

Gender Inequality and its Impact on Early Childhood Development, Health and Education in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract:- The paper explores the gender inequality and examines its impact on early childhood development, health and education in the Democratic Republic of Congo(DRC). It aims at contributing to the understanding of this serious problem and its long-term effects. It is based on the qualitative method and the deductive approach including semi-structured interviews with a target population of ten Congolese migrants in Egypt. Results revealed that gender inequality has a significant negative impact on early childhood development in all life aspects in the DRC. The paper found out that the Congolese girl child is negatively affected by gender issues that include female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage that present a significant health risk for girls. As parents prefer to educate the boy child, girls don't attend schools and even if they do attend schools, they are forced by their parents to drop out early and not to continue their education. Campaigns and programs should be deployed in all the country's institutions to raise the public awareness about the serious effects of the gender inequality issue and empowering the role of women starting from the early childhood development.

Keywords:- Gender Inequality, Early Childhood Development, Health, Education, Democratic Republic Of Congo.

I. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Woodhead(2014), early childhood is considered critical and essential as it forms the first half of the childhood. Early childhood development is shaped by the cultural beliefs and affects the children's health, survival and education. It is linked to the development of any nation as it results into the prosperity of societies and the achievement of social justice. Early childhood development is influenced by several factors such as nutrition, healthcare, hygiene, education and protection. Gender equality, improved children's health, education, skills and productivity are the results of investing in early childhood development.

The children's behavior from an early age is influenced by culture, education and stereotypes. If they will be constantly exposed to the same stereotypes, they will turn into norms as expressed by Bot(2018).

According to the United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF(2013), despite of being a period of great opportunity, the period of a child's early development can be vulnerable to negative influences. Due to the ethnicity, sexual orientation or families' income status, several children don't reach their full human potential. The importance of the early child development is highlighted in the Article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that states that a child has the right to develop to "the maximum extent possible."

Women spend six times more than men on unpaid work that includes cleaning, cooking, collecting water and caring for the children, elderly and ill. Discriminatory social norms that deny girls and women basic rights expose them to ongoing discrimination as mentioned by Gaëlle Ferrant et al. (2018).

Certain gender discriminating cultural practices in Africa are the result of poverty. These include excessive labor in households and fields and the inability of attending schools by girls that make them an easy target for child marriages. This violates their rights and results into gender inequality as expressed by Chifwafwa(2016).

As mentioned by Kabasele(2018), poverty remains the major reason of early marriage in the DRC where boys are sent to school and girls are oriented towards marriage. Discrimination is highly practiced against girls in rural areas than in urban areas where they are considered suitable for marriage from the first menstruation day.

As by the global partnership of more than 1400 civil society organizations (Girls Not Brides), 37% of girls in the DRC are married before they reach the age of 18 and 10% are married before the age of 15. Girls in rural areas are at a higher risk of early marriage which is also caused by gender inequality and the belief that girls are inferior to boys.

In accordance with the World Bank(2020), 72% of the population in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2018 was living in extreme poverty on less than \$1.90 a day. The early childbearing rate in the DRC is high, with 125.24 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 years. An average of 6.1 children per

woman demonstrates that the fertility rate in the country is higher than the Sub-Saharan average (4.8), while 43% of the Congolese children are malnourished.

As mentioned by Muzard(2018), women in the Democratic Republic of Congo face injustice and inequality. In this country, people would listen to a seven year old boy than to an old woman only because she is a woman. Discrimination is evident in the way women are denied opportunities as it is assumed that they are only able to work in the house. More than 57% of women have been victims to sexual or physical violence in their lives.

In order to better understand the issue of gender inequality in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it is essential to have a better understanding about the country particularly its economic status and the characteristics of the issue of gender inequality in the Congolese society.

