A man wearing a cap with 'PRA' on it and a white t-shirt is pointing at a small booklet or comic strip. A group of young girls are sitting around a table, looking at the same material. They are outdoors, with a building and palm trees in the background. The image has a warm, sepia-toned filter.

Social Norms and Girls' Education in Sierra Leone

Summary report

UNGEI

UNITED NATIONS
GIRLS' EDUCATION
INITIATIVE

Dalberg Design

Executive Summary

Despite international commitments to achieving gender equality in and through education, the UNDP Gender Inequality Index (GII) shows that gender equality has been slowing in recent years¹.

A study conducted by UNGEI, within the framework of the [Gender at the Centre Initiative \(GCI\)](#), showed that harmful social norms serve as persistent barriers to girls' access, participation and wellbeing in education².

The current study contextualizes these findings and zooms in on how social norms impact girls' chances to learn and thrive in the context of Sierra Leone. Based on a mixed-methods approach involving both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the research seeks to understand social determinants, norms, and perceptions surrounding girls' education in Sierra Leone, and identify positive pathways for change. Through a unique community-based and youth-led approach, the study aims at catalyzing community dialogue on how to transform harmful gender norms in the context of girls' education.

This report highlights the complex, interrelated sociocultural barriers that hinder girls' education. Some of these barriers include societal expectations that dictate that girls should focus on domestic responsibilities and a future as housewives, leading to unequal distribution of time, resources and motivation for educational pursuits. Deep-rooted beliefs about the status of women and girls in society are leading to high levels of gender-based violence and early pregnancies, which in turn have a far-reaching impact on girls' educational chances. Additionally, there is a lack of accessible female role models, especially in rural areas, which impacts the aspirations and motivations for young girls.

Despite the relative success achieved by government and non-governmental organizations in sensitizing communities on the importance of

girls' education, these initiatives have not yet succeeded in drilling further down and addressing the underlying beliefs about girls' and women's role in society. Government initiatives such as the Radical Inclusion Policy and community sensitization efforts have aimed at increasing opportunities for girls to go to school. However, persistent cultural norms that allocate care work and household work to girls (and not boys), combined with financial barriers and school-related gender-based violence, continue to keep girls from thriving in school and reaching their full potential.

Community initiatives established by NGOs and governmental organizations often fail in the face of harmful but deeply believed in cultural norms and do not sufficiently explain the need to focus on girls. To overcome these challenges, a collaborative approach that is sensitive to cultural norms while promoting human rights and gender equality is recommended. Yet, despite the barriers they face, some girls in the studied communities exhibit remarkable resilience in pursuing their education and defying traditional gender norms. Supportive community stakeholders challenge the status quo and actively work to create better opportunities for these girls. Girls demonstrate strong determination to continue their education amidst obstacles such as early pregnancy and economic hardships. To illustrate these stories, a pathway model has been used to showcase the unique journeys of girls and women towards improved livelihoods based on their individual enablers and inhibitors.

To enhance girls' education and promote gender equality, the study proposes a set of recommendations addressing sociocultural barriers and challenges. These include implementing localized community dialogue to shift harmful perceptions around gender roles and girls' education, providing quality teacher training to address gender norms in the classroom, promoting respect for pregnant girls and adolescent mothers in schools, increasing access to female role models, and generalizing quality comprehensive sexuality education to teach respectful relationships, consent and informed decision-making.

¹ [JNDP Gender Inequality Index \(GII\) 2020](#)
² [UNGEI, Yotebieng, K., 2021. What we know \(and do not know\) about](#)

[persistent social norms that serve as barriers to girls' access, participation and achievement in education in eight sub-Saharan African countries. New York.](#)

Methodology

Research background, approach & methodology

There is a growing understanding of the importance of social norms as barriers to girls' education. This research fits within the framework of the [Gender at the Centre Initiative \(GCI\)](#), a multistakeholder initiative to promote gender equality in and through education. The initiative was developed by the G7 Ministers of Education and Development in collaboration with multilateral and civil society organisations committed to advancing gender equality in education. GCI champions the leadership of education ministries and civil society national actors to advance gender equality in and through education in eight countries in Africa (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone). GCI is jointly coordinated by UNGEI and IIEP-UNESCO. The initiative has a specific focus on harmful social norms as the underlying barriers to gender equality in education. GCI addresses these root causes by adopting a holistic, systems-focused approach, transforming harmful gender norms both within government structures and communities. Engaging with gender equality in and through education by addressing deeply entrenched social norms has the potential to break the intergenerational cycle of gender discrimination and improve educational outcomes for girls and other marginalized children. This study takes a gender and education ecosystem view and adopts a participatory research approach to understand the specific social determinants of girls' education and identify pathways for transforming harmful gender norms.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Dalberg employed a mixed-methods approach, whereby researchers collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative Human-Centred Design research leveraged community-centered design principles.

