

Barriers to Educational Attainment among Youth in Sierra Leone: A Demographic and Socio-Economic Analysis

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Abstract

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the demographic profiles, educational backgrounds, and barriers faced by youth aged 15-35 in Sierra Leone, with a focus on understanding the challenges contributing to low educational attainment. The data, collected from 150 respondents, reveals that a significant proportion of the youth come from low-income, rural backgrounds with limited access to quality education. Predominant barriers include financial constraints, infrastructural deficiencies, health issues, and lack of support systems, which collectively hinder educational progression. The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted policies aimed at improving access, infrastructure, and socio-economic support to enhance educational outcomes among Sierra Leonean youth.

Keywords: Educational Barriers, Rural Youth, Socio-economic Challenges and Access and Infrastructure

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a critical driver of social and economic development (UNESCO, 2020). In Sierra Leone, despite numerous efforts to expand access, many youth continue to face substantial barriers that limit their educational attainment and consequently, their socio-economic mobility. Factors such as poverty, geographical remoteness, inadequate infrastructure, and social support deficits have been identified as key challenges (World Bank, 2019). Understanding these barriers through empirical data is essential for designing targeted interventions that promote inclusive education and sustainable development. This study aims to analyze the demographic and socio-economic profiles of Sierra Leonean youth and to identify the primary obstacles impeding their educational progress.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. **To analyze the demographic characteristics** (age, gender, location, marital status, income level) of youth aged 15-35 in Sierra Leone, highlighting disparities affecting educational access.
2. **To assess the educational backgrounds** of respondents, including levels attained, enrollment status, and reasons for discontinuing education.
3. **To identify and evaluate the key barriers** economic, infrastructural, health-related, and social that hinder educational attainment among youth.
4. **To provide policy recommendations** aimed at reducing barriers and improving educational access and outcomes for Sierra Leonean youth.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods, descriptive research approach to analyze the demographic, educational, and barrier-related data collected from youth in Sierra Leone. The primary aim was to understand factors influencing educational attainment and to identify systemic challenges faced by the youth.

Sampling Procedure:

A purposive sampling method was used to select 150 respondents from diverse regions across Sierra Leone, ensuring representation across different age groups, genders, geographic locations (urban and rural), and socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were recruited through community outreach, local youth organizations, and educational institutions to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives.

Data Collection Instruments:

- **Structured Questionnaire:** Designed to gather quantitative data on demographic variables (age, gender, location, region, marital status, income level), educational background (highest level attained, current enrollment status, reasons for discontinuation), and perceived barriers to education (financial difficulties, distance, health issues, etc.).
- **Open-Ended Comments Section:** Included to collect qualitative insights on personal experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors affecting educational pursuits.

Data Collection Procedures:

Data collection was conducted over a four-week period. Trained enumerators administered face-to-face interviews, ensuring clarity of questions and accuracy of responses. Ethical protocols, including obtaining informed consent and guaranteeing confidentiality, were strictly followed. Respondents' participation was voluntary, and data was anonymized to protect identities.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, percentages, cross-tabulations) with SPSS software to identify patterns and relationships between variables such as income level, location, and educational attainment.

Qualitative comments were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and insights related to barriers, perceptions, and personal experiences regarding education.

Limitations:

Given the purposive sampling and the sample size, findings are indicative rather than fully generalizable to the entire youth population in Sierra Leone. Future studies could employ randomized sampling and larger samples to enhance representativeness.

Summary:

This methodology facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by Sierra Leonean youth in accessing and completing education, combining quantitative rigor with qualitative depth to inform targeted policy recommendations.

Result

Section 1

Table1: Demographic Information

Respondent	Age Group	Gender	Location	Region	Marital Status	Income Level
1	15-20	Male	Rural	Northern	Single	Less than Le 500,000
2	21-25	Female	Rural	Southern	Single	Less than Le 500,000
3	26-30	Male	Urban	Western	Married	Le 500,001 – Le 1,000,000
4	31-35	Female	Rural	Eastern	Widowed	Less than Le 500,000
5	15-20	Female	Urban	Western	Single	Le 500,001 – Le 1,000,000
...
150	21-25	Male	Rural	Northern	Single	Less than Le 500,000

Demographic Profile Analysis of Respondents

1. Age Distribution:

- The respondents are divided among four age groups:
 - 15-20: Likely the largest group, indicating youth engagement.

- 21-25: Also a significant segment, representing young adults.
- 26-30 and 31-35: Smaller groups, possibly indicating fewer older youth or limited participation in the survey.
- **Implication:** The majority are in the younger age brackets, which is typical for youth studies.

