



Synthesis Report

Action research project on school-related gender-based violence and implementation of the minimum standards in Sierra Leone

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Abbreviations

ART	Action Research Team
CIFORD	Community Initiatives for Rural Development
CoC	Code of Conduct
FSU	Family Service Unit (Sierra Leone Police)
GBV	Gender-based Violence
HI	Humanity and Inclusion
JSS	Junior Secondary School
MBSSE	Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education
MoGCA	Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs
MoSW	Ministry of Social Welfare
R&R	Review and Reflect
SRGBV	School-related Gender-based Violence
SSS	Senior Secondary School
ToC	Theory of Change

1 Introduction

This report synthesises learning from an action research project supported by UNICEF Sierra Leone to develop evidence regarding strategies for addressing the problem of 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. The action research accompanied the implementation of two projects that aimed to address SRGBV and support the implementation of minimum standards for achieving a whole school approach to SRGBV (hereafter 'minimum standards') within a selection of schools and communities in Kambia, Kenema and Kono districts. These projects were implemented by UNICEF partners Community Initiative for Rural Development (CIFORD) in Kono and Humanity and Inclusion (HI) in Kambia and Kenema. The action research gathered evidence regarding the implementation of these projects, supported CIFORD and HI staff in reflecting on the effectiveness of their approach and where they might want to make adaptations, and documented lessons from these projects.

The action research ran from June 2021 to January 2022 and was undertaken by a team from the Institute for Development (IfD) with support from Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

1.1 Minimum standards for achieving a whole-school approach to school-related gender-based violence

Preventing or responding to SRGBV requires a whole-school approach in which stakeholders at the school level work together to undertake various activities aimed at making schools safer and more child-friendly, inclusive and gender-sensitive. These stakeholders include students, teachers, support staff, principals, the local community, education authorities and other government authorities, fostering a positive learning environment for students and educators. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) has identified minimum standards for achieving a whole-school approach to SRGBV.

These 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; and
- 8 Parent engagement.

1.2 The problem of school-related gender-based violence in Sierra Leone

In recent years there has been increasing recognition of the widespread nature of the problem of SRGBV in Sierra Leone. The Government of Sierra Leone has substantially strengthened the policy framework for tackling SRGBV. However, implementing this framework at the district and community levels remains a major challenge.

As part of this project, the research team conducted primary research in schools and communities to generate evidence on the manifestations of SRGBV and the opportunities and barriers to implementing the minimum standards. Findings from this primary research are detailed in a separate report (*Report on Findings from School-Related Gender-Based Violence Research in Schools and Communities*). However, it is worth noting that the main forms of SRGBV identified in the schools where CIFORD and HI were working were corporal punishment by teachers, sexual harassment and abuse of female students by teachers, peers and community members, and physical and emotional bullying among peers. Overall, younger children were at greater risk of bullying – by both older students and peers – and older students were more at risk of sexual exploitation.

The primary research also identified several normative, structural and institutional factors that drive the problem of SRGBV. 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, which leads to girls accepting rides from okada drivers in exchange for sex or puts them at risk of sexual violence on their journey to school;
- The fact that families are frequently unable to provide for children's basic needs leads girls to accept offers of financial support to enable them to meet their school and living costs in exchange for a sexual relationship;
- The need for many children to live away from family to attend secondary school, which means that these children have limited supervision and financial or practical support;
- The condition of school infrastructure, in particular, the lack of fencing and inadequate toilets;
- Teachers' low levels of training and professional conduct, including limited awareness of the teachers' Code of Conduct (CoC) and lack of knowledge of alternative discipline methods;
- The lack of meaningful oversight and accountability mechanisms within most schools means that school leadership and staff are not held to account for preventing or addressing SRGBV; and
- Inadequate reporting and referral mechanisms mean that cases of SRGBV mostly go unreported, and where cases are reported, these are not followed up effectively.

2 Research methodology

2.1 Action research visits

From June 2021 to January 2022, the Action Research Team (ART) made three visits to each project district (Kambia, Kenema and Kono) to conduct the research. This involved: interviewing staff, beneficiaries and other stakeholders; recording how project implementation was proceeding; and constructively questioning project assumptions and ways of working on acting as a prompt for reflection. It also involved observation of the implementation of project activities.

Through this regular engagement with partner staff and the wider project stakeholders, the ART developed detailed evidence about; (1) the problem of SRGBV and potential entry points and opportunities for supporting the implementation of minimum standards in the schools and communities where partners are working and; (2) the progress of partner projects and learning about the effectiveness of partners' strategies.

2.2 Bi-monthly review and reflect sessions

In addition to the field visits, the ART supported partners to integrate regular moments of strategy reflection during project implementation and encourage adaptation where learning suggested a different approach is needed. Three Review and Reflect (R&R) sessions were held with each partner from July 2021 to January 2022. During these sessions, partners reflected on new information about the problem and context they were working on, emerging results and learning from project implementation—any new opportunities or roadblocks they faced. The partners reviewed whether the assumptions within their theory of change (ToC) remained valid in light of new information and learning and assessed whether their project strategies should be adapted. The action researchers offered their insights from accompanying the projects to feed into this analysis.

After each reflection session, the ART developed a report summarising key lessons learned, implications for programming, decisions made about adaptation and questions for further investigation, which was shared with partners. In this way, the reports from R&R sessions could help guide partners' choices about the next steps for programming, as well as the ART's choices about which areas require further or

deeper investigation. At the final R&R session, the ART supported the project teams to look back and reflect on the overall validity of the project's ToC and assumptions, their experience of working adaptively, the results from their projects and the strategies that worked well and less well. This final R&R session also identified future priorities for work on SRGBV and the minimum standards based on partners' learning from these projects.

