

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN IN KAKUA CHIEFDOM, BO CITY, SIERRA LEONE

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a major public health, human rights and development challenge that disproportionately affects women worldwide. In Sierra Leone, despite policy reforms and interventions by government and development partners, GBV continues to undermine women's social and economic wellbeing. This study examined the effects of gender-based violence on the socio-economic development of women in Kakua Chiefdom, Bo City, Sierra Leone. Specifically, the study investigated the causes of gender-based violence, examined its socio-economic effects on women, and assessed its prevalence within the study area. A cross-sectional research design employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches was adopted. A sample of 50 respondents was selected using purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires and interviews, while relevant literature was reviewed to complement the empirical findings. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics comprising frequencies and percentages, whereas qualitative responses were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that poverty, unemployment, harmful cultural practices, gender inequality and economic dependence were the major causes of gender-based violence. The study further established that GBV significantly affected women's physical and mental health, reduced their economic productivity, weakened family relationships and limited their participation in community development activities. Respondents also perceived the prevalence of GBV in Kakua Chiefdom to be high despite ongoing interventions by government institutions and non-governmental organizations. The study concludes that gender-based violence remains a significant obstacle to women's socio-economic development. It recommends strengthening the enforcement of existing laws, promoting women's economic empowerment, expanding community awareness programmes and improving access to comprehensive support services for survivors.

Keywords: Gender, violence, development, women, empowerment.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) is recognised globally as one of the most pervasive violations of human rights and a significant obstacle to sustainable development. It encompasses physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence directed at individuals based on socially constructed gender roles and unequal power relations. Although both men and women may experience gender-based violence, women and girls remain disproportionately affected because of persistent gender inequalities, discriminatory cultural norms and unequal access to

social, economic and political opportunities. These inequalities continue to undermine women's wellbeing and restrict their ability to participate fully in national development. The uploaded dissertation frames GBV as a human rights issue and a barrier to economic and social participation, particularly for women.

Globally, gender-based violence has become a major public health and development concern. Its consequences extend beyond individual victims to families, communities and national economies through increased healthcare costs, reduced labour productivity, educational disruptions and intergenerational cycles of poverty. Violence against women limits their opportunities for education, employment and entrepreneurship while simultaneously weakening social cohesion and community development.

In Sierra Leone, gender-based violence remains a persistent challenge despite legislative reforms and increased advocacy by government institutions, civil society organisations and international development partners. The country's post-conflict context, entrenched patriarchal norms, economic hardship and unequal gender relations continue to expose many women to different forms of violence. Survivors frequently experience physical injuries, psychological trauma, economic deprivation and social exclusion, all of which reduce their capacity to contribute effectively to household welfare and community development.

Kakua Chiefdom in Bo City reflects many of these national challenges. Women in the chiefdom continue to encounter domestic violence, emotional abuse, economic deprivation and other forms of gender-based violence that negatively affect their livelihoods and social wellbeing. Although several institutions have implemented programmes aimed at preventing violence and supporting survivors, the persistence of reported cases suggests that considerable gaps remain in prevention, protection and response mechanisms. Understanding the nature of these challenges is essential for developing evidence-based interventions that promote women's empowerment and sustainable community development.

Against this background, the present study investigated the causes of gender-based violence, examined its effects on the socio-economic development of women and assessed its prevalence in Kakua Chiefdom, Bo City, Sierra Leone. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on gender and development while providing practical evidence for policy makers, practitioners and development partners working to reduce gender-based violence and promote women's socio-economic empowerment.

2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Gender-based violence continues to pose a significant challenge to women's socio-economic development despite increasing national and international efforts to eliminate violence against women. Across many developing countries, women continue to experience physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse that restricts their access to education, employment, productive resources and decision-making opportunities. These experiences not only violate fundamental human rights but also reduce women's ability to contribute meaningfully to household welfare and national development.

In Sierra Leone, gender-based violence remains widespread despite legal reforms, public awareness campaigns and interventions by government ministries, civil society organisations

and international development agencies. Many women continue to experience domestic violence, sexual violence, emotional abuse and economic deprivation, while barriers such as fear, stigma, inadequate institutional support and cultural norms discourage reporting and access to justice. The dissertation further notes that violence against women continues to undermine development by limiting women's participation in social and economic activities.

