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SIERRA LEONE NATIONAL POLICY ON RADICAL INCLUSION IN SCHOOLS: EXAMINING GIRLS' EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AT THE PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND TERTIARY LEVELS IN SIERRA LEONE.

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Abstract

Sierra Leone, located on Africa's west coast, has a population of 7.1 million and a constitution that guarantees fundamental human rights. The Education Act of 2004 outlines Sierra Leone's education system, which includes six years of primary, three years each of junior and senior secondary, and four years of tertiary education. The Education Sector Plan 2018-2020 aims to enhance education access for all, including individuals with disabilities. The Quality Schooling in Sierra Leone (FQSE) policy, introduced by President Julius Maada Bio, seeks to improve secondary students' performance in external exams and provides free education from kindergarten to tertiary, including all external exams. This study evaluates awareness of Sierra Leone's national policy on radical inclusion in schools and explores educational opportunities for girls at various levels. A qualitative research design was used in Kailahun District, Eastern Province, Sierra Leone, involving students, parents, teachers, school administrators, politicians, and community members. Forty participants were purposively selected, including 15 students, 5 parents, 5 teachers, 5 school administrators, 5 politicians, and 5 community members, to develop strategies for overcoming challenges female students face in accessing quality education. The study utilized both primary and secondary data, with primary data gathered through interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. The researcher utilized secondary data from textbooks, e-journals, project documents, newspapers, annual reports, and online literature. Both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods were employed, with descriptive tools such as percentages and graphs for questionnaire data. Interview and observation data were categorized into empirical arguments and theoretical results, analyzed using SPSS version 25. Education is a fundamental right for all. Inequality in Sierra Leone's primary and secondary education has led to poverty, high birth rates, and girls working in informal sectors. Respondents seem aware of the government's radical inclusion policy in schools. Results show that some respondents are aware of the government's radical inclusion policy that grants girls free primary and secondary education, supported by school administrators. Most respondents feel school publications lack a gender perspective.

Keywords: Policy, national policy, radical inclusion, education, opportunity, school.

1.0. Introduction

Sierra Leone, located on Africa's west coast, has a population of 7.1 million and a constitution that guarantees fundamental human rights. The Persons with Disabilities Act (PDA) of 2011 promotes equal opportunities for people with disabilities, particularly in education (Lamin, 2022). The Education Act of 2004 defines the structure of Sierra Leone's education system, consisting of six years of primary education, three years each of lower and upper secondary education, and four years of tertiary education. The Education Sector Plan 2018-2020 aims to enhance equal access to education at all levels for everyone, including people with disabilities. Special education needs have been recognized in Sierra Leone since the founding of the Milton Margai School for the Blind. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MBSSE) has created a national radical inclusion policy aimed at girls, individuals with disabilities, and marginalized children (Braima & Borway, 2023). The 2019-2023 Medium Term Development Plan focuses on human capital development through free education, quality healthcare, and food security, but often neglects special education, leaving children with disabilities in inclusive schools facing significant challenges (Bani Odeh & Lach, 2024). Kamara (2020) highlighted that Sierra Leone's Free Quality Schooling (FQSE) policy, initiated by President Julius Maada Bio, aims to enhance secondary students' academic performance in external exams. This radical inclusion policy guarantees free education from pre-primary to senior high school, including all external exams (Zoker et al.). After his election victory, he dedicated 21% of the country's budget to FQSE. Sierra Leone achieved the highest WASSCE pass rate in four years, with a 35% increase in exam takers from 2018 to 2021 (Macauley, 2023). The policy stresses the importance of context in quality education to prevent the unnecessary universalization of education standards. Secondary education lasts six years after primary school and includes compulsory and elective subjects like mathematics, English, general science, and social studies. Lamin (2023) notes that Sierra Leone's National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools aims to make education accessible to all children, particularly those who are marginalized. The policy promotes justice and equality, recognizing education as crucial for breaking the cycle of poverty and addressing stigmas like disability and pregnancy. The Sierra Leone National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools is the government's first effort to guide schools and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, ensuring a positive experience for all students, regardless of social status. Ordu (2023) defines radical inclusion, as stated by the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education, as the intentional inclusion of individuals excluded from education due to actions or omissions by individuals, societies, or organizations. Silence and infrastructure can contribute to intentional exclusion. Radical inclusion requires the urgent removal of implicit exclusionary policies, moral positions, formal policies, institutional regulations, national laws, and frameworks to foster true inclusion (Beckman, 2023). Rose et al. (2019) identify radical inclusion and poverty policies as major barriers to education in Sierra Leone, disproportionately affecting girls and leading to unpartnered sex, early marriage, and heavy caregiving responsibilities. Supporting children strengthens families. During the nine-month school closure in Sierra Leone from 2014-2015 due to Ebola, dropout rates surged due to teenage pregnancy, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. Sierra Leone has one of the world's highest rates of teenage pregnancy and child marriage. UNICEF estimates that up to 13 million girls from low-

