



RESEARCH ARTICLE

FACTORS AFFECTING SEXUALLY ABUSED GIRLS FROM ACCESSING JUSTICE IN THE RURAL COMMUNITIES OF SIERRA LEONE. CASE STUDY: LUAWA CHIEFDOM, KAILAHUN DISTRICT IN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse occurs around the world in completely different contexts and situations. An estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys under the age of 18 have experienced forced intercourse or other forms of sexual violence, including physical contact. The aim of this study is to explore factors that make it difficult for sexually abused girls to access justice in rural areas of Sierra Leone. Case study: Perspectives from Luawa Emirate, Kailahun District. The study used a descriptive cross-sectional research design using both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The study was conducted in Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District. The subjects of the study were girls aged between 10 and 20 years living in Kailahun Municipality. A population sample of 95 participants was selected of which 80 were female and 15 were male participants. 15 male participants were selected to share their views on the phenomenon under study. Data for this study was obtained from two sources namely primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources of data for this study were obtained from published and unpublished materials. These include computerized data, project documents, magazines, newspapers, textbooks, and annual reports on rape and other sexual abuse cases published by the Rainbow Centre in Sierra Leone and the Sierra Leone Police. The study concludes that sexually abused women and girls face a huge disparity in terms of justice compared to men. The study suggests that poverty is the main cause of sexual abuse of girls in Kailahun district.

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Introduction:-

According to Onyango, R. A. and Natarajan, M. (2023), child sexual abuse occurs worldwide and in completely different contexts and situations. An estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys under the age of 18 experience forced intercourse and other forms of sexual violence, including physical contact. Sales, J. S. & Magaldi, J. A. (2020) in a later global meta-analysis stated that the estimated prevalence of child sexual abuse in self-reported studies was 18% for female participants and 7.6% for male participants. The problem occurs in alarming rates in Africa, where up to one-third of girls report that their first sexual encounter was restricted.

Carlson (2014) points out that studies have shown that there is an age-based gender gap in sexual violence among young people aged 20-24. Carlson (2014) emphasizes that recent systematic studies have shown that adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa are at increased risk of unprotected sex and HIV infection. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) report cites that the 2010 Sierra Leone Police (SLP) annual data showed that the majority of reported gender-based violence (GBV) cases were wife beating (69%) and sexual offenses (27%). Wife beating and rape were widespread, but a culture of silence was prevalent. Most cases committed by husbands were "dealt with" within the family or traditional institutions such as chiefdoms. Given the weakness of the formal justice system, the police were the last resort for most victims of GBV, resulting in the difference between livings in fear or seeking life-saving help.

According to Defense of Children International (DCI, 2015), issues such as entrenched poverty and discrimination continue to lead girls and young women in Sierra Leone to poor educational outcomes, early parenting and remain trapped in a life characterized by sexual exploitation. Serious economic barriers to the right to education remain in Sierra Leone, linked to school fees and other costs such as uniforms and books. However, consultations with girls and other stakeholders revealed that the main causes of early drop-out from school are social and cultural, further exacerbated by discriminatory practices and laws. The main barriers to education identified in the study are forms of gender-based violence such as early pregnancy, female genital mutilation (FGM) and sexual exploitation. Robinson (2020) recognizes that violence against women (VAW) in Sierra Leone is a persistent issue that can limit women's ability to contribute to social development. According to the United Nations, most women in Sierra Leone experience some form of violence throughout their lives (UNDP, 2010). According to Robinson (2020), therefore, in order to mobilize the entire population in the reconstruction and development of the country, it is important that both men and women understand violence as a violation of their fundamental rights and ensure that they have adequate opportunities to redress it. Sexual abuse of girls is widespread in Sierra Leone, especially in rural areas, and Kailahun is no exception. Kailahun is a district in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. Its capital and largest city is Kailahun Town. Other major towns in the district include Segwema, Koindu, Pendembu, and Daru. Kailahun district is divided into 14 chiefdoms. A portion of the Moa River forms the district's border with Guinea. The district's population is primarily Muslim. Kailahun has a mixed economy with small-scale mining and agricultural production of coffee, cocoa, and rice. Rainfall in the region ranges from 2,001 to 3,000 mm per year, and the vegetation is a mixture of savanna, forest, and secondary vegetation, Rashid, (2023). After years of civil war (1991-2002) and slow reconstruction, the district remains one of the poorest in the country.

The majority of the population of Kailahun District belongs to the Mende ethnic group. However, significant minorities of Mandigo, Kissi, Fula, Gola, and Vai people also live in Kailahun District. The Vai, Kissi, and Gola ethnic groups make up the majority of the population of villages and towns in Kailahun District, which borders the Republic of Liberia. The economic situation and poverty levels in the district make it prone to crimes such as sexual crimes and gender-based violence, Wrigley-Asante et al., (2016). However, inefficiencies in the judicial system hinder the implementation of gender-based violence laws, leading to an increase in the number of (non-consensual) sexual assaults in the community, Siziba, E. (2020). For example, in Kailahun district, until recently, the court did not have a resident judge of the peace. Thompson (2022) found that the incidence of gender-based violence (GBV), including rape, murder, and other types of domestic violence, continues to increase in Kailahun district. Women, girls, and men expressed their dissatisfaction with the actions of some irresponsible men by marching in black through the streets leading to the popular Kailahun Court Barry.

Sesay, (2020) reported that, the head of the Family Support Unit (FSU), a division of the Sierra Leone Police, said sexual crimes are on the rise in this part of the country and are as serious as domestic crimes. He revealed that they have investigated 37 cases since January 2015, of which 25 have been charged in court. The remaining 12 cases are yet to have perpetrators arrested. Kamara (2020) highlighted that the FSU chief maintained that compromise on the part of parents, local leaders, police, chiefs and perpetrators was hindering proper investigation of such cases, since

2014 when he said that over 200 cases of teenage pregnancies had been registered in the district. Clinics for victims of sexual assault have also closed, making it nearly impossible for victims to access treatment, counseling, and legal assistance. This study is being carried out in precisely these areas to identify factors that limit access to justice for sexually abused girls.

