

Social Norms and Girls' Education in Sierra Leone

Insights and Recommendations Report

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Acronyms

RESEARCH

HCD - Human-Centered Design

CCD - Community-Centered Design

IDI - In-depth interview

SGD - Small Group Discussion

Development

GBV - Gender-based violence

FGM - Female Genital Mutilation

GIZ - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH

DHS - Demographic and Health Surveys

Education in Sierra Leone

JSS - Junior Secondary School

SSS - Senior Secondary School

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was commissioned by the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) within the framework of the Gender at the Centre Initiative (GCI) and developed by Dalberg. **Dalberg** is an impact driven advisory firm with key competencies in strategy, design, data and research.

Dalberg Research is the largest independent East African research firm with a reputation for delivering high-quality primary data and conducting field research in complex, multi-country projects.

Dalberg Design partners with leading organizations to bring people to the table, so they can design solutions to the challenges and opportunities that affect their day-to-day lives.

Over a four-month period, **Dalberg worked alongside UNGEI** to conduct mixed-methods research in Sierra Leone. This report contains the findings from the research including in-depth insights, data analysis, opportunities and recommendations.

This research was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. A special thank you to Eline Versluys and Christabel Musonda of UNGEI for their collaborative efforts in the design and delivery of this project. UNICEF Sierra Leone provided valuable inputs in the design and review of the research report. In addition, we would like to thank our advisory council members Mariama Wurie, Mustapha Kamara, Aminata Kamara, Diaka Mariama, Jesseka Davis, and Patricia Bah for supporting this research. This research would not have been possible without the additional support and perspectives of Haja Isatu Bah, and the community researchers Jakar Mariama, Anthony During, Umaru Discipline Musaia and Aminata Sankoh. Thank you for supporting the Dalberg team and fostering a collaborative spirit.

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 [UNDP 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.](#)

Research background & objectives

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 organizations 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 Objectives

This research was guided by the following objectives:

- To understand the social determinants of **girls' access to and participation in education, with a focus on social norms.**
- To understand **perceptions and norms around girls' education** and gender at individual, family, school and community levels.
- To identify **positive deviances and pathways to change** within the communities for positive outcomes for girls' education and improved gender equality.
- To identify the **links of these norms and perceptions** to decision-making regarding girls' education, marriage, childbearing and employment.

Research methodology

Mixed-methods approach

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative Human Centered Design (HCD) 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, considering how these factors may vary across various geographical locations and social norms.** The quantitative analysis involved analyzing quantitative secondary data from various sources including national censuses, surveys, and UN estimates to investigate gender disparities in school access, attendance, and completion, as well as social norms that hinder gender equality. To ensure credibility and better understanding of the data before analysis, important 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.** Data processing checks were conducted to ensure consistency and any anomalies were noted. Descriptive analysis using summary tables and charts was conducted to identify patterns in school access, attendance, and completion, and chart gender differences across indicators.

Qualitative research using community-centered design

Research entailed a detailed qualitative field study, targeting a sample of 117 participants, including direct in-person engagement with participants through in-depth key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Dalberg interviewed participants from eight districts of Sierra Leone: Falaba and Koinadugu in the North, Kambia and Tonkolili in Central, Kailahun and Kenema in the East, Pujehun in the South and Western Area Rural in the West. 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. The approach was particularly useful when exploring complex behavioural and social constructs that require multiple interactions with the community.

Dalberg **partnered with youth in the community to design and execute the qualitative research,** cognizant of the lived experiences, familiarity and trust they add to the interactions with participants. Partnering with community researchers also enabled us to surface nuances and dynamics that might otherwise have remained uncovered.

Research methodology

Youth-led and community-based research model

We utilized a participatory approach that engages young people and community members in the research process.

This model recognizes that community members possess valuable knowledge and insights into their own lives and contexts, and seeks to centre their experiences and voices in the research. We collaborated with community members and young people to co-create research questions, collect and analyze data, and develop and refine insights. This approach involved building trust, establishing relationships, and promoting equitable power dynamics between researchers and community members. **This approach helped us in:**

Mobilization and recruitment

Community researchers played a crucial role in helping us to gain a deeper understanding of the context and cultural nuances within the communities where we conducted our research by identifying the right profile of participants to engage with during interviews.

Shaping our research tools and research process

Community researchers provided valuable feedback on our research tools, including suggesting probes and activities that are culturally and contextually appropriate. They also acted as co-facilitators in our sessions, leading some interview sessions and assisting with translation as needed. Although most participants understood English, we recognized the need to incorporate nuances using Krio. Refining our research approach involved collaborating closely with the community research team to test and refine our tools and ensure the questions were framed in ways that were accessible to community members.

Shaping our research approach

Our research approach prioritized youth as the primary participants, along with their caregivers and educators. To ensure that the research process was effective, we gathered feedback from the youth after each session to understand how they felt about the research approach and what they learned from the discussions. This helped us to tailor our approach and iterate where necessary to better suit their needs and perspectives.

Shaping incentive packages

Community researchers played an integral part in helping us identify the materials that would be most relevant for the participants and their families. We collaborated with Haja, a young woman and founder of Uman4uman, a social venture dedicated to addressing period poverty in Sierra Leone. Uman4uman focuses on the sustainability, availability, comfort, and affordability of recyclable menstrual pads in Sierra Leone. We purchased pads for the girls we spoke to from her organization and have continued to hold discussions with her about her interactions with thousands of girls in Sierra Leone. The incentive package for all participants included milk powder, cocoa, sugar, soaps, toothpaste, juice, biscuits, notebooks, and menstrual reusable pads.

Shaping and refining our insights

To ensure the accuracy and relevance of our findings, we continue to collaborate with our research partners via WhatsApp to fine-tune and validate emerging insights. By involving them in this process, we aim to ensure that our insights and recommendations align with the voices and perspectives of the communities we engage with.

Child Safeguarding Protocols

The following outlines guidelines for the use of photographs, video and audio recordings, as well as the confidentiality of participants' information, that we implemented as part of this research.

Child safeguarding training and ethics training

The research team underwent extensive child welfare training that aligns with UNICEF child safeguarding policies to ensure that appropriate measures and approaches were employed in the research process.

Wellbeing and safety of participants

We ensured the well-being of the individuals who chose to participate in our research. This involved a careful evaluation of the risks and benefits of participation for each participant. The process of deciding who was included or excluded from the study was thoroughly thought out and transparent, with clear explanations for any exclusions made. Our interviewers had a deep understanding of and respect for the cultural norms and backgrounds of our participants, as well as their age, gender, and any other relevant demographic factors. We also prioritized creating a safe and comfortable environment for all participants, where they felt secure in their choice to take part in our research.

Consent of participants

We ensured that participants signed or had their consent recorded and, in the case of minors, we obtained the necessary consent from relevant authorities such as school, teachers, parents, or legal guardians. We ensured that all participants had a full understanding of the purpose of the

research and their rights as participants. This included informing them that their consent was always negotiable and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at anytime.

Data collection and photography With consent from all participants, photographs and video recordings were captured for inclusion in this report. In our documentation, we have taken care not to disclose names, addresses, or any other details that could identify the individuals or educational institutions involved. In some sections, we have used illustrations and alias names instead of actual photos and real names when sharing real stories of participants, to protect their identity. As members of the Dalberg team, we did not take any inappropriate photos of children or participants, ensuring they are only shown engaging in research activities. Additionally, we continue to collaborate with community researchers to review this document, ensuring that the images included respect the dignity of the participants.

Context and Research locations

Qualitative study locations

Research was conducted in eight districts across five provinces of Sierra Leone. We used the quantitative analysis as a foundation to identify areas most statistically impacted by gender disparity, cases of rape and violence, dropouts, access to education, and enablers of education.

Sierra Leone ranks as one of the poorest performing countries in education within the West and Central Africa region. The nation's population is predominantly young, with approximately 40% aged 15 or younger, with the majority residing in rural areas. Around 61% of Sierra Leone's population has attended school. The primary school age group (6-11 years) constitutes more than half of the school-going population. The country's history of instability and conflict has had lasting effects on education. As of 2019, 15.3% of girls aged 6-9 had never attended school, with even lower chances of completing secondary education or pursuing higher learning. Literacy rates in all regions, excluding the Western region, fall below the national average. A closer examination at the district level reveals that Falaba district has the lowest literacy rate at 20%.

Against this backdrop of challenges, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) has put in place legislative frameworks that establish the rights of children, specifically girls, to education. Notable policy frameworks include the lifting of a prior ban on pregnant girls to attend school, introduction of free quality school education and the Radical Inclusion Policy which addresses inequalities on girls and children with disabilities accessing school. In 2023, the GoSL enacted the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act which has an overarching goal of improving learning outcomes and promoting free, accessible, compulsory, relevant and all-inclusive and rights-based education. Regarding allocation

of resources towards the education sector, Sierra Leone's budget allocation to education at 22% is one of the largest percentage funding commitments in the world. However, close follow-up is needed to ensure these policies and budget commitments are put into practice.

Western Sierra Leone: West Area Rural More gender parity was observed between Junior Secondary School (JSS) and Senior Secondary School (SSS) level, but there are cases of sexual violence. These are however not as high as central and northern areas. The area also reports 27% completion rate in JSS and 17% in SSS. Percentage of women teachers in schools compared to other regions is highest at 16% in JSS and 10% in SSS.

Eastern Sierra Leone: Kailahun and Kenema Low completion rates for girls were observed in the two districts, with 38% at JSS level and 18% at SSS level in Kenema and 24% JSS level and 8% SSS level in Kailahun. Percentage of women teachers was also low, with 8% in JSS & 1% SSS in Kailahun and 7% JSS & 5% SSS in Kenema.

Central Sierra Leone: Kambia and Tonkolili Tonkolili and Kambia have the highest level of pregnancy among girls and adolescent school dropout. In Tonkolili there are also high cases of rape, violence and low women teacher representation. In Kambia, we discovered that the school completion rates were significantly low, with 27% of students completing JSS and 17% finishing SSS. Additionally, the percentage of women teachers is strikingly low, with only 6% teaching at the JSS level and an even lower 2% at the SSS level. In Tonkolili, the educational

Project Overview

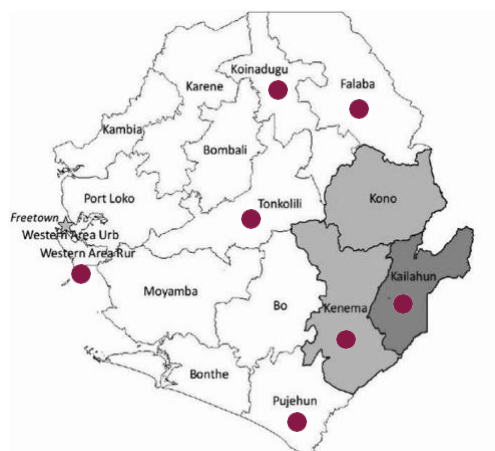
landscape reveals the completion rates for students stand at 24% for JSS and a significantly lower 8% for SSS. When it comes to the percentage of women teachers, the numbers remain low, with 12% of JSS teachers being female and only 5% at the SSS level.

Northern Sierra Leone: Koinadugu and Falaba

Drastic drops are observed in the ratio of girls dropping out from JSS level to SSS level. A total of 34% of students complete JSS, while only 12% manage to finish SSS. Furthermore, the percentage of women teachers remains low, with 9% at the JSS level and 2% at the SSS level in Koinandugu. There is a low representation of women teachers in Falaba. The available data on the education system is limited, particularly with regards to school completion rates, for which no data is currently accessible. However, the percentage of teachers in the region is noticeably low, with only 6% at the JSS level and 2% at the SSS level.

Southern Sierra Leone: Pujehun

There is no direct correlation between school distribution and school enrolment, and the area has fewer schools but higher enrolment. In Pujehun, high cases of rape, pregnancy, dropouts, and low women teacher representation were observed.



We ensured a diverse representation across the East, West, North and South of Sierra Leone, as well as a rural and urban split

Research Sampling

Qualitative study sampling

The sampling approach combined quantitative and qualitative Community-Centered Design (CCD) research methodologies. The qualitative community-centered research covered a sample size of 117 participants across five provinces.

Quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis conducted a **large screening of existing literature to uncover main barriers and drivers of girls' education in Sierra Leone**. This initial analysis painted a picture of the ecosystem and dynamics at play without giving a detailed explanation on the underlying reasons behind it. In the context of this study, our **Community Centered Design (CCD) research used the quantitative analysis as a foundation to determine where to probe deeper**.

CCD Research

Our CCD research focused on smaller sample sizes that allowed greater depth and nuance to be achieved. While a large sample may provide a population view into understanding social norms, having a smaller sample allows for a continuity when designing community-led concepts and **builds buy in and trust with the community**.

We interviewed a total of 117 participants using a mix of in-depth interviews and small group discussions.

Province	Participants					
	<i>Boys & girls between 12 - 14 years including those who have dropped out of school, continued with their education, have children and married early</i>		<i>Parents & caregivers including those with girls between 6-19 years, a mix of boys and girls, a mix of boy and girl children who have dropped out of school</i>		<i>Educators and community leaders including male and female teachers, chiefs and mammie queens</i>	
	IDI	SGD	IDI	SGD	IDI	SGD
Northern	3	3	2	1	2	2
Central	3	-	2	1	2	-
Eastern	3	2	2	-	4	-
Southern	3	1	2	-	4	-
Western	1	-	1	2	2	1
Total						117

Total IDIs = 36

Total SGDs = 13; Number of respondents covered in 1 SGD ~3-6; total respondents covered through SGDs ~81



Research Findings

UNGEI Dalberg Design



Mindsets on Girls' Education

UNGEI Dalberg Design

Sensitization efforts spearheaded by government and non-government organizations have shifted mindsets and attitudes of community members to value education. A growing number of community members now perceive education as an important means for the empowerment of girls.

The mindsets on education have shifted over the years to encourage the education of children, especially girls. Community sensitization through platforms such as mass media and community meetings has been a key enabler in communicating the value of educating children. Families are now able to experience improved livelihoods due to better access to stable income from formal employment opportunities that have come as a result of formal education. In addition, girls and women believe education empowers them with the language, knowledge and financial ability to tackle gender-based violence.



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 for community development and advancement. Participants in the research 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. Community leaders such as chiefs, teachers, and mammie queens* have also taken the initiative to hold community meetings and events aimed at sensitizing members on the importance of educating children, especially girls. In many instances, these efforts are made in collaboration with NGOs. This narrative is embodied by many community members including parents, teachers and children who noted a tangible increase in the number of girls joining and remaining in school.

While conducting our interviews, participants often used phrases such as “Education is the key to success” and “When you educate a girl child you educate the nation” when we inquired about their perspectives on education and girls’ education. While these phrases were learned from school or through sensitization efforts, participants were able to provide examples of educated girls in the community who had formal jobs and were financially supporting their families at home.

**A mammie queen is a term used in some West African countries and Sierra Leone, to refer to a female community leader or a woman who holds a position of influence and authority within the community. Mammie queens are often responsible for enforcing community by-laws and ensuring the welfare of women and children in their communities. They may also play a crucial role in mediating disputes, maintaining social order, and promoting education and empowerment for women and girls.*

“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



The school-going girls we spoke to mentioned that they were studying to become nurses, teachers and doctors and that if they did not become one of these things, men could mistreat and harass them. They mentioned that their future husbands were likely to get educated girlfriends on the side and spend the family income on the educated girlfriends instead of them.

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 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. School-going girls who often encounter sexual harassment believe being educated has given them the confidence to resist unwanted sexual advances and protect themselves from exploitation by men and boys in the community. Similarly, young boys too expressed the importance of education, highlighting its role in helping them avoid being taken advantage of, specifically in situations involving legal documents. The boys felt that it was important to educate girls, as it would enable them to avoid being exploited by men and create an avenue to financially care for their families. This recognition of education's protective role illustrates the vital role education could play in promoting gender equity and combating gender-based violence in the community.

“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

Mindsets on girls' education

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. Education across the different stakeholders we interviewed 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. In rural farming communities for example, the challenges associated with subsistence farming, such as its hand-to-mouth nature and vulnerability to climate conditions, make it a less attractive option for students and parents, some of whom are farmers. These parents encourage their children to pursue education as a means out of poverty for themselves and the family at large.

“Families with members who are not educated have high financial burdens. My dad was the only one who was educated at some point and I remember everyone was looking to him because he was doing well.”

Young father, Western Area Rural, Urban



Parents compete with other parents in the neighbourhood to secure the best possible education for their children. This competition is rooted in a desire to see their children attain the highest levels of academic achievement and socioeconomic mobility.

Parents are keen on showcasing their children's academic success and professional achievements, as these are seen as indicators of upward social mobility and a means of overcoming poverty.

“In Aberdeen, there are a lot of fishermen who are uneducated. In the community I come from, there are a lot of dropouts. I see how they live and it’s terrifying. Their thinking is very limited and attached to their settings. There’s always crime, conflict and drug abuse.”

Young father, Western Area Rural, Urban

“I feel proud of my 16-year-old child who reads messages on my phone and it is as a result of them acquiring education.”

Mother, Pujehun, Rural

“When you’re sitting in your Land Cruiser or Range Rover, men can’t hustle you. In fact, they refer to you as ‘madam’. Only doctors and lawyers will approach you because they’ll see you’re in the same class as them.”

Young girl, 15, Western Area Rural, Urban

“If you don’t learn you are unable to help your parents and yourself. I know how to read, write and sign documents so no one can take my rights from me. I am proud of my parents for taking me to school because they are not educated so they appreciate me and are proud of me.”

Young boy, 14, Western Area rural, Urban



Sociocultural Barriers to Girls' Education

UNGEI Dalberg Design

Multiple sociocultural barriers negatively affect children's access to education and future opportunities, with girls disproportionately impacted due to sociocultural norms.

These barriers include insufficient parental or caregiver support, particularly for children living with non-biological caregivers. The persistence of traditional gender roles results in unequal time for women to focus on educational opportunities. Financial limitations also compel girls to participate in income-generating activities or transactional relationships, which may have unintended consequences of early pregnancy or sexual abuse. Gender-based violence is heavily affecting girls and creating an unsafe environment in the school and the communities they live in. There is also a lack of accessible female role models, especially in rural areas, which impacts the aspirations and motivations for young girls. Finally, there are limited out-of-school options, especially for adolescent mothers who have dropped out of school. Collectively, these factors create a multifaceted set of challenges that impede a girl's educational access and prospects, with girls frequently encountering added difficulties due to prevailing cultural norms and expectations.



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. In rural areas, community members expressed the need to maintain their traditional and cultural beliefs and practices because this forms the core of their identity as a people. From an early age, girls are taught to prioritize home keeping, marriage and childcare, while boys are taught to take up leadership roles within the household. In the morning, girls wake up earlier to fetch water, clean the house and perform other domestic chores before going to school, while boys wake up later and go straight to school. In the evenings, girls will help with the cooking and cleaning before completing their assignments, while boys can study, take up small jobs or rest. The boy's domestic duties at home are mostly limited to fetching firewood and farming on weekends, which frees up their weekdays for school and extracurricular activities.

In few cases in peri-urban and urban areas, gender roles regarding household tasks are less rigid in urban communities compared to rural communities, with parents splitting the tasks differently between boys and girls. In peri-urban and urban areas, a noticeable shift in traditional gender roles regarding household tasks can be observed. Unlike rural communities, where deeply ingrained cultural norms often dictate that girls shoulder the majority of domestic responsibilities, urban communities exhibit more flexibility in the distribution of these tasks. This change can be attributed to a variety of factors, such as increased exposure to diverse perspectives, higher levels of education, and the influence of progressive social movements.

“Sometimes my mum cooks the sauce, then she tells me to cook the rice. She says some day in the future when I go to college, I will need to cook for myself.”

Young boy, 14, Western Area Rural, Urban

Sociocultural Barriers

“To be a boy means that I will be the head of the family, so I focus on my education. I am expected to do housework like fetch water, fetch firewood, launder and go to school. I consider responsibilities as something important in the growth and development of a boy. Whenever I want to take on new responsibility at home, my parents will allow me because they feel that am capable to do it.”

Young boy, 16, Kenema, Peri-Urban



Boys exhibit diverse viewpoints regarding the roles they anticipate assuming alongside their future wives within the household. Some prioritize self-sufficiency and mutual respect, while most emphasize the importance of adhering to traditional gender roles and express apprehension about partnering with a more educated woman. During discussions (*see the following page*), boys share their perspectives on the roles they believe they should take up in the household in the future, as well as their opinions on the education levels they would like their future wives to attain. In the dialogue, one boy emphasizes the importance of learning domestic tasks, such as cooking, as a form of self-sufficiency. He believes that marrying an educated woman will result in a relationship built on mutual respect, and that men should be willing to contribute to household tasks.

In contrast, the other four boys stress the importance of marrying an educated woman, but not one who is more educated than the man. They fear that this could lead to a lack of respect, misbehaviour, potential conflict within the marriage, or even being taken advantage of and losing property. While they appreciate the financial stability that an educated wife can bring to the family, they still expect her to perform traditional household duties and adhere to traditional gender roles, where women are the primary caretakers and subservient to their husbands.

“I feel good when a woman is at the top of many leadership positions, but at the same time, some women may not respect their husband because of the position they are in.”

Young male parent, 25, Kailahun, Peri-Urban

Boy 1:

"Sometimes my mum cooks the sauce, then she tells me to cook the rice. She says some day in the future when I go to college I will need to cook for myself. I want to marry a girl who is educated because an educated woman will respect me. I think the husband can cook and take care of the children, but some men want to treat their wives like slaves. My parents teach me that you don't have to wait for your wife to come and cook in the evening for you to eat. You can do it yourself."

Young boy, 14, Western area rural, Urban

Boy 2:

"You need to marry a girl who is educated but not more than you, so when you take her somewhere she will start misbehaving, calling you names. She will start abusing you and calling you names, and you will become shy. At home, you will not be able to control her. Then you will end up beating your wife because she is not a good wife. When a husband talks one word, then a woman should not talk fifteen words. She should listen to the man, but some women talk fifteen words when a man talks one word. The woman should be the one taking care of the children and cooking, not me because the house will be upside down."

Young boy, 16, Western area rural, Urban

Boy 3:

I think we need to be careful that we choose the girl to marry, not for the girl to come and marry us. I want my wife to be educated, but not more than me. I want her to be educated so when we both have a job, we can use the money for food and take the rest to the bank, so our child will not suffer. She should be the one to do the housework. If you start doing it, she will make a habit of letting you do it, and she won't do it herself. She will make you always do it."

Young boy, 16, Western area rural, Urban

Boy 4:

"You need to marry an educated woman, but if she is too educated, she can take advantage of you. The man needs to be more empowered because if we are not then we will suffer and if you get married your wife can take advantage of you and can make you sign away your property."

Young boy, 16, Western area rural, Urban



Traditional gender roles and responsibilities

Young girls aspire for marriages characterized by mutual respect, support, shared responsibilities, and personal agency. This emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency serves as a means of safeguarding their well-being and protection. Girls shared their perspectives on the roles they believe they should take up in the household in the future, as well as their opinions on the education levels they would like their future husbands to attain. In the dialogue [on the following page](#), the sentiment among young girls is that they desire a future marriage built on mutual respect, support, and shared responsibilities. They value the importance of education as a means to maintain independence, protect themselves from potential abuse, to help them to be aware of any deceitful behaviour from their partner, and foster a balanced relationship in which both partners contribute to the well-being of the family.

“It’s right for a woman to do 80% of the house responsibilities while a man needs to go out to acquire finance, but rationally, I feel bad about that since it’s the mentality of the majority. I feel good when women take leadership roles because they are hard-working, and they are always at the top in most walks of life. As for me, I still believe that it is the responsibility of a woman to be at home and do the necessary housework.”

Young girl, 16, Kailahun, Peri-Urban

Decision-making power

In some cases, women with limited education or income often lack decision-making power in their households. In households where women have limited education or income and primarily fulfil the role of a housewife, it has been observed that husbands often wield the decision-making power. Some women in these situations report not having a voice in decisions concerning their children’s education or the allocation of finances for family support. When seeking funds to assist their parents, these women must request money from their husbands, lacking the privacy to send financial aid discreetly, while their husbands may use funds secretly. Consequently, many of these women are motivated to encourage their daughters to pursue education, aiming to provide them with a different life and expanded opportunities in the future.

