

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF COMMUNITY-BASED CHILD PROTECTION MECHANISMS AND THEIR LINKAGES WITH THE NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM OF SIERRA LEONE

Introduction

Communities are at the forefront of efforts to address and prevent the harms to children caused by violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect. The objectives of this study, which was conducted from January-April 2011 in Sierra Leone, were: to learn about local beliefs and values concerning children, childhood and harms to children; to explore the actions that communities take and the mechanisms that they use for children's protection; and to understand if and how these actions and mechanisms are linked to the government-led child protection system. This study is part of a four-year inter-agency learning initiative.

Key Findings and Recommendations

- **A significant disconnect exists between the formal child protection system and community based child protection mechanisms in Sierra Leone.** Overwhelmingly people respond to child protection risks not through the formal system but through traditional mechanisms involving the extended family, the Chiefs and customary laws and practices.

Recommendations:

- In Sierra Leone, child protection agencies and stakeholders in all areas should use elicitive methods to document grassroots-level mechanisms of child protection
 - In Sierra Leone, Government and child protection agencies should prioritize the development of effective linkages between community based mechanisms and the national child protection system.
 - Globally, child protection agencies should re-think the common practice of establishing child protection committees that do not build on existing community actions.
 - Elicitive methods for understanding community based mechanisms and their linkage with national child protection systems should be included in efforts to map national child protection systems
- **The imposition of international concepts of child protection, most notably of 'child rights,' has had harmful effects.** The strong backlash against child rights and related concepts indicates that a top-down approach to introducing these concepts has been counterproductive. Parents and other adults in the villages see child rights and related concepts as outsider ideas, the imposition of which evokes feelings of frustration and being disrespected.

Recommendations:

- In Sierra Leone and globally, initiate inter-agency dialogue and learning about respectful ways of introducing child rights and child protection at community level, and document and test these methods to learn about their effectiveness.
- In Sierra Leone, Child Welfare Committees, focal points and other community links with the national child protection system should not be introduced in top-down approaches, but through respectful bottom-up approach that builds support from within communities.

Background

Community-based child protection mechanisms are used widely to address and prevent the harms to children caused by violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. A key question, however, is how effective and sustainable these mechanisms are.

The aim of this ethnographic study was to document existing community based child protection mechanisms, both externally initiated and indigenous, in Sierra Leone and their interconnections with the formal aspects of the national child protection system. The Government of Sierra Leone and other actors have invested extensively in efforts to give the formal national system a presence at community level, including mandating village-level Child Welfare Committees in the 2007 National Child Rights Act. The question however is whether people actually use the Child Welfare Committees and other formal mechanisms such as the Family Support Units.

The present study is the first part of four-year inter-agency learning initiative that aims to strengthen child protection practice through research in Sierra Leone and Kenya. The initiative is overseen by a global reference group involving 12 national and international agencies, and national reference groups. Save the Children serves as the coordinator of the initiative and the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity serves as the technical lead for the action research. The initiative is funded with generous support from the Oak Foundation, Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF, USAID PEPFAR, and World Vision.

Methodology

The research used a methodology of rapid ethnography. People were asked in multiple contexts what happens when a particular child protection issue arises—whom do people actually go to, who makes the decisions, which actions are taken, and how do various stakeholders who occupy different social positions view the outcomes? This was a bottom-up process of mapping the functional pathways through which people respond to child protection risks.

Site Selection

For purposes of depth of learning, the research did not study a nationally representative sample of villages but chose to focus on two districts judged to be typical of Sierra Leone and reflective of its diversity. Moyamba is a southern, mostly Mende speaking district with few international NGOs, whereas Bombali is a northern, mostly Temne speaking district with many international NGOs. Within each district, two comparable chiefdoms were selected, and within each chiefdom three villages were selected – giving a total of twelve village sites. The study population consisted of the approximately 6,000 people who live in the twelve sites.