income families could face early marriage in the next decade (Wechter et al., 2022). McCormack-Hale & Twum (2022) highlighted that pregnant girls in Sierra Leone have long been denied access to school and exams. This was challenged in the ECOWAS Court with support from a consortium that includes Equality Now, Waves, Amnesty International, and the Coalition 4 Girls Education led by Purposeful. After years of campaigning, the government repealed the ban in March 2020, enabling pregnant girls and new mothers to return to school and take exams. Despite more pregnant girls enrolling in school, stigma and discrimination still hinder their participation (Obetto, 2023). Radical inclusion policies aim to eliminate systemic barriers to learning and foster an empowering, inclusive environment free from prejudice and harassment (Kinuthia, 2023). Sure! Please provide the text you would like to shorten.

1.1. Aim and Objectives of the study

This study aims to evaluate the Sierra Leone National policy on radical Inclusion in Schools with specific focus on the following objectives:

1. Evaluate the level of awareness of National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools
2. Examining girls' educational opportunities at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

2.0. Material and Methods

2.1. Study design

A qualitative research design was used in this study, taking full advantage of the benefits of a qualitative approach. These methods allow researchers to collect rich, nuanced data from multiple perspectives that comprehensively understand a topic. The research design and methodology used in this study were born out of the need to achieve the study's primary objective. A descriptive research design was used in this study, specifically a cross-sectional survey developed using qualitative data collection methods. This design is used because the results of such a survey method can be easily extrapolated to the entire population, is time-saving, and is cost-effective.

2.2. Study area

This study was carried out in Kailahun District. Kailahun district is found in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. The District headquarters town is Kailahun City. Major towns in the district include Segwema, Koindu, Pendembu, and Daru. Kailahun District is divided into 14 chiefdoms. Part of the Moa River marks the district's border with Guinea. The district's population is predominantly Muslim. Kailahun District has a mixed economy with small-scale mining and agricultural production of coffee, cocoa, and rice. Currently, Kailahun has 410 schools (19 kindergartens, 346 primary schools, 35 junior high schools, and 10 secondary schools).

2.3. Population

The study population included educationists, parents, teachers, and students from selected communities and schools in Kailahun district. The accessible population consists of school administrators, teachers, students, educationists, and parents. The study used a purposive sampling technique to select participants including 15 students, 5 parents, 5 teachers, 5 school administrators, 5 politicians, and 5 community members. These participants are engaged in developing targeted strategies to address the unique challenges that female students face in

accessing quality education, including an assessment of gender equality in providing education opportunities with a focus on Sierra Leone's radical inclusion policy. The sample allowed for an in-depth exploration and analysis of the experiences and perspectives of the girls, parents, teachers, school administrators, politicians, and community members.

2.4. Sample size and sampling procedures

2.4.1. Sampling method

The study used a purposive sampling method to select a total of 40 participants. The participants included 15 students, 5 parents, 5 teachers, 5 school administrators, 5 politicians, and 5 community members who were engaged in developing targeted strategies to address the unique challenges faced by girls in obtaining quality education. This included an evaluation of gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities with a focus on Sierra Leone's radical inclusion policy. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher the freedom to select participants in such a way that a high level of validity and reliability was achieved. Gender equality in education is a critical issue and extensive research is needed to understand and address the unique challenges faced by girls. Sierra Leone's radical inclusion policy aims to provide equal educational opportunities for all, especially girls.

2.4.2. Sample size

The study used a purposive sampling method to select a total of 40 participants, including 15 students, 5 parents, 5 teachers, 5 school administrators, 5 policymakers, and 5 community members, who were engaged in developing targeted strategies to address the unique challenges girls face in gaining quality education, including an assessment of gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities with a focus on Sierra Leone's radical inclusion policy.