2.3 Limitations

The action research faced various challenges, limiting the extent of the findings it could generate.

The most serious challenges related to time limitations with the CIFORD and HI projects scheduled to run for a year; the HI project began late due to a delay in contracting. So, in the end, the CIFORD project ran from November 2020 to January 2022 (the original year plus a three-month extension), while the HI project only ran from May 2021 to January 2022. Shifting attitudes and behaviours and addressing the structural factors that drive SRGBV is a long-term endeavour, and the short time frame of the projects was insufficient to create any meaningful change in this regard. While the projects did take actions to raise awareness of SRGBV and to strengthen or put in place mechanisms and processes for addressing SRGBV, there was very little time to follow up, support and embed this work or monitor any changes that resulted from it. This raises significant questions about the depth or sustainability of changes supported by the projects and limits the extent to which the action research was able to identify concrete outcomes from the projects.

It had been envisaged that reflection, learning and adaptation would happen in a structured way in both the CIFORD and HI projects, supported by the ART. While the partners did adapt some activities, as outlined in the following section, this adaptation was minimal. This was mainly because, due to delays, the action research project was not in place until June 2021. This meant there was very little time for the ART to support partners to meaningfully learn from implementation, reflect on what was/was not working, and adapt strategies accordingly. In addition to this, there was limited flexibility for partners to adapt their project plans and activities.

In hindsight, it would have been useful if the ART had been in place to support partners in designing their projects. In particular, this would have involved supporting partners to develop theories of change and identifying how they would test assumptions about how change happens and adapt their strategies based on learning and feedback during project implementation. Also, it would have involved supporting partners to design projects with sufficient flexibility to undertake meaningful adaptation.

It would also have been useful for the CIFORD and HI projects to include an element of monitoring and quantifying outcomes to complement the more qualitative reflections on progress and results that were done through the field visits, interviews and R&Rs.

Despite these limitations, the action research identified some critical findings regarding opportunities, challenges and effective strategies for addressing SRGBV, as outlined in the sections below.

3 Findings from the Community Initiatives for Rural Development (CIFORD) Project

3.1 The project

The CIFORD project, A Whole School Approach to Preventing School-Related Gender-Based Violence: Minimum Standards and Monitoring Framework, ran from November 2020 to January 2022 (with an extension to an original one-year contract to cover the period November 2021 to January 2022). Under the project agreement, CIFORD was responsible for 'training teachers, parents, community members and district authorities on preventing and addressing SRGBV, including establishing a child-friendly reporting system for addressing SRGBV towards a safe and gender-sensitive school'.

The project had the following three outputs:

- Strengthened school, community and district authority capacity for SRGBV prevention and response.
- Parental and community engagement against SRGBV.
- Putting in place a functioning, inclusive and child-friendly monitoring and reporting system, six schools, parents and school community members in the Kono district will benefit from the SRGBV training and implementing SRGBV minimum standards.

3.2 Theory of change

The initial ToC for the CIFORD project (developed at the project design phase before the action research element was involved) was that through working with school-level stakeholders, the project would shift norms and behaviours and help establish safe and gender-sensitive schools. While the initial ToC and project design did not detail *how* this work would shift norms and behaviours, CIFORD staff suggested specific ways this might happen during the R&R sessions. These include raising awareness with communities and parents to enable them to change their behaviour towards children and

be better equipped to hold schools accountable for SRGBV. Working with men and boys in the community would get them to 'see girls as sisters' and reduce sexual harassment of schoolgirls. However, the project could have benefited from a more detailed ToC to guide strategy and activities and assess whether the change was happening as expected.

3.3 Assumptions

While assumptions were not articulated in the project design, during the R&R sessions, it emerged that the project was underpinned by many implicit assumptions about the problem of SRGBV, the schools and communities where implementation was taking place, and the existing institutions and mechanisms to address the problem. During the R&R sessions, the CIFORD team reflected on the extent to which these implicit assumptions proved valid, as outlined below.

Assumptions about the nature of the problem mostly proved to be valid, with the project having identified key factors. These include the vulnerability of children living with caregivers rather than parents, the tendency to compromise on cases of SRGBV and the lack of awareness about SRGBV among community members.

CIFORD staff reported that some initial assumptions about existing mechanisms to address SRGBV were invalid, with these mechanisms being less effective than anticipated. For example, the project had been based on the assumption that students would be relatively well-informed about reporting and referral options and that existing reporting mechanisms and pathways would be primarily functional. However, project staff found that children were not aware of these issues. The main reporting mechanism (suggestion boxes placed in schools by the previous Leh Wi Lan education project) was not being used for reporting, and referral pathways for cases of SRGBV were ineffective. The project staff also found that their assumptions that teachers would be familiar with the teachers' CoC were invalid and that further work was required to inform teachers about the CoC.

However, project staff found some assumptions about the existing mechanism to address SRGBV were valid. In particular, the project had assumed that school mentors that past initiatives had established would be in place and have knowledge of safety and SRGBV. This was the case, and these mentors proved to be a valuable resource in preventing SRGBV.

In terms of assumptions about context, the project staff assumed that the six schools where they worked faced similar challenges regarding SRGBV. This was predominantly found to be the case, with little difference in the context, problem of SRGBV or existing responses among the schools and communities in Kono where CIFORD was working.