Definition of community based child protection mechanisms:

all groups or networks at grassroots level that prevent and respond to issues of child protection and vulnerable children. These may include family supports, peer group supports and community groups such as women's groups, religious groups, and youth groups as well as traditional community processes, government mechanisms and mechanisms initiated by civil society and international agencies such as child protection committees.

Definition of a national child protection system:

an interlocking, dynamic set of institutions, mechanisms, norms and practices at different levels (e.g., family, community, district, society) that, in combination, have nationwide reach and protect children by preventing, responding to, and mitigating the effects of violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect of children. A national child protection system may include Government institutions such as a Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Health, police, and a judiciary, and many civil society mechanisms such as traditional chiefdom practices, customary law, and community-based mechanisms.

Although the study did not include representative sampling, it entailed a systematic effort to include people who lived on the margins of the community. The researchers sought deliberately to include adults and children, women and men. By collecting information from different subgroups it was possible to learn about the views of each subgroup and to contrast their perceptions.

Research process

Data collection occurred from February to April 2011. Each researcher, who spoke the local language, lived in a village for approximately two weeks and collected information until he or she reached 'saturation'. Each researcher conducted four group discussions (one each with teenage girls, teenage boys, adult women and adult men) fifteen in-depth interviews, ten timelines, multiple body mappings, and regular sessions of participant observation in each village. The two international researchers used an intensive methodology of reading the entire data set, identifying natural categories and consistent patterns that emerged. Common categories (e.g., types of risk) and patterns (e.g., patterns of response) were defined inductively, that is, by observing them at whatever levels they appeared, and variations were noted.

The research was conducted by a team of Sierra Leonean researchers led by a Lead National Researcher (Dora King) and Team Leader (David Lamin). Two international researchers (Mike Wessells and Kathleen Kostelny) from the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity oversaw the research design and led the analysis of the data.

Limitations

The research did not involve a national sample, and its short time frame limited its depth compared to that of traditional ethnography. Also the field researchers were still in the process of honing their skills and a small number of interviews had to be conducted via translation. Issues of confidentiality arose when names and other individual identifiers appeared in numerous records, though this problem was rapidly corrected. In addition, the research relied primarily on people's perceptions. It did not attempt to record the incidence rates of particular risks or responses.

Key Findings

Children, Childhood and Development

Contrary to international definitions of childhood based on age, Sierra Leonean community members understood childhood not according to age but to the individual's dependency, role, or activities. Even people who were over 18 years and would have been regarded as adults by the Convention on the Rights of the Child were seen by the participants as children if they were unable to do things for themselves. The importance of activities was visible in the widely shared view that once young people have become sexually active, they are adults since sexual intercourse is by definition adult activity. Participants also viewed children as means of continuing the family name and maintaining the memory of the parents.

Family-level factors to protect children

Communities presented numerous protective factors. Key protective factors were parental care and support from extended family members. Parents cared for their children, fed and clothed them, showed them how to become contributing family members, and taught proper behavior such as respect for elders and not stealing or fighting. Most parents sent their children to school and valued education. Grandmothers and elders frequently supported children and families by offering guidance and advice. Extended family members also helped to create a protective environment by, for example, an uncle taking in the children of his deceased brother.

Community-level factors to protect children

In the community, important protective factors were access to education, friendships with other children, and support from natural helpers such as teachers, religious leaders, women leaders, and youth leaders. In most communities, the Chief and other traditional leaders were seen as people who helped children and intervened when problems arose. Valuable preventative mechanisms were provided by the Chiefs and the traditional system of governance, which included by-laws against particular harmful practices.

NGOs and Family Support Units, which included police and social workers, did awareness raising on topics such as child abuse. This work not only contributed to prevention but also built links between the community and the government child protection system.

Main harms to children

Community members identified four primary harms to children:

- teenage pregnancy out of wedlock,
- children being out of school,
- maltreatment of children who were not living with their parents, and
- children doing heavy work.

