



SIERRA LEONE

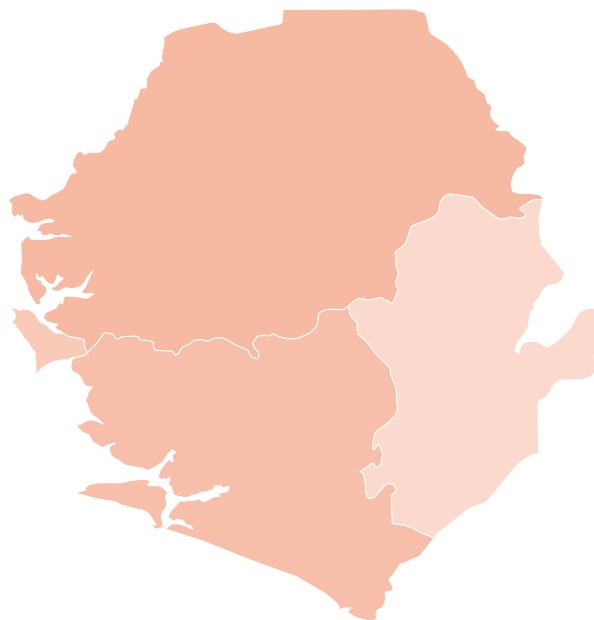
COUNTRY PROFILE



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SIERRA LEONE

Percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were first married or in union before age 18.



Source: Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017. **Note:** This map is stylized and not to scale. It does not reflect a position by UNFPA or UNICEF on the legal status of any country or the delimitation of any frontiers.

The country context

Sierra Leone is home to 800,000 child brides. Of these girls, 400,000 were married before age 15. The practice of child marriage has become slightly less common in the country over the past 25 years, with 30 per cent of all girls being married in childhood today compared with 37 per cent 25 years ago.¹ If this rate of progress continues, still 27 per cent of all girls in Sierra Leone will marry before they turn 18 in 2030 – the target year for the elimination of the practice as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Globally, over the past decade, the proportion of young women who were married as children decreased by 15 per cent, from nearly 1 in 4 to 1 in 5 girls becoming child brides. This means that, over the last 10 years, the marriages of some 25 million girls have been averted. But the global rate of progress also needs to be accelerated to enable the elimination of child marriage by 2030. In Sierra Leone specifically, even if the rate of progress witnessed over the past decade is doubled, 13 per cent of all girls will be child brides in 2030 and in 2050, the child marriage prevalence in the country will still be 4 per cent.²

Girls in Sierra Leone are not only at risk of child marriage. Among women aged 18–49, just 1.3 per cent are ‘only’ child brides, while 33.7 per cent of all women in this age group have been subjected to both child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). A further 56.8 per cent of the women have undergone FGM but

not child marriage, meaning that among women in this age group, only 8.3 per cent have not been subjected to either of these harmful practices.³

Despite progress in ending child marriage over the last decade, this achievement is now under threat due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the next decade, UNICEF estimates that up to 10 million additional girls will become child brides globally.⁴

Notwithstanding these challenges, the elimination of child marriage by 2030 remains a priority under SDG 5 on gender equality. This monumental task puts pressure on the global community to deliver on effective interventions and policies at scale, generating calls for coordinated efforts and renewed commitments from stakeholders, particularly governments, to invest more to accelerate an end to child marriage.



Key highlights



12,000

girls were reached with life-skills training, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), and information on gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health services.



Comprehensive sexuality education is now fully integrated into the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education's Basic Education Curriculum Framework.



5,276

adolescent boys were engaged in gender-transformative dialogue (including CSE) that promotes healthy relationships, positive masculinities and gender equality. Some 15,927 individuals in communities were engaged in group education or dialogue sessions on the consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality.



Over

3.6 MILLION

individuals were reached by mass media messaging on child marriage that also incorporated messaging on COVID-19; and 1,500 religious leaders engaged over 16,000 young people in intergenerational dialogues.



420 social workers were trained in case management and the child protection information management system within the context of the COVID-19 response.



The Communication and Advocacy Strategy for the National Strategy for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage was launched to harmonize communication, social mobilization and advocacy-related activities on adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in the country.

2020 Achievements



Overall,

3.9 MILLION

mobile phone users received messages on GBV and sexual and reproductive health, tailored to address harmful gender norms during the year.



In 2020, the programme was able to reach

12,000

girls through safe spaces, despite COVID-19.



