

Girls engaging in activism to end child marriage in Sierra Leone: Negotiating power, interacting with others and redefining their own lives

Abstract

Children's right to participate has been one of the most challenging rights to implement due to dominant norms which position children under adults' authority. Notably, this has more negatively impacted girls than boys due to traditional gender norms and practices that often restrict girls' agency and are reproduced and unchallenged in many societies. To contest these struggles, young female activists (13-17 years) in Sierra Leone, who are the focus of this paper, engaged in direct actions to influence public decision-making and prevent girls from being married during childhood. Drawing upon empirical evidence exploring the girls' activism experiences, this article explore, young female activists' practical work is an example of what intersectionality as praxis means by connecting social categories to inequalities, and highlights that they saw themselves as social actors with the ability to negotiate power, take part in community-based activism to end child marriage, and network with others to seek justice for practices and attitudes they perceived to be abusive.

Key words: girls' activism, child marriage, power, agency, relationships

Introduction

Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Africa, with 30 percent of girls married before their 18th birthday and 9 percent married before the age of 15 (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2021; Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF, 2020). This is often attributed to poverty, parents' lack of education and unequal power dynamics within a patriarchal society in which social structures typically subordinate females; these factors result in an imbalanced realisation of girls' rights (National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy, 2020). The intersection between poverty and patriarchal values has contributed to the perpetuation of this practice due to a combination of specific gender roles assign to females and their impoverished backgrounds which make girls more likely to face child marriage (Wodon et al., 2017).

Child marriage is an issue of greater worry for girls compared to boys as their lives are at risk of being severely impacted by an early marriage (Gastón et al., 2019); thus, a group of

Sierra Leonean young female activists organised themselves to mobilise peers and local stakeholders to carry out initiatives to stop this practice. The approach taken by these activists was to bring about change by addressing some of the social and cultural barriers perpetuating child marriage, especially focusing on female roles in society and highlighting the opportunities that girls can offer to their families and communities if they remain at school and get married as an adult not as a child.

This article is therefore not about child marriage as a practice. Instead, it explores how child marriage can be a driver for girls' activism. It also considers contributing factors that facilitated the young female activists' collective mobilisation in a restricted, gendered environment that discouraged them from engaging in actions that would bring them into the public realm and distract them from their culturally assigned roles. Furthermore, the article discusses how young female activists carried out their activism within contexts of generational difference, gender inequality and power differentials. Their views were sought to understand how they shaped and re-shaped their identities and roles within the complex cultural, social and political contexts in which they lived. This **connects** with the concept of intersectionality to represent the ways in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and other forms of discrimination intersect and create uneven dynamics that determine social positioning within specific contexts (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). Although the focus of this study is not to discuss intersectionality, the authors use intersectionality as praxis in order to challenge hegemonic views of childhood, to understand the roots of marginalisation of the young female activists, and unpack the collective actions for social justice **carried out** by them (see also Konstantoni and Emejulu, 2017). Moreover, the article discusses how the girls' activism was constructed in accordance with factors such as personal identities and political and social practices. The article concludes that young female activists carried out direct actions with others and for others in order to make a change based on their political ideals of equality; this change was achieved through their own determination and often in the face of initial resistance and reluctance from families and communities.

Background

Child activism

Social scientists have been exploring, defining and documenting children's participation during the last three decades in order to influence policy and practice, with a particular focus on children's engagement in decision-making processes (Marshall et al., 2015; Thomas, 2012; Percy-Smith, 2011). Equally, a new wave of scholarship has also contributed to child activism being understood as a form of children's participation, with powerful examples being drawn from child activism on climate change, education, gun control and child marriage (Prakoso et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2021; Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Hillstrom, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2018). Groups of children in different countries have engaged in activism to make a change, a decision which is dictated by many intertwined factors, such as the personal, the political and the social (Nolas et al., 2016; Bosco, 2010).