Although previous studies have documented the prevalence of gender-based violence in Sierra Leone, limited empirical evidence exists on how such violence affects the socio-economic development of women specifically within Kakua Chiefdom, Bo City. Consequently, there remained insufficient local evidence to inform context-specific interventions capable of reducing violence and promoting women's empowerment. This knowledge gap necessitated the present study.

3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable information for policy makers, development practitioners and researchers interested in gender equality and women's development.

Government ministries, departments and agencies responsible for gender affairs, social welfare and justice may utilise the findings to strengthen policies, improve implementation strategies and enhance the protection of women against gender-based violence. The evidence generated may also support the development of more effective programmes aimed at reducing violence and promoting women's socio-economic participation.

The study will equally benefit non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations and development partners implementing gender programmes by providing empirical information that can guide advocacy, awareness campaigns, survivor support services and community interventions.

Furthermore, the study contributes to academic literature on gender-based violence and socio-economic development in Sierra Leone. Future researchers may use the findings as a reference for related studies, while students and scholars may build upon its findings to advance knowledge in gender, social work and development studies. These intended beneficiaries are consistent with those identified in the dissertation.

4.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 This study was guided by Feminist Security Theory (FST)

Feminist Security Theory argues that security should extend beyond the protection of states to include the protection of individuals, particularly women, from all forms of violence and structural inequalities. The theory challenges traditional perspectives that overlook women's experiences and emphasises that gender inequality and patriarchal power structures create conditions that perpetuate violence against women. According to the theory, violence experienced within homes and communities should be regarded as an important security concern because it undermines human dignity, wellbeing and development.

The theory further explains that unequal power relations between men and women contribute to women's vulnerability to physical, sexual, emotional and economic violence. Such violence restricts women's opportunities to participate fully in education, employment, leadership and community development. Consequently, reducing gender-based violence requires not only legal protection but also the transformation of discriminatory social norms and institutional practices that perpetuate gender inequality.

The selection of Feminist Security Theory was appropriate because it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how gender-based violence influences women's socio-economic development. It explains that empowering women, promoting gender equality and strengthening institutional protection are essential for reducing violence and achieving sustainable development. This reflects the theoretical position presented in the dissertation.

4.2 Causes of Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) is recognised globally as one of the most persistent violations of human rights and a major barrier to gender equality and sustainable development. Although GBV affects individuals across different societies, women and girls remain disproportionately vulnerable because of unequal gender relations, discriminatory social norms and structural inequalities. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) describes violence against women as a significant public health and human rights concern rooted in unequal power relations between men and women. According to the WHO, approximately one in three women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence during her lifetime, demonstrating the widespread nature of the problem.

One of the principal drivers of gender-based violence is gender inequality. Patriarchal social systems often assign authority and decision-making power to men while limiting women's autonomy within households and communities. These unequal power relations create environments in which violence becomes a means of maintaining male dominance and control. The United Nations (1993) recognised that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have contributed to women's subordination and discrimination. This perspective suggests that gender-based violence is deeply embedded within social structures rather than being solely the result of individual behaviour.

Feminist scholars similarly argue that gender inequality forms the foundation of violence against women. Tickner (1992) explains that women's insecurity cannot be separated from broader political, economic and social structures that perpetuate unequal power relations. According to Tickner, traditional security perspectives often overlook violence experienced by women within homes and communities despite its profound impact on human security. Likewise, Enloe (2014) argues that patriarchal institutions normalise unequal gender relations, thereby creating conditions that sustain discrimination and violence against women. These perspectives reinforce the argument that eliminating gender-based violence requires transforming unequal gender relations rather than merely punishing perpetrators.

Economic deprivation has also been widely identified as an important contributor to gender-based violence. Women with limited access to education, employment and financial resources

are often more vulnerable to abuse because economic dependence reduces their ability to leave violent relationships. Poverty may further increase household stress, conflict and frustration, which can escalate into various forms of violence. Duvvury, Callan, Carney and Raghavendra (2013) observed that economic inequality not only increases women's vulnerability to violence but also creates substantial economic costs through reduced productivity, increased healthcare expenditure and lost income for survivors and their families.

