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Small Acts, Strong Voices: Agency, Dignity, and Informal Feminisms amongst Adolescent Mothers in Sierra Leone

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Abstract
Adolescent pregnancy in Sierra Leone is widely treated as a developmental crisis, associated with school dropout, poverty reproduction, and moral failure. This article reframes the issue through a womanist lensthat emphasizes agency within constraint. Using participatory methods - Photovoice and Peer Ethnography -in Tombo and Mattru Jong, the study points up the lived experiences of adolescent mothers and their strategies of survival and dignity. Findings show that young mothers rely on informal care networks, engage in small-scale trading, reconstruct identities through maternal pride, and navigate institutions through strategic compliance. These everyday acts, though often invisible to policy, represent forms of constrained but meaningful agency. The analysis cautions against romanticizing resilience while revealing the structural violence that demands it. It calls for interventions that recognize adolescent mothers as beyond being recipients of aid; they are also knowledge producers, moral actors, and contributors to community life.

Keywords: Adolescent motherhood**,** Sierra Leone**,** Agency**,** Womanist lens**,** Informal support**,** Feminist praxis

1. Introduction

Adolescent pregnancy in African countries like Sierra Leone is typically framed as a social crisis: a marker of moral failure, institutional weakness, and developmental stagnation. This framing dominates both policy discourse and scholarly literature, where early motherhood is often associated with school dropout, poverty reproduction, and diminished life prospects (UNICEF, 2021; Ahinkorah et al., 2021; Nuwabaine et al., 2023; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2013). Within this crisis paradigm, adolescent mothers appear primarily as victims who are acted upon rather than acting. They are largely perceived as subject to structural violence, patriarchal control, and public neglect. While these structural forces are undeniable, this article asks a different set of questions: What if we began not with what young mothers lack, but with what they do? What if we approached them not as failures of the system, but as agents operating within it, as persons who navigate, resist, and remake their social worlds?

This article explores the everyday acts of grit and agency among adolescent mothers in two rural Sierra Leonean communities, Tombo and Mattru Jong, where early pregnancy is common but rarely understood on the terms of those who live it. Drawing on a womanist standpoint framework (Collins, 2000) and participatory qualitative methods including Photovoice and Peer Ethnography (Wang & Burris, 1997; Elston et al., 2016), this study points up the voices, strategies, and aspirations of adolescent mothers themselves. In doing so, it challenges dominant narratives that treat them as passive subjects and repositions them as knowledge producers and community actors.

The central argument of this paper is that adolescent motherhood, even when forged under conditions of coercion, poverty, or limited choice, can also be a site of strategic agency. Agency here is understood as the capacity to act within constraint, often subtly, contingently, and collectively (Kabeer, 1999; Mahmood, 2005). In Tombo and Mattru Jong, this agency is expressed in quiet forms: through informal entrepreneurship, peer caregiving networks, strategic compliance with institutions, and the redefinition of social status through maternal pride. These expressions of agency are often invisible to formal systems and policy interventions, which remain narrowly focused on prevention, risk reduction, and demographic control.

By reframing adolescent pregnancy as a dynamic social process shaped by both constraint and

creativity, this article contributes to a growing body of feminist and African-centered scholarship that resists deficit models of girlhood and motherhood. It argues for a paradigm shift from one of rescue and rehabilitation to one of recognition and redistribution. This shift allows for young mothers to be seen not merely as recipients of aid but actors whose choices, however limited, carry meaning and consequence.

In what follows, the article first outlines the theoretical framing, drawing from womanist thought and debates on agency. It then describes the methodological approach, before presenting findings across four domains of adolescent mothers' lived experiences: care networks, informal livelihood strategies, identity reconstruction, and institutional navigation. In closing, it reflects on what development and policy might look like if it does not begin with pathology, but commences with agency and possibility. Across the analysis, we trace how adolescent mothers use informal infrastructures and embodied strategies to make life liveable (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2013).

2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding adolescent motherhood as a space of constrained but meaningful action requires a framework that resists both victim-blaming and romanticized agency. This study draws from womanist epistemology, feminist debates on agency under constraint, and participatory knowledge traditions to construct a theoretical lens that centers the lived experiences of adolescent mothers while accounting for the structural conditions they navigate.

2.1 Womanist Standpoint Epistemology

At the heart of this study is a commitment to womanist standpoint theory, which privileges the knowledge of those most marginalized in social hierarchies. Originating in African American feminist thought, womanism as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) emphasizes how Black women's experiences under conditions of racialized, gendered, and economic oppression produce unique epistemic vantage points. Applied to Sierra Leone, this framework allows us to take seriously the everyday wisdom of adolescent mothers who are often excluded from formal policy discourse, academic research, and community decision-making.