Martin (2007) considers that "activism is action on the behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine" (p.19). In this sense, activism is about an endeavour motivated by a cause and one that seeks to make a change. Similarly, de Lemus and Stroebe (2015) define activism as actions, both at the collective level (e.g., promoting collective actions by one's disadvantaged group) and at the individual level (e.g., individual actions, such as attaining leadership positions), that challenge existent socio-structural conditions that maintain power differences between groups. For instance, emerging literature discusses different forms of activism, including quiet activism, intergenerational activism and intersectional activism (Konstantoni, 2022; Pottinger, 2017). Whilst analysing activism, Pottinger (2017) argues that quiet activism is formed by everyday, embodied political actions that become robust due to their dissident nature. Likewise, Konstantoni (2022) points out that intergenerational and intersectional activism are built from personal lived experiences of injustice and inequality in which activists seek to exert influence on public decision-making and resist racialised, gendered and classed unfairness. Reflecting this, Cornish (2021) says that activism seeks social change; this can be done through a variety of means to confront power inequalities, including community creativity, disruption, protest or critique.

Bosco (2010) argues that child activism is intertwined with children's agency, where child activists are political agents who can create political and social change and shape power relations through their actions. Klocker (2007) conceptualises agency as something that children exercise rather than possess, since agency is vastly relational and defined by the contexts in which it is realised. She suggests that children's agency is "thin" or "thick",

depending on the circumstances in which it is exercised. “‘Thin’ agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterised by few viable alternatives. ‘Thick’ agency refers to having the latitude to act within a broad range of options” (Klocker, 2007, p. 85). Moreover, agency should not be considered as a component of an individual's decisions but, as Wyness (2012) argues, it should be explored as a relational concept and understood as the result of multifaceted social structures that vary across time and space.

Children’s identities as a catalyst for activism and change

Research indicate that often girls and boys realise their rights in dissimilar ways due to traditional gender norms, attitudes and values which tend to limit girls' agency and participation (Cuevas-Parra, 2022a; De Graeve, 2015; Lewis, 2012; Bose, 2012). In order to critically reflect on children’s opportunities for participation and activism, it is imperative to consider that these processes are situated in social relations and interdependency that vary across time, society and culture (Van Blerk, 2019; Hanson, 2016). The complexities of children’s lives are determined by the intersection between power relations, vulnerabilities, inequalities and social identities, including gender, age, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Konstantoni and Emejulu, 2017; Alanen, 2016). As a result, the combination of these factors as a whole determines the opportunities that children have to realise their right to participate. In this regard, there is no universal conceptualisation of childhood; instead, childhoods are constructed on the intersection between understandings of children's multiple identities, diversity of experiences and social inequalities (Ecklund, 2012; James and James, 2012; Mayall, 2000).

Within this landscape, the use of an intersectionality lens - first coined by Crenshaw (1991) as part of black feminist theory and grassroots activism – enables researchers to explore how lived experiences of inequality and power are shaped by the intersection between inequalities, with social positions, such as gender, age, socio-economic background, disability status, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and others, acting as categories of difference (Collins, 2017). This deepens understandings of how social groups are subordinated by structures of power and also how they develop their own strategies to challenge these structures (Hooks, 2015). This approach is also applicable to children and young people, and its use has increased in the past decade (Konstantoni and Emejulu, 2017).

For instance, children and young people in Brazil have moved forward intersectionality as praxis in order to carry out an emancipatory and activist agenda, with the aims to understand, contest and change intersectional discrimination (Cuevas-Parra, 2022a, 2022b).

Taking gender as an example, as this is the focus of this article, the social attributes and degree of privilege associated with being male or female means that gender has a significant role in framing girls' and boys' opportunities to engage in collective participation initiatives (De Graeve, 2015). Constructing gender roles is often rooted in stereotypes and patriarchal beliefs that severely prevent girls from participating equally (Konstantoni, 2022). Hence, the notion of gender needs to be understood and analysed as a cross-cutting socio-cultural variable that impacts children's lives. As such, gender is not an isolated identity category and should be analysed together with age, race, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic status in order to understand how policies, practices and attitudes perpetuate inequalities and uneven opportunities for particular groups of individuals (Bose, 2012).

Traditional, restrictive gendered norms and practices are connected to power relationships that determine the ability of girls to negotiate power, interact with others and take control of their lives. Drawing on Foucault (1983), participation and power are intertwined as power is always negotiated in specific contexts of action, implying that children's views and identities are negotiated in their relations with adults. Furthermore, participation and activism can therefore be nurtured or limited based on adults' perceptions of children's competencies; as such, some children may be treated as incompetent beings and objects of control and discipline whilst others may be perceived as fully competent actors (see also Le Borgne and Tisdall, 2017; Skelton, 2008). Thus, opportunities for child activism can be analysed from both children's and adults' perspectives as these could differ due to the contexts and circumstances, such as age, autonomy, perceived abilities and competencies.