1.1 Overview of the Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is considered one of the richest countries in the world with regard to its natural wealth of raw materials such as coltan and cobalt. The current estimate of the raw materials in the country is \$24 trillion. At the same time the Democratic Republic of Congo is considered one of the poorest countries in the world with most of the Congolese citizens living in extreme poverty and large numbers of its population are illiterate and nearly starve. The country is ranked in the 176th place out of 189 countries in the UN's Human Development Index as mentioned by Prashad & Musavuli(2019).

Based on Roberts(2018), there are various reasons for the chronic poverty in the Democratic Republic of Congo. One of these reasons is the inadequate use of abundant resources. Despite of the rich natural resources that the country enjoys that include eighty million hectares of arable land and more than 1,100 minerals and precious metals, only 10 million hectares of arable land is under cultivation. The reasons behind this are war and illegal mining. Another reason is the lack of the country's infrastructure. The country was once known for its healthcare system which has been declined now as 70% of the Congolese citizens don't have access to healthcare and the clinics and hospitals don't have supplies, equipment or staff. The transportation infrastructure is poor. The quality of the education system is low especially in rural areas that lack the basic services such as water and sanitation. Additional reasons are disease, malnourishment and food insecurity. 7.7 million Congolese people have food insecurity. 4.6 million Congolese children are acutely malnourished and 2.2 million children suffer from severe malnutrition. Only 9.3% of the Congolese citizens consume a minimum acceptable diet. Additionally, the Democratic Republic of Congo is the second highest country in the world in relation to malaria cases. One out of five Congolese children under the age of 5 and 7% of the whole population die from malaria. The

outbreak of the Ebola virus disease is considered a serious threat to the Congolese population.

As expressed by Keysa(2018), wealth in the DRC is not equally distributed as the rural areas are the most affected with lack of medical services and sanitation. Due to the war, infrastructure communities that depend on sanitation and clean water have been destroyed spreading waterborne diseases such as malaria, cholera and diarrhea. Less than one-fourth of the population has access to sanitation services and clean drinking water.

After discussing the economic status of the country, it is essential to shed light on the lives of children in the Democratic Republic of Congo and their situation.

In accordance with Prashad(2020), the children human rights situation in the DRC is severe as they witness armed conflicts on a daily basis. Additionally, they face various challenges that include disease, poverty and lack of access to food and clean water. During 2019-2020, measles caused 6,200 deaths. 85% of these deaths were children who were 5 years old and younger. In 2019, cholera caused the death of 540 people. Half of them were children. More than 3.3 million children in the DRC don't have healthcare. On the other hand, 25% of Congolese children are underweight. Anemia is widely spread between children who are aged between 6 months to 5 years.

1.2 Gender Inequality in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Before discussing the issue of gender inequality in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it is important to understand the concepts of gender, gender equality and inequality.

Based on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO(2017), the concept of gender refers to being a man or woman. Gender has various influences. It determines the roles and behaviors of women and men and defines the boundaries of what they can accomplish. It also determines the norms, practices and customs.

As by the United Nations Population Fund UNFPA(2005), gender is involved with the social, cultural and economic attributes that are linked with being female or male. Gender is considered cultural and social in nature and shapes the roles played by women and men and the expectations required by society from them.

According to Bot(2018), the term gender equality refers to the freedom of all human beings in making choices and developing their personal abilities without any prejudices. The concept of gender equality also refers to treating both women and men fairly and equally. It means that women and men various behaviors are equally considered and favored and that

their responsibilities and rights don't rely on them being females or males.

Based on the UNESCO(2017), gender equality is concerned with offering equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities for both women and men and making them enjoy the same status. As by the UNFPA(2005), gender equality requires that women and men equally enjoy resources and opportunities. It doesn't mean that they become the same. It means that accessing opportunities depend only on their gender. It involves the enjoyment of equal access to education for both women and men and equal responsibility sharing for the household and children. It also means that having access to resources is not limited to men only. On the contrary, it means that both males and females are considered equal partners with regard to reproductive and productive life. Therefore, gender equality is considered important and associated with sustainable development.

