

Vulnerability Viability of the Girl Child in Selected Single -Sex Secondary Schools of Lusaka District

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/bjmas.2022.04202>

Published November 17, 2024

Citation: Christine H.M. and Francis S. (2024) Vulnerability Viability of the Girl Child in Selected Single -Sex Secondary Schools of Lusaka District, *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies* 5 (6),14-25

Abstract: *The purpose of the study was to investigate the vulnerability viability of the girl child in selected single -sex secondary schools of Lusaka district of Zambia. The study objective was to establish the profile of a vulnerable girl child in selected single -sex secondary schools. The used adopted the qualitative approach and used a phenomenological research design. The study population included all the single girls schools in Lusaka district. The sample comprised of 38 participants who included 8 vulnerable girls in each school and 4 guidance teachers. Interviews were used to collect data from the guidance teachers while focused group discussions were used to collect data from pupils. Data was analysed thematically by coding the data, selecting what should be presented under themes which emerged from the study. The study found that the vulnerable viabilities included lack of proper dietary habits and good nutrition. Under household responsibilities, girls were overworked at home and performed many chores which made them to underperform in schools. Meanwhile, economic vulnerability included lack school materials like bookracks, desks, and brooms, lack of money for school upkeep, lack of proper school uniforms, shoes, socks, jerseys, necktie, and no lunch money. The other vulnerability was lack of resources and support for education. The parents of the vulnerable girl children cannot afford school extra tuition, school related books and materials. Lastly was the emotional vulnerability which included various emotional abuses which the learners underwent in the community and school indirectly and directly. The study concludes that secondary school girls were vulnerable differently in the secondary schools and these should be looked at with critical analysis for learners to excel in schools. The study recommends that teachers and parents should work together to ensure that they support their children for them to perform better in the Zambian education system.*

Key words: vulnerability viability, single -sex girls' secondary schools, Lusaka district

INTRODUCTION

One of the organizations that is playing an important role in ensuring the protection of children against any form of vulnerability is the United Nations. Bertini and Ceretti (2020) explain that the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) was set up to support children and rescue them from depravity, and since its establishment, the organization has stood by such principles and goals, through UNICEF, countries have also taken steps to recognize the important role of protecting children against vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) which is a legally binding international agreement has set out civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for every child regardless of their race, religion or abilities. Among the critical focus of these international statutes is the social right to education for every child. This right to education must be assured by governments through the provision of necessities of living for the child who should then be able to perform better.

The girl child is a female that who is below the age of 18 (Augustine, 2022). The misguided practices in the social environment in many parts of the world have resulted in exposure to vulnerability such as illiteracy, child labour, harassment, molestation underage marriage, sexual abuse all of which negatively impact on the schooling of the girl child (Augustine 2022). Their physiological development, in particular, coupled with a psychological and cultural disposition creates a subservient attitude. These factors become a challenge in an environment of depravity. With these challenges, the girl child's education then tends to suffer neglect and eventual dropping out of school. Solutions and models have been developed to address this vulnerability of the girl child and her education (Bhatty *et al.*, 2017). This study does not intend to replicate the already known information on girl child vulnerability and its impact on education. The study seeks to conduct a hermeneutical phenomenological exposition of the issue to primarily bring home the lived experience of selected girl children living in vulnerable conditions in Lusaka province of Zambia.

Studies have been conducted in different parts of the world on different angles of vulnerability which girls face. A study Chandar, Naik, Thumati, & Sarkar (2020) found that in the adolescent population, though consumption of cereals and pulses were adequate and satisfactory, the consumption of fruits, vegetables and iron/calcium rich foods was inadequate and poor. About one-fourth of adolescent girls had an abnormal nutritional status. Also, Sandøy, Mudenda, Zulu, *et al.* (2012) noted that the intervention components have been carefully selected to ensure they will be feasible and sustainable to implement. Increased schooling among adolescent girls is likely to empower them economically and cognitively, and combined with postponed childbearing this can enable them to better protect the health of their children and themselves and moreover increases the probability that their future children will complete secondary school