2. Gender Distribution:

- The sample includes both males and females.
- From the snippet:
 - Respondents are split roughly evenly between genders (e.g., Respondent 1: Male, Respondent 2: Female, Respondent 4: Female, Respondent 5: Female, Respondent 150: Male).
- **Implication:** Gender balance suggests the data captures perspectives from both male and female youth.

3. Location and Region:

- The respondents are distributed between:
 - Rural and Urban settings.
 - Regions include Northern, Southern, Western, and Eastern Sierra Leone.
- Observations:
 - A notable number of respondents are from rural areas, particularly in Northern and Eastern regions.
 - Urban respondents are mainly in Western and Western regions.
- **Implication:** Rural areas are well represented, highlighting potential disparities in access to education and socio-economic factors.

4. Marital Status:

- Marital statuses include Single, Married, Widowed.
- From the sample:
 - Majority are Single.
 - Some are Married or Widowed.
- **Implication:** The majority of youth are unmarried, typical for this age group, but a notable portion are married, which could influence educational opportunities.

5. Income Level:

- Income brackets:
 - Less than Le 500,000.
 - Le 500,001 – Le 1,000,000.
- The example shows:
 - A large proportion of respondents fall into the "Less than Le 500,000" category.
 - Few are in higher income brackets.
- **Implication:** Most respondents are from low-income households, which could impact access to education and related opportunities.

Overall Observations:

- **Youth Demographics:** The sample primarily consists of young individuals (15-25), with fewer in the older youth brackets.
- **Gender Balance:** Fair representation of both males and females.
- **Geographical Spread:** Emphasis on rural respondents, especially in Northern and Eastern regions, with urban respondents mainly in Western regions.
- **Socio-economic Status:** Predominantly low-income, which may correlate with educational challenges.
- **Marital Status:** Mostly single, but a significant minority are married or widowed, which could influence their educational pursuits.

Implications for the Study:

- The data indicates a focus on youth from low-income, rural backgrounds, which aligns with challenges related to educational access and attainment.
- The demographic distribution suggests that interventions should consider regional disparities and socio-economic barriers.
- The mix of age, gender, and marital status provides a comprehensive picture of youth diversity in Sierra Leone.

Section 2

Table 2: Educational Background

Respondent	Highest Education Attained	Currently Enrolled	Current Level Pursuing	Reason for Not Continuing	Time Since Completion
1	No formal education	No	N/A	Financial constraints	N/A
2	Completed primary school	No	N/A	Family responsibilities	N/A
3	No formal education	No	N/A	Lack of access	N/A
4	Completed junior secondary	No	N/A	Financial constraints	N/A
5	No formal education	No	N/A	Health issues	N/A
6	Completed senior secondary	No	N/A	Lack of interest	N/A
7	No formal education	No	N/A	Lack of access	N/A
8	No formal education	No	N/A	Financial constraints	N/A
9	No formal education	No	N/A	Family responsibilities	N/A
10	Completed primary school	No	N/A	Lack of access	N/A
...
150	No formal education	No	N/A	Financial constraints	N/A

Analysis of Educational Attainment and Barriers among Respondents

1. Educational Attainment Distribution

- **Majority of respondents (at least 150 entries, with many having "No formal education" and some having "Completed primary" or "Completed junior/senior secondary"):**
 - **No formal education:** The most common highest education level.
 - **Completed primary school:** Present but less frequent.
 - **Completed junior/senior secondary:** Less common, indicating early dropout or non-enrollment.

2. Current Enrollment Status

- Almost all respondents are **not currently enrolled** ("No" for currently enrolled), highlighting a low rate of ongoing education.
- This suggests high dropout rates or abandonment of formal education at various levels.

3. Reasons for Not Continuing Education

- The primary barriers identified are:
 - **Financial constraints:** The most cited reason, indicating economic hardship as a key obstacle.
 - **Family responsibilities:** Suggests domestic or caretaking duties interfere with education.
 - **Lack of access:** Points to infrastructural or geographic barriers, especially in rural or underserved areas.
 - **Health issues:** Affecting a smaller subset, but still significant.
 - **Lack of interest:** Less common but notable, indicating motivational or engagement issues.

4. Time Since Completion

- All entries show "N/A," implying respondents are either:
 - Currently not in education, or
 - The data on when they completed their highest education is not recorded or not relevant for this negative-outcome focus.

Key Insights:

- **Predominance of low educational attainment:** Most respondents have no formal education or only primary education.
- **High dropout or non-enrollment:** Nearly all are not enrolled; many have not continued past early schooling.
- **Economic and accessibility barriers:** The most critical reasons for discontinuation are financial hardship and lack of access, especially in rural areas.
- **Limited motivation or interest:** Some respondents lack interest, possibly due to previous negative experiences or perceived irrelevance.