Girl 1:

“I feel good about the chores I take on at home. It’s important to learn these things because when you’re older and get married and your husband is at work, you need to clean, take care of the home and cook. I’d like to marry someone who can take care of me and my children, respect me and provide for us.”

Young girl, 15, Western area rural, Urban

Girl 2:

“Boys also do house chores if the home doesn’t have any girls, but for most houses it’s the girls who do most of the work. I want to be more educated than my husband. Men who have money think they can do anything – like beat me and throw me out. If I’m educated and make my own money, I can say to him, ‘leave me alone and don’t talk to me like that’.”

Young girl, 16, Western area rural, Urban

Girl 3:

“Men will look down on you if you’re not educated. They will get different women and save their numbers on their phone with other names. You won’t know anything because you can’t read. Some even write love letters to them, but you can’t read, so won’t know what is going on.”

Young girl, 16, Western area rural, Urban

Girl 4:

“I’m not interested in just a man who is rich – they could be rich because they are in a cult. I want a man who respects me and performs his duties in the home, which is providing financially, working, and helping the children study.”

Young girl, 18, Western area rural, Urban



Social expectations

The community places significant importance on education, particularly for girls, recognizing it as a tool for elevating the financial status of families and the wider community through employment, even after marriage. The community recognizes the significant role of education in promoting socioeconomic mobility, and its value for girls is seen as extending beyond the individual to encompassing the community as a whole. Parents and children have recognized that girls have a higher likelihood of continuing to support their families after finding work, in contrast to boys. Boys are perceived to leave their families and limit the financial support extended to their parents, while girls are perceived as being more likely to provide financial assistance. Girls' education in this context is primarily focused on the benefits it can bring to the community, specifically in terms of nurturing and caring for others. This perspective, however, does not yet fully recognize girls' education as an inherent right for the individual girl, but rather as a means to support the well-being of others in the community.

“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, here is a shirt’.”

Town chief, Falaba, Rural

The community chief provided an example of his pregnant daughter, who, even with the limited financial support he provides, often sends him small gifts in return. In contrast, his son demands support without reciprocating any support in kind.

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. In some instances, both boys and girls are forced to participate in manual labour, such as petty trading or motorcycle transportation, to generate income to fund their education while simultaneously attending school. Many boys and girls face this challenge as they attempt to balance the demands of earning a living with their desire to pursue an education. Girls are found to do petty trading, while boys are found doing more challenging jobs like masonry or okada transportation. Some girls from very low-income households desire to get married to receive support with financial resources. This desire is often driven by the perception that marriage can provide financial security and a means to escape the cycle of poverty that they are mired in. In some instances, poverty can lead to transactional relationships, where some girls turn to boys and young men to help them pay for their school necessities. When a boy pays for a girl's needs, this leads to him being perceived as a "helper". Transactional relationships often perpetuate traditional gender roles, where boys are expected to be providers and girls are perceived as dependent. This dynamic can reinforce the notion that men hold power over women, contributing to a culture of inequality. The perception of boys as "helpers" may lead to a sense of entitlement, where boys feel they have the right to control or exploit young girls. Unfortunately, this can result in sexual abuse and early pregnancy. In addition, boys may face financial strain or be forced to take on adult responsibilities at an early age, which can interfere with their education and limit their future prospects.

During our research, we spoke to a young 16-year-old girl who dropped out of school because of pregnancy. She mentioned that her male classmate would buy her lunch or pay for her school materials. Eventually she got pregnant and was kicked out by her caregiver. Despite this, the boy is still pursuing his education and is no longer involved with her. When asked if she would be involved with the boy if she had the resources to pay for her own education, she said no and acknowledged that her current situation could have been avoided if she had the resources.

“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 when I won’t get a job? So some of them start petty trading or getting married and having babies. By the age of 15 you will find many girls are having babies. To the community, the idea makes sense because she needs to prioritize feeding her family and when she is done with school she won’t get a job so what’s the point.”

Young lady, Education Consultant



Impact of early pregnancy

Adolescent mothers who have dropped out of school desire to complete their education after encountering the hardships of staying home and fending 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. Girls who have dropped out of school lack financial independence. Many of them go into subsistence farming, small trade business, or remain at home and depend on their partners or relatives. Their caregivers lack the financial capability to support the continuation of their education in addition to their upkeep. Some caregivers are also unwilling to support the girls' return to school and perceive this to be the financial responsibility of the girl's partner. Additionally, teenage mothers lack adequate support with childcare once they decide to return to school. Having limited options to leave their babies with, they opt to stay home and transition to marriage and motherhood.

The girls we spoke to who had dropped out of school because of the pregnancy left school due to discomfort pertaining to fatigue and vomiting, but ultimately abandoned school because of the teasing from classmates. Even though they are aware they can still go to school, they would rather not endure the hurtful comments. Many of them now want to return to school but lack the financial resources and childcare support to do so.

“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

“Sometimes some fathers say to me, they will not take their daughters back to school because they will become pregnant again, so they say they do not want to waste their resources educating their child.”

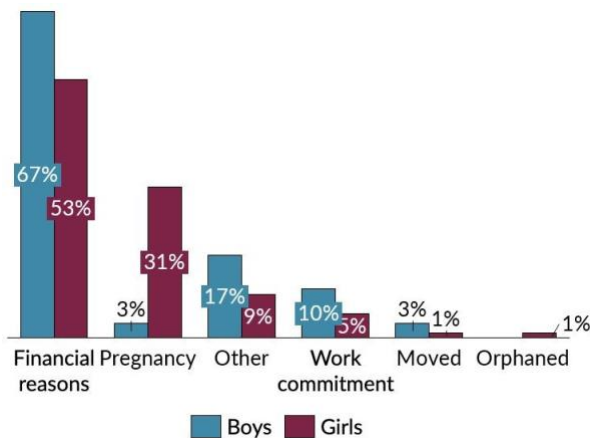
Community chief, Female, Kambia, Peri-Urban

Sociocultural Barriers

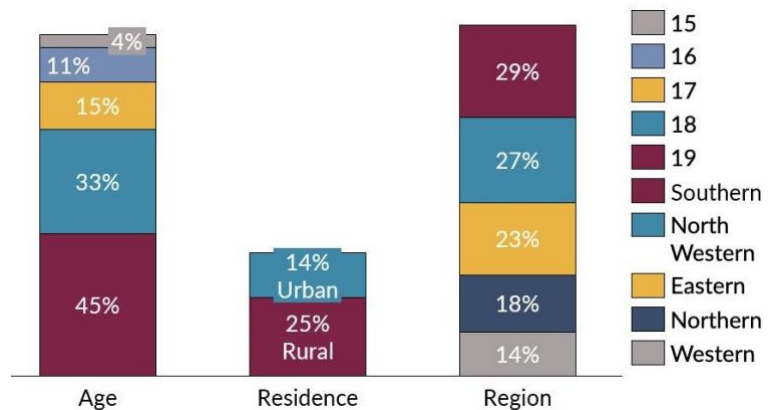
Social limitations of radical inclusion policy

Despite the government reversing the ban on pregnant girls and teenage 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 teenage girls adequately. Pregnant students often experience difficulties focusing in class due to pregnancy-related symptoms like nausea, vomiting, and fatigue. As their pregnancy advances, many girls choose to leave school. Additionally, these girls face teasing and taunting from peers, resulting in feelings of isolation and feeling discouraged to pursue their education. Overburdened teachers, grappling with a low teacher to student ratio (approx. 1 teacher for 50 - 60 students), generally lack the capacity to provide tailored support for these students, such as supplementary classes or counselling services.

REASONS FOR SCHOOL DROP-OUT



PERCENTAGE OF TEENAGERS WHO HAVE BEGUN CHILD BEARING BY AGE, RESIDENCE AND REGION



Source UNESCO (2020)

Early pregnancy is a common cause of early school dropout among girls. According to the UNESCO (2020) report, high prevalence of adolescent pregnancy is linked to child marriage, as girls who become pregnant out of wedlock are often forced by their families into marrying the men who impregnated them, even if the relationship had been an abusive or predatory one.

“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



Some sporadic initiatives funded by NGOs try to impart basic reading and writing skills and skills training among girls and women with no education. The women we spoke to in rural areas in the north, however, mentioned that these initiatives have not been active for many years. GIZ for example, occasionally runs vocational training programs in Kabala in the Northern region, where interested candidates can learn tailoring, hairdressing and other skills. The programs, however, are not regular. Kabala is also roughly a 2-hour drive from the research sites we visited, making it inaccessible for the majority of the community members who would like to join such programs.

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. Urban and peri-urban locations have more access to adult literacy programs which have enabled older women who did not complete their education to gain basic literacy skills that allow them to sign documents, read text messages, assist their children with basic assignments, and write. Many of the women are from low-income families and lack the incentive to stay in the programs as they often have competing priorities such as running small businesses. Teenage mothers want to learn technical skills such as tailoring, soap making, hairdressing and carpentry, that would allow them to venture into profitable businesses. The availability of vocational/technical training programs is negligible in many rural communities in the northern region which limits the opportunities for girl who have dropped out of school to advance their skills. Available programs are closer to peri-urban centers which adds a cost implication to accessing these classes.

“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

Sociocultural Barriers

School-Related Gender-Based Violence

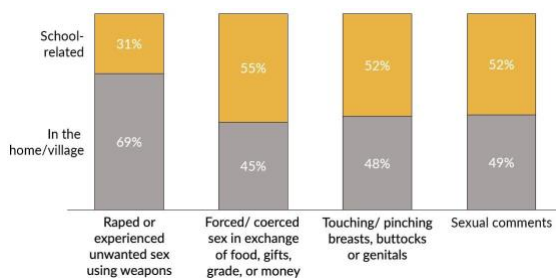
Various instances of illicit behaviour by teachers, which includes extorting money or sexual favours for grades, disproportionately affect students from low-income backgrounds and girls. Furthermore, girls face increased vulnerability to sexual harassment by boys and men during their journeys to and 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. Girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and harassment from teachers, who demand sex in exchange for higher grades and preferential treatment. Both girls, boys, and teachers have noted that male teachers often target low-performing girls, promising improved grades in return for sexual favours. This is often disheartening for girls, leading to low performance due to emotional distress or unintended pregnancy, which also leads to their dropping out of school. Girls mentioned that though some students try to report the teacher, this results in their grades being adversely affected or in mistreatment from the teacher. Some boys feel that continuing their education holds little value, as they cannot outperform the girls receiving preferential treatment. Moreover, parents in rural areas express concerns regarding their daughters' safety during commutes to school, as girls frequently encounter harassment from boys and men in the community. Some individuals even offer free transportation via "okadas" (motorbike taxis) in exchange for sexual favours.

“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.”

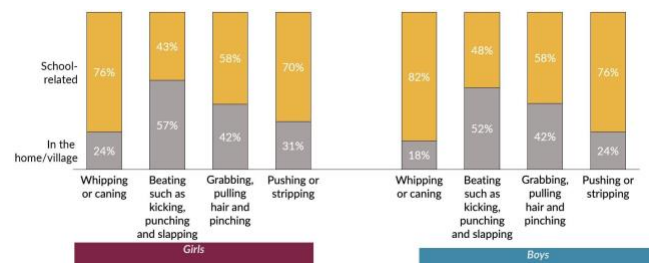
Young girl, 16 Western Area, Urban

Physical and sexual violence perpetrated by teachers is common, which may lead to low school attendance and completion rates. Students we spoke to reported beating and caning being commonly used by teachers as a form of punishment, while in some cases, male teachers asked girls for sexual favours in exchange for grades. Affected students report such incidents to trusted teachers and principals but a majority felt that there is little consequence for perpetrators. Students also expressed discomfort with reporting these matters as it could sometimes lead to further harassment from the teachers. Parents were another trusted source for reporting physical and sexual harassment, especially among students who had close relationship with caregivers.

