

# **RURAL POVERTY AND LIVELIHOOD CHALLENGES AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN NSIT ATAI LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, AKWA-IBOM STATE**

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## **Abstract**

This study examined the problem of rural poverty and how it affects the livelihood of adolescent girls in Nsit Atai Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Survey research design was used to elicit the opinion of 27 adolescent girls drawn from the three clans that make up the Nsit Atai local government area. In-depth interview method was used for data collection, while the qualitative data derived from the field were content analyzed. The sustainable livelihood approach provided theoretical direction for the study. Findings from the study revealed that the educational pursuit of adolescent girls is hampered in their bid to search for livelihood as most of them miss class lessons in search of food. Furthermore, they are exposed to maltreatment and abuse, particularly from those who engage them as 'house helps'. The study therefore recommends among others, the need for the Akwa Ibom State government to enforce regulations regarding its policy on free and compulsory education beyond urban centers to cover rural areas where adolescent girls are used during school hours for economic activities as a means of livelihood. This is necessary because it will help them to concentrate on acquiring knowledge in school, and as well, boost their capacity to compete favorably when opportunities come their way in the future.

**Keywords:** Adolescent girls; Economic activities; Free and Compulsory education; Livelihood; Poverty

## **Introduction**

Poverty is a global phenomenon with widespread implications. Statistically, an estimated population of over 700 million people is said to be living in extreme poverty in the world, with 84 percent of the population living in rural areas (World Bank, 2023; UNDP, 2023). Out of this population, the adolescent group happens to be one of the worst hit by poverty, with a majority of them said to be living in extreme poverty (Salmeron-Gomez, Engilbertsdottir, Levia, Newhouse & Stewart, 2023).

According to the UNICEF (2024), the adolescent population stands at about 1.3 billion in the world, with the rural area accounting for 55 percent of this population. Although there are limited statistics on poverty during adolescence, one estimate puts the number at 276.4 million, out of which 22.4% live in extremely poor households, and 45% live in low-income countries like Afghanistan, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Togo, Uganda, etc (Salmeron-Gomez et.al, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

In Africa, the Sub-Saharan region has the highest number of adolescents (40%) living in extreme poverty, and the highest number of children (71%) living in extreme poverty in the world (Salmeron-Gomez et.al, 2023). This population as reported by the World Bank (2023) is growing higher in the rural areas than in the urban centres.

Nigeria being the most populated country in the continent faces a similar situation with the majority of her adolescent group requiring basic services. Out of the 54,548,145 people estimated for her adolescent population, 67.5% are said to be living in poverty, with 90% living in rural areas (UNICEF, 2023; National Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

As reported by the UNICEF (2023), the population of adolescent girls in Nigeria stands at 26,785,324, a population that represents 1 in every 10 persons (11%) living in the country (Girls Effect, 2016). These girls in rural areas are seen to be facing more problems often than girls in the city (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2017). One of such problems is poverty which serves as one of the most significant barriers to their livelihood (UNICEF, 2022). Thus, for most of them to survive, they engage in farming and early marriages, while others migrate to the cities to serve as house helps or prostitutes (The Borgen Project, 2023; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). These have great implications for their education and ability to acquire skills for meaningful employment (UNICEF, 2022).

Furthermore, adolescent girls in rural areas in Nigeria, are regarded as key agents for development because of their catalytic role towards transformational economic,

environmental, and social changes required for sustainable development (Ochayi, 2021). They are seen as an agricultural workforce that ensures food production in large proportion and impacts the economy (Hartl, 2006; Scoones, 1998). However, they still represent a population that faces persistent cultural and structural constraints that prevent them from fully enjoying their human rights, and as well hamper their efforts to improve their lives and others around them (Ochayi, 2021).

As observed by Garba and Nasir (2023), most adolescent girls in the rural areas of Nigeria, face disproportionate obstacles in their lives because of poverty, and in many cases see their education interrupted. In an attempt to survive, most of them face consistent threats, ranging from domestic violence, intimidation, and sexual harassment/exploitation with attendant health risks such as early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Sarder, Alauddin, and Ahammed, 2022; Ochayi, 2021; Utoo, Ubah, and Eka, 2021).