Of these, the two that were most consistently cited across villages as serious problems were teenage pregnancy and children being out of school.

Teenage Pregnancy Out of Wedlock

Teenage pregnancy was a widespread problem that reflected a mixture of consensual sex, transactional sex, and sexual abuse. Consensual sex usually involved relations with boyfriends, many of whom were classmates of similar age or a few years older. Adults viewed teenage pregnancy from consensual sex as a problem only when it occurred out of wedlock, yet most girls did not regard pregnancy out of wedlock as a problem. Pregnancies out of wedlock also occurred through transactional sex with older men, which was not uncommon and was associated with material benefits such as obtaining nice clothing or getting one's school fees paid.

The most typical pathway of response was for the family of the girl who had become pregnant to try to reach a settlement with family of the boy who had impregnated her – see Figure 1 below. The usual outcome was that the girl's parents arranged for their daughter to marry the boy and to live with his family, who compensated the girl's family for their 'lost investment' on her school fees. Overall, adults viewed the arranged marriage as positive because the family had been spared the shame of having their daughter be out of wedlock following delivery and they had received significant economic benefits.

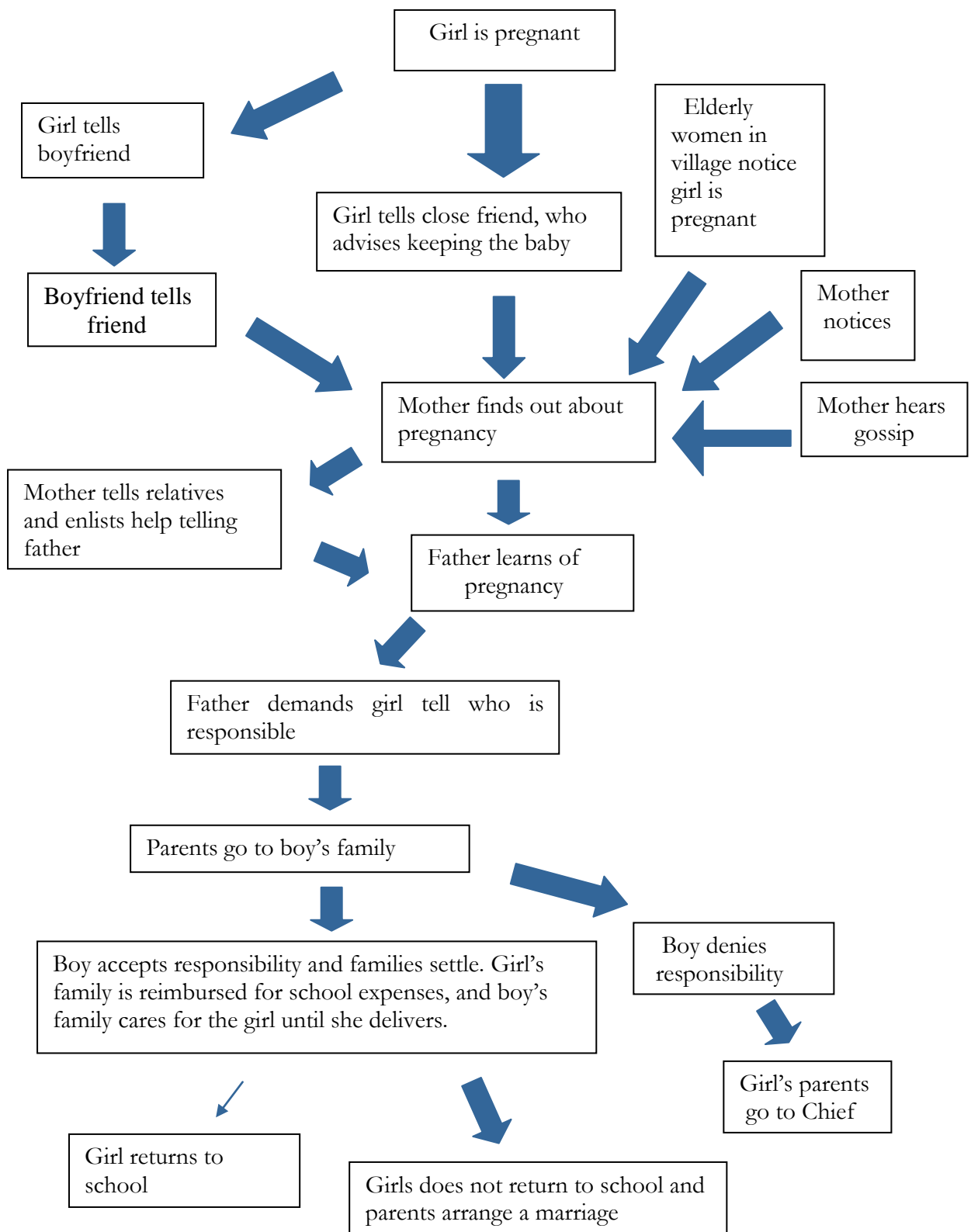
However, young women did not necessarily want to live with the boy's family, or in cases of transactional sex with an older man who gave her favors. In some cases, the families could not settle the matter themselves and took it to the Chief. Having heard the case, the Chief usually fined the boy and girl, required the boy's family to reimburse the girl's family for school expenses, and required the parents to arrange the marriage of the boy and girl. Sometimes cases would need to be referred by the Town Chief to the Section Chief, and rarely to the Paramount Chief. In the rare case that the Paramount Chief was unable to resolve the case, it was referred to the government.

