



Report on findings

from school-related
gender-based violence action
research in schools and
communities in Sierra Leone

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Abbreviations

CIFORD	Community Initiatives for Rural Development
CoC	Code of Conduct
FGD	focus group discussion
FSU	Family Service Unit (Sierra Leone police)
GBV	gender-based violence
HI	Humanity and Inclusion
IfD	Institute for Development
JSS	Junior secondary school
MBSSE	Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education
MoGCA	Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs
MoH	Ministry of Health
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SRGBV	School-related gender-based violence
SSS	Senior secondary school

1 Introduction

1.1 The research study and report

From June 2021 to January 2022, Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Institute for Development (IfD) conducted a research project on school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV). This research was funded by USAID in the framework of the 'School-Related Gender-Based Violence' project implemented by the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) in partnership with UNICEF Sierra Leone Country Office. This research project was commissioned by UNICEF and accompanied the work of two UNICEF partners, Community Initiatives for Rural Development (CIFORD) and Humanity and Inclusion (HI), as they undertook programming to address SRGBV in the districts of Kambia, Kenema and Kono. They implemented the minimum standards for achieving a whole-school approach to responding to violence in Sierra Leone.

As part of this project, from October to November 2021, the research team conducted qualitative research on norms, attitudes and practices related to SRGBV in six schools and communities where CIFORD and HI were working. This research aimed to understand the main manifestations of SRGBV in these schools and communities, the extent to which the minimum standards are being implemented, the barriers to implementing the minimum standards, and the opportunities and entry points to advance implementation.

This report begins with some background, minimum standards and a summary of the methodology used for the research on SRGBV. It then provides a brief overview of the policy context for addressing SRGBV in Sierra Leone, including reflections on this policy context from national-level stakeholders who were interviewed as part of the research. The report presents key findings regarding the manifestations of SRGBV in the schools and communities where research was carried out. It addresses each domain of the minimum standards, analysing the extent to which these are being implemented. It further looks at drivers of SRGBV under each domain and challenges and opportunities for strengthening the implementation of each domain. Finally, the report provides a summary of key lessons and conclusions.

1.2 School-related gender-based violence and minimum standards for a whole school approach

SRGBV is defined as sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around school, perpetrated due to gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics. This violence is commonly experienced and perpetrated en route to and from school, in and around school grounds, and cyberspace. The UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) identifies five major forms of SRGBV: (1) bullying, (2) corporal punishment, (3) sexual violence and child sexual abuse, (4) sexual harassment and (5) intimate partner violence among adolescents.

Globally, there has been limited research on the extent and scope of SRGBV. However, initiatives such as Together for Girls are starting to compile data on its prevalence in various African countries (not currently including Sierra Leone). However, existing evidence suggests that SRGBV is primarily driven by social norms, particularly gender-discriminatory norms within and beyond schools; weak or discriminatory institutional, legal or policy frameworks; and wider structural and contextual factors, such as conflict or socioeconomic deprivation.

Preventing or responding to SRGBV requires a whole school approach in which stakeholders at the school level –including students, teachers, school support staff, principals, the local community, education authorities and other government authorities –work together to undertake a range of different activities aimed at making schools safer and more child-friendly, inclusive and gender-sensitive, and fostering a positive learning environment for students and educators (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016).

UNGEI has identified minimum standards for achieving a whole-school approach to SRGBV and developing a set of indicators for monitoring the implementation of the whole-school approach.

The minimum standards fall into eight domains:

- 1 school leadership and community engagement
- 2 codes of conduct
- 3 teachers and educational staff support

- 4 child rights, participation and gender equality
- 5 reporting, monitoring and accountability
- 6 incident response
- 7 safe and secure physical environments in and around schools
- 8 parent engagement.

1.3 School-related gender-based violence in Sierra Leone

There are limited data on the nature and prevalence of SRGBV in Sierra Leone, although this problem is recognised as widespread by actors working on gender issues and children's rights in the country. One of the few pieces of research on this issue was the 2010 National Study on SRGBV in Sierra Leone, a collaboration between a coalition of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the African Child Policy Forum. This study was based on a survey of 1,312 children from 123 schools across 7 districts and the Western Area, including Freetown. It provided evidence on causes, forms, victims and perpetrators of gender-based violence (GBV) within school settings. It identified that physical and sexual violence is pervasive for school pupils across Sierra Leone, with teachers being the primary perpetrators.

In addition, a 2015 study, *A Mountain to Climb: GBV and Girls' Right to Education*, by Defence for Children International, examined how patterns of GBV affect girls' ability to remain in secondary school and higher education in Freetown. It identified various GBV-related barriers to girls' access to education and found that the 2014 Ebola outbreak had significantly exacerbated these barriers. More anecdotal evidence about the problem of SRGBV in Sierra Leone and what works in addressing

it has also emerged from other projects and initiatives, such as those supported by the UK government's Girls Education Challenge (2013).

1.4 Research methodology

This research aimed to answer the following key questions:

- What are the key manifestations of SRGBV in the participating schools and communities?
- How and why do experiences of SRGBV differ (e.g. by type of school, geographical location, social group, age and gender of children)?
- What key factors, including beliefs and norms, underpin SRGBV in the participating communities and schools?
- Which aspects of the minimum standards are in place?
- What are the possible entry points and pathways of change to enable and strengthen the implementation of minimum standards?
- How can key obstacles to implementing the minimum standards be addressed throughout implementation?

1.4.1 Sample

The research was undertaken in six schools, two each in Kambia, Kenema and Kono, all participating in ongoing SRGBV-reduction activities. All schools were combined junior and senior secondary schools; three were Christian faith schools, one was a Muslim faith school, and two were government schools. All were mixed schools, educating girls and boys. [Table 1](#) outlines the characteristics of the schools:

Table 1: Key characteristics of participating schools

School number	Region	District	Ownership	Safety
1	Eastern	Kono	Government	Not fenced. No water, no separate toilets. On main highway to Freetown. Bushy.
2	Eastern	Kono	UMC mission	Not fenced. Separate toilets. School in good condition with sufficient classrooms.
3	North-West	Kambia	Islamic mission	Fenced. Separate toilets. Water unavailable during dry season.

4	North-West	Kambia	Government	Partially fenced with sticks. Currently building toilets for girls. Water available.
5	Eastern	Kenema	Catholic mission	Partially fenced with sticks. Separate toilets.
6	Eastern	Kenema	Methodist mission	Not fenced

The researchers were introduced to the schools by HI and CIFORD. Student participants were selected randomly.¹ In all cases, the participating students were a mixture of those who participated in school SRGBV clubs and those who did not. The research thereby aimed to capture the views of those students with

greater knowledge of the topic and also to understand the perspectives of a broader body of students.

The research team undertook focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews within each school, as shown in [Table 2](#).

Table 2: Distribution of school-based interviews

Stakeholder	Method	Total number of FGDs/interviews	Total number of interviewees
Girls aged 12–14	Focus group and mapping	6	48
Girls aged 15–17	Focus group and mapping	6	48
Boys aged 12–14	Focus group and mapping	6	48
Boys aged 15–17	Focus group and mapping	6	48
Headteachers (all male)	Individual interview	6	6
Classroom teachers	Focus group	6	60

Across the sample, the researchers interviewed teachers on the government payroll and unqualified and untrained teachers to capture a diversity of attitudes and practices among these three groups. Around ten teachers were interviewed in each school, but the numbers in each category were not recorded.

At the community and district levels, the research team undertook the interviews and FGDs, as shown in [Table 3](#).

1. In some schools a large number of eligible students were put forward and then names were drawn at random to participate.

Table 3: Distribution of community and district-level interviews

Stakeholder	Method	Total number of FGDs/interviews	Total number of interviewees
Community level			
Mothers/female caregivers	Focus group	6	48
Fathers/male caregivers	Focus group and mapping	6	48
Community leaders – chiefs, mammy queen , religious leaders	Focus group and mapping	6	48
District level			
Family Service Unit (FSU) representative	Semi-structured interviews	3	6
Ministry Of Gender and Welfare ² representative	Semi-structured interviews	3	3
MBSSE representative	Semi-structured interviews	3	3

1.4.2 Methods

The study used qualitative research methods: FGDs and semi-structured interviews. (See [Appendix 1](#) for the tools used.) The focus groups with adolescents also involved developing maps of the school and community to prompt discussion of where different forms of SRGBV take place and who is at risk. The research teams also made observations in all schools, focusing on establishing the existence and condition of infrastructure such as fencing and toilets.

These observations took place throughout the project, during visits to the schools.

The data collection team comprised experienced researchers with substantial experience conducting interviews and FGDs on gender and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) issues. FGDs took approximately 1.5 hours each, and interviews were 30 to 45 minutes. Most data collection was conducted in Krio, with some interviews in Kambia undertaken in Temne. Focus groups with girls or women were facilitated by female researchers and those with boys and men by male researchers.

1.4.3 Ethics

UNICEF approved the research plans, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), Sierra Leone's ethics board run by the Ministry of Health (MoH), and ODI's Research Ethics Committee. Key elements of this were developing safeguarding plans to ensure that children were not put at risk by the research and a plan to provide details of support to children who disclosed abuse or became distressed during discussions. All research participants gave informed consent: participating children obtained parents'/caregivers' consent and provided consent for themselves.

Where participating children disclosed incidents of serious violence, the research team reported these to the school leadership and the relevant implementing partner.

1.4.4 Analysis

Data were transcribed and coded in NVivo, and analysed according to the key themes of this report: the manifestations of SRGBV in the participating

2. Though this Ministry has been split into MoGCA and MSW nationally, in some districts they have not yet.

schools and communities, the key factors contributing to SRGBV, the extent to which different minimum standards are being implemented and the factors that

supported or constrained implementation. The analysis also identified recommendations emerging from the research.

1.4.5 Limitations

The following issues may limit the study's findings:

- In the time available for the research, it was only possible to conduct the study in six schools and communities (out of 18 in which HI and CIFORD were working). Given these constraints, the research team sought to maximise insights from each school by interviewing, in focus groups, older and younger students, boys and girls, teachers and principals, and community members.
- Though the research team made strenuous efforts to ensure students' confidentiality, it is possible they were constrained from speaking out freely for fear of repercussions if they were critical of teachers.
- There was no private place for researchers to speak to students in a couple of schools, meaning that students would have been less likely to speak freely for fear of being overheard.
- There were some types of SRGBV that were not mentioned at all, notably the sexual abuse of boys.³ This should not be taken to mean such types of violence are not happening, but it may be because they are too taboo to be mentioned.
- The schools where the research took place were those where programming on SRGBV was already being undertaken by UNICEF's

partners CIFORD and HI, which may have led to better knowledge on the topic among staff and students than would typically be found. Likewise, some of the schools had previously been included in the SRGBV-related activities of other programmes, such as Leh Wi Lan.

- For accessibility reasons, the research focused on schools closer to provincial towns rather than those in more rural areas.
- Three minimum standards were not directly addressed in the research questions and did not come up in the discussions, so the research cannot provide findings on these. These were:
 - o School structures promote women's leadership and support teachers who experience violence ([Domain 3](#)).
 - o Teachers have the skills to use positive and gender-responsive teaching and learning methods ([Domain 3](#)).
 - o Classroom architecture and design are gender-responsive ([Domain 7](#)).

These issues were not explored as the research focused on those aspects of the minimum standards identified through the ongoing action research with CIFORD and HI as the most relevant, pressing and challenging. In addition, the team prioritised issues to avoid research becoming excessively long and resulting in interviewee fatigue.

3. Despite the fact that interviews with boys were conducted with male researchers, these issues were not surfaced.

2 Policy environment for addressing school-related gender-based violence in Sierra Leone

2.1 Policy context for addressing SRGBV

In the last few years, there has been an increased focus on strengthening the policy context for advancing child rights and addressing GBV Sierra Leone. Some of the policies and protocols are still in development. However, once finalised, they provide a relatively comprehensive policy framework for addressing SRGBV, although implementing this framework remains a significant challenge.

Some recent key policies and national-level initiatives relevant to SRGBV are as follows.

- The 2021 National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools aims to remove infrastructural and systemic policy and practice impediments that limit learning for any child. This includes elements on SRGBV.
- The 2019 revised Sexual Offences Act provides the main legal framework for responding to sexual violence, including SRGBV. This amended Act now provides more severe punishment for sexual offences, has an element of prevention and emphasises the need for service provision to survivors.
- The Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs (MoGCA) is final revising a National Referral Protocol on Gender-Based Violence. This protocol aims to ensure a more effective, coordinated, child-friendly, gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive response. It explicitly includes SRGBV.
- The government has recently developed and launched an SGBV response strategy. This is intended to respond to GBV, including SRGBV, comprehensively but does not include a prevention element, which is addressed separately.

- Several SGBV prevention strategies include a Male Involvement Strategy for the Prevention of SGBV.
- The government has developed a Gender Empowerment Bill, which has yet to be passed by parliament. This is intended to provide a long-term vision for promoting gender equality in Sierra Leone.
- The National Strategy for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage (2018 to 2022) focuses on an enabling school environment.
- The Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan states that quality education must embody healthy school environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive and provide adequate resources and facilities.
- Since 2018, the Sierra Leone government has been running the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme, which aims to increase access to quality school learning at all levels.
- The MoGCA has established six one-stop centres across the country for survivors of SGBV. These centres facilitate survivors' access to various services and accompany them through legal processes. The MoGCA has also set up a free hotline (116) for reporting SGBV cases.
- The Multi-Donor Education Trust Fund is led by MBSSE and managed by the World Bank. This involves several coordination groups, including a coordination group on comprehensive sexuality education with an SRGBV component.
- The Leh Wi Lan programme (2016–2022), funded by UK Aid, supports the MBSSE to improve learning outcomes in all government-assisted junior secondary schools (JSSs) and senior secondary schools (SSSs) nationwide,

including a focus on making schools safe for girls. It is aligned with the FQSE programme.

- The Code of Conduct (CoC) for teachers issued by the Sierra Leone Teaching Service Commission in 2020 sets out standards of professional behaviour for teachers and other education personnel.
- Community engagement is a critical component of the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) 's National Health Promotion Strategy (2017), highlighting the role of community change agents and traditional actors.