Harmful cultural norms and traditional practices further contribute to the persistence of gender-based violence. In many societies, beliefs that legitimise male authority and female submissiveness continue to influence attitudes towards domestic violence, early marriage and other harmful practices. The Council of Europe (2022) notes that discriminatory gender stereotypes, rigid expectations regarding masculinity and femininity, and social acceptance of violence contribute significantly to the continuation of gender-based violence. Where violence is considered a private family matter, survivors are often discouraged from reporting abuse, thereby reinforcing a culture of silence and impunity.

Weak legal and institutional responses also sustain gender-based violence. Although many countries have enacted legislation aimed at protecting women, implementation remains inconsistent because of inadequate institutional capacity, lengthy judicial procedures, limited survivor services and poor enforcement of existing laws. According to UN Women (2024), ineffective justice systems and inadequate support mechanisms discourage survivors from seeking assistance and reduce public confidence in formal institutions responsible for protecting victims.

Conflict and humanitarian crises further increase the risk of violence against women. During periods of conflict, displacement and social instability, the breakdown of family structures and community protection systems exposes women and girls to greater risks of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse. The World Health Organization (2024) explains that conflict settings often intensify pre-existing gender inequalities and weaken institutional mechanisms designed to protect vulnerable populations.

Within Sierra Leone, the persistence of gender-based violence has been linked to poverty, entrenched patriarchal norms, weak institutional responses and the legacy of the country's civil conflict. Albrecht (2007) argues that gender-based violence remains a major obstacle to peacebuilding and socio-economic development because it limits women's participation in social, political and economic life. Similarly, Denney and Ibrahim (2012) found that women in Sierra Leone frequently encounter barriers to justice, including social stigma, financial constraints, limited awareness of legal rights and inadequate institutional support. These findings suggest that the persistence of gender-based violence in Sierra Leone cannot be explained by cultural factors alone but is also influenced by structural and institutional challenges.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that gender-based violence results from the interaction of gender inequality, poverty, harmful cultural norms, economic dependence, conflict and weak institutional protection. Addressing these interconnected factors requires comprehensive interventions that promote gender equality, strengthen legal institutions, expand women's economic opportunities and challenge discriminatory social norms.

4.3 Effects of Gender-Based Violence on Women's Socio-Economic Development

Gender-based violence (GBV) has profound consequences that extend beyond the immediate physical and psychological harm experienced by survivors. Increasingly, researchers and development agencies recognise that GBV is not only a human rights violation but also a major impediment to economic growth, poverty reduction and sustainable development. Violence against women reduces their ability to participate fully in education, employment, entrepreneurship and community leadership, thereby limiting both individual wellbeing and national development. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies GBV as a major public health challenge with serious health, social and economic consequences for women, families and communities.

One of the most significant effects of GBV is its impact on women's physical and mental health. Survivors frequently suffer injuries, chronic pain, reproductive health complications, sexually transmitted infections, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. These health consequences often require long-term medical care and reduce women's ability to engage in productive economic activities. According to the World Health Organization, women who experience intimate partner violence are more likely to suffer poor physical and mental health outcomes than women who have not experienced violence, highlighting the long-term burden that GBV places on survivors and health systems.

Gender-based violence also undermines women's economic productivity. Survivors may miss work because of physical injuries, emotional trauma or repeated medical appointments, resulting in absenteeism and reduced productivity. In many cases, violence limits women's ability to retain employment, establish businesses or participate effectively in income-generating activities. Duvvury et al. (2013) argue that these losses reduce household income while simultaneously increasing expenditure on healthcare, legal services and social support. Consequently, violence traps many women and their families in cycles of poverty.

Recent economic analyses further demonstrate that violence against women has measurable macroeconomic consequences. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) reports that GBV reduces labour supply, lowers productivity, weakens human capital formation and diverts public resources towards healthcare and judicial services instead of productive investment. These effects constrain economic growth and reduce national development outcomes. The IMF further notes that reducing violence against women could generate substantial economic gains across sub-Saharan Africa, including Sierra Leone.

Violence against women also limits educational attainment and skills development. Women and girls who experience violence are more likely to discontinue their education because of trauma, early marriage, unintended pregnancy or family instability. Lower educational attainment subsequently reduces employment opportunities, earning potential and career advancement. The IMF identifies child marriage and gender-based violence as important contributors to lower school enrolment among girls and reduced long-term economic growth in Sierra Leone.