These worst possible scenarios in an attempt to make a livelihood, and the limited interventions for adolescent girls living in poverty have necessitated research concerns. Based on this hindsight, this study examined the problem of rural poverty in Nsit Atai local government area and the challenges it poses for adolescent girls in their attempt to make a livelihood. This is necessary because, despite the various poverty alleviation programs, very little attention is given to the livelihood issues of adolescent girls.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Rural poverty is a major social problem affecting a good number of young persons in Nsit Atai local government area. The situation is even worse for adolescent girls' whose population is said to be the most vulnerable (Caro, 2009). As observed by UNICEF (2022) most of the girls are not in school, and the ones in school, find it difficult to pay their fees and acquire the necessary learning materials. Many lack basic needs such as food, clothing, good healthcare, and access to information (Sarder *et al.*, 2022; Girls Effect, 2016). Also, in an attempt to survive and care for their family needs, most of them have been exposed to unhealthy livelihood activities that are detrimental to their well-being. The majority of them, have been forced into early marriages, exploitative sexual relationships, child labour, and abuse. Some have even become teen mothers in the process, with associated health problems that may have emerged as a result of teenage pregnancy and childbirth (Sarder *et al.*, 2022; Ochayi, 2021; Utoo *et al.*, 2021; Caro 2009).

Although there are interventions made available by government and non-governmental organizations, including other relevant authorities like the UNICEF, and

World Bank, to address most of these problems by providing the poor adolescent girls in some parts of rural Nigeria with health care delivery, education, skills acquisition and assistance in setting up micro and small scale enterprises (The Borgen Project, 2023), it is still obvious that some of the measures put in place are not sufficient to address them all, particularly the root cause which is poverty. Consequently, many adolescent girls are still wallowing in poverty and the implications are enormous. Sadly, most of them who are presently facing the impact of poverty, who are supposed to learn from their experiences and take caution, have made themselves susceptible to men who are out to take advantage of them because of their economic vulnerability. As a result, most of them as reported by UNICEF (2022) have been put in the family way in their quest for survival. The majority of them have already given birth to children who are likely to face the same situation. Unfortunately, where there is no improvement in livelihoods, the upcoming ones are likely to repeat the same circle, and society will keep facing the same problems again probably at a higher magnitude.

As it is presently, the menace has given birth to other social vices. Most of these girls in their attempt to make it and survive poverty have become victims to traffickers who lure them to cities with fake promises to help them acquire meaningful livelihood engagements. As a result, most of them, have lost their lives prematurely, also, many have been trafficked and sold into prostitution and hard labour. The effect is felt in their families and society, where they play major roles to drive and sustain the economy.

Despite all these, there is a dearth of studies on rural poverty and its implications on adolescent girls' livelihood. What is common in the literature are studies on the health implications of poverty on adolescent girls (Sarder *et al.*, 2022; Global Coalition to End Child Poverty, 2017; Oke, 2010; Furstenberg, 2008; Larson, 2007). Limited studies have addressed the issue of livelihood for adolescent girls in the rural environment. Based on this hindsight, this study examined the livelihood challenges confronting adolescent girls in their attempt to survive rural poverty in Nsit Atai local government area. This is necessary because there are many held assumptions that most adolescent girls because of poverty, are always motivated to engage in high-risk practices particularly the exchange of sex for gifts or money to survive.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study was to examine rural poverty and livelihood challenges among adolescent girls in Nsit Atai local government area. This was collaborated with the following specific objectives are to:

- i. Find out the causes of poverty among adolescent girls in Nsit Atai local government area.
- ii. Examine the extent to which rural poverty has affected adolescent girls in Nsit Atai local government area.
- iii. Find out the livelihood strategies adopted by adolescent girls to survive rural poverty in Nsit Atai local government area.
- iv. Make useful suggestions that will serve as recommendations to reduce the impact of rural poverty on adolescent girls in Nsit Atai local government area.

