. Respondents in this study, girls and adults alike, have all stressed that the public statements made by Minister Bai did not imply a change in practice regarding pregnant girls dropping out of school. Nor is there an actual policy document or law declaring girls are not welcome in schools. Rather, it is described as a cultural issue related to the perception of what effect a pregnant girl may have on her classmates and class room environment. Saffiatu, now 18 years old and mother of a 7 month old, said in her interview:

> *"If you're pregnant you can easily distract your friends from learning. Especially if you are tired and fall asleep in the class room or if you get sick and throw up. It is not fair for them to be treated differently but you have to treat a pregnant girl differently. It's not fair, but it's normal."*
>
> Saffiatu (2016)

Saffiatu found out she was pregnant after it was too late to consider abortion. She didn't know the father of the baby very well. They had met when the schools were closed during the Ebola crisis and as the boy went back to school when they reopened after the Ebola, Saffiatu had at the time of the

interview not even heard about the statements made by the Minister. Going back to school was still not an option, and at the request of her parents, Saffiatu stayed at home. It was a neighbor that had informed her mother about the learning centres that were opening up for pregnant and lactating girls, and together with her neighbor's daughter Fatmatma, Saffiatu enrolled. Fatmatma described going to the learning centre with excitement:

> *"The centres are good because they let me continue learning. I never wanted to stop going to school, and now I had the opportunity to keep learning. Today, I am back in school, I am glad it wasn't over for me".*

> Fatmatma (2016)

In one way, the perceived "new" ban can thus be seen as having created a window of opportunity as pressure was put on the government to ensure an alternate way of schooling for out-of-school pregnant girls. The learning centres in and of themselves should therefore, as a project, be seen as a step in the right direction to empower adolescent girls as it aims to ensure their continued schooling. As contended by Stromquist, access to education and education itself fosters knowledge and, indirectly psychological dimensions of empowerment by increasing the girls' self-esteem and future life aspirations (Stromquist, 2015, p. 314). The stories told by the girls' participating in this study all reflect various degrees of gratitude towards the government and implementing partners for taking a step in the direction to ensure girls' education. Linking this notion to the concept of empowerment and expanding the girls' ability to make choices, in and of themselves, the centres represent an option to staying at home as regular schools turn the girls away. They provide the potential of building and strengthening girls' sense of agency, a key part of the agency concept (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438), as the girls learn about and internalize their right to continued schooling.

The problem however seems to have been that expectations among the girls of what was to be provided for them at the centres, were not always met. The following sections will reflect on the two major challenges or obstacles that could be identified in the data collected, namely challenges related to financial restraints and challenges related to stigmatization and neglect.

5.3   Financial challenges

All the girls participating in interviews for this study, as well as many of the girls during the focus group discussions stated that financial constraints were their greatest challenge even prior to getting pregnant. Several stories told included testimonies of teachers taking or asking for money from the girls – both in the regular schools and in the learning centres. One of the girls said:

"The teacher would ask you to pay five thousand for each assignment and test taken as well as buy the handouts and most times the parents cannot afford it. So if a boy/man that has been after you for a long time finds [you] in such situation and offers the money; you would be tempted to succumb to his demands. Because no one wants to be continuously driven out of class or failed in tests. Also, if a girl goes to sell wares that are worth thirty thousand Leones and a man comes along offering fifty thousand Leones which you know you absolutely need, you have very little or no options. That was how most of us got into the situation we are in today".[1]

(2016)

Resources as a vital component of empowerment is highlighted by Kabeer, and the girls' testimonies regarding the financial challenges provides a prime example of how material resources inevitably play a crucial role in this. As described by the girls, it is an absolute necessity and a prerequisite to other forms of resources. High fees related to schooling is mentioned by all the girls as a major obstacle to access to education. Not only is tuition high and additional fees related to school materials are high, but several of the girls told stories about teachers being corrupt and asking for bribes before they hand out assignments or grades, or for allowing the girls to sit the necessary exams to proceed in their schooling.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, a frustration is expressed regarding what the girls' expected and what was delivered. Many of them were under the impression that fees related to going back to school would be either covered for or waived for them after having gone through the learning centres.

Mariatu, 22 years old, gave birth to her first son six years ago and consequently left school. Now a mother of two, she heard about the learning centres from her friend who in turn was informed about them through a local community leader. As she finished her year in the centre, she did not have the funds to return to school and had been under the impression that financial support was to be provided at the end of the year to enable her to do so. Mariatu then turned to her church where an elder was able to provide her with the funds for tuition to go back to school and she said in the interview that she had rather had a "man of God counselling and encouraging [her] to work to come back to school than being given empty promises". The frustration built up around not having been able to go back to school due to financial challenges has for many of the girls lead to what they

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[1] Quote from one of the girls participating in the focus group discussions, translated from Krio by the IsraAid facilitators.

describe as the same feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness that placed them in the situation they are to begin with.