The effects of GBV extend beyond employment and education to women's participation in social and political life. Survivors frequently experience stigma, fear, loss of confidence and

social isolation, reducing their involvement in community organisations, leadership positions and decision-making processes. Such exclusion weakens women's contributions to community development and reinforces existing gender inequalities. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports that gender discrimination and violence continue to restrict women's participation in governance, entrepreneurship and revenue generation in Sierra Leone, thereby limiting inclusive national development.

Family wellbeing is equally affected by gender-based violence. Children who witness domestic violence often experience emotional distress, poor educational performance and behavioural difficulties. Research has shown that exposure to violence during childhood increases the likelihood of perpetuating or experiencing violence later in life, thereby creating intergenerational cycles of abuse. Consequently, the effects of GBV extend beyond individual survivors to households and communities, reducing social cohesion and human capital development.

At the national level, gender-based violence imposes considerable financial costs on governments. Public resources are required to provide healthcare, policing, legal services, shelters and psychosocial support for survivors. These expenditures reduce the resources available for education, infrastructure and other development priorities. The IMF estimates that violence against women reduces economic activity through fewer hours worked, lower productivity and reduced labour-force participation while increasing pressure on already constrained public services.

Within Sierra Leone, the economic implications of GBV have become an increasing policy concern. The World Bank notes that addressing gender-based violence is essential for improving women's educational attainment, labour-force participation, earnings and productivity. Similarly, the Government of Sierra Leone has prioritised reducing sexual and gender-based violence through policies aimed at strengthening women's economic empowerment, expanding survivor support services and improving institutional responses.

Evidence from Sierra Leone also indicates that structural gender inequalities continue to limit women's access to land, finance, technology and formal employment. These inequalities, when combined with gender-based violence, reduce women's opportunities to participate effectively in economic activities and contribute to national development. UNDP (2023) therefore argues that strengthening women's economic participation is essential for reducing poverty and promoting inclusive growth in Sierra Leone.

Overall, the literature consistently demonstrates that gender-based violence has multidimensional effects on women's socio-economic development. It damages physical and mental health, reduces productivity, limits educational and employment opportunities, weakens household welfare and constrains national economic growth. These findings underscore the importance of addressing GBV not only as a human rights issue but also as a development priority requiring coordinated legal, social, economic and institutional interventions.

4.4 Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most widespread human rights violations globally, affecting women and girls across all regions, irrespective of age, education, income

or social status. Although considerable progress has been made in developing legal frameworks and international commitments to eliminate violence against women, the prevalence of GBV remains alarmingly high. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies violence against women as a global public health problem and estimates that approximately one in three women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual violence during her lifetime, most often perpetrated by an intimate partner. These findings demonstrate that GBV continues to be a persistent challenge to gender equality, health and sustainable development.

The prevalence of gender-based violence varies across countries because of differences in cultural norms, reporting practices, legal systems and access to support services. However, evidence consistently indicates that women living in low- and middle-income countries experience disproportionately higher levels of violence because of poverty, weak institutional protection, gender inequality and limited access to justice. The World Health Organization further notes that conflict, humanitarian crises and social instability significantly increase women's vulnerability to violence by weakening community protection mechanisms and exposing women and girls to exploitation, abuse and coercion.

Sub-Saharan Africa continues to record some of the highest levels of violence against women globally. Persistent gender inequalities, early marriage, harmful traditional practices, economic deprivation and inadequate enforcement of protective legislation contribute to the widespread occurrence of GBV throughout the region. These conditions often discourage survivors from reporting incidents because of fear of stigma, retaliation or lack of confidence in formal justice institutions. Consequently, the actual prevalence of GBV is widely believed to be higher than officially reported statistics.

In Sierra Leone, gender-based violence remains a significant social and development concern despite legislative reforms and increasing public awareness. According to the 2019 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (SLDHS), 53% of ever-partnered women aged 15–49 years had experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence at least once in their lifetime, while 40% reported experiencing such violence within the previous 12 months. These findings indicate that violence against women remains widespread and continues to affect a substantial proportion of women across the country.

Similarly, UNFPA Sierra Leone reports that 61% of ever-married women aged 15–49 years have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence by a husband or intimate partner, with half of these women experiencing recent spousal violence during the preceding year. The report further highlights that female genital mutilation remains highly prevalent, affecting approximately 83% of women aged 15–49 years, illustrating the persistence of harmful traditional practices that disproportionately affect women and girls.