The concept gender inequality is involved with the unequal treatment of an individual on the basis of gender as mentioned by Wood(2005). Based on the UNFPA(2005), gender inequality is usually involved with the exclusion of women with regard to access to social and economic resources and decision-making.

According to the Japan International Cooperation Agency JICA(2017) and as stated by the Gender Inequality Index, the DRC is characterized by strong male dominant gender norms where women have limited access to capital and land. Domestic violence against women is evident and their rights are not protected as men think that they have the right to beat their wives. In the Congolese society, domestic violence is not considered as a crime and when it occurs a wife is always returned by her family to her husband who may even be presented a gift from her family in order to accept her and take her back. Reasons behind domestic violence vary and may include not taking care of the children, talking back to the husband or burning the food. Early girls' marriage prevents them from continuing their studies and leads to various reproductive health related problems. Being the head of the households, Congolese men are in a strong position which makes the women subject to men. Therefore, any actions taken by men that can damage their masculinity are avoided such as assisting with the housework. The Congolese society praises men who are able to have many children and multiple relationships with many women. This makes the wives do lots of efforts in order to keep their husbands. On the other hand paying a high dowry price for brides makes men think that their wives are their ownership. Another form of gender inequality in the Congolese society is demonstrated in the relationship between the wife and the husband. Husbands control their wives income and all assets gained during marriage are written in the name of the husbands and are considered the ownership of the husbands, their brother and parents. In case of the death of the husband, the wife can

be kicked out of the house by his family as according to law, she doesn't have the right to own a house. That's why after the death of the husband, his family can take away his land and house from the wife. The Congolese society is also characterized by the early marriage of girls especially in rural areas where they can be married before reaching the age of 15. As for education, it also demonstrates gender inequality as it is considered that since girls will leave home after marriage, there is no need to educate them and invest in their education. In some cases, it is even considered that if girls are educated, they are not suitable for being married.

In accordance with Mbambi & Faray-Kele(2010), females in the Democratic Republic of Congo are in a weak economic position especially in rural areas due to their poverty and lack of access to property of lands and real estate. Despite of all this, several Congolese women managed to provide for their families with the small income they could earn.

II. METHODS

Qualitative semi-structured interviews have been conducted with ten Congolese migrants individually who are residing in Egypt. Four out of the ten participants were males while the remaining six were females. The participants were older than 25 years, married and most of them had daughters. They were speaking fair English and one of them who was able to speak good English volunteered in assisting as an interpreter whenever needed during the interviews. Each interview lasted for 30 minutes. The interviews were not recorded based on the participants wish but instead the researcher wrote notes.

The researcher respected the issue of confidentiality and assured the participants that their names will not be mentioned. Most of the participants knew each other and were recommended by each other to participate in the interviews.

The interviews atmosphere was relaxing and friendly and the participants were given the opportunity to freely express their opinions and share their experiences. The main interview topic was about gender inequality and its impact on early childhood development, health and education in the DRC and included various topics: FGM and early girls' marriage.

III. RESULTS

The following analysis and discussion are related to the subject of the paper that involves the impact of gender inequality on early childhood development, health and education. Several topics related to FGM and early girls' marriages were also discussed with the participants as they demonstrate the extent of gender inequality in the Congolese society.

3.1 Gender inequality

The following questions were raised to explore the opinions of the participants in relation to the existence of gender inequality issue in the DRC. The questions raised were as follows:

Question 1: Do you think that there is gender inequality in your country?

All six females agreed about the existence of gender inequality in the DRC while the four male participants didn't see any gender inequality issue in their country. On the contrary and as expressed by one male participant, each gender knows their rights and duties. He believed that since men play the role of the family supporter, women also play another different role which is taking care of the household and children. He added: *"If both genders play the role they are created for, why would there be any gender inequality issue?"*

Question 2: If you believe that there is a gender inequality issue in your country, please explain where it is evident.

