Gender analysis of the situation of women and children in Sierra Leone
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Introduction

In Sierra Leone, women and girls continue to face discrimination in the political, economic, social, cultural and civic and justice domains. Only 12.9% of Parliamentarians are women, 857 out of 100,000 women die from causes related to childbirth (Demographic Health Survey 2008), over 66% of women have no-education (DHS 2008), 88% of women aged 15-49 have undergone Female Genital Cutting (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2010) and 23% of women aged 15-19 are in a married or in a union (MICS 2010); and 47% of girls reaching 18 have given birth or are pregnant (DHS 2008).

Despite these bleak figures, social processes continue to unfold, and to bring change. In just five years:

- The literacy rate among women aged 19-24 has increased by 23%
- The number of girls aged 15-19 married before the age of 15 has dropped 7%
- Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGC/M) has dropped nationally by 6%

This document is based on the original research for a Gender Analysis commissioned by UNICEF Sierra Leone, to inform its situation analysis and next wave of country programme planning in 2013-14. It was modified and expanded to respond to a demand for a broad overview of gender issues in Sierra Leone. It focuses primarily on social data, and is not intended to be an analysis of the barriers and bottlenecks faced by women and girls in accessing services, nor is it an analysis of programme approaches and interventions.

Section one gives an overview of gender issues and indicators in Sierra Leonean society, based primarily on data from UNICEF's 2005 and 2010 Multiple Cluster Indicator Surveys, its 2010 study on Teenage Pregnancy and the 2008 Demographic Health Survey.¹

Section two describes the key features of the legal and regulatory framework for gender equality.

Section three consists of primary qualitative research carried out by the consultant and two teams of researchers on community attitudes towards gender equality. Field research was carried out over five days in Koidu city, in Eastern Kono District, capturing an urban mining economy, as well as Mannah town, in Northern Koinadugu District, a rural agricultural town an hour’s drive North of Kabala. Findings also build upon prior research by the consultant.

Section four makes ten recommendations for advancing gender equality:

1. Empower adolescent girls and promote their rights
2. Address key gaps in service delivery that enhance the vulnerability of adolescent girls
3. Facilitate positive versions of masculinity for boys and men
4. Use sport and creative spaces to transform gender relations and empower girls and boys
5. Affirm commitment to total abandonment of FGM/C

¹ Note that MICS data became available after the qualitative research component, and therefore the data highlighted in the first part of the study did not lead the field research.
6. Make gender equity a pillar of national employment and training strategies
7. Promote legal empowerment and effective methods of legal awareness raising on the rights of girls and women
8. Reinvigorate the affirmative action campaign and link to a wider advocacy agenda
9. Promote cross-sector information sharing and wider solidarity on gender issues
10. Support the capacity of the Ministry to lead on gender equality
Overview of gender inequality in Sierra Leone

Nine years after Sierra Leone’s brutal war ended in 2002, its impact on the restructuring of social relations continues to be felt. In rejection of the pre-war social order that saw the functions of the state serving the interest of an elite minority, the war became known for its brutal and anarchic quality, attracting waves of alienated youths from remote border enclaves and radicalized youth from the university campuses and the streets of Freetown. The war was an attack on the power structures of society that had marginalized them, eventually turning in on itself. It targeted the heart of social order, defiling sacred spaces, destroying institutions of state, dismantling systems of hierarchy and disrespected social norms. Women and children were specifically targeted with the most extreme forms of sexual and gender violence.

The World Health Organization states that “in many countries that have suffered a violent conflict, the rate of interpersonal violence remains high, even after the cessation of violence.”\(^2\) With the dearth of accurate statistical data on gender based violence (GBV)\(^3\) in Sierra Leone, the applicability of this trend difficult to verify.\(^4\) However estimates of the level of GBV are nonetheless very high. The Rainbo Centres, a network of centres that provide services to survivors of rape and other forms of sexual assault, reportedly provided support to 1,408 clients in 2009, compared with 1,235 in the previous year, suggesting an increase in service access. In the same year, only 17 cases out of approximately 4,000 filed were successfully prosecuted in court.\(^5\)

The war and its historical antecedents are believed to have raised society’s tolerance of violence and distorted moral standards. For instance, grave crimes such as rape are often not taken seriously by communities that are keen to maintain harmonious family relationships, or courts that fail to process cases in a gender and age sensitive manner. In one recent example near Freetown, the case of a 17 year old boy who had raped a 6 year old girl for the third time was settled out of court.\(^6\) Normalization of certain forms of GBV is evident in numerous anecdotes. In one discussion group on gender with men, a male teacher reportedly compared rape to being hungry and stealing cassava from a farmer’s field.\(^7\)