Recent evidence published by the World Bank also demonstrates the continued burden of gender-based violence in Sierra Leone. According to the World Bank, the most commonly reported forms of GBV among women aged 15–49 years are physical and sexual violence, affecting approximately 62% of women, while 61% have experienced spousal violence. The report further indicates that women and girls living with disabilities are two to three times more likely to experience violence than women without disabilities, highlighting the intersection between disability and vulnerability to gender-based violence.

Although national statistics provide valuable evidence on the magnitude of gender-based violence, they also demonstrate considerable geographical variation in prevalence and reporting patterns. Rural communities often experience lower reporting rates because survivors may have limited access to police services, healthcare facilities, legal aid and psychosocial support. Cultural expectations surrounding family privacy, marriage and male authority may further discourage women from reporting violence, resulting in substantial under-reporting of incidents. Consequently, community-level studies remain important for understanding the local dynamics of gender-based violence and identifying context-specific interventions.

The persistence of gender-based violence in Sierra Leone has important implications for women's socio-economic development. High levels of violence reduce women's participation in education, employment, entrepreneurship and community leadership while simultaneously increasing healthcare expenditure, reducing household income and weakening social cohesion. These consequences reinforce cycles of poverty and inequality, thereby slowing national development.

4.5 Knowledge Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates that gender-based violence is a widespread global and national challenge with serious implications for women's health, human rights and socio-economic development. Existing studies have extensively examined the causes, prevalence and consequences of gender-based violence at international, regional and national levels. Similarly, official reports from the World Health Organization, UN Women, UNFPA, the World Bank and the Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey provide important evidence on the magnitude of violence against women and the institutional responses aimed at addressing the problem.

However, relatively few empirical studies have specifically investigated how gender-based violence affects the socio-economic development of women in Kakua Chiefdom, Bo City, Sierra Leone. Most available studies focus on national prevalence estimates or broader policy issues, with limited attention to community-level experiences and their implications for women's livelihoods, productivity and social participation. Consequently, there is insufficient context-specific evidence to guide local policy interventions and community-based programmes within Kakua Chiefdom.

The present study was therefore undertaken to bridge this knowledge gap by examining the causes of gender-based violence, assessing its effects on the socio-economic development of women and determining its prevalence within Kakua Chiefdom, Bo City. The findings are expected to contribute empirical evidence that will support government institutions, non-governmental organizations and development partners in designing more effective interventions for preventing gender-based violence and promoting women's socio-economic empowerment.

5.0 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative techniques. The quantitative component facilitated the collection of numerical data on the causes, prevalence and socio-economic effects of gender-based violence, while the qualitative component provided deeper insights into respondents' experiences and perceptions. The cross-sectional design was considered appropriate because it enabled the collection of data from respondents at a single point in time, thereby providing an accurate assessment of the phenomenon within the study area.

5.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Kakua Chiefdom, Bo City, located in the Southern Province of Sierra Leone. Bo City is the country's second-largest urban centre and serves as an important commercial, educational and administrative hub. Kakua Chiefdom comprises diverse communities engaged predominantly in trading, agriculture, public service and informal economic activities. Despite various government and non-governmental interventions aimed at promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights, gender-based violence remains a significant social challenge within the chiefdom. The choice of Kakua Chiefdom was informed by the reported occurrence of gender-based violence and the need to generate empirical evidence on its implications for women's socio-economic development.

5.3 Target Population

The target population comprised women residing in Kakua Chiefdom who possessed adequate knowledge and experience regarding gender-based violence. In addition, selected community leaders, social workers and representatives of institutions involved in gender-related issues were included because of their familiarity with the occurrence and management of gender-based violence within the community.

5.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A sample of 50 respondents was selected for the study. The sample size was considered adequate to generate reliable information while remaining manageable within the available time and financial resources.

Purposive sampling was employed to identify respondents with relevant knowledge and experience concerning gender-based violence, including community leaders and institutional representatives. Simple random sampling was subsequently used to select eligible women within the study area, thereby providing every qualified respondent with an equal opportunity to participate in the study and reducing selection bias.

5.5 Data Collection Instrument

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions designed to collect information on the causes, prevalence and socio-economic effects of gender-based violence. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected key informants to obtain detailed information that complemented the quantitative findings.