2.2 Challenges in translating policy into action

While the policy framework to address SRGBV in Sierra Leone is now relatively strong, interviews with a range of stakeholders in Freetown – including government officials and development partner staff – identified many factors that may impede the implementation of this framework.

2.2.1 Overemphasis on policy level

Some stakeholders reflected that there had been a lack of balance between policy development and action, with more focus on central-level policy processes and insufficient focus on what is happening at the community and school levels. One bilateral development partner staff member commented:

The time invested in policy development has been intense. If this time were invested in communities and schools, we would see a change in attitudes and practices. We still have endless drafts of policies; we need to get on with working on the ground. NGOs are already working in the field, even without policies. We need to get on and support this type of work, change is taking place at the community level, and we are fiddling around with policies. We should take advantage of this change.

Another staff member of an international organisation commented that “strategies are tangible results that ministries can deliver and donors can fund. You can come out with tangible thing signed by the minister – it attracts funding.” However, other stakeholders argued that while this policy work has consumed a lot of time and resources, it was necessary to create the enabling conditions for effective coordination and action on SRGBV.

In addition, many stakeholders commented that this strong focus on policy and strategy development has resulted in the elaboration of multiple overlapping

strategies, which causes fragmentation problems in addressing SRGBV. For example, some questioned why there is a stand-alone male engagement strategy when this could be an integrated part of the wider GBV prevention and response strategies.

2.2.2 Weak knowledge and implementation of policies

Stakeholders identified some major challenges to the implementation of the current policy framework. Some of these are related to limited awareness of existing policies, particularly among local actors responsible for implementing them, such as school personnel, service providers, local officials and community leaders. Others are related to the fact that this policy framework is at odds with some prevalent social norms and attitudes, resulting in resistance from those responsible for implementing policies and from the wider community. This can be seen in the attitude of many police officers, officials and community members who do not follow the laws and guidelines related to cases of GBV. There is also inconsistency between some laws in this area, which adds to the confusion. For example, the Child Rights Act states that a child is someone under 18 and cannot give consent to get married, while the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act states that parents, guardians or a district chairperson can give consent for a child over 16 to get married.

Perhaps the biggest barrier to implementation is the lack of funds and capacity to implement the policies on the ground. There has been insufficient funding for institutions that were set up to address SGBV cases, such as the Family Support Units or hospitals that are, in theory, supposed to provide free health services to SGBV survivors. Meanwhile, at the district level, major barriers to effective responses to SRGBV include a lack of trained staff, vehicles, money for transport costs and other basic resources. Interviewees both from government ministries and development partners suggested that there are particular challenges with ensuring sustainable funding for implementation activities at the local level. One government official stated that “donors are keen to fund policy development plans and studies, but they need to invest more in implementation.” Meanwhile, staff from development partner organisations reported that many implementation activities in this area are unsustainable because they are done through short-term donor-funded projects and that implementation stalls when the project ends.

2.2.3 Weak coordination

Coordination is a major challenge to realising the potential of Sierra Leone's policy framework related to SRGBV. At the central level, the MBSSE leads coordination on SRGBV-related issues. However, many stakeholders suggested that the ministry cannot effectively play this coordination role. More broadly,

it was reported that there is a limited culture of coordination across most ministries, as well as territorial conflicts and competition over funds. In particular, SRGBV work requires strong coordination between MBSSE and MoGCA, which appears to be currently lacking. However, it was reported that coordination between other ministries, such as the MoH and MoGCA, is relatively effective. It was reported that most invitations to coordination meetings related to SRGBV come from development partners, not relevant government ministries. As one development partner staff described, “coordination is tough, especially for SRGBV. GBV requires many actors to prevent and respond, then throw in school actors and MBSSE, which is a very complicated coordination picture.”

A particular coordination challenge was caused by splitting the Ministry of Social Welfare and MoGCA into two ministries at the national level. However, they have remained together at the subnational level. This has reportedly created significant confusion and bottlenecks, hampering effective coordination. It was also reported that development partners working in this area do not always coordinate effectively among themselves and are not always aware of what others are doing on the issue of SRGBV.

Coordination is also a challenge at the subnational level. Although there are regular meetings between actors involved in the area of SRGBV at the subnational level,

this engagement does not always result in coordinated action. A significant challenge to local coordination is that officials need money to travel to meet and coordinate. Important coordination mechanisms exist for addressing SRGBV at the local and school levels, such as child welfare committees. However, these are often not working in practice and need to be reinvigorated. The SGBV one-stop centres test how different line ministries and partners can work together locally to provide survivors' services.

There are also challenges to coordination and information flow between the local and central levels. One development partner staff member reported that “there is not enough emphasis on accountability, oversight or reporting from the side of the ministries. Therefore, ministries don't know what different civil society organisations (CSOs) are doing on the ground,” while another suggested that “central ministries are not talking to district-level offices.” MBSSE officials reflected this reality, reporting that “organisations come with plans, get permission to work under the ministry, but then go and do things at the district level without telling the ministry. This can lead to duplication of activities on SRGBV at the local level.” MBSSE officials recognise that the ministry needs to increase coordination of local-level activities on SRGBV and ensure that these complement each other, and stressed that this requires a clear framework under which all actors working on SRGBV can operate.

3 Manifestations of school-related gender-based violence

3.1 Violence in schools perpetrated by adults

3.1.1 Corporal punishment

Despite corporal punishment being illegal, all site interviewees reported it was common. Most interviews did not indicate that particular groups of children were at greater risk: boys and girls, and older and younger adolescents, all reported flogging being common. One group of girls, aged 12 to 14 years, thought boys were more at risk. In one school in Kono, students indicated that new teachers were particularly likely to use corporal punishment (especially flogging) to assert their authority and that once they had settled into the school, the extent to which they resorted to flogging dropped. Students also reported that male teachers (who constitute the vast majority of teachers in the participating schools) flog students.

Students reported being beaten for a wide range of offences: being late, not completing their assigned work, being noisy, challenging or disobeying the teacher and bullying or fighting other students. In several schools and communities, adults (teachers, parents and community stakeholders) reported that children had become uncontrollable. They attributed partially to a misunderstanding of children's rights as a licence to misbehave without sanction. Respondents also felt that a rise in drug taking among boys was contributing to uncontrollable behaviour,⁴ and corporal punishment was one of the few means of maintaining discipline.

Some students (boys aged 15 to 17) in Kenema knew corporal punishment was illegal. Reflecting prevailing social norms, most students thought it was an

appropriate punishment if not carried out too severely (a small number of strokes) and an essential tool to train children and ensure discipline in school. A small number considered it harmful and suggested that students should instead be assigned to fetch water, clean toilets or kneel. Those students who did not support corporal punishment thought that students should be suspended or the consequences of their actions explained to them. Some, however, felt that such punishments were too lenient and would not serve as a deterrent. For example: "The teacher should flog the boy because if the teacher does not, the student may do the same thing again" (boys ages 12 to 14 years, Kono).

In one school in Kenema, boys mentioned that teachers tried to extort money from them for better grades and would beat them if they did not comply: "We have one teacher who asked us to bring soap or SLL 5000. If we don't bring that, he will flog us mercilessly" (boys aged 12 to 14 years, Kenema).

Both parents and teachers made reference to beliefs such as "spare the rod and spoil the child;" community stakeholders (e.g. chiefs, mammy queens⁵ or religious leaders) and teachers highlighted strong parental support for corporal punishment, recounting incidents where parents had come to schools and asked teachers to beat their children, or asked for a cane and proceeded to do so themselves. Some chiefs and religious leaders – typically those who had taken part in sensitisation initiatives – reported opposition to corporal punishment: Others disagreed and thought the law should be respected.

"Flogging is wrong even from the religious perspective. Flogging has many disadvantages and may not solve the boy's problem."

(Chief, Kenema)

4. This rise in drug-taking is attributed to ready availability of drugs as a relatively low price.

5. Women community leaders

"According to Islam, we are taught how to train up a child. For me, I think bringing the child closer and advising him is the better option. I will not beat up that child."

(Religious leader, Kambia)

However, all were opposed to beating that results in a child being injured.

Teachers also reported mixed views. One mentioned that, whether or not it was used, the threat of the cane helped to maintain discipline: "Some of the children are very much adamant but if they see you with the cane, they can be afraid. The cane frightens them."

(untrained and unqualified teachers, Kono)

Others in the same school considered moderate beating acceptable: "Flogging in school is not too bad, the excessive one is the issue. E.g. two strokes for stealing and six strokes for fighting. It's only the principal who is allowed to beat above six strokes."

School principals, by contrast, were more likely to report opposition to corporal punishment and that they had taken steps to outlaw it in their schools (see [Section 4](#)). There appeared to be some disconnect between different stakeholders' reports concerning the same institution, with the principal of the school above stating that a teacher had left because he was not allowed to beat the students. As discussed further in Section 4, many teachers felt that alternative discipline strategies suggested during training are ineffective, which leads them to continue using corporal punishment.

3.1.2 Sex for grades

Girls in all three sites reported that teachers had offered girls – particularly older adolescent girls in SSSs – better grades in exchange for sex, though they believed it was not common. By contrast, boys had only heard of this

happening in one area (Kono). This suggests that there is some secrecy around such arrangements. Students reported several reasons for accepting a sexual relationship in exchange for better grades. In some cases, girls felt intimidated by teachers and could not refuse (or feared being beaten if they did):

“If you refuse, they will intimidate you by flogging you whenever they come to class. You will not pass their test. A teacher has done this to me.”

(girl aged 15 to 17 years, Kenema).

Others saw it as advantageous if they found studying difficult or did not like doing so. Girls in Kambia reported that teachers tend to approach “vulnerable students, those that are not intelligent or those lazy ones who don't want to study” (girls aged 15 to 17 years, Kambia).

Teachers largely blamed the girls:

"This is happening in all schools in the country. Most of the teachers are young and attractive so girls seduce them. By their dress code. They wear short uniforms and expose their breast."

(Teachers in training, Kono)

They will say words like 'Mr Kamara, you shape o!' meaning you are attractive. They lavish praises on us. If you are not careful, you fall into their traps. They are leading teachers into temptations."

(Trained teachers, Kono)

This may reflect widespread underlying norms and stereotypes that see men and boys unable to resist 'temptations'. Male teachers also considered themselves to be at risk of false allegations from both girls and boys:

"I'm a victim of that. A student accused [me] of wanting to sleep with [them] just because I executed my duty."

(Trained teacher, Kambia)

"Male student always accuses us of dating female student. If we select female students for representation in any activities, they say we are doing so because they are our girlfriends, but those selections are based on criteria. Such information even goes to the parents."

(Untrained teachers, Kambia)

Respondents highlighted that parents were sometimes aware of and complicit in such relationships because of the financial benefit:

“ [A] few parents allow such relationship because of poverty. And because the men leave their responsibility to the women and with their limited resources, they have to allow them.

Most of the time, the parents are aware. The teacher will go and agree with the parents. In most cases, it is these teachers that support these girls financially in school.”

(Untrained teachers, Kenema)

However, many parents and community stakeholders considered teachers sexually exploiting students to be a very serious matter, much more so than corporal punishment:

If a teacher falls in love with a student, he should be suspended from that school, and he deserves to be in jail.

(Chief, Kambia)

It is wrong for the teacher to make advances at a girl above or below 16 years of age, as a teacher is a role model.

(Chief, Kono)

3.1.3 Verbal aggression

The adolescent boys and girls reported that teachers sometimes insult them. These insults can be personal comments or related to a child's perceived lack of academic capabilities. Girls in Kenema reported that this kind of verbal abuse was common; students in other sites did not indicate how common it was. For example, one female student in Kenema reported, "a particular teacher, whenever he comes to class, he called me big nose and that I am too old for this class." However, students also indicated a reduction in such abuse after teachers attended training programmes (see [Section 4](#)).

3.2 Violence in schools perpetrated by students

3.2.1 Bullying

As described by the students interviewed, bullying can involve physical and verbal violence. Girls of all ages, and younger boys, were reported to be at greater risk, with both boys and girls perpetrating bullying. Verbal bullying was often based on a student's physical characteristics (e.g. being short, tall or older than the other students), poverty (e.g. having cheap shoes), being an adolescent mother or academic weaknesses. For example:

We also fight because of provocations. We call older girls in class grandmothers.

(girls aged 15 to 17 years, Kenema)

They also make fun of girls with flat buttocks or breasts.

(girls aged 12 to 14 years, Kenema)

If someone mispronounces or does not answer a question well, they will mock you.

(girls aged 12 to 14 years, Kenema)

They shout and laugh at us when we speak English and [make a] mistake. This makes us shy away from answering questions in class.

(girls aged 15 to 17 years, Kambia)

Teachers in both Kono and Kambia considered that students fighting was very common; girls in Kono mentioned that physical fights between students of different schools had been common, but teachers had stopped it. In one school in Kono, girls reported physical aggression related to a lack of sufficient seats:

"Especially the JSS 3 boys. They always look for chairs, and if you refuse to give them. They will slap you. Sometimes, we fight for seating accommodations, but they will have them."

(girls aged 15 to 17 years, Kono)

Other issues that provoked fights included conflict over boyfriends and learning materials.

(reported by girls aged 15 to 17 years, Kambia)

Students in some schools suggested that bullying (physical and verbal) was one of the areas where violence had decreased due to training and other initiatives in their schools. They reported that teachers would try to break up fights or de-escalate situations and tended to take a more understanding approach than simply punishing the perpetrators. For more detail on responses to bullying, see [Section 4](#).

3.2.2 Sexual harassment

Students reported that sexual comments were widespread and that both boys and girls receive and make such comments. Tight clothing and informal norms among students about dress codes were key contributing factors.

Girls and boys use provocative words at each other such as ‘na frog die dey’ when a student’s virginal/penis area looks swollen. This is caused by the jeans we use as undies. Or ‘na boze’, which means swollen scrotum in men.

(girls aged 15 to 17 years, Kono)

Students’ responses varied widely regarding how common sexual touching, or other sexual harassment (e.g. upskirting), is in mixed schools. For example, while one group of boys aged 12 to 14 years reported that such incidents are rare, boys and girls in other sites suggested that they were quite common and that both boys and girls touch or speak sexually to one another. It was not clear from the students’ responses if there were gender differences in how common sexualised behaviour was:

For touching the private part, it is the boys that touch us. They hit our buttocks and squeezed our breasts while playing.