Jalikatu, 18 years old, said she was lucky to live with her mother and grandmother when she found out she was pregnant and that they could help her and protected her against other critical relatives. This, she said, was not the case among many of the parents to Jalikatu's friends who also got pregnant and had to drop out of school. Despite Jalikatu describing her situation at home as lucky, she is still out of school. The additional fees on top of school tuition adds up to an amount she cannot afford and she is therefore still at home with her now 1.5-year old daughter;

> *"Because I excelled at the learning centre, and thanks to help from my mother and auntie, my school fees have now been covered but I am still not going because I have no shoes, no books, no uniform."*
>
> Jalikatu (2016)

Poverty, financial constraints and lack of material resources are clear sources of disempowerment for these young mothers. Moreover, the financial challenges the girls and their families face, are also understood as being tinted by gendered processes. The girls participating in this study reflected upon their situations and compared them to that of the boys who impregnated them, and many expressed a certain understanding for the ban since the division of labor in homes and communities are clearly defined by gender hierarchies. The common understanding among the girls was that the fathers need to continue their schooling in order to be able to provide for the family, while the mothers need to stay at home and care for their children. Femininity and masculinity norms in society, understood as patterns of practice and the "currently most honored way of being" a man or a woman (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 833) can be understood as internalized to a certain degree by the respondents as they, in several of these cases, both justify and agree with these divisions of labor in families in Sierra Leone.

For some of the girls' families, it became a choice between sending one of the adolescent parents to school as they could only afford school fees for one of them. Kadiatu, who is now 22 years old and mother of a six year-old, had moved in with her boyfriend's family when they found out she was pregnant. The family, who had initially intended to send both adolescents back to school, encountered unexpected financial troubles, and as a result, only Kadiatu's boyfriend could return to school. As she enrolled in the learning centre, she was disappointed in both her own family and the society at large for making that prioritization. Gender roles, and both masculinities and femininities, can therefore be said to play a role within the category of financial constraints that hinder girls from

continuing their schooling. This will be further elaborated in the following section, discussing the stigmatization and neglect the girls' encounter as they become victims of early pregnancy.

5.4   Stigmatization and neglect

Both in the narratives shared by the girls and the knowledge shared by development partners and government representatives, stigmatization and neglect is highlighted as one of the major barriers to young mothers' access to empowerment. One of the girls in the focus groups discussed the neglect she encountered in her community:

> *"Wherever I go within the community I am reminded about my situation, even some of my former school mates are restricted by their parent from coming around me or having anything to do with me".[2]*

(2016)

The discourse and culture revolving pregnancy among school girls remain harsh and many talk about *pregnant girls* versus *innocent girls*, creating a false dichotomy that implies that the girls who became pregnant are somehow guilty or at fault. Based on this reality, government representatives stressed that the ban of visibly pregnant girls from schools was in practice not a new policy. Although donors and development partners continue to urge the government to lift this ban, the ban is not discussed as something that changes the playing field for girls in Sierra Leone. Abubakarr Koroma, from Concern International, explained:

> *"At family level, boys are mostly regarded as next of kin, and girls are not given the opportunity to play leadership roles. It takes two to make a baby, but it is girls who become pregnant. If a school boy impregnated a school girl, in most cases that is the end of the girl's education while the boy continues his education. That shows all the blame is given to the girl. In Sierra Leone, girls are seen as kitchen stocks while boys are seen as bread winners."*

Koroma (2016)

The gender hierarchies in society become more apparent when both girls and development partners start elaborating on how girls and boys are treated unequally – at large in society but in particular related to teenage pregnancy. The statement above sums up the most common chain of events and the sentiments regarding what girls are and what boys are – kitchen stock and bread winners. When

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[2] Translated from Krio, from the focus group discussions

asked about how a teenage father is received back in school, many of the girls had no clear perception of their situations. Most girls had vague answers, guessing that schools and communities had not treated them any differently than from before. Schools and communities have however, according to respondents, been very unforgiving and unfriendly to the girls. Many of the girls say they had to leave their homes when they revealed to their parents that they were pregnant. Many have and continue to withstand harassment from their immediate community.