Aim/ Objectives:-

The study aim at examining the factors affecting sexually abused girls from accessing justice in the rural communities of Sierra Leone with specific focus on the following objectives:

1. To examine the causes of girls' sexual abuse in Kailahun District.
2. To determine factors that affects sexually abused girls' from accessing justice in Kailahun District.

Materials/Methods:-

Study design

The study utilized a descriptive cross-sectional survey design using both quantitative and qualitative techniques of data collection. This design was used because the results from such a survey method are easily extrapolated to the entire population, and besides, the method is time-saving and less costly. The study is both qualitative and quantitative because a mixed-methods design is useful to capture the best of both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Study area

The study was conducted in Luawa chiefdom, Kailahun District. Kailahun is a district in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. Its capital and largest city is Kailahun Town. Other major towns in the district include Segwema, Koindu, Pendembu and Daru. Kailahun District is divided into 14 chiefdoms. Part of the Moa River forms the district's border with Guinea. The district's population is predominantly Muslim. Kailahun has a mixed economy with small-scale mining and agricultural production of coffee, cocoa, and rice. The region receives 2,001-3,000 mm of rainfall per year, and the vegetation is a mixture of savanna, forest, and secondary vegetation. After years of civil war (1991-2002) and slow reconstruction, the district remains one of the poorest in the country. Education is compulsory by law in Sierra Leone for all children under the age of six to attend primary school and three years of secondary education. However, a shortage of schools and teachers has made implementation impossible, despite the significant increase in the number of primary school students since the end of the Civil War in 2002. Currently, there are 410 schools in Kailahun (19 kindergartens, 346 primary schools, 35 secondary schools and 10 junior schools).

Population

The target population for this study is young girls between the ages of ten (10) and twenty (20) living in Kailahun town. These are young girls from various ethnic groups who are either in school or are not but have been identified to provide first-hand information about factors that prevent sexually abused girls from accessing justice.

Sample size and sampling procedures

Sampling method

A sampling method is a technique used to select a sample population, as pointed as revealed by Nsengimana (2017).

The respondents were selected using simple random sampling techniques.

Sample size

Sampling, according to Omona, (2013). as cited by Kamanda A.M.K., (2017), is not just about people to observe and interview in a study; sampling involves the settings, social processes, and events. Case studies require clear choices and individual cases to be involved in the research.

For the research to be relevant, a population sample of ninety-five (95) participants is selected, out of which eighty (80) are female participants and fifteen (15) are male participants. The fifteen male participants were selected to share their views about the phenomenon under investigation.

Data collection method

This is the method and process by which data was collected. The data for this study were from two sources namely, primary and secondary sources.

Primary Source of Data

Primary data was collected using questionnaires that were administered on a face-to-face basis as well as through interviews. The data was obtained from all the sections in Kailahun Township. During the interview process, the researcher was attentive and observant to better analyze what was gathered during the interview and information from the questionnaire administered.

Secondary Source of Data

The secondary data consists of the existing knowledge about the topic under examination. Secondary data provided critical material to direct and help the researcher to establish the research aim. The Secondary Sources of data in this study were derived from published and unpublished materials; they include computerized data, project documents, journals, newspapers, textbooks, and annually published reports on rape and other sexual abuse-related cases from Rainbow Centre and Sierra Leone Police in Sierra Leone.

Data presentation and analysis

Data presentation

Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis were used to analyze the data collected using percentages, and graphs for the data collected through questionnaires, whereas a description of findings was used for data collected through interviews, and data collected through observations. The collected were analyzed in two different categories: empirical discussions and theoretical results. Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) program (Version 25.0) was used for data entry and analysis.

Data analysis

The data analysis technique was descriptive qualitative analysis, and quantitative data was triangulated using graphs and tables. The quantitative data collected was coded and categorized according to the items in the semi-structured questionnaire using the frequency distribution table. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, with the results presented in frequency tables, graphs, and percentages. The data was generated from open-ended items and was analyzed by comparing responses from respondents. The study used simple chart (frequencies and percentages) to analyze the biological profile of respondents. The data obtained from the administration of questionnaire, interviews, and literature review will be analyzed through two different categories which are the Empirical discussion and theoretical result, using statistical presentations such as charts, and figures to demonstrate results using Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) program (Version 25.0).

Result and Analysis:-

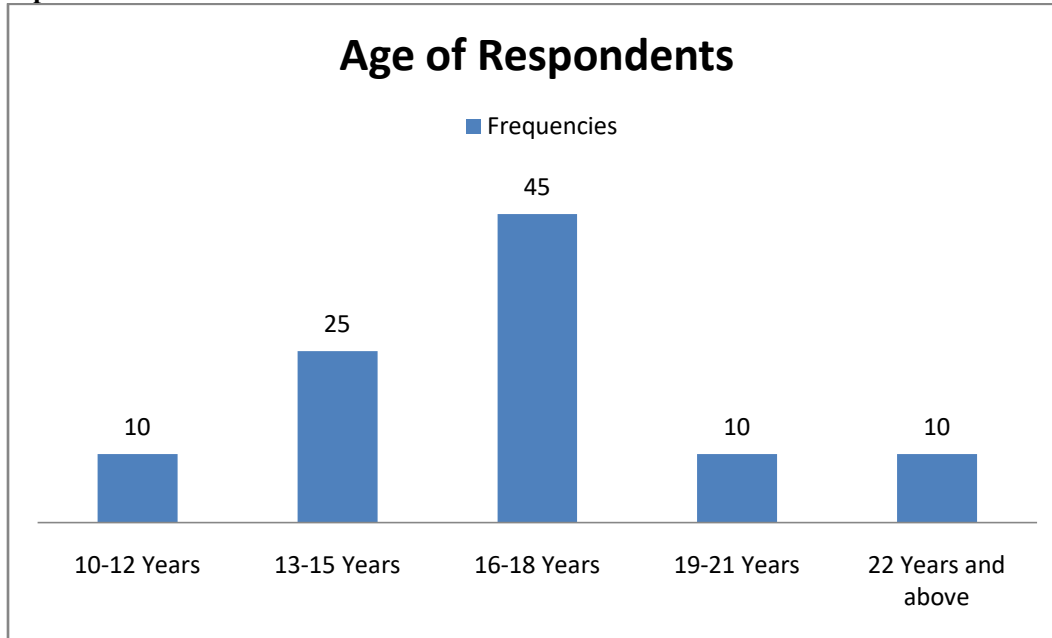
This section presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents who participated in the study. This information is obtained by the researcher to determine the age group of the participants, the education level of the participants, and the gender of the respondents as this information has a significant impact on the access to law of the respondents.