Rather than seeing these girls as subjects to be studied from the outside, a womanist standpoint positions them as producers of situated knowledge. It encourages researchers to listen with humility, to interpret with care, and to theorize from the ground up. This epistemic positioning also points up the intersectionality of age, gender, poverty, and geographic marginality in shaping adolescent motherhood. Thus, it paints a complex social condition marked by variability, creativity, and constraint (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). **A womanist lens presses beyond prot**ectionist framings to center girls' situated agency as moral and political work (Walker, 1983; Nnaemeka 2004; Collins, 2000). In African situations, nego-feminist insights on negotiation and everyday compromise are crucial to how agency operates under constraint (Nnaemeka, 2004).

2.2 Agency in Constraint: Rethinking Power and Possibility

The concept of agency has long been debated in feminist theory, especially in situations where autonomy is constrained by social structures. This study adopts Naila Kabeer's (1999) influential formulation of agency as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them," even when such action is exercised within restrictive environments. For Kabeer, agency includes decision-making and also the processes of negotiation, resistance, subversion, and survival.

This reading is further enriched by Saba Mahmood's (2005) argument that agency should not be measured solely by acts of resistance to power. It should also seen as the capacity to inhabit norms in ways that are meaningful or strategic. Mahmood's insight is critical for interpreting the behavior of adolescent mothers who, for instance, choose to embrace motherhood as a source of status or silently comply with institutional expectations while subtly resisting them in other spheres.

Triangulated, these perspectives allow us to conceptualize adolescent mothers' actions as instances of strategic navigation, in which agency is exercised quietly, often in the form of small wins, relational alliances, or identity work. This conceptual approach moves beyond binary readings of power and subordination and opens space for interpreting girlhood and motherhood as sites of complex negotiation. Read alongside de Certeau's notion of everyday tactics and African debates on respectability economies, these quiet moves index "power-to" rather than defiance-as-freedom (de Certeau, 1984; Hunter, 2010).

2.3 Participatory Knowledge and Embodied Narratives

Methodologically, this study is informed by participatory traditions that view marginalized people as co-producers of knowledge rather than as data point. More than just tools for collecting data, Photovoice and Peer Ethnography, and are theoretical commitments to the idea that knowledge emerges through dialogue, collaboration, and reflection (Wang & Burris, 1997; Elston et al., 2016).

Photovoice, for instance, enables adolescent mothers to document their worlds through their own lenses, literally and figuratively, challenge dominant representations and assert their perspectives. Peer Ethnography fosters trust and mutual recognition, and allow girls to speak more freely and analyze their own social conditions.

These participatory methods are grounded in a politics of recognition and respect. They affirm that lived experience, particularly when expressed through embodied, narrative, or visual forms, is a valid and vital source of theory. By integrating these methodological and epistemological tools, the study contributes to a growing tradition of feminist and decolonial research that values everyday life as data, agency, assertion and theory.

Collectively, the theoretical strands - womanist standpoint, agency in constraint, and participatory epistemology - enable a reading of adolescent pregnancy that is both critical and compassionate. Rather than seeing young mothers as cases to be corrected, it positions them as actors to be heard, as individuals who might operate in worlds not of their making, but who nonetheless make meaning, forge paths, and claim space where they can.

3. Methodology

The research focused on two communities, Tombo and Mattru Jong, selected for their high incidence of adolescent pregnancy and their contrasting socio-economic contexts: Tombo as a peri-urban fishing community, and Mattru Jong as a rural agrarian and mining settlement. This comparative design enabled a textured understanding of how geography and livelihood systems mediate adolescent motherhood.

The research was underpinned by a subjectivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, aligning with womanist and feminist traditions that center lived experience as a valid and vital source of knowledge (Collins, 2000). It adopted a standpoint approach that sees adolescent mothers as bearers of insight and capable of reflecting on their conditions, making sense of their lives, and theorizing their futures. The womanist lens also emphasized the ethical imperative to treat participants with care, dignity, and respect throughout the research process.