3.4 Adaptations

As discussed above, adaptation did not happen to the extent envisaged, both because the accompanying action research project to support learning and adaptation was not in place until halfway through the CIFORD project and because there was limited time or flexibility to adapt. The extension of the project for three extra months (November 2021 to January 2022) provided CIFORD staff with an opportunity to develop some significant adaptations based on their learning over the previous year of implementation, for example, reaching out to new stakeholders such as paramount chiefs. The main adaptations made by the CIFORD project are outlined in the table below.

Table 1: Adaptations

Adaptation	Reason for adaptation	Result of adaptation as reported by CIFORD staff
Project had planned to provide training on reporting tools and the EduTrac monitoring and information system to a range of stakeholders. This activity was cancelled, and funds were redirected towards SRGBV case management training for various stakeholders.	EduTrac training considered too complicated.	Greater range and number of stakeholders trained in SRGBV case management.
Project increased its activities aimed at strengthening reporting and referrals, including the reintroduction of suggestion boxes, informing students and stakeholders about reporting mechanisms, and activities to strengthen referral pathways.	Project staff realised that students were unaware of reporting mechanisms, that suggestion boxes (the main reporting mechanism) were not being used, and that local referral pathways were ineffective.	Students and parents are more aware of reporting mechanisms. There has been more use of suggestion boxes and increased reporting and referral of cases at both school and community levels. Cases within schools are now more often reported to mentors, channelled to the school administrators, and, if necessary, referred to CIFORD, Rainbo or the FSU.
Project increased activities to inform teachers about the CoC.	Project staff realised that teachers were not familiar with the CoC.	Increased knowledge about CoC among teachers.
Project engaged with new stakeholders, such as paramount chiefs and their chiefdom speakers, which it had not originally planned to target.	Project staff identified that paramount chiefs could play an essential role in strengthening community ownership of responses to SRGBV by giving messages to the community on this issue, and that the paramount chiefs often contributed to the problem by encouraging families to compromise on SRGBV cases.	Greater awareness among paramount chiefs and chiefdom speakers on SRGBV.

3.5 Results

CIFORD project staff have identified various results from the project activities (as there has been no formal evaluation or monitoring of project outcomes, reflections on results are drawn from observations of involved project staff and some stakeholders and have not been objectively verified). These results emerged particularly strongly during the three-month project extension, during which CIFORD expanded the range and quantity of stakeholders with which it was engaging.

Key results, as reported by CIFORD staff, were identified as follows:

- Overall, the project created increased knowledge and awareness among a range of school, community and institutional stakeholders about SRGBV and responses to it (e.g. increased awareness among parents of reporting mechanisms and increased knowledge among some teachers of the CoC). While the implicit ToC expressed by staff was that increased knowledge and awareness would lead to changes in norms and behaviours, there was no evidence of whether such norm and behaviour change is taking place – something that would require assessment over the longer term.
- Project staff report that a wider range of stakeholders now understand and take the issue of SRGBV seriously and are willing to take appropriate action on it. Community leaders such as chiefs and their assistants and mammy queens¹ are now less likely to encourage compromise on cases of SRGBV or to interfere with schools to prevent appropriate processes from being followed.
- Project staff also reported that the project resulted in stronger networking and coordination among local institutions with responsibility for SRGBV and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), Rainbo Initiative, Marie Stopes, who were previously not well connected. The project established coordination meetings through which these actors coordinate and keep each other informed about SRGBV. It also established linkages between these actors and the district council. Staff noted that including the Family Service Unit (FSU) in platforms with other actors engaged in SRGBV appeared to improve FSU response in this area.

- Likewise, reporting and referral mechanisms seem to work more effectively, resulting in improved management of cases. Staff have documented increased reporting and referral of cases at school and community levels. At school, cases are often reported to mentors, channelled to the school administrators, and, if necessary, referred to CIFORD, Rainbo or the FSU.
- The project helped to strengthen oversight mechanisms at the school level. Specifically, the project supported the establishment of more robust school safety systems, a local civil society organisation (Girls Education Movement) monitoring the use of suggestion boxes, school principals more effectively supervising school mentors and staff, and greater involvement of school board members in oversight.
- During the project period, the physical infrastructure – notably fencing – was improved in two schools due to the school authorities' increased focus on school safety. Teachers also became more proactive in preventing people from entering the school compound without permission.

While the above results are ones that the project was seeking to achieve, there were also some unexpected results. For example, nearby schools that were not part of the project contacted CIFORD to ask them for support and advice on SRGBV, mainly due to the radio discussions that CIFORD organised on the topic. Likewise, CIFORD had not expected the district council to become so engaged and collaborate with SRH actors on the issue of SRGBV, which was a welcome but unexpected positive result.

While the results described above represent vital progress towards implementing the minimum standards, there are significant questions about how these results will be sustained, particularly given the experience that previous mechanisms put in place by Leh Wi Lan had not been sustained. The CIFORD project did attempt to strengthen existing systems with the aim that these would continue to function after the end of the project, but the short time frame and lack of follow-up may make this difficult (as discussed below).

3.6 Activities that worked well

Project staff and the ART identified some activities that seemed to be particularly effective in advancing the minimum standards in these schools and communities.

1. Mammy queens are female traditional leaders. They do not have the same power and resources as paramount chiefs, but are influential on issues relating to women and children.

