Child marriage context

There are 776,000 child brides in Sierra Leone, 253,600 of whom were married before the age of 15. Currently, the prevalence of child marriage (marriage before the age of 18) among girls stands at 30 per cent, compared to 51 per cent in 1994. However, the average annual rate of reduction would need to be 30.6 per cent, compared to the observed 4.2 per cent in the last decade to be able to eliminate the practice by 2030 as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).  

UNFPA and UNICEF Evaluation Offices conducted a joint assessment of Global Programme adaptations to the COVID-19 crisis in 2021. The COVID-19 assessment aimed to:

- Assess relevant contingency planning and implementation and alternative delivery and management arrangements for the Global Programme due to the COVID-19 pandemic, taking into account the views of vulnerable adolescent girls, their families, communities and key implementing partners.
- Make recommendations for the immediate to mid-term improvement of the Global Programme response to child marriage circumstances of their families and communities. Globally, up to 10 million more girls are estimated to become child brides by 2030 as a result of the pandemic.

Programming context

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected the everyday lives of girls for a second year in 2021, including their physical and mental health, education and the economic circumstances of their families and communities. Globally, up to 10 million more girls are estimated to become child brides by 2030 as a result of the pandemic.

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to COVID-19, identify ongoing programme changes and recommending any additional support required to implement those programme changes and shifting priorities.

- Make any recommendations required to adjust the Global Programme Phase II to the new context, including its theory of change and the targets established before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results of the assessment indicate that:

- It is critical to keep the focus and efforts in reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized adolescents, including those in remote areas.

- Lessons could be taken from experiences using multi-channel and two-way communication approaches, while also being attentive to the digital divide.

- Vulnerable adolescents must continue to have access to education (especially if provided remotely), health and social welfare services.

- It is key to overcome drivers of poverty by leveraging existing social protection schemes.

- Ensuring the use of evidence led programming is important and so too is advocating with governments to keep child marriage prevention and responses on national agendas while continuing to develop legal and operational frameworks to help accelerate the end of child marriage.

**TABLE. Conclusions and recommendations from the COVID-19 assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONCLUSION</th>
<th>RECOMMENDATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Programme advocacy and engagement efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic</td>
<td>Advocate with governments to continue developing legal and operational frameworks contributing to ending child marriage with a rights-based and multisectoral focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kept child marriage on national agendas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The COVID-19 crisis underscored the vulnerability of adolescent girls in</td>
<td>Reinforce efforts to reach the most vulnerable and marginalized adolescent girls, boys and their families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rural and remote areas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption of digital and mass media approaches demonstrated a high potential</td>
<td>Develop complementary multi-channel approaches to reach target populations, ensuring that they foster two-way communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for sustaining engagement of adolescent girls at scale, although the digital divide should be considered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19 restrictions limited adolescent girls’ access to health and</td>
<td>Continue technical support and explore the most effective approaches to ensure adolescent girls have access to essential services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social welfare services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The programme theory of change remains valid but poverty and economic</td>
<td>Further articulate the strategy to leverage social protection schemes such as cash transfers and income generation opportunities for adolescent girls and their families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drivers need to be stressed further in operational strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19 programme adjustments created a high demand on data and</td>
<td>Continue adjusting monitoring, data generation and analysis in order to reinforce evidence-based programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evidence for adopted approaches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These results will inform future adjustments and refinements to the programme. They will help continue delivering in changing contexts and accelerating the pace, during the Decade of Action, of eliminating child marriage to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

**Key highlights**

- Over 11,000 adolescent girls (aged 10-19) actively participated in life skills or comprehensive sexuality education in programme areas.

- Over 350,000 individuals (boys, girls, women and men) were reached by traditional or social media messaging on child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls and gender equality.

- Over 112,000 individuals (boys, girls, women and men) participated in group education and dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls and gender equality.

- 2,593 vulnerable girls (aged 10-19) were supported by the programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school.