An estimated

3.5 million

people were reached through the radio programmes by the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy

Providing intensive support to marginalized girls

Results from a Global Programme-commissioned review that assessed child marriage evaluations published from 2000 to 2019 corroborate findings on the positive effects of adolescent girl-focused interventions, such as support to schooling, life-skills, livelihood and employment opportunities, in delaying marriage.⁵ In Sierra Leone, the Global Programme (to the extent that physical distancing requirements allowed) supported key activities to promote girls' empowerment during the year, including life-skills programmes directly engaging adolescent girls, and also orientation of Male Advocacy Peer Educators (MAPE) in three target districts, who engage their local communities on the need to end child marriage and support reporting of violations and harmful practices at the community level.

In 2020, the programme was able to reach 12,000 girls through safe spaces, despite COVID-19. These adolescent girls accessed life-skills training and were provided with information on sexual and reproductive health and GBV prevention and response services. Most of the year, however, in-person training could not take place due to the pandemic. To adjust for this, life-skills radio programmes were developed and aired throughout the country, with lessons six days a week and at different times for different age groups. The use of radio, and mobile phones for sending out messages to adolescents and their parents (in the form of both SMS and audio-recorded messages) on GBV and sexual and reproductive health, tailored to address harmful gender norms, were key to ensure continued outreach to adolescent girls, boys and communities during the pandemic. Overall, 3.9 million mobile phone users received the messages during the year. In the last quarter of the year, safe spaces in Kambia and Moyamba districts were partially reopened.

To ensure that girls had access to remote learning during the pandemic, the programme supported the distribution of 2,000 radios to vulnerable adolescent girls to allow them to continue with schooling and life-skills training during the pandemic. Furthermore, an estimated 3.5 million people were reached through the radio programmes by the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy, which disseminated key messages on protecting adolescent girls from child marriage, early pregnancy and GBV.

Using complementary funds, UNFPA also provided 2,500 dignity kits to vulnerable women and adolescent girls, containing essential items such as sanitary products and torches, along with COVID-19 prevention items such as face masks.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

During the year, many of the originally planned interventions had to be reprogrammed and adapted to be responsive to the COVID-19 context. With schools closed from April 2020, all life-skills and in-person training was suspended, thus the programme had to resort to extensive use of radio and mobile phones to reach adolescent girls, boys and communities. The closure of schools increased the risk of child marriage for already vulnerable girls, while limiting the ability of UNFPA and UNICEF to directly respond to this risk. However, through the use of radio and mobile phones, education and life-skills programmes could still reach girls during the year.

The pandemic also slowed or halted the standardization of a harmonized approach and curriculum for operating adolescent girls' safe spaces, the development of minimum standards for safe spaces – including a package of interventions and standard operating procedures on regulations, the mapping of adolescent girls most at risk in intervention areas, and the establishment of additional safe spaces for adolescent girls and boys.

In 2021, the programme will focus on accelerating programme activities, especially girls' and boys' safe spaces. The programme will also work to improve linkages and integrated interventions between the safe spaces and the MAPE networks for a holistic approach to girls' empowerment.

Enhancing the family and community environment

The Global Programme continued to promote gender-equitable norms and attitudes through information and education communication and social and behaviour change interventions in 2020. The MAPE networks were supported in three target districts to promote gender-transformative attitudes among men and boys. The training of the peer educators focused on gendered drivers of child marriage, such as harmful gender norms, and placed emphasis on the important role of men and boys in addressing these issues. In addition to the men engaged through these networks, 5,276 adolescent boys participated in life-skills programmes on GBV and other harmful practices. The engagement of the MAPEs and boys in the programme has increased commitment by communities to support the aims of the programme. Training and monitoring

tools provided to MAPE members support community awareness and contribute to the safety and protection of adolescent girls. Shifts in attitudes around the practice can be seen, and according to a 2020 U-Report poll involving 4,000 individuals in the country, 75 per cent of respondents expressed that child marriage is an ineffective strategy for protection or for financial security.

In addition to the engagement of men and boys, the programme also developed a positive parenting programme during the year, to promote positive child-rearing practices. The programme is currently being piloted and will be rolled out at scale following its validation and finalization in early 2021.

The programme also engaged more than 1,500 religious leaders in 2020, to promote positive gender norms and deconstruct negative norms that put women and girls at risk. The engagement of religious leaders enabled outreach to nearly 16,000 young people through intergenerational dialogues. Working with pastors and imams, key messages on child marriage were further reviewed and contextualized so that they are relevant and appropriate in their respective religious contexts, to be further disseminated in their communities and congregations.

Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic slowed much of the programming during the year, and strategies for community engagement had to be adjusted. In addition, the pandemic halted the implementation of the planned symposium on child marriage in 2020.

Strengthening systems

In 2020, UNFPA and UNICEF continued to support various systems-strengthening activities through the Global Programme, together with complementary funds, to address vulnerabilities of adolescent girls. For example, fears associated with the potential of an increase in GBV during the pandemic served to trigger momentum to enhance services for survivors: 420 social workers from the Government and civil society organizations were trained on the child protection case management information management system within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key components of the training covered psychosocial support, including GBV risk mitigation and prevention.