Children being out of school

Both children and adults said that many children did not attend school because the schools were located too far away and children did not like having to walk long distances, in some cases five or more miles, to get to school. Many children did not attend school because their parents could not afford to pay school fees and other school related costs. Also, some families required their children to work on their farms rather than go to school. Many children dropped out of school because they engaged in heavy work and were too tired, sick or otherwise unable to go to school. Similarly, children in Moyamba were often sent to live with uncles and others who elected not to send the children to school, making them work instead. Many girls dropped out of school after they had become pregnant, which happened frequently following initiation into Bondo Society.

Other factors that led children to being out of school included beating by teachers, teasing and discrimination. Polygamy also played a role, as stepmothers tended to want their stepdaughters to work. When children chose to leave school, adults tended to attribute it to the child not having developed proper values or behavior, describing them as "stubborn and "not serious." In contrast, children pointed out the significant hardships and stresses that they and other children encountered each day.

Figure 1. The dominant pathway of response to teenage pregnancy out of wedlock



The dominant pathways of response to children being out of school was through the extended family, and which pathway was taken depended on the cause of children being out of school. For example, if a girl were out of school because she was pregnant, the girl's family sought a settlement with the family of the boy, as described above. If, however, the child was unable to pay school expenses, he usually told either the parents, an aunt or an uncle, or the teacher or school chairman. Once family members had become aware that the child was out of school, they typically took steps to obtain the money needed to pay the costs of the child going to school. In some cases, teachers helped to pay.

In some cases involving boys who were out of school, the pathway of response was via a friend. For example, a boy who had stopped going to school told a friend, who then helped to pay the school related costs. Alternately, the friend advised the boy not to leave school for good but to work and earn money for a time and then return to school. If the child had decided to stop going to school even when the parents and most adults thought he or she should be in school, the father typically used a mixture of encouragement and threat.

Maltreatment of Children Who Were Not Living with Their Biological Parents

Particularly in Moyamba, significant numbers of children lived not with their biological parents but with uncles, aunts, or other extended family members. If both parents had died, for example, the children were taken in by extended family members of the parents, typically the father's. Discrimination in such situations was quite common, and the 'new' children in the household were expected to do extra work. Often, such children were deprived of food and subjected to beatings.

The main pathway of response was through the father, who typically learned the situation from the child or mother or an uncle. Having learned about the situation, the father or uncle visited the child's caretaker to investigate. If the father saw that the child was suffering and the caretaker had not provided proper care, he asked the caretaker to return the child home.