- Over 4,800 boys and men participated in group education or dialogue sessions on harmful masculinities, gender equality and on addressing harmful gender norms.
Providing intensive support to marginalized girls

UNFPA and UNICEF supported the mapping of adolescent girls most at risk of child marriage in intervention areas. Working with implementing partners, 80 communities in hard-to-reach areas were mapped. In collaboration with grassroots groups and civil society organizations, and engaging different community}

Programme performance

TABLE. Summary of output indicator performance (2021)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>TARGET</th>
<th>RESULT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 1111</strong>: Number of adolescent girls (aged 10-19) who actively participated in life skills or comprehensive sexuality education interventions in programme areas</td>
<td>25,500</td>
<td>11,058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 1211</strong>: Number of girls (aged 10-19) supported by the programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>2,593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 1211</strong>: Number of boys and men actively participating in group education/dialogues that address harmful masculinities and gender norms</td>
<td>10,750</td>
<td>4,870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 1221</strong>: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) who participate in group education/dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls and gender equality</td>
<td>14,950</td>
<td>112,009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 1222</strong>: 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</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>352,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 1233</strong>: Number of local actors (e.g., traditional, religious and community leaders) with meaningful participation in dialogues and consensus-building to end child marriage</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 1231</strong>: Number of civil society organizations newly mobilized in support of challenging social norms and promoting gender equality by the Global Programme</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 2111</strong>: Number of primary/secondary/non-formal schools in programme areas providing quality gender-friendly education that meets minimum standards</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 2131</strong>: Number of service delivery points in programme areas providing quality adolescent-responsive services (health, child protection/ gender-based violence) that meet minimum standards</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 2211</strong>: Number of partnerships (both formal and informal) established to deliver adolescent-responsive social protection, poverty reduction, and economic empowerment programmes and services</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 3111</strong>: Number of policies or legal instruments addressing child marriage drafted, proposed or adopted at national and subnational level with Global Programme support</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 3211</strong>: Number of generated evidence and knowledge that focus on what works to end child marriage</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 3212</strong>: Number of generated evidence and knowledge that apply a gender analysis</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indicator 3221</strong>: Number of South-to-South cooperation (conferences, expert visits, peer consultations, study tours, communities of practice) supported</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NA = Not applicable (the country programme does not work on or report on this indicator)
stakeholders, a total of 67 safe spaces were then established within the 80 mapped communities.

Within the safe spaces, girls’ clubs were formed (with a maximum of 25 girls participating in each club). In addition, 20 clubs were established in school settings and 20 were established for out-of-school girls in the Koinadugu district, and 20 girls’ clubs were established in the Kambia and Pujehun districts. 87 mentors and ten volunteers were identified and approved by community stakeholders to work in each safe space. They were then trained as trainers on life skills, including subjects, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and family planning.

The mentors have delivered life skills training on a weekly basis in the safe spaces, helping the girls build their knowledge and skills, making informed choices about their lives, health and sexuality and promoting empowerment and resilience. Mentors serve as key drivers for the desired behaviour change for the most at-risk girls in their communities and can create a lasting impact in the strive to end child marriage. A total of 192 life skills sessions were held in schools in the Koinadugu district, reaching a total of 17,495 adolescents (11,058 girls and 6,437 boys).

A UNICEF survey among 2,305 adolescent girls that have actively participated in the adolescent safe spaces prior to 2021, showed a 22 per cent increase in the proportion of girls who expressed that they felt an increased sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to negotiate and delay marriage and felt comfortable speaking without fear, from 58 per cent before engaging in the safe spaces, to 80 per cent currently. Likewise, the proportion of girls aged 15-19 years who think that children should have the final say in deciding when to get married has increased from 41 per cent to 80 per cent, and the proportion of girls aged 15–19 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care has increased from 33 per cent to 75 per cent.