Age of Respondents

The results for the ages of respondents are illustrated in Figure 1

The results in Figure 1, show that there is a relationship between the age of the respondents and their participation in the study. The survey seemed to have more respondents between 13 and 18 years old, which is not surprising as girls in this age group mature earlier and are more attractive. The results show that 10 respondents were between 10 and 12 years old. According to the results, there were 25 respondents between 13-15 years old, 45 respondents between 16-18 years old, 10 respondents between 19-21 years old, and 10 respondents over 22 years old.

Age of Respondents

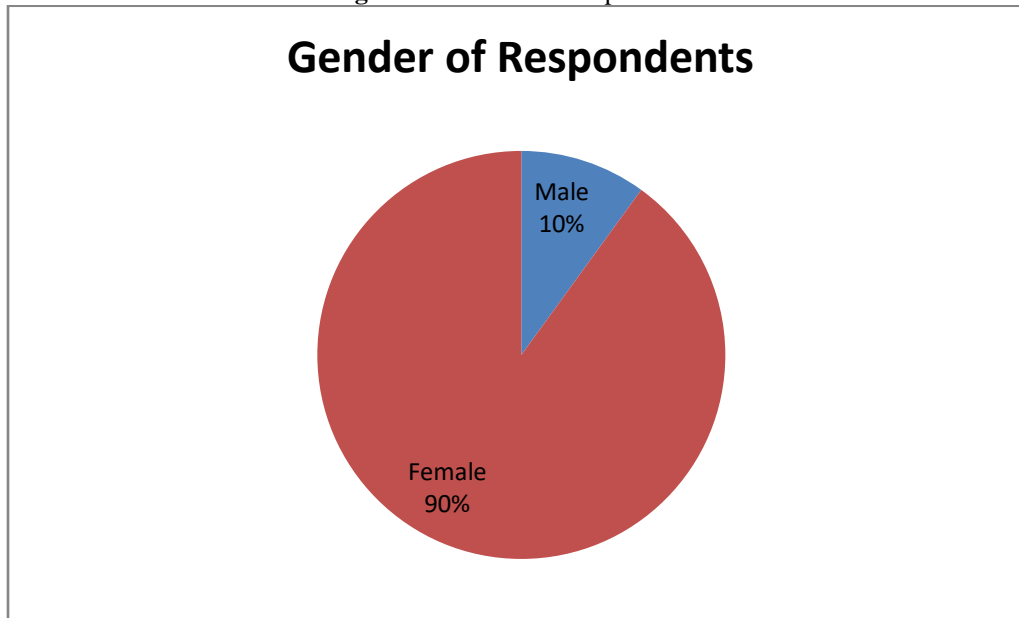


Source: Field Research 2023.

Gender of Respondents

Results on the Gender of Respondents are presented in Figure 2

Figure 2:- Gender of Respondents.



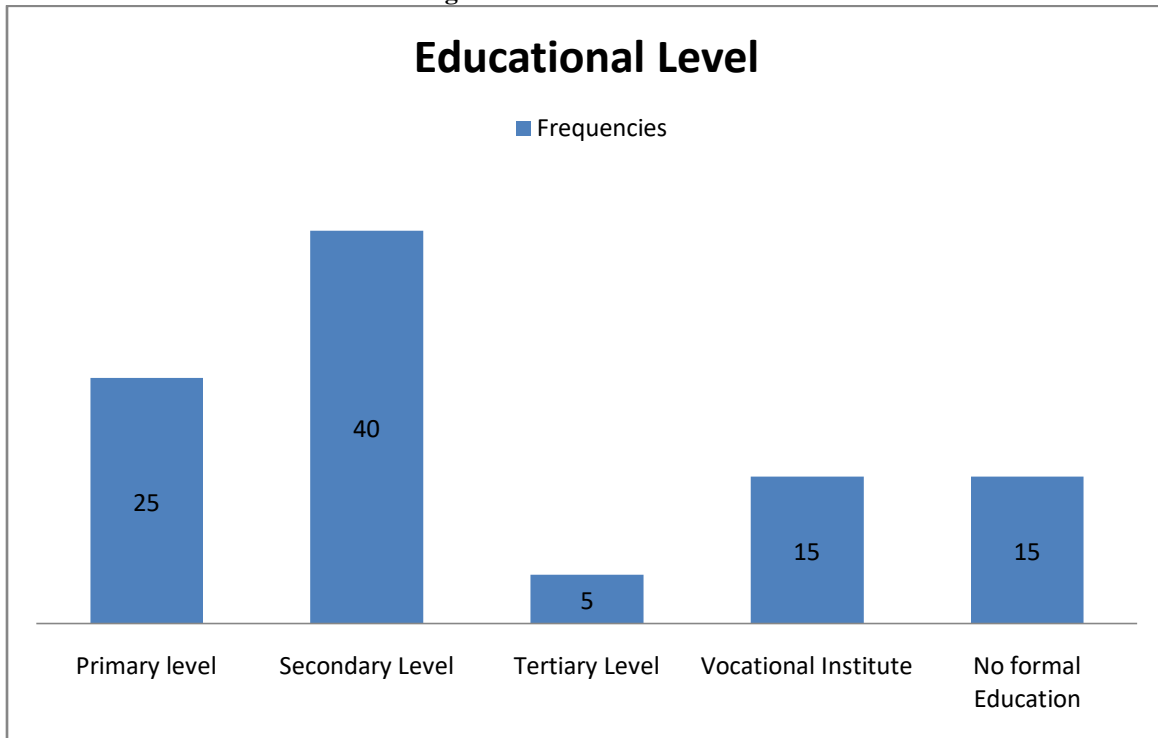
Source: Field Research 2023.