Quantitative analysis

An extensive review of existing literature was conducted to identify the primary barriers and motivators affecting girls' education in Sierra Leone. The quantitative analysis involved analysis of

quantitative secondary data from various sources including national censuses, surveys, and UN estimates, to investigate gender disparities in school access, attendance, and completion, and to understand the social norms that hinder gender parity. To ensure credibility and better understanding of the data before analysis, attributes such as data journey, recency, granularity, data protection, and data format were considered. The data used in the study was obtained from different sources, including UNESCO, Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and annual school census reports, among others.

Qualitative research using community-centered design.

Research entailed a detailed qualitative field study, targeting a sample of 117 participants, through direct in-person engagement with participants through in-depth key informant interviews and focus group discussions. We used a mix of research tools and activities including discussion guides, observation, photo cards and scenario stories to engage participants. These interactions enabled us to dig deeper and surface nuances missing in the quantitative research findings.

Dalberg partnered with youth in the community to design, plan and execute the qualitative research, cognizant of the lived experiences, familiarity and trust they added to the interactions with participants.

Research sampling

The sampling approach combined quantitative and qualitative Community-Centered Design (CCD) research methodologies. The quantitative analysis conducted a large screening of existing literature to uncover the main barriers and drivers of girls' education in Sierra Leone. The qualitative CCD focused on a smaller sample size of 117 participants,

which allowed greater depth and nuance to be achieved.

Research locations

Research was conducted in eight districts across the five provinces of Sierra Leone, i.e., Falaba, Koinadugu, Kambia, Tonkolili, Western Area Rural, Kailahun, Kenema and Pujehun. Location selection was informed by trends and indicators around gender parity in school, dropout rates, sexual violence and school completion.

Child safeguarding protocols

The research team underwent extensive child welfare training that aligns with UNICEF child safeguarding policies to ensure that appropriate measures and approaches were employed when engaging in the research. The team ensured the well-being and safety of participants during interviews, asked for consent from participants and caregivers of minors to speak and record conversations and images, and communicated that participants could withdraw from the study at any time.

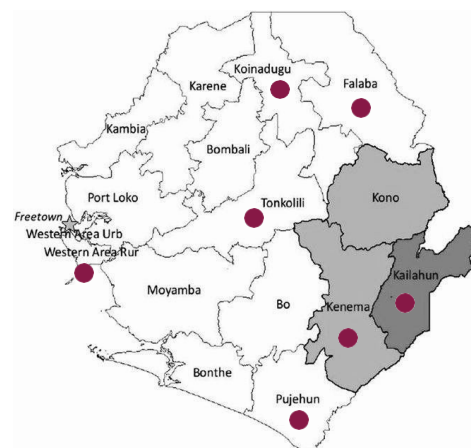
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A note on language

The language around girls' experience of sex in the international development world, especially when referring to girls in African countries, is challenging. "Transactional sex" is used to describe the phenomenon of girls having sex with older boys and men in return for small amounts of money or food or gifts. Yet many of these countries have laws on statutory rape where any sex with girls below a particular age is rape. When adolescent pregnancy is mentioned, the context of the sexual intercourse that led to the pregnancy is rarely noted. Yet conversations with girls and women in the community suggest that sexual violence and rape do take place, especially when girls are vulnerable. This report does not focus on the important intersection of sex and violence (rape) that girls experience. However, it must be noted that the harm and trauma caused by this experience is an important factor that must be explored and articulated in future research and analysis.