## **Literature Review**

### **Rural Poverty among Adolescent Girls and Livelihood Issues**

Some factors lead to poverty among adolescent girls in rural communities. Prominent among these factors are; inequality and marginalization, violent conflict, unique culture and social practices, lack of education, lack of infrastructure, lack of government support, and lack of jobs (Global Communities of Partners, 2020; Glass, Bynner, and Chapman, 2020; Khan, 2000).

These come with consequences that have great implications for the livelihoods of poor adolescent girls in rural communities. These consequences include; dropping out of school, being involved in child or forced marriage, becoming involved in sexual exploitation, trafficking, hazardous or exploitative work or work that interferes with education, becoming members of a gang, being recruited into militias and migrating (Lile and MacTavish, 2020; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016, Eneh and Chionuma, 2009). Others are health problems, cognitive issues, and getting pregnant early with associated problems (Bettenhausen, Winterer, and Colvin, 2021; Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997).

In an attempt to survive rural poverty, adolescent girls may choose between (or be constrained from choosing) three main clusters of livelihood options: agricultural intensification, income diversification, and migration (Scoones, 1998). In all these, agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for the poor adolescent girl in the rural area

(Mkpado and Omowole, 2020). In most cases, the adolescent girls play key roles in family farming and through their economic activities generate incomes that improve not just their livelihoods, but that of their family members. However, in cases where they are forced or trafficked for such duties, it becomes exploitative and is detrimental to their general well-being (Hartl, 2006).

Aside from agriculture, the rural girls also seek alternative means of survival via secondary and tertiary livelihood activities. These include wage labour, casual labour on large estates, and migration to urban centers. This category of girls sees agriculture as dirty work and they are migrating nationally and increasingly across international borders to make a living (Bennell, 2007). Although migration is not a guarantee to make a living, it is still one of the common livelihood strategies among rural people (Degefa, 2005). Most adolescent girls, who migrate, do so to cities in search of employment with the hope of raising money to contribute to their well-being and that of their families. They take migration as a means to achieve income diversification away from rural farming to improve their livelihoods. It is this quest to make a living in cities that exposes them to all kinds of exploitation and abuse.

Those who do not move away from the rural areas, and also do not participate in farming, get involved in casual and unregulated labor of income-generating activities such as processing and selling local beverages, selling firewood and charcoal, making handcrafts, petty trading, etc (Worku and Woldetsadik, 2013). It is ultimately difficult to find them staying idle without doing anything. Even though their efforts are minimal because of a lack of access to and control of land and other resources, they still contribute immensely to the livelihoods of their families, as well as their welfare (Population Council and the International Center for Research on Women, 2000).

Furthermore, some adolescent girls get into early marriage as a strategy to survive poverty. As observed by Caro (2009), some countries actively promote early marriage as part of a strategy for family income and social security. Most girls who get into marital relationships see it as employment. They join families with the expectation to make contributions, but most of them are not allowed to develop basic skills because they lack access to resources, as well as the necessary decision-making power.

Similarly, it is commonly believed that adolescent girls who face economic vulnerability are always motivated to engage in high-risk practices particularly the exchange of sex for gifts or money to survive. It is also assumed that most of them form relationships

with older men as a means of livelihood. However, it is difficult to establish whether all relationships or sex outside marriage are transactional (that is, if there is any exchange of sex for money or gifts), whether sex in marriage is also transactional, and whether a woman's basis for economic support depends on her being available and willing to have sex with her partner whenever he wishes. This is because some adolescent girls may enter into such relationships when they need protection, companionship, and adult guidance in their lives, and not necessarily to exchange sex for money or gifts (Caro, 2009).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted the Sustainable Livelihood Approach as its theoretical framework. The sustainable livelihood approach was first introduced by the Brundtland Commission on Environment and Development, and it was expanded in 1992 by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development which advocated for the achievement of sustainable livelihoods as a broad goal for poverty eradication (Krantz, 2001). The central notion of this approach is that different households have different access to livelihood assets (capitals) which the poor must often make use of to survive poverty (Serrat, 2017). These livelihood assets can be in the form of human, physical, financial, natural, and social capital.

