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Poverty, Parenting, and Policy: Understanding Child Artisanal Mining and Educational Disruption in Sierra Leone

Mohamed Gibril Sesay,
Department of Sociology and Social Work, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone

Francis Amadu,
Department of Social Work, Eastern Technical University

Abstract: This article examines the intersection of poverty, parenting, and artisanal mining in Sierra Leone, with a focus on how survival strategies shape children's educational exclusion. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Lower Bambara Chiefdom, the study introduces the concept of "survival parenting" to describe parental rationalizations of child labor in mining as a necessary adaptation to livelihood precarity. The analysis situates parenting within broader structural conditions, drawing on Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Nixon's concept of slow violence, and Mills' sociological imagination to link household decisions with historical and political-economic constraints. Findings reveal how poverty, gendered labor divisions, and weak institutional support normalize child participation in mining while undermining schooling trajectories. By integrating insights from caregiving, education, and resource governance, the study highlights the limitations of fragmented policy responses and calls for holistic, context-sensitive interventions that address structural inequalities shaping childhoods in mining-dependent communities.

Keywords: Artisanal mining; survival parenting; child labor; education; Sierra Leone; structural inequality

1. Introduction: Artisanal Mining, Education, and Survival Parenting in Sierra Leone

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) and education occupy paradoxical positions in Sierra Leone's development trajectory. ASM sustains the livelihoods of roughly 300,000 people directly and countless others indirectly, particularly in rural areas where poverty rates remain stubbornly high (Government of Sierra Leone, 2018; World Bank, 2022). At the same time, education is widely heralded as the cornerstone of post-war reconstruction and social mobility, symbolized by ambitious state-led efforts such as the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) program (Ministry of Finance, 2023). Yet, the realities of mining and education often collide in ways underexplored in scholarly and policy discourse. This article interrogates these intersections by focusing on how the demands of artisanal mining disrupt children's schooling trajectories in Lower Bambara Chiefdom, Kenema District.

Sierra Leone's poverty landscape provides an essential backdrop for understanding these dynamics. While national poverty rates have declined modestly, from 62% in 2011 to 57% in 2018, progress has been uneven and fragile. Rural poverty remains entrenched at 74%, with extreme poverty rising from 7.6% to 12.9% during the same period (World Bank, 2022, p. 17). The Multidimensional Poverty Index (UNDP, 2023) shows that 79.8% of rural Sierra Leoneans experience multidimensional poverty compared to 27.3% in urban areas, underscoring stark spatial inequalities. These patterns reflect a "dual economy" where urban centers benefit from services and trade, while rural areas remain trapped in subsistence agriculture and informal livelihoods (Wuyts& Mackintosh, 2020).

Kenema District offers a microcosm of these structural challenges. As a secondary urban hub and a major diamond mining region, Kenema illustrates both the promise and perils of rural transformation. Poverty in Kenema District stands at 49% in urban areas but spikes to 74% in its rural hinterlands (World Bank, 2022). Smallholder farming dominates local livelihoods, yet limited access to inputs, credit, and markets keeps productivity low (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2019). Infrastructure deficits, including poor roads and unreliable electricity, further constrain economic diversification (UNDP, 2023). Education gaps exacerbate these vulnerabilities; only 31% of adults in Kenema urban areas have secondary education, falling to 6% in rural areas within a 15km radius (World Bank, 2022, p. 25). These structural inequalities shape household decisions around child labor and schooling, particularly in artisanal mining zones where opportunity costs and livelihood insecurity are acute.

The persistence of poverty in Sierra Leone is a product of historical and political forces. Drawing on Zack-Williams' (1990) analysis of the extractive political economy, it becomes evident how colonial and postcolonial mining monopolies entrenched rural underdevelopment by displacing agriculture and degrading arable land. Merchant capital, operating primarily in circulation rather than production, reinforced exploitative trade relations that locked rural households into dependency and limited local agency (Zack-Williams, 1983).

This historical context situates contemporary child labor practices within broader structural and 'slow violence' which seep into and over a period serve to constrain choices in response to systemic exclusion.

Against this backdrop, parental decisions to involve children in ASM could be seen as survival strategies – which we call in this work 'survival parenting'. This is parenting that gets all available hands unto the shovel to ensure food and other necessities. Livelihood insecurity compels families to balance immediate economic needs against the uncertain long-term benefits of formal education (Bourdillon et al., 2015). This aligns with findings across sub-Saharan Africa where children's labor in extractive economies reflects household attempts to mitigate vulnerability amid weak social protection systems (Hilson, 2010). Yet, in Sierra Leone, this nexus between artisanal mining, parenting decisions and educational disruption remains strikingly underexamined.

This study addresses this critical empirical and theoretical gap: the lack of integrated analyses examining how child labor in ASM economies shapes parental and community actions towards education of children. Prior research has documented the prevalence of child labor in mining (WoME, 2021) and identified barriers to schooling (O'Neill, 2014; EPDC, 2018), but rarely explores how these domains intersect. This gap risks perpetuating fragmented policy responses that tackle either child labor or education in isolation, leaving underlying structural drivers unaddressed.