Key Findings

Mindsets on girls' education

Perceptions and attitudes towards education

Community Sensitization

The sensitization efforts of government and non-governmental organizations have played a significant role in shifting the attitudes of community members towards the importance of children's education, with a particular focus on girls. Sensitization efforts in the community have led to a perceptible change in priorities, with education now being regarded as a vital element in community development and advancement. Community members reported being exposed to the government's perspectives on the importance of educating girls and the radical inclusion efforts that have been implemented in Sierra Leone through mass media channels such as radio stations and television programs.

"Sensitization has changed perspectives of most people in my community. Parents are called for meetings by the chief, and they also use radio discussions to encourage parents to take their children to school."

Principal, Secondary School, Falaba, Rural

Girls' agency and independence

Girls perceive education as a means to achieve autonomy and agency, foster financial independence, and decrease their vulnerability to gender-based harassment and violence. Many girls believe education will widen their access to formal employment and stable income opportunities, which would allow them to support themselves and reduce overdependence on their spouse in marriage situations. The girls believe that having their own income will strengthen their ability to partner in decision-making around family finances and investments and reduce domestic violence.

"The boys disturb girls... the boys have the mind to say 'I love you' to you, but when they see you are working and that you are educated, they will have the mind to think about your status before approaching you..."

Young girl, 15, Koinadugu, Rural

Poverty reduction

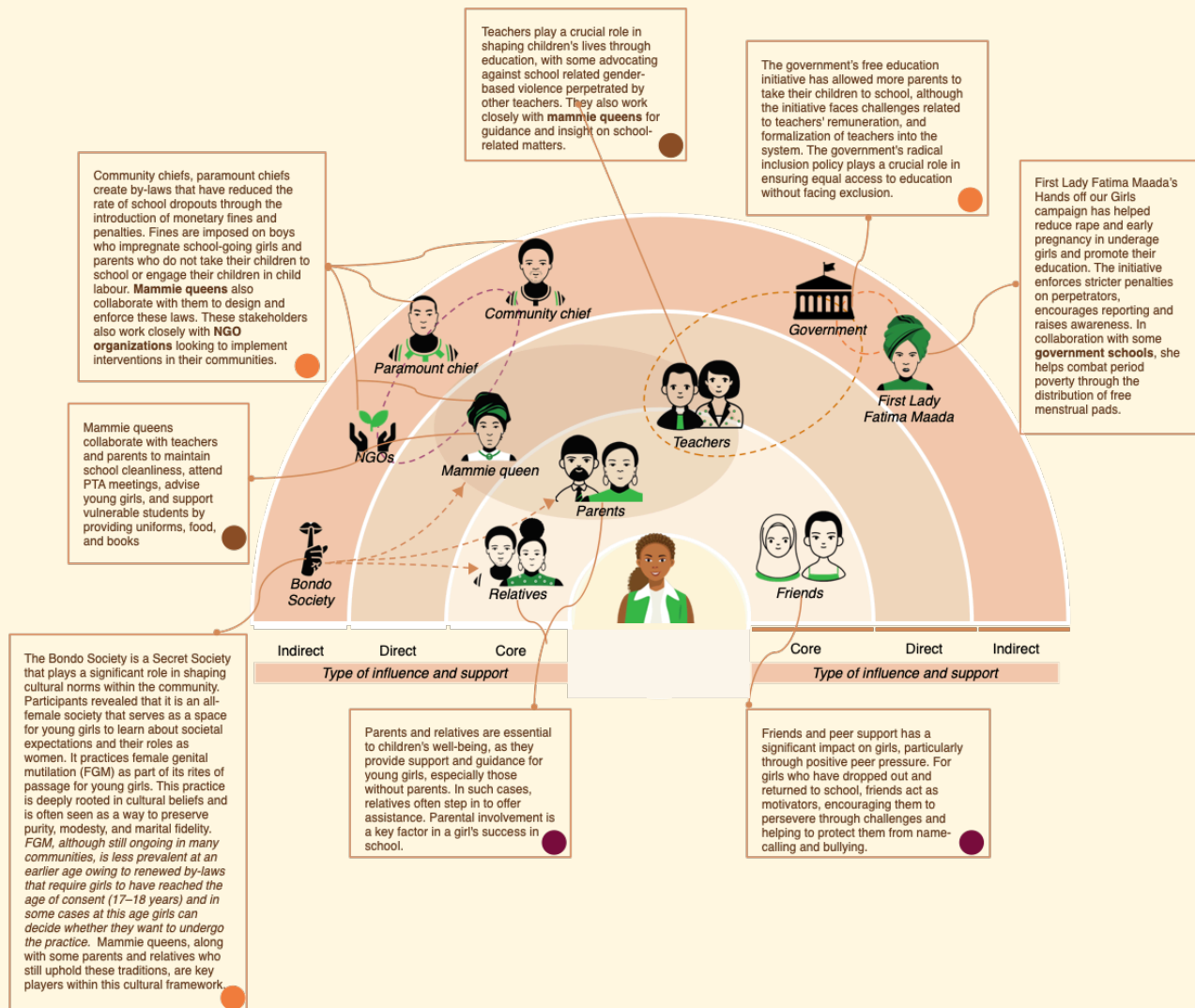
Education is highly valued in the community and perceived as the primary catalyst for overcoming poverty, accessing formal income opportunities and achieving long-term success. Across different stakeholders we interviewed, education is seen as a gateway to higher-paying income opportunities and more prosperous livelihoods. Many community members have witnessed the difference in the lifestyles and livelihoods of employed vs. unemployed community members.