(girls aged 15 to 17 years, Kono)

Boys used to put a mirror underneath girls when they sat to see their undies, but it came to the principal’s notice that all perpetrators were punished, and the principal beat and suspended them.

(girls aged 15 to 17 years, Kenema)

Some students suggested that sexualised banter was part of relationship formation, and, in the main, students did not dislike it:

It is normal, as most girls see it as a compliment. For example, if a boy says your waist or breast is getting bigger and attractive, girls usually respond boastfully, saying, “it’s because my boyfriend is taking care of me.”

(girls aged 12 to 14 years, Kono)

Most parents and teachers interviewed considered this normal teenage behaviour, but it should not occur in school. For example: ‘This is very common among teenagers. The only thing they should not exceed the limit.’

(female caregiver, Kenema)

Teachers argued that such behaviour largely reflected community norms and was, therefore, hard to challenge in school:

“It is not good, but these are inevitable. Wherever we find boys and girls, especially those in their teens, they will do it. We continue talking to them to minimise it and see why they should not indulge in such an act.”

(Principal, Kenema)

“The community has a lot to do with this. They perceive it as normal, so changing the child's mindset in school is challenging.”

(Teachers in training, Kono)

3.3 Violence against school students in the community

3.3.1 Sexual exploitation

FGDs in all three sites confirmed that girls – particularly older adolescents – engaging in sexual relationships

with *okada* (motorcycle taxi) drivers in return for rides and sometimes lunch money was common. Some girls were openly supportive of the practice, seeing it as one of their few opportunities to meet their financial needs, and because of the challenges of getting to schools located long distances from where they live:

“Most girls will accept such [a] proposal because some children live in far-off communities, their parents cannot afford sufficient lunch and transportation, and they will be caned if they are late. So, girls use those situations as evidence to date *okada* riders.”

(girls aged 15 to 17 years, Kono)

“Yes, they will accept because of poverty. You know women are easy to mislead. They are easy to convince. They will accept it even if it is just a small amount of money.”

(boys aged 15 to 17 years, Kenema)

Girls, parents and teachers in Kenema also underlined that families often encourage such relationships and/or similar relationships with teachers because of their need for financial support: “Some parents will encourage their children because the man will support the family financially.”

(girls aged 12 to 14 years, Kenema)

In areas where there is no school within walking distance, the research found a few examples of adolescents boarding in nearby towns, sometimes with relatives, in rented rooms or in houses that parents have built for their children in towns and cities. These adolescents have limited adult supervision and are sometimes responsible for their younger siblings. While this arrangement avoids children being abused

by ‘caregivers’ with whom they board (a common complaint), it puts a high level of responsibility on the shoulders of older adolescents. Some interviewees also suggested that while parents initially provide cash and food, their resources often dwindle over time, leaving children to meet their basic needs and educational costs themselves. For girls, engaging in transactional sex is a common way to meet these needs.⁶

6. As noted above, the research did not surface insights on sexual exploitation of boys, and further exploration of this issue was outside the scope of the research.

In addition to norms supportive of transactional sex, some respondents reflected prevailing stereotypes that view girls as responsible for these relationships rather than gendered economic inequalities or issues such as the location of schools. For example, a chief in Kenema reported that it was girls who “force themselves on these drivers” while boys in Kono said that girls give in easily because they “like money too much.” [Section 4, Domain 5](#), outlines stakeholders’ views of appropriate responses to such relationships.

3.3.2 Physical violence

The study also found instances of violence from community members towards school children. Respondents mentioned that community members sometimes enter school premises to use the water or toilets and wander around schools harassing children, particularly in schools without fences. This occasionally results in fights between these adults and students (see [Section 4, Domain 7](#)). In all communities, respondents mentioned that this was often related to drug use, with young men on drugs, in particular, perpetrating this sort of harassment.

The other main example occurred in Kenema when adolescent girls came to visit boyfriends or potential boyfriends from among their male peers at school. Norms whereby adolescent boys would often stay in a room attached to a family’s house but on the outside of it facilitated such visits and relationships of this kind. Some of the mothers interviewed reported that they had beaten girls they perceived as chasing their sons for a sexual relationship. Research participants considered this to be ‘school-related’ since the young people knew each other through school.

4 Analysis of minimum standards

4.1 Domain 1: school leadership and community engagement

- School principals, teachers, student councils and parents work together to develop a whole school approach to prevent and respond to SRGBV.
- Local entities such as women's organisations, the police, the judiciary and child welfare agencies partner with schools to prevent and respond to SRGBV.

The research suggests that the individual principal's commitment and capacity is a critical factors in determining the extent of SRGBV in a school and whether effective measures are taken to address it. All six principals in the research schools had received some training on SRGBV, although they all also said they needed more training, particularly on the teachers' CoC. However, most of them still demonstrated relatively limited knowledge of the issue. In many schools, it was reported that the principal did not take SRGBV seriously or enforce the CoC among school staff. In one school, it was reported that the principal had tried to coerce a female student into having sex with him.

The research identified a principal in one school in Kambia who had participated in a substantial amount of training, had a good understanding of SRGBV issues and was determined to address the problem. This principal had developed a positive relationship of trust with the students, and students would approach him to report cases of SRGBV. In this school, responses to cases of SRGBV or violations of the CoC by teachers were generally more robust, with the principal bringing in the board of governors and suspending teachers if needed. This was an unusual example of a whole school approach that sought to embed action on SRGBV issues across all relevant stakeholders. This illustrates the importance of developing strong school leadership and

bringing different stakeholders on board to help prevent and respond to SRGBV.

Most schools have limited engagement with the community, with mechanisms for engagement often established but not used. One school in Kenema stood out as an example of strong coordination between the community and the school. A key player in facilitating this engagement was the paramount chief, who has a strong interest in education. The paramount chief would often visit the school to speak to staff and students, and, following his example, other community leaders would also regularly visit the school. Notably, some district education officers in Kenema reported that establishing school safety committees and mothers' clubs have helped to strengthen school–community relations and reduce the issue of violence in schools. They reported that “all these clubs have experienced people willing to protect our children from all forms of violence.”

In all the research locations, it was reported that sensitisation activities and training had been undertaken with communities and schools, primarily by NGOs but also by government entities, for example, by district education officers with support from NGOs. Training and awareness raising to prevent SRGBV seemed to be the main way external entities engage with schools and communities on this issue. There was less evidence of external agencies providing support to respond to cases of SRGBV. However, there were some examples of local police and Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare officials following up on incidents.

4.1.1 Key lessons on Domain 1

- There is significant value in strengthening the professional development of principals, including their capacity and commitment to tackle SRGBV.⁷ Given the hierarchical culture within schools, principals wield much power and set the framework within which teachers operate.

7. Some support for professional development of principals is offered by MBSSE, as well as in some cases by NGOs. So it should be possible to include or strengthen the focus on SRGBV in this training.

- Where community leaders are supportive and engaged with a school, this seems to contribute to stronger relationships between the school and the parents and the wider community. It can also potentially contribute to oversight of the school by these leaders. It may be helpful to foster communication and engagement between community leaders and local schools.
- Local external agencies (NGOs and government, coordinated by local MBSSE officials) generally focus on sensitisation and training activities in their partnerships with schools and communities on SRGBV. Such training is mostly done in the context of projects and is limited to a couple of days of sensitisation/training. It could be useful for these agencies to focus more on longer-term engagement with schools and communities that facilitates reflection on attitudes and values related to SRGBV. It could also be useful for these entities to increase their focus on strengthening structures and processes for responding to incidents, which is a very weak area for most schools.

4.2 Domain 2: code of conduct

- Key definitions of the different forms of SRGBV are outlined in the code.
- The code provides an unambiguous, zero-tolerance stance on SRGBV.
- The code emphasises conduct that promotes a positive and safe school environment.

The CoC for teachers issued by the Sierra Leone Teaching Service Commission in 2020 sets out standards of professional behaviour for teachers and other education personnel in their relationships with learners, colleagues, parents and the general public, as well as providing principles to guide professionalism and promote a positive learning environment and the well-being of learners. However, the research found significant variation among schools in awareness of the CoC's existence, understanding of its contents or whether and how it was used to guide teachers' conduct.

All 60 teachers that were interviewed for this research reported being aware that the CoC exists. However, when asked to, most could not produce a copy, and some were unclear about what was in it. Some teachers – including untrained teachers – reported receiving training on the CoC, in some cases from the principal. However, it was also reported the high turnover of

teachers in many schools meant that newer teachers had not received this training or a copy of the CoC. This suggests it would be useful to provide a copy of the CoC and some training on it to all newly recruited teachers as part of their induction. There was also confusion among the teachers interviewed about whom the CoC applies to. Some reported that it is a code for teachers, others for all school staff and others to guide teachers and students.

In terms of wider knowledge among students and parents about the CoC, all schools surveyed have some extracts from the CoC displayed in public, often written on school walls. This had been done as part of the Leh We Lan project. Many students either cannot read this or have not read it, with some expressing surprise when researchers told them what the text said. However, some older adolescent boys reported reading these extracts on the walls. In some schools, students reported that the principal had spoken about the CoC in assemblies and had given them some information about it. For example, students were told that teachers should not ask them for money to pay for learning materials that the school's responsibility is to provide. This discussion in assembly appeared to be a more effective way to inform less literate students about the CoC and to elaborate on why the code is important and what students can do when teachers break it, as well as to demonstrate to students that the CoC is something the principal takes seriously.

Parents are mostly not aware of the CoC, although many parents are generally aware that there are rules that teachers are supposed to follow. Most parents knew teachers were not supposed to beat children or call them insulting names.

The research found little evidence of teachers following the CoC in most schools. Indeed, researchers heard about – and in some cases directly observed – multiple incidents where the CoC was flouted, including physical and sexual violence by teachers, teachers physically fighting with each other, teachers asking students for material goods and teachers insulting and humiliating students. However, there were reports from some schools that the CoC is used as a guide in responding to incidents. A trained teacher in the Methodist Secondary in Kenema reported that when an incident occurs, “the teacher will be called upon and give a word of advice and will let him know that it's contrary to the teacher's code of conduct. If he keeps doing the same thing by any means, the law will have to take its course.”

Some aspects of the CoC contradict widely shared beliefs within communities: for example, beliefs about the need for corporal punishment to discipline children. This suggests that just displaying and distributing these as ‘rules’ is unlikely to have much impact. Instead, a significant discussion is required with school staff, communities, parents and students about the purpose

of the CoC and the values it reflects to support teachers in changing behaviour and students and parents to change their expectations of teachers.

4.2.1 Key lessons on Domain 2

- While the content of the CoC is broadly adequate, the challenge is low awareness and even lower compliance among teachers.⁸
- Action is required to ensure that all teachers are familiar with the CoC. This can include the following:
 - o Some schools have weekly meetings where teachers discuss various issues, including SRGBV. These sessions could be used to provide information on the CoC.
 - o Training on the CoC could be included in refresher training that the MBSSE provides to some teachers on various topics during the school holidays.
 - o School leadership could include information provision/discussion of the CoC in inductions for all new teachers.
- Actions are required to make students aware of the CoC and to give them a clear message that the school takes it seriously. This must go beyond writing the CoC on walls and could include the principal speaking about it in assemblies.
- Actions are also required to inform parents and community leaders about the CoC and the steps they can take if it is violated. This can be done in the school and by local NGOs and others working on SRGBV.
- It is important to recognise that teachers are unlikely to follow rules that are not in line with dominant norms just because these are written in the CoC. Encouraging teachers to adhere to the CoC must be part of wider efforts to shift community attitudes about child rights and expectations about teachers' behaviour.
- The CoC is potentially a useful framework to hold teachers accountable and inform responses when incidents occur. There is some evidence that this is happening, with principals warning teachers that their actions violate the CoC. Building knowledge and commitment on the CoC among those with oversight of teachers' conduct (principals, school safety committees, boards of governors, where these exist) can help these actors to use the CoC to hold teachers to account.

4.3 Domain 3: teachers and educational support staff

- Teachers can identify, respond to and prevent SRGBV.
- School structures promote women's leadership and assist teachers who experience violence.
- Teachers have the skills to use positive and gender-responsive teaching and learning methods.

The research found that over half the teachers interviewed had received some training, including on the CoC and SRGBV issues. Teachers reported receiving training from MBSSE, Leh Wi Lan, Action Aid and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), among others. However, mostly just a few qualified and senior teachers had received training. No evidence of this learning being cascaded down to lower-ranking school staff. Overall, teachers demonstrated very low knowledge about the CoC and SRGBV issues, and reports of teachers perpetrating SRGBV (particularly corporal punishment) were widespread across all schools.

In most schools, the research found that most teachers were untrained, unqualified and not on the MBSSE payroll.⁹ This lack of trained teachers is partly because people who travel to Freetown or larger towns to undertake training do not want to return to work in more remote areas, so schools in these areas often rely on untrained volunteers. Some schools were trying to overcome this challenge. For example, in one school, the principal encourages the best final-year students that graduate from the school to stay on as volunteer teachers while training remotely for a qualification. Untrained and unqualified teachers reported that it could take up to five years to be on the payroll, and until this time, they receive a small stipend and often face ridicule or disrespect from students who are aware of the small amount they earn. In general, untrained and unqualified teachers appeared to have the weakest knowledge of SRGBV and were reported as being more violent to students. The research identified one school in Kenema where most teachers were on the payroll, and teachers in this school appeared to be more motivated and accountable than in some other schools.

It was reported that untrained and unqualified teachers¹⁰ are often excluded from any ongoing training offered within the school. One untrained teacher in Kono stated

8. These schools did not have other staff eg cooks, guards etc., hence we focus on teachers and principals.

9. Untrained and unqualified teachers are volunteers who generally lack any relevant qualifications and are not on MBSSE's payroll. They receive a small stipend from the school subsidy.