While the government provides free education for all primary, junior and senior high school children the Global Programme helped address some of the barriers to school enrolment and retention for marginalized adolescent girls at risk of child marriage, such as providing scholastic, hygiene and sanitary materials. UNFPA supported the provision of hygiene and sanitary packs at the safe spaces in the Pujehun and Kambia districts. A total of 1,755 girls were provided with packs including toothpaste and a toothbrush, bathing soap, face masks and sanitary pads to support hygiene management and COVID-19 protection. Among the 1,755 girls supported, 802 adolescent girls from vulnerable families were also provided with school bags, copy books, pens, pencils, erasers and rulers to remain in school. Meanwhile, UNICEF supported 838 vulnerable out-of-school girls to enrol in school and provided them with educational materials (uniforms, bags and footwear) in the Kono and Kambia districts. Parents, community leaders and adolescent girls expressed gratitude as the education support relieved them of the burden of providing (and possibly failing to provide) these materials, and hence reducing the girls’ risk of dropping out of school due to lack of basic educational materials. Since the distribution of educational materials, there have been no reported cases of school dropouts in any of the communities with established a safe space in the four targeted districts.

“These engagements have improved the ability of young people to avoid risky sexual behaviour and have also influenced their skills to interact effectively with their peers. It has also helped in building self-confidence of these adolescent girls and boys, building a certain comfort level that have helped them to develop greater self-confidence and broader interests, developed leadership skills focusing on the development of teamwork, having higher aspirations and greater motivation and, most importantly, allowing girls to be themselves in an environment where they feel safe to express themselves and engage in an open and safe exchange of ideas.”

Family Support Unit Officer (police) in charge of the Kondembaia community
CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

Business continuity capabilities of most of the implementing partners were disrupted by COVID-19, resulting in delays in meeting the requirements to renew or extend their formal partnership agreements with the Global Programme. This in effect delayed the implementation of the programme work plans and ultimately the ability of the programme to meet its annual target: less than half of the targeted adolescent girls were reached with life skills and comprehensive sexuality education during the year.

The often short-term nature of safe space programming and attempts to address a very complex issue have led to conversations on how to improve strategies while scaling up and sustaining efforts to create a more meaningful, as well measurable, impacts when it comes to life skills training in the country. The newly developed standardized approach including minimum standards, standard operating procedures and regulations is expected to get partners on the same page and allow the government to better track results nationwide.

Even though the government of Sierra Leone has eliminated school fees for children, there are still barriers to girls’ full participation and retention in schools. Additional support and comprehensive sexuality education are essential. Hence, the programme will support the government to implement comprehensive sexuality education in selected schools in 2022. Girls missing school sessions during their menstruation is also a challenge that needs to be further addressed. Although the Global Programme provides disposable sanitary pads in hygiene and sanitation packages, disposable pads are not sustainable in the long run, neither economically nor environmentally. Production and distribution of reusable pads could be a more sustainable input into the programme. Reusable pads would help relieve monthly costs for girls and help them stay in school and actively attend classes during their periods. However, changing the programme interventions to include the procurement and distribution of reusable pads will require additional funds.

Enhancing the family and community environment

In 2021, UNICEF completed a survey on social and behavioural drivers of child marriage whose findings show that:

- While a majority of respondents said they themselves think child marriage should be abolished, children under age 18 would prefer not to be married and that marriage of their own children was not practiced (possibly reflecting social desirability bias). The overarching perception is that many parents in the communities are still practicing child marriage and would ultimately opt to marry their children before the age of 18 given the opportunity.

- Perceptions and attitudes around parents making child marriage decisions seem to be shifting, but it seems like children are still subject to expectations of early marriage and judgement for promiscuity if they are not married by a particular age.

- While respondents acknowledged that parents would be respected if they chose not to marry their daughters before 18, they simultaneously felt that girls who remained unmarried after the age of 18 would suffer reputational harm and reduced marriage prospects. This indicates that social consequences for girls themselves could be a significant barrier to eliminating child marriage, even if its negative effects are well understood.

- Gender norms lag behind attitudinal shifts around child marriage, from attitudes about domestic violence to believing a father should have the final say in his children’s marriage decisions. Further work on the meta-norms that underlie the constructs of child marriage may be a way to continue to progress the elimination of this practice. Though the consequences of child marriage are well understood, the cultural context of Sierra Leone may continue to implicitly support the practice until there is progress on this aspect of the equation.
Based on results of the advanced analysis of the study, demographic factors (namely age and gender) and environmental factors (specifically income and education level) bear most heavily on decision-making around child marriage in Sierra Leone. In particular, there is a correlation between the desire to end child marriage and men, older people, higher income levels and higher education levels.