Since all the four males didn't believe in the existence of any gender inequality issue, the researcher didn't ask them this question.

Based on the responses of the six females, gender inequality is strongly evident in early childhood development, health and education.

In order to gain as much information as possible that could serve this paper, the researcher was flexible in addressing the questions. Since the men didn't believe at all in the presence of any gender inequality issue, the researcher raised the questions differently in order to retrieve their opinions and be able to have a full and wider picture of all the topic related aspects.

Since the women referred to the existence of gender inequality in early childhood development, health and education which are also in line with what this paper examines, the researcher raised the following questions:

3.2 Gender inequality and child development

It was essential to find out about the role of the girls and women that the Congolese people teach their boys from young age in order to understand the roots of the gender inequality issue in the country. Therefore, the following question has been raised.

Question 3: What is the role of girls and women that you teach your boys from young age?

Based on the responses of all male participants, since young age the boys are taught that they are superior in the house and that the girls and women are to serve them and take care of the household and children. They are taught not to participate in any related household activities such as cleaning or cooking as this is regarded as degrading and a woman's job.

All female participants shared the same responses related to the role of girls and women taught to boys from young age although four of them didn't express content about this limited role. One female participant added: *"No matter in what century we are, the traditional women role remains unchanged in my country especially in poor and rural areas. It is always related to taking care of the household and the children."*

The aforementioned responses are in assent with what was stated by the (Global Fund for Women) that women in the Democratic Republic of Congo face inequality and are often restricted to traditional care-taking roles. They experience lack of education and face discriminatorily attitudes against them. They are considered the most poorest in the country facing violence, poverty and inequality.

3.3 Gender inequality and health

One of the practices that demonstrate gender inequality and discrimination against women and girls and has dangerous consequences on their health is female genital mutilation (FGM).

As explained by Odukogbe et al.(2017), female genital mutilation is a traditional practice that involves the partial or total incision or excision of the external female genitalia. This practice is common in Africa and underreported in several African countries. The purpose of FGM is to fulfill cultural or religious rites and is mostly performed by nonmedical practitioners with poor surgical skills and the lack of antiseptic techniques. This results in various complications which can lead to the death of the patient.

As by the (World Health Organization WHO), FGM is carried out on young girls between infancy and adolescence. It is considered internationally as violation of the children rights and a discrimination form against girls and women. Not only does it violate their rights, it is also considered a cruel, inhuman and degrading practice and may also lead to death. It demonstrates the deep-rooted inequality between females and males.

Question 4: Do you believe that female genital mutilation is necessary?

All male participants together with two out of the six female participants believed that FGM is necessary. Based on their responses, it is performed to control the girls' sexuality and ensure that they remain virgin before marriage. One male participant added: *"FGM maintains the family honor and the virtue of our daughters and fidelity of our women."*

One female participant who supported FGM mentioned: *"It is my role as a woman to raise my children well and to ensure that my daughters are virtuous and remain virgin before marriage. If FGM is not practiced on my daughters, I lose face in front of the family, relatives and neighbors. It*

means that I didn't raise my daughters well. Who will marry them then? If they are not married, they will add additional financial burden to me and to my husband."

Another male participant said: *"There is no place for debate in this matter. It is in our roots. FGM was and will always remain part of our traditions and culture. Our parents and grandparents taught us that FGM is a necessity to maintain the innocence and honor of our daughters. "*

Their responses are in compliance with what was expressed by Hammerschlag(2020) that it is believed that FGM ensures the wife's fidelity and prevents sex before marriage. The participants' responses are in consonance with what was mentioned byMire(2020) that the reasons for practicing this tradition are related to chastity, virginity and control of women's sexuality.

They are also in line with what was expressed by Klein, Helzner, Michelle, Kohlhoff, & Smith-Norowit(2018)that FGM has deep sociological roots that create social norms that force the parents to perform FGM on their daughters. It is believed that FGM maintains the girls' chastity and ensures maintaining their virginity before marriage and their fidelity after marriage.