10. Untrained and unqualified teachers do not have a degree in any subject and have not been trained as teachers. Qualified but untrained teachers hold a degree in some subject, but have not been trained as teachers.

that “whenever we have [an] invitation to training, the trained and qualified teachers are given preference.” However, another untrained teacher in Kambia reported having been trained on referral pathways. There was some evidence that training improved teacher performance. For example, one female caregiver in Kono stated that “mocking or making comments about students” intelligence in class has stopped because of the training teachers receive. A trained teacher in Kono reported that “initially, when I started teaching, I was very temperamental, and I was beating the children severely, but due to this constant training, I have modified my character and attitudes towards the student.”

Students reported a range of abuse and violence by trained and qualified teachers and by untrained and unqualified teachers. It was reported that most teachers flog the children, which was seen as normal and acceptable by most stakeholders. While some teachers seemed unaware that corporal punishment is prohibited, others reported that they know it is banned but continue using it because they do not know other discipline methods. For example, one trained teacher in Kambia stated that “we are finding it difficult to get alternative measures for a student with the abolishment of the cane. When we talk to student[s], they don’t listen, even when we try to counsel them, it [is to] no avail.” Caregivers were largely supportive of teachers flogging students and, in some cases, had requested that teachers flog their children.

However, a few of the teachers interviewed were clear that corporal punishment is not allowed and that they must use alternative forms of discipline. A teacher in Kenema remarked:

“A teacher should be able to control his anger because if you go out of temper, many problems will occur, like hitting a child in the wrong area, and the child may collapse, and that is why a teacher should always control his temperament no matter how ugly the situation is.”

The teacher should control himself and report to the principal to control the situation.

A few caregivers thought there had been a reduction in beating due to new rules prohibiting this. For example, a female caregiver in Kenema reported that “beating has reduced because there is an existing law guiding it, and also, the parent goes to the school when their children are badly beaten.” Likewise, a female caregiver in Kambia stated that “beating in school has reduced because there is an existing national law against it.”

In addition to flogging, it was reported that teachers: insult and humiliate students; sexually harass and abuse female students, including exchanging sex for grades or material goods; request money, material goods and favours from students (e.g. using students’ phones to make personal calls); and make students do physical labour, usually in the teachers’ home or on the teachers’ farm. In addition, many teachers reportedly do not come to class, come late or do not teach when in class.

4.3.1 Key lessons on Domain 3

- Teachers’ capacity on SRGBV or positive teaching methods is very low. While there are some efforts to build this capacity, these are not systematic and far-reaching enough and often tend to involve one-off training, including just a few of the more senior teachers.
- There is little oversight or effective management of teachers, allowing them to commit SRGBV with impunity. There is also limited leadership and guidance for teachers from senior staff.
- A major challenge is the high number of untrained/unqualified teachers who have not received any basic professional training, are excluded from any ad hoc training on SRGBV and have limited knowledge, motivation and accountability. Addressing this challenge could involve:
 - o Supporting untrained teachers to undertake distance training while working;
 - o Improving the conditions of service for teachers in less attractive locations to incentivise qualified teachers to take up posts there; and
 - o Ensuring that untrained and unqualified teachers are included in any training on issues such as SRGBV and child rights.
- It is important to cascade and embed learning within the school from any external training in which teachers participate. For example, teachers in training can share their learning with colleagues or take responsibility for supporting the implementation of key elements they have learned about.
- It is important to recognise that shifting individual teachers’ behaviour will be difficult as long as there are widely shared norms that some forms of SRGBV (notably corporal punishment) are expected and acceptable behaviour for teachers.

- However, it could be useful to build on the fact that some teachers are aware that they should not use corporal punishment and are trying alternative discipline methods. These teachers can act as ‘positive deviant’ examples to others by making them visible and discussing their alternative approaches to discipline.

4.4 Domain 4: child rights, participation and gender equality

- Child rights approaches are integrated into curricula.
- Student leadership is centralised, and girls and boys are equally represented.
- Healthy peer relationships are promoted, and student awareness and attitudes about gender norms and SRGBV improve.

Teachers, parents and community members are generally aware of children’s rights, although most do not understand what these rights involve. Critically, many teachers, parents and community members view child rights negatively as an impediment to adult authority and discipline. This point was made repeatedly by various interviewees. For example, one mammy queen in Kono stated: “I believe that if we give too many rights to our children, we will not achieve what we want. This excess right has left us with badly behaved children.”

There was evidence that schools are taking steps to integrate child rights issues, specifically SRGBV, into the curricula. Students in some schools reported that their schools had developed new rules (by-laws) about sexual harassment and violence among students. For example, a male student in a school in Kambia said, “we have been warned that any attempt to touch a girl’s private part is sexual violence.” These students also reported that actions by the school to inform students about these rules and enforce them have reduced violence. A male student from a school in Kono stated: “Yes, it [SRGBV] was happening, but it has stopped because we have been advised about violence, and we have listened to the advice. That is why violence has reduced in the school.” Likewise, a male student from a school in Kambia reported that ‘bullying and mocking stopped because of these laws.’ In addition to new rules, it was also reported that the principal and other senior staff in school assemblies discuss child rights issues. Officials from Gender and Social Welfare in Kambia and representatives of the FSU in Kenema reported that they had visited schools to talk about SRGBV.

Across many schools, there was a strong perception among male students that teachers discipline boys more harshly than girls. For example, a male student from a school in Kenema told researchers that “the girls in some cases will refuse to plait their head, but they will not be beaten while any boy who refuses to get a haircut as instructed by the prefects will be beaten by the teacher.” Another male student from a school in Kono reported that “if a girl makes a complaint about us, the teacher mostly pays attention to her, but we are often ignored and intimidated whenever we report the girls.” Some school staff confirmed this differing approach to discipline, suggesting it is because they believe girls to be weaker and less able. For example, a principal in Kenema, when asked how he responds when students fight, stated: “For the boys, you call and admonish them. Counsel them. If they are girls, crack jokes with them.”

The research found evidence that in some contexts, teachers did encourage healthy peer relationships, with several teachers reporting that when students fight, teachers encourage them to overcome their differences and become friends.

Mechanisms for student participation, such as student councils, exist in all schools, but these are mostly inactive. In one school, there is a functioning system by which male and female student representatives from each class meet regularly with the principal. This mechanism was reported to be effective in enabling students to raise concerns with the school leadership.

4.4.1 Key lessons on Domain 4

- Poor understanding and negative perceptions of children’s rights are barriers to including children’s rights in the curriculum or practice in schools. It would be useful to provide more information for all key stakeholders – teachers, parents, students and community leaders – on what children’s rights are and how they contribute to a healthy school environment, including the value of positive discipline.
- It could also be helpful if discussions around these issues provided space for stakeholders to reflect together, not just on how to uphold children’s rights but also on the responsibilities and behaviours the school and community expect from adolescents. This could help address the common perception that children have too many rights and not enough responsibilities.
- Discriminatory gender norms contribute to unequal perceptions, expectations and treatment of boys and girls by school staff. Changing this will involve wider work on

gender norms and attitudes in communities of which teachers and students are part. This could limit the space for gender-discriminatory responses by staff. It could also help to develop standardised approaches for how staff should respond to incidents involving students or to students' concerns so that this is not left entirely to the individual staff member's discretion.

- The fact that mechanisms for student participation are often inactive suggests that no staff member is responsible or accountable for implementing these and that they are not a priority for school leadership. School leadership could address this by prioritising making these mechanisms functional and giving responsibility to senior teaching staff for doing this.
- The model of class representatives having direct and regular access to the principal seems promising and could be replicated in other schools. This requires a principal who is committed to student participation.

4.5 Domain 5: reporting, monitoring and accountability

- Students have safe and confidential spaces to report experiences of SRGBV.
- Reporting mechanisms are linked to support systems.
- School protection or review organisations are in place to improve monitoring and accountability.

Across the schools, the research found a variety of approaches to reporting SRGBV, depending on the nature of the violence and the perpetrator's identity. While there were various mechanisms in place in the different schools to facilitate reporting, such as suggestion boxes, mentors and school safety committees, in practice, these were largely ineffective, and students mostly did not have safe and confidential options to report SRGBV.

4.5.1 Reporting corporal punishment

In the case of teachers beating students, this was generally not reported for several reasons. First, students found this as expected behaviour and did not see the need to report it. Also, students were wary of reporting such punishment to their parents because parents are largely supportive of corporal punishment and would often respond by beating the children

themselves as a punishment for having got into trouble. For example, students made comments such as: "We rarely report flogging to our parents as the flogging is considered a means of shaping our future;" "We do not tell our parents because the teachers do not flog us without any serious reasons except if we deserve it;" and "If I report, my parents will bring me back to school and ask the teacher to flog me more."

Only in cases where beating was very severe and led to visible injuries did students and parents think it appropriate to complain. However, even in these cases, they were often reluctant to approach the school for fear that the student would face reprisals from the teacher and because they knew the school was unlikely to take any action. Despite this, researchers were told of cases where parents complained to the principal about teachers flogging children, and these teachers received a warning.

Very rarely would parents report extremely severe beatings directly to the FSU. Where beatings were extreme and caused significant visible injury to the child, parents would sometimes report these cases to community leaders such as chiefs, mammy queens or religious leaders. Doing this is widely frowned upon in these communities. When parents complained to chiefs, mammy queens, or religious leaders about flogging at school, these leaders responded that flogging is acceptable as long as it is not too severe. Value is placed on resolving conflict within communities; going to the police is seen as an extreme measure.

4.5.2 Reporting sexual harassment and abuse

In the case of teachers sexually harassing and abusing female students, if families become aware of this, they tend to complain to the principal, community leaders or, in some cases, directly to the FSU. However, it was reported that female students rarely report this type of violence to their families but instead try to keep it secret. In some cases, this is because of the benefits girls receive from engaging in a sexual relationship with the teacher regarding grades or material goods. In other cases, it is because girls are frightened of reprisals from the teacher, particularly that the teacher will fail them or beat them. For example, one student commented, "if a teacher confesses love for a girl, she might be afraid to report him," Although other girls asked about this issue commented, "we are afraid to report sexual abuse or beating by the teacher" and "as long as it concerns [a] teacher they will not talk." This is despite the fact that, in some schools, students had been told to report any sexual violence to the authorities (principal or guidance teacher). Some students reported that if they complain to one teacher about abuse by a fellow teacher, it is likely that the teacher they complained to will tell the perpetrator.

In the case of male students sexually harassing female students, including through unwanted comments or touching, this rarely gets reported. Girls say they do not want to report this to teachers as they do not want to get their fellow students into trouble. One girl commented that ‘the boys normally say we are their wives, and if we want to report, they will say we are their brothers, and we allow teachers to beat them, they will avoid us, so we don’t report’. However, some adolescent girls said they did report indecent touching by fellow students, and school staff reported that they admonish boys who do this.

In the case of girls being sexually harassed or exchanging sex for transport, money or food with *okada* riders, most families take action on this if they become aware of it. Although some interviewees across all stakeholder groups considered it primarily up to girls to stop this form of sexual exploitation (‘just say no’), both parents and school students felt that adults – either the girls’ parents or community leaders – should intervene.

While it was reported that some girls tell their parents about sexual harassment by *okada* riders, many others keep this secret from their families. This secrecy can be because of the material benefits the girl gets from the *okada* rider or because family and community members may blame the girl for attracting the *okada* rider’s attention. Both male and female caregivers in all three sites said they would not tolerate such relationships – some had already had to confront *okada* drivers. Others said that if they were informed that their daughter was accepting rides from an *okada* driver, they would tell the driver to stop and, if necessary, report it to the FSU:

“ I have experience. I saw my child with an *okada* rider, and they were playing. As my child spotted me, she introduced me to the man. I asked him what his relationship with my child he said they were friends, so I warned him to stay away from my daughter, telling him that I gave lunch and transport to my daughter and I never wanted to see them together again. I don’t want their friendship.”

(Female caregiver, Kenema)

Community stakeholders, such as chiefs and religious leaders, also felt that such relationships were a serious matter: they were illegal and reporting the driver to the FSU would be appropriate.

4.5.3 Mechanisms for reporting

There is a range of mechanisms that schools have put in place to facilitate reporting of SRGBV. The most common mechanism, which was found in all schools, is the suggestion box where students can put anonymous notes. These suggestion boxes were put in place in most schools as part of the Leh Wi Lan project. However, it was widely reported that the suggestion boxes are ineffective for several reasons. Suggestion boxes are often placed in locations where teachers can monitor which students are making complaints, such as next to the staff room. Many students reported they do not use the boxes as they are afraid that they will be identified – either because they are seen leaving a complaint or by their handwriting – and will then face reprisals from the teachers in terms of low grades or beatings. While some principals and teachers said that suggestion boxes were regularly opened and complaints reviewed, most students reported that suggestion boxes are, in fact, rarely opened. Action is not taken in response to suggestions and complaints that are made. Hence students saw little point in taking the risk required to use these boxes. Comments from students in Kono included: “If they are opened, we have never seen them taking action on the numerous complains we have put in them;” “We don’t see the suggestion box being opened. We heard it should be opened periodically.” Likewise, one MBSSE official reported that schools often only put out the suggestion boxes when he visits to inspect them. It was reported that when students are very angry with teachers, they write complaints about them on nearby rocks and trees around the school to express their anger.

Another mechanism for reporting SRGBV found in most schools is the school safety committee. This committee comprises the principal, deputy principal, one male mentor,¹¹ one female mentor and a guidance counsellor if the school has one.¹² In theory this committee is responsible for recording and addressing any violence reported in the school, though in some schools, it was completely inactive and, in general, was rarely mentioned by stakeholders, suggesting that it is not seen as of great relevance.

The most effective mechanism for reporting SRGBV appeared to be students and parents directly reporting to the principal in those schools where the principal was open and supportive. This seemed the best way to ensure action was taken in response to complaints. For example, a female student Kono told researchers,

11. The male and female mentors were established in all the research schools by the CIFORD and HI projects.

12. Three of the research schools had guidance counsellors.

“I was severely beaten by one of my teachers, and I report[ed] the matter to my mother. So, she came to the school and talked to the principal about it. So, the principal called the teacher and warned him not to do it again.” It was reported that one principal in Kenema has an open-door policy for students to report issues such as teachers demanding money from students in return for grades. Students frequently come to him with concerns. However, this was an unusual case, and in other schools, principals were neither open nor supportive, and students said they would be afraid to report any concerns.