PLACES WHERE GIRLS EXPERIENCE SEXUAL VIOLENCE



PLACES WHERE PHYSICAL VIOLENCE HAPPENS BY GENDER OF THE VICTIM



“There are issues of rape and sexual predation from teachers in the school. Issues of rape are settled at the community level rather than the law being enforced. Leaders cover up issues that affect the young people in the community. In my own experience, my teacher approached me and seized my exam results. When I reported the matter to my parents, they were afraid to take action because nothing good can come out of it – only an apology. In my own experience, I was approached by the principal to have a relationship with him and when I refused, he threatened to punish me by failing me, not allowing me to progress to the next level.”

Young girl, 16 Kailahun, Peri-Urban

“I normally advise my daughter not to play with boys too much in the village because when they are playing, boys like to touch their breasts. When she starts her period, I won’t allow her to buy pads for herself. I will make sure I buy them myself because I know boys will start calling her and offering to buy her things.”

Mother of teenage girl, 31, Western Area Rural, Urban



Access to female role models

Girls and women in rural communities are not exposed to a wide range of female role models to which they can aspire compared to their urban-residing counterparts who have better access to women they can model 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. In rural areas, the majority of the girls we interviewed aspire to become nurses, having been inspired by the female health workers they see in the health centres. They also noted that these female health workers make their own money and live alone, and consequently aspire to be like them and earn their own income. Some girls in the rural areas mentioned wanting to have roles and positions in the community that are “better than a mammie queen”, who serves as another powerful source of influence in the girls’ lives. These mammie queens have not completed their formal education, however, which places them at a disadvantage when looking for formal employment opportunities.

In a photocards research activity we conducted in rural communities, girls pointed out the various roles they had seen women in their community take on. These were mostly farming, petty trading, childcare, teaching and nursing.

On the other hand, girls in peri-urban and urban settings often express aspirations for careers in fields such as computer engineering, fashion modelling, law, being a basketballer, and pursuing medicine.

“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

Lack of parental or caregiver involvement

In many cases, children living with non-biological caregivers face educational challenges due to the limited support and involvement provided to them in regards to their education. A number of children we spoke to do not reside with their biological parents owing to factors such as parental death, being disowned due to pregnancy, or the need to support elderly family members. Children who have lost their parents often rely on the support of their relatives. However, these caregivers may struggle to provide adequate financial support, as they often have their own children to attend to. As a result, the children may face additional challenges in accessing education and other basic needs. In some cases, girls are required to care for their ailing grandmothers during school hours resulting in missed classes while other girls engage in transactional relationships to support their learning and upkeep. Orphaned boys tend to engage in small-scale trading and farming to financially support themselves and their households. According to teachers we spoke to in urban and peri-urban areas, children living with non-biological caregivers have a higher likelihood of dropping out early or performing poorly in school. This is particularly true when some relatives living in urban areas offer to relocate and provide education for children in rural communities but go back on their word once the children are in their homes. These children are used to provide domestic labour in their caregivers' homes and sell in markets instead of focusing on education.

We spoke to a young 15-year-old girl with a three-year-old child in Kambia, Central area. She mentioned that she dropped out of school in form one because both her parents passed away and there was no one to take care of her, because of which she was unable to continue her education. She then moved in with her aunt, but decided to do tailoring for no pay in order to keep herself busy.

Similarly, a 23-year-old young man in Falaba, Northern area dropped out of senior secondary school after losing his parents and being unable to pay his school fees. He was out of school for six years, during which he went into business driving an okada (motorcycle) to earn income for his upkeep and save for his return to school. He was able to save enough money to return to school after those six years in the business and is now in SS3. On holidays and weekends, he earns an income through farming and petty trading.

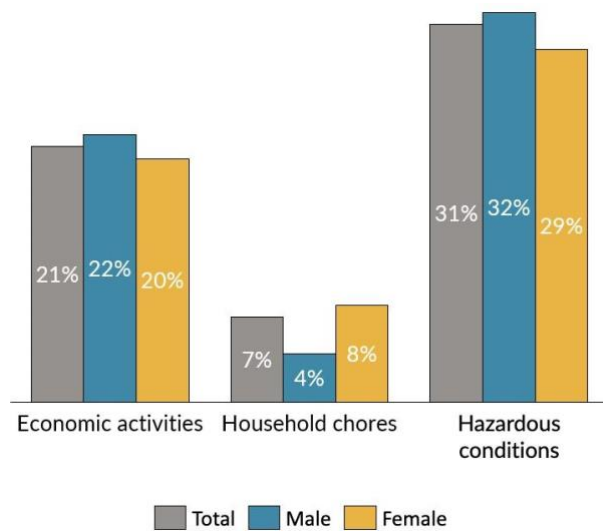
“I am a mother of two caring for eight additional non-biological children. When I get some rice, it is up to us to share the rice amongst ourselves. It gets hard and with petty trading I can only do so much; it is the loan from LAPO that helps us. I took 1,000,000 leones that helps us have something small to eat, but I can't provide for everyone. I have chosen to help these children for different reasons – their mom went mad, others have lost their parents – and I'm the only one they can stay with.”

Mother, 38, Tonkolili, Peri-Urban

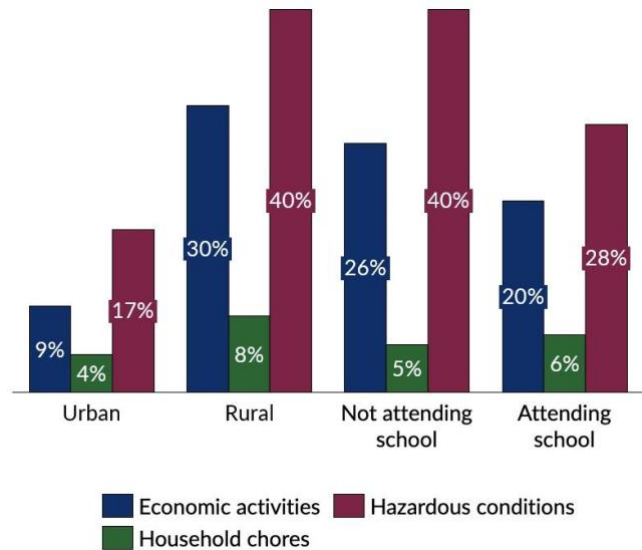
Sociocultural Barriers

There is a high rate of child labour among children not attending school, with almost one-third of children reporting involvement in hazardous conditions. This increases with age and is more prominent in rural areas compared to urban settings.

CHILDREN IN DIFFERENT CHILD LABOUR ACTIVITIES BY GENDER



CHILDREN IN DIFFERENT CHILD LABOUR ACTIVITIES BY TYPE AND AREA OF RESIDENCE



Source UNESCO (2020)

“A neighbour of mine came with an 8-year-old orphaned girl from the village and was using her to sell water. Others are taken by their caregivers to the mine to break stones. If you question them, they say that there is no money to feed an extra mouth.”

Father, 33, Western Area Rural, Urban

“A lot of girls, especially near the border, are petty traders. They are expected to be the breadwinners from an early age. They are told to go out and make money and get married.”

Mammie queen, Kambia, Peri-urban



Drivers of Girls' Education

UNGEI Dalberg Design

Girls' education is positively influenced by active parental involvement, government-funded education, community by-laws and shifting social expectations that recognize the value of their education.

There are a number of drivers that positively influence girls' education. These drivers include active parental involvement, which creates a supportive environment and encourages motivation and engagement in school, and government-funded education, which alleviates the financial burden on some families and increases accessibility to education. While the government promotes the concept of free education, it is crucial to recognize that additional expenses exist in the form of registration fees, book purchases, and uniforms. These costs can create financial challenges for some parents, who struggle to provide these necessities for their children while also covering their daily living expenses. Community influencers are increasingly stepping up to financially support girls' education when external or family resources are limited, further contributing to the improvement of educational opportunities for them.

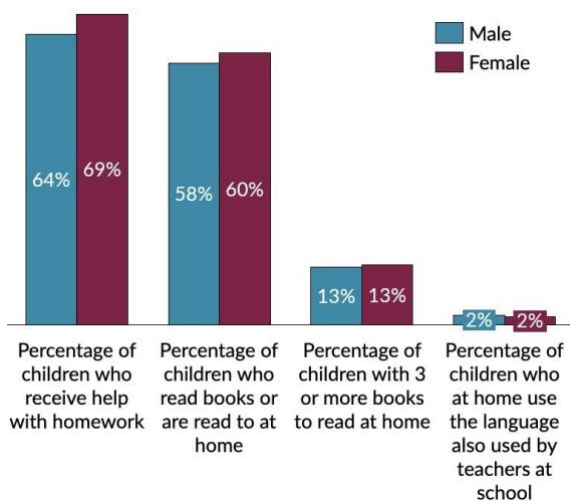
Drivers of Girls' Education

Parental Involvement

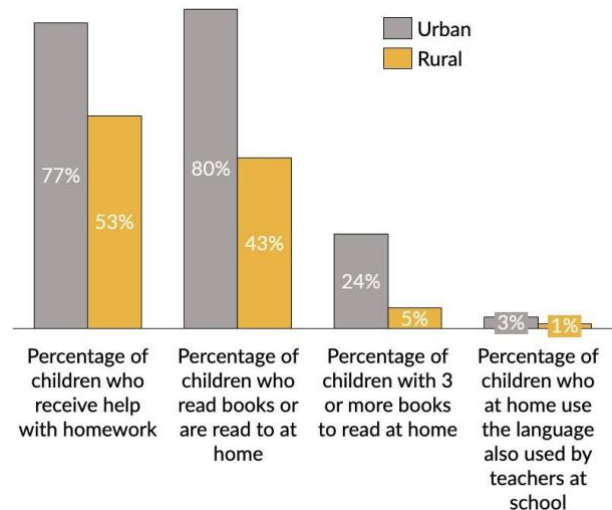
Active engagement of parents serves as a critical motivator for girls' retention and motivation to stay in school. This includes offering personal advice and guidance on essential life skills, participating in meetings with teachers, and assisting with assignments when possible. By doing so, parents help to create a supportive environment that encourages girls to stay motivated and engaged with their education. Teachers also mentioned that they have seen parents involved in different ways in their children's education by calling them directly when they have an issue, attending the parent teacher meetings and asking them to help guide their children. Our research revealed that the primary advice given to young girls in the community emphasizes the importance of concentrating on their studies and minimizing interactions with young boys and men. This guidance stems from the recognition that early sexual activity and pregnancy can have a significantly negative impact on a girl's education and future opportunities. On the other hand, boys are often advised on their role of being the protectors of young girls and their families, but also about their role as providers for their future households. In some families, male parents tend to take on the role of financial providers and, when more educated than their spouses, assist their children with homework. On the other hand, women without financial means often have limited decision-making power within the family. However, these women actively seek to support their children's education by participating in adult literacy programs when they lack formal education. This allows them to better assist their children with homework and contribute to their academic success.

Home learning environment impacts children's schooling positively. 77% of children in urban areas receive help with their homework, compared to 53% in rural areas. In addition, 80% of children who read books or are read to at home in urban areas, compared to 43% who are read to in rural areas.

HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT



HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT - RURAL VS. URBAN



Source: Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS,2017), Annual School Census report (2020)

“I usually hear my mum advise my small sister that beauty fades. That if she is not educated, a guy will not marry her because they will look at her education background and how well she did in school.”

Young boy, 14, Western Area Rural, Urban

Government funded education and the 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. Government-funded free education has emerged as essential for many parents who find themselves in financially precarious situations, granting them the opportunity to provide their children with education that would have been otherwise unattainable. By eliminating the burden of costly tuition fees, providing students with school bus transportation and some textbooks and, in some cases, one pair of school uniform, these programs have helped families to have the chance to send their children to school or provide them with money for meals by lowering the overall costs they need to consider. In addition, a radical inclusion policy has also been implemented by the government to address educational disparities and ensure that all children, regardless of their background or abilities, have equal access to quality education. This policy aims to bridge the gaps created by socio-economic, gender, and geographical barriers, as well as those faced by children with disabilities or special needs. It also addresses the specific needs of pregnant girls, who have historically faced discrimination and exclusion from education in Sierra Leone. Recognizing the importance of providing equal educational opportunities for all, the policy aims to ensure that pregnant girls can continue their education without fear of stigmatization or expulsion. Schools are encouraged to create supportive and inclusive learning environments that accommodate the unique needs of pregnant students. The radical inclusion policy also emphasizes the importance of teacher training and sensitization to accommodate diverse learning needs and create a supportive educational atmosphere. The policy, which allows pregnant girls to return to school, presents an opportunity for further research into its distinct effects on both girls and boys. It is vital that additional studies are conducted to evaluate the gender-specific outcomes of this policy.

