

# **A Mountain to Climb**

Gender-Based Violence and Girls' Right to  
Education in Sierra Leone

May 2015

## **Defence for Children International**

Defence for Children International (DCI) is an independent non-governmental organisation that promotes and protects children's rights on a global, regional, national and local level.

DCI is represented in over 45 countries worldwide through its national sections and associated members across Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and Europe. At the global level, the DCI movement is united in its commitment to working for justice for children, protecting, defending and advocating for the human rights of children involved in the criminal justice system. DCI national sections develop and implement programmes in response to the needs of children in their countries, working on a range of issues in addition to juvenile justice including child labour, sexual exploitation and access to education.

Located in Geneva, DCI's International Secretariat is the focal point of the movement at the international level, implementing programmes that promote child rights globally and supporting the activities and growth of its members.

## **Defence for Children International, Sierra Leone**

Defence for Children - Sierra Leone (DCI-Sierra Leone) was founded in 1998 during the country's civil war, a time when the rights of many child citizens were gravely violated. It was initially established to monitor and document violations of children's rights and to provide legal assistance to child victims of violence and children in conflict with the law, including those who were detained and accused of being rebels. Although DCI-Sierra Leone is a local and independent chapter, it develops its programs based on the core principles and values of the Defence for Children International movement. DCI-Sierra Leone envisions that children's voices are heard and that their rights are protected in both law and practice at national and community levels.

DCI-SL has its head office in Freetown, with branch offices in five different districts with forty-five staff spread over the four regions of Sierra Leone. The main goal of DCI-Sierra Leone's work is to provide legal assistance, psychosocial and socio-economic empowerment for child victims of abuse/violence, children in conflict with the law and children in very vulnerable situations.

## Acknowledgments

The author owes a debt of gratitude to everyone who made this study possible.

Huge thanks are owed to Ileana Bello, Executive Director, and Anna Tomasi, Advocacy Officer, at the DCI International Secretariat in Geneva, who have provided immense support and encouragement for the research from the outset.

Very special thanks also to Abdul Manaff Kemokai, Executive Director of DCI-Sierra Leone, who hosted and organised the research fieldwork, and to the DCI-SL team in Freetown, especially Ian Leigh, Allison Chandler, Amidu Koroma, Yvonne Shears and Sarah Safa. Manaff and his colleagues took time out from their busy schedules to support, interpret and record the consultations in 2012 and repeated the entire process again for the follow-up interviews in 2015. Many thanks to Hawanatu Nemata Mansaray and Sarah Safa who set up the original interviews and focus groups. The support and generosity of the DCI-Sierra Leone team throughout this research has been invaluable and is very much appreciated.

Of course, this research would not have been possible without the participation of the girls from the Bonga Town and Rokupa Girl Power Panels, who agreed to share their experiences of life in Freetown with us: special thanks are owed to you all. Thanks also to the other research participants, including community members and representatives of various NGOs and educational bodies, who shared their views on some of the problems facing girls in Sierra Leone today. These participants included:

**Francis Reffell**, Project manager, YMCA slum livelihood project Freetown

**Hassan Fuad Kanu**, National Coordinator, YACAN (Youth and Child Advocacy Network)

**Eileen Hanciles**, National Coordinator Sierra Leone chapter, Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)

**Anita Koroma**, Country Director, Girl Child Network Sierra Leone

**Ena K. Harmon**, National Coordinator, One Girl Sierra Leone

**Abdul Manaff Kemokai**, Executive Director, DCI-Sierra Leone

**Ian Leigh**, DCI Project Officer, Western Area

Deputy Director of Education, Waterloo

**Rev Joseph Sam Ellie**, school principal

**Ramatu Kamara**, school principal

**Raymond Senesie, Sumaila Banie Eilleh-Seisay, Mustapha Kieh** DCI managers, Makeni and Kenema

Finally, thanks to my supervisor Dr Jackie Turton at the University of Essex, who has provided unstinting support and guidance throughout this project.

**Barbara Robinson**  
**Geneva, May 2015**

## Table of Contents

	Page
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Sierra Leone Overview</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Girls' attitudes and experiences of the education system in Sierra Leone</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Impact of forms of Gender-Based Violence on the Right to Education</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Responses to the Gender-Based Violence: Role of NGOs and the <i>Girl Power</i> Programme in Sierra Leone</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Summary and Recommendations</b>	<b>36</b>

## Executive Summary

### Background and Rationale for the Research

The right to education is regarded as universal and inviolable, yet all over the world children, especially girls, continue to be denied their right to a quality schooling. In Sierra Leone, a gender gap in education persists, particularly from secondary school onwards where lower levels of female participation are recorded<sup>1</sup>, due in part to forms of violence and discrimination directed against girls. This situation is in turn perpetuating a vicious cycle of poverty and gender inequality from generation to generation.

This report examines how different forms of gender-based violence, including harmful cultural practices such as early marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), are affecting girls' ability to access and remain in secondary and higher education in Sierra Leone. The main aims of the research are as follows:

- To examine girls' perspectives and experiences of the educational system in Sierra Leone;
- To investigate the cultural, social and financial barriers to girls' right to further education;
- To provide some insight into the impact of the 2014/15 Ebola epidemic on girls' experiences of school and their wider lives; and
- To examine the role of the State, civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Sierra Leone in addressing these issues.

The report mainly focusses on issues affecting girls and young women in Freetown, although information regarding the situation of girls outside the capital and in rural Sierra Leone was collected through interviews with NGO staff based in those areas. The project was undertaken in two stages by a researcher from the University of Essex Human Rights Centre alongside DCI-Sierra Leone, a non-governmental organisation that works to promote and protect children's rights. For the first stage, interviews and focus groups were carried out with key stakeholders in Freetown in October 2012, including teachers, NGO groups and government representatives, as well as girls and young women who participate in the DCI *Girl Power* panels. In January 2015, a number of the *Girl Power* participants were again interviewed, in order to gain an insight into how their lives have changed and to explore the impact of the Ebola epidemic.

### The Right to Education in Sierra Leone

Under Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), ratified by Sierra Leone in 1990, all children have the right to free primary education and efforts should be made to improve access to secondary level education if possible. Although school enrolment figures have improved thanks to the abolishment of fees and the introduction of compulsory primary education, the quality of education provided is questionable and for many Sierra Leonean children the ability to progress on to junior secondary school (JSS) and complete their education remains an aspiration rather than a reality.

These problems are especially evident with regard to girls. While participation in primary education is now roughly even among girls and boys, the gender gap is more obvious at secondary and tertiary level: only 9.5 per cent of adult women have achieved a secondary level education or higher, compared to 20 per cent of men<sup>2</sup>. Families

---

<sup>1</sup> Net attendance rate for girls at secondary level stands at 25.1 per cent compared to 30.6 for boys. See United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) <http://www.ungei.org/infobycountry/sierraleone.html>

<sup>2</sup> UNDP (2015) <http://www.sl.undp.org/content/sierraleone/en/home/countryinfo/>

frequently struggle with the costs associated with education in terms of fees, uniforms and other expenses. For girls, however, further problems arise as a result of a conflict between adherence to cultural norms regarding traditional female roles on one hand, and modern influences promoting gender equality on the other. This is producing significant obstacles to girls' right to education, which manifest themselves in the three domains that normally serve to protect rights of girls and women, namely the families, communities and the State, mirroring the definition of gender-based violence set out in the key doctrine for gender rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and in Article 2 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW, 1993).

## **Report findings**

Although Sierra Leone has made great strides in the past decade, both in terms of developing a progressive policy framework to tackle educational disadvantage and to realise these provisions in practice, it is obvious from statistical and anecdotal data that massive challenges remain to real change.

Some of the key findings from this research are as follows:

- The Ebola epidemic has had a devastating impact on children's lives, with thousands of children being directly affected according to DCI-Sierra Leone. In addition to the tragic loss of life, the effect on the country's education system has been immense, as schools closed for 8 months during the course of the epidemic. The follow-up interviews conducted with girls earlier this year highlighted the personal cost of the crisis, with a reported rise in teenage pregnancies and girls voicing their fears that they may not be able to reengage in education following the school closures;
- Although poverty and illiteracy were cited as key underlying reasons for disengagement from education, girls face difficulties staying on at school due to social and cultural obstacles to education, which are based on stereotypical views of the roles of women. The barriers identified by informants to this research are all forms of gender-based violence, occurring in the contexts of the family, community and the State in which girls live. The Ebola epidemic has exacerbated these problems and has made already difficult living conditions even worse;
- These barriers included girls' involvement in sexually exploitative relationships (often with the knowledge and approval of their parents); early marriage; pregnancy the heavy burden of domestic and street labour placed on girls by family members; the widespread prevalence of FGM (particularly in rural areas) and girls' involvement in prostitution;
- Although there is a progressive national legislative framework in place that guarantees the right to education for all children, the State in Sierra Leone was described as failing to protect the rights of girls in a number of ways, including the prevalence of sexual harassment and corporal punishment in schools; the failure to provide safe, accessible school environments and discriminatory practices such as the barring of pregnant girls from school;
- The top priorities for the girls consulted with regard to education were safe, clean, local schools with adequate sanitation facilities, and well-trained motivated teachers. Harassment of girl students by teachers in the form of sexual abuse and corporal punishment was stressed as a huge deterrent to school attendance, as was the lack of proper toilet facilities, which is particularly an issue for girls during their periods. As highlighted above, during the follow-up interviews girls described the devastating impact of the Ebola epidemic and how the crisis has brought their schooling and their communities to a standstill;

- Other important findings included the widespread stigma that continues to be attached to unmarried motherhood, which alongside the dearth of formal childcare options, often results in young mothers leaving school permanently following the birth of their babies;
- The research also highlighted the vital role played by NGOs including DCI-Sierra Leone and the *Girl Power* project in providing education and support services to vulnerable girls and young women, and the value placed on work of this nature by local communities.