The study seeks to:

1. Analyze how household livelihood insecurity influence parental decisions about children's participation in mining and schooling.
2. Examine how community norms and gendered expectations reinforce child labor and educational disruption.
3. Assess the role of governance structures and development interventions in addressing (or perpetuating) these dynamics.

The research questions guiding the study include:

- How do families in mining communities rationalize children's involvement in ASM?
- In what ways do gendered and cultural norms mediate children's access to education?
- How effective are existing policy interventions in mitigating child labor and educational exclusion in mining zones?

2. Literature Review: Poverty, Artisanal Mining, and Educational Disruption in Sierra Leone

2.1 Artisanal Mining as Livelihood: Safety Net or Poverty Trap?

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) continues to straddle the line between survival and entrapment in Sierra Leone's rural economy. Long viewed as a "sector of necessity" (Artisanal Mining Policy, 2018), it absorbs labor excluded from agriculture and formal employment. As Maconachie and Binns (2007) note, the coinage "farming miners" illustrate how households adapt to uncertainty by oscillating between agriculture and mining.

Yet this adaptability masks deep precarity. ASM offers short-term income but rarely secures long-term stability (Hilson, 2010). Without social protection, households remain vulnerable to shocks (Extractives Hub, 2020), often relying on children's labor to sustain livelihoods. Historical monopolies entrenched these vulnerabilities: Zack-Williams (1990) demonstrates how corporate control displaced artisanal miners onto marginal lands. Mechanization has not alleviated these inequalities but instead consolidated elite dominance, further disempowering local diggers (Conteh & Maconachie, 2021).

Today, as alluvial deposits decline, communities face what Maconachie and Conteh (2025) describe as being "stuck in transition," with diversification constrained by limited access to credit, markets, and institutional support. Gender further shapes these dynamics. WoME (2021) shows women and girls remain relegated to peripheral, low-reward activities, a situation that reinforces both economic dependence and educational exclusion.

2.2 Education in Sierra Leone: Achievements, Gaps, and the Mining–Schooling Nexus

Educational expansion in Sierra Leone has been notable, particularly under the FQSE policy launched in 2018, which increased enrollment from 2.0 million to 3.1 million within three years (Annual School Census, 2021). UNESCO (2023) reports a gross primary enrollment ratio of 98%, while complementary initiatives including school feeding, sanitary pad provision, and Radical Inclusion have boosted attendance (UNICEF, 2022).

Despite these gains, retention remains fragile. Only 40% of children complete primary school, and girls experience disproportionate dropout due to early marriage, pregnancy, and domestic labor (Annual School Census, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Learning outcomes are also poor, with fewer than half of early-

grade pupils achieving literacy and numeracy benchmarks (EDT, 2023). Structural pressures often force households to trade long-term education for immediate survival (O'Neill, 2014; Ministry of Finance, 2023).

These pressures are acute in mining zones, where child labor in ASM compounds educational exclusion. Yet the nexus between mining and schooling remains largely absent from scholarship and policy. While UNICEF (2008) identifies child labor as a barrier to schooling, it overlooks mining-specific dynamics. Similarly, Maconachie and Hilson (2019) and WoME (2021) recognize children's involvement in ASM but do not explore its educational consequences. In contrast, evidence from Ghana and the DRC clearly links ASM participation to school dropout and reduced literacy (Hilson, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2019).

This study addresses that gap by focusing on Lower Bambara Chiefdom, where ASM and education intersect most starkly. It situates children's participation in mining within the broader context of survival strategies, governance failures, and gendered labor divisions, and offers a more integrated understanding of how artisanal mining sustains cycles of educational exclusion.

2.3 Parenting, Caregiving, and the Neglected Artisanal Mining Nexus in Sierra Leone

Parenting is both a personal practice and a reflection of broader social, cultural, and political economies (Clausen, 1968). While existing literature on parenting in Sierra Leone emphasizes family arrangements, fostering systems, and normative models of child development, it has largely overlooked how artisanal mining reshapes caregiving and educational trajectories. This omission is striking in a context where artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sustains large rural populations and structures household economies (Zack-Williams, 2006). Addressing this gap requires situating parenting not only within cultural traditions but also within the precarious livelihood strategies shaped by mining.

Clausen (1968) conceptualizes parenting as a central project of socialization, equipping children with values and norms for societal participation. Later frameworks distinguish parenting styles by emotional climate and responsiveness, with authoritative parenting typically linked to resilience and independence, while authoritarian and permissive approaches correlate with poorer psychosocial outcomes (Dewar, 2021, 2024; Ritika, 2022). Yet, as Dewar (2021) cautions, such models, often drawn from Western contexts, downplay structural constraints, such as poverty, gender inequities, and environmental precarity, that shape parenting in African societies. In Sierra Leone, the National Positive Parenting Education Program, promoted by UNICEF and state partners, incorporates such models, emphasizing non-violent discipline and emotional coaching (UNICEF, 2024; AYV News, 2023). However, their applicability remains limited where livelihoods are defined by informality and scarcity.