Other ways in which students sometimes report SRGBV incidents to include reporting to mentors, guidance counsellors, senior teachers or the head boy or girl who can pass the complaint to the principal. In one school in Kambia, there is also a mothers’ club – a group of teenage mothers who are students– to which students sometimes report concerns. The extent to which any of these reporting mechanisms were effective appeared to depend largely on the commitment of the individual involved and their willingness to take action and escalate complaints to more senior colleagues where needed.

4.5.4 Key lessons on Domain 5

- A major reason students and families do not report violence is because of prevalent norms that either view this violence as acceptable, as in the case of flogging, or blame and stigmatise victims of violence, as in the case of girls who are sexually abused by teachers or *okada* riders. Changing these norms is a long-term endeavour required to make SRGBV unacceptable and create a context in which it is always reported and taken seriously.
- Fear of reprisals by teachers is another key reason why students and their families do not complain. Addressing this requires strengthening confidentiality and putting in place follow-up actions and oversight of teachers to ensure such reprisals are not possible.
- There is very little understanding of or respect for confidentiality within schools. This is a major disincentive for students to report cases of SRGBV, as this puts them at risk of stigma and reprisals. Basic training and clear guidelines on this could help, as well as consequences for school staff who breach confidentiality.
- The main mechanism for reporting that schools rely on is suggestion boxes, but these are not working. For these boxes to be effective, they need to be put in appropriate places, the confidentiality of students reporting to them

needs to be ensured, and they need to be part of an institutionalised complaint and response mechanism within the school.

- There is no evidence of regular and effective monitoring, oversight or inspection that could assess how well schools are dealing with reports of SRGBV, nor of mechanisms to hold the school and its leadership accountable for responding to reports. Such oversight and accountability mechanisms are crucial if reporting systems are to work.
- The effectiveness of reporting mechanisms depends heavily on the interest and commitment of the individual staff member to whom the report is made or who is responsible for taking forward the report. Responses to reports of SRGBV need to be institutionalised, with clear guidelines for all school staff to follow.
- There is little evidence that reporting is linked to any support system or that reports will result in any meaningful follow-up by the school or other authorities. This is another major disincentive for reporting. It could be useful if students and parents are given information on what follow-up and support they should expect when they report SRGBV to help them hold the school and other authorities responsible for providing this.
- It is important to engage with communities regarding how SRGBV cases can be reported and should be responded to. This includes informing them about which type of cases should be reported to the FSU, as well as informing them about other reporting channels, such as district social workers, one-stop centres and the 116 reporting line.

4.6 Domain 6: incident response

- Child-centred procedures are in place to respond to the different needs of girls and boys who experience SRGBV.
- Establish referral links with local child protection systems.

The research found that schools mostly do not refer cases of teacher violence to outside authorities because of a desire to protect the school’s reputation. Cases where teachers have severely beaten children, tend to be resolved by the principal giving the teacher an informal warning. Cases of sexual abuse by teachers are taken more seriously, and principals will sometimes

suspend or expel the perpetrator. However, both in cases of beating and sexual abuse, it seems schools are very unlikely to involve external institutions, either to investigate the case or to provide support to the victim. This is despite established referral pathways for GBV and child abuse cases. It appears that in most schools, the principal has almost complete discretion in deciding how to respond to cases of SRGBV. Including whether cases should be referred to external agencies, with no collective decision-making by the senior management team and no mechanism to hold principals accountable if they do not follow established referral protocols.

Local chiefs and community leaders also tend to discourage families from reporting SRGBV cases to the police or other external agencies because they are interested in protecting the local school's reputation. For example, a mammy queen in Kenema stated, "some families report issues to us, but what I normally do is refer the issues back to the school head to look into," while a chief in Kono said, "as long as a teacher beat him, I will not go to the police. I will only go to the police if another person beats him." However, some community leaders were willing to go to the police, particularly in cases of sexual abuse by teachers. A chief in Kambia reported: 'If a teacher falls in love with a student, he should be suspended from that school, and he deserves to be in jail.'

FSU staff from the three districts told researchers that the most commonly reported form of SRGBV was severe beating teachers and sexual abuse by teachers. These complaints are mostly made directly by victims and their caregivers. FSU staff reported that in cases of beating, they often encourage families to settle these cases,¹³ or else they speak to the school leadership to give them a warning. In cases of sexual abuse by teachers, FSU staff are more likely to investigate and take action, especially if there is evidence. However, even where the FSU is willing to take action, families often give up on cases after some time because of the cost involved and the difficulty of travelling from remote villages to towns to follow up on cases. For many families, justice is so costly and difficult to obtain that the best option appears to be compromising with the perpetrator.

In terms of the role of other agencies in following up on SRGBV cases, some officials from Gender and Social Welfare in both Kenema and Kambia reported that they provide support and counselling in cases of sexual violence against school students. Some district-level officials from the Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare and MBSSE reported receiving and imparted training on reporting and referral pathways for SRGBV. However, based on the reports by students and families, it seems that these follow-up mechanisms by other agencies are often ineffective or non-existent. It was reported

that there are not enough healthcare workers or social workers at the local level to provide follow-up services in cases of SRGBV.

When students perpetrate SRGBV, action is taken by the school. For example, when female students report that male students are sexually harassing them, the school generally punishes the boys concerned by flogging them or calling their parents to the school. The research found no evidence that girls who experience sexual harassment and abuse from teachers or their peers are offered support or counselling.

4.6.1 Key lessons on Domain 6

- Strengthening minimum standards in this domain is particularly challenging, as failures are related to wider systemic problems of limited capacity and inadequate coordination across a range of institutions that should be involved in responses to incidents of SRGBV.
- There are no clear procedures in place within most schools for dealing with SRGBV incidents. Basic steps would be to establish these procedures within each school, including clarifying the responsibility of different staff members (mentors, guidance counsellors, school leadership) for implementing them and informing all staff, parents and students about them.
- It is problematic that decisions about when and how cases of SRGBV should be referred to outside agencies are largely left to the principal's discretion, particularly given that principals are generally reluctant to make such referrals for fear it could damage the school's reputation. Mechanisms are required to hold principals to account for making or failing to make referrals, for example, through oversight by the Board of Governors or MBSSE education officers. Such accountability would require as a basic first step that reliable records are kept of all reported incidents of SRGBV and what action the school has taken, which is currently not happening in any of the schools.
- Referral pathways need to be clearer, and links between schools and other agencies involved in child protection must be strengthened. There is potential for the new National Referral Protocol on Gender-Based Violence to improve this situation once it is launched, but only if it is backed up with awareness raising, capacity-building and resources.

13. Settling or compromising cases can involve paying money, or just an apology.

- It could be useful for MoGCA, MBSSE and MoH to do integrated monitoring and supervision to strengthen the capacity of officials in districts to respond effectively to SRGBV. This could be part of the roll-out of the new GBV referral protocol.
- Weak responses to SRGBV must be understood as part of a much larger challenge of impunity for GBV and other crimes in Sierra Leone. This impunity is driven by a weak and sometimes corrupt police and justice system, the fact that chiefs and community leaders regularly arbitrate crimes they should refer to the police, and a culture of compromise. Strengthening responses to SRGBV requires addressing this wider context of impunity.

4.7 Domain 7: physical environment

- Sanitary facilities are safe and secure.
- Classroom architecture and design are gender-responsive.
- Students move safely to and from school.

The research found clear differences in student safety between fenced and non-fenced schools. Of the six schools where research was carried out, one was fully fenced, two were partially fenced, and three were completely unfenced. In non-fenced schools, it was reported that members of the community, or students from other schools, would regularly come onto the school premises to steal, use drugs and harass female students. Some schools remained unfenced because of the lack of funds to carry out this work.

The toilets were repeatedly mentioned as the place where female students felt most insecure.¹⁴ In half the schools, there were no separate toilets for boys and girls, and in all schools, students reported that toilet facilities were inadequate and unsanitary. Girls reported that boys would harass and shout at them as they used the toilet, or in some cases, that they had to urinate in the open because of inadequate toilet facilities, and that boys would watch them do this. A female student in Kambia reported that “our toilet does not have doors or windows, most of the time if we want to use it, we have to bend down to remove or put on our undies before and after using the toilet, so those outside or in the classrooms will not see us.” Another female student in Kono told researchers that ‘they [the boys] always watch us while we are urinating’.

In some schools, drinking taps were also mentioned as places where students feel insecure. One female student in Kono reported that the most insecure place was “the tap, because boys using drugs from other schools normally hang around, calling girls passing to court them, when they refuse, they insult their parent.” Female students also reported that there are other parts of the school compounds where boys take drugs and harass passing girls. For example, in two schools in Kenema, female students reported being frightened to go behind the SSS building because older boys gathered there to take drugs.

Students reported several other risks from the school's physical environment. These included snakes and scorpions that are often seen around school toilets, drinking taps or bushy areas of the school compound. Also, half the schools did not have any water facilities in their compound, while the other half had insufficient water facilities during the dry season. This means students must leave the school compound to get water, increasing their insecurity. Students reported feeling safest inside school buildings or parts of the school compound that are well-cleared and visible from the staff room.

The research found evidence that some schools are taking action to address security threats on the school premises. A female student from a particularly violent and insecure school in Kenema reported that “the school informed the police of the thugs under the tree, and they were arrested.” A male student from the same school reported that “our principal does not allow commercial bikes on our school premises.”

Female students reported feeling vulnerable on the way to and from school. Some said they have to walk long distances through areas without houses and are frightened of being attacked on their journey. This was also a concern for students' families, with one male caregiver from Kono reporting that “most of the children are coming from far and isolated places, and there is no provision for transportation.” As discussed in Section 3, because of the long distances students have to walk to school, girls are vulnerable to exploitation by *okada* riders who offer them transport in exchange for sex.

4.7.1 Key lessons on Domain 7

- The security threats from the physical school environment are clear and well-understood by school leadership, communities and students. There is widespread agreement about the need to address these.

14. Toilets at the schools were a hole in the ground with a fence around it.

- There is evidence that some of these security threats can be addressed through actions by school leadership – for example, making rules that commercial bikes cannot enter the compound or calling the police when outsiders enter the school, or drugs are being used.
- However, addressing insecurity that is caused by inadequate facilities – toilets, fencing, water supply etc. – requires extra funding.
- To address concerns about insecurity on the way to school, it could be useful for schools and communities to look at options such as a walking school bus (groups of children walking together with an adult volunteer), which have worked in other contexts.

4.8 Domain 8: parental engagement

- Parents are involved with the school in keeping learners safe.
- Parents use positive parenting and disciplinary techniques.

The research found that most parents have little awareness of SRGBV, although they are generally aware that they can complain to the school about the mistreatment of their children. However, parents mostly do not approach the school to raise concerns except in severe cases. This is primarily because they are concerned that their child might face reprisals, but also because of the time and transport costs required to come to the school because there is little culture of parents engaging with schools and because teachers are viewed as significant authority figures. In addition, in some cases of SRGBV – notably flogging – parents support this type of violence. Moreover, where children live with caregivers, these caregivers appeared less likely to engage with the school on their behalf.

While there is relatively low engagement and communication between schools and parents in most schools, there are some cases where this is improving. In one school in Kenema, the principal told researchers that:

Parents report cases from their homes to us, as I keep telling them during the Community Teachers Association (CTA) meetings, that whatever affects the child at home affects them in school. So, what they cannot handle at

home, they refer to us, and we do likewise. In some cases, we sit with the parent to see how we can salvage the situation.

Likewise, a male student in Kono reported that where students are perpetrators of SRGBV, “the form master will take you to the principal’s office, and if they can’t address the issue, they will call your parent and report to them. That is why they have the phone numbers of all our parents.”

Though exploring parenting was outside the scope of the research, the FGDs found very little evidence of positive parenting in the communities where the research occurred.¹⁵ Parents were largely in favour of corporal punishment and often blamed girls for the sexual harassment they faced. In many cases, they paid limited attention to their children’s welfare. According to one religious leader in Kono, “most parents don’t monitor their child to see whether their child is in school or not.” In addition, some parents encouraged girls to become involved in sexual relationships with teachers, *okada* riders or other adult men because of the material benefits such relationships can bring. It was reported that where children lived with caregivers rather than their parents, these caregivers generally showed particularly limited interest in the child’s welfare.

Despite this, there were signs that parents’ awareness of positive parenting is improving due to sensitisation activities being undertaken in communities. One male caregiver in Kenema reported that:

“Our community has improved in the way we treat children. Community sensitisation is helping parents treat their children better. I know of one woman who treats her children harshly. With the training and advice, she has improved how she treats her children.”

A female caregiver in Kenema reported, “we have learnt that some children have good ideas, but the moment you abuse them publicly, they shy away from talking and sharing their experience.” A female caregiver in Kambia reported that:

“I learned that children should focus on their studies to avoid drop-out and that bullying and teasing, *okada* men asking girls to be their girlfriends, teachers promising good grades to girls if they have a sexual relationship with him, are all hindering factors towards the progress of a child’s education.”

There was also evidence that community leaders were learning about positive discipline techniques from sensitisation, making them better placed to advise community members and schools on this. A mammy

15. For more information on violence against children in homes in Sierra Leone see the UNICEF commissioned study: Formative research on violence against children (VAC) in homes to inform opportunities for positive parenting in Sierra Leone, 2020. Freetown: Maestral.

queen in Kenema reported: “I learnt about school violence. Also, we are taught to stop flogging children as that will affect their brain.”

4.8.1 Key lessons on Domain 8

- Special attention must be paid to the welfare of children living with caregivers rather than parents. Caregivers are less likely to focus on the welfare of a child or advocate on a child’s behalf than parents. It would be useful if schools could record which students live with caregivers and check in regularly with these students on their welfare. This could be a role for school mentors or others with pastoral care responsibilities.
- There is evidence that sensitisation on positive parenting in communities provides parents and community leaders with new information and ideas. The extent to which this is currently resulting in changed behaviour is unclear. It could be useful to expand and build on this sensitisation work, in particular, making visible examples where community members are parenting differently, to act as role models and help shift norms around parenting.
- It could be useful to conduct sensitisation and hold discussions on positive discipline to bring school staff and parents together to help strengthen the parent–school relationship and open a conversation between parents and the school about how children should be treated.
- Community leaders play an important role in shaping attitudes about how children should be treated, including guiding parents on how to respond to SRGBV. It seems that sensitisation with them is having some impact, so this is something to expand and build on.
- In almost all the schools, it appears parents only engage with the school if they are called in about their child’s misbehaviour or if they want to complain when their child has been mistreated at school. One school actively encouraged parents to approach the school to discuss problems they have with their children at home and problems their children are having at school. This success seemed largely due to the principal’s commitment. It might be useful to replicate this more positive and proactive engagement between parents and schools in other schools.