## **Recommendations**

In order to help address these problems and protect the rights of vulnerable girls and young women, particularly with regard to staying on in education, this report recommends a focus on the following areas:

- This research has identified a huge need for support and information services for girls in Freetown and outside the capital, particularly following the Ebola outbreak, as successfully keeping vulnerable girls in school will involve improving access to financial supports, family planning services, access to contraceptives, assistance to exit exploitative relationships and assistance with childcare;
- Greater efforts must be made to implement existing policies and laws that guarantee the right to a quality education and protect girls and women from violence and abuse. These efforts must be properly resourced and the development of programmes should prioritise community participation, including girls and women as much as possible. More work needs to be done to harmonise the legal system with influential customary laws, especially with regard to areas such as early marriage;
- More efforts are needed in order to target girls who have dropped out of education, to help them to re-engage in the system. A lot of work is currently being undertaken by NGOs in this area, for example through outreach work in slum communities, the establishment of drop in centres for girls who wish to stay on or reengage in education and through the provision of scholarships, but a more coordinated response across statutory and civil society agencies is required;
- The feedback on early pregnancy and sexually exploitative relationships demonstrates the need for comprehensive sex and relationship education to be provided to children at school;
- Informants to this research expressed concerns that an outright ban on FGM could drive the practice underground. Therefore, it is recommended that engagement with community elders, cutters and others is prioritised to explore more positive options such as alternative initiation rites, which are less harmful to girls' health and well-being. A ban should be considered on politicians sponsoring mass FGM initiations;
- NGOs and civil society should continue their grass-root engagement work especially with parents and local communities, to raise awareness of the importance of girls' right to education and the impact that harmful practices such as early marriage and FGM have on their life chances. This is especially important for deprived slum and rural areas where it can be more difficult for positive messages to get through. More targeted work is also required, for example, with

regard to girls involved in sexually exploitative relationships, who need practical and personal support to exit these relationships and re-engage at school.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This report is based upon research undertaken by the University of Essex Human Rights Centre alongside Defence for Children International - Sierra Leone (DCI-Sierra Leone). The main aim of the research is to examine the major obstacles to the right to education for girls in Sierra Leone with a view to identifying how these problems can be overcome, with special attention to the efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in particular the *Girl Power* programme<sup>3</sup>.

In Sierra Leone, problems including entrenched poverty and discrimination continue to trap girls and young women in lives marked by poor educational outcomes, early parenthood and sexual exploitation. Serious financial barriers to the right to education persist in Sierra Leone, which are linked to school fees as well as other costs such as uniforms and books. However, during consultations conducted with girls and other stakeholders, it emerged that the main causes of early disengagement from education are social and cultural in nature, compounded by discriminatory customs and laws. The main barriers to education that emerged in this research are forms of gender-based violence, including early pregnancy, female genital mutilation (FGM) and sexual exploitation.

Since the original fieldwork took place in 2012, an outbreak of Ebola in Sierra Leone has claimed the lives of over 3000 people, affecting every area of the country including the Freetown slum areas where research consultations took place. According to information received from DCI-Sierra Leone, around 952 children have been infected with Ebola, with 372 confirmed deaths. Hundreds more have been orphaned by the epidemic. Aside from the tragic loss of life, the Ebola epidemic has also had a profound impact on children's right to education. The government closed all schools in September 2014, and while they reopened in March 2015, it is likely that many children will not return to school following their eight month absence. As one girl commented:

*If the government fails to provide free education for girls and also help them with uniforms and school materials after the Ebola crisis, many girls will not be able to afford school expenses and may not return when schools reopen.* (Girl's follow-up interview)

On a broader level, the epidemic has exacerbated existing problems, stretching already hard-pressed public services to the limit. The full impact of the epidemic on the situation of girls and women, who commonly take care of the sick and dying and also form the majority of frontline medical staff including nurses, remains to be seen. However, it is certain that the outbreak has made the country's already tough living conditions even more difficult to bear.

### **The Right to Education and Gender-Based Violence**

Under international law, all children are entitled to free compulsory primary education, while States have an obligation to develop secondary education and responsibility for

---

<sup>3</sup> The full title of the programme is *Girl Power: Promoting Equal Rights and Opportunities for Girls and Young Women* (2011-2015). Funded through the Dutch Ministry for Foreign Affairs, it is being rolled out in ten countries in Africa, Asia and South America through NGOs including Plan Nederland; Defence for Children – ECPAT Nederland; Child Helpline International; Free Press Unlimited; International Child Development Initiatives and Women Win. The programme aims "to build and strengthen civil society to ensure the equal rights and opportunities of girls and young women in developing countries, and their full participation in the social, economic and political development of society."

developing measures to make it accessible for all children<sup>4</sup>. General Comment No 13 of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights<sup>5</sup> defines the right to education as follows, recognising the importance of education not merely in academic terms but also something intrinsic to a child's socialisation, in order to realise their potential to contribute to their society and the wider world:

*Education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. As an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities. Education has a vital role in empowering women, safeguarding children from exploitative and hazardous labour and sexual exploitation, promoting human rights and democracy, protecting the environment, and controlling population growth. Increasingly, education is recognized as one of the best financial investments States can make. But the importance of education is not just practical: a well-educated, enlightened and active mind, able to wander freely and widely, are one of the joys and rewards of human existence<sup>6</sup>.*

As set out above and in Article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979)<sup>7</sup>, the importance of schooling in protecting and empowering girls and women shows why denial of the right to education through forms of gender discrimination and violence is so damaging.

With regard to gender based violence, Articles 1 and 2 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW, 1993)<sup>8</sup> state that violence against women and girls includes a broad spectrum of abuse perpetrated in the families, communities and the State in which they live. The development of the DEVAW demonstrated a growing international acceptance that discrimination and violence against girls and women in their domestic as well as public lives represented a violation of their human rights, which needed to be recognised and addressed in policy and legislation<sup>9</sup>. In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action widened the definition of violence against women to include the issues of forced pregnancy and sexual slavery, as well as violence perpetrated against women in times of conflict (among others)<sup>10</sup>.

## **Methodology**

The research uses qualitative data gathered through consultations where participants were asked about their perspectives and experiences of the education system in Sierra Leone, in particular the obstacles faced by girls and young women and how these are being overcome through the efforts of the State and civil society.

---

<sup>4</sup> ICESCR (1966) Article 13.2. For more information see Unicef/United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2007) *A Human Rights Based Approach to Education* <http://www.right-to-education.org/sites/r2e.gn.apc.org/files/A%20Human%20Rights-based%20Approach%20to%20Education%20for%20All.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

<sup>6</sup> See General Comment No.13 of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1) [http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/ae1a0b126d068e868025683c003c8b3b?Opendocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/ae1a0b126d068e868025683c003c8b3b?Opendocument)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/CEDAW\\_1979.pdf](http://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/CEDAW_1979.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> United Nations. 1993. *48/104: Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* (A/RES/48/104); and United Nations. 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Qureshi (2013) p188.

<sup>10</sup> *The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action: Fourth World Conference on Women: Beijing, China: 4-15 September 1995* (DPI/1766/Wom), paras. 114-116.

DCI-Sierra Leone assisted throughout the course of the research: setting up the fieldwork, providing help with the interpretation and facilitation of consultations and accessing appropriate contacts for participation. The fieldwork took place in October 2012 and included semi-structured interviews and focus groups with girls and young women as well as NGO representatives and other stakeholders (see table below). The research fieldwork was concentrated in Freetown, which is significant given the diversity of attitudes and experiences found in rural and urban Sierra Leone. However, efforts were made to capture some of the experiences of people outside Freetown through consulting with professionals from Makeni, Kenema and the small town of Waterloo, outside Freetown.

In January 2015, staff from the DCI Sierra Leone office in Freetown undertook follow-up interviews with 12 of the 28 *Girl Power* participants who had contributed to the original group discussions. The girls who participated were aged 10-22 years and were all still in education (at primary and secondary level).

**Table 1: Overview of research participants**

<b>Research</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
<b>Semi-structured interviews October 2012</b>	NGO workers (Freetown)	7
	Deputy Director of Education (Waterloo)	1
	School head teachers (Rokupa and central Freetown)	2
<b>Focus groups October 2012</b>	NGO workers (Kenema and Makeni-based)	3
	Community representatives (Bonga Town)	9
	Community representatives (Rokupa)	2
	Girl Power members (Bonga Town) aged 5-19 years	20
	Girl Power members (Rokupa) aged 8 – 22 years	8
<b>U p d a t e d i n t e r v i e w s January 2015</b>	Girl Power members	(12)
<b>Total number of participants:</b>		52

The topics covered in the semi-structured interviews with professionals focussed mainly on the nature of their organisations' work with girls and young women, the policy environment, the educational system in Sierra Leone and their relationship with communities and the State. With regard to the community representatives, similar questions were posed regarding problems with regard to education and employment, with a particular emphasis on local issues. Finally, the focus groups with girls explored their perspectives and experiences of the education system in Sierra Leone, the problems faced by girls who wish to go to school, as well as their involvement in the *Girl Power* programme. The 2015 follow-up interviews were undertaken on a one-to-one basis with DCI staff and were designed to explore the girls' progress in their education and wider lives and also to assess the impact of the Ebola epidemic on their schooling.