Despite this gruesome legacy, social indicators suggest that attitudinal and behavioural change is beginning to happen. Seventy three per cent of women aged 15-49\(^8\) believe that a husband is

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\(^3\) Gender-based violence is a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women’s ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men. It constitutes any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. This violence is based on socially ascribed differences of gender. While women and girls of all ages make up the majority of the victims, men and boys are also both direct and indirect victims. (Summary derived from CEDAW, DEVAW and ECOSOC)
\(^4\) The consultant made 4 unsuccessful attempts to obtain data from the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police during the course of this research.
\(^5\) Rainbo Centre Program Update, The International Rescue Committee, January 2010
\(^6\) Interview, COOPI, July 2011
\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) UNICEF, Sierra Leone Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey, 2011
justified in hitting or beating his wife under some circumstances,\(^9\) down from 85% in 2005. The current proportion of girls aged 15-19 holding the same view is smaller, but significant, at 63%. In a similar analysis, the 2008 DHS survey found that 32.7% of girls do not agree with any possible reason for refusing sexual intercourse with a husband, compared with 30.9% of boys in the same age group. Youth is also a contributing factor to submissiveness, with younger groups generally feeling less justification in refusing sexual advances, compared with the oldest groups.

The institutionalised inequality of women and the resulting violence they face is evident in many aspects of society.

**Gender based violence**

Tolerance of violence inside intimate partnerships is captured by national perception data. The percentage of girls aged 15-19 who believe a husband is justified in beating a wife under some circumstances has dropped slightly from 67% in 2005, but remains significant, at 63%. Impunity is another sign of a society’s tolerance for violence. Teale (2009) citing unpublished statistics from the police Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police obtained in 2007, states that domestic violence is by far the most reported form of grievance. “Despite this, hardly any convictions are obtained, and those that are, are generally unsuccessful: in 2006 across the whole of Sierra Leone only 1 conviction was obtained for domestic violence.”\(^{10}\) Barriers to justice for victims of SGBV include pressure on victims by families to settle disputes through community-level mediation, distance and lack of transportation, fees for medical examinations and treatment, lack of provision for witness protection and legal aid, incorrect charges by police prosecutors leading to case dismissal. Rainbo Centres provide comprehensive support for victims of SGBV, but are limited to three in the country.\(^{11}\)

**Harmful traditional practices**

There has been a larger decrease in harmful traditional practices that target girls, though prevalence remains unacceptably high. In 2010, 8% of girls aged 15-19 were married before the age of 15,\(^{12}\) down from 15% in 2005. Nationally, the proportion of women aged 15-19 who are married or in a union is 23%, and is highest in the North.\(^{13}\)

Sierra Leone continues to have one of the highest prevalence rates for female genital cutting in West Africa, although in this area too, a considerable drop was registered, from 94% in 2005 to 88% in 2010.\(^{14}\) Of the women surveyed, a minority of 22% wish the practice to be discontinued compared to 72% who want it to be continued. Higher educational attainment and wealth quintiles are correlated with FGC abandonment.

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\(^9\) For example, going out without informing the husband, burning food and refusing sex, cited in Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2005


\(^{11}\) 16 Days of Activism Meeting, Bintumani, Chaired by MSWGCA, 25 November 2011.

\(^{12}\) Highest ranking districts: Pujehun, Bonthe, Kambia, Tonkolili

\(^{13}\) In descending order: Tonkolili (39.9%), Kambia (34.6%), Port Loko (34.6%), Koinadugu (32.1%) vs. Western Urban (9%), MICS 2010

\(^{14}\) Measured using membership of Secret Societies as a proxy, MICS 2005/2010
Education

At primary level, girls have now achieved parity with boys, exceeding the MDG 1:1 ratio target, at 1.04 on the Gender Parity Index (GPI).\(^{15}\) Disaggregation of these figures however highlights several regional disparities, the worst of which now affect boys.\(^{16}\) Overall, girls are performing better; in 2005, the percentage of male to female students sitting the final examination for primary level was 62% and 38% respectively, compared with 53% and 47% in 2010.\(^{17}\) The considerable increase in the literacy rate among women 19-24, from 25% (2005) to 48% (2010), reflects the impact of concerted efforts to get the first generation of girls to since the conflict to attend school.