In an effort to engage boys and men through a gender-transformative approach, UNFPA supported the identification, training and engagement of 60 male advocacy peer educators (MAPES) and 40 out-of-school boy club members in the efforts to end child marriage. The boys further reached out to 16 communities in the Moyamba and Kambia districts, where they engaged 587 people, including 76 community stakeholders and 12 people living with disabilities. Their efforts led to enhanced knowledge of the consequences of child marriage and violence against girls and women. In all these engagements, female participation was very high and most of the engaged stakeholders pledged to be actively involved in reporting cases of child marriage and violence using the correct channels as well as ensuring that the cases are addressed.

The Global Programme focused on social change using key community advocates to address gender inequality as a root cause of child marriage through school debates, radio programmes and social media campaigns. Representatives from schools and communities were supported to participate in radio shows on ending child marriage and engage other community members in focus group discussions to help identify community actions to be taken on issues related to child marriage and other harmful practices. Students were, at the same time, engaged in debates on the topic of my body, my right with a total of 1,256 students and 14 teachers engaged in the awareness raising sessions.

Through nationwide engagements by religious leaders affiliated with the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone, girls and boys were given a platform to freely express their views, share experience and demand action from local authorities through intergenerational dialogues on ending child marriage and other forms of abuse, including barriers to higher education and protection services. Similarly, women and men were engaged through regular positive social and gender norms messages through religious engagements in their communities. This approach has allowed for a scale up of the programme’s reach, and it has been reported that the audience generally accepts the messages that child marriage is harmful and that children, especially girls, should remain in school.

**LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS**

Striving to do gender-transformative work, it is important to engage boys as well as girls to challenge existing gender norms and promote positive change. The programme has engaged boys to participate in the discussions around issues that adolescents, particularly girls, face in their communities and their rights to make their own choices regarding their sexual and reproductive health and to access appropriate services.

The male engagement component must be well incorporated with the girl-focused interventions. In 2022, the programme will strengthen coordination between interventions at the community level. There will also be sustained engagement of community decision makers to address harmful power relations and gender norms within safe spaces and communities to ensure improved agency for girls’ club members and their peers. By strengthening linkages between the safe spaces and quality sexual and reproductive health and protection services, girls will be empowered to enrol and remain in school and have increased economic potential.

**Strengthening systems**

UNFPA worked closely with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education to develop teaching materials for comprehensive sexuality education at the primary and junior secondary level. In order to ensure that the materials were culturally appropriate and in line with the International Technical Guidelines on Sexuality Education, a technical group of key stakeholders including key staff
from the ministry, the Teaching Service Commission and development partners was established.

UNFPA, in partnership with the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs, supported setting up four adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health hubs in four hard-to-reach communities in the Koinadugu district, which has been piloted for easy access to services for adolescent girls who participate in the safe space programme. The hubs are within walking distance of the safe spaces to enhance the referral pathways to services. The four hubs were refurbished with laptops, desks, examination couches, cabinets and chairs.

UNICEF provided technical assistance to the Family Support Unit to train 100 officers (74 male and 36 female) on the revised sexual and gender-based violence standard operating procedures and 50 court monitors and police prosecutors of the legal and justice department (25 male and 25 female) on crime data collection and management. In addition, support was provided towards the operation of a toll-free hotline for reporting and referral of gender-based violence cases.

As of September 2021, 140 cases were reported and recorded at the call centre and were referred to services, including at one-stop-centres. However, efforts must be made to strengthen case management, including information management and timely and effective responses. During the year, UNFPA supported the production of national clinical guidelines for the management of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. These guidelines will help improve the quality of clinical care provision to survivors of gender-based violence.