The girls who completed their year at the learning centres and have successfully reintegrated into schools, also testified that they encounter stigmatization and discrimination upon returning to school. They described that teachers and peers alike would treat the young mothers with disrespect and neglect, trying to provoke a reaction that they could then somehow punish. Zainab, 18 years old, said in her interview. "They did not think I belonged back in school. My first child was already five years old, and would soon be enrolled in school. 'Your child goes to school, you shouldn't!', they told me".

Returning to the definition of gender employed in this thesis, namely that gender is to be understood as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on 'perceived' differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (Scott, 1986), such relationships can be found in many of the girls' stories. The experiences shared by the girls in this study have provided clear examples of how different expectations put on girls regarding their future responsibilities in the homes and families create different challenges for adolescent mothers than those the expectations put on their male peers create.

The gendered processes in Sierra Leone, as expressed by the participants in this study, the social norms regarding family formation and the traditional gender roles leave these girls with no support from the babies' fathers. Some of the girls who knew the boys' families were sent to live with the them as their own families kicked them out of the house. But even then, the boys took little to no responsibility for the child, and often these girls became essentially indentured servants to the families. Fatmatma knew the father of her child very well as they had grown up in the same community, and their parents had known each other for decades when Fatmatma announced that she was pregnant. Immediately, her father made arrangements with the boy's father to have her move in with them. Neighbors and communities blame the girls for getting pregnant and they are often considered to having brought shame to the family, Fatmatma explained. After she was dismissed by her family and moved in with the boy's family, who were also struggling financially, Fatmatma was not only blamed for the pregnancy, she also experienced that the family saw her and the baby as a

heavy burden financially. As a consequence, she had to take on household labor and was further separated from her teenage peers.

5.5   The importance of psychosocial support

Generally, in Sierra Leone, there is little to no access to mental health support with only a single psychiatrist and mental health hospital in the country. The result is that mental health issues are highly stigmatized and understood as only for people with severe schizophrenia, bipolar disorders, or substance abuse issues. The challenge thereby lies in breaking a cycle of taboos and providing the emotional support to vulnerable groups in efforts to empower them, responding to common mental health disorders and needs such as depression and anxiety. To find ways to treat these needs, a reformulation of vocabulary has been required, shifting away from discussing depression or anxiety. Psychosocial support has become a term that provides a general framework for support without a diagnosis. As a practice, it became widespread after the civil war ended in the early 2000's, but generally it has not been systematized and there is little research on its direct impact or best practices (Bornstein, 2016).

A package including psychosocial support was provided to the girls as part of the learning centres (UNICEF, 2016b). This support consisted of teaching coping mechanisms and offering emotional support to the girls, as a way to build resilience among them. In part, this was seen as a way to avoid girls from getting pregnant again as that would keep them out of schools more permanently. Throughout the interviews with the girls, it was highlighted how this component of the programme was particularly appreciated. As discussed above, girls in Sierra Leone are continuously struggling for their empowerment and the provision of psychosocial support, the girls found, helped them understand their own situations better and become more motivated to go back to school. Jalikatu said that the support received helped her understand her options and rights moving forward and although she is still not back in school, she spoke with great enthusiasm about one day being able to afford going back to school.

"Psychosocial counselling has really helped me understand it's not over for me"

Jalikatu (2016)

As Murphy-Graham and Lloyd suggest in their conceptual framework, empowering education for girls need to foster the recognition of their dignity and equal worth with others (2016, p. 561). The psychosocial support component constitutes a prime example of this. Value formation is, as described by the participants in this study, essential in order to achieve any long-term change in Sierra Leone. Girls and adults alike acknowledge a need to recognize such values. It is however

important to note that this component is not part of formal school curricula and the crux thus remains – how can a formal education system from which some girls are banned foster such recognition?

With discussions of mental health related issues remaining a taboo in Sierra Leone, the positive benefits of psychosocial support the girls have experienced suggest that more data driven approaches to seek ways to meet their emotional needs without stigmatizing them are crucial. Finding ways to continuously embed such discussions in the mainstream would be of benefit to both these girls and other vulnerable groups, as well as to development practitioners' programming. In the context of educational systems addressing the psychosocial aspects of empowerment, and for schooling to contribute to the questioning of gender relations, the stories told in this study reflect a need to adequately address gender-related knowledge and experiences that validate girls' experiences and needs. Stromquist has stressed that curricula should be designed to bring relevant gender issues to the consciousness of both girls and boys (Stromquist, 2015, p. 314), and although the psychosocial support provided through the learning centres may have focused on the coping mechanisms, motivational and emotional support to girls and not specifically addressing gender relations.in society at large, the appreciation expressed by the girls could be seen as supporting arguments to expanding on these efforts.