Three core data collection methods were employed, each designed to maximize participation, agency, and narrative richness:

a. Photovoice

Photovoice was used to enable adolescent mothers to document and reflect on their daily lives through photography. Participants were given disposable cameras or mobile phones and asked to capture images representing their experiences, struggles, and sources of strength. These images became entry points for discussion during subsequent interviews and focus groups, allowing participants to control the framing of their stories (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice was particularly powerful in surfacing themes that participants found difficult to express verbally, such as shame, hope, or defiance.

b. Peer Ethnographic and Evaluation Research (PEER)

Peer ethnography involved training a small group of adolescent mothers as co-researchers. These peer ethnographers conducted informal, open-ended conversations with their friends and peers, using semi-structured prompts developed collaboratively with the research team. This method helped bypass power dynamics that often emerge in adult-led interviews and fostered more authentic, trust-based disclosures (Elston et al., 2016). The peer researchers also participated in data analysis, identifying common themes and contributing to the interpretation of findings.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 24 adolescent mothers aged 14 to 19 from the two communities, with roughly equal representation from each site. Additional participants included four peer ethnographers (two per site) and a small group of community stakeholders (teachers, health workers, and caregivers) who participated in contextual interviews to triangulate findings. Participation was entirely voluntary, with informed consent obtained from each participant, and assent obtained for minors, alongside

caregiver consent where ethically appropriate. Pseudonyms were used throughout; and participants could withdraw at any stage. Special care was taken to avoid retraumatization when discussing sensitive topics such as coercion, sexual violence, or abandonment.

Reflexivity was also central to the research process. The lead researcher, a Sierra Leonean woman with personal experience of adolescent pregnancy, maintained a reflexive journal and debriefed regularly with field assistants and peer researchers. This positionality was a strength, offering both empathy and insight, but it also demanded constant self-interrogation to avoid projection or overidentification.

Data were analyzed thematically. Peer researchers contributed to the interpretive process through participatory coding sessions and collective reflections. Visual data from Photovoice were analyzed alongside narrative data, allowing for multimodal triangulation

4. Findings

4.1 "One to Look After the Baby": Care Work, Sisterhood, and Informal Support

For adolescent mothers in both Tombo and Mattru Jong, the immediate aftermath of childbirth was moment of profound shift in social dependency. Contrary to popular narratives that portray these girls as entirely abandoned, the data show that many were embedded in complex, informal care networks, particularly among female kin, peers, and older women in the community. These kin and peer networks often compensate for thin or punitive institutional responses, creating de facto welfare where schools and clinics fall short (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2013).

Several respondents in both communities emphasized that their survival, both materially and emotionally, depended on the willingness of others to step in. A notable number lived with female relatives, especially mothers, grandmothers, or older sisters, who provided essential support such as food, shelter, and childcare. This arrangement was often framed as both caregiving and moral correction. In this setup, maternal figures offered a dual role: they were both disciplinarians and protectors, helping to reintegrate the young mother into family and community life.

Where family-based support was weak or unavailable, peer-based systems emerged. In several cases, girls formed informal mutual aid circles with other adolescent mothers. The peer networks involved rotating child care, sharing small amounts of food, and emotional companionship in the face of social stigma. These micro-collectives functioned as a buffer against the isolation many felt, especially when excluded from school or shunned by community members.

Beyond practical support, the networks also provided emotional scaffolding. One respondent captured this when she said that being around other young mothers made her feel "seen" - a sense of mutual recognition in a society that often rendered them invisible or shameful.

However, these networks were not without their limits. In some instances, support was conditional - based on continued obedience, gratitude, or compliance with family rules. A few girls recounted being thrown out when they challenged household authority or when the burden of care on the host became too much. Informal support systems, while deeply significant, were often precarious and dependent on interpersonal dynamics rather than formal guarantees.

In sum, adolescent motherhood in these communities was not lived in isolation. It unfolded within webs of care, tenuous but vital, that shaped how girls experienced their early parenting. These support systems were as much responses to crisis as they were evidence of collective adaptation. They illustrate how care work, often devalued and invisible, becomes central to young mothers' strategies of endurance and dignity.

4.2 "Ah dae sell small-small": Informal Livelihoods and Entrepreneurial Survival

For many adolescent mothers in Tombo and Mattru Jong, economic self-reliance emerged as a key pathway to restoring agency and dignity after the upheaval of early pregnancy. In the absence of stable institutional support or sustained contributions from the fathers of their children, the young women turned to informal livelihoods, including petty trade, food vending, tailoring, and soap-making as survival strategies and identity resources.

Economic activity among the girls was shaped by both need and aspiration. Livelihoods were often described as something more than income - they were expressions of competence and control, especially in a social landscape that had reduced their value to shame and dependency. Several girls, especially in Tombo, spoke of how they engaged in street trading - selling fried fish, boiled eggs, soap, or groundnuts - to support

themselves and their children. These trades, though small in scale, enabled young mothers to meet basic needs, avoid total dependence on caregivers, and reclaim a sense of personal initiative.