The information gathered through the fieldwork, including recordings and notes from interviews and focus groups, as well as photographs and pictures, was coded and analysed in NVIVO 10, a qualitative software programme.

## **Aims of the research**

The main aims of the research are as follows:

- To examine the views and experiences of girls and young women in Sierra Leone, to provide them with the opportunity to share their perspectives and to deepen understanding of their particular educational needs;
- To investigate the social, cultural and financial obstacles girls face in accessing their right to education with regard to gender-based violence;
- To investigate the role of the State and extent to which it is honouring its obligations to guarantee the right to a quality education for all children and to protect girls from discrimination and violence;
- To examine the role of civil society and non-state actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and grassroots organisations; and
- To provide some insight into the impact of the Ebola epidemic on the right to education in Sierra Leone.

## **Report structure**

The following chapter sets out an overview of the situation in Sierra Leone, including the policy context, with a focus on domestic and international laws that impact on the lives and education of girls. Chapter 3 draws upon the consultations with girls and young women, to explore the key issues affecting their right to education, while Chapter 4 attempts to illustrate how forms of gender-based violence are being translated into social, cultural, personal and economic barriers that prevent girls from engaging in education.

Chapter 5 explores the work of NGOs and civil society in addressing problems facing girls and young women, with special reference to the *Girl Power* programme. Finally, Chapter 6 sets out the report's conclusions and recommendations, based on the research findings and feedback provided by DCI. Quotes from the consultations, as well as case studies provided by DCI-Sierra Leone, are used throughout the report to illustrate the text.

## Chapter 2: Sierra Leone Overview

Sierra Leone is a West African nation with a population of around six million people, of whom just over 40 per cent are children aged 14 and under<sup>11</sup>. The coastal capital of the country is Freetown, established by freed slaves during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and now home to an estimated one million people, including the majority of Sierra Leone's Krio population. Beyond Freetown, the population is mainly rural and formed of indigenous ethnic groups including the Mende, Temne and Limba, with a number of smaller towns including Makeni in the north and Kenema in the south eastern region.

Despite the considerable progress that has been made since the end of Sierra Leone's civil war (1991-2002), the country continues to be one of the poorest in the world. It ranks 183 out of the 187 nations on the UN Human Development Index, based on factors including life expectancy (which stands at 45.6 years), with around 46 per cent of the population living in 'severe' poverty<sup>12</sup>. For informants to this report, endemic poverty was the main issue underpinning the barriers to education:

*These are the basics that always retard a lot of parents from sending their children to school. How am I going to get the money to pay for the fees? How am I going to have the uniforms or the books? (NGO lead, Kenema).*

*Poverty is a big disease that is destroying the future of many girls in Sierra Leone. Many families cannot even afford to provide complete meals for their children. Without food and other basic needs, girls would hardly cope and finish school. (Girl's follow-up interview).*

Despite the rise in Sierra Leone's urban population in recent years, the majority of its people (60 per cent) still live in rural areas<sup>13</sup>. However, public services are still highly centralised in the capital and the perception that the decision makers of Freetown are corrupt and far-removed from people's lives remains strong<sup>14</sup>. According to informants to the research, in rural Sierra Leone customary law wields greater influence than the formal constitutional law system. As a result, traditional practices such as early marriage are more common. While in Freetown, factors such as the lure of relationships were frequently mentioned as the reasons why girls disengage from education, in rural areas pressures brought to bear on girls by families and communities, particularly regarding early marriage, were more likely to act as barriers to staying on in school.

*As you move towards the rural areas, the rate of pregnancy goes higher because of limited possibilities*

### Girl child education in Sierra Leone

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Sierra Leone in 1990, all children have the right to free primary education and efforts should be made to

---

<sup>11</sup> All statistics are taken from UN Population Data on Sierra Leone, unless otherwise stated: <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=SIERRA%20LEONE>

<sup>12</sup> UNDP Human Development Report 2014: Sierra Leone: [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr\\_theme/country-notes/SLE.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/SLE.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> UNICEF Statistics: At a Glance Sierra Leone [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/sierraleone\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/sierraleone_statistics.html)

<sup>14</sup> UNEP (2010) *Sierra Leone: Environment, Conflict and Peace Building Technical Report*. p4. [http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/Sierra\\_Leone.pdf](http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/Sierra_Leone.pdf)

improve access to secondary level education if possible (Articles 28 and 29)<sup>15</sup>. Although enrolment in primary education surged following the abolishment of fees in 2003, only 74 per cent of children complete primary school. Access to lower secondary education has also improved with enrolment rates now standing at 62 per cent compared to 27 per cent in 2000, but is clear that many children are not making the transition to secondary school and completing their education<sup>16</sup>. This is especially evident with regard to girls. There are about 9 girls for every 10 boys at primary school level and the gender gap is even more evident at secondary and tertiary level. Only 9.5 per cent of women in Sierra Leone are educated to secondary level or higher, compared to 20 per cent of men<sup>17</sup>. Overall youth literacy in Sierra Leone is just 59 per cent, demonstrating that the country still has some way to go to improve educational outcomes for its young people.

With regard to employment, the girls and young women consulted for this research were highly positive regarding their future job prospects. Sadly, this optimism is not supported by official employment statistics or anecdotal evidence. Youth unemployment remains high in Sierra Leone as around two thirds of young people are out of work<sup>18</sup>. Employment opportunities are limited for women, who work predominantly in the low paid 'informal' sector, such as in agriculture and street trading<sup>19</sup>. Work of this kind does not normally require a formal education and it is difficult for women to find work outside these traditional roles. Even when girls and young women have the benefit of an education, they can struggle to find a job. For example, a Freetown head teacher explained how he is frequently approached by qualified female teachers looking for work, who he is unable to help due to the lack of job opportunities.

*In this area of Rokupa, I know of many who have gone to teacher training colleges, they're out but the*

## **Gender-based violence in Sierra Leone**

In Sierra Leone, discrimination and abuse directed against females are widespread and embedded in traditional customs and laws. A culture where violence against women and girls is accepted is further aggravated by the hidden nature of the problem and high levels of illiteracy among the female population.

*Owing to the fact that we have traditional ways and practices that are very discriminatory to girls, we have a lot of families who don't think that girls should start and end school. Sometimes they are allowed to start but at some point, they take them and push them into marriage. They also have situations where they subject them to female genital*

*mulatation, they subject them to long hours of domestic work which also affect their education. (Executive Director, Child Rights NGO)*

<sup>15</sup> Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the right to education as follows: "1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular: (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all; (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need; (c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means; (d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children; (e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates." (United Nations, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Unless stated otherwise, statistics taken from UNESCO *Education For All Country Profile: Sierra Leone* (2012).

<http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Dakar/pdf/SierraLeoneprofileEFAoct2012.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> UN Human Development Report on Sierra Leone (2012): <http://hdrstats.undp.org/images/explanations/SLE.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Education for All Coalition Sierra Leone (2010) p6.

<sup>19</sup> African Development Bank (2011) *Sierra Leone Country Gender Profile*. p 12  
<http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/Sierra%20Leone%20Country%20Gender%20long%20version%20final%20%282%29.pdf>

Ambiguous attitudes towards girls and women were sometimes demonstrated during the consultations for this research. For example, girls involved in sexually exploitative relationships were regarded both as child victims in need of protection, but also as adult women on account of their actions. As one informant put it: *"You see you are not a woman, but not a girl again, because you are doing certain things that do not belong to a child."*

The forms of gender-based violence identified in this research are very prevalent in Sierra Leone. The country has one of the highest rates of early marriage in the world, with around 48 per cent of women married before the age of 18, although there are significant regional variations (for example from 24 per cent in the Western Area to 60 per cent in the Northern region)<sup>20</sup>. Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy, with 38 per cent of women becoming mothers by the age of 18<sup>21</sup>. The health impact of becoming a mother at an early age in Sierra Leone has been well-documented. According to Amnesty International (2009), the prevalence of early motherhood and the government's failure to provide even "minimum" maternal health facilities has resulted in the country having among the highest rates of maternal mortality in the world<sup>22</sup>. The prevalence of FGM is also among the world's highest, with approximately 88 per cent of women aged 15-49 having undergone the procedure<sup>23</sup>.

### **Impact of the Ebola epidemic**

The Ebola outbreak is undoubtedly exacerbating the already difficult living conditions for many people in Freetown and beyond the capital. According to information received from DCI-Sierra Leone, the epidemic is having a devastating impact on the country's children. Over 10,000 children are believed to be directly affected by the outbreak. In addition to the high number of children who have lost their lives to Ebola, many more have become orphans because of the crisis. Some children taken to hospital with their families survived alone when both parents and other members of the family died. These surviving children now face many problems - as well as dealing with the loss of their families, they need to find new guardians to care for them.

As mentioned earlier, the epidemic led to schools being closed for eight months and has damaged the social fibre of communities. The girls interviewed described how the epidemic has left them lonely, isolated, afraid and often hungry.

*I can't go to school anymore and I can't socialise. Now I feel more depressed with poverty, fear of Ebola and hunger.*

*It has affected my schooling and freedom of movement. My family has also become poorer.*

The Ebola crisis has left the poor of Sierra Leone even poorer, cut off from their livelihoods they have no way of making money. The already serious problems of sexual exploitation and engagement in transactional sex are even more prevalent, as girls turn to relationships with older men and boys in order to survive

---

<sup>20</sup> UNFPA Child Marriage Profiles: Sierra Leone, p10 [http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/ChildMarriage\\_8\\_annex1\\_indicator-definition.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/ChildMarriage_8_annex1_indicator-definition.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> UNICEF (2013) Sierra Leone: An Evaluation of Teenage Pregnancy Pilot Projects in Sierra Leone [http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index\\_72952.html](http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_72952.html)

<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International (2009) *Lives Cut Short: Make Pregnancy and Childbirth Safer in Sierra Leone* p2.