An additional parenting institution that complicates this picture is the fostering practice locally termed *men pikin*. Bledsoe (1990) documents how children are often placed with wealthier relatives to secure opportunities, portraying fostering as both adaptive and exploitative. She highlights the ambivalence toward education in fostering households, where children's labor frequently substitutes for schooling. Zack-Williams (2006), writing from a political economy perspective, situates fostering within the dislocations of peripheral capitalism, showing how structural adjustment and economic decline pushed children into survivalist subcultures in urban centers. His contrast of *gemeinschaft* (communal solidarity) with *gesellschaft* (instrumental social relations) points up the erosion of traditional caregiving under conditions of poverty and marginalization. Both Bledsoe and Zack-Williams illuminate the fragility of childrearing in crisis but stop short of linking fostering to the structural realities of ASM.

The neglect of artisanal mining in parenting and caregiving studies is especially problematic given its clear implications for children's wellbeing. Mining regions frequently coincide with poor education outcomes and high child labor rates. While UNICEF (2008) and later debates on corporal punishment and emotion-coaching (Gottman et al., 1997) have framed parenting in relation to crises such as Ebola or schooling reforms, the daily pressures of ASM households remain absent. Even studies that have amongst their themes children's involvement in mining economies (Maconachie & Hilson, 2019; WoME, 2021) rarely examine how parental decisions about education are directly shaped by mining livelihoods. Comparative research from Ghana and the DRC demonstrates the link between ASM, child labor, and reduced literacy (Hilson, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2019), but such connections remain underexplored in Sierra Leone.

This article advances the concept of "survival parenting" to address this omission. Survival parenting captures how parents in impoverished communities prioritize immediate household needs over long-term investments like education, often integrating children into mining-related labor. The idea resonates with Bledsoe's (1990) finding that foster parents often valued labor contributions over schooling and with Zack-Williams' (2006) critique of capitalist structures that erode family capacities to nurture children. By directing attention towards this nexus, the analysis highlights the need to move beyond individualized parenting models and instead situate caregiving within the political economy of ASM, where poverty, gender inequities, and absent social protections converge to shape children's futures.

2.4 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Our theoretical and conceptual framework draws from Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus, which we integrate with Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence and C. Wright Mills' (1959) sociological imagination to interrogate the interplay between household agency, survival parenting and structural constraints in Sierra Leone's artisanal mining communities. Together, these perspectives provide a multi-scalar lens for understanding how parental decisions regarding child labor and education emerge from, and reinforce, the broader political economy of rural under development.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus anchors our analysis by framing parental rationalizations of child labor as culturally embedded yet structurally conditioned dispositions. In contexts like Lower Bambara Chiefdom, where livelihoods are characterized by chronic precarity, environmental degradation, and weak governance, habitus captures how historical patterns of survival have become internalized and normalized within household decision-making. Parental choices to involve children in mining are thus not reducible to individual failures or cultural pathologies but are reflective of adaptive survival parenting strategies honed over generations.

To extend this analysis temporally, we integrate Rob Nixon's (2011) notion of slow violence, which shows the incremental, often invisible processes of harm that accumulate across time and space. Unlike immediate or spectacular forms of violence, slow violence operates through attritional mechanisms, including soil erosion, loss of arable land, collapsing agricultural systems that quietly undermine livelihoods and future possibilities. In Sierra Leone's mining zones, such processes have seeped into parental decision-making, a situation that makes child mining appear not as deviance but as necessity. This perspective problematizes conventional policy approaches that prioritize rapid interventions without addressing the long-term ecological and socio-economic harms that perpetuate vulnerability.

Finally, C. Wright Mills' (1959) sociological imagination enables us to bridge these structural insights with the lived experiences of households. By connecting "personal troubles" to "public issues," Mills' framework nudges us to situate individual and familial decisions within the broader political economy of Sierra Leone's extractive history and governance failures. Decisions about whether to send children to school or into the mines are thus reframed as embedded within systemic inequalities rather than as purely private choices. This analytic move challenges moralizing discourses around child labor and argues the need for interventions that engage directly with structural drivers of exclusion.

Jointly, these frameworks highlight how child labor and educational disruption are shaped by structural violence operating through slow, cumulative processes, culturally mediated dispositions, and broader historical legacies of extractive governance. They also expose the limitations of technocratic solutions that fail to account for these complex intersections. This framing suggests the need for multi-scalar, context-sensitive approaches that address both household-level rationalities and the structural conditions that constrain them.

3. Methodology: Locating Voices in the Terrain of Mining and Education

This study employed a qualitative research design rooted in an interpretivist paradigm, seeking to uncover how artisanal mining economies and educational disruptions intersect in rural Sierra Leone. The research was conducted in Lower Bambara Chiefdom, Kenema District - a region notable for its extensive artisanal mining activity and persistently low education indicators. The methodology was informed by a recognition that child labor in mining communities is more than merely an individual or cultural phenomenon. It is a reflection of structural poverty, governance failures, and household survival strategies.