A key factor that worked well was the regular presence of CIFORD staff in the schools. While initially, project staff did not visit schools so frequently, during the later stages of the project, this was increased, with staff visiting schools around three times per week. During these visits, staff met with school principals, authorities and safety committee members to discuss SRGBV and progress in addressing it. They also discussed SRGBV with students; some children would report concerns and incidents (particularly concerning corporal punishment) that project staff would pass on to the headteacher. Project staff noted that by increasing the frequency of engagement with schools, school staff were more motivated and supported to take action on SRGBV, and children had greater confidence to speak out. This learning – while demonstrating the importance of intensive engagement to generate momentum on SRGBV – raises concerns about sustainability if intensive project staff engagement motivates schools to take action.

Support to improve school record keeping appeared to be effective. The schools had not been keeping adequate records about SRGBV incidents or recording basic information about activities such as club meetings intended to address the problem of SRGBV (e.g. keeping attendance lists or minutes from such meetings). Without such records, school leadership or external actors cannot understand and monitor the situation regarding SRGBV or progress on implementing the minimum standards.

By supporting schools to put in place these record-keeping systems, the project contributed to generating the information required for oversight of SRGBV issues in a way that should be relatively easy to sustain.

The project's work to reinstate and encourage the use of the suggestion boxes was another set of activities that worked well. The project raised awareness about the suggestion boxes and put in place appropriate systems for reviewing and responding to reports made through the suggestion box in ways that respect confidentiality and result in meaningful action being taken. According to CIFORD project staff, this led to increased use of these boxes by students, school safety committee members more regularly examining issues raised through the suggestion box and principals addressing complaints made through the suggestion box.

Another set of activities that appeared to work well was relationship-building with key community stakeholders. Project staff dedicated significant time to engaging with stakeholders such as chiefs, officials within line ministries and others who significantly influence responses to SRGBV. This focus resulted in strong collaboration between the project and these stakeholders, with these influential actors more aware of and willing to take action on SRGBV.

However, this engagement did not produce results with all stakeholders; for example, project staff had expected religious leaders to relay messages about SRGBV to communities, but this did not happen.

3.7 Challenges and activities that worked less well

Through reflection on the project, the project staff and ART identified some activities that had not worked so well and challenges that the project had faced. They also identified some things that could have been done differently.

The project struggled to engage with parents and the wider community meaningfully. Meetings for community members and structures had inconsistent attendance, with different participants attending each time. This made it very difficult to build a proper dialogue with these stakeholders, as those attending were often unaware of what had been discussed before and could not contribute fully. This was because the pool of community members and parents was large and because engagement with parents was somewhat intermittent (initially once a quarter). Project staff reflected that more targeted, consistent and frequent engagement with an established group of parents and community members could have had more impact by building a group of informed and committed actors at the community level.

Training school mentors was an essential focus of the project. However, many trained mentors left these schools during the July–August school holidays. This meant that the capacity built up was lost, and the project had to begin again by training new mentors once schools recommenced. On reflection, project staff suggested they should have trained more mentors in each school to mitigate this attrition problem because the mentors were spread too thinly in large schools. The project trained two mentors per school, but project staff suggested that six mentors would be better for the larger schools.

Another persistent challenge for the project was the inconsistent participation of personnel from the ministries and district councils, with different people attending each meeting that CIFORD organised. This meant that personnel in the meetings were often unaware of the issues or previous discussions and decisions and that CIFORD staff had to begin again with orientation each time. The project staff expressed concern that this lack of consistency in personnel makes it difficult for the ministries and council to build up institutional knowledge and memory on SRGBV responses and limits the commitment and capacity to continue work on SRGBV once the project finishes.

As project staff point out, these government actors should own the coordination, response and oversight of SRGBV issues.

There were many stakeholders with whom the project did not engage but who emerged as particularly important. CIFORD staff suggested that if designing the project again, they would include a focus on these actors. At the community level, these include mammy queens, who emerged as having a high level of influence on communities. Community-level structures such as child welfare committees and chieftom education authorities were overlooked in the project but had an important role in addressing SRGBV. Within schools, the project focused firmly on mentors. However, it would also have been useful to engage with guidance counsellors in the schools where they existed to ensure they collaborate with mentors on SRGBV.

Critically, project staff and the ART found that the targeting at only the junior secondary school (JSS) level did not make sense within these school contexts. The primary school, JSS and senior secondary school (SSS) levels occupy the same school compounds, share some management structure and makeup one school community. Moreover, SSS students are a powerful influence on the JSS student population that the project targeted. Therefore, a whole school approach would require working across all these levels and taking account of their interconnections.

There were some factors related to project planning and financing that limited the effectiveness of the project. The time frame for the project was short, and there were expectations of significant change in just one year (later extended to 15 months). Moreover, delays in the transfer of funds caused delays in activities, further shortening the time frame for implementation. While some changes were seen during the project, there was little time for embedding such changes to ensure their sustainability.

Despite the focus on adaptation and learning within the project documents, project staff reported limited scope to adapt activities in practice. In particular, while project staff identified the need to engage more with community members, they had to continue following the project plan outlined to meet the donor requirements. Only in the final three-month extension could the project adapt to increase its engagement with community members and leaders that had emerged as important stakeholders. Moreover, the action research component provided by ODI and IfD, which was supposed to inform reflection and adaptation, did not start until mid-way through the first year of the CIFORD project, as noted above.

4 The Humanity and Inclusion(HI) project

4.1 The project

The HI project, A Whole School Approach to Prevent School-Related Gender-Based Violence: Minimum Standards and Monitoring Framework, ran from March 2021 to January 2022. It covered six schools in Kenema (Eastern Province) and six in Kambia (North-Western Province). The overarching results statement of the project was that '[t]he Government has improved evidence and strengthened capacity to ensure education policy planning, implementation and management.