Figure 2 Gender categories show that 90% of the respondents were female and 10% were male. This suggests that a higher percentage of female participants were included in the study as the phenomenon studied focuses on the barriers preventing access to justice for sexually abused women in rural areas of the Kailahun region. To get the male participants' perspective on the topic under study, the researcher included 10% of male participants in the questionnaire.

Level of Education

The level of education of respondents are indicated in Figure 3

Figure 3:- Level of Education.



Source: Field Research 2023.

The educational level of the respondents is shown in Figure 3. The data shows that the majority of the respondents in Kailahun city have an education level between primary and secondary education, with 65 respondents falling into both primary and secondary education categories. Only 5 respondents had secondary education or above. The findings show that 15 respondents only had vocational training and 15 had no formal training. This shows how gullible this group of people is when it comes to sexual issues, especially when they lack the education required to understand that sexual abuse is illegal and punishable.

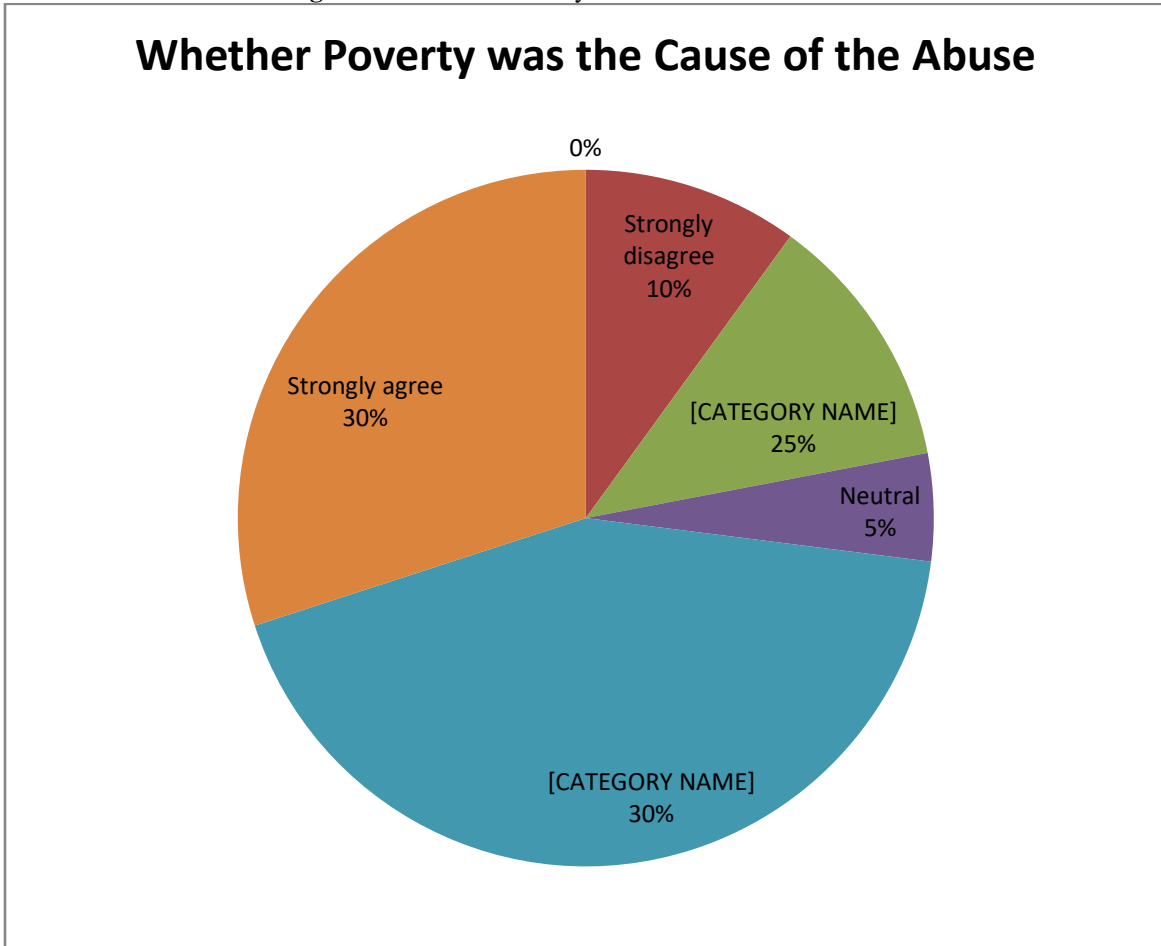
Causes of Girls Sexual Abused in Kailahun Town

The objective of this part is to identify the causes of sexual abuse of girls in Kailahun. Responses are measured using a Likert scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Combining the responses "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" into a "strongly disagree" statement and "disagree" into a "disagree" statement allowed the researcher to simplify the results. Percentages and frequencies are used to discuss the results.