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

Mother, Western Area Rural, Urban

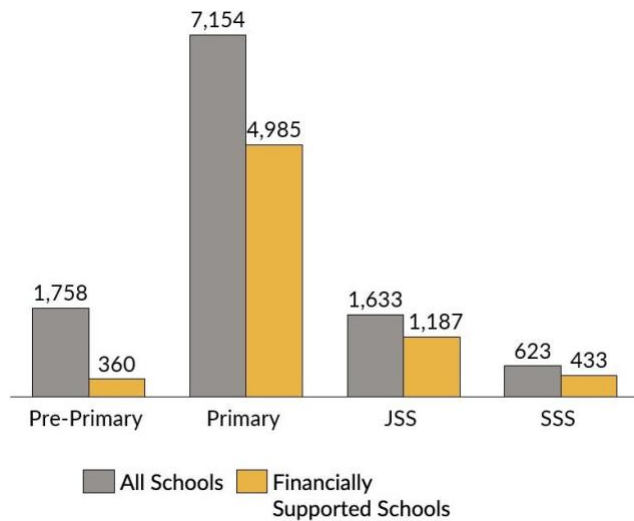
“The government has a policy of radical inclusion and has made progress in promoting gender transformative education, but more action is needed, especially in terms of training. The government also offers free education, but there are still some associated fees that can prevent access to education.”

Young lady, Education Consultant

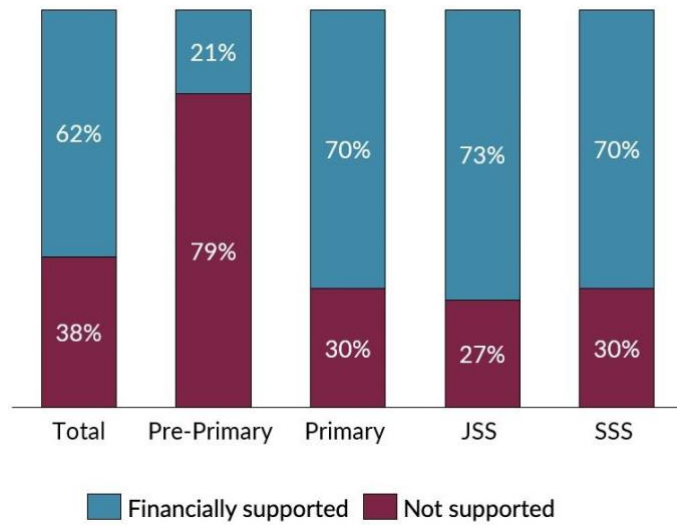
Drivers of Girls' Education

Government support in school has been a key driver to education access. At least 62% of schools receive financial support from the government. However, we find that the government provides more support at the primary level compared to pre-primary, junior secondary and senior secondary.

SCHOOLS RECEIVING FINANCIAL SUPPORT VIA FQSE



% OF SCHOOLS RECEIVING FINANCIAL SUPPORT VIA FQSE



FQSE: Free Quality School Education
 Source: Out-Of-School Children Study Sierra Leone (2021)



“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 girl and the child until they are both able to return to school.”

Female chief, Kambia, Peri-urban

Community by-laws

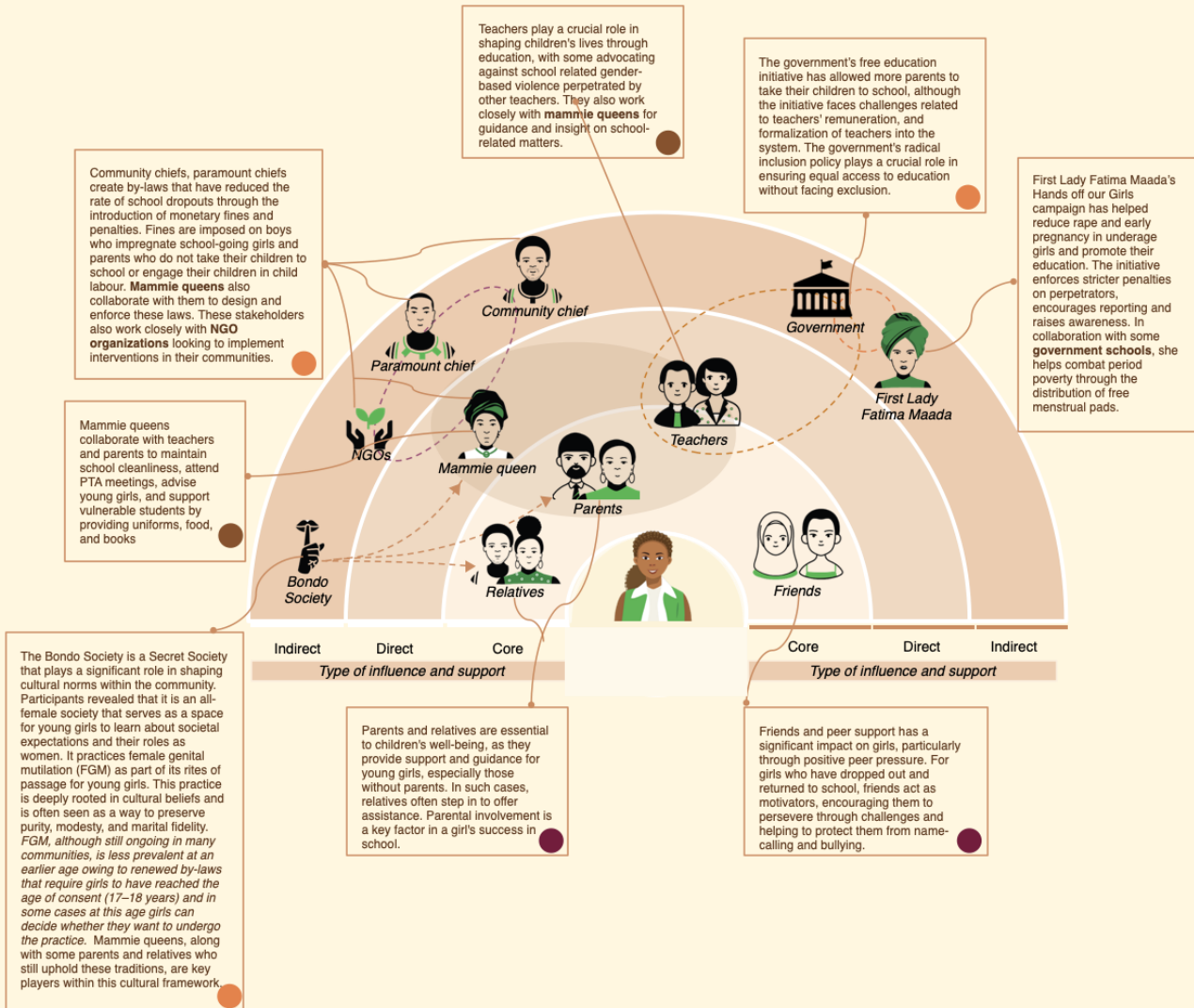
Community by-laws, set by community-level administration officers and leaders such as chiefs, mammie queens and traditional elders, have been instrumental in protecting girls’ rights to education. These by-laws have led to a tangible improvement in the attendance and completion of education by both girls and boys. Some of the by-laws scripted by leaders in these communities include monetary fines imposed on boys who impregnate school-going girls, fathers who do not provide child support and parents who do not take their children to school or whose children are spotted trading during school hours. In some cases issues of gender-based sexual violence are handled in collaboration with the Family Service Unit police in each of these regions for investigation and to ensure justice to the victim.

“There are strict laws in this community. For example, no underage girls should be sent out of the house past 7 pm for any sort of errands, If you are found, there’s a fine. The mammie queen demands 25,000 leones as a fine. It keeps our girls safe.”

Mother of teenage girl, Western Area Rural, Urban

Influencers of young girls' livelihoods and education

Ecosystem map of influence on girls' education in the community.



- ECOSYSTEM KEY**
- Core influence and support ●
 - Direct influence and support ●
 - Indirect influence and support ●

There is free distribution of sanitary pads. Back then, I used to take my old clothes and tear them into pieces to serve as pad, but the provision of pads by Her Excellency Fatima Bio have made me feel much better and more decent in using the reusable menstrual pad.”

Young girl, 16 Kenema, Peri-Urban

“To my knowledge, our community might have initiative programs, but I am only aware of Hands Off Our Girls Campaign by Her Excellency Madam Fatima Bio. The change I’ve experienced in my community is the drastic reduction of early teenage pregnancy, school drop out, and violence. There are no specific initiatives or programs in place to support the girls who have to drop out of school except for the free education program, which has encouraged many people to return to school.”

Young father, 25 Kailahun, Peri-Urban



Gaps in Community Initiatives

UNGEI Dalberg Design

Often community initiatives are implemented with no consideration of cultural norms, and are characterised by lack of sustainability in NGO and government efforts and a perceived imbalance in addressing the needs of both girls and boys.

Community initiatives face obstacles such as opposition to externally imposed cultural shifts, short-term NGO and government interventions, and a perceived imbalance in the emphasis on girls' empowerment. To address these challenges, community leaders advocate for a collaborative approach that respects traditions while advancing human rights and gender equality. Additionally, the intermittent nature of NGO projects hinders their long-term effectiveness, resulting in community skepticism. Finally, there is a need to recognize and address the educational challenges faced by adolescent boys dealing with early fatherhood, as the current focus on girls' empowerment creates a perception of inequity.



Lack of community involvement

Community leaders feel that the introduction of modern perspectives around human rights and gender roles should be done in a consultative manner that factors in the cultural beliefs and norms of the community instead of imposing these beliefs as law.

Imposing these beliefs as law is perceived to result in misunderstanding, resistance and backlash from community members. In some instances, community leaders feel that children are exploiting the definition of human rights and using it as an excuse to justify disobedience and disrespect to their parents. Domestic tasks traditionally given to children such as farming, cleaning, cooking and dishwashing are termed by some NGOs as child labour, which goes against the beliefs of parents and other elders in the community who feel children need to shoulder some of these responsibilities. Corporal punishment, such as caning, is used as a method of discipline in the communities but is seen as physical abuse under the human rights act. Children are now emboldened to report cases to the police or chief when they face physical punishment from their parents, which does not sit well with many parents. Community leaders suggest that they are engaged in the process of change through dialogue, awareness-raising and sensitization efforts. The leaders recognize the significance of culture and its role in shaping community and children's values, hence the need for a more collaborative approach that promotes understanding and respect for cultural traditions, while also addressing areas where these traditions may infringe upon human rights or gender equality.

“Laws are just imposed on us without sitting down with us to discuss what our traditions and culture are. We need to be involved in decision-making. Children don’t even know responsibilities and consequences. They just know ‘human rights’. These days, you can’t touch a child - they’ll just say crazy things about human rights. Some even defend the men who have impregnated them when we want to jail them.”

Town chief, Falaba, Rural

“When NGOs come to this community, they only go to the paramount chief to share ideas on sensitizing the community or implementation. They only talk to him, so the conversation is only between them but they do not involve me or the layman so the information only stays with him.”

Female community chief, Kambia, Peri-Urban



Lack of sustainability of NGO and government initiatives

Incorporating the importance of gender equality and social norm interventions, the inconsistent funding and project-based nature of NGO and government interventions in rural communities can hinder sustainable efforts to address long-term challenges faced by community members, including gender inequality and entrenched social norms. Seasonal approaches and limited funding often lead to interventions that may not effectively tackle the root causes of these issues, resulting in a lack of lasting change or stability. As a consequence, community members may view such interventions as temporary stop-gap measures that fail to provide enduring solutions. The short-term nature of these interventions can also restrict the capacity of community members, especially the most vulnerable, to fully engage with and benefit from initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and transforming social norms.