<sup>23</sup> UNICEF Statistical Profile on Female Genital Mutilation: Sierra Leone. [http://data.unicef.org/corecode/uploads/document6/uploaded\\_country\\_profiles/corecode/222/Countries/FGMC\\_SLE.pdf](http://data.unicef.org/corecode/uploads/document6/uploaded_country_profiles/corecode/222/Countries/FGMC_SLE.pdf)

*We no more go to school, we no more interact with each other and have fun. Many girls are getting pregnant.*

*During this Ebola crisis, many girls have got pregnant simply because they were looking for their survival. Even basic food is difficult to afford by the girls, so they keep men or older boys like commercial 'bike riders' who can provide them with at least food to eat.*

Despite this struggle for basic survival, the girls still prioritise their education. They also voiced fears that the long period of school closures could spell the end of their education, with no return to normality in sight.

*Ebola has affected my schooling because the crisis has kept us out of school for long and has also made our parents poorer and may find it difficult to finance my schooling when schools reopen after the Ebola crisis.*

*It has prevented me from going to school; it has affected our festive seasons and activities done during public holidays. Now, many girls have become street traders and are at high risk of not returning to school when schools reopen.*

### **The policy and legislative context in Sierra Leone**

**International standards:** Sierra Leone is a signatory to a number of key legal standards that impact on the right to education and gender rights, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the African Covenant on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). The UNCRC is probably the most significant of these standards from a child rights' perspective, and having ratified the Convention over 20 years ago, Sierra Leone is obligated under international law to establishing education as a right and securing its provisions in policy and practice.

With regard to gender rights, Sierra Leone ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1988, which obliges nations to eliminate discrimination against women in national policies, laws and practices (Article 2); to make efforts to guarantee women's rights in social, cultural and political fields (Article 3) and to ensure equal rights in terms of education and employment (Articles 10 and 11). However, while these international norms have been integrated into national standards, the situation in practice is more complex as three different systems of law are used in Sierra Leone, namely constitutional, customary and Islamic.

The formal constitutional system is based on the British model and has been developed in line with international human rights frameworks. However, traditional customary law retains its influence in the provinces and in rural areas, where people identify little with what are regarded as the laws of Freetown.  
(Women's education advocate, Freetown)

These customary laws are often discriminatory against women, allowing for early marriage and abuse of women's property and divorce rights. Although efforts are being made to harmonise the constitutional and customary law systems, attachment to traditional ways remains strong. For people who are illiterate as well as far removed from the decision-making process in Freetown, it is often easier to maintain the status quo than to adopt the new laws in practice.

*We've got a lo*

*They favour the old way of doing it, not because they don't want to learn the new ways but because the old way is much easier. (Youth organisation lead)*

**Table 2: Summary of relevant international standards<sup>24</sup>**

<b>International and Regional Standards</b>	<b>Year ratified/ acceded by Sierra Leone</b>
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) 1989.	<b>1990</b>
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1979.	<b>1988</b>
African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) 1990	<b>1992</b>
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 1966	<b>1996</b>
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) 1966	<b>1996</b>
UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960)	<b>1967</b>
ILO Convention no. 138 concerning Minimum Age for admission to employment (1973)	<b>2011</b>

**National standards:** With regard to national legislation in Sierra Leone, the most important development since the end of the civil war is the Child Rights Act (CRA, 2007), which represented an attempt to harmonise the country's different domestic law systems with the provisions of the CRC<sup>25</sup>. Under the Child Rights Act, a child is defined as a person under 18 years; child labour is prohibited and limits are set for the use of corporal punishment<sup>26</sup>.

The right to education for all children is guaranteed under Sierra Leone's constitution. The Education Act (2004), as well as the Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan (ESP, 2007), set out the country's vision for education policy and practice. Fees have also been abolished for the National Primary School Examination (NPSE), which all students must pass in order to make the transition to secondary school and fees for junior secondary school (JSS) have been scrapped for girls in the north and east of the country. Despite these improvements, informants to the research commented that more efforts are needed to ensure that the educational system is free from gender discrimination, especially with regard to school-based forms of gender based violence.

In recent years, a number of significant laws have been passed which aim to improve the rights of girls and women<sup>27</sup>. In 2007, three Gender Acts were passed to guarantee in law women's property and divorce rights and to legislate against domestic violence<sup>28</sup>, while the Sexual Offences Act (2012) is designed to protect women and girls from rape and abuse.

*There is this culture that women cannot have positions, women cannot have power, women cannot hav*

<sup>24</sup> For a comprehensive summary of international instruments regarding the right to education, see Right to Education Project: [http://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/RTE\\_International\\_Instruments\\_Right\\_to\\_Education\\_2014.pdf](http://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/RTE_International_Instruments_Right_to_Education_2014.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Coinco, Emily (2010) *A Glimpse Into the World of Teenage Pregnancy in Sierra Leone*. UNICEF p9.

<sup>26</sup> ACPF (2012) *Harmonisation of Children's Laws in West and Central Africa*. Addis Ababa: The African Child Policy Forum p101.

<sup>27</sup> African Child Policy Forum, (2012) p97-98.

<sup>28</sup> Coinco (2010) p9.

*The Government must enforce the sexual offences laws. Girls drop out from school mostly as a result of pregnancy. This was also the case for my elder sister. (Girl's follow-up interview)*

Under the CRA (2007), the minimum age for marriage for both sexes is set at 18. However, research participants reported that, despite the efforts of the government and NGOs, these laws are having little impact on the lives of girls and young women, due to lack of information and the high rates of illiteracy among women. In addition, there is currently no law prohibiting or restricting the practice of FGM in Sierra Leone. The government's silence on the matter is due to the fact that FGM is a highly politicised issue, as leaders who speak out against the practice risk alienating voters who value FGM as part of their traditional culture.

**Table 3: Summary of relevant national laws in Sierra Leone**

<b>National Legislation</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Year Passed</b>
<b>Education Act</b>	Established basic education as a right for every citizen. Children have a right to nine years of compulsory, basic education (primary through to junior secondary school), starting formal education at the age of six.	<b>2004</b>
<b>Child Rights Act</b>	Enshrined the provisions of the UNCRC in the constitution.	<b>2007</b>
<b>Three Gender Rights Acts: Domestic Violence Act; Devolution of Estates Act; Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act.</b>	Set out women's rights against domestic violence; property rights and rights in customary marriages and divorces. Banned forced or early marriage for girls under the age of 18.	<b>2007</b>
<b>Sexual Offences Act</b>	Protects girls from abuse from people in authority; bans rape in marriage; provided greater powers to Family Support Units (FSU) to investigate and prosecute cases of sexual abuse.	<b>2012</b>

Despite the positive policy developments, it remains clear that many progressive laws are simply not being translated into practice. Often, a clash of social versus legal norms regarding issues such as FGM, early marriage and child labour, was stated as the main factor affecting the implementation of progressive policies.

With regard to free basic education, for example, the reasons for problems in terms of implementation offered by participants included: a lack of state resources allocated to education; absence of monitoring procedures; lack of information and awareness-raising regarding new laws; low quality of education offered due to short school days and the widespread failure to provide supportive and safe environments for girls at school.

*You could say only 20-30 per cent [of new laws] are being implemented. A lot more haven't been imple*

Despite the numerous challenges facing Sierra Leone, many of the participants involved in the research were optimistic about the long-term future of girls' education as there is growing awareness of the benefits of educating girls and women. Sierra Leone has put a

significant amount of planning and resources into improving its education sector and tackling gender discrimination, but more effort is required if it to ensure better educational outcomes for its young people and to meet its obligations under international and national standards.

### Chapter 3: Girls' experiences and perspectives of the education system in Sierra Leone

Information regarding the attitudes and experiences of girls with regard to their right to education was gathered in two phases. Firstly, through focus groups conducted in 2012 with *Girl Power* programme participants. It is important to note that due to the group nature of the discussions, which took place in open settings, personal issues relating to family and relationships were not explored in detail with the girls. The second phase of consultations took place in January 2015, when 12 of the original 28 girls were interviewed by staff from DCI-Sierra Leone. These 121 discussions explored the girls' current situation with regard to their schooling and the impact of the Ebola outbreak on their education. In this chapter, quotes from both consultations are used, alongside a case study provided by DCI.

#### Overview

The girls and young women consulted in 2012 were highly positive for their futures. They expressed strong beliefs regarding the importance of education and had a clear sense of the links between achieving in education and improving their life chances. Despite the dearth of employment opportunities in Freetown, being an educated woman with a job was regarded as the main way a woman could assert her independence and realise equality with her male peers. In both phases of the consultations, the most common career choices included teaching, nursing, law and accountancy.

*Education is very important for girls and young women to empower [them], it helps you become a good citizen and to be a good role model for others. You learn from others and others will learn from you.*

*I want to be a good role model for the community, that's number one, and I want to become an account*

However, following the terrible experiences of the Ebola epidemic, the girls who contributed to the follow-up interviews were less optimistic regarding their schooling and the future in general.

*Yes they are still big problems for girls in terms of education. Lack of money has become even worse than before the Ebola crisis. Many of our colleagues have lost their parents and may not be returning to school if not given financial and other supports by the government or NGOs. Many girls have also become pregnant because they sold their body for money so that they can survive (Follow-up interview).*

Support from parents, both personal and financial, was regarded by the girls in both phases as the key factor which decided whether they would be able to stay on at school. In the slum communities where the consultations took place, it was argued that parents need both information and financial assistance to keep their daughters in school, to appreciate the value of education and stop the cycle of poverty and illiteracy. However, in one of the groups, the participants highlighted that girls themselves have a role to play in ensuring that they complete their education by avoiding the distractions posed by boys and the money and gifts offered through sexually exploitative relationships and formal prostitution.