Methods

This study was conducted in Sierra Leone due to the high prevalence of child marriage in the country. It is estimated that 800,000 girls below the age of 18 are married and, of these, 400,000 were married below 15 (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2018). The government of Sierra Leone has acknowledged that child marriage is a national problem inextricably linked to harmful practices rooted in dominant gender norms and to family strategies for economic survival as a married girls means one less person to feed and educate (National Secretariat

for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy, 2020). In Sierra Leone, 59.2 percent of the population lives in poverty, which is measured by having less the US\$2 per day, and 21.3 percent is classified as vulnerable due to multi-dimensional poverty (World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, the Ebola outbreak in 2015 and COVID-19 crisis in 2020/2022 negatively impacted households' incomes, and consequently placed girls at higher risk of child marriage (Sillah and Barrie, 2020).

Within this landscape, the study discussed in this paper explored the engagement of female young activists in Sierra Leone who advocated for ending child marriage. The study focused on how their activism contributed to diminishing the practice of child marriage and whether they were able to bring about change to their own everyday personal lives and the lives of other children and young people in their communities. Research questions that guided this study were: (a) what are the social and cultural factors that increase or reduce the opportunities for young female activists to engage in their cause to end child marriage? (b) How do social identities and inequalities intersect with power and have an impact on the young female activists' work? (c) What are the approaches used by young female activists to address consistent challenges to participation through their activism?

The study used a qualitative research design to explore understandings and perceptions of Sierra Leonean girls' activism on the fight against child marriage. This project builds on richness of data from direct conversations with young activists about their experiences, a richness which has been increasingly recognised by other studies (e.g. Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2020). To look into this topic, the study used qualitative methods since these are useful tools for unpacking the way research participants "engage in processes of constructing and reconstructing meanings through daily interactions" (Leavy, 2017, p. 129). This exploration was conducted in Sierra Leone due to the high prevalence of child marriage in the country and the significant concern voiced by young female activists about this issue; they had, subsequently, organised themselves to carry out initiatives to stop the practice. The focus of the study was therefore informed by considering the activism of the Sierra Leonean girls as a "critical case" (Flyvbjerg, 2010).

The research participants were 20 girls, aged 13 to 17, who defined themselves as local young female activists who worked together to address child marriage in their communities. Participants were from rural and semi-rural areas in Bo, Tonkolili and Koinadugu districts. They belonged to the Mende, Temne and Kuranko ethnic groups and spoke their

local language in addition to English. They all attended school at the time of the interviews and were all members of Kids Clubs supported by World Vision, where they participated in training and capacity building activities to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to carry out their activism. None of the participants had been married, but they engaged in this cause as they reported that all girls after puberty are potentiality at risk of being married off by their families.

To gather substantial data, the researchers conducted semi-structured one-to-one interviews and focus groups. The first method was chosen because it offers participants a flexible process during which they can answer questions, ask for clarifications and introduce new angles for discussion (Fontana and Frey, 2008). By the same token, focus groups were selected since they support participants to engage in a collective conversation with peers and assist researchers to adjust the unbalanced power relationship between participants (Hill, 2006). Focus groups can certainly also bring some challenges, such as peer pressure and power differential (e.g., some participants dominate conversations, others have a better popularity status that might make their views more easily adopted by the group). However, the research team implemented the good practice of using participatory methodologies to minimise these problems. For example, we respected 'silence' in the focus groups by encouraging quiet participants to share their thoughts and being patient to give participants enough time to think. Offering additional attention and support to quiet participants also provided child participants with a good example of how to provide peer support in group discussions; we subsequently noticed a gradual emergence of mutual peer support in focus group discussions. A further positive benefit of using focus groups was that they allowed participants who shared similar interests and experiences to generate enhanced insights and rich information about the researched topics (Halperin and Heath, 2020).