Secondary data were obtained through an extensive review of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government publications and reports from international organisations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), UN Women, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Bank.

5.6 Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from relevant community authorities to facilitate access to respondents. The researcher explained the objectives of the study to all participants and obtained their informed consent before administering the research instruments. Respondents were assured that participation was voluntary and that all information provided would remain confidential and be used solely for academic purposes.

The questionnaires were administered directly to respondents, while interviews were conducted with key informants at mutually agreed locations and times. Throughout the data collection process, ethical principles of confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation and respect for respondents' rights were strictly observed.

5.7 Data Analysis

The collected data were coded, edited and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarise the quantitative data and present the findings in tables. Qualitative data obtained from interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, whereby responses were organised into themes and interpreted alongside the quantitative findings. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence enhanced the credibility and comprehensiveness of the study findings.

6.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Causes of Gender-Based Violence

The study found that poverty, unemployment, harmful cultural practices, gender inequality and women's economic dependence were the principal factors contributing to gender-based violence in Kakua Chiefdom. These findings suggest that violence against women is largely driven by structural inequalities and socio-economic conditions rather than isolated individual behaviour. Women who depend financially on their partners are less likely to report abuse or leave violent relationships because of limited economic alternatives. Similarly, harmful cultural beliefs that reinforce male dominance and female submissiveness continue to normalise violence within households and communities.

These findings are consistent with the World Health Organization (2024), which identifies unequal gender relations, poverty and discriminatory social norms as major risk factors for violence against women. Similarly, Duvvury et al. (2013) found that women's economic dependence and limited access to productive resources significantly increase their vulnerability to intimate partner violence. The findings also support the arguments of Tickner (1992), who explains that women's insecurity is embedded within broader political, economic and social structures that perpetuate unequal power relations. Likewise, Enloe (2014) argues that

patriarchal institutions reinforce gender inequalities that sustain violence against women. The consistency between the present findings and previous studies demonstrates that reducing gender-based violence requires interventions that simultaneously address poverty, strengthen women's economic empowerment and challenge harmful gender norms.

The findings further support Feminist Security Theory, which argues that women's insecurity extends beyond armed conflict to include violence experienced within households and communities. The theory maintains that unequal gender relations remain central to understanding violence against women. Therefore, addressing gender-based violence requires structural reforms that promote gender equality and protect women's rights.

6.2 Effects of Gender-Based Violence on the Socio-Economic Development of Women

The study established that gender-based violence has significant adverse effects on the socio-economic development of women in Kakua Chiefdom. Respondents reported that violence resulted in poor physical and mental health, reduced economic productivity, lower household income, family instability and limited participation in community development activities. Survivors frequently experienced emotional trauma, fear, low self-esteem and financial hardship, all of which constrained their ability to participate effectively in productive economic activities.

These findings corroborate those of Duvvury et al. (2013), who concluded that gender-based violence imposes considerable economic costs through reduced labour productivity, increased healthcare expenditure and income losses among survivors and their families. Similarly, the International Monetary Fund (2024) reports that violence against women weakens labour-force participation, reduces productivity and limits human capital development, thereby constraining national economic growth. The World Health Organization (2024) also reports that women who experience violence are at greater risk of chronic physical injuries, depression, anxiety and other health complications that reduce their participation in education, employment and community life.

Furthermore, the findings are consistent with those of the United Nations (2006), which argues that violence against women restricts women's opportunities, limits their ability to contribute to development and reinforces cycles of poverty and inequality. The agreement between the present study and previous research indicates that gender-based violence should be viewed not only as a human rights concern but also as a significant development challenge that undermines women's socio-economic empowerment.

From the perspective of Feminist Security Theory, these findings illustrate that violence against women creates insecurity that extends beyond physical harm to include economic and social exclusion. Consequently, promoting women's security requires expanding access to education, employment opportunities, healthcare services and legal protection.

6.3 Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence

The study revealed that respondents perceived gender-based violence to be highly prevalent in Kakua Chiefdom despite ongoing interventions by government institutions and development partners. Physical violence, emotional abuse, economic violence and intimate partner violence

were identified as the most common forms experienced by women. Respondents further indicated that fear of stigma, cultural expectations, family pressure and limited confidence in formal justice institutions discouraged many survivors from reporting incidents of violence.