However girls are less likely to complete their education. Fewer girls complete their primary education: 91.8% of girls entering primary at Class One complete their final Class Six year, compared to 93.3% of boys. There is a descending trend in female enrolment, with gender disparities against girls most visible at secondary level. According to the 2010 School Census data, girls make up 51% of those enrolled into pre-primary schools; 49% of primary level enrolment, 45% of junior secondary enrolment, and 38% of senior secondary enrolment. Transition to secondary school is only 24% among girls, and 26% among boys. GPI for secondary education is 0.83, as boys are more likely than girls to continue their formal education to this level. Stark regional disparities that fall below this national average include Kambia, Moyamba, Kailahun and Tonkolili (GPI: 0.51, 0.53, 0.67, 0.67 respectively).

Systemic factors disproportionately affect the protection, attendance and performance of girls in school as they reach adolescence and adulthood, such as sexual exploitation by teachers and the low number of female teachers and other role models, (National Study on School Related GBV in Sierra Leone, 2010).

A similar trend applies to the number of females in the management of education system, which decreases inversely with grade levels. Women make up 82% of pre-primary school teachers; 25% of primary school teachers; 14% of junior secondary school teachers and 8% of secondary school teachers. We also know from the census that 15 chiefdoms don't have a junior secondary school, and 102

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\(^{15}\) The GPI for primary school in Sierra Leone shows that there are now some districts (Bonthe: 1.26; Moyamba: 1.16) where the percentage of girls that attend primary school is much higher than boys, suggesting the need to examine reasons for lower male attendance in these areas.

\(^{16}\) Regional disparities in GPI at primary: Kambia for girls (0.91), and Bonthe, Moyamba and Pujehun for boys (1.26, 1.16 and 1.11 respectively).

\(^{17}\) 2010 Education Sector Review
chiefdoms don’t have a secondary school, making the commute to headquarter towns necessary for adolescents who want to continue their education.

Teenage pregnancy
Sierra Leone has very high rates of teenage pregnancy; 47% of girls reaching 18 have had a live birth or were pregnant (DHS 2008). According to MICS 2010, 7% of girls 15-19 have had a live birth before age 15, and girls in rural areas are twice as likely to get pregnant before reaching 15. Regional analysis reveals that Moyamba has the highest adolescent fertility rate (5.8 compared to the national average of 4.3), followed by Kono (5.5) and Kambia (5.5).

Teenage pregnancy is often the unwanted result of transactional coping strategies, leading to school dropout and abandonment by family, among other negative consequences. A nationwide study by UNICEF in 2010 on Teenage Pregnancy that carried out 800 randomly selected in-depth interviews in 9 provinces\(^{18}\) found that 83% of girls who were pregnant did not want to get pregnant at the time. The study also reveals that 50% of sexually active respondents had been forced into sexual intercourse, including 58% among sexually experienced children aged 12-14. Of the 231 sexually experienced girls that had been involved in a pregnancy, 55% were not in school or dropped out, compared to 31% who returned to school after pregnancy. Among those sexually experienced adolescent girls who dropped out of school, 71% reportedly did so due to pregnancy, while 27% of adolescent males dropped out due to impregnating a girl. In the Western Area, 58% of sexually active teenagers involved in a pregnancy are not living with either biological parent. The same study showed that the primary reason for sexually experienced adolescents to engage in sexual activities was related to meeting basic needs and materialistic wants, beyond peer pressure: including money, gifts, school support and food. Sixty one percent of sexually active males state they have more than one sexual partner, compared to 68% of sexually active females who state they are in monogamous relationships. Overall, 4 in 10 sexually active adolescents between ages 15-19 have two or more sexual partners.

HIV/AIDS
The prevalence of transactional sex and relationships, combined with women and girl's low power to negotiate sex and condom use, increases their vulnerability to HIV. In the qualitative study below, girls explained that condoms are unpopular among boys who often do not agree to use them because they prevent “body to body” contact. Men may accept free condoms and agree to use them, but often don’t use them when the time comes.

At 1.3%, Sierra Leone has a low but gendered HIV rate; HIV prevalence among women 15-49 is 1.7%, compared to 1.2% among men. Women are also infected by HIV at a younger age: prevalence is 1.5% for women aged 15-24 compared with 0.5% for men of the same cohort, partly reflecting the dynamic of girls who have relationships with older men with multiple partners. The rate is highest among women aged 30-34, and among widows. Knowledge of AIDS is higher among men (83%) than among women (69%); and is lowest (65%) among those who are married, or who are living with a man as if married (DHS 2008).

Sex with non-regular non marital partners, and sex without a condom are behaviours that increase the risk of HIV infection. For young women, sex with older men also increases this risk.