Other scholars like Milimo, Zulu, Svanemyr, *et al.*, (2021) stated that the payment of school fees led to improved school attendance and helped a lot of adolescent females remain in

school, partly due to removal of economic barriers, but possibly also due to enhanced behavioural control to refrain from engaging in sex and to concentrate on learning. It is likely that the guardians perceived the economic support to be a golden opportunity for their daughters to lead a better life, hence they wanted them to exploit it as much as possible. Further, a study by Nyimbili, Mainza, Mumba and Katunansa (2019) revealed that parents in schools supported the teaching and learning of comprehensive sexuality education by allowing relatives to help pupils answer the question on sensitive pregnancy, childbirth and sex itself. The challenges parents and teachers faced included culture barriers and older pupils failing to participate in the discussion about sex in classes, among others. These challenges should be worked on to ensure that students are well helped in the education system.

Further, Chandar, Naik, Thumati, & Sarkar (2020) found that the majority of adolescent girls ate cereals (97.4%) and pulses (54%) regularly. However, regular vegetable (34.5%) and fruit (13.1%) consumption was low. Only about 10% and <2% had regular consumption of milk and iron-rich vegetables and fruits, respectively. Regular consumption of junk food items was found among 5.6%. Prevalence of thinness among adolescent girls was 10.7% (95% CI: 7.3–15) and overweight was 13.5% (95% CI: 9.7–18.1). In this adolescent population, though consumption of cereals and pulses were adequate and satisfactory, the consumption of fruits, vegetables and iron/calcium rich foods was inadequate and poor. About one-fourth of adolescent girls had an abnormal nutritional status. Hence, focused nutritional and health-education intervention should be given to encourage the consumption of fruits and vegetables, iron-rich and calcium-rich food items. Keats, Rappaport, Shah, Oh, Jain, Bhutta, (2018) conducted a systematic review to summarize the current dietary intake and practices among adolescent girls (10–19 years) in low and medium income communities (LMICs). The study searched relevant databases and grey literature using MeSH terms and keywords. After applying specified inclusion and exclusion criteria, 227 articles were selected for data extraction, synthesis, and quality assessment. Of the included studies, 59% were conducted in urban populations, 78% in school settings, and dietary measures and indicators were inconsistent. Mean energy intake was lower in rural settings (1621 ± 312 kcal/day) compared to urban settings (1906 ± 507 kcal/day). Self-reported daily consumption of nutritious foods was low; on average, 16% of girls consumed dairy, 46% consumed meats, 44% consumed fruits, and 37% consumed vegetables. In contrast, energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods, like sweet snacks, salty snacks, fast foods, and sugar-sweetened beverages, were consumed four to six times per week by an average of 63%, 78%, 23%, and 49% of adolescent girls, respectively. 40% of adolescent girls reported skipping breakfast. Along with highlighting the poor dietary habits of adolescent girls in LMIC, this review emphasizes the need for consistently measured and standardized indicators, and dietary intake data that are nationally representative.

A study on assessing the impact of an adolescent-girl-tailored nutritional education curriculum on nutritional outcomes, including knowledge, dietary behaviour, anthropometry and anaemia was conducted by (Hewett, Willig, Digitale, Soler-Hampejsek,

Behrman, & Austrian, 2021) ITT results indicate that exposure to the nutritional educational programme did not meaningfully change outcomes for adolescents or their children. Intervention adolescents were no more likely to correctly identify healthy foods ($P = 0.51$) or proper infant-feeding practices ($P = 0.92$); were no less likely to be stunted ($P = 0.30$) or underweight ($P = 0.87$) and no less likely to be anaemic ($P = 0.38$). Outcomes for children of intervention participants were not improved, including being breastfed ($P = 0.42$), stunted ($P = 0.21$), wasted ($P = 0.77$) or anaemic ($P = 0.51$). Even a high-quality nutritional educational intervention tailored to adolescents within an empowerment programme does not assure improved nutritional outcomes; adolescent preferences, resource control and household dynamics require consideration in the context of nutritional educational programmes.