Kenema District was selected for its prominence in Sierra Leone's diamond mining economy and its stark educational disparities. As highlighted by Statistics Sierra Leone and World Bank (2022), poverty rates in Kenema exceed 70%, and educational retention rates fall far below national averages (Education Sector Performance Report, 2022). These conditions make it an ideal site for exploring the nexus between child mining and education.

Fieldwork was carried out over three months in early 2025, using multiple qualitative techniques to capture diverse perspectives across the community. Data were collected through:

- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Nine FGDs were conducted with groups such as teachers, chiefs, older miners, female parents of child miners, and wives of miners. Each FGD involved 6–8 participants selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representation across gender, age, and social status. Discussions focused on perceptions of child labor, household decision-making, and the impact of mining on children's education and well-being.
- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): 21 interviews were held with local leaders, education officials, NGO representatives, and community activists. These interviews provided insights into governance dynamics, policy enforcement, and interventions targeting child labor.
- Participant Observation: Researchers spent extended periods in mining sites and village schools, observing the daily routines of children and adults, informal mining practices, and the interactions

between community members and local authorities.

- Document Review: Local policy documents, NGO reports, and school attendance registers were reviewed to triangulate field observations.

Participants were selected purposively from five sections of the chiefdom - Kpandebu, Buimi, Kpujami, Gbotoryema, and Nyawa. The study involved over 50 community members, including former and current miners, teachers, chiefs, and parents of child miners. Gender balance was maintained to capture differential experiences and rationalizations around child labor.

Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurrent patterns, with particular attention paid to themes such as poverty rationalizations, parental agency, peer influence, and educational disengagement. The analytic process also drew on Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Zack-Williams' (1990) analysis of the extractive economy to situate individual narratives within broader structural forces.

Informed consent was secured from all participants. Where participants told us not use their names, pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and sensitive issues such as child exploitation were handled with care and cultural sensitivity.

4. Findings

Survival Parenting as Rationalization

Parents consistently framed their decision to involve children in artisanal mining as a necessary adaptation to acute economic precarity. For many, survival parenting - an approach shaped by structural poverty and limited livelihood alternatives - emerged as the only feasible strategy for meeting household needs. A parent from Kpujami Section explained that with farming yields declining and no salaried jobs available, engaging their children in mining was perceived as the most reliable way to secure daily meals and school fees for younger siblings. Similarly, another parent from Bomi Community emphasized that sending children to mining sites was "a hard choice," but one forced on them by mounting debts and medical bills.

Several community leaders reinforced this perspective, noting that child involvement in mining had become normalized due to persistent hardship. The chief of Gbotoryema Mining Site reflected on how families view children's participation in mining not only as economic support but also as part of their socialization into resilience and responsibility. In Bomi Section, a teacher observed that even households with some income from petty trading or farming resorted to mining when food shortages intensified, highlighting a cycle where poverty eroded the very coping mechanisms meant to alleviate it.

Experts confirmed these patterns. The Social Welfare Officer in Buimie Community described survival parenting as an unintended consequence of "the absence of social safety nets and limited access to microcredit for rural parents." This was echoed by the NGO focal person, who reported that many families considered mining to be the only alternative to hunger, even if it meant compromising their children's education and health.

Intergenerational experiences also shaped parental rationalizations. Older miners in Pandebu Community recalled their own childhoods in the pits and expressed a sense of inevitability about passing on this survival tactic to their children. One wife of an older miner in Kpandebu Community noted that, in their household, mining had become "a family tradition born out of necessity."

Despite occasional NGO sensitization campaigns, parents indicated little shift in their views. The Environmental Protection Agency officer in Kenema noted that while awareness programs had increased knowledge about child rights, they had done little to alter behavior because "no viable economic alternatives are being offered." In several interviews, parents articulated a pragmatic calculus: mining risks were weighed against the certainty of food insecurity without the additional income children provided.

The narratives illustrate how survival parenting is less a failure of individual responsibility than a collective response to systemic constraints. Parents, constrained by economic marginality and weak institutional support, rationalize child labor in artisanal mining as their only viable option for family survival.

Educational Aspirations versus Economic Reality

Across the Lower Bambara Chiefdom, parents consistently expressed aspirations for their children's education, even as they made decisions that pulled those same children out of school to engage in mining. A parent in Bomi Community lamented that while she believed education would offer her children a better life, the harsh realities of subsistence living forced her to prioritize immediate earnings over schooling. She recalled withdrawing her daughter from Junior Secondary School to help pan for diamonds during the peak of the rainy season when food was scarce.

Teachers across several communities echoed similar concerns about interrupted schooling. In Pandebu Community, a teacher explained that children often disappear from class during the mining season as their

families send them to work in the fields or on mining sites. He described this pattern as a "cyclical exodus" tied to financial pressures on households. Another teacher in Tokpombu Community noted that even when parents spoke passionately about education during community meetings, economic crises such as poor harvests or sudden illnesses quickly led them to remove their children from school.