Human capital refers to skills, one's labour, and good health. Physical capital refers to infrastructure and producer goods that are required to support livelihoods. Financial capital is the accessibility to cash, or its equivalent, for the quest for livelihood strategies. It includes savings in the bank, jewelry, livestock, etc. Natural capital is the things obtained from the natural environment. Social capital is related to the relationship, networking, and cooperation among and between the members of the community (Morse et.al, 2009).

Apart from the aforementioned assets, the approach also has other relevant variables that are necessary to take into consideration if one wants to achieve improved livelihoods. These variables are structures (government and the private sector); and the processes (laws, policies, culture, and institutions). For livelihoods to be improved (income, food security, and well-being), the structures and processes must influence the utilization of assets positively. Government policies and institutions including regulations of the private sector must be favorable to human activities in their utilization of assets to make livelihoods. Where there is no positive interaction between the assets, structures, and processes, vulnerability (shocks, seasonalities, and critical trends) will set in and it will affect

livelihoods. The shocks here represent conflict, illnesses, floods, storms, droughts, pests, and diseases; seasonalities represent prices and employment opportunities, while critical trends represent demographic environmental, economic, governance, and technological trends (Serrat, 2017).

In analyzing rural poverty and livelihood challenges among adolescent girls, the livelihood approach has helped us to understand the economic vulnerabilities adolescent girls face in rural areas because of poverty, and the livelihood strategies they have adopted to survive it. Most adolescent girls in rural areas who live in poverty lack access to assets (land and other resources) that can be utilized to improve their livelihoods. This is made worse in some societies where cultures and customary laws do not make provisions to protect the girl child. In such cases, the girl child lacks adequate decision-making power over the utilization of assets and other resources to make a living. She is conditioned to continuously depend on a man for her livelihood. Where the man fails or is absent, the girl child struggles and engages in all kinds of livelihood activities to make a living. When she does not have better options, she is forced to engage in negative ones which constitute exploitation and abuse to survive. This is why adolescent girls are the most vulnerable in poverty situations particularly in Africa and Asia where there are stringent societal structures and processes against their livelihood options. For them to overcome this, there must be changes in policies and institutions for the girl child to have adequate decision-making power over asset utilization that will guarantee sustainable livelihoods.

The livelihood approach is praised for its ability to go beyond other approaches to poverty eradication by offering a more coherent and integrated explanation of the concept of poverty and its survival strategies. It is observed that other theories of poverty eradication are too narrow because they focus only on certain aspects or manifestations of poverty, such as low income, or do not consider other vital aspects of poverty such as vulnerability and social exclusion, the livelihood approach has done well by recognizing that more attention must be paid to the various factors and processes which either constrain or enhance poor people's ability to make a living in an economically, ecologically, and socially sustainable manner (Krantz, 2001).

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to examine rural poverty and livelihood issues among adolescent girls in Nsit Atai Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State An exploratory

qualitative study was conducted to show the extent poverty has affected adolescent girls in Nsit Atai Local Government Area and the livelihood strategies they have adopted to survive it.

Since the population of adolescent girls who live in poverty in Nsit Atai Local Government Area is unknown, the Bill's (2004), infinite population formula was used to determine the sample size for this study. From calculations, the sample size of two hundred and seventy-four (274) was derived. The formula and calculation of the sample size are presented below:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Z &= \text{Value of } Z \text{ (1.654)} \\
 p &= \text{Population Proportion (0.5)} \\
 q &= 1 - p \text{ (1 - 0.5)} \\
 e &= \text{Margin of Error (0.05)} \\
 n &= \text{Sample Size}
 \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Thus: } & \frac{1.654^2 * 0.5 * (1 - 0.5)}{0.05^2} \\
 &= \frac{2.735716 * (0.5 * 0.5)}{0.0025} \\
 &= \frac{2.735716 * 0.25}{0.0025} \\
 &= \frac{0.683929}{0.0025} \\
 n &= 274
 \end{aligned}$$