"Education is value. It helps to eradicate poverty as a whole. For the female child they will get an education and help the nation so we are paying more attention to them now."

Male school teacher, Falaba, Rural



Girls' ecosystem of support and influence



ECOSYSTEM KEY

- Core influence and support
- Direct influence and support
- Indirect influence and support

Key Findings

Sociocultural barriers

Social norms as barriers to girls' education

Traditional gender roles and responsibilities

In rural communities, parents, young girls, boys and community members continue to place a strong emphasis on preserving traditional gender roles in the community, which in many cases reduces the amount of time girls can dedicate to their education. Deviation from these roles, particularly for girls, is often met with backlash from the community.

"My girl wakes up by 6 am to sweep and fetch water and the boy at 7 am because he doesn't have much to do before school – just preparing and going. The girl is home by 2.15 pm... she'll wash her uniform and help her mother with house chores. At night, she will do her assignment. I think the girl does a lot, but if she doesn't her mother will get angry and shout at her."
Father, Falaba, Rural

Even when the community values education for girls, it does so mostly because of the value it holds for the family and the community, rather than as a fundamental right for the girl herself. Education is seen as a tool for elevating the financial status of families and the wider community through formal employment, even after marriage.

"When I send my daughter money, she uses part of it to buy me food or household items. But the boy... He is working but does nothing for me. In fact, he still demands some money from me, but not one day has he come and said, papa (offering a parent a gift), here is a shirt." Town chief, Falaba, Rural

Limited financial support

Poverty remains a significant barrier to education. The lack of adequate financial

resources for girls often translates into transactional relationships which can result in early pregnancy and sexual abuse. Although school fees are meant to be free, there are associated costs with going to school such as transportation, food, clothes and/or uniforms and shoes, learning materials such as notebooks and pencils—as well as what may be considered the loss of funds from sending children to school in lieu of sending children on to farms and/or into markets or other forms of labour.

"School does not put food on the table, but these transactional relationships do. Majority stop school at primary school. Some say, what's the point? Where will education take me and I won't get a job? So some of them start petty trading or getting married and having babies."
Young lady, Education consultant

Impact of early pregnancy

Adolescent mothers who have dropped out of school desire to complete their education, especially after encountering the hardships of finding for themselves as their peers progress to higher education levels or formal employment. However, they lack the financial resources and caregiver support to enable their return to school.

"I stopped going to school when I became pregnant. I was sick and dizzy. I would also feel shy and people were laughing at me and talking behind my back." Adolescent mother, Koinadugu, Rural

Despite the government reversing the ban on pregnant girls and adolescent mothers attending school, pregnancy symptoms, such as nausea and fatigue, combined with stigmatization from peers cause pregnant girls to drop out of school. Additionally, teachers are ill-equipped to support these teenage girls adequately.

"I stopped going to school when I fell pregnant because I was ashamed. People were talking about me. I was tired and sleeping in class. Also, I don't think anyone would have accepted me." Adolescent mother, Western Area Rural, Urban

Limited out-of-school pathways

There are limited pathways to better economic opportunities for teenage mothers who drop out of school due to poverty, and a lack of accessible vocational training and adult literacy programs especially within rural communities.