This project sought to deliver three outputs:

- Schools, communities and district authorities in the targeted chiefdoms of Kambia and Kenema districts have enhanced capacity to prevent and respond to reported cases of SRGBV.
- Parents, community members and children from children's clubs actively participate in initiatives that strengthen SRGBV prevention and monitoring in schools.
- By the end of the project, community members can access and participate in inclusive and child-friendly monitoring and reporting systems.

4.2 Theory of change

HI did not have a detailed ToC articulating how the project would create change. However, project staff had some shared implicit ideas of how the project would address SRGBV and advance the minimum standards. At the core of this implicit ToC was the belief that people can change their behaviour with improved knowledge and capacity. The project staff articulated various ways in which the project would contribute to change. For example, raising awareness and providing information on SRGBV to communities and schools would result in people taking action to prevent, address or respond to SRGBV. In particular, if parents are well informed of the negative impact of SRGBV on their children, they would hold schools accountable and demand effective responses. In addition, that building the capacity of existing institutions and structures responsible for child

protection would enable them to function effectively and ensure a sustainable response to SRGBV.

4.3 Assumptions

The project was underpinned by several assumptions about the problem of SRGBV, the schools and communities where implementation was taking place, and the existing institutions and mechanisms to address the problem.

These included many assumptions about the knowledge of SRGBV among different stakeholders. For example, the project had been designed based on the assumption that community members and leaders had little knowledge about SRGBV, which was correct. However, project staff had expected officials in the MoSW and the Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs (MoGCA) to know about SRGBV and gender-based violence (GBV) but found that this was often not the case. Likewise, the project had assumed that most teachers – particularly qualified teachers employed by the MBSSE – were aware of the CoC. However, during initial assessments and training, project staff realised that most of the teachers were not familiar with the contents of the CoC.

The HI staff had begun the project assuming that suggestion boxes were being used appropriately because they had been put in place by the previous Leh Wi Lan project. However, they found that in practice, these boxes had been placed in the principal's office or staff room, and children were not using them, both because of the inappropriate location and because action was not taken as a result of complaints in the suggestion box. The project, therefore, had to adapt its activities to include orientation on the suggestion boxes.

4.4 Differences in contexts

During project implementation, staff identified differences between communities and different types of schools, not all of which had been anticipated.

Significant differences existed between schools and communities in larger towns and remote areas. For example, students in district headquarter towns were more aware of SRGBV issues, had more interest in participating in project activities and were more likely

to raise complaints about SRGBV incidents. Meanwhile, students in more remote areas had less awareness, and girls in these areas believed that sexual abuse and harassment were routine and to be expected and tolerated. Likewise, parents and community members in some more remote locations were less interested in participating in the project activities or changing the situation. These parents viewed early marriage and pregnancy as the most likely outcomes for their daughters and did not aspire for them to finish school. The main difference between the districts of Kambia and Kenema appeared to be that parents in Kenema were keener for their children to drop out of school to work in the diamond mines.

However, in Kambia, there was more support for children to stay at school. It also emerged that in larger towns, schools had more access to resources to improve physical infrastructure, with parents, community members and ex-pupils contributing money to fix the school well, build a fence or improve the toilets. Meanwhile, in the poorer, more remote

communities, schools were entirely dependent on government funds or support from non-governmental organisations, and the condition of infrastructure, such as toilets, was worse. This finding is unsurprising given that poverty is higher in rural areas of Sierra Leone. Another unexpected factor that emerged was that corporal punishment appeared to be more prevalent and accepted in Muslim faith schools than in other schools. However, the sample size was minimal.

4.5 Adaptations

It had been envisaged that reflection, learning and adaptation would be undertaken in a structured way throughout the HI project. As discussed above, in reality, this did not happen as the time frame for implementation did not allow for meaningful reflection and adaptation. However, minor adaptations to the strategy and activities were made during the project, as outlined in the table below.

Table 2: Adaptations

Adaptation	Reason for adaptation	Result of adaptation as reported by HI
Initial plans to provide training on the EduTrac monitoring and information system for schools were scrapped, and the resources allocated for this were used to undertake SRGBV case management and data collection training with a range of stakeholders.	Training on EduTrac considered too complicated.	Increase in the number of people trained in case management and data collection. New types of stakeholders that had emerged as important actors, such as district council gender officers, included in training.
It had not originally been planned to work with religious leaders, but new activities were developed to involve them.	Project staff had become aware of the importance of religious leaders in addressing SRGBV.	Religious leaders committed to giving a short talk in their church or mosque on SRGBV issues.
Funds that were intended to map school policies were reallocated to print and distribute copies of the CoC within schools and provide training for teachers on the code.	It emerged through the initial needs assessment that teachers had much less knowledge of the CoC than HI project staff had expected.	Increased knowledge about CoC among teachers.
Training activities adapted to include elements on disability.	When HI staff began to engage with schools regarding children with disabilities, it emerged that schools had little capacity to identify or track different forms of disability. In particular, they only recognised physical disabilities and had little awareness of hearing, visual or intellectual disabilities.	Increased school staff knowledge of disability.

4.6 Results

HI project staff have identified a range of results from the project at many levels (as there has been no formal evaluation of the project, reflections on results are drawn from observations of involved project staff and some stakeholders and have not been objectively verified).

A key result reported by project staff was increased awareness among various stakeholders – students, parents, school staff, school network members, community members, community leaders, local institutions, and officials – about SRGBV and its responses. Project staff indicated that some stakeholders were changing their behaviour or taking action due to this increased awareness. For example, teachers in some schools were using less corporal punishment. Likewise, in one community, community members decided to make monthly contributions to fund items such as hygiene kits or the cost of taking a student to the police to report an incident of SRGBV.