From the sample size, 10% (27) of respondents were considered for the in-depth interview. The in-depth interview method was adopted because of its ability to give room for respondents to give detailed responses on a subject matter under study. The choice of only 10% (27) from the calculated sample size, was because it would have been practically tedious to interview 274 respondents individually within the scheduled time for the study. Also, the analyses of responses via the in-depth interview method from 274 respondents would have been very demanding. Based on these justifications, the researchers purposively selected twenty-seven poor rural girls from the three major clans (Afaha, Ibedu, and Ibiaikot) in Nsit Atai local government area for the data collection process.

To reach the target population for data collection, the researcher purposively used women leaders from the three clans that make up the local government area. The women leaders were mobilized to search and bring girls who are living in extreme poverty and are struggling to survive in their respective areas. Through their help, the target population was

reached, and the selected girls were subsequently booked for an interview at their various clan head houses respectively. All participants booked were adolescent girls (ages 13 – 19) who barely have what to eat daily and are struggling to survive.

Furthermore, since the in-depth interview (IDI) technique was adopted for this study, the researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide with questions to identify the causes of rural poverty among adolescent girls, the extent to which poverty has affected them, and the livelihood strategies they have adopted for survival.

Lastly, the researcher used the qualitative inductive approach to analyze the transcribed responses derived from respondents during the in-depth interview session. These responses were presented thematically in line with the objectives of the study.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This study investigated the problem of rural poverty and how it affects the livelihood of adolescent girls in Nsit Atai local government area. To achieve this goal, three main objectives were examined: to find out the causes of poverty among adolescent girls in Nsit Atai local government area; to examine the extent to which rural poverty has affected adolescent girls in Nsit Atai local government area; and to find out the livelihood strategies adopted by adolescent girls to survive rural poverty in Nsit Atai local government area. This section presents the findings from the study and the discussion thereof. It is done in themes based on the objectives of the study.

### **1. Causes of Poverty among Adolescent Girls in Nsit Atai**

Respondents were asked what they think is the cause of their poverty status. Out of the total number of 27 respondents interviewed, 10 (37%) of them attributed the cause of their poverty status to the death of their parents. This was the popular opinion. As narrated by some of them:

If my parent were alive, I would have been sent to a better school like other children whose parents have money. I won't be sleeping hungry because they will go out and source for money to take care of me and my siblings, like other parents do. Since they are not alive to provide for me, I have been living in poverty, and I struggle to survive daily (View of the respondent from Ndon Ikot Itieidung, Ibiaikot Clan, 10/06/2024).

I lost my dad who was the breadwinner of my family; my mom is living with somebody. She can't even take care of me and my siblings. This influenced my decision to go and live with my uncle (my father's brother) to survive, but still, I am finding it difficult to have my needs met. My uncle cannot care for me sufficiently as my parent would have done (View of the respondent from Ikot Edebe, Afaha Clan, 10/06/2024).

Life has been difficult with me since I lost my parent. I am living with my grandmother. If my grandmom does not provide for me, I won't eat. This has exposed me to so many things I wouldn't have personally loved to do if my parent were alive to provide for me as other parents do for their children (View of the respondent from Ibedu Atai, Ibedu Clan, 10/06/2024).

Apart from the death of parents, other respondents attributed the cause of their poverty status to a lack of money and jobs. For those who say this, they looked beyond themselves to incorporate their parents who have nothing to do to sustain them. As narrated by some of them:

I am poor because my parent has no money. They have nothing to do to raise daily income for survival. Unless we are called to weed farms for people, we have nothing else to do. This has made life extremely difficult for me and my entire family (View of the respondent from Ikot Ukpong, Afaha Clan, 10/06/2024).

We are many in our family, and many nights we sleep hungry because there is no money to eat. Sometimes, we eat pears as food to sleep. This is because our parent has nothing to do and money is not coming in from anywhere. If we don't work for people on their farms, we won't have food to eat (View of the respondent from Ikot Essien, Ibiaikot Clan, 10/06/2024).