2.5. Data collection method

Primary and secondary data sources were the two major sources of data for this study.

The primary data was collected through:

- a. Interviews: By conducting semi-structured interviews with stakeholders such as students, teachers, parents, and policymakers, researchers obtain personal stories and insights about girls' experiences. The interviews may cover topics such as access to education, quality of education, cultural norms and practices, and perceptions of radical inclusion policies.
- b. Focus group discussions: Organizing focus group discussions with diverse groups including girls, boys, teachers, and community members allows researchers to explore shared perceptions and social dynamics regarding gender equality in education. These discussions provided valuable insights into the barriers, challenges, and opportunities for girls.
- c. Observation: The researcher may observe the classroom environment, school practices, and implementation of radical inclusion policies to gain a deeper understanding of girls' lived experiences in the Sierra Leonean education system. Observing classrooms may reveal gender bias, discrimination, and the inclusiveness of the overall learning environment.
- d. Document analysis: This is the analysis of policy documents, reports, and relevant literature on gender equality and radical inclusion policies in education

providing a broader understanding of the context. Document analysis helps in identifying the gap between the goals and implementation of the strategy and sheds light on the effectiveness of the strategy in addressing gender inequality in access to education.

The secondary method of data collection is the method used to collect previous work and is easily accessible from other sources. This means that the information used by the researcher has already been collected by scientists other than the researcher. Secondary data is very helpful for the researcher in building the theoretical framework and literature review as it is guided by the work of various scholars and researchers. The sources of secondary data that researcher use in his research include textbooks, electronic journals, project documents, newspapers, published annual reports, web-based literature, etc. The secondary data consists of existing knowledge about the topic being studied.

2.6. Data presentation and analysis

2.6.1. Data presentation

The researcher used both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods to analyze the collected data. Descriptive tools such as percentages and graphs were used for data collected through questionnaires. Explanation of results was used for data collected through interviews and observations. The collected data was analyzed into two different categories: empirical discussion and theoretical results. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program (version 25.0) was used for data entry and analysis.

2.6.2. Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves coding, categorizing, and interpreting the collected data. Thematic analysis is a commonly used approach to identify major themes and patterns within a dataset. Researchers may identify recurring themes related to gender inequality, access to education, cultural barriers, political efficacy, the impact of radical inclusion policies on girls, etc. The analysis should also take into account the broader socio-cultural context, historical factors, and power relations. Qualitative research methodology offers a valuable approach to assessing gender equality in education, focusing primarily on girls' experiences.

By using a variety of methods such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and progress related to gender equality in education. The case study of the Sierra Leone policy of radical inclusion in schools further contributes to understanding the complexity and effectiveness of such policies. The use of qualitative research methods can contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies to achieve gender equality in education, not only in Sierra Leone but across the world. The data analysis method was descriptive qualitative analysis and quantitative data was triangulated using graphs and tables. The quantitative data collected was coded using frequency distribution tables according to the elements of the semi-structured questionnaire. The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program (version 25.0) and the results were presented in percentages and graphs.

3.0. Results and analysis

3.1. Demographic characteristics

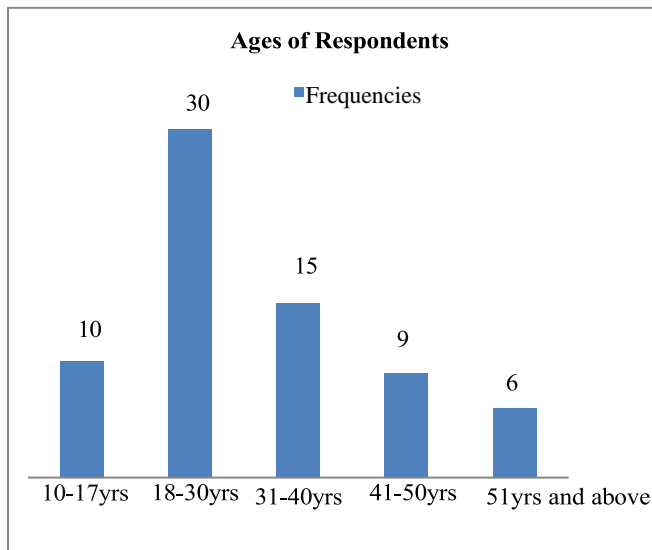
This section presents the demographic characteristics of the people involved in the study. The data collected was useful to the researcher as it provided information about the age group of the respondents, their educational background and gender, the position

they currently hold, and the length of time they have been working in the institution.