"Because of shame, some girls are not able to go back to school. If they could go to those technical training schools and learn to tailor then it would help them start earning an income." Town chief, Falaba, Rural.

School-related gender-based violence

Various instances of illegal and exploitative behaviour by teachers, such as extorting money or sexual favours for grades, disproportionately affect girls and students from low-income backgrounds. Furthermore, girls are vulnerable to sexual harassment by boys and men during their journeys to and from school. Students have reported that teachers grant higher marks to those who offer a small payment following exams. This practice has led to theft, children engaging in petty trade, forgoing lunch money, or girls dating boys, older men, and even teachers to secure funds for better grades.

"Male teachers ask girls to have sex with them for grades. When you get pregnant, teachers threaten you to terminate the pregnancy, or they'll fail you, and you'll be expelled." Young girl, 16 Western Area, Urban

Limited access to female role models

Girls and women in rural communities are not exposed to a wide range of aspirational female role models compared to their urban-residing counterparts who have better access to women they can model their lives after. In urban and peri-urban areas, young girls and boys have access to role models in their community and through media platforms, which exposes them to a diverse range of professions and opportunities. This exposure serves as a source of inspiration and motivation for them to work towards their goals and aspirations.

"I want to become a nurse because my family will provide me with support if I want to become one. I know a nurse here called Fenda who works at the health centre. She gets a salary and I see how she's doing well. She told me if I want to become a nurse, I must make books my companion." Young girl, 14, Falaba, Rural.

Key Findings

Drivers of girls' education

Enablers that positively influence girls' education

Free education and radical inclusion policy

Government-funded education is seen as a valuable resource by some parents who are unable to provide financial support, while the radical inclusion policy plays a crucial role in ensuring equal access to education without exclusion.

"For us without the upper hand, this free government education has helped us. Before I would have to give my daughter 20 leones for poda poda transport and I would not be able to give her some money to buy lunch, but now with the school bus I can give her some money for lunch."

Mother, Western Area Rural, Urban

Parental involvement

Active engagement of parents serves as a critical motivator for girls' retention and motivation to stay in school. This includes offering personal advice and guidance on essential life skills, participating in meetings with teachers, and assisting with assignments where possible. In some households fathers are more supportive than mothers, whilst it may be the reverse in other households. In other households both parents can either be supportive or unsupportive.

"I sit my girl down and talk to her. I remind her that when she is educated, it will help her to get a good job and not to be like me. I had dreams of being a doctor, but I dropped out of school in SS3 because I got pregnant, so I don't want the same for her."

Mother, Western Area Rural, Urban

Community by-laws

Community by-laws set by community-level administration officers and leaders such as chiefs, mammie queens and traditional elders have been instrumental in protecting girls' rights to education. These by-laws have led to a tangible improvement in the attendance and completion of education by both girls and boys.

"We fine parents up to 500,000 leones if they don't take their children to school on the first day and the same if a child is seen selling during the day instead of being in school. For boys who impregnate girls, we demand that they also stop going to school and take care of the girls and the child until they are both able to return to school." Young lady, Education consultant

Interventions in communities

The Hands off our Girls Campaign, spearheaded by Sierra Leone's current First Lady Fatima Maada, has led to a significant decrease in the incidence of rape and early pregnancy for underage girls. Through the initiative, perpetrators of sexual violence are now more heavily penalized, and community members are encouraged to report any such cases. In addition, some government schools have also received free menstrual pads which has helped to reduce period poverty among school-going girls.

"Leh Wi Learn/Lan", a government and FCDO initiative mentioned by teachers, has implemented an intervention to address the issue of menstrual hygiene by providing sanitary pads to girls in rural areas. This has helped to reduce the stigma associated with menstruation, resulting in increased attendance among girls during their menstrual cycle.

Positive Deviance Stories

Positive deviants & pathways

Young girls

**Fatima, 19**

Adolescent mother,
Kambia, Peri-Urban

"My parents sent me out of the house when I told them I was pregnant, and so I went to speak with some elders - the mammie queen and her friends.. They later came to speak with my parents, who then let me back in, and eventually they agreed that I can go back to school instead."