My dad has no job, and my mom is doing nothing. We have a little piece of farm where we eat from. Life has been difficult with us, and almost daily, we beg to eat particularly when there is no farm work to engage in (View of respondent from Okoro Nsit, Ibedu Clan, 10/06/2024).

From the trend of responses, it is apparent that the majority of the respondents blamed their poverty status on the death of their parents, lack of money and jobs. However, only one respondent from Ikot Akpan Ike in the Afaha clan attributed her poverty status to lack of education on the part of her parent. According to her, "If my parent had attended school as other parents did, they would have had the necessary qualification to access better opportunities which would have fetched us money and changed our poor status".

The views expressed here corroborated with the submission of Global Communities of Partners (2020) who argued that, without a job or a livelihood, people will face poverty; and in situations where a family breadwinner is dead, households can be impoverished with significant consequences for children within them (Global Coalition to End Child Poverty, 2017). This situation is the case in Nsit Atai as narrated by the majority of respondents during the IDI session. In addition, since the majority of them are still young and without the prerequisite educational qualification, together with the fact that they are living in rural areas that have limited livelihood opportunities, they cannot access meaningful employment that can change their poverty status.

## 2. The Extent to which Rural Poverty has affected Adolescent Girls in Nsit Atai

Respondents were also asked how poverty has affected them. The majority of them lamented about the challenges they face because of poverty, particularly in their educational pursuit. According to them:

Poverty has affected my education. Some days, I stay back from school to attend to farm work. I am living with my grandmother, and she is not strong enough to do farm work all alone. So, when we have farm work, we go together, so that we will have what to eat. If those days are school days, I have to stay away from school to source for livelihood. This deprives me of school lessons and proper education (View of IDI respondent from Odot 2, Afaha Clan, 10/06/2024).

Because of poverty, I can't further my education. I am done with secondary school, but there is no money to further higher education. I couldn't even afford the Jamb form to write the last University Matriculation Exams (UME) as others did. (View of the respondent from Ikot Ebita, Afaha Clan, 10/06/2024).

Poverty has affected my chances of going to school. I live with my auntie, who takes me to the farm even on school days. Apart from staying away from school to attend to farm work, sometimes, I don't have money to buy learning materials like other children do (View of the respondent from Ikot Inyang, Afaha Clan, 10/06/2024).

Apart from the effect on school attendance, majority of respondents also lamented that poverty has affected them to the point that they hardly have what to eat daily. Out of all the views collected, the most touching experience came from a respondent from Ikot Essien village, Ibiaikot Clan who narrated that most times she and her siblings survived on seasonal fruits such as pear. According to her, "Because of poverty, we sometimes sleep without food. We are in the season of pear now, so most times, we eat pear and sleep when there is no food".

Furthermore, the majority of the respondents agreed to have been exposed to exploitative labour because of poverty. Apart from being taken to the farm during school hours, some of them agreed to serve as 'house girls' where they were maltreated and used for street hawking. As narrated by some of them:

I have been affected by poverty. As a result, I moved to live with somebody in Uyo as a 'house girl', since my parent couldn't take care of me and my many siblings. While living with the person, I was made to sell buns even during school hours before I had food to eat. After, suffering for the person, selling buns for her children to go to school, I was later accused of stealing and was sent away (View of the respondent from Odot 1, Afaha Clan, 10/06/2024).

I lived with somebody as a maid because of poverty, and I was maltreated seriously. Before I go to school, I will have to finish all my house chores and drop her children at school, before I resume mine late. After school, I will go and hawk on the streets to raise money for her. Life was difficult there, so I couldn't bear it again, I had to

return to the village (View of the respondent from Adia Nsit, Ibiaikot Clan, 10/06/2024).

Because of poverty, I migrated to Uyo to live with somebody as a maid. I worked at home and was made to sell on the roadside without pay. Life was not easy. Apart from the stress I passed through, my master wanted to take advantage of me by trying to sleep with me. So, I had to run away and return to the village (View of the respondent from Ikot Ubok Udom, Ibedu Clan, 10/06/2024).