Facilitating supportive laws and policies

In 2021, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs and other stakeholders to make progress in implementing legal and policy reform. Revision of the Child Rights Act, which started in 2020, continued in 2021 and resulted in a comprehensive analysis report with recommendations from nationwide multi-stakeholder consultations, including UNFPA. Consultations culminated in a two-day national validation workshop which helped endorse key recommendations, such as promoting the independence of the National Commission for Children, ensuring explicit mention of female genital mutilation and child marriage as unlawful harmful practices and prohibition of corporal punishment in all settings.

UNFPA and UNICEF continued to support the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy (NSRTP) for the coordination of the implementation of the National Strategy for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage (2018-2022), including at subnational levels. The strategy was developed to guide the prioritization of all evidence-based interventions to address adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in the country. With six main pillars, the strategy sets out a national goal and the objectives to achieve this goal are priority strategies to achieve the stated objectives, guiding principles to inform implementation of the strategies, the coordination mechanisms, a monitoring and evaluation framework and a costing framework for 2018-2022. The NSRTP coordinates the work of six line ministries as well as civil society partners to implement the strategy.

With support from UNFPA, Women in Crisis Movement and Kids Advocacy Network Sierra Leone hosted the
National Girls’ Empowerment Forum in celebration of the International Day of the Girl in 2021. A total of 137 girls aged 14-25 years from across the 16 districts of Sierra Leone were mobilized to participate in the forum. Awareness and demand for action on issues affecting the welfare of adolescent girls were raised with senior professionals from government, ministry and private sectors. The three-day event for girls’ empowerment utilized a variety of different methodologies, such as a series of lectures and a talent exhibition to build the capacity of participants on key areas including advocacy and leadership. Professionals from around the country delivered impactful sessions including a keynote statement delivered by the Minister of Gender and Children’s Affairs who gave a commitment to end child marriage and protect girls from cyberbullying. As a result of the forum, girls developed advocacy plans to take back to their home districts for ending harmful practices and campaigning for the enactment of the Gender Bill into law.

CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

During the revision of the Child Rights Act, it became evident that a lack of timely direct engagement with the Law Reform Office and its absence from consultations hindered the full reflection of the recommendations produced in the first draft of the bill. With UNICEF support, a new set of consultations were carried out in 2021, where both the senior leadership from the ministry and the Law Reform Office were constantly present and provided significant inputs. The outcome proposed intended to increase the chances of producing and passing a draft which will better address the current gaps and reflect the recommendations from key stakeholders.

Supporting the youth-led network to engage adolescent girls in enhancing their voices and build their capacity to advocate and engage duty bearers, has brought about a positive change in the attitudes and perspectives of adolescent girls. In 2022, UNFPA will support participants from the National Girls’ Empowerment Forum to undertake advocacy programmes in their districts and to engage other adolescent girls who are outside the programme districts.

Generating and applying data and evidence

UNFPA and UNICEF supported the mapping of adolescent girls most at risk of child marriage in intervention areas. Through the exercise, a total of 17,960 underserved marginalized adolescent girls were identified in 80 communities between the two agencies. As for UNFPA, data collectors were trained on the specific assessment design and administration coupled with basic research concepts and ethics, as well as COVID-19 mitigation measures. Questionnaires were administered using tablets and extensive efforts were undertaken to ensure robust data quality using remote and on the spot supervision for real time data quality assurance, monitoring of coverage and error management. The mapping generated disaggregated data on girls, by age and disability and other factors related to risks of child marriage.

UNFPA and UNICEF have worked jointly on initiating the establishment of a gender-based violence information management system in Sierra Leone. With technical support from UNFPA and UNICEF at the global, regional and national level and government leadership from the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs, the information management system will be rolled out in 2022. UNFPA, UNICEF and the ministry are also collaborating with other partners, including the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation, the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police and Rainbow Initiative, among many others, invested in addressing gender-based violence on this work.

LESSONS LEARNED

Cross-sectoral collaboration with education, health, nutrition and social and behaviour change sections within UNICEF have been key in evidence-generation initiatives. The school-related gender-based violence action research initiative, the formative research on adolescent health and the survey on social and behavioural drivers of child marriage are three products of such cross-sectoral collaboration. Of note, major success can be seen in the enhancement of the inter-ministerial collaboration between relevant ministries and government actors.
end child marriage