3.1.1. Ages of Respondents

Figure 1 displays the age categories of respondents.

Figure 1: Ages of Respondents



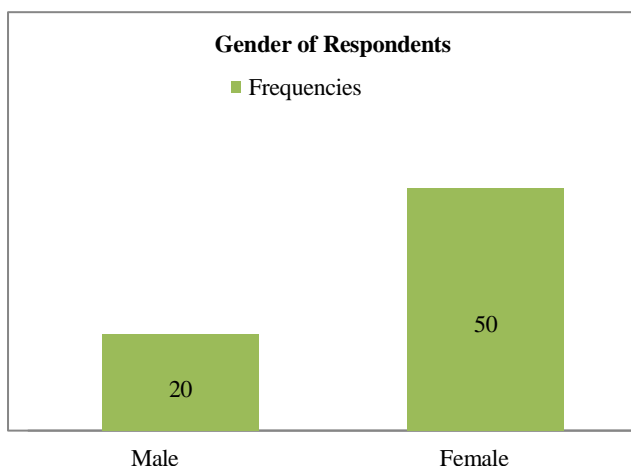
Source: Field Research, 2024

The results shown in Figure 1 indicate that the age of the respondents ranged from 10 to 51 years and above. The results in Figure 1 show that the respondents between 10 to 17 years of age had a frequency of 10, making up 14% of the total number of respondents. The age group between 18 to 30 years of age represented a frequency of 30, making up 43%. The age group between 31 to 40 years of age represented a frequency of 15, making up 21% of the respondents. The age group between 41 to 50 years of age represented a frequency of 9. The frequency was 13% but there were six frequencies, making up 9% of the respondents in the age category of 51 years and above. The results in Figure 1 show that there is a relationship between the age of the respondents and their involvement in gender issues. More respondents seem to belong to the age category between 18 to 40 years of age, with a total of 45 respondents making up 64%.

3.1.2. Gender of respondents

The results of respondents' gender status are presented in Figure 4.2

Figure 2: Gender of Respondents



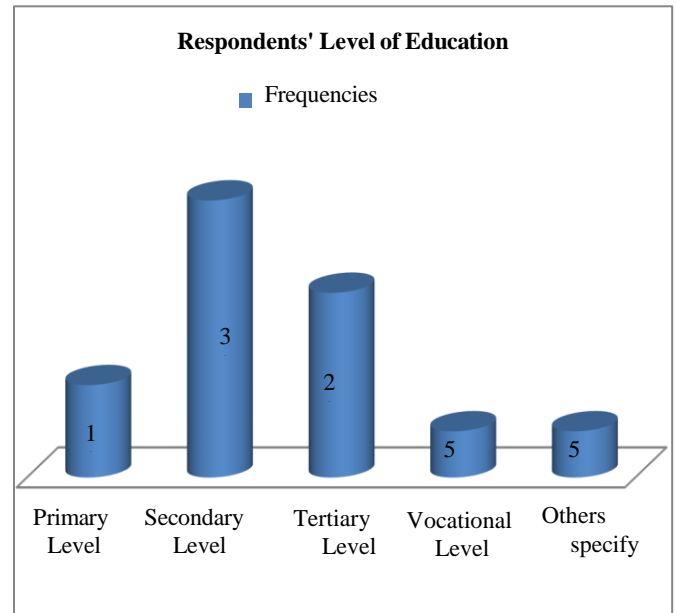
Source: Field Research, 2024

The results in Figure 2 show the gender of the respondents. In the gender category, it is shown that there is a frequency of 20, which represents 29% of male respondents, and a frequency of 50, which represents 71% of male respondents. This shows that more female participants participated in the study. The researcher included both male and female respondents to explore the opinions of both genders regarding the phenomenon under study.