From the Zambian studies, Milimo, Zulu, Svanemyr, *et al.* (2021) explored the role of economic support in influencing education and sexual decision making among female adolescents in a randomised controlled trial in Zambia. The study adopted a qualitative approach. It utilized purposive and convenient sampling. Data were collected from 4 schools using 18 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 4 focus group discussions (FGDs) comprising 48 school-going female adolescents in grade 8 aged 14 to 17. Findings suggested several benefits of the economic support for the female adolescents such as economic independence and empowerment; increased assertiveness and autonomy; reduced desire for sexual relationships with boys in exchange for cash and gifts; increased motivation for school; enhanced parental and community support for female adolescents' education and; reduced school dropouts. However, they also experienced jealousy from those who did not benefit from the economic support.

From the Zambian perspective, documented reports from UNESCO as affirmed by the Zambia Statistical Agency (2018) gives a clear explanation of the state of Girl child vulnerability. In terms of primary school Net Attendance Ratio (NAR) for the population aged 7-13, the report indicates 79% (81% for girls and 77% for boys) of this age group are in attendance. The secondary school NAR drops drastically to 40% (38% for girls and 42% for boys). The report further indicates that sixty-two percent of girls in the highest wealth quintile attend secondary school, as compared with 10% of those in the lowest wealth quintile. Such statistics still paint a picture of the exclusion of girls in education, especially in public schools. This study will ascertain the NAR of girl children in the selected secondary schools and verify the reasons for low girl attendance in Lusaka. The correlates creating this bias in attendance for the girl child will be documented.

In dealing with emotional and abuse, Meinck, Cluver, Boyes, *et al* (2016) stated that the incidence and prevalence rates of physical, emotional and sexual abuse in South Africa are high in comparison to Western samples and similar to rates shown in other sub-Saharan African countries. Many children also report multiple abuse victimisation. Perpetrators of physical abuse are mainly caregivers and teachers; perpetrators of emotional abuse are mainly caregivers and relatives; and perpetrators of sexual abuse tend to be intimate partners and peers. Further, Beyene, Chojenta, Roba, *et al.* (2019) revealed GBV was

significantly associated with place of residence, witnessing parental violence, substance abuse, marital status, and educational status. From the available literature, evidenced lacked on the availability of literature on vulnerability viability of the girl child in selected single -sex secondary schools of Lusaka district hence this study was conducted.

Objective

1. What is the profile of a vulnerable girl child in selected single -sex secondary schools?

Significance of the study

The study is important as it would provide the educators with the profile of the vulnerable children so that they are able how to treat them in the school system. The study would also make the parents realise the vulnerabilities which their children are faced with so that they are able to help them excel in school. The findings may drive police reforms in how the education system in Zambia deals with such children so that they can be helped to have access to better education.

METHODOLOGY

The used adopted the qualitative approach and used a phenomenological research design. The study population included all the single girls schools in Lusaka district. The sample comprised of 38 participants who included 8 vulnerable girls in each school and 4 guidance teachers. Interviews were used to collect data from the guidance teachers while focused group discussions were used to collect data from pupils. Data was analysed thematically by coding the data, selecting what should be presented under themes which emerged from the study. Common responses were then presented as verbatims to show evidence of the voices from the participants. The study was ethically approved by the university of Zambia, consent forms were signed between the participants and the researcher, anonymity and data privacy were considered in this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents findings and discussions on the vulnerable viabilities of the girl child in selected single -sex secondary schools. The study findings were collected from the guidance and counselling teachers and the vulnerable girls in the selected schools through interviews and focus group discussions. However, triangulation of data was also achieved by comparing what the guidance and counselling teachers through interviews said with the vulnerable girls said through focus group discussions.