*There are lots of parents who force their child not to go to school, force them to get married, so the parents need more education so that they help to take care of the child.*

*Some girls don't study and at the end of the day they see that the only way to get*

[money] *is in exchange for sex.*

*Parents and teachers always demonstrate less confidence in girls to finish school because lots of girls are getting pregnant and hence give limited support to girls.*  
(Follow-up interview)

Many of the girls expressed the belief that their education could bring about benefits beyond their own lives, for their families, communities and their nation as a whole. This could be achieved through providing a good income for their children and educating the next generation of girls. These attitudes were summed up by the phrase: "educate a woman, educate the nation", which was frequently mentioned in the girls' groups.

*It is good to learn for your own personal gain, but it would also be beneficial for the others, for the people around you.*

### **Girls' priorities in education and schooling**

In 2012, sense of girls' priorities regarding education was gained through asking them to divide into feedback groups and to draw their impressions of good and bad schools, based upon their personal experiences. This was then followed by discussions, where a number of key issues were consistently highlighted. These were prioritised as follows:

1. Adequate toilet and sanitation facilities, in particular separate toilets for boys and girls;
2. Provision of other facilities, such as computer labs and libraries, and a clean, safe and school;
3. The importance of well-trained, motivated teachers interested in educating their pupils, who did not resort to corporal punishment and show sexual interest in girl students;
4. A relevant and holistic curriculum; and
5. The provision of local accessible schools.

It is important to note that many of the issues cited as problems by adults in the course of the research (such as early marriage), were not highlighted by girls during the initial discussions. This is probably because they were asked to focus exclusively on school-based issues, with wider issues relating to social lives explored later in the discussions.

In the follow-up interviews in 2015, the girls agreed that these issues remained important and relevant, and the order of priorities had only slightly changed: having a clean, safe, secure school with proper toilet and sanitation facilities remains of utmost importance for girls.

1. Provision of facilities, such as computer labs and libraries, and a clean, safe and school;
2. Adequate toilet and sanitation facilities, in particular separate toilets for boys and girls;
3. The importance of well-trained, motivated teachers interested in educating their pupils, who did not resort to corporal punishment and show sexual interest in girl students;
4. A relevant and holistic curriculum; and
5. The provision of local accessible schools.

The girls raised also new issues in the course of the follow-ups, such as the need to provide food for school going children so that they don't go to school hungry.

*Another important thing to include is food and nutrition. Many girls can't concentrate in class due to hunger.* (Follow-up interview)

#### **1. Adequate toilet and sanitation facilities**

The most frequently highlighted issue in the girls' groups in 2012 related to the availability of adequate sanitation facilities at school, in particular the provision of clean, separate toilets for boys and girls. The feedback on toilets provoked some interesting discussions regarding peer relationships. When toilets were not available or had to be shared with boys, the participants felt that girls' modesty would be compromised and opportunities for having sex would be presented. It was not implied these sexual encounters with boys their own age were coercive or non-consensual in any way, but the girls stated that such relations were undesirable if a girl wished to avoid becoming pregnant and subsequently miss out on her education.

*Good schools should have toilets for both boys and girls so that if they only have one toilet for boys and girls, sexual intercourse will not happen. But if both of them mix in the same toilets they will have sexual intercourse or romantic things will happen.*

*There is a special reason for that, having separate toilets for the boys and girls because thinking about the peer groups, if you allow them to use the same toilet then there will be a pregnancy as they will have something which is not good like the sexual intercourse.*

During the updated consultations, provision of adequate toilet and sanitation facilities remained a high priority, if not even more so in light of the Ebola epidemic.

*The outbreak of Ebola has even made cleanliness and sanitation even more important for schools, especially for girls. This is what we are now told in all Ebola sensitisation messages. (Follow-up interview)*

The negative impact of girls' monthly periods on school. Discussed in the context of the need for clean, girls-only toilets, the participants described how periods acted as a deterrent to school attendance. This issue was also highlighted by an NGO informant to the research, whose organisation provides sanitary towels to women and girls. The project was set up as a response to feedback from girls (particularly from rural areas) who stated that they were missing school on a regular basis due to their periods.

*Poor toilet facilities discourage girls from coming to school. As for me I would hardly come to school when I am having my period or have running stomach due to [the] lack of proper toilet facilities. (Follow-up interview)*

## **2. Safe, well maintained schools**

In both phases of the consultation, a well-maintained school offering access to modern technologies such as computer labs as well as libraries was rated a high priority by the girls. A good school was described as a place where children would be safe, having a building that was clean and well-built with glass windows, and with a secure compound. With regard to facilities, the provision of computers was regarded as crucial in a 21<sup>st</sup> century educational system. The girls from one feedback group explained that computers in schools are especially important for developing practical experience with technology, as most children do not have access to computers in their own homes.

*Look up, open windows – no glass. No toilet facilities, students defecating behind the compound. No staff room, no computer lab, no library, no good steps to the compound.*

*We [should] also have a library, so that some of us during the lunchtime if we have lunch and we don't have the time to play, we go into the library – we sit there, read books that will educate us, find more knowledge.*

*Proper facilities at school and safe and clean, well maintained school buildings make school popular and attract good teachers. (Follow-up interview)*

### **3. Motivated, well-trained teachers**

The role of teachers was emphasised by the girls, who highlighted the positive influence that a good teacher could have on pupils' academic outcomes. For the girls consulted in 2012, a good teacher (either male or female) is motivated and interested in their pupils, as well able to impose discipline without resorting to violence (referred to as 'flogging'). In contrast, teachers who used corporal punishment and took an unwanted sexual interest in their female students were seen as a serious deterrent to girls' school attendance. Corporal punishment is regularly used for behaviours including being late for school or not paying attention in class, and girls in both phases of the consultations stressed that ending the practice is very important for boys and girls alike.

*Violent discipline must change. Corporal punishment drives girls away from school. (Follow-up interview, 2015).*

Inappropriate advances by male teachers was highlighted as something that at the very least made girls feel ill at ease, and at worst could lead them to drop out from school, due to feeling intimidated and threatened.

*There the teacher is approaching girls, his students, it is not a good school [...] Girls will not go to school*

*The other issue that should be included is sexual harassment by boys and male teachers. They have no regard for girls. (Follow-up interview).*

### **4. The importance of the curriculum**

The provision of a holistic and relevant curriculum was also highlighted by the 2012 groups, especially when asked as to what constituted their ideal school. Community-based vocational training offering courses in hairdressing and garment-dyeing for example, was a high priority for the girls. Although the majority of participants wished to pursue academic paths, the girls stated that access to other forms of training is very important for the communities in which they live. They also placed particular emphasis on information regarding personal hygiene, such as the importance washing their hands to avoid catching and spreading infections. As the original consultations took place following a serious cholera outbreak in Sierra Leone in 2012, it is possible that public awareness campaigns could have had an influence on the girls' priorities.

*The teachers talk about hygiene, wash your hands before eating, eat good food, wear clean clothes, take plenty of exercise and sleep well, that motivates our hygiene. It makes us know so much about our hygiene, cleaning, especially we girls. We should know how to take good care of ourselves.*

In 2015, the girls agreed that the curriculum remained a priority, though less important than the school environment and teaching. One participant suggested that the existing curriculum was not realistic, in terms of the ability of teachers to prepare pupils adequately for exams.

*In terms of curriculum, the government needs to revise them because our teachers hardly finish the syllabus and prepare us well for exams (Follow-up interview).*

### **5. Accessible schools with access to further education**

Finally, having an accessible local secondary school was a priority for the girls in 2012 and 2015. Reflecting the discussions with older members of the community, as well as feedback from NGO professionals, distance from school is a source of concern for both girls and parents, and affects school attendance due to fears regarding personal safety. The girls in the Bonga Town group discussion explained that female students walking to school felt threatened by older men on motorbikes, who would intimidate them and attempt to coerce them into having sex. Suggested solutions to this problem were the provision of a school bus service, or simply building a secondary school based in or close to their community.

*They are saying that they need a school bus, because when they are walking to school there these big*

*They should build schools in the community where girls go to school.*

*Distance to school is also a huge challenge for me as it makes schooling quite expensive and difficult for me and my parents (Follow-up interview)*

## **Summary**

The follow-up consultations demonstrate the terrible impact of the Ebola epidemic in terms of girls' schooling but also their basic survival. They also show how the provision of services usually taken for granted by western schoolchildren such as adequate toilet facilities, can have a dramatic effect on children's experiences and enjoyment of school. However, these practical improvements cannot be made in isolation to the wider social and cultural situation in which girls live. The lack of separate toilets was linked to sexual relations and the problem of early pregnancy, as it normally spells the end of a girl's education. Conditions for schooling are improving in Sierra Leone but as the following chapter demonstrates, the underlying issues that are causing girls to disengage early still need to be overcome, while the Ebola epidemic has made difficult conditions even worse.