Whether Poverty was the cause of the abuse

Figure 4 shows responses on the statement "whether poverty was the cause of the abuse"

Figure 4:- Whether Poverty was the cause of the abuse.



Source: Field Research 2023.

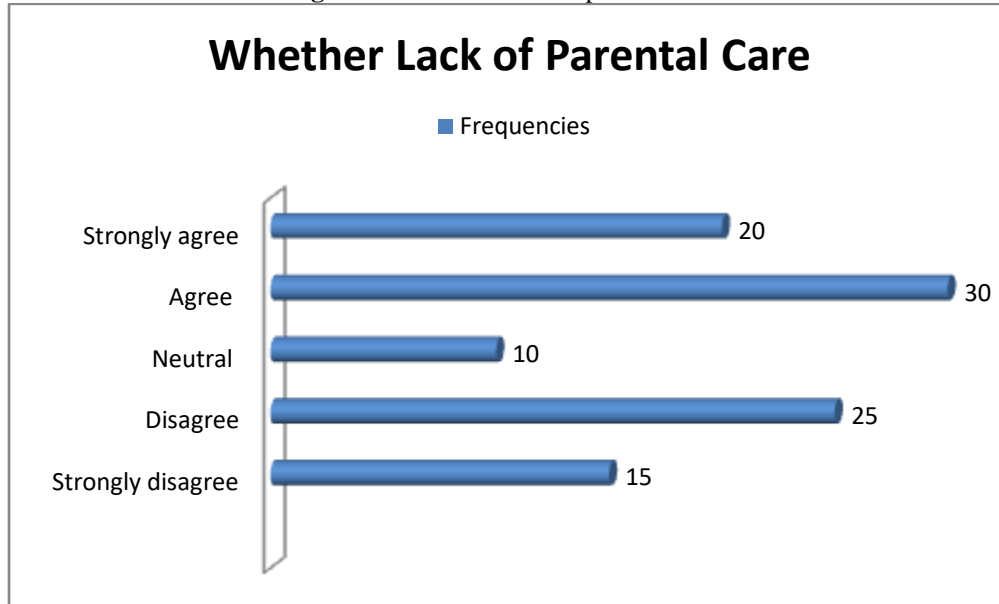
The results show that 25% of the participants disagreed with the statement, 5% were neutral, 30% agreed, 10% disagreed, and 30% strongly agreed that poverty was the cause of the abuse they suffered. The results show that the majority of the respondents believe that there is a direct relationship between poverty and sexual abuse. This suggests that poverty is the main reason for the abuse of girls in Kailahun District. These results support previous findings (UNODC 2009) that parents encourage their children to work to improve the standard of living at home, and that high levels of poverty lead to high levels of child labor.

The fact that widespread poverty puts children at risk of sexual abuse and trafficking. It is also associated with exploitative, dangerous, and often violent forms of child labor, such as prostitution and domestic work. The extent of the problem is difficult to gauge, as children working as vagrants are vulnerable to sexual abuse from a variety of people, including passers-by and, in some cases, people who shelter them. Gupta et al. (2020) support this, finding that poverty is a significant factor in child sexual abuse. Most sexual abuse comes from low-income families, where selling children to buy daily necessities is common.

Whether lack of parental care

The responses of respondents “whether lack of parental care” are presented in Figure 5

Figure 5:- Whether lack of parental care.



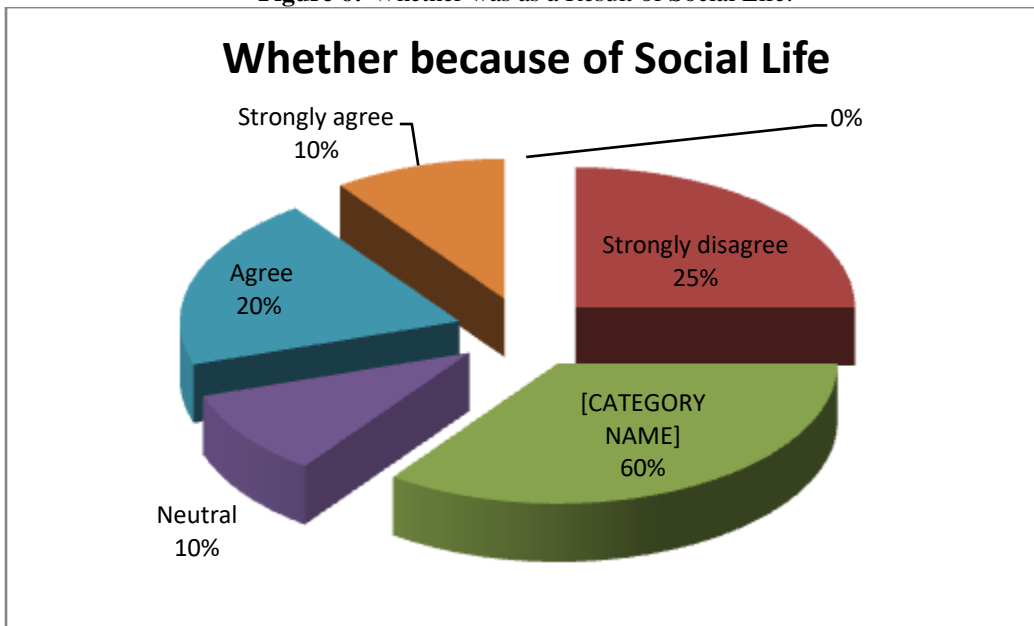
Source: Field Research 2023.