Four female participants strongly opposed the practice of FGM as follows:

One of them shared her personal experience: *"Although FGM was practiced on me during a young age, I can't forget the horror of that moment until now. Whenever I remember what they made me go through, I feel so angry and depressed."*

Another female participant added: *"The pain of the moment is still in my memory. I don't want my daughters to have the same fate but unfortunately, I don't have any saying in this matter. It is the decision of my husband and the men in the family."*

One of the female participants shared: *"Since my husband made one of my young daughters who is 10 years old undergo FGM, she wakes up in the middle of the night crying and having panic attacks."*

The fourth female participant mentioned: *" Undergoing FGM is a very distressing and painful experience which will never be forgotten. I am forced to remember this nightmare and my painful experience with each one of my daughters who were forced to this too. I have a young daughter who will also go through FGM soon. It pains me every time I look at her face and see how much she will suffer as soon as she will undergo this practice. It is so unfair and unjust but we, women don't dare and don't have the right to oppose that in front of our families as we will be considered as non virtuous women."*

Besides mentioning painful and emotional feelings, the female participants also named several long-term health issues that they suffered as a result of undergoing FGM such as urinary, vaginal problems and painful sexual intercourse.

The responses related to the health issues they suffered are in line with what was mentioned by Hammerschlag(2020) that girls who were victims to female genital mutilation suffer pain during urination or sex and complications during childbirth. They are also subject to mental health disorders. The participants' responses are also in conformity with what was mentioned by Naguib(2012) that FGM affects the girls for the rest of their lives and causes various health problems such as urination problems, infections and cysts.

As for the emotional and psychological issues mentioned by the participants, they are in alignment with the psychological effects cited by Odukogbe et al.(2017)that included panic and anxiety disorders and depression. Other effects include the feeling of being betrayed by the parents and feelings of humiliation.

Another practice that also shows that gender inequality is evident against women and girls and also negatively affects their health is early girls' marriage.

Based on Owe (2020), child marriage is often practiced in developing countries. It can be an informal union or a legal marriage with a girl child under the age of 18. The groom is often an older boy or man. There are several reasons for child marriage. It mostly happens in countries with low economic development levels. Beliefs and norms can also be the reason for child marriage as in some countries, when a girl starts its menstruation it is viewed as a grown up woman who should be married and have children. It is also believed that a young girl who is married is easily controllable and can be turned into an obedient wife. Some families believe that having an unmarried daughter is considered shameful and in order to avoid that and to guarantee that she remains a virgin before marriage, they arrange her marriage when she is young and to ensure that she can have many children. Early girls' marriage has negative consequences on the girl's health and development. Besides being emotionally and physically not prepared for marriage and becoming a mother, she and her baby may also be exposed to a high risk of dying in childbirth.

Question 5: What is your opinion about early girls' marriage?

Based on the male participants, early girls' marriage is a necessity. One participant mentioned: *"It is important to make the girls marry at a young age as they will be able to produce more children."* Another participant added: *"I highly support the early girls' marriage especially during the financial hardships. It allows me as a father to be able to take care of my other children as it reduces the expenses and eases the financial burden I carry."*

Two out of the six female participants believed in the early girls' marriage as they are still young, they will be able to have more children and properly care for them.

These responses are in line with what was mentioned by Kabasele(2018) that girls are considered suitable for marriage from the first menstruation day in the DRC.

They are also in congruence with what was mentioned by (Girls Not Brides)that in the DRC from a very young age, girls are mostly expected to be wives and mothers.