These findings are consistent with the 2019 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey, which reported that over half of ever-partnered women had experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence during their lifetime. Similarly, UNFPA Sierra Leone reports that gender-based violence continues to affect a substantial proportion of women despite increased public awareness campaigns and policy interventions. The World Bank also identifies gender-based violence as a major barrier to women's empowerment and inclusive development in Sierra Leone, emphasising that persistent violence limits women's educational attainment, labour-force participation and economic opportunities.

The findings also agree with Albrecht (2007), who observed that gender-based violence remains deeply rooted within Sierra Leonean society because of persistent poverty, unequal gender relations, weak institutional responses and a culture of silence surrounding violence against women. Likewise, Denney and Ibrahim (2012) found that many survivors face significant barriers when seeking justice, including inadequate institutional support, financial constraints and fear of social stigma. The similarity between these studies and the present findings indicates that although awareness of gender-based violence has increased, significant institutional and socio-cultural barriers continue to hinder effective prevention and response.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that the persistence of gender-based violence in Kakua Chiefdom reflects broader structural inequalities affecting many communities in Sierra Leone. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts involving government institutions, civil society organisations, community leaders and development partners to strengthen law enforcement, improve survivor support services and promote gender-transformative social change.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined the effects of gender-based violence on the socio-economic development of women in Kakua Chiefdom, Bo City, Sierra Leone. The findings demonstrate that gender-based violence remains a significant challenge affecting women's wellbeing, livelihoods and overall contribution to community development. The study established that poverty, unemployment, harmful cultural practices, gender inequality and women's economic dependence are the principal drivers of gender-based violence within the study area. These factors continue to reinforce unequal power relations that expose women to different forms of physical, emotional, sexual and economic violence.

The study further revealed that gender-based violence has profound socio-economic consequences for women. Violence adversely affects women's physical and mental health, reduces their productivity, limits their participation in income-generating activities and weakens household welfare. The resulting loss of income, social isolation and reduced community participation undermine women's ability to contribute meaningfully to local and national development. Despite interventions by government institutions and development partners, the prevalence of gender-based violence remains high because of persistent socio-

cultural norms, inadequate enforcement of existing laws and limited access to support services for survivors.

Overall, the study concludes that gender-based violence is not only a human rights concern but also a major development challenge that hinders women's socio-economic empowerment in Kakua Chiefdom. Addressing the problem therefore requires integrated interventions that combine legal protection, economic empowerment, community education and institutional strengthening to promote gender equality and sustainable development.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government of Sierra Leone should strengthen the implementation and enforcement of existing laws relating to gender-based violence by ensuring that perpetrators are investigated and prosecuted promptly while survivors receive adequate legal protection and access to justice. Strengthening the capacity of law enforcement agencies and judicial institutions will improve public confidence in formal reporting mechanisms and reduce impunity.

The Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, together with local councils and development partners, should expand community-based awareness programmes aimed at challenging harmful cultural norms and discriminatory gender stereotypes that perpetuate violence against women. Such programmes should actively engage traditional authorities, religious leaders, youth groups and men as partners in promoting gender equality and preventing violence within families and communities.

Economic empowerment initiatives should be strengthened to reduce women's financial dependence and improve their socio-economic resilience. Government agencies, non-governmental organisations and development partners should increase access to vocational training, entrepreneurship development, microcredit facilities and livelihood support programmes that enable women to achieve sustainable economic independence.

Healthcare institutions and social welfare agencies should improve access to comprehensive survivor-centred services, including medical treatment, psychosocial counselling, legal assistance and safe shelter for survivors of gender-based violence. Strengthening referral systems among health facilities, the police, social workers and community-based organisations will ensure that survivors receive timely and coordinated support.

Educational institutions should integrate gender equality, human rights and violence prevention into school curricula and extracurricular activities to promote positive attitudes and respectful relationships from an early age. Continuous public education through the media and community outreach programmes should complement these efforts by increasing awareness of the consequences of gender-based violence and available support services.

Finally, further empirical studies should be conducted in other chiefdoms and districts of Sierra Leone to generate broader evidence on the socio-economic effects of gender-based violence and to evaluate the effectiveness of existing prevention and response interventions. Such research will provide policy makers and development partners with stronger evidence for designing context-specific programmes that promote women's empowerment and reduce gender-based violence.

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