According to the results shown in Figure 5, 25 respondents disagreed with the statement "whether lack of parental care" was the reason for the abuse they experienced, while 10 respondents were unsure, about 30 respondents agreed, and 20 respondents strongly agreed. According to the findings, half of the respondents agreed that their abuse was caused by a lack of parental care; as their parents were unable to provide the protection they should have, the abusers had to take advantage of this. These outcomes are in line with the conclusions drawn by Ezekiel et al. (2017) as revealed in their qualitative study, "Factors associated with child sexual abuse in Tanzania: a lack of parental monitoring".

Whether was as a Result of Social Life?

Figure 6 shows results on "whether was a result of social life" that girls suffer abused in Kailahun.

Figure 6:-Whether was as a Result of Social Life.



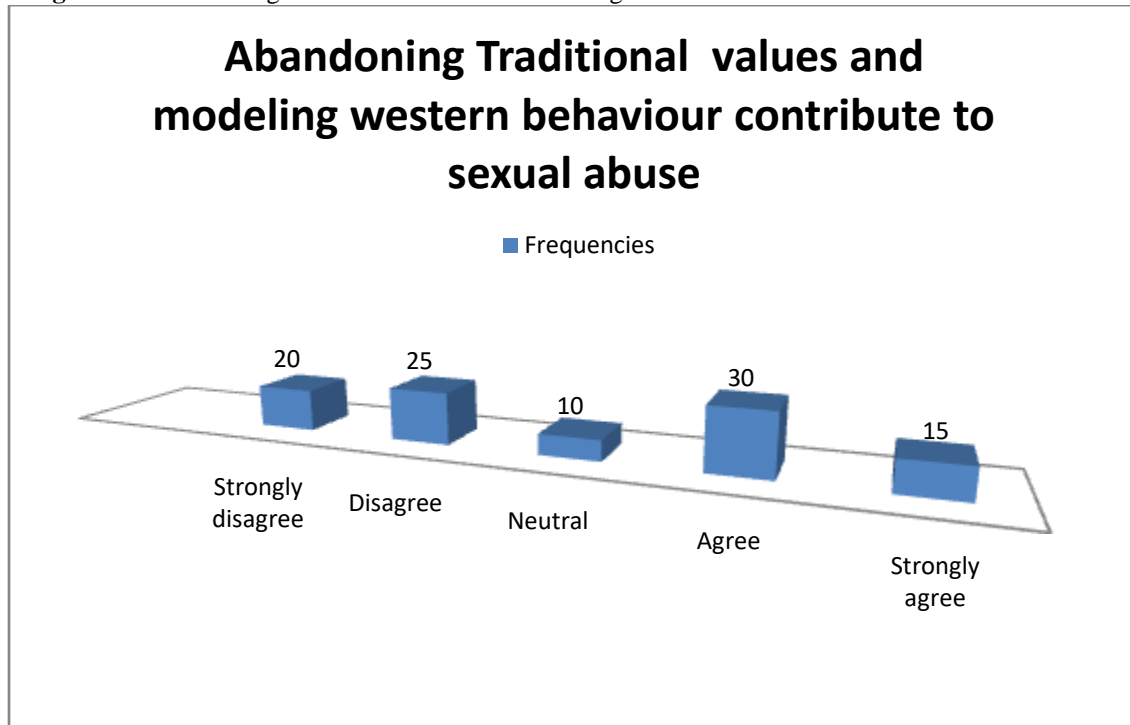
Source: Field Research 2023.

As seen in Figure 6, the majority of respondents—60% of them—disapproved of the statement, while 10% had a neutral opinion and 20% said they agreed with it. The data show that respondents do not attribute as much of the sexual assault of females in Kailahun town to their social lives.

Abandoning traditional values and modelling Western behaviour contributes to sexual abuse

Responses of respondent on the statement “Abandoning traditional values and modeling Western behaviour contributes to sexual abuse” are displayed in Figure 7

Figure 7:- Abandoning traditional values and modeling Western behavior contributes to sexual abuse.



Source: Field Research 2023.

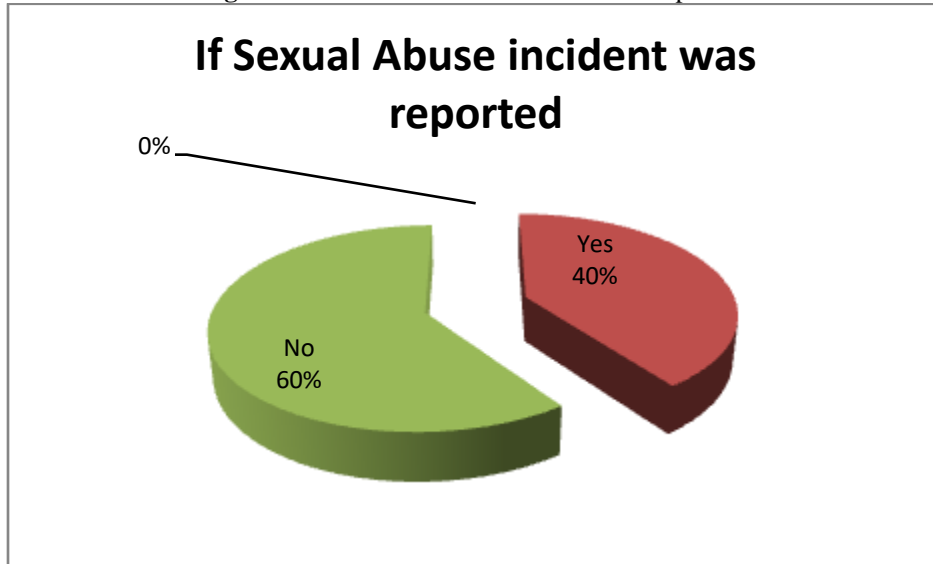
Regarding the statement "Abandoning, traditional Values and modeling Western behavior contributes to sexual abuse," Figure 7 shows the results. Of the respondents, 25% disagreed with the statement, 10 expressed no opinion, and 45 agreed. The findings show that respondents' views on the statement were mixed. Regarding the question of whether "abandoning traditional values and modeling Western behavior contributes to sexual abuse," the majority of respondents were unsure. Some people thought that embracing a Western lifestyle contributed to their abuse, while others felt that eschewing traditional values and embracing Western behavior contributed to their abuse. The findings contradict the opinions (Silberschmidt 2001; referenced in the UNODC 2009 report) that some of the sexual behaviors observed in Sub-Saharan African countries stem not from traditional "permissiveness," but rather from the disintegration of customary sexual norms and regulations, which is made worse by pervasive poverty.