The study obtained ethical approval from University College London and followed the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) ethics standards and World Vision's child safeguarding procedures. All participants were given detailed information sheets and were then asked to provide informed, written consent to participate. Those who were below the age of consent were included in the study on the condition that parental/caregivers' consent was also provided.

Taking into consideration the sensitive nature of this study, and since the research team was unable to travel to Sierra Leone due to COVID-19 restrictions, the researchers

engaged in-depth conversations with World Vision local staff members in order to develop a clear understanding of participants' backgrounds and experiences, as well as gaining a solid knowledge of their families, local communities and social contexts. World Vision played a significant role in supporting participant recruitment and relationship management with local stakeholders as the organisation had strong connections with the communities based on their long-term development work. To provide participants with specialised support, World Vision assigned staff members to assist the research team in case any participant felt uncomfortable or required psychosocial assistance, including a referral system and access to local independent child support and free counselling services.

The research team took rigorous steps to ensure confidentiality and participants' anonymity were maintained at all stages of the data collection, analysis and write up. A statement about maintaining confidentiality of the information shared in the focus groups and interviews was also included in the information sheets and consent forms. However, participants were informed that the researchers could report cases when any safety or protection issues arose. To ensure anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed from notes and reports. Actual names were replaced with pseudonyms.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic context, interviews and focus groups were conducted via Zoom - the online conferencing system. Each individual interview and focus group lasted around 60 minutes and 90 minutes respectively. With participants' consent, all interviews and focus groups were recorded by a voice recorder. To ensure equal opportunities to participate during interviews, interpretation into the local language was offered but all participants opted to use English as they felt confident speaking in this language. The experience of online fieldwork was positive and less challenging than expected as the participants were able to attend the community centres run by World Vision where they had access to devices and good internet connection. Without this support, the fieldwork never would have progressed due to the limited access to internet in the country's rural locations. The research team recognised that online settings can have negative impacts on the data collection dynamics. These include challenges establishing rapport between participants and researchers, and the possibility that participants may feel less confident expressing themselves. However, these challenges were mitigated with icebreakers, games and the support of local staff members, known to the participants, who helped to facilitate the sessions.

Data from interviews and focus groups was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis and followed the six-phase approach suggest by Braun and Clarke (2012). These are become familiar with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define themes and write-up. The choice of analysis method supported the research team to engage in both inductive and deductive data analysis approaches, but also critically examine how the knowledge was put together by the participants and how ideas from the researchers' theoretical perspectives informed the gathered data.

Results and discussion

Based on the information provided by participants, the work of the young female activists was structured into three steps. Firstly, organising themselves as a group with the goal to stop child marriage in their communities, including equipping themselves with the skills and tools to carry out their activism. Secondly, running educational and awareness raising sessions in schools and community centres to sensitise community members about the dangers of child marriage. Thirdly, identifying potential cases of child marriage and advocating to relevant stakeholders to stop them.

Although participants indicated that their actions as young female activists were challenging, they reported feeling confident that their practices were successful because they were able to engage with the community and take steps to increase awareness of the importance of advocating for children's rights. As suggested by participants, two critical elements were central to their success of engaging in child activism in Sierra Leone. Firstly, the inseparable interconnection between social identities, power negotiation and activism that girls were able to utilise to further their cause. Secondly, the fact that the girls' activism was conducted *with* others and *for* others, resulting in strong networking and joint efforts to redefine their own lives. These two themes are discussed below.

Social identities, power negotiation and activism

Research participants pointed out that a central component of their activism was their identity as females, being below the age of 18, living in poverty, and coming from traditional and restricted patriarchal environments. Participants did not mention differences between activists based on specific geopolitical and cultural contexts. They highlighted that their gender was one of the most visible dimensions of their oppression, with gender-oppressive

structures constituting part of their everyday lives. Participants reported that these structures resulted in them having less opportunities than their male peers, experiencing discriminatory attitudes and exercising less power to make decisions. One participant offered the following reflection:

[In] our community and our homes, boys have more opportunities to attend school than girls. And even in schools, unfortunately, if a girl child happens to attend a mixed school, we are in the classroom with the boys, and the teacher gives all the rights to the boys. They say that boys make more sense when answering question instead of the girls (Animata, aged 16, interview).