Fatima, a 19-year-old woman originally from a rural area, relocated to Kambia, a more peri-urban area, to complete her education after an early pregnancy. Fatima aspires to wear a suit and secure a job, much like the successful business women she admires. Fatima became pregnant four years ago at the age of 15 and dropped out of school. Though her teacher Mary offered encouragement and support, Fatima found it too challenging to continue her education at the time as she was struggling to focus in class. Devastated to learn of her pregnancy, her parents attempted to marry her off to the man responsible, but Fatima was able to seek the help of community elders who intervened on her behalf. Fatima has now resumed her learning three years later with the financial support of her uncle who caters for her school resources. Her parents provide child care for her son while she focuses on school.

Enablers

- Financial support from relatives to return to school.
- Community members' intervention to persuade her parents not to marry her off early.
- Fatima's determination and resilience to overcome unplanned pregnancy and parental pressure to marry early.
- Fatima's parents' willingness to forgive what they see as a moral transgression and support her journey back to education.
- Child care assistance from her parents who care of her son while she attends school

**Koroma, 16**

Adolescent mother,
Western Area Rural,
Urban

"I want to be a computer engineer and I also play a lot of basketball. I will join the NBA one day and be popular. People will say, 'I went to school with this girl, and she faced a lot of challenges but look at her now.' I'll be an example to other girls."

Koroma, a 16-year-old girl, dropped out of school due to early pregnancy but was able to resume her education after giving birth to her son. Her favourite subjects are Physics and Mathematics. Koroma enjoyed a close relationship with her mother, which enabled her to confide in her when she fell pregnant. Despite initial disappointment, her parents forgave her and took care of her throughout the pregnancy and are now supporting her as she is in school. Her family had initially wanted her to marry her child's father, but she convinced them to let her complete her education, and to consider marriage after they had both completed their college education. Her child's father's family is currently taking care of her son as they both continue with their education. Living in an urban setting, Koroma is exposed to a range of female role models in her own community and through the media she consumes. She envisions one day joining the NBA team and closely follows basketball matches on TV.

Enablers

- Emotional and financial support from parents who encouraged her to return to school after pregnancy and provided the financial resources to enable her schooling.
- Exposure to female role models who inspire her to complete her education and aspire to formal employment.
- Supportive friends and allies in her class and school have motivated her to pursue completion of her education despite occasional teasing from peers.

Positive deviants

Older women



ISATU, 52

Mammie queen, Falaba,
Rural

"I feel bad that I did not go to school, that is why when I see young girls not going to school I try to intervene to help them. I know how far I would be if I was able to go to school. I see my friends and what they have become, they bring me things like smartphones and even though they try to give them to me, I don't even know how to use them."

Isatu, a 52-year-old mammie queen in Falaba was denied the opportunity to receive an education during her childhood. As a result, Isatu now faces challenges in reading and writing. She often compares herself to her educated peers who return to the village with impressive careers and material wealth. Motivated by her own experiences, Isatu has become a passionate advocate for girls' education in her community. In her role as a mammie queen for the past 17 years, Isatu is known for advocating for parents to enrol their children in school, supporting vulnerable girls by providing them with food and school materials, and playing an active role in parent-teacher meetings at various schools. Through her actions, Isatu has become an influential figure in her community, using her own experiences to drive positive change and promote girls' education.

Enablers

- Authority and respect accorded to her role enables her to influence others and drive change
- Isatu's own personal experience of being denied education allows her to empathize with others in similar situations
- Community involvement and active participation in community activities enables her to build strong relationships and trust with community members, which can help support her goals
- Access to resources of the adult literacy program offered by an NGO allows her to acquire the literacy skills she desires



Aminata, 38

Mammie queen, Kambia,
Peri-Urban

"I was born here, grew up here and chose education. It wasn't easy - my parents couldn't afford fees and there were men pursuing young girls, as is the case now. I remained determined and had to fetch firewood to sell in the market to make money to afford my schooling."

Aminata is a mammie queen and educationist who was born and raised in Kambia district, central province. She chose to become a teacher after noticing that there were very few female teachers in her community. She recounts having to spend her out-of-school hours collecting firewood to sell in order to afford school fees, and having to reject the advances of men who wanted to marry her. Furthermore, she aspired to become like the only female teacher that was in her school then, and felt that completing her education despite the challenges and hardships she encountered was the only way to get ahead in a male-dominated society. When she's not teaching, Aminata spends her time visiting schools to mentor girls, running informal clubs to encourage parents to get involved in their children's education, speaking in community radio stations to sensitize the community on the value of education, and counselling teenage mothers to return to school or get skills training.