Factors that limit Sexually Abused Girls to access Justice

If Sexual Abused incidents are reported

Figure 8 indicate results on “if sexual abused incidents are reported.

Figure 8:- If Sexual Abused incidents are reported.



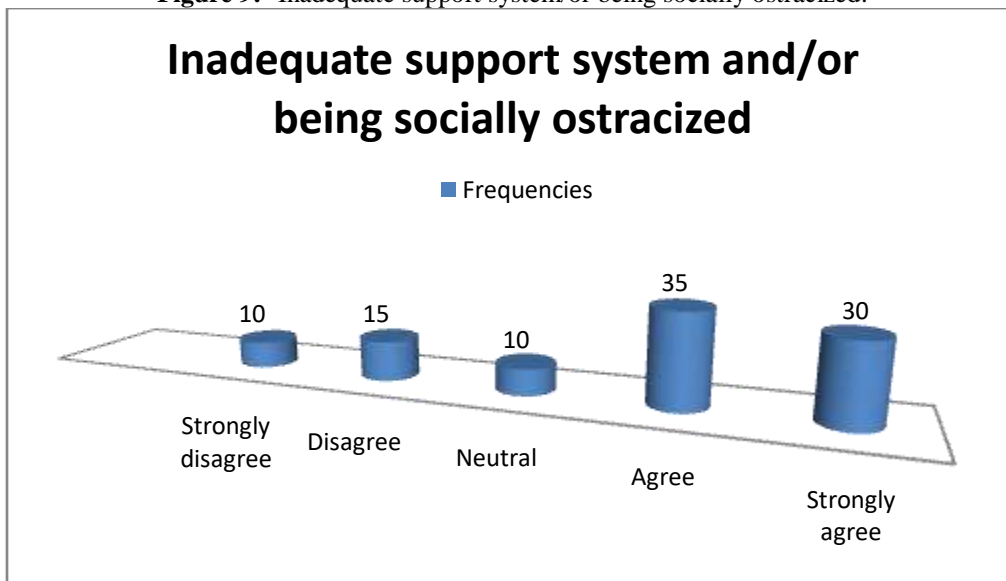
Source: Field Research 2023.

According to Figure 8's findings, 40% of respondents indicated that incidences of sexual abuse are reported, while 60% indicated that such incidents are not reported. These findings imply that the majority of girls are dying in silence as a result of not reporting cases of sexual assault, depriving them of access to justice. The findings support the opinions of (Maguire, 2012), who stated that women and girls face unique obstacles. These are caused by the kinds of crimes or conflicts (sexual, domestic, or other gender-based discrimination-related issues like land disputes with their husbands' families) that they are likely to bring to the courts, as well as by their unique degree of marginalization. Due to their unique marginalization, they are always reluctant to report these crimes, and social norms can also be a barrier to accessing the legal system. For example, women may be expected to put up with levels of criminal behaviour, such as domestic abuse, or to give in to family pressure not to file a complaint or go to court to protect the "good of the family".

Inadequate support system/or being socially ostracized

Figure 9 present responses on the statement it was a result of “inadequate support system and/or being socially ostracized”.

Figure 9:- Inadequate support system/or being socially ostracized.



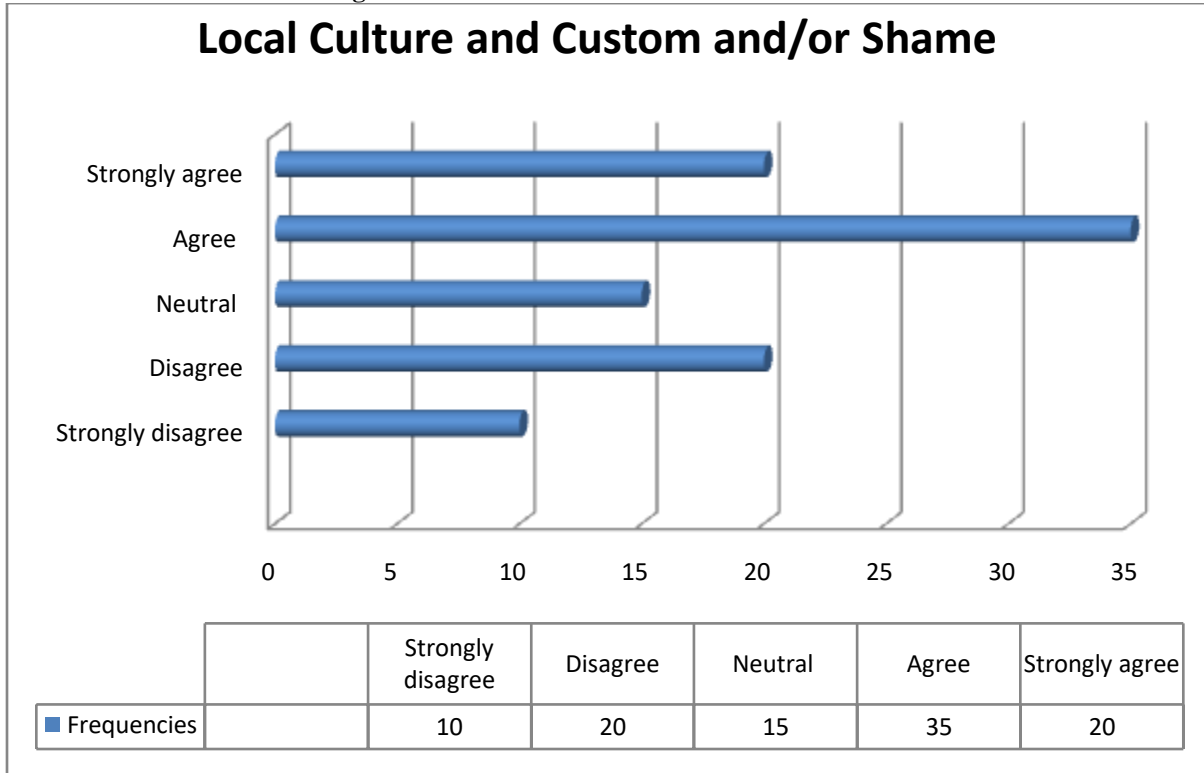
Source: Field Research 2023.