5 Conclusions and lessons

5.1 Conclusion

This research identified a wide range of manifestations of SRGBV perpetrated by school staff, students and members of the broader community. Despite this wide range, some types of SRGBV were more commonly raised by stakeholders and appeared to be the most frequent. These were corporal punishment by teachers, the sexual harassment and abuse of female students by community members, peers and teachers, and bullying (both physical and emotional) among peers.

SRGBV in these schools appears to be driven by many different normative, structural and institutional factors. These include deep-rooted norms that legitimise the sexual exploitation of adolescent girls or corporal punishment of children; the distance many children must travel to attend secondary school, or the need to live away from family to do so; the fact that parents are frequently unable to provide for children's basic needs; and the lack of any meaningful oversight and accountability mechanisms within schools. Therefore, addressing the problem of SRGBV will require work across multiple levels to address these different types of drivers.

While there has been significant focus on issues related to SRGBV at the policy level in recent years, the research found that at the school and community levels, efforts to address the problem and specifically to implement the minimum standards were limited and patchy. The existence and effectiveness of such efforts varied widely, depending on the individual commitment of key actors such as principals or community leaders, the availability of adequate human and material resources in schools and the capacity and engagement of relevant local-level government and civil society entities.

In general, efforts to prevent SRGBV were often more substantial and effective than efforts to respond to SRGBV. For example, awareness-raising and sensitisation work with parents, community leaders and school staff was reported in some cases to have resulted in changed attitudes and behaviour. Meanwhile, efforts to strengthen reporting of and response to incidents of SRGBV appeared very weak and were significantly hampered by a lack of commitment and capacity at multiple levels.

It is important to remember that this was relatively rapid research conducted in just six schools where UNICEF supported local partners to undertake SRGBV interventions. While it provides a snapshot, there remains a significant knowledge gap. Further research is required, in particular, to identify more examples of good practices and entry points for change that can inform efforts to implement the minimum standards in Sierra Leone. This includes identifying barriers to implementation and understanding how these can be addressed. This will be particularly important to inform the meaningful implementation of the new policy framework developed in this area.

5.2 Lessons on implementation within each domain

The research identified many lessons related to each domain of the minimum standards. These were regarding how standards were being implemented; entry points and opportunities to strengthen implementation; building on what works, and addressing implementation challenges and barriers. While these lessons are presented throughout the report, they are listed below for ease of reference.

5.2.1 Key lessons on Domain 1

- There is significant value in supporting the professional development of principals, including their capacity and commitment to tackling SRGBV. Given the hierarchical culture within schools, principals wield much power and set the framework within which teachers operate.
- Where community leaders are supportive and engaged with a school, this seems to contribute to stronger relationships between the school and the parents and the wider community. It can also potentially contribute to oversight of the school by these leaders. It may be useful to foster communication and engagement between community leaders and local schools.
- Local external agencies (NGOs and government) are focused on sensitisation and training in their partnership with schools and

communities on SRGBV. These are important, but it could be useful for them to increase their focus on structures and processes for responding to incidents, which is a weak area for most schools.

5.2.2 Key lessons on Domain 2

- While the content of the CoC is adequate, the challenge is low awareness and even lower compliance among teachers.
- Action is required to ensure that all teachers are familiar with the CoC. This can include, for example:
 - o Some schools have weekly meetings where teachers discuss various issues, including SRGBV. These sessions could be used to provide information on the CoC.
 - o Training on the CoC could be included within the refresher training that the MBSSE provides to some teachers on various topics during the school holidays.
 - o School leadership could include information provision/discussion of CoC in induction for all new teachers.
- Actions are required to make students aware of the CoC and to give them a clear message that the school takes the CoC seriously. This must go beyond writing the CoC on walls and could include the principal speaking about the CoC in assemblies.
- Actions are also required to inform parents and community leaders about the CoC and the steps they can take if the CoC is violated. This can be done by the school and local NGOs, and others are working on SRGBV.
- It is important to recognise that teachers are unlikely to follow rules that are not in line with dominant norms just because these are written in the CoC. Encouraging teachers to adhere to the CoC must be part of wider efforts to shift community attitudes about child rights and teacher behaviour expectations.
- The CoC is potentially a useful framework to hold teachers accountable and inform responses when incidents occur. There is some evidence that this is happening, with principals warning teachers that their actions violate the CoC. Building knowledge and commitment on the CoC among those with oversight of teachers' conduct (principals, school safety committees, boards of governors, where these exist) can help these actors to use the CoC to hold teachers to account.

5.2.3 Key lessons on Domain 3

- Teachers' capacity on SRGBV or positive teaching methods is very low. While there are some efforts to build this capacity, these are not systematic and far-reaching enough and often tend to involve one-off training, including just a few of the more senior teachers.
- There is little oversight or effective management of teachers, allowing them to commit SRGBV with impunity. There is also limited leadership and guidance for teachers from senior staff.
- A major challenge is that the high number of untrained/unqualified teachers who have not received any basic professional training are excluded from any ad hoc training on SRGBV and have limited knowledge, motivation and accountability. Addressing this challenge could involve:
 - o Supporting untrained teachers to undertake distance training while working;
 - o Improving the conditions of service for teachers in less attractive locations to incentivise qualified teachers to take up posts there; and
 - o Ensuring that untrained and unqualified teachers are included in any training on issues such as SRGBV and child rights.
- It is important to cascade and embed learning within the school from any external training in which teachers participate. For example, teachers on training courses can share their learning with colleagues or take responsibility for supporting the implementation of key elements they have learned about.
- It is important to recognise that shifting individual teachers' behaviour will be difficult as long as there are widely shared norms that some forms of SRGBV (notably corporal punishment) are expected and acceptable behaviour for teachers.
- However, it could be useful to build on the fact that some teachers are aware that they should not use corporal punishment and are trying alternative discipline methods. These teachers can act as 'positive deviant' examples to others by making them visible and discussing their alternative approaches to discipline.

5.2.4 Key lessons on Domain 4

- Poor understanding and negative perceptions of children's rights are barriers to including children's rights in the curriculum or practice

in schools. It would be useful to provide more information for all key stakeholders – teachers, parents, students and community leaders – on what children’s rights are and how they contribute to a healthy school environment, including the value of positive discipline.

- It could also be helpful if discussions around these issues provided space for stakeholders to reflect together, not just on how to uphold children’s rights but also on the responsibilities and behaviours the school and community expect from adolescents. This could help address the common perception that children have too many rights and not enough responsibilities.
- Discriminatory gender norms contribute to unequal perceptions, expectations and treatment of boys and girls by school staff. Changing this will involve wider work on gender norms and attitudes in communities in which teachers and students are a part. It could also help to develop standardised approaches for how staff should respond to incidents involving students or to students’ concerns so that this is not left entirely to the individual staff member’s discretion. This could limit the space for gender-discriminatory responses by staff.
- The fact that mechanisms for student participation are often inactive suggests that no staff member is responsible or accountable for implementing these and that they are not a priority for school leadership. School leadership could address this by prioritising making these mechanisms functional and giving responsibility to senior teaching staff for doing this.
- The model of class representatives having direct and regular access to the principal seems promising and could be replicated in other schools. This requires a principal who is committed to student participation.

5.2.5 Key lessons on Domain 5

- A major reason students and families do not report violence are because of prevalent norms that view this violence as acceptable, as in the case of flogging, or blame and stigmatise victims of violence, as in the case of girls who are sexually abused by teachers or *okada* riders. Changing these norms is a long-term endeavour required to make SRGBV unacceptable and create a context in which it is always reported and taken seriously.
- Fear of reprisals by teachers is another key reason why students and their families

do not complain. Addressing this requires strengthening confidentiality and putting in place follow-up actions and oversight of teachers to ensure such reprisals are not possible.

- There is very little understanding of or respect for confidentiality within schools. This is a major disincentive for students to report cases of SRGBV, as this puts them at risk of stigma and reprisals. Basic training and clear guidelines on this could help, as well as consequences for school staff who breach confidentiality.
- The main mechanism for reporting that schools rely on is suggestion boxes, which are not working. For these boxes to be effective, they need to be put in appropriate places, the confidentiality of students reporting to them needs to be ensured, and they need to be part of an institutionalised complaint and response mechanism within the school.
- There is no evidence of regular and effective monitoring, oversight or inspection that could assess how well schools are dealing with reports of SRGBV. Nor are there mechanisms to hold the school and its leadership accountable for how they respond to reports. Such oversight and accountability mechanisms are crucial if reporting systems are to work.
- The effectiveness of reporting mechanisms depends heavily on the interest and commitment of the individual staff to whom a report is made or who is responsible for taking forward the report. Responses to reports of SRGBV need to be institutionalised, with clear guidelines for all school staff to follow.
- There is little evidence that reporting is linked to any support system or that reports will result in meaningful follow-up by the school or other authorities. This is another major disincentive for reporting. It could be useful if students and parents are given information on what follow-up and support they should expect when they report SRGBV to help them hold schools and other authorities responsible for providing this.
- It is important to engage with communities regarding how SRGBV cases can be reported and should be responded to, including which type of cases should be reported to the FSU.

5.2.6 Key lessons on Domain 6

- Strengthening minimum standards in this domain is particularly challenging as failures are related to wider systemic problems of limited capacity and inadequate coordination

across a range of institutions that should be involved in responses to incidents of SRGBV.

- There are no clear procedures in place within most schools for dealing with SRGBV incidents. Basic steps would be to establish these procedures, including clarifying the responsibility of different staff mentors (mentors, guidance counsellors, school leadership) for implementing them and informing all staff, parents and students about them.
- It is problematic that decisions about when and how cases of SRGBV should be referred to outside agencies are largely left to the principal's discretion, particularly given that principals are generally reluctant to make such referrals for fear it could damage the school's reputation. Mechanisms are required to hold principals to account for making or failing to make referrals, for example, through oversight by the Board of Governors or MBSSE education officers. Such accountability would require as a basic first step that reliable records are kept of all reported incidents of SRGBV and what action the school has taken, which is currently not happening in any of the schools.
- Referral pathways need to be clearer, and links between schools and other agencies involved in child protection must be strengthened. There is potential for the new National Referral Protocol on Gender-Based Violence to improve this situation once it is launched if it is backed up with awareness-raising, capacity-building and resources.
- It could be useful for MoGCA, MBSSE and MoH to do integrated monitoring and supervision to strengthen the capacity of officials in districts to respond effectively to SRGBV. This could be as part of the roll-out of the new GBV referral protocol.
- Weak responses to SRGBV must be understood as part of a much larger challenge of impunity for GBV and other crimes in Sierra Leone. This impunity is driven by a weak and sometimes corrupt police and justice system, the fact that chiefs and community leaders regularly arbitrate crimes they should refer to the police, and a culture of compromise. Strengthening responses to SRGBV requires addressing this wider context of impunity.

5.2.7 Key lessons on Domain 7

- The security threats from the physical school environment are clear and well-understood by school leadership, communities and students.

There is widespread agreement about the need to address these.

- There is evidence that some of these security threats can be addressed through actions by school leadership – for example, making rules that commercial bikes cannot enter the compound or calling the police when outsiders enter the school, or drugs are being used.
- However, addressing insecurity that is caused by inadequate facilities – toilets, fencing, water supply, etc. – requires extra funding.
- In order to address concerns about insecurity on the way to school, it could be useful for schools and communities to look at options such as a walking school bus (groups of children walking together with an adult volunteer), which have worked in other contexts.

5.2.8 Key lessons on Domain 8

- Special attention must be paid to the welfare of children living with caregivers rather than parents. Caregivers are less likely to focus on the welfare of a child or advocate on a child's behalf than parents. It would be useful if schools could record which students live with caregivers and check in regularly with these students on their welfare. This could be a role for school mentors or others who already have pastoral care responsibilities, in conjunction with engagement from social workers.
- Evidence shows that enrolling parents and caregivers into positive parenting education programmes help curb violence in homes and creates peaceful communities while influencing behaviour change around gender roles and practices. It could be useful to expand and build on such work by making visible examples where community members are parenting differently, such that they act as role models and help shift norms around parenting. The MoGCA has developed guidelines on positive parenting, which can be useful in this regard.
- It could be useful to run nationwide campaigns on positive discipline to bring adolescents, school staff, parents and communities together, to help strengthen the parent–school relationship and open a conversation between parents and school about how children should be treated. Expanding these discussions in safe spaces will give students a larger and freer forum to air their views on SRGBV and help curb violence against children.

- Community leaders play an important role in shaping attitudes about how children should be treated, including guiding parents on how to respond to SRGBV. It seems that sensitisation with them is having some impact, so this is something to expand and build on.
- In many schools, parents only engage with the school if they are called in about their child's misbehaviour or if they want to complain when

their child has been mistreated. One school actively encouraged parents to approach the school to discuss their problems with their children at home and their children's problems at school. This success seemed largely to be due to the principal's commitment. It might be useful to replicate this more positive and proactive engagement between parents and schools in other schools.

References

UNESCO and UN Women (2016) *Global guidance: school-related gender-based violence*. Paris: UNESCO

Appendix 1 Research tools

Research tool for adolescent school students

This research tool is to be used with separate groups of boys and girls. Approximately 6 to 8 children should be identified to participate in each group. Groups should be organised by age, with separate groups for younger adolescents (ages 12 to 14) and older adolescents (ages 15 to 18). Wherever possible, each group should include various ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic and religious identities, disabilities and other relevant factors.

Introduction

My name is X, and I'm a researcher with the Institute for Development based in Freetown.