“Some parents really wanted to put their girls in the bondo society. But we try to convince parents. We engage parents in activities such as documentaries, film screening for them to understand the impact FGM has on their child.”

Young lady, Activist, Freetown, Urban

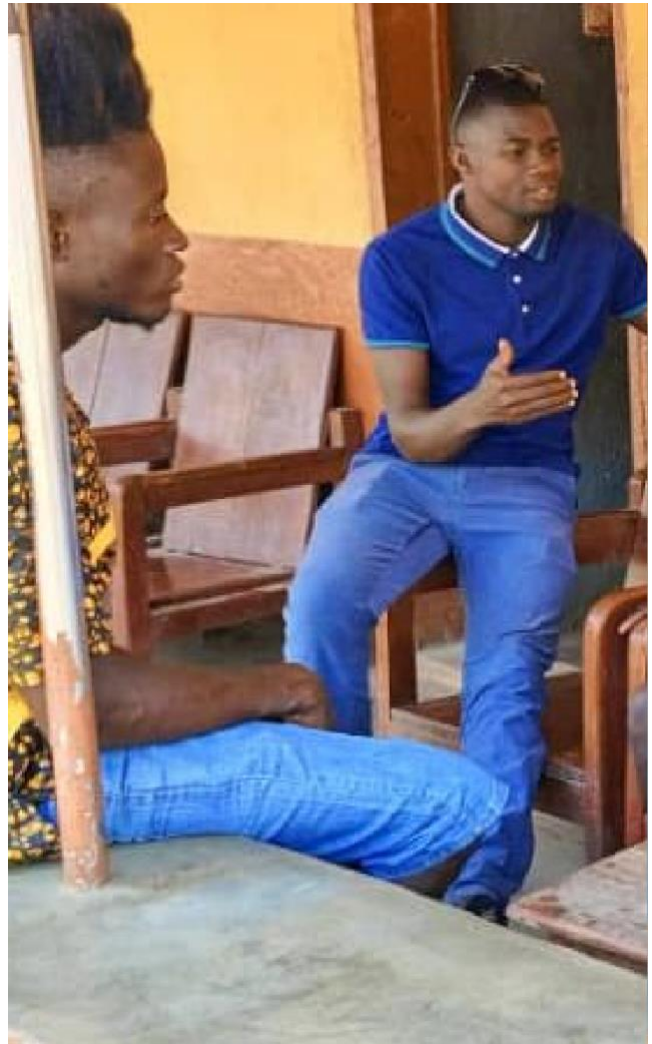
Gaps in community initiatives

Girls' empowerment initiatives

Some fathers who have dropped out of school to care for their partners and children feel that the return-to-school initiatives focus on the girl child without addressing the impact of early fatherhood on teenage boys. Others, however, support the initiatives as they feel girls face more difficulties in continuing and completing their education due to the burden of pregnancy and primary childcare. Community by-laws have become more stringent, with school boys being jailed for up to seven years for impregnating underage girls (who are in school). Parents of the two students can however negotiate the boy's release if the boy agrees to financially care for the pregnant girl and her child and support her eventual return to school. This results in many of the boys dropping out of school to find jobs and earn income to support their new family. Some boys feel that initiatives only advocate for the girls' return to school and leave out the teenage boys who also want to complete their education. They feel aggrieved as they have also made sacrifices to care for their family and want equal opportunities to advance their education.

“I had to drop out of school and start farming and business to take care of my wife and newborn. It was very discouraging. I felt disappointed to have to let go of my goals for an education. I want to go back to school, but it's hard. If NGOs come here and help 10 girls, they should help five boys also. Don't just help girls, we have parent boys too.”

Young father, Western Area Rural, Urban



During our interviews with male participants, a debate arose about the efforts around empowering girls and advocating for their return to school came up [see next page]. Some of the men argued that the boy child was being neglected in the wake of girls' return-to-school initiatives, while others felt that the girls were greatly disadvantaged and that efforts needed to continue empowering girls.

Man 1:

“The girls are protected, but we are sent to prison if they become pregnant. Why aren't we also given protection? When they get pregnant they don't even report the man who has money, they report the classmate boyfriend who has nothing, and they can't prove it wasn't you. Why?”

Male teacher, Koinadugu, Rural

Man 2:

“You are depriving the girl from coming to school if you impregnate them. A boy can impregnate five girls in a night, dress up and come to school as normal and no one will know. Girls will have to carry that pregnancy and abandon school.”

Male teacher, Koinadugu, Rural

“My wife was 17 when she got pregnant. She had to stop school for a while and I wanted to run away to be honest but her family took me to the police station. We decided to come together and get married, and the charges were dropped. It was a difficult decision for me to have to marry someone but eventually we decided to stay together for love.”

Young father, Western Area Rural, Urban

“I had relations once with this girl during my father's funeral, then one day she said she's carrying my child. I was forced to marry her and it had a lot of psychological impact on me. It's really hard because now you have these huge responsibilities and I feel like the girl planned it all because of my social and economic status.”

Young father, Western Area Rural, Urban



School-related Barriers

UNGEI Dalberg Design

Despite increased school attendance, barriers such as shortage of female and male qualified teachers, low and irregular remuneration of teachers, and reduced proximity of schools to villages prevent the effective delivery of quality education and expose girls to the risk of sexual harassment and exploitation.

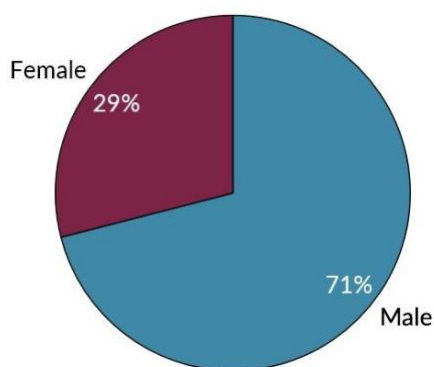
There is a widespread shortage of qualified teachers in schools, especially in rural areas, which results in high student-to-teacher ratios, teacher fatigue, and an overdependence on unqualified/untrained community teachers. In addition, teachers' pay is low and irregular, which demotivates them and forces them to seek alternative income sources such as private tutoring. This may create an unsafe environment, especially for girls. Long distances to schools from villages expose girls to the risk of sexual predation as they commute to school. Girls in rural areas also struggle to study and complete their assignments at home due to the lack of electricity, and they are often tasked with the additional responsibility of performing their domestic chores before school.

School-related barriers

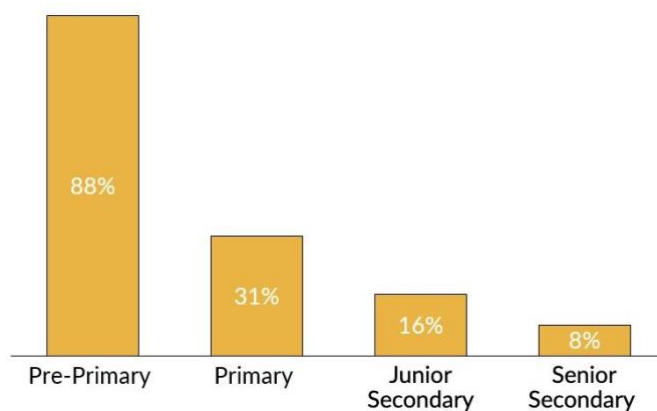
Shortage of qualified teachers

The delivery of quality education is hampered by the scarcity of trained and qualified teachers across regions, but more significantly in remote and rural locations, where unqualified community teachers outnumber government-employed teachers. Even with the addition of community teachers, the student to teacher ratio still remains high – a majority of teachers reported teaching classes of 60-80 students, taking on multiple subjects and having very little downtime, which leads to burnout. In addition, there is gender disparity in the teaching profession, with only a few female teachers available in the majority of the schools. This negatively affects girls' motivation and retention in school, as female teachers often acts as role models for girls and provide a perception of safety for both girls and parents. Teachers also reported that the number of teachers trained in the Sciences is almost negligible.

DISTRIBUTION OF TEACHERS BY GENDER



% SHARE OF FEMALE TEACHERS BY SCHOOL-LEVEL



Source: Annual School Census Report (2020)

Despite the increase in attendance of girls in schools, the female to male teacher ratio remains significantly low. The low number of female teachers is likely to present a challenge to girls in schools. According to the Annual School Census Report (2020), the distribution of teachers by gender stands at 29% for female teachers and 70% for male teachers.

“The government does not send help even if they promise free and good education. Even when you request them for more teachers to come to teach students in the school, they send us what we call “U U trainers” (unqualified and untrained teachers). That is not better education.”

Male teacher, Western Area Rural, Urban

“In my school, I only have one female teacher and 19 male teachers. As soon as she completed her course, I hired her, and she’s now being paid. It’s really encouraging many girls and parents in this area, and they now want their children to become like her.”

Secondary school principal, Falaba, Rural



Teacher remuneration

Teachers in government schools are poorly and irregularly remunerated, which not only demoralizes teachers but impacts the quality and frequency of education delivery, as some teachers seek alternative income-generating activities to supplement their income. Many teachers are taking on additional jobs and engaging in alternative business to supplement their teacher's salary, which they reported as low and often delayed. Teachers charge for extra private classes after school, teach in private schools, sell handouts to students or go into small businesses to accrue income to support their families. Many teachers in schools, especially in peri-urban and rural areas, are yet to be assigned a government voucher (tax code) that would allow them to earn a monthly salary, and therefore depend on stipends and contributions from community members. These community teachers form the bulk of the teaching staff in the schools we visited. These workarounds, in which teachers ask for money from students and engage in private classes, may create an unsafe environment that exposes girls to the risk of sexual exploitation.

Teachers we spoke to in Western Area Rural mentioned that quality education is dependent on the teacher's welfare, which means their needs must be met. They mentioned that teachers sometimes go without pay for two to three months at a time, which results in them abandoning their normal teaching schedule and taking on private tutoring in the afternoon to supplement their income. This practice is common even with school principals.

“Teachers should be paid well. If you look at countries that are more advanced than us, like Ghana, you don’t hear the teachers asking their students to bring some small money here and there.”

Young girl, 14, Falaba, Rural



“I don’t have enough light to study. I am busy selling groundnuts to make some money so I can buy some solar lamps and school lunch. My uncle helps me, but I can’t pay for all my school items and lunch. I’ve been selling now for the past two years.”

Young girl, 16, Falaba, Rural

Distance to schools

In rural areas the distance between schools and children’s homes poses a significant challenge to accessing education, particularly for girls, who are more vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment as they commute to school.

In rural areas, the considerable distance between schools and children’s homes presents a major obstacle to accessing education. This issue is particularly acute for girls, as they are more susceptible to sexual violence and harassment while travelling to and from school. The lack of adequate transportation options and the often treacherous routes students must navigate exacerbate these risks. These challenges not only deter families from sending their daughters to school, but also contribute to high dropout rates and absenteeism among girls who have already enrolled.

Lack of electricity

Lack of electricity and sufficient lighting options in rural areas is a significant impediment to studying, especially in the morning and evenings, as reported by students and teachers. This limits study time and contributes to lower academic performance. The absence of electricity and adequate lighting options in many communities poses a significant challenge to students’ ability to study effectively, particularly in the early morning and evening hours. Girls living in rural areas often have to perform their domestic chores before school in the morning and immediately after school before dark due to the poor lighting. As reported by both students and teachers, this limitation restricts the available time for studying, thereby negatively impacting academic performance.



Positive Deviants

UNGEI Dalberg Design

Girls in the communities show remarkable resilience in pursuing their education despite facing significant challenges, with some even defying ruling gender norms. Supportive community stakeholders question the status quo and actively work to create better opportunities for these young girls.

The girls we spoke to demonstrated exceptional resilience and tenacity in pursuing their education amid obstacles such as early pregnancy and economic hardships. The girls defy regressive gender norms that require them to marry early. Their unwavering determination to continue their education, despite these considerable challenges, is commendable. Additionally, we encountered community stakeholders who champion education initiatives, even though they themselves may not have had access to educational opportunities in their youth. These individuals are also actively speaking against social norms such as FGM and child marriage, sometimes going out of their way to rescue victims. We have used a pathway model to illustrate the unique pathways different profiles of girls and women take towards achieving improved livelihoods depending on the unique enablers and inhibitors they face.