3.1.3. Respondent's Level of education

Results on the level of education of Respondents are displayed in Figure 3

Figure 3: Respondents' Level of Education



Source: Field Research, 2024

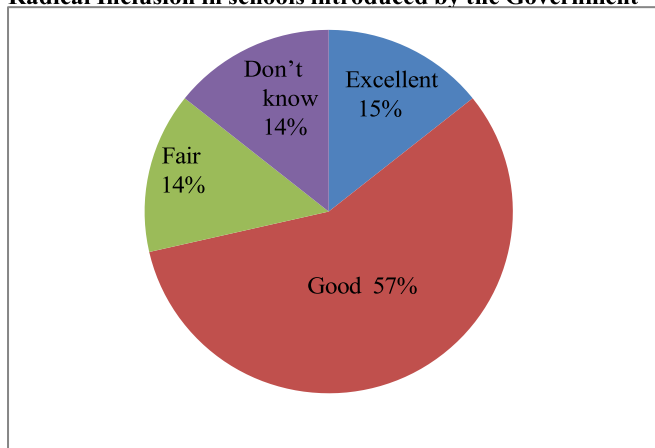
The educational level of the respondents in Figure 3 shows that the educational background of the majority of the respondents falls under the category of secondary education with a frequency of 30% and 43% of the respondents, while those with primary education are at 10% and 14%. The frequency of the respondents with higher education was 20% and 29% respectively, while those with vocational training were at 5% and 7% respectively. The frequency of the respondents with qualifications such as diplomas and certificates was 5% and 7% respectively of the total number of respondents.

3.2.1. Your level of awareness based on National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools introduced by the Government

Responses of respondents in the statement "your level of knowledge based on National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools introduced by the Government" are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Your level of awareness based on National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools introduced by the Government.

Your Level of Knowledge based on National Policy on Radical Inclusion in schools introduced by the Government



Source: Field Research, 2024

Figure 4 shows that 10 people representing 15% of the respondents said that they have good knowledge about the national policy on radical inclusion in schools and 40 people representing 57% of the respondents said that they have good knowledge about the government policy that introduced the national policy on radical inclusion in schools. 10 people representing 14% said that they have good knowledge about the national policy on radical inclusion in schools introduced by the government and 10 people representing 14% said that they do not know at all about the national policy on radical inclusion in schools introduced by the government. This result suggests that some of the respondents have good knowledge about the radical inclusion policy in schools introduced by the government.

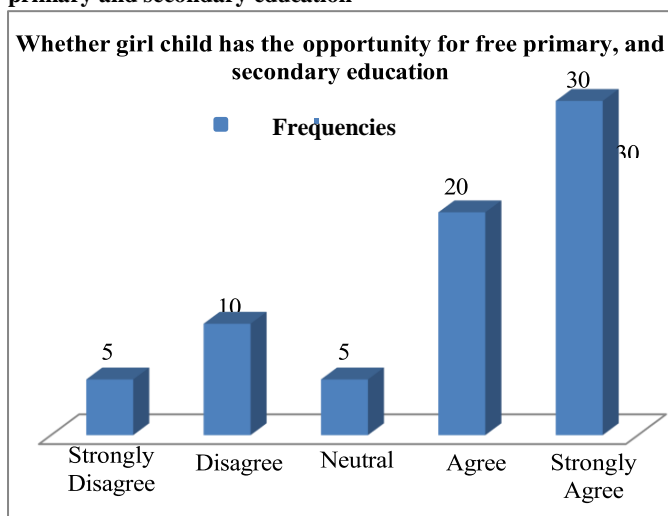
3.3. Examining girls' educational opportunities at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

The objective of this section is to examine the opportunities for the girl child in education at the primary, secondary and tertiary level.

3.3.1. Whether girl child has the opportunity for free primary and secondary education

Results on the statement "Whether girl child has the opportunity for free primary and secondary education" are indicated in Figure 5

Figure 5: Whether girl child has the opportunity for free primary and secondary education