This account was shared by all participants who perceived gender-biased behaviours in all settings, including their schools, homes and the broader community. This resulted in implicit and explicit stereotypes that determined girls' choices and interactions. For instance, participants reported that families and community members considered boy-favouring attitudes to be the norm and justified this belief on the premise that boys are smarter and will provide for their families in adulthood. Reflecting this, a participant said, "For people in rural communities [it] is difficult to educate girls, so parents invest more in the boys because the boys remain in the family and the girls go to another family" (Nasratha, aged 15, focus group).

However, whilst participants were aware of gender bias and its resulting negative consequences, they contested the view that boys are better future investments, arguing that this could be changed by focusing on equal access to education for all. For instance, Animata (aged 16, interview) said, "If a girl child gets educated well, this is going to bring more importance in the community and even in the homes." Furthermore, whilst reflecting on the value of child activism, another participant shared:

For some people being a child activist is a waste of time, but for me, it is something very important to bring about change. Being a child activist takes a lot of work; we prepare ourselves, go to the radio to speak, visit people in the field and sensitise parents. Sometimes they do not listen, but others change their views about child marriage thanks to our messages (Asuma, aged 15, focus group).

Consequently, although participants concurred that gender discrimination had a negative impact on their interactions with their peers and their ability to make choices, they realised that if they organised themselves, they could challenge the social practices, attitudes and values that placed them at the bottom of the decision-making hierarchy in their communities.

Participants pointed out that being female in a male-dominated society motivated them to work together with other girls who experienced similar struggles and to contribute to change. When asked how they were able to organise themselves to challenge these practices, participants said that being part of the World Vision Kids Club programme was a critical factor as they developed a sense of community, and acquired new knowledge and enhanced advocacy and negotiation skills. Hence, they perceived that through the Kids Club, they were able to have a space to speak out and to question unfair power structures. One participant noted:

Many elders said that we children should not have a voice, but things changed when World Vision started operating in my village and we joined the Kids Club. We learn many things, and this gives us more urge to be doing what we are doing. We continue to raise awareness to our colleagues' children so they are also more aware of their rights and their responsibilities. (Marie, aged 15, interview)

Within this landscape, their own subjectivity and lived experiences also became central to their activism and united them to challenge oppressive systems and practices, such as patriarchy and child marriage. This echoes Konstantoni's (2022) research which found that children and young people experience major inequalities when seeking to participate in public decision-making, especially based on the widespread belief that they need to be confined to children's spaces and age-based activities. Also, Konstantoni argues that these limitations are worse for children and young people from minority or oppressed racial and ethnic groups, refugee communities or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This exemplifies the need to use an intersectional lens to unpack how identity categories are shaped by exclusion and inequalities.

The identity-based struggles of the participants connected them to a common cause to uphold their rights and shared interests and motivated them to change something they considered unfair. This type of activism can be also called intersectional activism and a form

of intersectionality as praxis (Konstantoni, 2022), even though the participants did not use this terminology. A research participant noted, “As a girl, I can understand other girls' feelings and experiences, so I can speak on their behalf and deliver a strong and believable message” (Mariatu, aged 14, focus group). This form of identity-based activism resonates with Papa's (2017) arguments that activism is successful when it is built on a deep emotional conversation that unites activists in a shared cause. Furthermore, the impact is more sustainable when activism transforms personal struggles into a collective issue. When participants were asked about power imbalances between themselves, they did not mention any tension or conflict when deciding on their actions. However, the research team perceived that some participants tried to dominate the conversations as they were more outspoken and knowledgeable than other girls. Nonetheless, it seems that this did not have a negative impact on perceived success of the collective decision-making.

Alongside their fight against child marriage, the participants sought to advance opportunities for girls to participate equally in society and questioned the norms that defined their roles and responsibilities in accordance with their age and gender. Mindful of the literature on the struggles that often girls experience in realising their rights against a backdrop of traditional gender norms and practices that restrict their agency (e.g. De Graeve, 2015; Bose, 2012; Lewis, 2012), the participants were asked to examine their own hidden biases, discussed their identities and strengths, and reflected on what they needed to do to be an activist for change. Within this context, their activism involved working with their families and community members to transform widespread beliefs that confined girls to their homes and limited them to household responsibilities. For example, a participant shared, “We are becoming role models for other girls as we are breaking traditional views of girls. We are strong, and we make our voice heard. When other girls see this, they feel there are able to do it as well” (Binta, aged 15, interview).