These views align with the submissions of Lile and MacTavish (2020); Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) who argued that poor children lack school preparedness and school connectedness because probably their parents have fewer or no resources to invest in their education. They often have cognitive issues and lower educational achievement, and because they have no resources for school activities, they are often expelled or suspended from school compared to financially stable students. Also, most of them are exposed to hazardous and exploitative work. They work long hours in semi-formal and informal businesses that expose them frequently to dangerous and unhealthy environments for little pay or no pay. Most of them are domestic workers and are exposed to physical and sexual violence (Overseas Development Institute, 2012).

This is an indication that there is laxity in the implementation of government policies and regulations about child labour. Where adolescent girls are exploited as reported above, it shows that the government has failed in the protection of the girl child. Consequently, as advocated by the sustainable livelihood approach, girls exposed to such conditions, would not be able to utilize their assets to make a livelihood (Serrat, 2017), hence poverty persists as most of them who migrated to the city to make a living are back to the village where poverty prevails. The implication therefore is, that these girls have nothing to do in the village, and a girl who is not engaged positively at adolescent age is equally exposed to all kinds of sexual exploitation where men will come in the name of marriage or friendship and take advantage of them. This is the reason we have high cases of teenage pregnancy and teen mothers in our rural communities, and in the process of giving birth, many of them have lost their lives due to immature reproductive organs.

### **3. Livelihood strategies adopted by adolescent girls to survive rural poverty in Nsit Atai.**

The researchers also made inquiries to know what these poor girls do to survive poverty. In response, a lot of them said they join their parents/guardians to do farm work to put food on the table. Some claimed they weed farms for people and sell farm produce like 'fufu' (made from cassava), palm kernel, and coconut for their parents/guardians. None of

them claimed to have something to do personally to survive poverty. All of their responses indicated dependency on parents/guardians for survival. Apart from those who admitted to having once or twice migrated for a 'house girl' job in the city, others claimed they have been into sexual relationships with men to gain assistance where they needed help. However, there were those (though very few) who claimed to be doing nothing, but they relied totally on what their parents/guardians offered them.

The following are extracts from the IDI session to buttress the above submission:

To survive poverty, I break palm kernels and sell them to bring money back home. I am living with my parent, but I have once lived with my grandmother and auntie, all to survive poverty. I sometimes follow my mom to work on peoples' farms so that we can get paid to buy food (View of the respondent from Odot 3, Afaha Clan, 10/06/2024).

My dad is a pastor, and his pay is very little which cannot sustain us as a family. Because of this, I migrated to live with somebody for my secondary school education. After my secondary education, I lived with another person as a 'house help' to survive poverty. Here, I was exposed to sexual harassment from my master who wanted to take advantage of me. Because of this, I left and returned to my parent in the village. While in school, I had a boyfriend, who was my classmate. He supported me and helped me academically through school. Poverty has pushed me to do things I wouldn't have loved to do if I were not poor (View of the respondent from Odot 2, Afaha Clan, 10/06/2024).

I accompany my auntie to weed farms for people to get money. Life is difficult. I would have loved to have a man of my own who would support me and take care of my needs, but my auntie did not allow me. A lot of men have approached me for a relationship, but my aunt keeps pushing them away (View of the respondent from Ikot Mkpene, Ibedu Clan, 10/06/2024).

I usually join my uncle's wife whom I am living with to farm. She usually buys farms (ukpe ndep ikot) for the cultivation of cassava. It is from such farms, that we harvest cassava, process it, and produce 'fufu' which I sell to bring money back home (View of respondent from Ndon Omum, Ibiaikot Clan, 10/06/2024).