An official from the Teaching Service Commission observed that mining communities present unique challenges to retention and completion rates. He explained that poverty-driven migration patterns lead to children dropping out as families move closer to active mining sites. These disruptions, he argued, undermine efforts to stabilize attendance figures in rural schools.

Parents' narratives reflected a profound sense of conflict. In Palima Community, one parent said she "felt ashamed" each time she asked her son to skip school to go for it at the mining site. Yet, she justified her actions by explaining that the family could not survive without such contributions. Similarly, in Kpajami Mining Community, a child miner shared that he initially resisted going out of of school, but over time, he accepted mining as necessary.

Community leaders also acknowledged the tension between valuing education and needing child labor. A chief in Sandeyima Community admitted that while they encourage education publicly, they privately understand parents' decisions, given the "dire state" of household economies. He noted that the seasonal nature of mining amplifies these dilemmas, with many parents promising to re-enroll their children "when times improve."

These accounts show a recurring pattern where education is held as an ideal but subordinated to the pressing need for survival. The resulting educational disruption reinforces cycles of poverty as children lose critical years of schooling, diminishing their future livelihood prospects and perpetuating their families' reliance on artisanal mining.

Intergenerational Perspectives on Child Labor

The persistence of child labor in artisanal mining is deeply intertwined with intergenerational experiences and shifting parental expectations. Older participants often reflected on their own childhoods spent in mining, framing their decisions for their children within cycles of economic survival and learned behaviors. For example, an older miner from Gbotoryema Mining Site recalled being sent to mining pits as a boy, where he spent years working to support his family instead of attending school. He noted that many parents today see mining as a continuation of what they once endured, albeit with heightened awareness of the missed opportunities their children face.

A parent from Mavehun Community similarly described his youth in mining as "inevitable" given the absence of alternative livelihoods, expressing both resignation and concern that his children might inherit the same fate. Yet, he admitted that he and other parents often lack the means to chart different futures for their children.

Among younger parents, there were nuanced perspectives. A mother in Bomi Community married to an older miner, highlighted how her husband's experience in the pits informed his strict insistence that their own sons avoid mining and focus on school. However, she acknowledged that financial strains frequently eroded such aspirations, leading to compromises like part-time mining during school holidays.

In contrast, some parents viewed mining as character-building. A chief in Sandeyima Community remarked that boys who engaged in mining early developed resilience and a sense of responsibility. He echoed sentiments from elders who tied masculinity to mining labor. Yet, even he expressed growing unease about the risks posed to children's health and education.

An education officer observed that these intergenerational patterns complicate interventions. He noted that parents often voice regret about their lack of education but simultaneously justify child labor as a necessary response to poverty. This ambivalence points up how memories of past hardship intersect with present-day constraints, creating a feedback loop of survival-oriented parenting.

Meanwhile, a former child miner in Tongola Section provided a more critical perspective. He described how mining derailed his aspirations and left him "chasing lost time" in adulthood. His reflections reveal the long-term costs of early mining exposure and a desire to break the cycle for future generations.

External Influences on Parental Decisions

Parents across the Lower Bambara Chiefdom often spoke about external actors - government, NGOs, and community leaders - and their attempts to influence decisions around child labor in mining. However, these influences were described as fragmented, with limited impact on entrenched practices shaped by poverty and survival needs.

In Pandebu community, a social welfare officer observed that NGO sensitization campaigns often failed to reach mining households effectively because their messaging was seen as abstract and disconnected from the

daily realities of families relying on child labor for survival. He noted that while workshops were held, many parents viewed them as opportunities for food and transport stipends rather than as catalysts for behavior change. Similarly, a mines warden (Er-10) stationed in Kpandebu explained that regulatory efforts to discourage child labor in mining lacked local enforcement mechanisms, making them largely symbolic.

Parents also expressed mixed feelings about external interventions. A parent in Kpujami Mining Site described how NGO workers visited their area to discourage child labor and promote education, but he felt the advice seemed unrealistic in a context where mining remained the only viable livelihood. He recalled hearing a talk on the dangers of child labor, but when asked whether he had considered pulling his children out of mining, he shrugged, saying that "the mines feed us when all else fails."

Teachers provided another perspective on these interventions. A teacher from Tokpombu community reported that while awareness campaigns had made some parents more cautious about openly sending their children to the mines, there was little actual reduction in child participation. He attributed this to the lack of sustained follow-up and the absence of alternative income support for families. Another teacher in Buimi section mentioned cases where parents reluctantly allowed their children to remain in school after NGO interventions, only for those children to return to mining during harvest and planting seasons when family labor demands peaked.

Community leaders also reflected on their roles. A chief in Sandeyima community admitted that chiefs are often approached to enforce bylaws against child labor, but he confessed that enforcement was weak due to the chiefs' own economic ties to mining operations. He noted that while they "advise parents in public," many elders see child mining as a necessary evil during difficult times.