Throughout their activism, the participants engaged directly with people in power without using intermediaries. In doing so, they created relations that contested established power structures and offered new alternatives of authority, such as the power of being educated. One participant shared, “Some factors that are giving us the opportunity [to engage in activism] are that we are more educated than the girls before, we go to school and know more things” (Mariatu, aged 14, focus group). Mirroring Freire's (2000) thoughts, the participants cultivated their power by critically discussing it and pushing for new spaces for

dialogue between those in positions of power with those perceived as less powerful. Hence, as Foucault (1983) argues, power is not organised from the top down within a social hierarchy but is dynamic, circular and complex. The findings thus demonstrated that participants' participation and activism within their communities was framed in terms of them questioning and modifying power through negotiation in order to achieve their activist goals (for further discussion see also Gallagher, 2008).

Fighting with and for others

The narratives of the young female Sierra Leonean activists who participated in the study emphasised the need for close connections with “others” in order to carry out their activism. This reflects Wyness’ (2018) observation that children’s agency implies a “relational conception where agency emerges from the relations children have with others” (p.132); as such, there is a need to “locate children’s capacities and competences within ongoing relationships that they have with others, including peers and adults” (p.133). The findings of the study also support Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra’s (2020) assertion that child activism appears to be collective and relies on a nexus of established relationships rather than isolated or individualistic activities. Specifically, data from the study showed that the young female activists navigated two dimensions of potential support. Firstly, peer support, which was evident when the girls conducted collective activities and identified cases of child marriage. This peer engagement brought positive results, such as moral support, but also posed challenges, with the young female activists also facing some backlash from peers in their community. Secondly, the young female activists attracted support from some adults, although this engagement also brought specific challenges. Each will now be discussed in turn.

Within this study, the term “others” was frequently included in participants’ narratives in relation to fighting *for others* and fighting *with others*. The former was used when discussing participants’ motivations to engage in activism to protect and support other girls who were at risk of been offered in marriage, despite being under the age of majority. For instance, many of the participants defined their young female activist role as “speak[ing] on behalf of the others, especially those who are voiceless” (Amara, aged 14, focus group), “stand[ing] to advocate on issues that affect our lives” (Fatou, aged 15, focus group) and “[ensuring] all child[ren] have rights” (Marie, aged 15, interview). For participants, these

particular “others”, that featured so prominently in their narratives, were therefore peers - girls who lived in the same communities and shared similar challenges in the course of their lives, especially in relation to child marriage. On the other hand, participants talked about fighting *with others*. This reflected the close cooperation they developed with different individuals or groups when mobilising people to end child marriage. These “others” could be either children (peers) or adults (key community stake holders) whom participants engaged with to promote children’s rights-based messages relevant to their cause.

Focusing first on young female activists’ engagement with their peers, the participants reported that peer networking functioned as a vital source of information for finding out about cases of child marriage that were happening in their communities. Once they gained such information, the participants took action, such as talking to relevant parents or local stakeholders. Amara (aged 14, focus group) noted, “We find out through friends and the community; we ask if some child is getting married, and with this information, we talk to the parents.” Peer networks therefore served as a mechanism through which the young female activists could collaborate with their peers in a joint fight to respond to imminent threats of child marriage. Participants also reported working alongside their peers to raise awareness about the issue of child marriage. For example, one activist mentioned:

We do go to schools for sensitisation and community visiting, where we meet their parents or the guardians of the children and talk to them about the importance of education and the harmfulness of teenage pregnancy and early marriage (Aminata, aged 16, interview).

Therefore, in their joint fight to prevent child marriage and address the root causes of the problem, one of their key strategies was to work collectively with peers to educate significant others, especially other girls and parents, and to spread values about children’s rights (e.g., rights to education and protection) and the harmful consequences of child marriage.