Importantly, the act of earning, however modestly, became a site of self-affirmation. As one mother framed it, “ar nor wan beg man,” (I don’t want to beg a man). This signals a desire to distance herself from transactional relationships and to assert economic integrity. Earning an income, however limited, provided food and diapers and also a moral repositioning from burdened daughter to contributing adult.

In some cases, livelihood strategies overlapped with informal peer support. Small groups of adolescent mothers pooled resources or took turns minding each other’s babies to allow for selling time in markets. Though these solidarities were often improvised, they reflected a form of economic agency embedded in relational networks.

Yet, these efforts were not without constraint. The informal economy was saturated, and adolescent mothers, especially those with infants strapped to their backs, faced logistical and social hurdles. They were often mobile under duress, without capital or security, and vulnerable to harassment. Still, as one of the girls noted, “even though waytin ar day get nor borku, e kin make ar feel lek porsin way able do something for esef” (Though what I get is not much, It makes me feel like a person who can do something for herself). Thus it was precisely in these small, everyday acts of selling soap, frying fish, and setting up a stall that young mothers reasserted themselves as agents in a world that had largely written them off.

Ultimately, the turn to “small-small” business points how economic activity can become a tool of symbolic repair and social repositioning. It affirms that even under conditions of material scarcity, adolescent mothers find ways to craft livelihoods that carry both sustenance and self-worth.

4.3 “We get shame but we nor gree make shame kill we”: Identity Reconstruction and Pride

Despite the burden of stigma and exclusion that followed early pregnancy, many adolescent mothers in Tombo and Mattru Jong actively worked to reconstruct their sense of self and often anchoring their new identity in the role of motherhood. This redefinition was a quiet, persistent form of resistance to community narratives that positioned them as failures or delinquents.

Some adolescent mothers reframed motherhood as a point of transformation rather than decline. They saw childbearing as the beginning of a more serious, purposeful life. As one participant explained, she believed that “having a child made her more responsible and gave her life more direction”. Such reframing reveals the complex emotional and moral recalibration these girls undertook to reclaim meaning in the face of judgement.

This identity work was visible, embodied, and often performative. Young mothers paid close attention to their appearance and to the presentation of their children. Many spoke of dressing neatly and keeping their babies well groomed, as a way of countering negative community perceptions. Thus clean clothes, combed hair, and general tidy appearance became small acts of symbolic resistance that insist on dignity in the face of societal expectations that new mothers like them would be scruffy.

In their efforts to reassert personhood, adolescent mothers also drew strength from their capacity to care. They narrated themselves as responsible, nurturing, and determined - recasting their maternal role as evidence of growth, not recklessness. This is reflected in the observation by an adolescent mother, “ people wan for laf me say me nor betteh porsin. I kin feel am en shame some tem dem. But me na betteh porsin, ar day try for do me best for take care of me pikin en mesef” (People want to laugh at me; that I am not a good person. Sometimes I feel it and become ashamed. But I am a good person, I try my best to take of my child and I). The emphasis on “doing their best” indicates a moral self-assessment - rooted in effort, care, and perseverance - even when social validation remained elusive.

These narratives of pride challenged assumptions without directly confronting them. In this way, identity reconstruction was both a personal strategy and a form of social commentary. It allowed adolescent mothers to redefine themselves on their own terms, even within the narrow margins allowed by their communities.

While these efforts reveal that pride and shame often coexist in the lives of adolescent mothers, what also matters is how girls navigate the space between the two. They draw on their caregiving labor, their appearance, and their refusal to disappear as tools for self-definition and quiet endurance.

4.4 “We sef sef sabi how for talk”: Institutional Navigation and Strategic Compliance

Adolescent mothers in Tombo and Mattru Jong did not simply passively receive services or interventions

from schools, clinics, or NGOs. Instead, they developed adaptive strategies to navigate these institutions - choosing when to engage, when to withdraw, and how to present themselves in ways that secured access or minimized stigma. This section examines how young mothers acted strategically within institutional settings that were often judgmental, exclusionary, or indifferent.

One recurring issue was the reception adolescent mothers received at health facilities. Some deliberately avoided clinics they sought to protect themselves from verbal abuse and humiliation. Some of the girls said they avoided going to clinics because the nurses spoke harshly to them, while others chose to go only when an older relative accompanied them. This form of avoidance was a calculated decision based on prior experiences, reputational management, and emotional preservation.

