

Award of prizes to deserving girls as UNICEF partners with Government in scaling up girls education - by Alison Parker



Freetown, Sierra Leone October 2008 – The jam packed hall of the Miatta Conference Centre in Freetown was buzzing with excitement as over 400 girls prepared for the “Award of Excellence” certificates. The event which served as a climax to the commemoration of the National Girls’ Education Week from 20 -26th October on the theme ‘*Educate a Girl for a Better Quality of Life*’, was hosted by the Ministry of Education, Youths and Sports in collaboration with UNICEF and other development partners.

The award specifically targeted girls in primary school who scored 85% and above in their class promotional examinations and those who scored 320 marks and above in the National Primary School

Examination (NPSE) for entry into secondary school.

In Sierra Leone, an estimated 64 per cent of primary school age children are currently enrolled in school. Attendance rates for boys and girls are almost equal at the primary education level, however, girls’ drop out rate is high and their attendance rate is only 19 per cent at secondary level. This year’s commemoration therefore serves as a clarion call for scaling up girls education, by not just providing access but also ensuring that girls stay in and complete school.

Delivering her key note address to a cross section of policy makers including the Deputy Minister of Social Welfare Gender and Children’s Affairs, teachers, parents and pupils the First Lady of Sierra Leone Madame Sia Nyama Koroma observed that though women are the pillars of national development, “In Sierra Leone 75% of our women folks are illiterate and only 10% of them can earn a regular income”. Madame Koroma called on teachers to improve their teaching methodology, making it more child-friendly and participatory and encourage girls to pursue viable career choices. The First Lady also reminded parents on the double dividend of ensuring that all children, both boys and girls attend school and complete their education.



Some of the factors responsible for the low rate of girls’ enrolment and school completion are: poverty, child marriage, teenage pregnancy and inability to re-enter school after giving birth, lack of infrastructure and teaching/learning materials, sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as cultural and religious biases which give preference to boys over girls. About 62 per cent of women of child bearing age in Sierra Leone are married before 18 and 27 per cent are married before 15 years of age. Lack of education impedes young mothers’ ability to provide care for their children. The rate of under-five mortality for children in Sierra Leone born to mothers without any education is 279 per 1,000 live births compared to 164 per 1,000 live births for those born to mothers with secondary education.



“The number of Sierra Leonean girls still out of school is unacceptable”, said Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF Representative, speaking on behalf of education development partners. “Without accelerated action to get more girls into school over the next few years”, the UNICEF Representative warned, “national action to reduce poverty and improve human condition risks to be seriously undermined”. Mr. Cappelaere concluded with a strong call for men (as parents, teachers and friends) to bear greater responsibility of ensuring that girls go to school and stay in school.

The high point of the event was the vote of thanks delivered by 11 year old Pyne Bailey who scored the highest grades in the National Primary Exams for girls. The event serves as a motivation for girls to work harder in school, while at the same time creates the opportunity for the involvement of all stakeholders and service providers to take responsibility and put more effort in promoting girls’ education.

Events marking the week also included march past, drama performance and radio discussion programmes in all 13 districts nationwide.

To ensure that girls go to and stay in schools, UNICEF works closely with the Government of Sierra Leone and development partners to ensure the full and speedy implementation of the Education Sector Plan. In particular, UNICEF supports the efforts of the Ministry of Education, Youths and Sports to provide access to primary education, create retention and foster completion and high performance of pupils, especially girls.

According to Dr Minkailu Bah, Minister of Education, Youths and Sports, “girls’ education is about providing quality education for girls, narrowing the gap between the enrollment of boys and girls in school and ensuring equal opportunities for all”.



At the local level, UNICEF is addressing the issues of gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy and child marriage through awareness raising and training of communities and stakeholders and supporting the development of by-laws at chiefdom level. At the national level, Government plays a predominant role in ensuring quality education for girls. This is evidenced by the provision of free primary school education for both boys and girls and provision of uniforms and teaching and learning materials for girls in secondary school, to name a few.