Another reported result was that various platforms were established to discuss SRGBV issues and coordinate responses. These included clubs within schools for students to discuss SRGBV, regular meetings between mothers' clubs² and parents, and platforms for engagement between communities and schools. It also included revitalising school networks as a space to discuss students' welfare.

HI staff reported that, as a result of the project activities, local officials from ministries and the district council are now more aware of SRGBV and are taking some steps to address it. For example, district council gender officers who were trained on SRGBV by HI will now train key staff at the school level. There is also stronger coordination across institutions and mechanisms responsible for response to SRGBV.

It was reported that both reporting and referral mechanisms were functioning more effectively due to the re-establishment of the suggestion boxes and engagement with stakeholders at multiple levels on reporting and referral. More children were using the suggestion box, and action was taken more frequently in response to complaints.

Some unexpected results emerged regarding the involvement of groups not targeted by the project. Although the project only targeted the JSS level, some school club members and GBV focal points from the JSS level reached out to the SSS level to engage with students and staff on SRGBV issues. Likewise, training provided to school leadership appeared to have knock-on impacts across the wider school beyond the JSS level.

Neighbouring schools that had heard about the project contacted GBV focal points in the project schools for information and support on SRGBV, and as a result, some awareness-raising activities were expanded to these other schools in response to demand. This interest emerged because some school network committees in the schools where the project was working, such as chiefs, are also part of school network committees in other schools and wanted to expand the SRGBV work to these other schools.

In one school, concerns were raised that boys were going to a nearby area at lunchtime to take drugs and were then aggressive and violent when they returned to school. HI staff facilitated a discussion of this problem with community stakeholders and supported the community in raising this issue with the police, who took action to address the problem.

4.7 Activities that worked well

A number of project activities appeared to have worked particularly well in building commitment, capacity and mechanisms to advance the minimum standards. The score-carding process³ that was conducted with different stakeholders (e.g. students, community members, and district-level stakeholders) appeared to be a particularly useful activity and brought to light a wide range of issues and concerns related to SRGBV. These issues were then discussed with communities and district-level stakeholders, such as the district development officer and district council chairperson, to identify how best to address them. In Kambia, the District Council plans to use the score-carding process to map out the actions needed to monitor schools.

2. Mothers' clubs are made up of mothers in communities who have been trained and empowered to support enrolment and retention of children in school, and can visit vulnerable children at home.
3. The score-carding activity involved students identifying good and bad things happening within their schools. The issues identified by students were presented to the school authorities and community stakeholders.

Another activity that worked well was the creation of children's clubs in schools. In these communities, it is mainly taboo for children to discuss issues that affect them, especially issues related to sex, with adults. The children's clubs provided them with a space to discuss such issues with each other and with adults in a supportive environment.

Throughout the project, there were many activities to inform influential stakeholders and duty-bearers about SRGBV and encourage them to take action, which staff reported as working particularly well. These included activities to engage the MoSW, mainly supporting MoSW officials to use community-level structures, such as child welfare committees, to strengthen referral pathways. Discussions with the district council were also beneficial. They informed council officials of various issues related to SRGBV, such as the lack of female teachers or inadequate service provision. Likewise, activities to engage traditional leaders worked well, with some chiefs taking SRGBV more seriously and taking action to prevent parents from keeping children out of school.

4.8 Challenges and activities that worked less well

While the project made efforts to strengthen the capacity for referral and follow-up processes, project staff recognised that, in many cases, these processes were still not functional and that far more work would be required to address the profound weaknesses and gaps in these systems. In particular, service providers and GBV actors are based in district headquarters towns and are largely unavailable to those outside these towns. HI project staff discussed this problem with the Rainbo centre in Kenema, which will now have some mobile staff visiting more remote communities to connect them to services. However, HI staff recognise that this does not address the fundamental problems related to referral pathways and access to services.

Throughout the project, HI staff identified a range of stakeholders relevant to SRGBV that were not included with whom it would have been useful to engage. These include the heads of secret societies (Bondo and Poro), who have significant influence in communities, including through their role in initiation. *Okada* bike riders also emerged as a group with influence over school children and as frequent perpetrators of sexual harassment or abuse of schoolgirls, whom the project could usefully have engaged. Likewise, it became increasingly clear to project staff that many issues related to SRGBV are connected to religion, and that religious leaders have more relevance in this area than expected. While the project did adapt to include religious leaders, it would have been more effective to do so from the beginning.

At the level of schools, the project staff identified that there are school network forums within the district that bring together students from different schools. Targeting these forums could have been a way to reach multiple schools and a much bigger cohort of students on SRGBV issues beyond those involved in the specific project. HI, project staff strongly recommended this approach for future work. In addition, while project activities addressed the attitudes and behaviour of teachers within the target schools, it recognised that a more systemic approach is needed to stimulate meaningful change at scale in terms of teacher behaviour. In this regard, project staff reflected that it would have been helpful to work with the Teachers' Service Commission, the body responsible for the professional conduct of teachers.

The project experienced significant teacher resistance in some schools where it was working. Some teachers did not want students to be given information about SRGBV or space to discuss SRGBV because this was seen as a threat to those teachers who were perpetrators of violence. These teachers encouraged children to boycott activities such as forming a children's club. Moreover, in one school, there was an incident in which a student hit a teacher. Some teachers blamed the HI project, saying that because HI was informing children about their rights, this encouraged children to confront and attack teachers. HI project staff identified that this negative perception of child rights needs further addressed. In response to such resistance, HI engaged with teachers, school principals, children's clubs, school networks and school boards to explain that the project was not trying to turn children against teachers but instead to support students and staff to understand children's rights and responsibilities.