Dietary Habits and Nutrition

The participants revealed that the dietary habits and nutrition was a source of vulnerability which was observed in this study. This brought about lack of love for their parents, themselves and other friends since the vulnerable girls did not look as good as other children who had better dietary habits and nutrition. In other words, the girls did not have

balanced dietary food to enable them be proud in school compared to other girls coming from better families. This is supported by the following verbatim quotes for Teacher A from School A as a typical example:

The girls who look vulnerable share their lived experiences in the way they appear in class and school. They are usually isolated during break and they always look hungry and disoriented in one way or the other. From this, we are able to tell that this child has some personal matters which need argent attention.

In addition, teacher B from school B said:

We have some girls who feel they are not loved by their parents because they are unable to meet their daily demands in school. For instance, the girls come without packed meals from home while they see their friends with nice food. Such make them think their parents do not love them.

Meanwhile, teacher D from school D noted that:

Some of my girls in school who look vulnerable did not even have a better uniform to make them be presentable in class. Such type of dressing brought about lack of self-confidence and this was added to the lack of better meals in school. The children stayed hungry for the whole day until they knocked off which was bad.

The study findings are supported by Chandar, Naik, Thumati and Sarkar (2020) who found that in adolescent population, though consumption of cereals and pulses were adequate and satisfactory, the consumption of fruits, vegetables and iron/calcium rich foods was inadequate and poor. About one-fourth of adolescent girls had an abnormal nutritional status. The foregoing mean that dietary vulnerability was not only common amongst single sexed schools in Lusaka but even in other parts of the world. Therefore, the dietary vulnerability brings about academic vulnerability in the secondary schools especially amongst the girls which should be curbed.

After having a discussion with learners, they also affirmed that they indeed lacked love and they thought their parents did not provide food, school materials and this made them to feel insecure and become vulnerable in one way or the other. Their vulnerability included being exposed to social ills of love affairs and lust for better food among other which leads to poor academic performance and low self-esteem. Learner B4 from school B narrated that:

It is not good for us as pupils to be lacking good food when we are in school because we become jealous of our friends who come from better homes. Even when we ask for some food, they do not give us because they say we shall never come with better food like them for them to ask from us.

Another Learner C3 from school C said that:

It is a sad situation we go through when we are in school. Just look at my uniform, my parents cannot afford a new one because we have no money as a family. I have been using this uniform since

grade 10 and I may only change when one grade 12 gives me since she promised to assist me with hers when she completes.

A girl from Learner D1 from school D added that:

It is not an easy thing to learn with children who come from better families because we are always failing to be free in class. Even when I know the answer I fail to make a presentation of the answer in from because I look hungry and not presentable.

General vulnerability is not limited to food but also leads to certain students to fail to compete in class due to the inward created low self esteem. These findings are in line with Keats, Rappaport, Shah, Oh, Jain and Bhutta, (2018) who noted that energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods, like sweet snacks, salty snacks, fast foods, and sugar-sweetened beverages, were consumed four to six times per week by an average of 63%, 78%, 23%, and 49% of adolescent girls, respectively. 40% of adolescent girls reported skipping breakfast. Attending school on an empty stomach makes students to underperform in the secondary schools. To these findings, Hewett, Willig, Digitale, Soler-Hampejsek, Behrman, and Austrian (2021) argues that even a high-quality nutritional educational intervention tailored to adolescents within an empowerment programme does not assure improved nutritional outcomes; adolescent preferences, resource control and household dynamics require consideration in the context of nutritional educational programmes. To enhance the education gains of the girls, there is need for the schools to probably introduce nutritional education in the main stream school. Despite this, the vulnerable girls will only have the knowledge about diet which they have to consume and yet they will not have the means to acquire of buy such food making them continue being vulnerable in schools.

Household Responsibilities

The other form of vulnerability was the household responsibilities which the children were subjected to in the different homes. This form of vulnerability was reported by all the participants and resulted into being a major concern and source of vulnerability. The girl children at home were given more house chores to work on while the boys did not do much work. The house responsibilities included taking care of their siblings, cleaning the house, washing clothes for siblings and keeping the house when parents go looking for food. The respondents during the interviews and focus group discussions expressed that children work for the family to generate income because they send them to sell food on the street and picking plastics for resell. Teacher C from school C as a typical example:

The end of the school day marks the beginning of household duties for these students. Their evenings are filled with chores like washing dishes, sweeping, cooking, and sometimes laundry. These responsibilities eat into their study and rest time, leaving them exhausted. The extent of these domestic burdens is captured in their words, washing plates cause mostly spend half the day doing chores.