Please note: The narratives featured in this section represent the genuine personal experiences of the young girls and women we interviewed. To protect their identities, we have created illustrations and used different names across each story. It is important to note that these stories are not to be mistaken for personas, as each of these women and girls has had their own distinct and individual lived experience.



Mariama, 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."

Mariama, 16, Western Area Rural, Urban

Background

Mariama is a 16-year-old mother of a one-year-old boy. She 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. Mariama felt disappointed in herself when she got pregnant and was worried about her future. She enjoyed a close relationship with her mother and was able to confide in her and tell her she was pregnant. Despite being disappointed in her, her parents forgave her and took care of her through the pregnancy and delivery, 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 that they could 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.

Mariama has experienced various challenges such as teasing after returning to school. In addition, she has to sit at the back of the class as all front positions were filled while she was out of school, which makes it difficult for her to hear some teachers. Despite these challenges, she is determined to complete her education and earn a bachelor's degree, which she feels will improve her access to formal employment. Living in an urban setting, Mariama is exposed to a range of female role models both 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.

Mariama says, "I decided to go back to school because I have a dream, and I am determined to succeed. It's not easy because people talk about you but you have to remember what your goals are. A lot of people and friends also encourage me and motivate me to push on."

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
- Supportive friends and allies in her class and school have motivated her to pursue completion of her education despite occasional teasing from peers
- Exposure to female role models who inspire her to complete her education and aspire to formal employment



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, and apologized. They later came to speak with my parents, who then let me back in, and eventually they agreed that I could go back to school instead.”

Fatima, 19, Kambia, Peri-urban

Background

Fatima, a 19-year-old woman, was originally from a rural area and eventually relocated to Kambia, a more peri-urban area. Fatima aspires to wear a suit and secure a job, much like the successful businesswomen she admires. She is now back in school, pursuing her education after experiencing an unplanned pregnancy four years ago when she was 15. While in a relationship with a man from her rural community, Fatima found herself pregnant and struggling to focus on school, ultimately leading to her dropping out when she was three months pregnant. Though teacher Mary offered encouragement and support, Fatima found it too challenging to continue her education at that time.

Devastated to learn of her pregnancy, her parents attempted to force Fatima into marriage with the man responsible. Determined not to marry, Fatima sought assistance from community elders, who intervened and spoke to her parents on her behalf. With heartfelt apologies and prayers for forgiveness, Fatima eventually found a path back to education.

Three years after leaving school, Fatima resumed her studies at the age of 18. With the support of her forgiving parents and community elders, she relocated from the rural areas to live with her uncle in Kambia, a peri-urban setting. Her uncle has been a tremendous source of support, providing Fatima with a pair of school uniforms and other necessary educational resources. In addition, her parents have taken on the responsibility of caring for her son, allowing Fatima to focus on her education.

Enablers

- Financial support from relatives such as her uncle to relocate from the rural area to live with them and return to school
- Community members' intervention to persuade her parents not to marry her off early but instead complete her education
- Fatima's determination and resilience to overcome challenges related to unplanned pregnancy and parental pressure to marry early
- Fatima's parents' willingness to forgive and support her journey back to education after the pregnancy
- Child care assistance from her parents who care of her son while she attends school allowing her to focus on her education



Mariama and **Fatima** actively challenge patriarchal structures and social norms that perpetuate girls' vulnerability in several ways. By defying forced marriages, they assert their right to make decisions about their personal lives and relationships. This resistance to cultural pressures demonstrates their courage and determination in taking control of their own lives and enhances their agency and decision-making power.

Advocating for their education is another crucial way these girls confront societal expectations. They understand the value of education in improving their lives and future prospects, and they refuse to let their circumstances dictate their opportunities. By returning to school after their pregnancies, they defy stereotypes that suggest young mothers are unable to continue their education or achieve their goals. In doing so, they send a powerful message that girls and young women have the right to pursue knowledge regardless of their backgrounds or personal challenges. They challenge the notion that women must conform to traditional gender roles or that their worth is solely determined by their roles as wives and mothers.

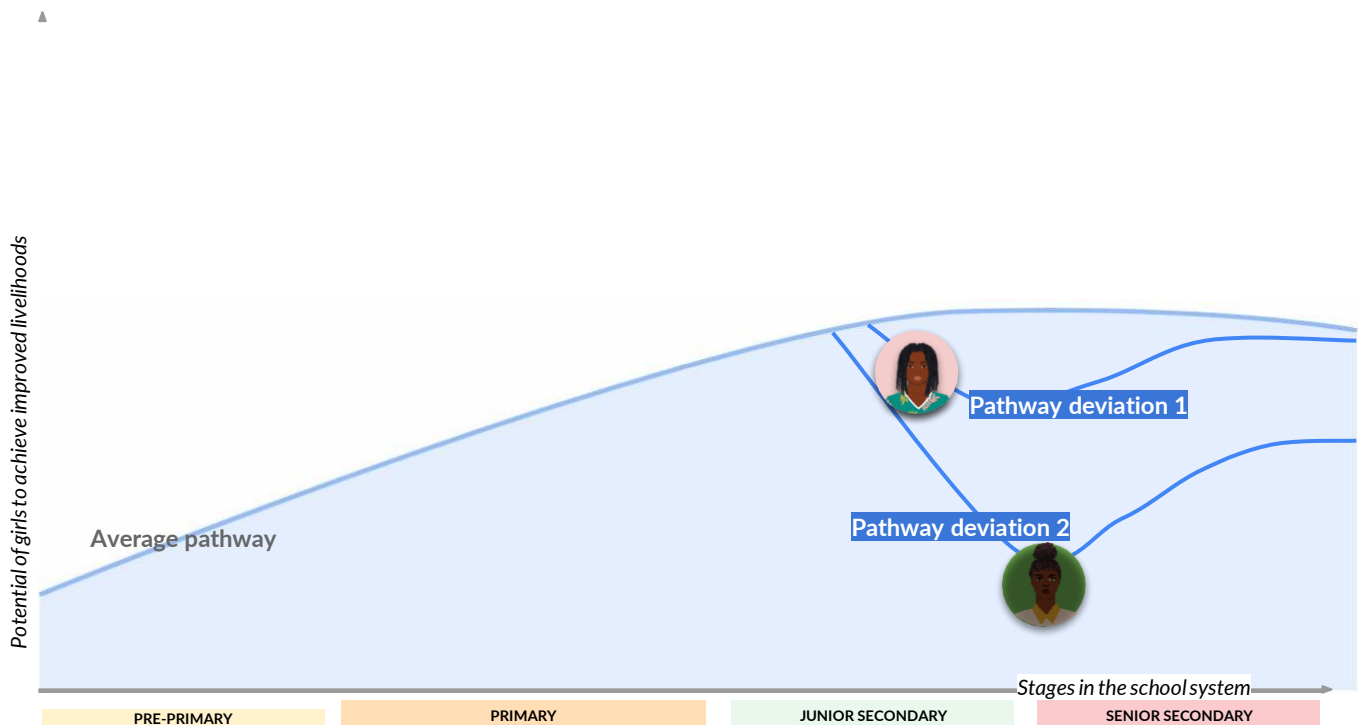
Their determination to continue their education and forge their own paths not only empowers them to break free from traditional constraints, but also serves as an inspiration to others in similar situations. By sharing their stories, they can encourage other young girls and young women to stand up against oppressive societal norms and to create their own paths to success, regardless of the challenges they may face.

Illustrative pathway for young girls

Some girls begin their educational journey at the primary school level with a strong determination to excel academically and achieve better economic outcomes for themselves and their families. However, as they progress through the schooling system, the number of girls remaining in education decreases in comparison to boys. This can be attributed to various external factors such as early pregnancy, loss of parental support, and gender-based violence. Girls who continue their education and successfully complete it often enjoy a supportive and positive environment beyond the school setting, which helps them overcome these challenges.

Path deviation 1: While in JSS3, a girl who falls pregnant discontinues her education due to pregnancy-related discomforts coupled with teasing from peers. She drops off for the period of her pregnancy and during the first months after her child's birth to nurse her baby. With the **right supportive environment from her parents to provide counselling, financial resources for her schooling, and childcare support**, she is immediately able to return to school soon after her child is born and rejoin her peers to complete her education.

Path deviation 2: Upon joining SS1, a girl becomes pregnant and is forced to drop out of school for three years out of shame and an inability to concentrate. Her parents are angry with her and try to force her to get married to the child's father as a solution to the lost educational opportunity. She seeks the help of **community leaders who intervene** on her behalf, and they eventually appease her parents, who reconsider the idea of early marriage as the only solution. She returns to school after some years with the **support of parents who care for her child and relatives who finance her education**, and rejoins the path to complete her education, albeit at a slower rate than her peers.





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 52, Falaba, Rural

Background

Isatu, a 52-year-old mammie queen in Falaba, a rural area, was denied the opportunity to receive an education during her childhood. While her father supported her pursuit of education, her mother objected due to concerns that schooling would erode their cultural heritage. 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, further deepening her regret for not having had the chance to attend school.

Despite her circumstances, Isatu is determined to learn and has enrolled in an NGO-offered adult literacy program, where she is acquiring basic literacy skills such as learning how to spell. Although she acknowledges the challenges of learning at her age, she remains committed to her educational goals. 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 has made a significant impact on her community. She is known for organizing and participating in the cleaning of health centres and schools, advocating for parents to enroll their children in school, and mediating disputes between married couples or parents and their children facing early marriage. Additionally, Isatu supports vulnerable girls by providing them with food and school materials when their parents are unable to do so. Isatu also plays an active role in parent-teacher meetings at various schools, where she encourages parents to advise and support their children, contribute funds for teacher remuneration, and maintain open communication with their children.

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 an 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 the 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, 38, Falaba, Rural

Background

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 forge 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 receive skills training.

Aminata says, "I have a club I founded where I bring together young girls and encourage them to do something for themselves. I also like to engage their mothers so that they reinforce this message at home."

Enablers

- Financial ability 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



Janeba, 52

Community chief, Kambia, Peri-Urban

“The adult literacy program is important because in this community you will see that when men are talking, women will not have a say because some of them do not know how to read and write. So when the men are meeting or having their forums, when a woman comes they will be told to go and cook because they have nothing to contribute.”

Janeba, 52, Falaba, Rural

Background

Janeba, a community chief, faced significant challenges during her youth. After losing her parents, she moved in with her older brother, who was also unable to provide for her. Consequently, Janeba dropped out of school and turned to petty trading for her livelihood. Through her work, she supported other women in the community, helping them understand business and improve their trading activities. Recognizing her dedication and involvement, the community elected her as their chief.

Upon assuming her role as chief, Janeba identified a need to empower women in her community through literacy. She initiated an adult literacy program exclusively for women, conducting classes under a mango tree to teach reading and writing skills. As a result of this program, many women have developed the ability to read text messages, understand the alphabet, write their names, and sign documents. Taking note of the success of Janeba's program, men in the community began to express interest in improving their literacy as well. Eventually, Janeba expanded her program to accommodate both genders, making it a mixed-gender adult literacy initiative.

In addition to her work with the adult literacy program, Janeba is an advocate for girls' education. She actively engages in sensitization efforts and disseminates information to encourage parents to enroll and keep their daughters in school beyond the primary level. Janeba's dedication to education stems from her own experiences, and she remains committed to fostering positive change in her community.

Enablers

- Janeba's own personal experience and difficult past serving as a lesson
- Community recognition and support providing her with the authority and influence needed to initiate and lead programs
- Janeba's ability to collaborate with different stakeholders in the community



Isatu, Aminata, and Janeba are remarkable women who challenge patriarchal structures and social norms that perpetuate girls' and women's vulnerability by pursuing education and literacy despite personal challenges, demonstrating that academic success is attainable for both genders. In their respective roles as mammie queen, teacher, and community chief, they actively advocate for girls' education and emphasize its importance, challenging traditional views that prioritize domestic responsibilities over educational pursuits for girls.