In addition to working with their peers through collective actions, participants also highlighted the emotional support they received from peers and friends which was fundamental to the success of their activism. As such, fighting *with others* not only constituted their public joint actions but also backstage emotional and moral support (see also Taft, 2017). For example, one participant, Marie (aged 15, interview), shared that her peers’ support

provided her with a strong sense of belonging to her particular community or group and also reduced stress, especially her friends' patient listening and provision of comfort when she experienced challenges in her efforts to be an advocate and ambassador for children. Thus, their activism held a moral dimension as they supported each other and fought together to stop child marriage, mirroring Wyness' (2018) observation that "children's contributions and collaborations with others often involve judgements and values" (p. 135).

However, although their work with peers was a critical element of both fighting *for others* and fighting *with others*, participants pointed out that sometimes they also experienced tensions between themselves and their peers (see also Halstead et al., 2021). For example, some reported that they had lost their friends because the latter did not agree with their cause. As explained by one participant:

...some [friends] don't even want to see me anymore in the community, having seen me talking about some of the bad effects of the teenage pregnancy and some of this early marriage...some of them are involved with a lot of fears. Having prejudice outside and even inside. So, having me being involved in Kids Club activities, and talking to them about those bad effects, they see me as a bad person, so they move away from me (Aminata, aged 16, interview).

Participants certainly appeared to struggle with such criticism. However, they nonetheless considered themselves to have more supportive peers on their side than detractors. Furthermore, when reflecting on how they overcame criticism and their fears, one girl noted that she could not operate alone, saying:

...because, in anything, no man is an island, I cannot do it. I need friends to help, I need their support, I need my parents, I need family, I need the community to do what I want to do (Marie, aged 15, interview).

Thus, Marie recognised that whilst she had agency and could promote her own beliefs, even in the face of criticism, she could not operate without the support of others because the journey of becoming child activists was understood to be highly collective rather than isolated (see also Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2020). In addition, this finding reflects the notion of a type

of activism that is intersectional and strongly linked to those in power in order to achieve children and young people's joint goals (Konstantoni, 2022).

The notion of fighting *with others* also applied to the young female activists' interactions with adults. When considering how they worked with adults to motivate them to engage in their cause, participants pointed out that supportive adult figures mattered. They identified some key adults that helped them in their activism, especially in facilitating their involvement in actions to stop child marriage. These included "understanding parents" and "supportive mentors". During the interviews and focus groups, participants acknowledged that their actions to stop child marriage in their local communities were supported by professionals from both non-governmental organisations (e.g., World Vision's Kids Club) and local authorities (e.g., local Family Support Units). For instance, Zuri (aged 14, interview) discussed the support she received from professionals in her community, saying, "One of my mentors [enabled] me to go to radios, walk with me in my community to sensitise, and even in school told my teachers to give me 30 hours to talk to my colleagues about the things that affect their health and our education."

The intergenerational support received by supportive adults was repeatedly mentioned as a key resource through which participants received training to build up their abilities and skills to advocate for themselves, and gained support to mobilise their peers. They perceived that this support had equipped them with the tools to develop self-awareness and then motivate others to make a change and stop child marriages. For example, one participant said:

We have a lot of support at the Kids Club... We have been trained with skills and many new things to carry out our activities. Thanks to the trainings we have managed to pull out our bucket of fears, and learned much stuff (Aminata, aged 16, interview).

Through assistance from supportive adults, participants therefore recognised that they built up both skills and the vital courage and confidence to speak for themselves and others. However, despite positive support from some adults, participants recognised that there had been some tensions between the activists and their important adult others. For instance, some parents did not allow their children to join World Vision's Kids Club as they viewed children's involvement in such groups as a source of bad influence. This situation resonates

with the concept of “ambiguous agency”, developed by Bordonaro and Payne (2012), that explains the tensions between children and adults when “children see their actions as positive, but adults impose a negative judgement on what they are doing” (p.186). Certainly, as highlighted by all participants, it was not easy challenging adults and their local culture, norms and beliefs, especially since the widespread practice of engaging girls in marriage as soon as they began their menstrual period was treated as “normal” and “good” for the girls and their families.