The Global Programme supported the Rainbo Initiative to provide medical supplies and support operation of services to survivors of GBV in the Bo and Freetown Rainbo centres, offering free counselling and clinical care. Further, the establishment of one-stop centres



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providing free quality care to GBV survivors and ensuring an intersectoral case management and referral mechanism, were supported in six additional districts. National clinical guidelines for management of survivors of sexual violence and GBV were developed during the year (for 2020–2025). These clinical guidelines build on international best practices and have been endorsed by the Government. The clinical guidelines are being put into practice in Global Programme-supported Rainbo centres and government-run one-stop centres.

Furthermore, through complementary funds, the national toll-free 116 GBV hotline and eight one-stop centres were supported to increase the availability of quality services to survivors of GBV in Sierra Leone. In a related activity, through support by UNFPA and UNICEF, the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs formed a technical working group to oversee the expansion of PRIMERO (the child protection case management information management system) to include GBV (called GBVIMS+), through the development of terms of reference and consultations held with GBVIMS+ global experts.

During the year, CSE was fully integrated into the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education's Basic Education Curriculum Framework and accompanying syllabus for the following subject areas: social studies, religious and moral education, integrated sciences,

home economics and physical health education. In 2021, additional resources will be produced and teachers will be trained on the revised content.

To further promote quality of education for girls, technical support and advocacy influenced the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education to establish a broad-based task force on sexual and reproductive health and rights. A key mandate of the task force is to advise the Minister of Education on issues related to the inclusion of vulnerable groups in education, such as marginalized girls and children with disabilities. A key measure of the task force's success during the year was the lifting of the ban against pregnant girls attending school.

Challenges

Due to the closures of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, the planned school-related GBV action research, which aims to strengthen coordination mechanisms between the education and child protection sectors, could not be undertaken during the year.

Facilitating supportive laws and policies

An analysis of longitudinal data on child marriage policies published in 2020 by the World Policy Analysis Center found that the rate of child marriage reduced by an average of 6 per cent in countries that enforced

child marriage laws. The same study found that child marriage laws, combined with advocacy efforts surrounding their enactment, foster improvements in gender-equitable attitudes.⁶ In Sierra Leone, the Global Programme has continued to strengthen capacities at policy and decision-making levels to facilitate an enabling environment for adolescent girls' well-being. The Child Rights Act is currently being reviewed to identify bottlenecks that impair children from receiving child-friendly legal and welfare services in a conflicting legislative framework.

During 2020, UNFPA and UNICEF jointly supported the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy to conduct a midterm review of the implementation of the National Strategy for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage. The outcome of the review led to a deeper understanding of progress to date, good practices that could be replicated and challenges faced. The strategy aims at promoting community engagement by using existing community platforms and ensuring that every chiefdom and ward has a body responsible for reducing adolescent pregnancy and child marriage. This responsible body works closely with schools on efforts to prevent teenage pregnancy and forced marriages. The strategy also works to identify platforms, such as religious institutions, that can promote behaviour change activities for boys and men to support efforts to end child marriage. In March 2020, a communication and advocacy strategy was further developed and launched to guide the harmonization of all communication, social mobilization and advocacy-related activities in the country, focused on reducing adolescent pregnancy and child marriage.

During 2018–2020, the domestic budget allocation for child marriage ranged increased from 3.2 per cent in 2018 to 3.7 per cent in 2020. According to a recent *Save the Children* publication, in 2020, total government budget allocations relevant to child marriage equalled about US\$7.80 per Sierra Leonean child.⁷ In addition to the impact of COVID-19, there has been a significant increase in budget allocation due to an increase in school fee subsidies.

Challenges

In 2021, continued high-level advocacy will be prioritized for the enactment of a bill on the prohibition of child marriage in Sierra Leone.

Generating and applying data and evidence

During the year, the Global Programme initiated a formative study on social norms related to child marriage in Sierra Leone. The field survey, which targeted 950 respondents across four districts (Western Area Urban, Kambia, Kenema and Pujehun), was completed and preliminary data are now available, with the final findings expected to contribute to informing policies and improving programme design once ready.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

During the COVID-19 pandemic, planned evidence generation activities were deprioritized due to restrictions on movement, and to enable addressing of the immediate needs of the COVID-19 response.

In 2021, data collection activities will be prioritized to inform all programme activities, ensuring greater effectiveness and efficiency. Focus will be on COVID-19 prevention measures and programme adaptations will be closely monitored throughout the year.