Also, teacher D from school had this to say:

Some of my girls do a lot of house chores and this affects their studies. When you ask them why they did write the homework which you gave them, majority of them will say it's because of house chores. They do a lot of house chores like washing plates, sweeping the house and preparing supper.

Additionally, learner A3 from school A also narrated that:

When at home, I do a lot of house chores like washing plates, sweeping the house and preparing supper. This affects my studying programme. I would plan very well that today or tonight before sleeping I will study but I won't because I always get tired. It's very hard for me study.

Also, learner C5 from school C had this to say:

I find it very hard to study because of too much house chores. After knocking off from school, I have to sweep, cook, wash plates and sometimes do laundry leading to less time to study and rest. I'm the only girl so I do most of house chores and my brothers are not helpful. If they were very helpful, I know I could have been managing study and have enough rest.

Since the students had more house hold responsibilities which made them become academically vulnerable in the education system. Sandøy, Mudenda, Zulu, et al. (2012) concur with these findings when they stated that the vulnerability intervention components have been carefully selected to ensure they will be feasible and sustainable to implement. They argued that increased schooling among adolescent girls is likely to empower them economically and cognitively, and combined with postponed childbearing this can enable them to better protect the health of their children and themselves and moreover increases the probability that their future children will complete secondary school. In this case, there is need to make the learners realise the need for acquiring education despite their economic situation and household hardships the children are going through. Better engagements should be done between the schools and the parents to enable the children have a fair share of their education which will later benefit their parents and families.

Economic Vulnerability

Another form of vulnerability was the economic vulnerability which the children were subjected to. This form of vulnerability was reported by all the participants and resulted into being a major concern and source of vulnerability. The participants during the interviews and focus group discussions expressed that economic challenges contributes the most towards the poor performance of the vulnerable girl children. The economic vulnerability included lack school materials like bookracks, desks, and brooms, lack of money for school upkeep, lack of proper school uniforms, shoes, socks, jerseys, necktie, and no lunch money. Teacher B from School B as a typical example:

Lack of school materials like bookracks, desks, and brooms, limited availability of literature books leading to poor performance, and need for more scholarships to alleviate parents' burden.

Similarly, teacher D3 from school D had this to say:

Financial, lack of proper uniforms, no lunch money has been major challenges these vulnerable girl children go through. They lack proper school uniforms, shoes, socks, jerseys, necktie, no lunch money, and some have to walk from home to school.

Further, learner A3 from school A narrated that:

“I don’t have a proper school uniforms, socks and jersey for school. my parents don’t work, so it’s difficult for them to meet all my needs at school. it’s very hard for me.”

The economic vulnerabilities which learners go through in the education system come from their family economic standing. Milimo, Zulu, Svanemyr, et al. (2021) whose findings suggested several benefits of the economic support for the female adolescents in the secondary schools. These were such as economic independence and empowerment; increased assertiveness and autonomy; reduced desire for sexual relationships with boys in exchange for cash and gifts; increased motivation for school; enhanced parental and community support for female adolescents’ education and; reduced school dropouts. Any child who is not economically empowered finds it difficult to excel in the education system because they need better cognitive power to make them more responsible and academically able. From this, we can infer that economic standing and position of a child affects the academic achievement and this is what has to be worked on to make the Zambian children perform better in Zambian schools.

Resources and Support for Education

More than three-quarters of the participants cited that resources and support for education was a source of vulnerability which vulnerable girl children experience. The participants during the interviews and focus group discussions expressed that parents of the vulnerable girl children cannot afford school extra tuition, school related books and materials, ICT equipment is away from reach and parents sending children for work or look for food during school time. Teacher A from School A as a typical example:

Parents for these vulnerable girl children fails to buy study materials for school. They cannot afford to send their children for extra tuitions because majority of them do not work.