In the realm of education, a different set of negotiations occurred. Several adolescent mothers expressed a desire to return to school but encountered institutional gatekeeping. Those who succeeded often did so by leveraging relationships with sympathetic actors, including teachers or NGO staff, who served as mediators. This mirrors regional findings that official inclusion regimes coexist with everyday gatekeeping, where compassion is discretionary and compliance must be performed (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2013).

A particularly telling strategy involved the selective deployment of language. Young mothers learned how to speak in ways that would elicit support or at least reduce friction. They internalized institutional expectations and responded accordingly. This form of discursive compliance reflects both awareness and agency: girls calibrated their speech and demeanour as a way of performing compliance; but it was also chosen to ensure their survival

These strategies - avoidance, alignment, selective disclosure - demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of institutional logics. Girls knew when to silence certain truths, when to highlight others, and how to manage their identities within settings that could be punitive or extractive. What appears externally as acquiescence is, in fact, a repertoire of navigational tactics developed in response to unequal power relations. Their performance of strategic compliance should not be mistaken for surrender. It reflects grit and situational intelligence in systems that rarely meet adolescent mothers with dignity or care.

4.5 Place Matters: Comparing Tombo and Mattru Jong

Although adolescent motherhood in both Tombo and Mattru Jong shared common features, including stigma, early school exit and economic struggle, important contextual differences shaped the girls' experiences and strategies. Geography, livelihood structure, and community norms interacted to produce varied landscapes of risk, opportunity, and resistance.

Tombo, a peri-urban coastal town with a bustling fishing economy, offered adolescent mothers more avenues for informal livelihood. Many young women there engaged in small-scale trading, often in proximity to the fish landing sites and markets. The relatively dynamic economy of Tombo translated into a slightly more open terrain for adolescent girls to exercise economic agency - even as they continued to face social judgment.

By contrast, Mattru Jong's more agrarian and extractive (mining) character shaped a different set of constraints. Limited economic opportunities, coupled with strong social surveillance and a more conservative moral culture, restricted the movements and options of adolescent mothers. These tighter normative controls often meant harsher social responses to adolescent pregnancy and less tolerance for young mothers seeking to re-enter school or public life.

Another key difference lay in the visibility and anonymity available to young mothers. In Tombo's more mobile, trade-oriented environment, there was a degree of urban anonymity, which allowed girls to blend in or disappear among strangers. This stood in contrast to Mattru Jong, where social boundaries were more clearly marked and enforced. This spatial difference had real consequences: in Tombo, a girl could disappear into market activity or street trading; in Mattru Jong, her movements were more likely to be monitored, her decisions interpreted through the lens of family honour and community morality.

These contrasts are crucial for interpreting adolescent motherhood in Sierra Leone. They show that experiences of stigma, agency, and support are not uniform but place-bound, and are shaped by local economies, cultural expectations, and patterns of surveillance. Where one community provides avenues for silent resistance and economic improvisation, another may reinforce dependency and moral policing. Recognizing these differences complicates any universal narrative of adolescent motherhood and emphasizes the need for place-sensitive interventions and policies.

5. Discussion of the Findings

5.1 Reframing Adolescent Motherhood: From Pathology to Possibility

Dominant narratives of adolescent pregnancy in Sierra Leone, as in much of the global South, tend to frame young mothers as victims of misjudgment, morality failure, or developmental interruption. Within policy, media, and often academic discourse, adolescent motherhood is approached as a problem to be fixed - a sign of vulnerability, irresponsibility, or breakdown. These narratives are simplistic incomplete. What this study reveals is a parallel and less examined reality: that adolescent motherhood, even in its most precarious form, can become a terrain for the reassertion of dignity, capability, and purpose.

Across the four domains explored - care, livelihood, identity, and institutional navigation - the girls in Tombo and Mattru Jong demonstrated grit and social intelligence. While they did not reject the stigma associated with their pregnancies outright, they negotiated it, sometimes by embracing caregiving roles, sometimes through micro-businesses, and at other times by carefully calibrating their interaction with health and education systems. These actions suggest a reframing of adolescent motherhood beyond pure crisis, and towards being seen as a crucible within which new capacities emerge.

This is not to romanticize early motherhood. The shame, abandonment, and hardship these girls faced were real and often brutal. But the study shows that alongside suffering, there was also adaptation. One girl described becoming “more responsible” after childbirth; another took pride in “not depending” on her child’s father. These are markers of how motherhood, when interpreted through the girls’ own lived frameworks, can offer a renewed sense of moral purpose and adult legitimacy.