## Chapter 4: The Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Girls' Right to Education in Sierra Leone

Under the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW, 1993) three domains - family, community and the State – are described as the main contexts in which violence against women and girls takes place. The provisions set out under the DEVAW illustrate the diverse nature of gender-based violence, in terms of physical, sexual and psychological abuse, as follows:

*Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following: (a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation; (b) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution; (c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs<sup>29</sup>.*

The forms of gender-based violence described by informants to this research are all included in the DEVAW definition. With regard to the perpetrators involved, parents who push their daughters into sexually exploitative relationships and early marriages, were frequently mentioned by participants. Other perpetrators included older men or “uncles” who coerce young girls into intimate relationships in exchange for money or gifts, as well as the family and community influences that compel girls to undergo FGM. The State is also complicit in perpetuating a culture where gender-based violence is accepted, for example, through failing to provide a safe environment for girls at school.

### a) How poverty affects girls' lives

While the root causes of the barriers to education are complex, poverty is the key factor underpinning them all, meaning poverty of opportunity and ambition for girls' futures, as well as the very real financial barriers that exist. Poverty means that for many families, it is more important for a girl to scrape a day-to-day living through trade or prostitution, rather than focussing on her long-term future.

*Lack of money has kept many of our friends out of school particularly those without parents or with very poor parents. Most of them were forced to drop out of school and do trading or got into marriage or prostitution. (Girl's follow-up interview).*

The harsh reality of life in deprived areas was cited as the main reason for school drop outs by the representatives of communities living in slum areas, who described the difficulty of prioritising education in settings where basic services including clean water and toilets are lacking.

*One of the main problems in this community is the lack of development. Lack of education that is in the*

### b) The Role of the State

Informants to the research highlighted a number of ways in which the State in Sierra Leone is failing girls in education, including the prevalence of discriminatory practices,

---

<sup>29</sup> Full text of the Declaration is available on the following website: <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>

poor teaching standards and school conditions, and the failure to address the continuing high rate of drop-outs.

- **Quality and quantity of education offered**

Four components have been identified as integral to the right to education, namely availability (provision of free education with properly qualified teachers and facilities); accessibility (an educational system which does not discriminate); acceptability (an appropriate curriculum and safe school environment for children) and adaptability (provision of a system that can be adapted to meet the needs of different groups, including girls)<sup>30</sup>. It is clear that many of these factors are lacking in the Sierra Leonean system. Discriminatory practices as well as the failure to implement progressive policies are keeping girls from school and locked into traditional female roles. The girls' groups consistently highlighted problems with the physical infrastructure in their schools; poor facilities and untrained teachers mean that many children who are going to school do not receive a quality of education, while a chaotic system and short school days mean that children do not receive the quantity of education to which they are entitled.

Enrolment rates may be improving, but country's low youth literacy rate (at 59 per cent) bears testimony to these problems, as does the rate of transition from primary to secondary school, at just 77 per cent<sup>31</sup>. While efforts are being made to reduce the burden of fees throughout the educational system, the cost of schooling renders staying in education post primary level impossible for many poor Sierra Leoneans. The educational system appears to be in a chaotic state in many respects. Due to their inability to deal with the huge surge in primary level enrolment over the past decade, many Sierra Leonean schools operate a half-day system where children either attend class in the morning or the afternoon, meaning that they are literally missing out on half their education. In addition, there appears to be little effort to monitor children's school attendance:

*You know in our educational system we have the two shift system, how do we know, how do we track them to know if they should be in in the morning or the afternoon? If you meet them in the morning they are going to say I'm going in the afternoon, you meet them in the afternoon they'll say I went this morning mam! (Women's education advocate, Freetown)*

- **Discrimination and violence at school**

School-based forms of gender-based violence such as harassment of girls and young women in educational settings was highlighted as a problem by the girls and a number of the professionals consulted, because it allows for a culture where girls can feel unsafe and victimised, which is not an environment conducive to learning. In schools, this harassment was described as unwanted attention and pestering by school employees such as teachers, cleaners and security staff, as well as male peers.

*You see, at the starting of the school the girls are more interested in school than the boys. But as time goes on, because of certain harassments, the girls begin to step down. (Head teacher, Freetown)*

*We have testimonies from children in Sierra Leone, which are the girls, they have been harassed in sch*

---

<sup>30</sup> More information on the 4 As is available on the Right to Education website: <http://www.right-to-education.org/node/226>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Dakar/pdf/SierraLeoneprofileEFAoct2012.pdf>

(Youth activist, Freetown)

- **Exclusion from education**

Informants to the research also described how girls face discrimination through exclusion from school. One of the most serious instances related to girls who were refused entry to school during pregnancy and following the birth of their babies, or prevented from sitting exams while pregnant, in clear violation of their rights under the UN CRC.

*Some of the pregnant girls were allowed to sit; some who were very big did not. They were strict about who could go for the exams and who couldn't. Those who were just initially pregnant, they were allowed to sit the exams and that was it. (NGO lead, Kenema)*

**c) The Barriers to Girls' Right to Education**

During the course of this research, a number of forms of gender-based violence were described as the key barriers preventing girls from going to school. These were early marriage and sexually exploitative relationships; early pregnancy; harmful traditional practices and the use of girls as domestic labour, which are set out as forms of violence against women under Articles set out above. All have their roots in traditional norms and laws, which affect the poorest and most disadvantaged women in Sierra Leone.

- **Early Marriage and Sexually Exploitative Relationships**

As mentioned earlier, marriage for under-18s has been illegal in Sierra Leone since the Gender Laws were passed in 2007. However, girls continue to be married at an early age, particularly those in the poorest homes and in rural areas<sup>32</sup>. Participants commented that early marriage is hugely damaging to girls' right to education, because girls are seen as forfeiting their rights as children once they become married 'women'. The issue is not just linked to a culture where girls are expected get married at an early age, but also a fear amongst parents that their daughters may get pregnant out of wedlock, bringing 'shame' upon their families.

*The culture, the setting in that part of the country, women are not coming forth to access education, be*

With regard to Freetown, where efforts to promote the new marriage laws appear to have had more success, problems were more focused on girls' involvement in sexually exploitative relationships, particularly with older men in exchange for money or gifts, as well as formal prostitution. Poverty again plays a role here: participants reported that in deprived communities, girls' desire for basic items as well as luxuries such as mobile phones was one of the main reasons for their involvement in such relationships. Disengagement from education normally follows, especially if a girl becomes pregnant. A discussion on this subject in one of the girls' groups revealed that relationships with older men often become coercive or forced, even when the girl initially agrees to exchange sex for money or gifts.

*There are not enough positions or scholarships for our children out here, especially for girls. So they end up having to turn to an uncle, they call them their sugar daddies, a boyfriend or something. (Country Director, Women's Education Project)*

*This thing about the poverty is – some of the girls in the community, because they want mobile phones*

<sup>32</sup> UNFPA Child Marriage Profiles: Sierra Leone, p10 [http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/ChildMarriage\\_8\\_annex1\\_indicator-definition.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/ChildMarriage_8_annex1_indicator-definition.pdf) .

Parental attitudes were also highlighted with regard to girls' involvement in sexually exploitative relationships. For poor families living in slum communities, a daughter in a relationship can represent one fewer person to feed and support. It was also mentioned that girls from deprived backgrounds face being pushed into prostitution by their parents in order to support themselves and their families. Due to illiteracy and the lack of opportunities to make money, they often have few other options open to them.

*Some girls are being thrown out into prostitution early by their families, because no provision is made for them and they have to go out and fend for themselves. (Women's education advocate, Freetown)*

*The problems [affecting girls] either discourage or repel girls from going to school. They can also push girls into prostitution. Girls often see prostitution as an alternative to education...The government should make laws to stop prostitution. Their families should help too. (Girl's follow-up interview)*

It was reported that young girls are also engaging in inappropriate and exploitative relationships with influential men in their communities, such as NGO workers and teachers, who were stepping into to fill the void left by parents unable to financially support their families. These relationships were often regarded as a positive outcome for the girl involved, regardless of the impact on her education and future life chances.

*Their parents know about their boyfriends, they do not take care of them, they have the willingness but the resources are not there, the means is not there to actually take of their girl child. So the girls sometimes what they end up doing is to have a lover who is maybe an NGO worker in that community or a teacher or a businessman, and that man controls the life of that girl. (NGO lead, Makeni)*

However, some positive feedback received in the follow-up interviews regarding marriage and relationships suggests that messages regarding keeping safe are having an impact on girls' attitudes and behaviours.

*I understand what are sexual advances and how to deal with them. I used to perceive big men in our community to be fond of girls and very generous, not knowing that some of their approaches are considered sexual advances. Now I know and I don't allow them touch my body or play with me. (Follow-up interview)*

#### **- Early Pregnancy and Motherhood**

Closely tied to the problems described above, pregnancy and early motherhood have a profound impact on girls' ability to stay on in education and were the main reason identified for the high rates of disengagement among adolescent girls. Similarly to early marriage, once girls become mothers their social position changes and they are perceived as 'giving up' their right to education. As one participant put it "pikin nor de born pikin": a child cannot give birth to a child.

*Teenage pregnancy has been one of the most contributing factors. In the schools, by the time they get to the junior secondary school level, a lot of the girls will get pregnant before they can complete secondary school. (NGO lead, Kenema)* *Poverty is invol*

One of the main reasons for the high rate of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone is the very low rate of contraceptive use: among married girls in Sierra Leone, only 1.2 per cent is using contraception<sup>33</sup>. For girls who have babies, the barriers to re-engagement

---

<sup>33</sup> UNFPA Marriage Profiles: Sierra Leone p10

at school are many, including stigma attached to being unmarried mothers; a lack of childcare options for young mothers who wish to return to school; lack of financial support and a culture where girls are treated as adults once they've given birth even if they are "babies having babies". The Ebola epidemic appears to have intensified this desperate situation even further.