Partnerships and working as one

In 2020, the Global Programme engaged 304 partners across regional and country offices – an increase from 249 partners in 2019. In Sierra Leone, the programme worked with 14 partners, of which 6 were government bodies, 7 civil society organizations and 1 the national partnership of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone. The engagement with the government bodies shows the importance of the multisectoral nature of the programme, as UNFPA and UNICEF engage with the sectors of health, education, social protection and gender. Of the civil society organizations, two are youth-led, aiming to ensure the participation of adolescents, and three are focusing on women's rights, aiming to ensure that the

programme empowers girls and women and that it is gender transformative.

The programme continues to prioritize coordination between UNFPA, UNICEF and implementing partners. Some of the joint activities in 2020 included support to the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy; development of messaging on GBV and sexual and reproductive health that was sent out through mobile phones; and integration of GBVIMS+ into the child protection information management system led by the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs.

Communicating the need to end child marriage

The communication activities by the programme in 2020 focused on GBV, teenage pregnancy and child protection in the context of COVID-19, as key messages and communication materials such as posters were developed by the organizations. The posters were distributed together with dignity kits to vulnerable adolescent girls. Radio jingles were also produced

highlighting the importance of girls going back to school and staying safe during the pandemic.

Two videos produced by the programme also highlighted the situation of girls who are survivors of child marriage, as part of the UNICEF #ENDViolence Against Children campaign in 2020.

Summary of output indicator performance (2020)

| Indicator | Target | Result |
|---|---------|-----------|
| Indicator 1111: Number of adolescent girls (aged 10–19) who actively participated in life-skills or comprehensive sexuality education interventions in programme areas | 25,000 | 12,000 |
| Indicator 1121: Number of girls (aged 10–19) supported by the programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school | 250 | 0 |
| Indicator 1211: Number of boys and men actively participating in group education/dialogues that address harmful masculinities and gender norms | 10,750 | 5,276 |
| Indicator 1221: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) who participated in group education/dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls and gender equality | 3,375 | 15,927 |
| Indicator 1222: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) reached by mass media (traditional and social media) messaging on child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality | 300,000 | 3,649,144 |
| Indicator 1223: Number of local actors (e.g., traditional, religious and community leaders) with meaningful participation in dialogues and consensus-building to end child marriage | 50 | 1,538 |
| Indicator 1231: Number of civil society organizations newly mobilized in support of challenging social norms and promoting gender equality by the Global Programme | N/A | N/A |
| Indicator 2121: Number of primary/secondary/non-formal schools in programme areas providing quality gender-friendly education that meets minimum standards | N/A | N/A |
| Indicator 2131: Number of service delivery points in programme areas providing quality adolescent-responsive services (health, child protection/gender-based violence) that meet minimum standards | N/A | N/A |
| Indicator 2211: Number of partnerships (both formal and informal) established to deliver adolescent-responsive social protection, poverty reduction and economic empowerment programmes and services | N/A | N/A |
| Indicator 3111: Number of policies or legal instruments addressing child marriage drafted, proposed or adopted at national and subnational levels with Global Programme support | 6 | 0 |
| Indicator 3211: Number of pieces of evidence and knowledge generated that focus on what works to end child marriage | 5 | 0 |
| Indicator 3212: Number of pieces of evidence and knowledge generated that apply a gender analysis | N/A | N/A |
| Indicator 3221: Number of South–South cooperation activities (conferences, expert visits, peer consultations, study tours, communities of practice) supported | N/A | N/A |

N/A, not applicable.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2017.
- 2 UNICEF analysis based on the Sierra Leone MICS 2017.
- 3 United Nations Children's Fund, *Understanding the Relationship Between Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation: A statistical overview of their co-occurrence and risk factors*, UNICEF, New York, February 2020, <<https://data.unicef.org/resources/understanding-the-relationship-between-child-marriage-and-fgm/>>, accessed 17 August 2021.
- 4 United Nations Children's Fund, *COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage*, UNICEF, New York, 2021, <<https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>>, accessed 17 August 2021.
- 5 Malhotra, A., and S. Elnakib, '20 Years of the Evidence Base on What Works to Prevent Child Marriage: A systematic review', *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 68, no. 5, 2021, pp. 847-862, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.11.017>>, accessed 17 August 2021.
- 6 Omidakhsh, N., and J. Heymann, 'Improved Child Marriage Laws and Its Association with Changing Attitudes and Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence: A comparative multi-national study', *Journal of Global Health*, vol. 10, no. 1, June 2020, art. 010707, <<https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.10.010707>>, accessed 17 August 2021.
- 7 Save the Children, *Ending Child Marriage in West Africa: Enhancing policy implementation and budgeting - Sierra Leone and Niger*, n.p., n.d., <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/18683/pdf/ending_child_marriage_in_lwest_africa_budget_and_policy_analysis_final.pdf>, accessed 17 August 2021.

UNFPA-UNICEF
GLOBAL PROGRAMME
TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

ACT NOW:
Accelerating gender equality
by eliminating child marriage
in a pandemic

2020
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