Importantly, this reframing does not replace the risk lens with a celebratory one. Instead, it insists that adolescent mothers are more than what institutions assume about them. It asserts the need to move from models of “saving girls” to listening to them, to seeing them as actors within constrained and complex social worlds. As the findings make clear, adolescent pregnancy in Sierra Leone is a deeply ambivalent experience - shot through with hardship, but also shaped by effort, relation, and refusal to collapse under shame.

This perspective sets the tone for the rest of the discussion below. It calls on researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to hold complexity: to see that even within constrained conditions, adolescent mothers construct meaning, shape strategies, and assert themselves in small but significant ways. Their stories invite a rethinking of adolescent motherhood away from pathological lens, and towards seeing it as a possible site of improvised personhood. Reading through a womanist lens clarifies how adolescent motherhood is made in the friction between policy scripts, informal support, and lived moral worlds.

5.2 Agency Within Constraint: Small Acts, Big Meanings

The adolescent mothers in this study did not inhabit agency in its classical, liberal sense, where autonomy is equated with choice and resistance with defiance. Rather, their agency emerged through a series of quiet, embodied, and relational acts. These are often small gestures that negotiated stigma, restructured daily life, and carved dignity out of constraint. This view aligns with an ethics of the self (Mahmood 2005) in which agency is understood not as opposition to social norms but as the capacity to work within them, reconfiguring one’s relationship to power through disciplined adaptation.

Girls in both Tombo and Mattru Jong exercised such agency through the choices they made around care, livelihood, self-presentation, and institutional engagement. Returning to school after childbirth, for instance required reading the mood of school authorities, aligning with sympathetic adults, and presenting or performing oneself as committed to change. Likewise, avoiding public clinics was a risk-calibrated strategy, grounded in knowledge that harsh words from nurses could trigger shame or re-traumatization.

These calculated silences, appearances, and movements suggest a form of what Kabeer (1999) calls “power to”. This is the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them even in highly constrained environments. Whether it was the act of keeping a child well-groomed or selling soap to avoid dependency, these seemingly were acts investments in a moral economy in which adolescent mothers could reposition themselves in subtle contradiction to the stigma and other constraints that were thrown their way.

Institutional actors often miss such forms of agency. Programs and policies tend to reward visible compliance, like girls who return to school, or who speak up at community dialogues, who engage with NGOs. But this study shows that meaningful action also resides in what is quiet, hesitant, and even ambivalent. The girl who sells fried fish without making eye contact with her former teacher is no less agentic than the one who formally reintegrates into school. Both are navigating constrained choices, but doing so on their own terms.

This does not mean the girls had full freedom. Their actions were bounded by poverty, patriarchy, and public judgment. But within those bounds, they moved. They chose when to speak and when to withdraw, whom to trust and when to act, what to reveal and what to withhold. These small acts carry big meanings. They might not radically change the constraints in the girls world. But they allow girls to endure it without fully surrendering themselves.

Our argument is that agency among adolescent mothers is best understood not as a constellation of everyday decisions made under pressure, rather than some single act of rebellion. It is in the selling of soap, the combing of a baby's hair, the silence in a clinic queue, those the sites where girls assert that they are still here, still acting, still shaping life on their own textured terms.

5.3 The Centrality of Informal Structures

Across both research sites, it was informal networks, rather than formal institutions that sustained adolescent mothers. These included circles of peer support, caregiving arrangements with relatives, and street-based trading activities. They functioned as the primary scaffolding for daily survival. These structures, though often invisible to policymakers and under-theorized in mainstream adolescent health literature, were vital not only for material wellbeing but also for the moral and emotional reconstitution of the self.

In both Tombo and Mattru Jong, adolescent mothers repeatedly emphasized the role of female kin in supporting them through childbirth and the postpartum period. Mothers, grandmothers, and older sisters provided housing, food, and childcare. These are resources that were crucial in stabilizing young lives disrupted by early pregnancy. The domestic arrangements were forms of intergenerational care embedded in African communal values, even when accompanied by correction or conditionality.

Equally central were the micro-communities that formed among adolescent mothers themselves. In both towns, girls created informal alliances to share food, rotate child-minding duties, and offer each other companionship in the face of stigma. The peer networks functioned as survival economies, emotional sanctuaries, and practical training grounds for early mothering.

Economic activity was another informal structure through which agency was expressed. Girls who sold boiled eggs, soap, or fried fish were making ends meet as were actively participating in alternative economic systems that offered significant symbolic returns. The activities were central to how girls avoided total dependency on parents or on the men who fathered their children.