Also, teacher B from school B narrated that:

These children lack so many things because their parents don’t work. As a results some parents resort in sending their children for work. Sometimes, they send them to look for food. It’s rough for these children. So, you will find that buying educational materials for them by their parents is a challenge.

Further, learner D5 from school D explained that:

“My parents cannot afford to buy school materials for me.”

These findings are in tandem with Dahlqvist et al., (2016) who stated that emotional vulnerability such as depressive symptoms may very well make

students vulnerable when the parents are unable to support them academically through buying books and other school related support. Further, Milimo, Zulu, Svanemyr, et al., (2021) agreed that the payment of school fees led to improved school attendance and helped a lot of adolescent females remain in school, partly due to removal of economic barriers. It is likely that the guardians perceived the economic support to be a golden opportunity for their daughters to lead a better life, hence they wanted them to exploit it as much as possible. The provision of resources to the vulnerable children brings hope amongst learners and their parents as this is what they both lack and want. If the provision of educational resources is enhanced, there will be improved academic achievements amongst the vulnerable girls in the secondary schools and this will put a smile on their parents who are struggling to make their children not to fall into a trap of meeting men at an early stage.

Emotional Vulnerability

The other form of vulnerability was the emotional vulnerability which the children were subjected at school, home and the community. This form of vulnerability was reported by all the participants and also resulted into being a major concern and source of vulnerability. The vulnerable girl children were subjected to drug abuse, alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, lack of love, caring, loneliness, shame, broken homes, and battery-being beaten by a drunk parent. Teacher D from school D who narrated that:

“Abuse, sexual abuse, battery-being beaten by a drunk parent.”

Correspondingly, learner D2 from school D had this to say:

“sometimes when my father is drunk, am bitten.”

Emotional vulnerability is not limited to the Zambian children only. These results are supported by Beyene, Chojenta, Roba et al. (2019) who revealed GBV was significantly associated with place of residence, witnessing parental violence, substance abuse, marital status, and educational status and affected the children in school as they suffered unseen emotional abuse. In addition, Meinck, Cluver, Boyes et al., (2016) found that many children in the South African communities also report multiple abuse victimisation. Perpetrators of physical abuse are mainly caregivers and teachers; perpetrators of emotional abuse are mainly caregivers and relatives; and perpetrators of sexual abuse tend to be intimate partners and peers. An emotionally abused child finds it difficult to excel academically because they fail to concentrate at school and this leads to being absent minded whilst in class. The Zambian education system should work on improving the system so that learners are able to find peace in school and at home. It is also the role of the society to make lives for children to be well natured so that they can make all children feel safe in schools and at home. This will make lives for children to improve and so will be the wider community.

CONCLUSION

The study explored that vulnerability viability of the girl child in selected single -sex secondary schools of Lusaka district. The study concludes that under dietary habits and nutrition, the girls did not have balanced dietary food to enable them be proud in school

compared to other girls coming from better families. With regards to household responsibilities, the girl children at home were given more house chores to work on while the boys did not do much work. The house responsibilities included taking care of their siblings, cleaning the house, washing clothes for siblings and keeping the house when parents go looking for food. The economic vulnerability included lack school materials like bookracks, desks, and brooms, lack of money for school upkeep, lack of proper school uniforms, shoes, socks, jerseys, necktie, and no lunch money. The resources and support for education the parents of the vulnerable girl children cannot afford school extra tuition, school related books and materials, ICT equipment is away from reach and parents sending children for work or look for food during school time. To this end, emotional vulnerability, the vulnerable girl children were subjected to drug abuse, alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, lack of love, caring, loneliness, shame, broken homes, and battery-being beaten by a drunk parent. The study concludes that secondary school girls were vulnerable differently in the secondary schools and these should be looked at with critical analysis for learners to excel in schools. The study recommends that teachers and parents should work together to ensure that they support their children for them to perform better in the Zambian education system.

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