Conclusion

Whilst the UNCRC is central to the debate on children’s participation rights, the notion of child activism has gradually emerged as a conceptual and practical framework to interrogate traditional understandings of participation and to address persistent challenges that restrict children from realising these rights. As discussed in this article, the activism conducted by the Sierra Leonean young female activists brings new perspectives on what activism means and how it differs from participation. First, the activists who participated in this study recognised participation as a fundamental children’s right that they sought to realise fully. On the other hand, they considered activism as the approach they had chosen to contest and challenge oppressive and unfair practices with the aim of generating change. As a result, their engagement in activism went beyond only influencing decision-making; their pledge was to reshape power structures and confront others to transform oppressive structures. This resonates with Konstantoni (2022), who argues that children and young people have a long history of engaging in activism to address intersectional discrimination and inequalities, which in this case study is moulded by the intersections of being female, poor and young in specific social, cultural and family contexts. With such a paradigm shift, child activists can be seen as political agents who are able to create political and social change, and contest power relations and unequal social structures.

Second, the case study illuminates how the young female activists carried out activism to pursue their political ideals of equality and justice. Data showed that participants adopted intersectionality as praxis - without planning to do so - in order to embrace an emancipatory and activist agenda that aimed to address discrimination and inequalities that perpetuate child marriage in their communities. Drawing on Pottinger (2017), the Sierra Leonean girls’ activism resembles a form of quiet activism, which is assenting and at the same time able to

cause important and lasting changes, despite being modest and narrow in scope. Hence, their activism was built on relations with others, including peers and adult supporters, and these relationships added an emotional value that was considered fundamental to sustaining their activism.

Third, a fundamental component of the girls' activism was the intertwined relationships between their social identities, power negotiation within complex cultural and social environments, and the collective causes they jointly adopted in order to make a change within contexts of generational difference. As de Lemus and Stroebe (2015) argue, this kind of activism strives to challenge existing socio-structural conditions that uphold power differences between groups. Equally, Tisdall (2017) points out that vulnerability based on the intersection between social identities and inequalities needs to be addressed on the premise that children and young people have the ability to understand their own vulnerabilities and develop their own narratives to contest unfairness as a result of these vulnerabilities.

Hence, data from the study showed that it was pivotal to include gender and resistance lenses to understand how the participants' activism was constructed and how their actions were connected to the intersection between their own identities and the unjust systems within their families and communities. If one uses this approach, child activism can rectify some of the obstacles to children's participation, such as providing better opportunities for children to lead their own agendas and carry out direct actions without adult mediation.

This study evidences that more work is needed in the field of childhood studies to conceptualise child activism and intersectionality. Thus, it is critical that researchers and activists themselves apply elements of intersectionality as theory and praxis in their emancipatory efforts in order to identify and contest multiple form of inequalities based on social identities. The work done by the young female activists to challenge hegemonic views of childhood shows that in order to carry out their collective actions for social justice, they first examined how gender, ethnicity, and patriarchy were placed in their everyday life within their communities. By locating their lived experiences at the centre of their activism, they were able to embrace an emancipatory agenda.

The young female activists seemed to pursue sustainable change in a more confrontational way than traditional forms of participation, demanding that the people in power within their community altered customary practices and respected the law that bans

child marriage. This study found that the young female activists were able to mobilise themselves for a cause and open public debate within their communities in a way that increased their chances of being seen and heard on matters relevant to them. Furthermore, although these young female activists experienced difficulties and limitations when they engaged in child activism in a traditional and restricted patriarchal society, they were undeterred. Instead, they actively exercised their agency, bravely negotiating with their surrounding environment and relationships to engage in numerous actions. These included the establishment of action groups in local communities with peers, delivery of educational sessions to diverse stakeholders and direct actions to protect fellow peers from child marriage. Such agentic practice suggests they had “latitude to act within a broad range of options” (Klocker, 2007, p. 85). Therefore, through their activism, they had more opportunities to exercise their agency in a “thick” sense as their collective efforts made them more visible and respected in their community.

The findings thus echo Cornish and colleagues’ (2018) position that activism is an approach to decisively contend power inequalities between those in positions of power and those perceived to be powerless. To advance this goal, the young female activists mobilised themselves to carry out actions that went beyond what was understood as conventional and sought to make a change. However, this task was intricate as the activists were forced to deal with traditional community values associated with child marriage that did not align with the emancipatory views of young female activists. This, in turn, provoked some tensions between community members and the activists. But, as Freire (2000) says, social change is about tension and conflict; without them, change does not occur.

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