The participants' responses are also in consonance with what was discussed byOwe (2020) that one of the reasons for young girl marriage is survival. Poor families who can't afford to feed their children and educate them, force their daughters to get married at a young age to give the opportunity to the boys to attend school and avoid starvation. Parents who live in extreme poverty or have several children make their daughters marry young in order to reduce the desperate economic circumstances of the family. They believe that their daughters are a financial burden and if they make them get married young, it means that there will be one less mouth to feed and one less education to pay for. The younger the girl, the more it means that she would be able to bear more children which increases her price as a bride.

The responses are also in line with what was stated by (Girls Not Brides) that poverty is one of the child marriage causes. As a way to reduce the financial pressures, bride price is negotiated where the groom pays money and offers gifts to the bride's family. As a result, the worth of girls is lowered since husbands are considered to own them.

As for the remaining four female participants, they opposed the early girls' marriage. One participantmentioned: *"Early girls' marriage steals the childhood of the young girls. At this age when a girl should be practicing her basic rights as a child to play, to be educated and taken care of, instead she is married and is forced to bear the burden of having children, taking care of them and the household."*

Her response is conforming to what was expressed by Owe (2020)that girls who get married young are expected to play the role of an adult woman with regard to raising a family and caring for the household. They are denied the opportunity to play and attend school.

Another participant referred to the negative health consequences of the early girl marriage as it increases the death of the girls during childbirth and premature birth. The participant added: *"I was married very young and two of my children died while I gave birth to them as I was very young and weak and there was not good medical care."*

The response of this participantconfirms what was expressed by Owe (2020) that besides being emotionally and physically not prepared for marriage and becoming a mother, the young girl and her baby may also be exposed to a high risk of dying in childbirth.

The responses are also in line with what was mentioned by the (United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF) that there are various vulnerabilities in the DRC such as child marriage and early pregnancy.

From the participants ' responses, it is obvious that families only prepare their girls for an early marriage and therefore, discourage them from attending school.

3.4 Gender inequality and education

Question 6: Do your children attend school? Do you believe in the equal education of girls and boys?

Not all the participants' children attended schools and the reasons differed from one participant to another. While most of the participants mentioned that due to their poor financial status, they can't pay the obligatory cost of the teacher bonuses in a public school which has witnessed a rising. Therefore, they were forced to make their children drop out of school. Some of the participants who had boys and girls and afforded to pay the required fees for some of their children to continue attending school, chose to pull their girls out of the school while allowing the boys to continue their education.

One male participant mentioned that he has five children,two boys and three girls and in the beginning all his children were attending school but due to his poor financial circumstances, he kept only the three boys at school to be educated and have the opportunity to work in better positions with high income in order to be able to care for the family. As for the girls he made them drop out of school.

The responses of the participantsdemonstrate the strong gender inequality in education between girls and boys. They are also in compliance with what was expressed by Ihebuzor(2014)that families that have financial difficulties make their girls and not the boys drop out of schools in order to the run the household.

These above-mentioned responses are in accord with what was expressed by Boumaiza(2020)that based on the World Bank; the DRC is one of the poorest countries in the world withthe poverty rate reaching 73% in 2018. As a result, both inequity and poverty prevent access to education particularly for girls. In 2015, only 62 girls for every 100 boys attended upper secondary school while in 2012, only 88 girls were in primary school for every 100 boys.

As for the second part of the question, all the male participants preferred not to have their daughters attending the school. One of the participants mentioned: *"I don't believe in educating my daughters. What will this benefit them as they will at the end get married and take care of their own household?"*

Another male participant said: *"Even if I will be able to financially support my daughters' education, I will not allow them to attend school. I believe that our girls should be kept at home raised according to our culture and social norms. Education for girls is in my opinion something bad as it opens their thoughts towards Western ideas that don't match our society or our way of life."*

These responses are in accord with what was mentioned by Boumaiza(2020) that among the barriers that prevent the girls' education in the DRC is the expectation of their roles in the household, their early marriage and pregnancy.

Only four out of the six female participants believed that both the girls and boys have the equal right to attend school and to learn while the remaining two participants were neutral about this matter. They believed that it doesn't make any difference.