Some external actors tried to frame child labor in moral terms, but parents resisted this framing. A parent in Bottom Mango Layout, herself a former child miner, explained that most parents viewed child labor as pragmatic rather than unethical, particularly in a community where formal employment opportunities were nearly nonexistent. She reflected on how external actors "don't understand our struggle," emphasizing that lectures on children's rights feel hollow without practical solutions to food insecurity.

Education officers and local officials added another layer to these accounts. An education officer described his attempts to work with schools and community leaders to reduce absenteeism linked to mining. While he noted some progress in urban fringes, rural mining communities remained resistant. A staff member of the Teaching Service Commission in Kenema (Er-7) echoed these challenges, pointing out that poor teacher-to-student ratios and inadequate school infrastructure further reduced the credibility of educational campaigns in mining areas.

In summary, external influences have penetrated local discourse to some extent, but they have not reshaped parental decisions in a sustainable way. Parents' reliance on child labor persists, mediated by deeply rooted structural constraints and survival needs that external interventions have yet to address meaningfully.

Cultural Framing of Child Mining

In the chiefdom, child mining is is often framed as part of the cultural fabric of work and responsibility. Many parents, elders, and community members justified children's involvement in mining by appealing to local values of industriousness, resilience, and familial obligation.

A traditional leader (Chief, Njagbewa Section) described child participation in mining as a "rite of passage" for boys, claiming it builds strength and prepares them for adulthood. He argued that in the past, boys worked on farms with their parents, but with farmland dwindling, mining has become the new avenue for teaching responsibility.

This view was echoed in the Joru Section FGD, where several caregivers agreed that mining teaches children self-reliance. A male participant (FGD5 – Farmer) said that "in our fathers' time, farming was the school of life; today, it is mining." Women in the same FGD emphasized that girls, though less involved in digging, often support the mining economy through tasks like selling food or carrying water, which they saw as essential training for managing households.

An elder in Sandaru Section noted that while some see mining as harmful to children, it has become "part of our way of life," especially in areas where alternative livelihoods are absent. An environmental officer in Kenema provided a broader perspective. He explained that cultural acceptance of child mining is reinforced by the lack of visible state presence. "Communities have created their own moral codes around mining," he said, "because they feel abandoned by the government."

During an FGD in Njagbewa Community, young parents expressed mixed feelings. One woman (FGD2 – Trader) admitted she felt guilty about sending her son to work but rationalized it by noting that mining has long been considered an acceptable way for children to help families survive lean times.

These narratives generally show cultural framings of child mining that blend necessity with a sense of continuity. The practice is not viewed simply as labor exploitation but also as a mechanism for socializing

children into communal values of hard work and contribution to family welfare.

Local Leadership and Community Complicity

Across Lower Bambara Chiefdom, local leaders and elders often framed child involvement in mining as a necessary adaptation to structural poverty. In Buima Section, a chief acknowledged that while child mining is not ideal, it has become a pragmatic response to community-wide economic hardships. He explained that parents who send their children to the pits often do so because alternative livelihood opportunities are non-existent. This perspective, he added, is widely shared among other chiefs and elders in neighboring sections.

An education officer in `Kenema city noted that local authorities rarely enforce child protection bylaws, partly out of sympathy for families struggling to survive. He observed that chiefs tend to view mining as a local coping strategy, and any attempts to restrict children's access to the mines are often perceived as undermining community autonomy. A women's leader in Lalehun Community (Kr29) confirmed this view, stating that community meetings often end with an implicit consensus that children's contributions, however risky, are indispensable to household sustenance.

This complicity was also highlighted in FGD sessions. In Manjama Community (FGD2), participants shared accounts of village elders openly praising boys who bring home income from the mines. One participant reported that such public recognition reinforces a communal sense of pride and discourages efforts to challenge the practice. Similarly, in Kpanguma Village (FGD5), women noted that even when NGOs attempted to discourage child mining, local leaders rarely endorsed such campaigns. Instead, they emphasized the community's right to "self-manage" its economic realities.

A mines warden argued that this complicity is partly rooted in historical patterns, where traditional leaders have long mediated access to mining spaces for both adults and children. He pointed out that chiefs often act as intermediaries between mining companies and local laborers, reinforcing their position of influence but also perpetuating norms that legitimize child labor.

Conversely, a family support unit officer suggested that some chiefs do express private concern about the physical toll of mining on children but feel constrained by their roles as cultural custodians expected to defend communal practices. A teacher in Bomi Community added that the reluctance of elders to confront the issue reflects fears of creating tensions in an already fragile social fabric.

The persistence of these dynamics reveals a subtle yet powerful layer of complicity. As a social welfare officer noted, local leadership often serves as both a buffer and a barrier: shielding families from external sanctions while simultaneously limiting transformative action against child mining. This duality complicates intervention efforts and underscores the importance of engaging traditional institutions as partners in any future reform initiatives.

Gendered Division of Labor in Mining

The gendered organization of artisanal mining in Lower Bambara Chiefdom is deeply embedded in cultural and economic structures. Boys are overwhelmingly drawn into the high-risk, physically taxing tasks of digging, transporting gravel, and entering hazardous pits. In contrast, girls are largely confined to peripheral yet labor-intensive roles, combining domestic duties with economic activities near the mines.