From the above responses, it is obvious that most of these girls engage in one economic activity or the other to survive poverty. Some even wished to engage in sexual relationships to gain assistance where they needed help. These corroborate with the view of the Population Council and the International Center for Research on Women (2000) in the literature, that it is ultimately difficult to find adolescent girls staying idle without doing anything. Even though their efforts are minimal because of a lack of access to control land and other resources, they still contribute immensely to the livelihoods of their families, as well as their welfare. As seen in their responses, agriculture stands out as the main source of livelihood. This aligns with the views of Mkpado and Omowole (2020); Scoones (1998)

who said that agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for the poor adolescent girl in the rural area. In most cases, adolescent girls play key roles in family farming and through their economic activities generate incomes that improve not just their livelihoods, but that of their family members (Hartl, 2006). Although some of them admitted to having been involved in sexual relationships for assistance, such cannot undermine their positive contribution to the well-being of their families and that of society as a whole. By implication, it means that the contribution of the girl child is very important to the survivability of her family members and the economy of the society she finds herself. When they are up and doing at least agricultural activities will not cease, and food security is sure.

One salient issue discovered in the course of the study is that all girls interviewed were in school or at least have acquired formal education at primary and secondary school levels despite their poverty status. This can be attributed to the free and compulsory education policy of the state government for primary and secondary school students. This has afforded these girls the opportunity to go to school, and it is expected that with time their education will be beneficial to them, particularly in their quest to find meaningful employment that will salvage their poverty situation.

## **Conclusion**

Multidimensional poverty is higher in rural areas, where 72% of people are poor, compared to 42% of people in urban areas (NBS, 2022). This is because there are fewer opportunities to make a living in rural areas than in the urban centers. Consequently, people struggle to make livelihoods to survive poverty and its associated problems, and rural adolescent girls appear to be one of the most affected categories of persons. The adolescent girls as it is revealed in this study, bear the brunt of struggling to put food on the table, not only for themselves, but for the benefit of other family members. This has hampered their education, and as well exposed them to exploitative relationships which if not managed well, can jeopardize their future. Thus, it is imperative to conclude that there is strength in adulthood, and adolescent girls are one of the major contributors to the improvement of the household economy and that of the society they find themselves. Such strength if supported, can improve their livelihoods, and as well save them from poverty and its associated consequences.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are imperative:

- i. There is a need for the government to enforce its regulation on free and compulsory education beyond urban centers. Adolescent girls should not be missing classes for farm work and other economic activities as found in this study. Government should extend their monitoring exercise beyond urban centers to rural areas where these girls are used more to raise money to sustain their hungry family members. By so doing, it will help them acquire complete lessons in school while boosting their capacity to compete favorably when opportunities come their way in the future.
- ii. Since the study revealed that children who have lost their parents are the ones facing poverty the most, there is a need for government/NGOs to put in place a special social service program that will cater to the basic needs of these children. In addition to the free and compulsory education policy, government should put in place a special program that will serve as a platform to cater to the welfare of poor children. This platform should take care of their food, educational materials, and clothing. Also, able members of the society who are of good standing can also partner to make this happen. This will go a long way to reduce the burden poverty has placed on this category of children.
- iii. Since it has been established that agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for adolescent girls living in poverty. Government should assist them with the necessary facilities to engage in mechanized and commercial farming in large quantities. If this is done, it will boost their turnover in terms of harvest, and as well put more food on their table, while enhancing the economy of the society they find themselves. Also, poverty will be reduced and better livelihoods will be achieved for the girls and their families.
- iv. Government should make legal provisions or execute the existing ones (if there are any) to address the issue of maltreatment of adolescent girls who are serving as 'house help' to people, particularly in cities. This is necessary because there are several reports of maltreatment and abuse of adolescent girls by their guardians or masters. If this is done, it will help bring the perpetrators to book, while acts that are capable of jeopardizing the future of the girls will be checked.
- v. Parents, guardians, and other relevant authorities should continue to talk to our adolescent girls about the need to stay away from relationships that can jeopardize their futures. The benefits of pursuing a bright future should be emphasized over teen marriage and teen pregnancy. This will save our adolescent girls from the numerous

health and social consequences that accompany pre-marital sex and early marriage. Parents, who promote this culture because of poverty, should also be made to know the consequences, and the need to stay away from such acts, to save the future of our young girls.

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