Finally, it is worth noting that some of the appreciation for this support can be seen as an expression of their lack of such support in other areas of life. Generally, girls lack spaces for processing the complex situations and feelings they are facing. Part of empowerment requires having an opportunity to find their strength, in order for them to build resources and agency and in turn achieve their goals. Their stories function as supporting arguments to what feminists have long argued regarding empowerment not being something that can be done to or for women. If it is when girls recognize their power within and can act together to exercise power that they gain power to act as agents (Cornwall, 2016, p. 356), and psychosocial support and similar interventions should therefore be considered instrumental in achieving empowerment objectives.

To conclude the analysis, the case at hand constitutes an example of how government policies affect individuals' abilities to lead the lives they want as policies intersect with areas of for example reproductive health and the right to education. Coupling this with development interventions, it becomes necessary to find ways forward that simultaneously empower individuals and strengthen capacity among decision-makers and governments. Empowerment of adolescent girls remain challenging in development contexts, and studying countries suffering from development set-backs can offer insights to what those ways forward may be.

6   Concluding discussion

Based on the analysis above, a number of concluding remarks are in order. These remarks could be considered potential points of departure for further research that could better inform project design, and they reflect the lessons learned during this research process.

It has become clear that, based on the empirical data collected in this study, the girls lack the fundamental resources and agency that constitute capabilities which in turn enable them to make informed decisions related to both their schooling and their reproductive health. Primarily, the challenges they face consist of financial constraints, severe poverty, societal gender norms, stigmatization and neglect of those who are victims of adolescent pregnancy. Here it becomes relevant to reiterate the core principles of empowerment – namely that it concerns the expansion of one's ability to make choices – and include a remark that while the learning centres have provided the girls with the option of staying in school, they have not significantly changed the playing field for girls to effectively make choices regarding their reproductive health and education.

The direct implication of becoming pregnant as a young girl in Sierra Leone is still to be dismissed from schools, although now, the girls are offered a bridge programme to return to their formal education. Prevailing norms in communities about what girls and boys do and how their activities and roles after having become pregnant are to be valued still determine the girls' educational opportunities. In addition to this, it can be worth noting that equal access to education could depend on other categorizations than gender, and perhaps an all-encompassing evaluation of children's access to education in Sierra Leone would show that economic dividends constitute the major factor. However, such claims cannot be made based on the data collected in this study, and since the ban exclusively affects girls, one can argue that gender indeed affects access to education.

As girls and development partners alike continue to urge the government of Sierra Leone to lift the ban on visibly pregnant girls from schools, the learning centres have functioned as a temporary solution to not completely abandon and exclude these girls. This is undisputedly a positive thing, and a step in the right direction in order to ensure they are not deprived of all education. But access to education remains challenging. High costs related to schooling in combination with social structures and gender hierarchies constitutes the major obstacles to girls' empowerment through education.

The Ministry for Education, Science and Technology is currently undertaking an assessment exercise to evaluate how the learning centres have been able to achieve positive outcomes in terms of empowering and getting the girls back to schools. This assessment is to be finalized in early 2017

and will provide an analysis of how many girls successfully reentered the school system in 2016. As ensuring education of marginalized children, and girls in particular, has become an important part of the global development agendas to reach goals of universal primary education and gender equality, cases like Sierra Leone are important to study to better understand how this is best achieved, and to identify potential pitfalls for such activities. Questions have arisen during this research process that will be equally important to follow as the learning centres enter a new phase with the Girls' Access to Education programme, targeting all girls, no matter the cause for them being out of school. While the hopes are that the GATE programme will have positive long-term effects on the levels of out-of-school girls in Sierra Leone, it is equally important for programmes to not overlook the very particular situation young mothers are in and to differentiate the interventions aiming to empower them.

Furthermore, the fact that the Ministry now opens up the learning centres to include all girls, regardless of the reason for why they are out of school, leads to wonder if the justification to keep pregnant girls out of school falls. If the main reason for keeping pregnant girls out of class rooms is the negative influence they have on other girls, how does the government justify placing them in learning centres around the country with thousands of other girls? Will this new set up work to dismantle social stigma around pregnant girls or will it enhance it by making invisible the particularity of girls falling victim of early childbearing?

It was surprising to learn that there was no official project document drawn up for the project angled to adolescent mothers describing what the project with the learning centres actually contained. As the centres were part of a government led initiative, such a document should be their responsibility but also the UN agencies managing different components should have produced project descriptions available to the public. The fact that there is no project document raises some fundamental questions about transparency, project implementation and accountability, but it also highlights the issue of expectations.