By implementing community initiatives such as adult literacy programs, informal social clubs, and mentoring activities, they empower girls and women to challenge gender norms and seek independence. These women serve as role models, inspiring others to believe in their own potential and break free from societal constraints. Furthermore, their support for vulnerable girls and involvement of mothers in their programs fosters a nurturing environment, enabling girls and women to challenge and overcome the obstacles posed by patriarchal systems.

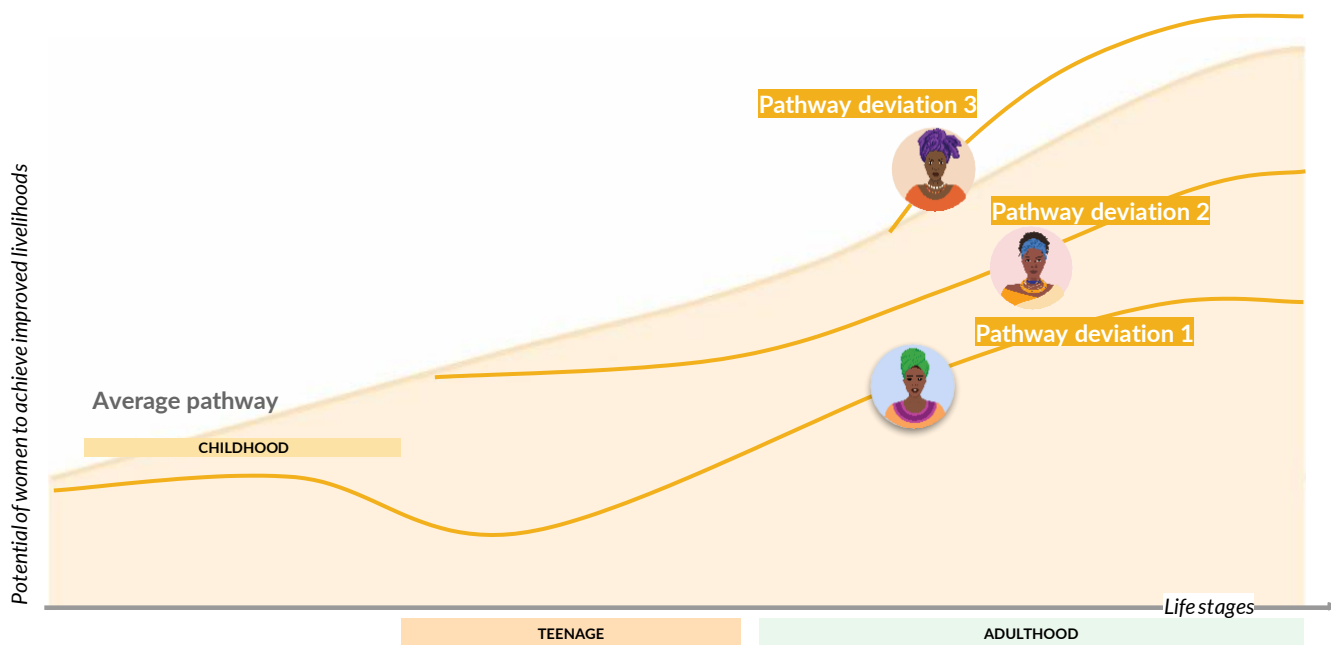
Illustrative pathway for older women

Some older women, particularly those residing in rural areas, have faced significant obstacles in accessing formal education opportunities. These barriers include early marriage, early pregnancy, FGM, regressive gender norms, and poverty. Despite these challenges, some women have been able to complete their education if they have access to financial resources and a supportive home environment. Even among those who have not completed their education, many still recognize the importance of educating girls and become advocates for girls' education at the household and community levels. These women have either witnessed or experienced first-hand the benefits of educating girls and are motivated to promoting its value.

Path deviation 1: As a young girl in a less modern society, she is denied formal education by her parents, who do not value education for the girl child. While her brothers and peers pursue education, she is married off as a teenager and starts a family. She is envious of her female peers, who now have office jobs and better living conditions. Over time, she plays a huge influence in her rural community and is soon crowned mammie queen. She uses this position of influence to promote the completion of girls' education through mentoring, sensitization and fundraising initiatives. Her role exposes her to opportunities such as adult literacy programs that provide basic reading and writing skills.

Path deviation 2: A girl is forced to drop out of school when her parent die and her relatives are unable to care for her. She begins petty trading to earn income and begins to teach other women basic business skills, which earns her recognition in the community. She is elected community chief, a role that gives her more exposure and work experience. She uses this opportunity to start adult education classes in her community and influence by-laws.

Path deviation 3: Growing up, a girl faces challenges with inadequate financial resources and unwanted advances from men that threaten to deter her education. She finds workarounds to earn extra income for her school needs and receives counsel from one of the few female teachers in her community. She's soon able to complete her education, and becomes a teacher. Having experienced and overcome challenges similar to what girls face today, she sets up clubs and one-on-one chats with girls and their parents to communicate the value of education and address social challenges. She is elected mammie queen due to the trust she has built within the community, which further expands her reach and advocacy work.





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 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 may contradict traditional societal beliefs and norms. Boys and men feel that the return-to-school initiatives unfairly favor pregnant girls and adolescent mothers and neglect adolescent fathers. Initiatives introduced in communities, such as adult literacy or vocational training, have not been

sustainable or locally relevant, 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 female 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.

The recommendations presented in this section emphasize the importance of addressing social norms that act as barriers to girls' education. It has been recognized that sociocultural barriers at the home and community levels play a critical role in preventing girls from attending school, even when the education system itself is accessible. By focusing on these deeply ingrained societal attitudes and practices, we can work towards dismantling the obstacles that hinder girls from receiving a quality education. This approach requires collaborative efforts from various stakeholders, including community leaders, caregivers, teachers, and organizations, to create an environment that promotes gender equality in and through education.

Recommendations

1. Develop contextualized community engagement initiatives to shift harmful gender norms and practices.

- **Community-led research:** partner with community researchers to develop in-depth understanding of local social norms, power dynamics and community influencers.
- **Community-led dialogue at the grassroots level:** Promote ongoing community-led dialogue that goes beyond surface-level sensitization and addresses deep-rooted beliefs and perceptions about gender roles and practices, using innovative, evidence-based facilitation approaches. Ensure a culture-sensitive approach with active listening and respect for community values.
- **Boys' and men's engagement with girl's empowerment:** Create platforms to engage boys and men in addressing restrictive social and harmful gender norms, promote positive masculinity and gender roles that support girl's empowerment and education.
- **Spread awareness on existing policies:** Use targeted messaging to increase awareness and acceptance of existing policies to advance gender equality in education, such as the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools
- **Partner with young people and influential community members:** Use the examples of positive deviants in this study as starting points to inspire young girls and community members to shift traditional gender norms and stimulate social change. Develop a network of community-based gender champions. Support young feminist activists to lead the change at community level.

2. Address harmful gender norms through teacher training and school curriculum.

- **Gender-Transformative Teaching:** Provide training on gender-transformative pedagogy, gender norms and positive masculinity for teachers. Equip teachers to critically examine their own gender biases as well as those perpetuated in teaching and learning materials, question harmful school cultures and support learners to question societal norms and develop a more nuanced understanding of gender roles and responsibilities.
- **Support pregnant learners:** 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. Such training can help dismantle misconceptions and social barriers surrounding pregnancy, promoting a culture of empathy and respect within the school community.
- **Address School-Related Gender-Based Violence:** Strengthen capacity of teachers to identify, respond to and prevent SRGBV including developing school codes of conduct that provide an unambiguous, zero tolerance stance on SRGBV and emphasizes promoting a positive and safe school environment.

3. Increase access to female role models through various channels to inspire young girls and help shift perceptions on gender roles.

- **Support women teachers and school principals:** promote the recruitment and support of women teachers and school principals, especially in rural areas, to increase the pool of positive role models in schools. Provide peer support systems for women teachers and school principals.
- **School talks:** Encourage schools to invite women alumnae for regular talks where they share their educational experience and career trajectory to inspire students. In addition, women working in the community as nurses, doctors and program managers may be invited to these sessions to encourage girls to defy traditional gender roles and pursue their ambitions.
- **Community meetings:** Facilitate community dialogues and meetings hosted by chiefs and mammie queens as avenues through which influential female figures working in the community and from other regions are invited to provide encouragement and advice to students and parents.
- **Local media:** Use local community radio shows and other media channels to showcase success stories from local or national female role models to encourage girls to pursue their ambitions.

4. Reform the Comprehensive Sexuality Education curriculum to address harmful gender norms and practices

- **Implement political commitments:** 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.
- **Teacher training:** equip teachers with the necessary skills to teach comprehensive sexuality education and feel comfortable facilitating discussions about sexuality and relationships with students. Develop networks of teachers and health workers for sharing and peer support and leverage the potential of digital applications for interaction with young learners.
- **Consent education:** Teach students of all genders about the importance of consent, emphasizing clear communication, respecting boundaries, and understanding the nuances of both giving and receiving consent in various contexts.
- **Pregnancy prevention:** Educate students about various pregnancy prevention methods, including contraception, emergency contraception, and the importance of family planning. This should also emphasize the shared responsibility of both partners in preventing unintended pregnancies.
- **Complementary community engagement:** 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. Ensure young people have access to youth-friendly Sexual and Reproductive Health services.

“There should be more forums to educate not just children, but the parents themselves, on sex. Sex in Africa is a taboo. How can you educate kids on early pregnancy if you can’t even pronounce the word sex as an adult?”

Female teacher, Western Area Rural, Urban

“I’ve never seen a government going to the grassroots for sensitization. They just talk on radio and TV. The people who need to hear these messages don’t have these things, and they don’t even have the time to watch anyway. The best thing to do is go out, sit with them and have dialogues. Use us, who are part of the community, to pass on these messages.”

Young father, 30, Western Area Rural, Urban

“We started the adult literacy classes under a mango tree with a few women. Some couldn’t use phones, now they can. They can sign documents, write their names, read, write and identify the alphabet.”

Female community chief, Kambia, Peri-urban

“Women in high positions are serving as role models for girls - look at the first lady. For a long time, men have been put in positions of power. It’s not only us men who must be chiefs or town heads. Women can do this as well and encourage the young girls.”

Town chief, Western Area Rural, Urban



Reflections for future community- based research

Our collaboration with community researchers shed light on learnings and actions to take forward in future research projects.

Allocate ample time and resources for community researchers capacity building, given that most may be new to conducting in-depth research and may benefit from additional time and guidance. In addition, conduct regular practice sessions with community researchers, during which they can take the lead in conducting interviews. This will provide valuable hands-on experience for the researchers and help them develop their skills in a supportive environment. In addition, allow for incidental research expenses that arise during fieldwork, separate from the researcher's remuneration.

Facilitate staff training in harm reduction and trauma-informed approaches to support the team to enter and engage communities with care and equip them with the skills to interact in the least harmful way possible.

Create a gender-diverse team of community researchers whenever feasible, as this fosters a constructive and inclusive atmosphere, particularly when broaching sensitive topics with participants of the opposite gender. For example, our team observed an instance in which a male community researcher demonstrated courage in posing inquiries that would have been difficult for female researchers to ask male participants.

Establish a participant incentive model that is contextually appropriate for the countries we work in and set up internal systems and processes to guarantee transparency in the incentives' disbursement process. Collaborate with research partners to develop the incentive packages to share with the participants. Avoid cash incentives because they can create an imbalance of power between the researcher and participant, potentially exploiting vulnerable individuals who may feel pressured to participate in the study solely for financial gain. Alternative non-monetary incentives or compensation should be used instead to encourage participation and respect the ethical principles of research.

Develop formal guidelines and contracts for engaging with community advisory members and community researchers to guarantee the respect of stakeholders' time and resources.

Facilitate aftercare sessions with staff and community researchers to support their mental and emotional well-being after research is conducted, especially in contexts where difficult challenges are experienced by the community. Research in sensitive topics, such as gender-based violence or trauma, can be emotionally taxing for both community researchers and the participants. Providing support and resources to mitigate any negative impacts of the research can help ensure the well-being of all involved. Aftercare sessions can include debriefs, counselling, referrals to relevant mental health professionals, and safe spaces for staff and community researchers to share their experiences in a supportive environment.