*We no more go to school; we no more interact well with each other and have fun. Many girls are pregnant.*

*Lack of money has become even worse than before the Ebola crisis. Many of our colleagues have lost their parents and may not be returning to school if not given financial and other supports by the government or NGOs. Many girls have also become pregnant because they sold their body for money so that they can survive.*

In a controversial move, the government recently barred pregnant girls from attending school, as they were described as setting a bad example to other pupils, demonstrating the extent of the discrimination faced by young mothers<sup>34</sup>.

It was highlighted that girls from deprived and rural backgrounds were far more likely to disengage early than the better-off, who receive greater encouragement to remain in education.

*When girls get pregnant from a rich family or a relatively better off family, they can look after the children and go back to school; their parent will take care of their children. But when the girl comes from a poor family, when they become pregnant that is the end of their whole education. There is not someone to take care of the child; they can't go back to school. (NGO lead, Kenema)*

#### **Case Study: Mariama's story, aged 16 years**

Mariama is a bright and promising girl in school. However she was born in a family where marriage is more important than education for a girl child. Mariama had this to say: "I don't really understand my father. He always sends his daughters to school, spend money to pay their fees but would not allow them finish school. My four elder sisters were all removed from school at different times and forced into marriages. This is the same thing that my father wants to do to me. I thought he had changed this habit since this is the twenty first century". She further narrated that one day when she came from school, there was meeting going on at home between her father, brothers and another visiting family. Little did she know that they were there to seek her hand in marriage. Following some few days, her father confronted her and asked her to stop going to school and get prepared to start a new life. When she asked what her father meant, he told her that she will be getting married in a month's time. She ran to her mother crying and begged her mother to talk to her father not to do this to her. Her mother just replied was that this was not new and she should make up her mind to accept it otherwise her father would disown her. She asked her teachers and other neighbours to talk to her father but he refused to change his mind. The girl then ran to DCI-SL's Socio-Legal Defence centre for help. DCI-SL teamed up with the FSU/Police to stop the marriage. The father and mother of the girl were given strong warning letter by the FSU/Police and DCI-SL's lawyer. The marriage did not go ahead and the girl continues to go to school. She is now part of the Defence for Girls Group in Adonkia.

The lack of accessible and affordable childcare was raised as the main practical barrier to young mothers remaining at school. Girls normally have to rely on ad-hoc arrangements

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/may/11/let-pregnant-school-girls-back-into-the-classroom-in-sierra-leone>

with their partners, families and neighbours if they wish to return to school. If these supports are not in place, girls are simply unable to reengage following the birth of their babies.

*Most of the girls at this stage after they get pregnant and deliver, their family situation is very hard. Because in their family there is no real gains for their father or mother to spend on their girl to go to school, unless the one who impregnated them will say to the parents – I will assist. But if that isn't the case most of them will drop out. (Head teacher, Freetown)*

#### **- Female genital mutilation (FGM)**

Female genital mutilation (FGM) was regarded by informants as having a serious impact on girls' disengagement from education, due to its symbolic role in marking their transition to womanhood, as well as the dangerous physical toll it can take on girls' bodies. It was reported that there is strong social pressure on girls to take part in initiation ceremonies through secret societies such as the Bondo. These initiations are not just centred on girls' circumcision or 'cutting', but are also regarded as important social events representing an opportunity to gather friends, families and communities together, especially in rural areas.

*Other girls, they don't want to be part of it [FGM], their parents are forcing them to do so because it is*

Research participants highlighted a number of problems involved in tackling the issue of FGM and its negative impact on educational outcomes. Firstly, as part of deeply-entrenched customs, it is closely tied with community bonds and celebrations as well as being a personal milestone for the girls involved. Secondly, it was mentioned in several interviews that FGM in Sierra Leone is a 'political' issue, meaning that it is used by politicians who wish gather support through sponsoring mass initiations. Furthermore, efforts to address FGM are hindered by politicians who are afraid of speaking out for fear of alienating their traditional support bases.

*It is now coming into elections so politicians can go to a rural community, grab all the young ladies and put them into Bondo as a way of doing good to the community. Making himself popular, I'm going to initiate all of your children, three or four on me, so you can vote me in. (NGO lead, Makeni)*

#### **- Use of girls as domestic labour**

Finally, the use of girls as 'household helps' and as street traders, was consistently mentioned as a significant barrier to schooling. This is centred on traditional gender roles and responsibilities: girls' place is in the home, where there is a strong emphasis placed on undertaking duties such as cooking, cleaning and caring for siblings, as well as selling wares on the streets. Unfortunately, this burden of work leads to girls missing out on school and being too tired to concentrate in class.

*If anyone breaks the law, they have to enforce it. You say you have to send your girl child to school, but you will see a lot of children selling in the markets on these roads. No child should sell during school hours. You will see there are a lot of them, but they are not enforcing the law. (NGO lead, Makeni)*

Exploitative child labour is banned under Sierra Leone's Child Rights Act (2007), but the use of girls as market traders as well as domestic workers is prevalent throughout the

country and it appears that few efforts are being made to enforce the law<sup>35</sup>. The importance of implementing laws to ensure that children should be in school was frequently raised, but the resources and political will are not in place to ensure that they attend school instead of working at home and on the streets.

## **Summary**

This chapter has described some of the barriers that are causing girls to drop out from education at an early age, which is damaging their ability to improve their life chances. Throughout the course of the consultations it became clear that traditional customs are contributing to a culture of where gender inequality is accepted: Sierra Leone remains a highly patriarchal society where boys are given preferential treatment. Greater emphasis is still being placed on girls' ability as domestic workers, while education is secondary to their development as future wives and mothers, as the quote below illustrates:

*We know their daily lives, they are women, a woman's place is in the kitchen, so if you are the daughter of 14 years, you're supposed to wake up in the morning, you go help with the chores at home. And maybe you don't have pipe-drawn water so you go and collect water. You don't have a kitchen in your house so you go outside to get some firewood to start a fire. You do all that and then you have to go to school. By then, they are tired, their concentration span is limited. And, after school they are just waiting for their bed, because they haven't eaten that much at home. (Women's education advocate, Freetown)*

---

<sup>35</sup> African Child Policy Forum (2012) p101.

## Chapter 5: Responses to Gender-Based Violence: The Role of NGOs and the *Girl Power Programme*

The previous chapters have demonstrated the serious economic, political and social problems that are affecting the effective delivery of education services in Sierra Leone. One of the reasons for the failure to implement the policies outlined in Chapter 2 is the relative weakness of the Sierra Leonean state, as it strives with limited resources to overcome the legacy of the country's devastating civil war. Many of the informants to this research were NGO professionals practising in the fields of youth work, education and juvenile justice, who were trying to enhance existing educational provision and fill the gaps left by the state. In this chapter, the work of NGOs, in particular DCI-Sierra Leone and the *Girl Power* programme is examined, in order to demonstrate the efforts being made by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society to support girls to stay on in education and training.

### Work of NGOs in Sierra Leone

There is a strong NGO presence in Sierra Leone which is working to support gender rights and girls' right to education through advocacy and campaigning, as well as direct service provision and development work. With regard to the NGOs consulted for this research, most were involved in direct service delivery (in terms of education and support services), advocacy and lobbying activities. The following are some of the many examples of educational support for vulnerable girls offered by the participating NGOs, which included:

- Scholarships for girls from underprivileged and deprived backgrounds;
- Practical support, such as providing schoolbags, shoes, socks for girls;
- Life skills programmes for vulnerable girls;
- Advocacy and lobbying government ministries on issues affecting women and girls including education, FGM, sexual abuse and domestic violence;
- Addressing violence in schools and aiming to make schools safer places.

At a policy level, DCI and other NGOs are playing a key role in putting pressure on the government to address problems around policy implementation and drawing attention to areas, such as FGM, where girls' rights need to be protected. DCI is also providing direct support to vulnerable girls and young women, as well as to statutory bodies such as the Family Support Units (FSUs), through assisting in case investigations and in the identification and arrest of abusers. The *Girl Power* programme, which includes DCI-Sierra Leone as a partner and from where the girls' groups were sourced, contains elements of direct provision to address causes of gender discrimination, poverty and social exclusion, and also lobbies the government to uphold its commitments to protect the rights of girls and young women.

The NGOs offered a wide range personal and practical support for girls, their families and communities in the form of programmes that included:

- Legal assistance for girls who are victims of abuse or in trouble with the law;
- Support with medical care, medical examinations and treatment for girls who are victims of abuse;
- Support with sanitation issues;
- Training for professionals working with vulnerable children, such as teachers and magistrates;
- Information and awareness raising on sexual and reproductive health.

## Community Engagement

One of the main findings to emerge from the consultations was the importance placed by community members on the role of NGOs in enhancing service provision. NGOs play a significant part in bringing about change, as their influence often crosses regional, cultural and ethnic lines to highlight positive messages about the roles of girls and women. All of the NGOs who participated in the current research reported that they were involved in community engagement work, to raise knowledge and awareness of women's rights, the importance of girl child education and protecting girls and young women from gender-based violence. NGO informants frequently highlighted the importance of promoting local role models in their community – women who had succeeded professionally or educationally, despite facing many of the challenges that the girls themselves now face. In the slums of Freetown for example, the *Girl Power* programme promotes the right to education and provides information and support regarding barriers to schooling such as early pregnancy.

*There was not a lot of sensitisation before the Girl Power programme. They are going from house to house*

In rural areas, DCI-Sierra Leone is also educating local communities regarding the importance of prioritising their girls' education over initiation into the Bondo secret society, working with local authorities to educate communities and develop bye-laws that target those involved in performing FGM.