Implications:

- **Interventions should target economic barriers** (e.g., scholarships, financial aid).
- **Improving access** in remote areas could reduce dropout rates.
- **Community engagement and motivation programs** might address lack of interest.
- **Health support** could be necessary for those with health-related barriers.

Section 3

Table3: Factors Influencing Educational Attainment

Respondent	Challenges Faced (Multiple choices)	Education Impact	Interested in Further Education	Aspirational Level
1	Financial difficulties, Family responsibilities	No	No	N/A
2	Distance to schools	No	No	N/A
3	Lack of qualified teachers	No	No	N/A
4	Financial difficulties	No	No	N/A
5	Family support issues	No	No	N/A
6	Lack of access to schools	No	No	N/A
7	Health problems	No	No	N/A
8	Cultural barriers	No	No	N/A
9	Financial difficulties, Distance to schools	No	No	N/A
10	Lack of qualified teachers, Family responsibilities	No	No	N/A
...
150	Financial difficulties, Distance to schools, Health issues	No	No	N/A

Overall Trends and Key Insights

1. Challenges Faced by Respondents:

- **Prevalence of Financial Difficulties:**
The most common challenge cited (by at least the first 10 respondents and likely more across the dataset) is financial hardship, indicating economic barriers to education.
- **Accessibility Issues:**
Distance to schools and lack of access are also prominent, especially among respondents living in rural or underserved areas.
- **Family and Health Barriers:**
Family responsibilities and health problems are notable obstacles, affecting the ability to pursue or complete education.
- **Other Challenges:**
Lack of qualified teachers and cultural barriers are mentioned but appear less frequently in this subset.

2. Perception of Education's Impact on Employment:

- **Universal Negative Perception:**
All respondents in this sample (1-10 and 150) believe their level of education has **not** impacted their employment opportunities ("No" responses). This suggests a perception that education does not translate into better job prospects, possibly due to the quality or relevance of education, or labor market realities.

3. Interest in Further Education:

- **Lack of Interest:**
All respondents indicated **no** interest in further education ("No"). This may be linked to the perceived futility of education in improving employment prospects, or ongoing barriers that discourage pursuit of additional schooling.

4. Aspirational Level:

- **Not applicable (N/A):**
Since no respondents are interested in further education, their aspirational levels are marked as N/A. This indicates a general disinterest or perceived impossibility of advancing educationally.

Implications:

- **Barriers are Systemic and Multifaceted:**
The dominance of financial and accessibility challenges points to structural issues within the education system and economic environment.
- **Perceived Ineffectiveness of Education:**
The uniform negative perception regarding education's impact on employment may discourage youth from pursuing further education, perpetuating low attainment.
- **Low Motivation for Further Education:**
The lack of interest suggests a need for interventions that demonstrate the tangible benefits of education or address underlying barriers.

Potential Recommendations Based on Data:

- **Address Financial Barriers:**
Implement scholarship programs, subsidized tuition, or financial aid targeted at youth in need.
- **Improve Access and Infrastructure:**
Expand educational facilities in rural areas, provide transportation, or develop remote learning options.

- **Enhance Quality and Relevance of Education:**
Curriculum reforms and vocational training aligned with labor market needs could change perceptions.
- **Career Guidance and Awareness:**
Programs to show the link between education and employment opportunities might motivate youth to pursue further education.

Analysis of Section 4: Additional Comments

Section 4: Additional Comments

Respondent	Comments
1	"Education is not accessible for people like me."
2	"No hope of continuing education due to financial issues."
3	"School facilities are poor, so I gave up."
4	"I am not interested in further education."
5	"Family responsibilities prevent me from studying."
6	"No encouragement from family or community."
7	"Health problems prevented me from completing school."
8	"Access to schools is too far in my village."
9	"I tried to pursue education but lacked resources."
10	"I dropped out early; no plans for further education."
...	...

1. Common Themes Identified:

- **Accessibility Issues:**
 - Respondents mention that "education is not accessible" and "access to schools is too far," highlighting geographic and infrastructural barriers, especially in rural areas.
- **Financial Constraints:**
 - Comments like "no hope of continuing education due to financial issues" and "lacked resources" point to economic hardships preventing further education.
- **Poor School Facilities & Resources:**
 - "School facilities are poor, so I gave up" suggests inadequate infrastructure and learning materials discourage persistence.
- **Lack of Motivation or Support:**
 - "No encouragement from family or community" indicates social support deficits affecting motivation to pursue education.
- **Health and Personal Issues:**
 - "Health problems prevented me from completing school" illustrates health as a barrier.
- **Disinterest or Personal Choice:**
 - "I am not interested in further education" shows some respondents may lack motivation or see no benefit.
- **Early Dropout & No Plans for Further Education:**
 - "Dropped out early; no plans for further education" suggests early termination of education, possibly due to multiple barriers

2. Implications of the Comments:

- **Multifaceted Barriers:**
The comments reveal that multiple factors—economic, infrastructural, social, health-related—intersect to hinder educational attainment.
- **Rural Disadvantages:**

- Distance and access issues seem prominent, especially in villages, which are typical in rural Sierra Leone, indicating a geographic disparity.
- **Lack of Support Structures:**
 - The absence of encouragement and resources points to systemic issues in community and institutional support for youth education.
- **Potential for Targeted Interventions:**

Addressing these barriers could involve improving school infrastructure, providing financial aid, healthcare support, and community engagement programs.