Throughout this research process, it has become more and more evident that there has been a gap in communications. There is a discrepancy between how government and implementing partners describe the programme design, what they see as having been communicated to the girls, and what the girls expected. Additionally, these discrepancies seem to have been exacerbated by different learning centres providing different services and packages, as other stakeholders came in to support the centres. Supplementary packages and services is, of course, valuable and admirable, but it seems to have created further expectations among the girls. If they hear a particular learning centre

provided for example childcare services or even financial support to the girls enrolled there, disappointment is bound to arise if that support is not offered in the next learning centre.

There not being a formal project document available to the public, and maybe most importantly, available to the beneficiaries of the project – the girls – could perhaps explain some of this confusion, but more likely, the expectations were simply not managed adequately as the girls entered the learning centres. With a current development policy discourse focusing on human development and capabilities of the beneficiaries, the lack of transparency this implies is further problematic.

Moreover, the gender hierarchies and gendered discrimination girls experience in their homes, schools and communities, raises important questions about the transformational capacity of the schooling models. Are the schools addressing adequately rights and gender related issues and are curricula designed and implemented to effectively empower girls (and boys for that matter)?

Reducing early pregnancy is a long-term process and as much as prevention is needed, support to those who already are or have been pregnant is equally important. Some of the puzzles the GoSL would need to solve include how to achieve long-term change through efforts that seek to address the many complex underlying issues leading to stigmatization of teenage mothers which creates the system where they're left out. And if the ban is lifted, how can the government still ensure that they support the girls' affected by such stigma, while trying to achieve a long-term societal shifts? With the global development agenda and its SDGs, and the current discourse in development policy focusing on capabilities, cases of girls' empowerment related issues, such as the one in Sierra Leone, are all relevant to study in order to better inform interventions.

Out of the nine girls that participated in this study, six are back in schools today. While this ratio could be disproportionately high, it leaves hope that the centres if used correctly can help empower girls and facilitate their access to continued education.

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8 Appendix

8.1 List of data collection activities

INTERVIEWS:

Agnes, 20 years' old

Fatmatma, 18 years' old

Isha, 23 years' old

Jalikatu, 18 years' old

Kadiatu. 22 years' old

Mariatu, 22 years' old

Saffiatu, 18 years' old

Sarah, 19 years' old

Zainab, 19 years' old

(The girls' names have been changed in this thesis to ensure their anonymity)

Olive Musa, Director Non-Formal Education, Ministry for Education, Science and Technology

Ann Konneh, Gender Unit, Ministry for Education, Science and Technology

Mary Okumu, Country Director UN Women

Wongani Grace Taulo, Head of Education, UNICEF

Salamatu Kemokai, National Programme Analyst UNFPA

Gibril Krgbo, Programme Advisor, Irish Aid

Illia De Souza George, Learning Centre Coordinator, Freetown

Michele Bornstein, Country Director, IsraAid

Abubakarr Koroma, Concern International

OTHER:

Focus group discussions during *Adolescent Girls Symposium: Invest in Girls for Progress in Sierra Leone: Improving Data for Girls' Empowerment*

Organized and facilitated by: UNFPA, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and IsraAid

7 October, 2016, 9 am – 2 pm

8.2   Interview guide: Young mothers

BACKGROUND

Age, place of birth, family and living conditions

EDUCATION

How long have you been out of school?

How did you learn about the learning centre?

Tell me about your time in the learning centre?

Do you plan to go back to your regular school?

Why is education important to you?

Is sex education or family planning included in your school program?

OTHER INTERVENTIONS

Do you feel there has been adequate support for you as a young mother?

What is missing?

GENDER

Have you experienced any differences in how you are treated and how the father is treated?

Regarding access to education in particular?

Do you speak about gender inequality with your friends and peers?

FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

What do you want to do in the future?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

Anything to add?

Questions for me?

8.3 Interview guide: Government and development partners

BACKGROUND

Name, organization, title

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEENAGE MOTHERS

What is your role in the learning centres/other initiatives to provide teenage mothers with educational opportunities?

Are the learning centres well known in the country?

From your perspective, what are the major challenges for your programming?

Has the Ebola crisis changed the playing field for work on girl's education, and if so how?

What other strategies are put in place to empower young mothers?

What are your thoughts on the ban on visibly pregnant girls in schools?

Is the development community and GoSL working together on these issues?

GENDER

From your perspective, how do gender hierarchies in families or communities or Sierra Leone at large affect girls' empowerment?

How do you address issues related to gender norms and roles?

Are there social or cultural barriers to girls accessing education? If so, what do these barriers consist of?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

Anything to add?

Questions for me?