### Examples of positive practice: The work of the Girl Power Programme

The *Girl Power* programme has been running in Sierra Leone since 2011. Funded by the Dutch Ministry for Foreign Affairs and rolled out by local partners from Plan International, DCI-Sierra Leone and the One Family Partnership, the programme aims to reduce gender and sexual violence through empowering girls and their communities. Its objectives and programme design are based on four key areas agreed upon by the Child Rights Alliance and their local partners<sup>36</sup> (gender-based violence; educational exclusion; lack of opportunities for political participation and lack of participation and representation in decision-making). Working in partnership with local organisations and communities has been highlighted as the most effective way to realise the programme's vision, as community ownership of the initiative can help to provide a sense of legitimacy and the potential to achieve long term change<sup>37</sup>. *Girl Power* has developed a range of activities to strengthen civil society, from establishing girls and children's rights clubs to training community leaders and professionals working with children, as well as awareness raising through media and sensitisation activities.

*DCI try to appeal to complicated girls, particularly those who may be vulnerable in communities like rural areas and the slums, so they can have the confidence to resist abuse and also engage parents as well as community leaders on issues that affect them*  
(Executive Director, Child Rights NGO)

---

<sup>36</sup> NGOs involved in the programme include Plan Nederland; Defence for Children – ECPAT Netherland; Child Helpline International; Free Press Unlimited; International Child Development Initiatives and Women Win.

<sup>37</sup> Girl Power Information Sheet, 2011.

### **Case Study: Marie's story, aged 16 years**

Marie lives in Rokupa, one of the slum communities in Freetown. At 16 she became the breadwinner of her home following the death of her mother. Her mother was single and died from cholera during a period of outbreak that took many lives from that community. She has two younger sisters as siblings. To survive, she decided to forgo schooling and engage in petty trading during the day and prostitution at night, a usual practice of some girls in that community. With the introduction of the Girl Power project in the Rokupa community, a Child Welfare Committee member recruited her to be part of the Defence for Girls Groups that the Girl Power project established in the community. DCI-SL provides training on child rights, child abuse, gender and life skills for members of the groups. Since there were no physical benefits like food, cash and clothing from the project, Marie found it very difficult to attend the life skills sessions because she needed to use that time to go out and find money. When DCI-SL social workers running the life skills activities took notice of her frequent absence, they became concerned. The social workers who are also young ladies tried to get closer to her in order to better understand her situation. Following several counselling sessions, Marie was able to open up and revealed her story in tears. She was encouraged to return to school and DCI-SL helps her with school fees and books. The social workers have also helped her better organize her life by making sure that she drops the practice of prostitution. Marie's life is now organized in a way that she is able to draw a balance between her schoolwork and her business. DCI-SL through the Girl Power project has also provided her with grants to strengthen her business. Her younger sisters are also part of the younger group. Marie is not only progressing in school but has grown to become young woman capable of speaking her own mind.

### **Feedback on the Girl Power programme**

*I was naive about my right but now am proud to say "I know my rights and responsibilities" and also sexual and reproductive health and self-hygiene (Girl's follow-up interview)*

As previously mentioned, the *Girl Power* programme has a specific objective to address gender-based violence, which was identified as a key area for action by the local partner NGOs in Sierra Leone. The importance of including boys and men in the programme was also stressed by a number of research informants, as it was agreed that it would be difficult to implement *Girl Power's* objectives in any meaningful way without their participation.

Among the girls consulted during both phases of the research, the *Girl Power* programme was credited as being a positive influence, through giving participants a greater sense of their self-worth and ability to be independent, as well as promoting the importance of education.

*DCI are training young girls to be self-reliant, because most of our colleagues [other girls], everything*

Most of the girls' reasons given for engaging with *Girl Power* involved their desire to 'empower' themselves (which was defined as being 'strong' and 'independent' young women) and to access support to help them stay in education. The *Girl Power* programme was also credited by the girls' groups and NGOs with helping young women to appreciate education as an alternative to engaging in risky relationships and working at home or in trade. In 2012, a number of girls commented that while *Girl Power* had originally started out with DCI staff providing the support, the girls themselves now feel able to move on and assist their peers who may be in need of help. Among those who

contributed to the follow-up interviews, increased knowledge of their rights and entitlements as children and girls was the most important thing that they had learned from the project. This was very evident from the language they used, with words such as 'respect', 'independence' and 'inspiration' being frequently cropping up during the discussions.

*There are many important things that we should know which we are not being taught at school. For example had it not been for the Girl Power project, I will never have understood what child rights are. (Girl's follow-up interview, 2015)*

*Girls have lots of problems and they need someone to help them psychologically. We are lucky to have met DCI whose staff are helping us a lot. (Girl's follow-up interview, 2015)*

*Talking of early marriage, the girls now know that their parents should not be forcing*

Local community representatives also expressed a positive view of the programme. Participants mentioned that they had noticed an encouraging change in girls' behaviour since the start of the programme, and that it provided a welcome alternative to hanging around on the streets. It is also seen as serving as a 'watchdog', deterring girls from entering into behaviours that put their well-being at risk, through information and support programmes that encourage girls to stay at school. The community representatives reported that *Girl Power* is helping local communities to realise the importance of girl child education and to mobilise to raise awareness of the issue.

*The girls want to go to school but at the end of the day, they don't get the proper help. In this community, we go out to help, so we call them, we go from house to house, talk to the parents there, talk to the pikin there. So we go to the houses and we sensitise them. (Community member, Bonga Town)*

*When you educate the woman, you educate the whole family, the whole community because everybody admires her. (Community leader, Rokupa).*

## Chapter 6: Summary and Recommendations

For Sierra Leonean girls, the conflict between adherence to traditional cultural norms on one hand and modern influences promoting gender equality on the other, is very real. This report has explored forms of gender-based violence, including early marriage, sexual exploitation, early pregnancy and FGM, which are preventing girls from moving beyond traditional roles as wives and mothers and making the transition to secondary and tertiary education.

This is a time of growing awareness in Sierra Leone regarding both the importance of girl child education and the problems girls face in accessing this fundamental right. However, the feedback received from girls who contributed to the follow-up interviews in 2015 suggest that little has changed regarding the poor learning conditions and discrimination faced by girls at school since the original consultations two years previously. Respect for tradition remains paramount, trumping progressive alternatives and ways of life that could improve the situation for girls and women, while the Ebola outbreak has only served to worsen the lives of those worst affected by these problems. Bringing about change will not just require providing adequate resources to enforce new laws, but also a concerted effort to change attitudes towards girls and women and to improve living conditions for the poorest and most vulnerable in Sierra Leone.

### Recommendations

In order to help address these problems and protect the rights of vulnerable girls and young women, this report recommends a focus on the following areas.

#### Need for greater support services for vulnerable girls

- This research has identified a huge need for support and information services for vulnerable girls in Freetown and outside the capital, particularly following the Ebola outbreak, as successful engaging girls in secondary school will not only involve providing quality education, but also improving access to financial supports, family planning services, access to contraceptives, assistance to exit exploitative relationships and assistance with childcare;
- More efforts are needed in order to target girls who have dropped out of education, to help them to re-engage in the system. A lot of work is currently being undertaken by NGOs in this area, for example through outreach work in slum communities, the establishment of drop in centres for girls who wish to stay on or reengage in education and through the provision of scholarships, but a more coordinated response across statutory and civil society agencies is required;
- The feedback on early pregnancy and sexually exploitative relationships demonstrates the need for comprehensive sex and relationship education to be provided to children at school;
- There is a need to develop formal, affordable childcare options for girls from deprived backgrounds, for example through local community organisations or drop in centres with local staff in whom they can build trusting relationships;
- A number of informants to the research also made the point that take-up of contraceptives is very low in Sierra Leone. As part of a strategy to prevent early pregnancy and to help girls to stay on in education, NGOs and civil society organisations need to be supported by the state in their attempts to raise awareness of contraceptives and encourage their use.

## **Legislation and policy development and implementation**

- The constitutional law system has a comprehensive framework in place to protect the rights of girls and women, however, more work needs to be done to harmonise these laws with influential customary laws, with regard to areas such as early marriage, for example;
- Greater efforts must be made to implement existing policies and laws that guarantee the right to a quality education and protect girls and women from violence and abuse. These efforts must be properly resourced and the development of programmes should prioritise community participation, including girls and women as much as possible. More work needs to be done to harmonise the legal system with influential customary laws, especially with regard to areas such as early marriage.

## **FGM**

- Informants to this research expressed fears that an outright ban on FGM could result in driving the practice underground. Therefore, it is recommended that engagement with community elders and cutters among others to explore more positive options such as alternative initiation rites, which are less harmful to girls' health and well-being;
- A ban should be considered on politicians sponsoring mass FGM initiations.

## **Awareness raising and the role of civil society**

- NGOs and civil society should continue their grass-root engagement work especially with parents and local communities, to raise awareness of the importance of girls' right to education and the impact that harmful practices such as early marriage and FGM have on their life chances. This is especially important for deprived slum and rural areas where it can be more difficult for positive messages to get through. More targeted work is also required, for example, with regard to girls involved in sexually exploitative relationships, who need practical and personal support to exit these relationships and re-engage at school,
- A key aspect of effectively engaging with communities will involve the participation of girls and young women to ensure that they are fully involved in the influencing and decision-making process.

## **Employment**

- Greater efforts needs to be made to encourage teachers, especially female teachers, to return to and remain in rural areas, for example through incentives such as greater opportunities for up-skilling and training;
- Although a process of decentralisation is under way in Sierra Leone, many services are still concentrated around the capital. The development of better education, health and other public services in the provinces would not just improve people's quality of life, but would also lead to much-needed employment opportunities in these areas.