We are conducting a research project to understand the different types of violence that girls and boys experience in and around schools and to find ways to address this violence. The research will help improve the projects being run by CIFORD/HI in your school, community, and others.

The findings from this research may also be included in a published report about the problem of school-related gender-based violence in Sierra Leone. When the research is complete, we will share the findings with the schools, communities, and others who participated.

School-related gender-based violence is violence that happens in or around schools. It includes:

- Corporal punishment, such as teachers and school staff hitting students;
- Verbal violence and abuse, such as teachers insulting and humiliating students;
- Hitting, teasing and bullying among students; and
- Sexual harassment, assault or rape by school staff and students or by other people children come across at or on the way to school.

You have been asked to participate in this discussion as we want to understand school students' views about the problem of gender-based violence in schools.

We will not report anything you tell us to your school, parents or caregivers, or anyone else in your community unless this has been discussed and agreed upon. We will record your age and the name of your school and community but ensure that anything you tell us can't be traced to you. The research team will only see our notes and not share them with anyone else.

Do you have any questions about the research or how your information will be used?

Are you happy to participate in the discussion? You can choose whether you want to participate in this research. You can also choose not to answer any specific questions or leave the discussion whenever you want.

This is not a test, and there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer as honestly as you can.

Activity: Mapping of school and surroundings

Together, draw a map of the school and its surroundings. (Use this also to verify physical infrastructure issues like the condition of toilets, school

gates/fencing, etc.) Mark on it the places where girls/boys feel unsafe or face different forms of violence and where they feel most safe and protected.

If any forms of violence (physical punishment, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, bullying, dating violence) are not mentioned, probe whether they do/don't take place, and how common they are.

Using the map as a prompt, discuss the following questions with the group:

- 1 Who is at risk of violence, bullying, teasing, and touching private parts in these places? (Ask all girls, boys, older students, younger students, etc.)
- 2 Who tends to do these things?
- 3 If any of these things happen to a student, can they report it? If so, where? What would happen then? (Ask whether any action would occur, depending on the different types of violence.) Do students feel safe reporting violence by school staff?

Now we're going to discuss some different situations to understand what people think about these and how they usually respond:

1. A student aged 14 years is hit by his teacher because they spoke to the teacher rudely. Would most students think this is an appropriate punishment? What if a boy was hit for touching a girl's private parts in class? Would most students think this is a suitable punishment? Are there any situations where students or their families would complain to the school if a teacher hit a student? Does this kind of violence often happen in your school?
2. A teacher tells a girl that he will give her good grades if she has sex with him. What would most girls do in this situation? Would they tell anyone? How would the school usually respond if the girl or her family reported the incident to the school? How do you think the school should respond? Do you think teachers ever ask for sex in exchange for good grades? If so, why does this happen?
3. A group of teenage boys regularly make sexual comments to girls in their class. Do you think this is a problem or normal teenage behaviour? Should the school do anything about this? If so, what? Is it common for boys to make these kinds of comments to girls at your school?

4. A 13-year-old girl no longer wants to go to school because she is being bullied and teased by other children. What could the school do to respond? How do you think the school could prevent bullying from happening in the first place? Is there much bullying and teasing at your school, and is anything ever done to stop it?
5. An *okada* driver starts giving a girl a free ride to school. After a few rides, he tells her she has to have sex with him if she wants more rides. What would most girls do in this situation? Would they tell anyone? If the girl told her family or the school, what would happen? What should the school do? What should the family do? Do you think this is a common problem in your community?
6. Have you noticed any efforts to reduce violence, teasing or bullying in your school? What actions has your school put in place? What have been the effects? (Ask whether there is a code of conduct for staff and student behaviour if students and staff are aware of it or follow it.)
7. What could your school do to help end these forms of violence against students? (Ask about different forms.) (Ask about the role of student leadership if not mentioned.) What can different groups of people do?

At the end of the discussion, tell the students that if they want to talk in confidence about the violence that happens in or around school or if they want to seek support for the violence they have experienced or report a violent incident, there are various organisations they can contact. Talk them through these organisations (CIFORD/HI, other relevant NGO service providers, Rainbo, social work and FSU). Provide each child with a paper giving the contact details for these organisations so they can take this away and refer to it later.

Also, at the end of the discussion, say that any child who wants to speak individually to one of the researchers can do so and make some time for this. Following the visit to the school, please fill in your main observations regarding the physical school site and how you saw different people behaving in and around the school in the table on the following page.

Researcher observations	
Observations about the physical school site (e.g. fencing, toilets, information posters, etc.)	
Observations about the behaviour of students, staff and other people in and around school (e.g. incidents of violence and aggression by staff/students, community members hanging around school premises, etc.)	

Tour of school

If possible, ask if some students would be willing to guide you around their school and its surroundings, pointing out some of the places they identified during the mapping exercise. This is also an opportunity to verify the condition of the toilets, etc.

This would probably need to be agreed upon with the school authorities so the students can do this.

Note: if participants become distressed talking about violence, one researcher should continue the

discussion while the other speaks to the upset child separately. The child may choose not to participate further. They should be given information about where to seek help or report violence before leaving.

If participants report a serious incident of violence or urgent child protection concern that requires follow-up. Please note down all the details and report it immediately to the research lead (Tania) and CIFORD/HI staff, who will be responsible for organising appropriate referrals (see separate safeguarding document).

Research tools for parents/caregivers

Introduction

My name is X, and I'm a researcher with the Institute for Development based in Freetown.

We are conducting a research project to understand the different types of violence that girls and boys experience in and around schools and to find ways to address this violence. The research will help improve the projects being run by CIFORD/HI in your school, community, and others.

The findings from this research may also be included in a published report about the problem of school-related gender-based violence in Sierra Leone. When the research is complete, we will share the findings with the schools, communities, and others who participated.

School-related gender-based violence is violence that happens in or around schools. It includes:

- Corporal punishment, such as teachers and school staff hitting students;
- Verbal violence and abuse, such as teachers insulting and humiliating students;
- Hitting, teasing and bullying among students; and
- Sexual harassment, assault or rape by school staff and students or by other people children come across at or on the way to school.

You have been asked to participate in this discussion as we want to understand the views of parents and caregivers about violence and bullying in school. Your answers could be based on what your children or other people have told you or what you have observed.

We will record the name of your child’s school and community but will ensure that anything you tell us cannot be traced back to you. You will not be identified by name, and we will not report what you say to your child’s school or anyone else without discussing this with you first.

The research team will only see our notes and not share them with anyone else.

Do you have any questions about the research or how your information will be used?

You can choose whether you want to participate in this research. You can also choose not to answer any specific

questions or leave the discussion whenever you want. Are you happy to participate in the discussion?

Discussion

Discuss the following questions with the group:

- 1 Do you think that a school is a safe place for your children?
Why/why not? What would make it safer?

I will read a list of types of violence that can occur in and around schools.

Based on what your children have told you or you have observed, could you tell us whether you think they are common in your school and community?

Form of violence	How frequently does it take place?	Who is most affected?	Who is most likely to do these things?
Physical punishment by teacher (e.g. hitting, pulling hair or ears)			
Teachers insulting students (e.g. telling them they are stupid or worthless)			
Students fighting/ hitting one another			
Students teasing/ bullying one another			
Students making sexual comments to one another			
Students groping one another/touching other students’ private parts without consent			
Teachers having affairs with students/offering sex for grades			
Okada drivers offering sex for rides			

Other people living in the community making sexual comments to or touching students without their consent			
Community members sexually assaulting or raping students			
Community members beating/fighting with students			
Other (identified by students in focus groups)			

Have you noticed any changes? Have any of these forms of violence become more or less frequent? Why do you think these changes have taken place?

Now we're going to discuss some situations and ask how families would normally respond:

- 1 A 14-year-old student is hit by his teacher because he or she spoke to the teacher rudely. Would most families think this is an appropriate punishment? What if a boy was beaten for groping a girl in the class? Would most families think this is a suitable punishment? Are there any situations where families would complain to the school if their child was beaten?
- 2 A teacher tells a girl that he will give her good grades if she has sex with him. She tells her mother. What would a family usually do in this situation? (Would it depend on the age of the girl?) How would the school usually respond if the family reported the incident to the school? How do you think the school should respond?
- 3 A group of teenage boys regularly make sexual comments to girls in their class. Would most families think this is a problem or normal teenage behaviour? Should the school do anything about this? If so, what?
- 4 A girl aged 13 years no longer wants to go to school because she is being bullied and teased by other children. How would most parents/caregivers react? What could the school do to respond? How do you think the school could prevent bullying from happening in the first place?

- 5 An *okada* driver starts giving a girl a free ride to school. After a few rides, he tells her she has to have sex with him if she wants more rides. If her family hears of this, how would they respond? Would it depend on the girl's age? Would/should they inform the school? What would/should the school do? What should the family do?
- 6 Have schools, NGOs, or other organisations run activities for parents and caregivers about violence in or around school?
- 7 What did you learn from these activities? Did you – or others you know – make any changes as a result? If not, why not?
- 8 Is there anything else the school can do to make it a safer place for your children?

Thank you very much for your time. We will use your answers to help improve the work of organisations working to stop violence in or around schools.

Note: If participants report a serious incident of violence or urgent child protection concern that requires follow-up. Please note down all the details and report them immediately to the research lead (Tania) and CIFORD/HI staff, who will be responsible for organising appropriate referrals (see safeguarding document).

Research tool for headteacher and school staff

This research tool is to be used for the following:

- An individual interview with the school principal;
- A group interview with senior teaching staff, school mentors, focal points on gender/GBV, child protection issues, etc;
- A group interview with qualified teachers;
- An interview with unqualified teachers if they are present on the day (this may be an individual or group interview depending on how many volunteer teachers are there);
- An interview with other school staff such as assistants and secretaries, staff who monitor children during playtime, cooks, etc. (this may be a group interview or individual interview depending on how many such staff there are); and
- A group interview with members of the board of governors/CTA (only if HI/CIFORD advise that these groups are active and relevant).

Introduction

My name is X, and I'm a researcher with the Institute for Development based in Freetown.

We are conducting a research project to understand the different types of violence that girls and boys experience in and around schools and to find ways to address this violence. The research will help improve the projects being run by CIFORD/HI in your school, community, and others.

The findings from this research may also be included in a published report about the problem of school-related gender-based violence in Sierra Leone. When the research is complete, we will share the findings with the schools, communities, and others who participated.

School-related gender-based violence is violence that happens in or around schools. It includes:

- Corporal punishment, such as teachers and school staff hitting students;
- Verbal violence and abuse, such as teachers insulting and humiliating students;
- Hitting, teasing and bullying among students; and
- Sexual harassment, assault or rape by school staff and students or by other people children come across at or on the way to school.

You have been asked to participate in this discussion as we want to understand the views and experiences of teachers and other school staff about violence and bullying in school.

We will record your school's name but will ensure that anything you tell us cannot be traced to you. You will not be identified by name, and we will not report what you say to anyone without discussing this with you first.

The research team will only see our notes and not share them with anyone else.

Do you have any questions about the research or how your information will be used?

Are you happy to participate in the discussion? You can choose whether you want to participate in this research. You can also choose not to answer any specific questions or leave the discussion whenever you want.

Discussion

- 2 What training have school staff had on school-related gender-based violence or the minimum standards for preventing and responding to it?

Who has provided this training? Who has taken part in it?

- 3 What topics has it covered? Here, ask specifically about training on the following topics:
 - Gender equality/child rights.
 - Alternative discipline methods.
 - Codes of conduct. If the school has a code of conduct, please request a copy and ask whether it's for all staff or just teachers.
 - Bullying.
 - Reporting mechanisms (e.g. suggestion boxes). Ask what mechanisms the school has and how it responds to reports.
 - Positive physical environment (e.g. clean, separate toilets).
 - Child voice and participation (e.g. student councils).
 - Role of school leadership.
 - What did you learn from this training?
 - What changes did the school implement as a result of the training?
 - Are there some changes you were unable to make? Why?
 - Are there topics where further training would be useful?
 - [If some school staff (cooks, guards, etc.) have not had training, ask what training on school violence and bullying they would find useful.]

- 3 Two 15-year-old boys don't get on and sometimes have physical fights in school. Would it be different if a boy and girl were fighting? Or two girls? How do you think the school should respond?
- 4 A group of teenage boys regularly make sexual comments to girls in their class. Is this a problem or normal teenage behaviour? Should the school do anything about this? If so, what?
- 5 There are rumours that one of the teachers is offering to give girls students better grades if they have sex with him. What would other school staff do if they heard this rumour? What would the school management do if the rumour was reported to them? How difficult do you think it would be to stop the practice?

We'd like to understand what you see as the main forms of violence in your school. Could you tell us if you have heard of or seen any of these occur? And if students are reporting them? / how common are these in your school?

- 1 What are the most common reasons children bully, tease, or fight each other?
- 2 While one researcher is discussing with participants, the other should fill in this matrix (some of this may already have been discussed in the previous question).

We'd like to understand the beliefs different people in this school and community hold about violence and bullying in schools. We're going to present a few different situations – please could you tell us how you think different people would react.

- 1 A 13-year-old girl no longer wants to go to school because she is being bullied and teased by other children. What could the school do to respond? How do you think the school could prevent bullying from happening in the first place?
- 2 A teacher hit a 14-year-old student because he spoke to the teacher rudely. Would the school take any action if this was reported – by the boy, his family or another teacher? What would other teachers and school staff think about this punishment? Would parents/caregivers complain if they found out?

Form of violence	Have observed/heard of this taking place	Students have reported this	How did/would the school respond?
Students fighting/hitting another one			
Students teasing/bullying one another (verbally)			
Students groping one another/touching other students' private parts without consent			
Physical punishment by teacher (e.g. hitting, pulling hair or ears)			
Teachers insulting students (e.g. telling them they are stupid or worthless)			
Violence outside the school that affect students (e.g. <i>okada</i> drivers offering sex for rides, community members raping or hitting students)			
Other (identified by students in focus groups)			

We'd like to come back to the reporting mechanisms you have in place (unless fully covered earlier):

- 1 What are the mechanisms for students to report violence? What are the main forms of violence that they report?
- 2 Are there mechanisms for staff to report unacceptable behaviour by other staff? What sorts of violence would you report? Are there any that you would not? Why?
- 2 What structures does the school have for hearing students' views (e.g. a school council)? Do boys and girls participate equally in these structures? Are there examples of changes that have been made due to students expressing their views?