Enablers

- Financial resilience to complete her education despite family's difficulty affording school fees
- Access to a female teacher who acts as a role model and inspires her to complete her education
- Teaching role enables her to win the trust of her audience during sensitization efforts on radio and in community meetings
- Mammie queen role enables her to reach various audience types, influence by-laws that advocate for girls' education and act as a trusted source of information.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

In recent years, Sierra Leone has made significant progress to enhance girls' access to and participation in education. This has been achieved through a combination of efforts that include sensitization campaigns that have helped shift the attitudes of community members to value girls' education, the introduction of progressive policies like government-funded education and the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools which allows pregnant girls and adolescent mothers to attend school without restrictions and various government and non-government initiatives that aim to improve the experience of girls in education. Such initiatives include the provision of menstrual hygiene products, contraception options for girls and severe penalties for sex offenders.

Despite the measures taken to improve girls' access to education, many girls still face barriers due to harmful sociocultural norms and practices that hinder their ability to complete their education and reach their full potential. These include school-related gender-based violence, gendered roles and responsibilities at home, early pregnancies, and child marriage which often lead to girls dropping out of school with limited opportunities to return to formal education. In addition, insufficient parental involvement in their children's education and a scarcity of female role models in the communities negatively impact girls' motivation to stay in school when confronted with challenges.

There are some gaps in the initiatives aimed at promoting girls' education and providing return pathways to school or improved economic prospects for school dropouts. Community leaders feel that implementation

partners do not consult them adequately before introducing initiatives that require sensitivity and deep community involvement when they challenge traditional societal beliefs and norms. Initiatives introduced in communities, such as adult literacy or vocational training, have not been sustainable or locally contextualized, and often fold after a short period.

Additional structural barriers to accessing quality education including a shortage of teachers, proximity to schools and lack of electricity negatively impact learning. There's a high student to teacher ratio in many schools, leading to teacher fatigue and a lack of trained and qualified teachers, especially in rural areas. Women teachers are few, which demotivates girl learners. The distance to school from homes also exposes girls to the risk of sexual harassment and violence as they commute to school, and the lack of electricity in homes in rural areas limits study time for girls, who are often occupied with domestic chores during daylight.

We identified positive deviants who have managed to challenge traditional gender norms and forge a different path from the conventional paths in their communities. Some of the girls who left school due to early pregnancy have been able to resume their education with the financial and social support of their caregivers. Similarly, women who lacked formal education in the past are now leveraging their experiences and influence to promote girls' education. Recognizing the factors and conditions that contribute to the success of positive deviants can help us pinpoint strategies that can be replicated to enhance girls' educational outcomes and transform social norms.

Recommendations

1. **Develop contextualized community engagement initiatives** to shift harmful gender norms, using approaches that go beyond surface level sensitization and address deep-rooted beliefs around gender roles and practices.
2. **Create platforms for boys and men to address restrictive gender norms**, understand and practice positive masculinity which includes support for girls' empowerment.
3. **Increase access to female role models**, especially in rural areas, including by supporting women teachers and school principals, organizing school talks with women alumni and showcasing role model life stories through local media.
4. **Provide gender-transformative teacher training**, equipping teachers to critically examine their own gender biases and support students to question harmful gender norms.
5. **Equip teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to better understand the specific needs** of pregnant learners and create tailored support strategies to ensure their educational success.
6. **Implement the action points from the West and Central Africa's Commitment for educated, healthy and thriving adolescents and young people**, ensuring contextualized Comprehensive Sexuality Education for all learners.
7. **Accompany the school sexuality education curriculum with community-based spaces for dialogue on sexuality and relationships, supporting parents and community leaders to engage in meaningful conversations with young people especially around consent.**
Ensure young people have access to youth-friendly Sexual and Reproductive Health services that provide accurate, easy to understand information on contraception and safe sex as well as access to free reproductive health prophylactives and contraceptives.
8. **Invest in youth-led, community-based research to gain contextualized understanding of the socially determined barriers to girls' education**, engaging with community researchers as local experts and changemakers.