One of the four participants who agreed in granting education for both girls and boys shared her experience: *"I had a dream since young age to be educated and join university but my dreams were all crushed as my family was against my education and made me drop out of school very early and today I am bearing the consequences of not continuing my studies. I have been working all my life as a housemaid having to put up with the worst conditions and low income. I will never do that to my children. I want them to have the right to a full education whether they are girls or boys."*

Another participant mentioned that since her family didn't allow her to join school, she is illiterate and can't support her own family now especially after the death of her husband: *"I feel sorry for myself. I am suffering a lot now having to raise seven children all by myself after the death of my husband. I am not receiving any assistance from my family or my husband's family which forces me to work as a maid. Unfortunately, the circumstances forced me to make my girls drop out of school."*

A participant added: *"My ten years old daughter wishes to continue her studies as she believes that it will give her a better future and more opportunities. Unfortunately, we can't afford to pay for her education further and she will be forced to leave school."*

Another participant mentioned: *"Educating my daughters is not something up to me although I strongly wish that they will be able to continue their studies and even high*

school. But as I said it is not up to me to decide. It is up to my husband to make this decision. I tried to discuss with him that it is important for our girls to continue their education but he is against this idea as we can't afford to pay for their education further. So at the end, whether I want this or not, I am not able to change anything in reality."

The participants' responses support what was expressed by Muzard(2018) that in the DRC due to culture aspects; women are not considered equal to men. The people invest more in boys rather than girls as it is assumed that women should only take care of the children.

Their responses are also in line with what was mentioned by the (United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF) that in the DRC, 52.7% of girls aged 5 to 17 do not attend school.

The responses are in compliance with the United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF(2017) that the drop-out rates among girls are higher than boys particularly between grade 5 and the beginning of secondary school.

The responses of the participants so far with regard to the issue of gender inequality in relation to education and early girls' marriage are in line with what was stated by Bolton(2020) that in the Democratic Republic of Congo girls are forced to early marriage and are treated by their parents as a material good in exchange for dowry money. They are regarded as ignorant and inferior to boys. Most of them didn't attend school or were withdrawn from school in order to participate in the domestic work, take care of the housework and their younger siblings.

From all the aforementioned participants' responses, it is clear that men and women play different roles in the culture of the Democratic Republic of Congo where girls are responsible for caring for the household and children and men are leaders of the household. Fewer girls attend school in comparison to boys and therefore earn less money than men. Besides this, the continuous practices of harmful traditions such as FGM, early marriage have harmful health effects and prevent the women from playing a contributive role in the society's development. It demonstrates the high discrimination and unfair treatment against women and girls which lay the foundation for the gender inequality issue.

IV. CONCLUSION

One of the biggest obstacles towards the achievement of gender inequality in the Democratic Republic of Congo is poverty. Overcoming poverty is challenging yet possible if all the country's resources can be used equally in a proper way that allows the maximum benefit from these resources. At the same time, although it is essential to understand that neglecting the early development of children and preventing them from being educated and having a proper medical care

will harm the country's development in the long-term. As one day, these children will be the ones who will have the appropriate skills and abilities to contribute to increased production and better economic development for their country.

Complex issues like gender inequality which are demonstrated in the practices of female genital mutilation and early girls' marriage require the implementation of serious solutions in all sectors of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the enforcement of laws that protect the children. From young age, children should be taught to respect both genders and not to minimize the role of any gender in favor of the other. This can be challenging especially with the discriminatory social norms that are rooted in the country from old generations. Therefore, national gender strategies should be adopted and girls and women should be allowed to speak up in case of being victims to any harmful practices or actions. This can be encouraged through the organization of more gender equality campaigns that shape the awareness of the important roles women play in society, to empower them and to stop degrading them. It is also important to intervene early during the child's early development to correct any gender biases and put an end to the gender inequality issue that doesn't benefit the country's development.

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