- 3 What does the school leadership see as priority actions about gender-based violence in schools? Why?
- 4 What kind of support does your school receive on gender-based violence? What would further support be helpful?

Note: If participants report a serious incident of violence or urgent child protection concern that requires follow-up. Please note down all the details and report it immediately to the research lead (Tania) and CIFORD/HI staff, who will be responsible for organising appropriate referrals.

Research tool for use with community leaders

This tool is to be used for key informant interviews with chiefs, religious leaders or other community leaders, including female community leaders.

Introduction

My name is X, and I'm a researcher with the Institute for Development based in Freetown.

We are conducting a research project to understand the different types of violence that girls and boys experience in and around schools and to find ways to address this violence. The research will help improve the projects being run by CIFORD/HI in your school, community, and others.

The findings from this research may also be included in a published report about the problem of school-related gender-based violence in Sierra Leone. When the research is complete, we will share the findings with the schools, communities and other people who participated.

School-related gender-based violence is violence that happens in or around schools. It includes:

- corporal punishment, such as teachers and school staff hitting students
- verbal violence and abuse, such as teachers insulting and humiliating students
- hitting, teasing and bullying among students
- sexual harassment, assault or rape by school staff and students or by other people whom children come across at school or on the way to school

You have been asked to participate in this discussion as we want to understand the views of community leaders about the problem of gender-based violence that affects school students.

We will record the name of your school and community but will make sure that anything you tell us can't be traced to you. If any points you raise need to be discussed with the authorities, we will discuss this with you first. The research team will only see our notes and not share them with anyone else.

Do you have any questions about the research or how your information will be used?

You can choose whether you want to participate in this research. You can also choose not to answer any specific questions or to leave the discussion whenever you would like. Are you happy to participate in the discussion?

Questions

- 1 Do you think a school is a safe place for the children in this community? Why/why not?
- 2 Have there been any training or awareness-raising activities about school-related gender-based violence in your community?

Have you ever taken part in these activities? Who provided this training/activities?

How useful did you think they were/what did you learn from them?

We would like to understand how people in this community respond to different types of school-related violence. We are going to read out some situations. We will ask how you think people in this community would respond and what community leaders like you would do.

- 1 A 14-year-old boy is hit because he spoke rudely to his teacher. What would people in the community think of this punishment? Would it be different if he was hit because he was forcing himself on a girl in the class? (What if the boy was badly injured?) in either case, would families report this to a community leader or the police? What would you do if the family complained to you about it?
- 2 A teacher tells a girl that he will give her good grades if she has sex with him, and the girl reports this to her mother. What should happen in this situation? If the family informed you, what would you do or advise them to do? (Ask whether the family's/school's and your response be different if the girl was young, e.g. 12 years compared to 16 years of age)?

- 3 Girls are offered rides to school by *okada* riders in return for sex. How would people in the community see this? Is it a problem or just normal behaviour by men? What should girls do? If this was reported to you, what would you do or advise them to do? (Ask whether this would vary with the girl's age.)
- 4 A 13-year-old girl no longer wants to go to school because she is being bullied and teased by other children. What should the school do? What would you say or do if the family asked you to help solve this problem?

As part of our research, school children have told us that some of the key places in the communities they face violence on the way to/from school are [show map and describe whom they face violence from]:

- 1 What could community leaders do to stop this happening and make the community safer for school children? (If not mentioned, try to elicit responses such as raising awareness, setting fines, reporting to the police or school, etc.)
- 2 What support is there for community leaders to do this? Would you like further support to help prevent violence that affects school children? What? And who is it from?

Research tool for use with district-level officials

This tool will be used for key informant interviews with district-level officials from education, police or social work departments.

Introduction

My name is X, and I'm a researcher with the Institute for Development based in Freetown.

We are conducting a research project to understand the different types of violence that girls and boys experience in and around schools and to find ways to address this violence. The research will help improve the projects being run by CIFORD/HI in your school, community, and others.

The findings from this research may also be included in a published report about the problem of school-related gender-based violence in Sierra Leone. When the research is complete, we will share the findings with the schools, communities and other people who took part.

School-related gender-based violence is violence that happens in or around schools. It includes:

- Corporal punishment, such as teachers and school staff hitting students;
- Verbal violence and abuse, such as teachers insulting and humiliating students;
- Hitting, teasing and bullying among students; and
- Sexual harassment, assault or rape by school staff and students or by other people children come across at or on the way to school.

We requested this interview to understand better the role of [insert name of department] in preventing and responding to school-related gender-based violence.

You will not be identified by name, and we will make sure that anything you tell us cannot be traced to you.

Our notes will only be seen by the research team and not shared with anyone else.

Do you have any questions about the research or how your information will be used?

You can choose whether you want to participate in this research. You can also choose not to answer any specific questions or leave the discussion whenever you want. Are you happy to participate in the discussion?

Questions

- 1 Could you describe your department's role and responsibilities concerning school-related gender-based violence? (Ask about the respondent's knowledge of legal/policy framework that should guide their department's work if not mentioned.) Has that changed in recent years?
- 2 What are the main types of violent incidents you are aware of in communities and schools in this district?

For district education officials only:

- 1 Have you had any training or support specifically on school-related gender-based violence? Who from? What did you learn from that training?
- 2 What guidance and training have your department provided to schools on gender-based violence so far? What are your plans for training and support to schools on school-related gender-based violence?
- 3 What measures have schools put in place that you think is most effective and why? Which are the least effective? Why? What are the key challenges schools face in implementing prevention and response measures?
- 4 What challenges do you face in supporting schools to prevent and respond to school-related gender-based violence? What would help overcome those challenges?

For police and social workers only:

We are going to describe some situations and would like to ask you what would normally happen and what you think should happen in these situations:

- 1 A 14-year-old boy is hit as a punishment for bad behaviour. Would families normally complain? Given that corporal punishment is illegal, should the police get involved? (Ask if it depends on whether the boy was badly injured if this is not mentioned.)
- 2 A teacher tells a girl that he will give her good grades if she has sex with him, and the girl reports this to her mother. Should this be considered a crime? Why/why not? Does it depend on the age of the girl? What should happen in this situation, and who should be involved?

- 3 *Okada* riders make sexual comments to schoolgirls and offer them rides to school in return for sex. Should this be considered a crime? Does it depend on the age of the girl? Should anybody act on this (parents/caregivers, officials, community leaders, etc.)? What should they do?
- 5 What happens if an incident of school-related gender-based violence is reported to you? What actions does your department take? Does it differ from the type of violence? Or the impact (physical injuries, pregnancy, STDs, etc.)?
- 6 How common is it for incidents to be reported to your department? Why do you think this is? Has reporting been increasing or decreasing over the past year? In general, who would you report an incident? What encourages/discourages you in reporting violent incidents?
- 7 Have you had any training or support on responding to school-related gender-based violence? Who from? What did you learn from that training?
- 8 What are the key challenges you face in taking action to respond to reported cases of school-related gender-based violence? What would help you overcome those challenges?

For all respondents:

- 1 What else can be done to prevent school-related gender-based violence from happening? What do you think teachers should do (if not covered earlier)? Parents/caregivers? Community leaders? Is there anything else your department could do?

Summary matrix

Following all the interviews with different stakeholders, use the following table to debrief and summarise your findings about how common different forms of violence are, who is most affected, what happens if this violence is reported, people's opinions about these types of violence and any differences between what different stakeholders told you.

Form of violence	Main findings and observations		
Physical punishment by teacher (e.g. caning, slapping, pulling hair or ears)			
Teachers insulting students (e.g. telling them they are stupid or worthless)			
Students fighting/hitting one another			
Students teasing/bullying one another			
Students making sexual comments to one another			
Students touching other students' private parts without consent			
Teachers having affairs with students/offering sex for grades			
Okada drivers offering sex for rides			
Community members making sexual comments to or groping students			
Community members sexually assaulting or raping students			
Community members beating/fighting with students			
Other (identified by students)			

Appendix 2 Safeguarding plan

Nature of research

The research will involve FGDs with children in seven JSS schools (including one pilot) in three districts (Kono, Kambia, Kenema). Each focus group will be made up of six to eight children (grouped by gender and age group), and each discussion will last for around 1.5 hours. The children will be asked a number of questions about SRGBV in their school and community and will be invited to discuss a number of 'invented' scenarios involving SRGBV. They will be asked to map out the school environment and identify where violence is most common.

Justification for conducting research with children

The justification for conducting these FGDs with children is the need to understand their experience of SRGBV and to get their perspective on what can be done to address it. While interviews and FGDs will be held with a range of other adult stakeholders, the experiences and opinions of children themselves must inform the findings of the research and the recommendations and actions that flow from them. The involvement of children in this research will benefit these individual children and/or other children if it results in actions to address the problem of SRGBV in their school.

Consent

It is important to obtain the informed consent of both the children and their parents/guardians.

To ensure this, the children selected to participate in the research will receive an age-appropriate explanation of what the research will involve. If they want to participate, they will be given a letter to take home that can be read by/read to their parents/guardians to inform them about the research.

At the start of the FGD, the purpose of the research and the nature of the children's engagement will be explained again. It will also be explained that the children can decide to stop participating in the discussion at any time. The children will then be asked

to confirm (1) that they agree to participate and (2) that their parents/guardians have read the letter and agreed for them to participate.

When asking for children's consent, the researchers will be sensitive to the adult-child power dynamics that may make children feel they must consent. They will make clear that it is fine to decide not to participate and that there is no need for children to explain their choice.

Potential risks and harms

The research team has identified many potential risks and harms to the children participating in this research. These include:

- Children may become distressed from talking about issues of violence.
- Children may face reprisals from perpetrators of violence (teachers, community members or other children) if they report specific incidents of violence or name perpetrators during the discussion.
- Stigmatising information – either about the children participating in the discussions or other children in the school – may be made public if children mention this in the discussion.
- There is a risk that the most marginalised or vulnerable children may face barriers to participation in the discussions, and, therefore, their perspectives will be overlooked.
- Children may be exposed to information on sex and sexual violence that is not age-appropriate during the discussion.

The following actions will be taken to mitigate these risks and harms:

- Researchers will ask for a briefing from CIFORD/HI on the school communities before they begin researching them to understand the context and any particular sensitivities.

- There will be an emphasis on ensuring that a variety of children are selected to participate, including the most vulnerable (poorest, disabled, those from minorities, etc.) to ensure inclusivity and representativeness. School staff are key gatekeepers for selecting participants, so the importance of different types of children participating, not just 'star pupils', will be explained to them.
- During the discussions, researchers will support and encourage all children to speak, recognising that the most vulnerable may find it more difficult to do so. Suppose some children face particular challenges in participating due to disability. In that case, the researchers will find ways to support their inclusion (e.g. telling visually impaired children what is on the map so they can participate in the mapping exercise).
- Children will be separated into groups by gender and age. This will allow girls and boys to speak more freely. It also means that younger children are less likely to be exposed to inappropriate information on sex and sexual violence that older children might discuss. Some questions about sexual violence will not be asked if children have not already raised these issues in the discussions.
- There will be two researchers present at all times; a male researcher will lead discussions with boys, and a female researcher will lead discussions with girls.
- The researchers will begin the FGD by laying out some ground rules, in particular, that what is said during the discussion is confidential and should not be reported to others outside. However, they will make it clear that in certain circumstances (if a safeguarding issue needs to be reported), they may have to break this confidentiality, but this would be done only after speaking to the child involved. Also, they will make it clear that participants should treat each other respectfully and not provide confidential information about others during the discussion.
- The researchers will explain at the beginning that children should not specifically name individuals when giving information (e.g. saying, 'X had sex with a teacher'). If children begin to name others involved in SRGBV incidents, the researchers will stop them and remind them not to do this.
- It is envisaged that there will not be any school staff present during the group discussion. If a member of the school staff insists on being present, the researchers will adapt the

questions to ensure that there is no risk that children could face reprisals for their answers (e.g. they may not ask directly about teachers having sex with children).

- If a child becomes upset during the discussion, one researcher will speak to them separately to find out what is causing the upset and what action is required while the other continues to lead the discussion.
- Suppose there is any particularly hurtful or stigmatising comment that could harm other children in the group or reinforce stigmatising and discriminatory behaviour. In that case, the researchers will address this either during the discussion or at the end.
- At the end of the discussion, the researchers will provide the children with information about where they can seek help on issues of SRGBV or report incidents (local NGOs, social workers, the FSU, etc.). This will be provided verbally, and in written form, so the children can keep it and refer to it later. The researchers will also be available if any child would like to speak to them individually after the group discussion.

It is possible that during the discussions, a child discloses incidents of abuse or the risk of abuse, which requires action. In this case, the following steps will be taken:

- After the discussion, the researchers will speak to the child individually and explain that the incident/risk must be reported.
- The researchers will note down all details of the incident/risk and will discuss with the child if there is anyone they feel safe to tell about it (e.g. a family member or supportive teacher). They will also discuss what the child would like to happen.
- Once the researchers leave the school, they will immediately inform the research lead (Tania) and CIFORD/HI about the incident. The research team will then liaise with CIFORD/HI to ensure that the incident is reported to the correct authorities and that the child is provided with support and follow-up.
- In doing this, the researchers will be sensitive to reporting abuse that cannot be substantiated or where no action will be taken by authorities, which can put the child at greater risk. The response needs to be tailored to the context, and CIFORD/HI will play a crucial role in this as they know the communities.

Confidentiality

The researchers will take all possible steps to respect children's right to privacy and ensure that the information they provide remains confidential.

The information gathered will be anonymised. The names of participants will be recorded, but nowhere will their names be linked to the information and opinions that they have given. Interview notes will only be seen by the research team and not shared with anyone else.

The data gathered will be stored on a password-protected SharePoint site to ensure that research team members can only access data. Data will be stored for as long as the project lasts and removed.

When the findings are presented to the communities or presented in written reports, all examples will be anonymised so that no individual can be identified.

Report on findings

from school-related gender-based violence action
research in schools and communities in
Sierra Leone