While the child was home, the father looked for a better placement for the child. A second option was to 'settle' with the caretaker, getting an agreement on changes that the caretaker would make. If the father saw that the care arrangements were not too bad or that no other options existed, he advised the child to go back and live with the caretaker. This option was not uncommon when the child had no other means of continuing school.

Heavy Work

Heavy work, which was more prevalent in Bombali, was linked with problems such as maltreatment of children who were not living with their parents. Extended family members typically expected children to work in exchange for food and housing while they attended school. However, some extended family members provided them with neither food nor access to school and only demanded that they work. Engagement in heavy work was identified as one of the leading causes of children either not being able to learn or being out of school altogether.

Some children who engaged in heavy work viewed it as a contribution to their families. If heavy work was too much for a child, the main pathway of response was for the child to complain to the mother, saying 'the work is heavy.' In turn, the mother requested the father to 'change the duties' of the child. The father then asked the child which type of work he would prefer, and the child selected work that was satisfactory to both himself and the father. Alternately, the child (in some cases with the encouragement of an aunt) told the Chief or the town head man of his situation. The Chief then called the parents and advised them how to treat children.

Throughout the discussions of harms to children, significant discrepancies between the views of adults and children were visible. For example children frequently indicated beating, abusive language and punishment as things that they disliked, whereas most adults did not see these as sources of harm.

Additional Harms to Children

Children and adults in communities also identified other harms to children including child beating; cruelty; incest, sexual abuse; neglect and bad parenting; witchcraft, abduction and ritual murder; and child rights. On the last point, adults expressed strong concerns that child rights were interfering with their ability to be good parents, for example to discipline children and teach proper behaviour. People also said that NGOs had taught children about their rights without placing equal emphasis on responsibilities, contributing to unruly behaviour.

Linkage of community based child protection mechanisms with the National Child Protection System

Connections between community based mechanisms and the national child protection system were, for the most part, weak or even nonexistent. The majority of people in the villages had little, if any, contact with police, social workers, trained human rights workers or other elements of the national child protection system. Cultural barriers were observed to be a significant problem as people regarded every community member as part of the family and were reluctant to report cases outside the community.

The following are some of the key elements of the protection system in Sierra Leone:

- **Child Welfare Committees** - CWCs had been established at chiefdom level in the research sites and had received training by NGOs. However, most participants made no mention of CWCs. Also, CWCs encountered challenges such as inconsistent training, lack of standardized operational guidance, excessive reliance on volunteer effort, and lack of outreach to villages.
- **Social Workers** – Although the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs had designated a social worker for each chiefdom, few social workers lived in or near the chiefdoms to which they had been assigned. In some villages, people had not seen their Social Worker for over a year.

- **Family Support Units** – FSUs operate under the Sierra Leone Police and include both police and social workers trained on how to work with children. While FSU staff expressed strong motivation to support vulnerable children and reach out to communities, most people said that they had little access to FSUs because they were not present in their villages. People also said they could not afford to take time away from their farming and that there were few benefits for victims of reporting to the FSU, as little happened afterwards. Also, people were reluctant to report problems to outsiders and preferred to follow the norm of using family and community mechanisms.

- **Human Rights Workers** - Several villages had people who had been trained by NGOs to do human rights education and promotion. The human rights workers responded to serious cases such as child rape, and collaborated in appropriate ways with Chiefs. However, many people saw human rights as undermining parental authority and imposing outside ideas that did not fit the local context.

The full report of this study is available on the Community Child Protection Exchange Forum <http://childprotectionforum.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2011/11/Ethnographic-Phase-Report-Final-7-25-11.pdf>

For more information about the Inter-agency Learning Initiative on Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms please contact the project coordinator, Sarah Lilley, at s.lilley@savethechildren.org.uk and the Principal Investigator, Mike Wessells at mikewessells@gmail.com