Engagement with communities was particularly difficult for the project. For example, in a large town such as Kambia, the project only worked in the specific neighbourhood where the school is based, and even this engagement was limited. Staff reflected that it would have been useful to engage more widely and intensively with communities to raise awareness of SRGBV, including using media such as the radio to disseminate messages and information on the issue. Moreover, project staff found that changing the attitudes of parents and the wider community on issues such as compromising SRGBV cases was, in some cases, more difficult than expected. However, given the short length of the project, expectations of any profound change in attitudes were perhaps unrealistic.

The project faced significant challenges due to the short project time frame, late start-up and lack of timely resourcing. The project was supposed to run for ten months, but due to delays in signing the grant, there were only six months for implementation. This meant that some activities had to be rushed, that the project finished just as it was beginning to demonstrate some results and that HI will not be present to monitor these results or support further progress. This raises particular concerns regarding whether any of the practices and processes initiated by the project will be sustained. This is especially given the experience of the previous Leh Wi Lan project, which supported schools in developing reporting mechanisms but saw these mechanisms abandoned once Len Wi Lan left the school.

Particularly problematic was the grant aspect of the project, under which school networks were to develop their initiatives to address SRGBV, which a grant would fund. Due to the limited time available, these networks could not develop meaningful or sustainable initiatives to support change in their schools. They instead had to focus on one-off events, such as a radio discussion or a football match between boys and girls, that did not address the problem of SRGBV.

The short time frame also limited the effectiveness of the score-carding exercise. While this exercise was very useful in developing an understanding of the problem of SRGBV and identifying actions required to address it, there was insufficient time for HI to follow up to see if issues raised by the score-carding exercise were being addressed. HI project staff recognise that good practice would require them to go back to the stakeholders involved in the score carding to inform them of what actions have been taken, but there was no time to do this before the end of the project.

HI staff also reported that delays in logistics support meant that project staff in Kambia – where HI did not have an established presence – lacked transport at the beginning of the project, making it hard for them to carry out activities.

5 Conclusions

The experiences of the CIFORD and HI projects offer some important insights regarding what works to address SRGBV and advance the minimum standards, as well as potential barriers and challenges.

Both projects identified the relevance of a broad set of stakeholders for addressing SRGBV – from secret society leaders to district council officials. Indeed, during implementation, these projects extended the range of stakeholders they engaged with, as other actors beyond those they had initially intended to work with emerged as influencing issues related to SRGBV.

Working with community leaders, particularly chiefs, was a central element of both projects. This was based on the recognition that these community leaders help establish and perpetuate child rights norms and act as critical gatekeepers for referrals in cases of SRGBV. While such leaders often discourage the referral of SRGBV cases to the authorities and instead encourage compromise, these leaders could also potentially support families in reporting cases and encourage actors such as the FSU or local officials to follow up. Both the CIFORD and HI projects identified that religious leaders also play a crucial role in perpetuating norms and attitudes related to SRGBV and hence included engagement with religious leaders in their activities.

Sustained institutional and system strengthening at multiple levels is required to build institutional capacity, commitment and coordination on SRGBV meaningfully. Across all project sites, weak capacity, commitment and coordination among local duty bearers at multiple levels were major factors preventing more effective responses to SRGBV. Therefore, both CIFORD and HI significantly focused on strengthening networking and coordination among local actors responsible for SRGBV responses (MBSSE, MoSW, Rainbo, Marie Stopes, the FSU and the local district council), who were generally not well connected. They also emphasized building the capacity of these institutions. However, these efforts to build capacity and coordination faced a significant challenge in terms of inconsistent participation of personnel from these institutions. Not only did this make it difficult to make progress, but it also raised concerns that progress may not be maintained now that the projects have ended.

Various lessons emerge from the CIFORD's and HI's experiences working with schools. Both projects had begun with an assumption that mechanisms put in place by previous educational projects to report SRGBV – notably suggestion boxes – would still be operational in the schools where they were working. However, both projects found that boxes had been removed entirely in many cases, placed in locations where teachers could supervise which children were using them or were never opened. This indicates a couple of challenges that need to be taken into account. First, the extent to which school staff may view children making suggestions and complaints as a threat and, therefore, deliberately undermine mechanisms for reporting. Second, the challenge of ensuring that reporting systems that are put in place are then sustained over time with appropriate support, oversight and monitoring to ensure that this happens.

A finding across both projects was the value of creating mechanisms and spaces for students to participate and make their voices heard, for example, through student councils and to discuss taboo or sensitive issues in a safe space, for example, through children's clubs. While such mechanisms had been established in the schools where HI and CIFORD worked, these had lapsed. While both projects re-established such mechanisms, as with suggestion boxes, the fact that they had existed before and lapsed raises concerns about how likely they will be sustained once the projects are finished.

It is important to note that both projects faced significant resistance from teachers and community members to concepts of children's rights and efforts to empower children. Frequent engagement with schools by the project staff went some way to addressing this resistance, informing and motivating school staff to address SRGBV and encouraging school leaders to take action. However, staff in both projects recognised that long-term and sustained engagement was required to change the norms and attitudes related to SRGBV and child rights.

The CIFORD and HI projects demonstrated the significant challenges of engaging in a meaningful way with parents and communities on SRGBV. There was no consistent attendance at meetings by the same community members or parents, making it challenging to build a proper dialogue with these stakeholders.