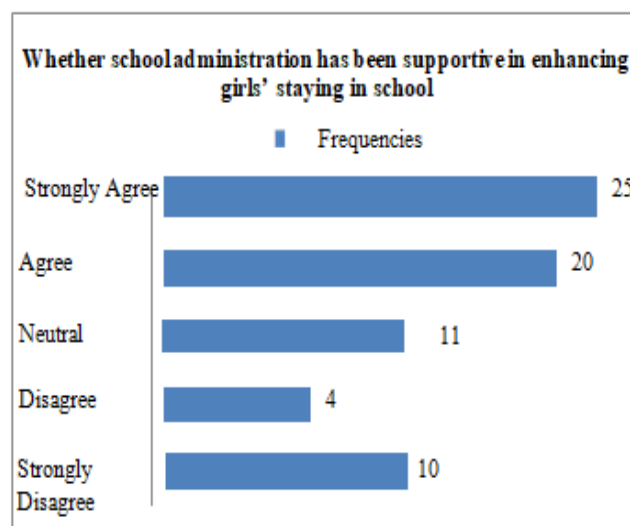
Source: Field Research, 2024

The results in Figure 5 show that some respondents (15 people, or 21%) disagreed with the statement regarding whether girls have the opportunity to receive free primary and secondary education, while 5 people, or 27%, did not express an opinion on the issue. As for whether girls have the opportunity to receive free primary and secondary education, 50 people, or 72%, agreed with the statement. These results suggest that the majority of respondents agree that girls have the opportunity to receive free primary and secondary education. These results support Nasser's (2016) opinion that while access to education is guaranteed to girls' at all educational levels, in a severely underfunded, and overcrowded system, many girls slip through the cracks.

3.2.1. Whether school administration has been supportive in enhancing girls' staying in school

Responses of respondents on the statement "Whether school administration has been supportive in enhancing girls' staying in school" are presented in Figure 6

Figure 6: Whether school administration has been supportive in enhancing girls' staying in school



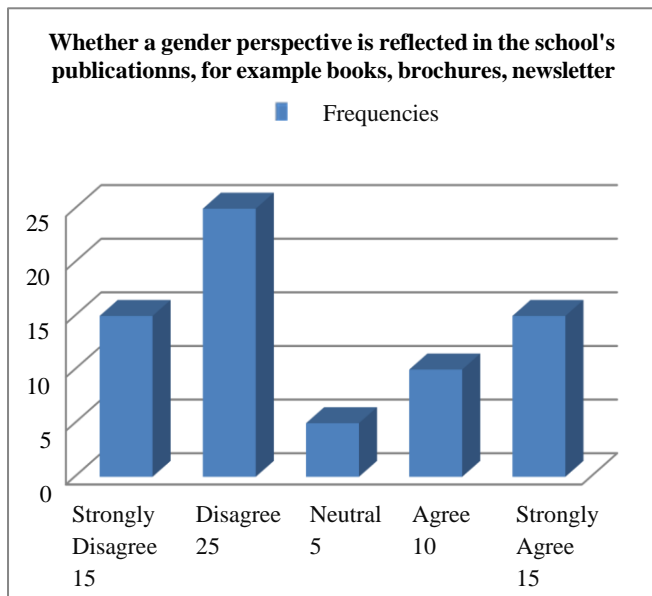
Source: Field Research, 2024

The results in Figure 6 show that 14 frequencies representing 20% of the respondents do not agree with the statement whether school administrators support female students in attending school, while 11 frequencies representing 16% of the respondents have a neutral opinion. In terms of agreement with this statement, 45 frequencies representing 64% of the surveyed people agreed with this statement. These results show that the majority of participants agree that school administrators support female students in attending school. These findings contradict Yokozeki's (2014) view that not only do female students have less class time, but their contributions in class are often systematically ridiculed, and female students are subject to verbal and non-verbal attacks.

3.3.3. Whether a gender perspective is reflected in the school's publications, for example books, brochures, newsletters

Figure 7 displayed responses of respondents on the statement "whether a gender perspective is reflected in the school's publications, for example books, brochures, newsletters"

Figure 7: Whether a gender perspective is reflected in the school's publications, for example books, brochures, newsletters



Source: Field Research, 2024

The results in Figure 7 show that 40 or 58% of the surveyed people do not agree with the statement regarding the presence or absence of gender perspective in school publications. Books, pamphlets, newsletters are taken into consideration, while 25 people or 35% of the surveyed people agree with this statement and 5 people or 7% of the surveyed people have no opinion on this statement. These results suggest that the majority of the respondents do not agree with the gender perspective in school publications. B. Books, pamphlets, newsletters are taken into consideration.