A former child miner from Gbotoryema Mining Section, described how boys are "expected to dig because it's heavy work" while girls are often seen around the mining sites selling food, water, or other small items. This was reinforced by a wife of a community leader in Gbotoryema Mining Site, who explained that girls' responsibilities are twofold - supporting their mothers in petty trading and carrying out household chores. She stressed that this double burden leaves little room for girls to prioritize their schooling.

FGD participants in Njagbewa Section highlighted similar patterns. One male participant (FGD1, Njagbewa Section) noted that "boys see mining as proving their strength and earning respect," while girls are drawn into "support work" such as washing clothes for miners or preparing food. A female participant (FGD2, Njagbewa Section) added that these roles are not perceived as optional: "Even if a girl wants to stay in school, she is often needed to help the family earn money or take care of siblings."

The NGO focal person with Network for Movement for Justice, and Development, linked these divisions to cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity. He pointed out that boys are praised for their endurance in the mines, while girls are commended for their ability to multitask between economic and caregiving roles. A social welfare expert, observed that such gendered norms reinforce structural inequalities: "Boys risk their health in the pits; girls risk their education because they're overloaded at home and at the mining site."

Key informants also drew attention to the dangers of this division. A wife of an older miner in Bomi Community, explained that while boys are injured more often due to their direct mining roles, girls are equally vulnerable to long-term physical and emotional exhaustion from their double workload. A teacher from Tokpombu Community, emphasized that "girls may not be in the pits, but their school performance suffers

because they're always helping at home or at the mines."

This gendered allocation of labor perpetuates cycles of vulnerability. Boys are socialized into hazardous physical labor, exposing them to injury and limiting their educational opportunities. Girls, meanwhile, are trapped in a system where their economic contributions and domestic responsibilities collide, often leading to early school dropout.

Girls' Dual Burden: Domestic Labor and Support Roles

The accounts of parents, key informants, and community members repeatedly revealed how girls in mining households shoulder a disproportionate share of responsibilities. This "dual burden" involves not only support roles tied to artisanal mining activities but also the unrelenting weight of domestic labor. Together, these overlapping demands restrict their participation in education and expose them to heightened physical and emotional risks.

In Nyawa Section, a teacher, described how girls are often tasked with house chores before accompanying their mothers to the mining sites where they sell water, food, or small items to miners. He observed that "many girls wake as early as 4 a.m. to fetch water, sweep, and prepare food before heading to the pits. By the time they're done helping at the site, school is either missed or they attend too exhausted to learn." This sentiment was echoed in FGD3, where participants in Gbotoryema Mining Site noted that girls are expected to perform household duties first, regardless of their schooling needs. One participant explained, "Our girls are raised to help. Even if school is free, parents still need them to work."

A social welfare expert, emphasized that these practices are not merely about survival but are deeply embedded in gendered cultural norms. She pointed out that "girls are viewed as extensions of their mothers' labor, and this expectation often overrides any consideration for their education or rest." In Tokpombu Community, a community health worker, described how this workload exposes girls to chronic fatigue and illness, saying, "We see girls fainting in class or reporting sick more often because of long hours working at home and the mining sites."

FGD1 participants from Bomi Community added another layer to these observations, discussing how the environment at mining sites exposes girls to inappropriate attention from older boys and men. One male participant stated, "When girls go to sell food or help their brothers, they meet men who lure them with gifts. Some parents even look the other way because they see it as an extra source of income." A parent in Njagbewa Section, confirmed this by sharing that some girls become engaged in transactional relationships as part of their support roles around mining sites, describing this as "another way to help the family survive."

The education officer, reflected on how the intersection of domestic and mining-related roles undermines girls' schooling: "Girls are more likely to drop out or perform poorly. Even when they remain in school, their attendance is irregular because their mothers pull them out for help during peak mining periods." This reality was confirmed by a female parent in Bomi Community, who admitted that her daughter's schooling has suffered because "I can't manage the household alone; she must help, or we won't eat."

This complex entanglement of gendered labor roles in mining communities reveals the structural vulnerabilities that keep girls locked in cycles of unpaid work and limited educational prospects. It underscores how poverty, cultural norms, and the informal mining economy intersect to reinforce gender inequalities from an early age.

Gendered Educational Disruption

The gendered dynamics of artisanal mining extend deeply into patterns of educational disruption, with girls facing a particularly acute set of challenges. Across the interviews and FGDs, parents, teachers, and community leaders described how the double burden of mining and domestic responsibilities leads many girls to disengage from schooling altogether.

A mother from Ngandorhun Section, explained that her daughter's schooling became untenable after she started selling at the mines and at the same time managing household chores. "She would be too tired to focus on her schooling," the mother recalled. This pattern was corroborated by a teacher in Njagbewa Section, who observed that girls' absenteeism peaks during mining seasons, especially when families rely on their labor to support income from auxiliary roles such as food vending or carrying loads for miners.