These findings point up a crucial insight: formal systems such as schools and clinics, while vital in principle, often failed adolescent mothers in practice. Health clinics were sites of harsh moral judgmentand schools required strategic negotiations for reentry. In contrast, it was the "unrecognized" spaces - the back rooms of aunties' homes, market stalls, and friendships formed on the margins - that provided stability, care, and moral repair. This calls for a serious shift in how intervention frameworks are designed, so that they could move from formal delivery models toward approaches that recognize the informal architectures girls already build and inhabit. Recognizing these "subaltern infrastructures" as primary care economies suggests that interventions should resource what already works, rather than route girls back into systems that routinely misrecognize them (Tamale, 2011).

5.4 Space, Surveillance, and Social Scripts

While adolescent mothers across both research sites faced stigma, judgment, and material hardship, the ways they experienced and responded to these pressures were significantly shaped by place. Tombo and Mattru Jong offered different spatial economies, levels of visibility, and moral regulation. These differences mattered deeply for how girls navigated adolescent motherhood.

Tombo's coastal, peri-urban character, with its active fish trade, mobile population, and bustling street life, allowed for a greater degree of anonymity and economic engagement. Girls could blend into the public, take up informal trading roles, and avoid certain community surveillance structures. The mobility and density of urban life made it easier for young mothers to move about, engage in commerce, and re-enter community spaces with less direct scrutiny.

By contrast, Mattru Jong's more agrarian and closely-knit setting, with stronger religious oversight and traditional authority structures, produced heightened moral surveillance. Community norms were more rigid, and the greater presence of elders meant that adolescent motherhood was more openly condemned. In this setting, a girl's actions were more visible, her movements more policed, and her attempts at recovery more dependent on elder sanction.

This spatial contrast also played out in the degree of social recovery available to adolescent mothers. In Tombo, a girl who dressed her baby well, kept her stall clean, and kept to herself could quietly rebuild a life. The economy allowed for some fluidity of role. That spatial room, both literal and symbolic. enabled a different kind of re-entry into public life.

In Mattru Jong, however, where everyone knew everyone else, a girl's choices and past were more difficult to obscure. The tighter mesh of community relations also meant fewer entry points for informal economic reintegration and greater dependence on family or male partners. Surveillance here was intimate, enforced through gossip and neighbourly observation.

These spatial differences reveal that adolescent motherhood is not a static or uniform condition. It is shaped by such contextual factors as the material flows of trade, the moral economies of religion, and the physical layout of a town. In Tombo, space allowed for movement and quiet improvisation; in Mattru Jong, space demanded conformity and visibility.

In sum, place matters, as both background and as a set of structures that mediate what is seen, what is possible, and what can be quietly survived. To understand adolescent motherhood in Sierra Leone, one must understand gender, generation and importantly, geography.

5.5 Implications for Womanist and African Feminist Praxis

The experiences of adolescent mothers in Tombo and Mattru Jong affirm the need for a feminist analytic that begins with the lived and situated knowledge of girls themselves. This study offers fertile ground for such an approach. It shows how adolescent motherhood, while framed in dominant discourse as social failure, is reinterpreted by the girls through moral labour, care work, and quiet improvisation. These interpretive and practical acts align strongly with the ethos of womanist and African feminist praxis.

Womanist epistemology, as developed by scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, emphasizes lived experience, relational care, and survival intelligence as sources of knowledge and resistance. In this study, t

whilst reacting to structural forces, the adolescent mothers are also engaging in meaning-making, including reframing motherhood as responsibility, street trade as dignity, silence as strategy. It is not a rejection of progress when a young mother in Tombo chooses not to return to school but instead to sell soap and care for her child. Rather, she is recalibrating what survival and success look like in her own terms. These are precisely the kinds of situated choices that womanist thought urges us to take seriously.

African feminist perspectives deepen this insight by drawing attention to the moral economies of respectability and the structural entrapments of patriarchy. Scholars like Amina Mama (1995) and Sylvia Tamale (2011) remind us that African girls and women live within complex matrices of tradition, religion, economic marginality, and postcolonial governance. Whilst there are tendencies to frame them as "fallen girls" and "welfare cases", the adolescent mothers in this study are navigating respectability, family honour, and moral scrutiny while simultaneously crafting forms of care and independence. Their use of appearance (neatness, clean babies) as resistance or their strategic speech to secure institutional support reflects what African feminists recognize as the double burden of survival and moral performance.

Moreover, the informal infrastructures of peer support, maternal kin networks, and trading strategies are themselves feminist spaces. They operate outside of formal systems but carry the weight of practical solidarity. These spaces echo what African feminists have called "subaltern institutions," where excluded women develop their own systems of exchange, caregiving, and justice. Whislt there are tendencies to see them as just fallback mechanisms, they are feminist infrastructures, built from necessity but sustained by shared knowledge and mutual obligation.