3.4. Discussions

As shown in Figure 1, the age of the respondents ranges from 10 years to 51 years and above. This distribution indicates that the respondents are mostly young people and their involvement in gender issues is significant. The results in Figure 2 show the gender of the respondents. In the gender category, it is shown that there is a frequency of 20 which represents 29% of male respondents, and a frequency of 50 which represents 71 male respondents. This indicates that more female participants are taking part in the study. The researcher included both male and female participants to elicit the opinions of both men and women on the phenomenon under study. The educational level of the respondents in Figure 3 shows that the educational background of the majority of the respondents fell into the category of secondary education with a frequency of 30, which represents 43% of the respondents. Those with primary education were represented by a frequency of 10, which represents 14% of the respondents. Those with tertiary education were represented by a frequency of 20, which represents 29%. Those with vocational training were represented by a frequency of 5, which represents 7% and those with qualifications such as diplomas and certificates were represented by a frequency of 5, which represents 7% of the total number of respondents. Figure 4 shows that 10 people representing 15% of the respondents responded that they have good knowledge about the national policy on radical inclusion in schools and 40 people representing 57% of the respondents responded that they have good knowledge about the government policy that introduced the national policy on

radical inclusion. In schools, 10 people equivalent to 14% responded that they have good knowledge about the national policy on radical inclusion in schools introduced by the government and 10 people equivalent to 14% responded that they do not know at all about the policy on radical inclusion in schools introduced by the government. This result suggests that some of the respondents have good knowledge about the policy on radical inclusion in schools introduced by the government. The results in Figure 5 show that some of the respondents (15 people or 21%) do not agree with the statement whether girls have an opportunity to get free primary and secondary education and 5 people or 27% of the respondents do not have any position. When asked to make a statement on this point, 50 people, or 72% of the surveyed people agreed with the statement on whether girls have an opportunity to get free primary and secondary education. These results indicate that the majority of the respondents believe that girls have the opportunity to receive free primary and secondary education. These results support the opinion of Nasser (2016) that girls' access to education is guaranteed at all educational levels. In a severely underfunded and overcrowded system, many girls fall behind. The results in Figure 6 show that 14 frequencies representing 20% of the respondents do not agree that the school administration supports promoting girls' enrollment, while 11 frequencies representing 16% of the respondents have a neutral opinion. 45 frequencies representing 64% of the surveyed people agree with this statement. These results indicate that the majority of participants agree that the school administration is supportive of promoting female students' enrollment. These findings contradict Yokozeki's (2014) observation that not only do female students receive less instructional time, but their contributions in class are often systematically ridiculed and subjected to verbal and non-verbal attacks. The results in Figure 7 show that 40 respondents, or 58%, disagree with the statement regarding whether gender perspectives are reflected in school publications (books, pamphlets, newsletters, etc.), while 25 respondents, or 35%, and agree. Five respondents, or 7% of the respondents, had no opinion on the statement. These results suggest that the majority of the respondents do not agree that gender perspectives are reflected in school publications (books, pamphlets, newsletters, etc.).

3.5. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to examine how gender equality in girls' education can be achieved within the framework of the national policy on radical inclusion in schools. It can be concluded that education is the right of all citizens, regardless of gender, skin color or geographical location. Inequality in education in Sierra Leone, especially in primary and secondary education, has led to poverty, high birth rates and employment of girls in the informal sector as maids, barmaids and food vendors.

The results suggest that the respondents are expected to have good knowledge about the national radical inclusion policy in schools introduced by the government. The results suggest that some respondents have good knowledge about the national radical inclusion policy in schools introduced by the government.

The study found that girls have the opportunity to get free primary and secondary education. This is evident from the fact that school administrations support girls in their school life.

These results show that majority of the respondents do not agree that school publications such as books, pamphlets, newsletters etc. contain a gender perspective.

All these variables indicate that girls have the opportunity to get free primary and secondary education. 3.6

3.6. Recommendation

Based on the result, it is recommended that:

The Sierra Leone National Policy on Radical Inclusion introduced by the government be disseminated in schools to raise awareness among education stakeholders and students. If the radical inclusion policy is not perceived as being in everyone's interest, it will be difficult to achieve meaningful results from the implementation of the policy.

Also, school administrators must encourage female students to attend school.

The government should also ensure that girls have the opportunity to receive free primary and secondary education.

Furthermore, gender perspectives are to be taken into account in school publications such as books, pamphlets, newsletters, etc.

Moreover, reducing the educational gap between boys and girls is crucial for economic and social development. The need to close the gap becomes even more crucial given the benefits of maternal education in reducing poverty among the poor. Governments must support students, especially vulnerable girls, by covering school fees, transport, uniforms, study materials, etc., so that girls from poor families can receive secondary education without barriers while in school. The study shows that since poverty limits girls' access to education, governments are urged to support at-risk girls.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest was declared by the author.

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