Out of 100 participants, 25 respondents disagreed with the statement, 10 respondents had a neutral attitude, and 65 respondents agreed with the statement, as shown in Figure 9. This suggests that a lack of a strong support network and/or social exclusion are contributing factors to the underreporting of incidents involving sexual abuse of girls. The findings contradict the study by Rittenhouse R. (2017), which states that a child who is the victim of sexual exploitation has a right to pursue and receive redress under international law for that breach. Nevertheless, a lot of young people who are sexually exploited become victims again because the existing legal system is unable to sufficiently treat and make up for the damage they have experienced.

Local culture and custom and/or shame

Figure 10 show results on the statement “Local culture and custom and/or shame” is the reason why most sexual abuse incidents are not reported.

Figure 10:- Local culture and custom and/or shame.



Source: Field Research 2023.

Figure 10 presents the results, which show that although 55 respondents agreed with the statement, 30 respondents disagreed with it and 15 expressed a neutral opinion. The findings imply that shame and/or local customs are some of the things that prevent females who have experienced sexual assault from coming forward with reports of such instances in the Kailahun district. The results are consistent with the view that social norms or local culture can act as a barrier to accessing justice. For example, women may be expected to put up with criminal behavior such as domestic abuse or to give in to family pressure to forgo filing complaints or taking legal action in the name of the "good of the family"

Discussions:-

The study reveals that sexual abuse in Kailahun is prevalent and often unreported. The main reasons for such abuse are poverty and lack of parental supervision. Most respondents believe that incidents of sexual abuse are never reported due to social exclusion, lack of support networks, and fear of mistreatment, local customs, or embarrassment.

Parental neglect plays a role in a girl's sexual abuse, as most instances originate from low-income homes where it is a common practice to sell the child to pay for everyday necessities. Majority of the respondents believed that social life of girls in Kailahun do not play much role in their being abused. Abandoning traditional values and modelling

Western behaviour contributes to sexual abuse, with the majority of respondents being unsure. Some believe that embracing a western lifestyle contributed to their abuse, while others think that eschewing traditional values and embracing western behaviour contributed to their abuse.

The study concludes that girls who have experienced sexual assault in rural areas of Sierra Leone, particularly in Kailahun, are unable to access justice due to these factors. However, obstacles to accessing justice in Sierra Leone include the reluctance of victims to report abuse cases, inadequate support system and/or being socially ostracized, poverty effects, and local culture and custom and/or shame. Poverty is considered one of the main causes of sexual abuse in Kailahun town, with 73% of respondents believing it is due to poverty. This is supported by previous research, which found that parents encourage their children to work to raise the standard of living in the home, leading to high incidences of child labour. The prevalence of poverty puts children at risk for sexual abuse and human trafficking, as well as exploitative, dangerous, and frequently violent child labour such as prostitution and domestic work.

Conclusion:-

This study draws the conclusion that when it comes to getting justice, women and girls who are sexually abused face a significant disparity compared to their male counterparts. The study concludes that a number of variables contribute to the sexual abuse of girls in the Kailahun area; the main causes of sexual abuse of girls in Kailahun were found to be poverty and a lack of parental supervision. The main reasons why sexual abuse incidents involving girls go unreported are because the families want to protect their reputations and names given the stigma associated with sexual offenses, which is especially true in rural communities. Other contributing factors include inadequate support systems, social exclusion, and local customs and culture, and/or shame. As a result, victims and survivors of sexual abuse may not prioritize receiving a criminal justice remedy.

Recommendation:-

1. From the investigations it was found out that poverty is the main cause of girls sexual abused in Kailahun district, based on this it is incumbent on the government and other partners to pay attention to improving livelihood by development and pro-poor programmes in the rural communities to minimize the poverty level in these communities so parents will not give their daughters in early marriage but send them to school to achieve a brighter future for them.
2. Enhance education and empowerment: Implement gender-sensitive educational programs that address the root causes of sexual abuse and promote gender equality. Provide training and capacity-building programs for girls and their communities to empower them to report cases of abuse and access justice.
3. Increase awareness and community engagement: Develop comprehensive awareness campaigns to address societal attitudes towards sexual abuse, promote survivor support, and encourage community involvement in preventing and addressing cases of abuse.
4. Improve access to justice and support services: Establish accessible and gender-responsive justice systems in rural communities, including legal aid programs, counseling services, and safe spaces for survivors. Enhance collaboration between relevant government agencies and civil society organizations to ensure comprehensive support for sexually abused girls. Support Services: Develop and expand support services, including counseling and legal aid, for sexually abused girls in rural areas, ensuring their accessibility and effectiveness.
5. Education Initiatives: Promote education and awareness campaigns to encourage the reporting of sexual abuse cases, ensuring the confidentiality and safety of victims.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors have not declare any conflict of interest.

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