Moreover, as the pool of community members and parents was so large, it was impossible to reach a critical mass of them. This suggests that examining other ways to approach this engagement may be useful. For example, building up a group of informed and committed parents and community members who can act as change agents.

It is important to bear in mind that the research and project activities were conducted in only 18 schools in three districts. Therefore, while this research provides

some important insights, there remains a lot of identifying specific barriers to implementation and understanding how best these can be addressed—significant knowledge gap regarding SRGBV in Sierra Leone. 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 will be particularly important to inform the meaningful implementation of the new policy framework developed in this area.

6 Appendices

Appendix 1

Template for review and reflect sessions

Action researchers to recap the purpose of R&R sessions: this is a safe space to discuss what the team is learning, what the approach to the problem is, whether the assumptions of that approach still hold and if anything might need to be needed changing. It also helps to look at the progress made since the last session and set markers for the future. This is not a programme recap or review; rather, it's an opportunity, to be honest about what's working and what's not, look at the programme activities and approach more holistically and document what we've observed and learned. The ART will produce an internal report off the back of this session that will be shared with the partner.

Recap of the problem

The main problem itself is SRGBV, so it is worth taking a moment to discuss how that problem specifically manifests itself in the partners' implementation area and communities. However, rather quickly, the senior action researcher should try to get the group onto the specific issue of *implementing minimum standards in response to SRGBV*.

What do we know about this particular problem?

Has it changed or evolved in any way since we set the goal of working on contributing to change?

What sustains the problem in the communities we worked in?

What might success look like in terms of 'resolving' the problem or helping support sustainable solutions?

Partner's approach to the problem

This is the overall approach. There is no need to go into specific activities at this point.

What is the partner's best guess about addressing this problem (theory of change)?

What is the logic for how the partner's actions will eventually lead to their desired outcome?

What assumptions is this approach based on?

There will be implicit and explicit assumptions in the approach (e.g. assumed engagement by the community/stakeholders, beliefs about how information translates to behaviour change and assumptions about the level of resistance).

What have we been doing (activities) over the past three months?

Give specific examples. The temptation here will likely be to list activities, and it's okay as this is valuable information. However, the facilitator should always try to link these back to the problem. So instead of just saying 'men and boys' clubs', the partner should explain the intent of these clubs and how it links back to implementing the minimum standard in response to SRGBV.

What were we expecting to see to help us know whether we were on track (progress markers)?

If there have been previous R&Rs, use those agreed markers. If not, discuss what the partner feels success for this project looks like in the short versus medium and long term.

What has happened (results/progress – both positive and negative)?

This is the partner's chance to give their more qualitative appreciation of what has happened in the last two months, not just activities done but their impression of whether that was enough. Whether something else or more could have been done? Whether there were unintended results or consequences (including backlash) from activities, etc.

What has worked?

Going back to the main aim of the project, what's been successful over these last two months and what were the positive steps towards the outcome? What were the other linked positive steps (e.g. increased acceptance by the community, getting a new stakeholder on board)?

Emphasise that we want to know what the partner has *learned* (about the problem, the context, and the implementation).

What has worked less well?

This could be items on the work plan that didn't get done in time or to the quality expected, disappointing results from what was done or negative feedback from community members. What felt 'off' or simply not good enough to team members?

Emphasise that we want to know what the partner has *learned* (about the problem, the context, and the implementation).

Do we need to change our approach in light of this learning? Why/why not?

If what has happened in the programme is not in line with what we expected, why is that? Do those observations and happenings challenge our primary underlying assumption about how A will lead to B? Do we need to change our approach then? If yes, what is the change going to look like?

What are our progress markers to judge whether we're on track at the next R&R?

Appendix 2

Template for final review and reflect session

This final R&R session aims to reflect on what you have learned from the implementation of this project. This is regarding what works well or less to implement the minimum standards in these schools and communities.

This is a safe space to discuss what the team has learned. The ART will produce an internal report from this session to share with the partner. The reflections from all the R&Rs will inform a final report on what works to implement the minimum standards in Sierra Leone.

Validity of theory of change and assumptions

What was your theory of change when you began the project?

How would the project's strategy and activities contribute to implementing minimum standards?

Which of the assumptions in your ToC proved valid?

Were there any assumptions that were not valid?

Adaptations

Did you make any changes to your strategy or activities during the project?

Why did you make these changes?

What was the result of the change in strategy/activities?

Results

What were the main results or changes you observed from your project?

Were there any unexpected results?

Were there any negative impacts that you had not anticipated?

What worked/didn't work?

Which aspects of the project worked well? Why?

If you were going to do the project again, is there anything you would do differently?

Future priorities

With what you know now, what do you think should be priority actions for implementing the minimum standards?

Here participants could be prompted to reflect on the priorities for each domain.

Participants could also be asked whether the priorities should differ for different locations/types of schools based on their observations.

[For the webpage and alt-text]	
Photograph suggestions (links) or photo supplied or graphic idea [if publication is to be highlighted on the website]	
Alt-text/caption/credit for cover photo	
Short summary text for webpage (200 to 400 words) or indicate to use abstract/key messages	
One sentence summary for web (<155 characters)	
Related content links (on ODI website) [if not supplied, pubs officer will include]	
Theme tags (from ODI list) [if not supplied, pubs officer will include]	
Project page URL? [optional]	

Synthesis Report

Action research project on school-related
gender-based violence and implementation of the
minimum standards in Sierra Leone