FGD2 in Dodo Section revealed similar narratives. One participant reflected that while she valued education, the immediate financial support her daughter could bring from selling at the mines outweighed distant hopes for a better future. In FGD5, held in Largo Section, mothers discussed how cultural expectations of girls as caregivers compounded these choices, and make it socially acceptable to sacrifice their schooling for the family's welfare.

Boys too face disruptions, but in a markedly different way. A miner from Tokpombu Community, noted that while boys often alternate between school and mining depending on the season, their absence is tolerated

because their role is perceived as temporary and transitional. In contrast, girls who leave school are less likely to return, as the chief from Bomi Community, pointed out. He remarked that once girls assume domestic and mining roles, community members often view them as having outgrown formal education.

The education officer highlighted systemic barriers amplifying this problem. She described how schools in mining communities lack the flexibility to accommodate irregular attendance, a situation that leads to punitive measures like expulsion for repeated absenteeism.

A parent in Yawama Community, shared that early marriage is a common consequence for out-of-school girls, often seen as a protective strategy against perceived vulnerabilities. He recalled cases where girls, pulled from school to assist in mining-related tasks, were married off within a year to reduce their burden on the family.

This gendered disruption also has long-term effects. The social welfare expert noted that girls who exit school prematurely are more likely to remain trapped in cycles of low-paid, informal work and early motherhood, thereby perpetuating intergenerational poverty. In contrast, boys, though equally vulnerable, often have greater social encouragement to return to education or seek apprenticeships.

Across the narratives, it becomes clear that the intersection of gender, labor, and education produces unequal outcomes for boys and girls. While both are impacted by the demands of artisanal mining, girls carry a heavier burden, their educational trajectories often permanently altered by cultural norms and economic imperatives that prioritize immediate family survival over long-term investment in female education.

Conclusion: Survival Parenting, Slow Violence and Education in the Uncertain Economies of Mining Communities

This study shows how parents and communities in Lower Bambara Chiefdom negotiate the dilemmas of raising children amid artisanal mining, poverty, and weak institutions. Child labor is revealed as a product of of structural violence, gendered expectations, and systemic neglect. The concept of *survival parenting* captures this reality: caregiving oriented to immediate subsistence rather than long-term goals like education.

Survival parenting emerges as a rational response to deep constraints. Parents describe child mining as a necessary social practice, a logic we interpret as shaped by habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and slow violence (Nixon, 2011) - the erosion of agriculture, ecological damage, and absent state support. These forces make child labor both normalized and difficult to escape.

Education illustrates the contradictions of peripheral capitalism. While many parents value schooling, costs and daily survival override aspirations. Skepticism grows where schools fail to deliver mobility, and echoes Bledsoe's (1990) and Zack-Williams' (1990) accounts of educational, care giving and socializational uncertainty in Sierra Leone.

Community norms reinforce this trap. Mining is seen as rite of passage for boys and "helping hand" for girls, with gender shaping distinct burdens around masculine endurance in mining for boys, and domestic and auxiliary mining tasks for girls. These dynamics entrench inequality and restrict educational access.

Finally, structural and policy blind spots persist. As Conteh and Maconachie (2021) note, mining regulation often empowers elites while marginalizing households. Interventions that criminalize child labor without addressing poverty and exclusion simply reproduce failure. Families return to the same harsh conditions, a circumstance that exposes the limits of top-down reform and the need for approaches grounded in everyday realities.

This study advances sociological and development debates in several ways. First, it reframes child labor by moving beyond moralistic and individualizing views to show it as part of household survival strategies within a structurally violent political economy. Second, it extends the insights of Bledsoe's (1990) ethnography and Zack-Williams' (1990) political economy critique, introducing the idea of *survival parenting* in mining contexts. Third, by integrating Bourdieu's notion of habitus with Nixon's idea of slow violence, it highlights how structural inequities seep into everyday life through gradual harm and dispositional logics.

In terms of policy, the findings call for a holistic response. This includes redistributive rural development through investment in agriculture, infrastructure, and resource governance; flexible schooling models such as mobile classes, vocational training, and feeding programs tailored to mining communities; gender-sensitive measures that respond to the distinct vulnerabilities of boys and girls; and community-led solutions that actively involve chiefs, elders, and women's groups in designing interventions that align with local moral economies.

Looking forward, several research directions emerge. Longitudinal studies could track how households adapt as mining economies and governance shift. Comparative studies of other resource-dependent regions may reveal both common patterns and unique dynamics. Giving voice to children themselves would deepen understanding of how they interpret and navigate their roles in mining economies. Finally, ethnographies of policy implementation could show how interventions are embraced or resisted in practice, making them more context-sensitive.

Ultimately, child labor in Sierra Leone's mining areas points up a window into the structural violence of peripheral capitalism and governance failure. *Survival parenting* is a rational yet tragic response to systemic neglect. Breaking this cycle demands addressing the underlying conditions of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Without doing so, interventions will remain palliative treatment symptoms that leaves intact the slow violence that blights lives in mining communities.

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