What this study ultimately contributes is a challenge to linear, saviourist models of girlhood. The adolescent mothers here are not waiting to be rescued by NGO programs or school reintegration policies. They are already doing the work of survival, of care, of repair. The challenge for feminist praxis is to see and name these practices as being beyond coping strategies, but as legitimate forms of political and moral agency.

In centering the girls' own voices and contextual strategies, this study affirms a womanist and African feminist commitment: to look beyond formal scripts of empowerment and recognize that power often lives in the unglamorous, everyday practices of girls deemed marginal - those who, in the words of one participant, "den go try for put shame pan we all tem, but nor go make shame kill we". (They will always try to heap shame on us; but we will not allow shame to kill us).

5.6 Caution Against Romanticizing Agency

While this study points up the agency and adaptive strategies of adolescent mothers in Sierra Leone, it is important to temper that narrative with caution. The ability of these girls to survive, reframe, and reassert themselves should not distract from the structural violence that conditions their lives. To celebrate resilience without interrogating the systems that make such resilience necessary is to risk romanticizing suffering and neglecting the moral urgency of structural change.

The adolescent mothers in this study did not choose their pregnancies from a wide menu of life options. Their agency, real as it is, was forged in contexts of limited choice: absent fathers, fragile school access, and punitive healthcare encounters. Moreover, the forms of agency observed - trading, caregiving, self-presentation - while admirable, are also exhausting. They demand constant vigilance, emotional suppression, and labor that is rarely acknowledged, let alone supported. The girls often mentioned that they were doing their best. However, this "doing their best" happens within a social context that rarely reciprocates their effort. Instead, the burden of repair falls disproportionately on the very girls most failed by formal institutions.

Even the informal systems that provide stability such as maternal relatives and the peer trading networks should not be romanticized as sufficient. They are compensatory, not transformative. The girl who finds support from her grandmother or rotates child care with friends is not thriving; she is surviving. These arrangements exist because formal support has broken down or was distracted by the intense judgmental dispositions of those, like teachers or nurses, who implanted the programs adolescent mothers in mind.

Thus, while this study affirms the girls' intelligence, strength, and creativity, it also insists on the continued analysis of structural injustice. The story here is one of girls navigating adversity because empowerment remains elusive. They are living in the wake of policy gaps, cultural rigidity, and patriarchal neglect. Celebrating resilience and grit without reworking the punitive moralism of schooling and care reproduces a "do-better" burden that girls must privately shoulder.

To honour the agency of adolescent mothers, then, is not to glorify it. It is to see it clearly in relation to its power, its limits, and its cost. The goal is not to frame them as heroines of hardship, which is called in Sierra Leone as "suffer posh" (suffering inside but appearing as posh outside). Rather it is to push forward a framing that sees them as citizens entitled to dignity, care, and social systems that do not require them to fight so hard for so little.

Conclusion and Implications

This study has explored the lives of adolescent mothers in Tombo and Mattru Jong, not through the conventional lenses of risk and vulnerability alone, but through their own stories of care, improvisation, and moral repair. What emerged was a textured portrait of young motherhood that is marked by hardship, but also animated by quiet forms of resilience, tactical navigation, and survival intelligence. Their lives demonstrate what African feminists and womanist scholars have long argued: that power does not always reside in grand resistance or visible leadership, but in the mundane, relational, and affective labour of survival.

The study's findings have several key implications:

1. For Research

Research on adolescent motherhood must move beyond deficit-based frameworks that treat early pregnancy as a singular crisis. More grounded, ethnographic, and participatory approaches are needed - ones that center young women's perspectives and trace how agency unfolds within constraint.

2. For Policy and Intervention

Formal institutions such as schools, clinics, and social programs, must be redesigned with the knowledge that adolescent mothers are already embedded in informal systems of care and survival. Thus school and clinic practice should be aligned with post-2019 policy reforms by auditing everyday gatekeeping, embedding dignity protocols, and funding community-based supports that adolescent mothers actually use.

3. For Feminist Praxis

The study invites a feminist reorientation: to listen more closely to girls' silences, small acts, and unspoken

negotiations. It calls for an ethic of attention, not only to what girls say but to what they do in the absence of formal recognition. It also cautions against celebrating agency without dismantling the structures that confine it.

At its core, this work reframes adolescent motherhood as a social condition that is neither purely tragic nor entirely redemptive. It is a condition that demands solidarity, policy imagination, and a commitment to seeing adolescent mothers as everyday theorists and practitioners of survival.

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