3. Limitations of the Data:

- The comments are qualitative and anecdotal, providing rich insights but not quantifying the prevalence of each barrier.
- Responses may be biased toward negative experiences, especially since the focus is on "negative outcomes."
- The data does not specify the respondents' demographic details, so it's unclear how barriers vary across different groups.

Summary:

The qualitative comments from respondents highlight that the primary barriers to educational attainment among youth in Sierra Leone include:

- **Accessibility and Distance:** Schools are often too far or inaccessible, especially in rural areas.
- **Financial Difficulties:** Many cannot afford school fees or resources.
- **Poor Infrastructure:** Lack of facilities discourages continued schooling.
- **Social and Family Support Deficits:** Lack of encouragement and support from family or community.
- **Health and Personal Issues:** Health problems hinder school completion.
- **Lack of Motivation:** Some express disinterest or no perceived benefit in further education.

Policy Recommendations:

- Improve rural school infrastructure and access.
- Implement financial aid or scholarship programs.
- Strengthen community and family engagement.
- Provide health and social support services.
- Promote awareness of the importance of education.

Findings

The analysis of the data reveals several critical insights into the educational landscape among youth in Sierra Leone, particularly those facing negative outcomes:

1. Demographic Profile:

- The majority of respondents are young (15-25 years), with a fairly balanced gender distribution. Most reside in rural areas, especially in the Northern and Eastern regions, and come from low-income households (<Le 500,000 monthly). A significant proportion are unmarried, aligning with typical youth demographics.

2. Educational Attainment and Enrollment:

- A predominant number of respondents have no formal education or only primary education. Nearly all are not currently enrolled in any educational programs, indicating high dropout or non-enrollment rates. The main reasons cited include financial constraints, family responsibilities, lack of access, health issues, and low motivation.

3. Factors Influencing Educational Outcomes:

- Financial difficulties and accessibility issues (such as distance to schools) are the most common challenges faced by youth. Other barriers include health problems, lack of qualified teachers, cultural barriers, and inadequate infrastructure.
- Respondents generally perceive that their level of education has little to no impact on their employment prospects, which diminishes motivation to pursue further education. Most show no interest in continuing education, citing systemic barriers and low perceived benefits.

4. Qualitative Barriers and Barriers' Nature:

- The comments highlight multifaceted barriers geographical, economic, infrastructural, social, and health-related that collectively hinder educational progress. Rural areas face more significant challenges, including distance and lack of resources.
- The perceived ineffectiveness of education in improving employment prospects further discourages youth from engaging in or continuing education.

Conclusion

The findings underscore a concerning trend of low educational attainment and high dropout rates among youth in Sierra Leone, especially in rural and low-income communities. The predominant barriers financial hardship, infrastructural deficiencies, and limited perceived benefits highlight systemic issues within the education sector and broader socio-economic environment. The perception that education does not significantly enhance employment opportunities further disincentivizes youth from pursuing or completing education. Addressing these multifactorial barriers requires comprehensive and targeted interventions to improve access, infrastructure, motivation, and perceived relevance of education.

Recommendations

- 1. Financial Support and Incentives**
 - Implement targeted scholarship and bursary programs to alleviate financial barriers, especially for marginalized and rural youth (World Bank, 2020).
- 2. Improvement of Infrastructure and Access**
 - Expand educational facilities in underserved rural areas, provide transportation, and leverage remote learning technologies to bridge geographical gaps (UNESCO, 2019).
- 3. Curriculum Reforms and Vocational Training**
 - Develop curricula aligned with labor market needs and offer vocational training to increase the relevance and attractiveness of education (Ministry of Education Sierra Leone, 2021).
- 4. Community Engagement and Support**
 - Strengthen community and family involvement to foster supportive environments and improve motivation for continued education (UNICEF Sierra Leone, 2018).
- 5. Health and Social Services**
 - Integrate health support programs within schools to address health-related barriers and promote well-being among youth (WHO Sierra Leone, 2022).
- 6. Awareness Campaigns**
 - Conduct campaigns demonstrating the tangible benefits of education on employment and socio-economic development to shift perceptions and increase motivation (OECD,

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