\(^{18}\)Western Urban, Western Rural, Urban Slums, Kailahun, Kono, Pujehun, Bo, Koinadugu, Bombali.
According to MICS 2010 data, 37% of young women 15-24 had sex with non-regular partners in the past 12 months (non-marital, non-cohabiting partners), this number is higher in urban areas (43%) than rural areas (33%). Condom usage among young women is low, especially given that much of the sex this group participates in is transactional. Among women 15-24 who had high risk intercourse had sex with a non-marital, non-cohabiting partner in past year, condom use dropped to 12% in 2010, down from 20% in 2005. Sex with men at least 10 years older in 2010 was 36% among 15-19 year olds and 35% among 20-24 year olds, though the figures are thought to be underestimated because many respondents did not know the age of their partner. This practice is higher in rural areas, and among lower educational and wealth levels.

Maternal mortality
Maternal mortality is one of the greatest threats facing women in Sierra Leone. According to 2008 data, 857 out of 100,000 women die from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Pregnancy-related deaths are known to be a leading cause of mortality both for girls between the ages of 15 and 19. In 2009, figures put the lifetime risk of a woman dying from complications of pregnancy and childbirth at 1 in 8.\(^{19}\) About 62% of births occurring in 2008-2010 were attended by skilled personnel.\(^{20}\) The direct causes of maternal death include obstructed labour, haemorrhage, anaemia, ruptured uterus, complications arising from unsafe abortions, eclampsia (caused by high blood pressure) and lack of safe blood transfusions. The risk of maternal death is heightened by delays 1) at the point of seeking medical care, due to lack of knowledge of danger signs, cost and lack of seriousness accorded by male decision-makers, 2) in the transport to health facilities, due to the cost of transport and poor road networks, and 3) at the health facility itself, by user fees, untrained staff, and lack of electricity, water and medical supplies.\(^{21}\) The introduction of the Free Healthcare Initiative in April 2010, removing user fees for pregnant and lactating women and children under 5, and to strengthen services and drug supply, is a critical intervention expected to reduce the maternal mortality rate.

Family planning
Appropriate family planning plays an important role in determining the health of women and children by preventing pregnancies that are too early or late, extending the period between births and limiting the number of children. Current use of contraception was reported by only 11% of women currently married or in union, and there is a 27% unmet need for contraception by women seeking to limit or space the number of births.\(^{22}\) Abortion is illegal in Sierra Leone except in cases where the mother’s life is in danger, however it is a concern among women.\(^{22}\) There is no reliable data on the frequency of abortion in Sierra Leone, nor on the percentage of maternal deaths that unsafe abortions cause. However using global estimates, it can be assumed that 13% of deaths are caused by abortion, of which 25% are among adolescents.\(^{23}\)

Land access and tenure
By custom, women outside the Western Area cannot own property or land, even though they are involved in the majority of time-consuming farm labour. The position of married women

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\(^{19}\) GOSL, November 2009, “Free healthcare services for pregnant and lactating women and young children in Sierra Leone”
\(^{20}\) MICS 2010
\(^{21}\) Amnesty International 2009, Out of Reach: The Cost of Maternal Care in Sierra Leone
\(^{22}\) GOSL, Sexual and Reproductive Health Behavioural Change Communication Strategy (2011), p.15
whose livelihoods and food security, tied to land access, is highly insecure, and easily threatened when marital breakdown deprives them of their only livelihood asset. Men also control most community level decision-making, such as decisions about sharing out harvests, despite women’s equal or disproportionate labour inputs. The law protecting women’s equal entitlement to inherit the property of her husband or common law does not apply in situations where the land is governed by customary tenure.

**Employment and income-earning**

Sixty four point nine percent of Sierra Leone's labour force is engaged in agriculture, contributing to 40% of the GDP. Across the labour force, women make up 33% of crop farming, compared to 30% of men. The gender division of labour in agriculture, combined with women's reproductive role, maximizes women's energy inputs and non-remunerated work, as is discussed further below.

Gender parity in non-agricultural employment is low. The MDG Report (2010) contrasts the proportion of women in non-agricultural employment, which in 2001 was at 7.5 percent but which had reached 23.2 percent in 2005. However the number of women in senior positions is very low: 13% of women compared with 87% of men. Eighty four percent of economically active women work in the informal sector, where they lack any form of social protection, and are vulnerable to exploitation.

**Political representation**

One of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was that political parties ensure at least 30% of their candidates for public elections were women. This was also the target for the achievement of the MDG on empowerment of women. Women face greater barriers entering into political life, including in accessing male dominated political networks and making allies, in financing election campaigns, and in commanding respect. They are more likely to experience gendered forms of political slander, such as having their morals questioned. Women’s ability to compete on an equitable basis with men and to effectively represent other women is also affected by their low level of literacy, their comparative lack of understanding of the political processes involved and how to influence them, their knowledge about their rights, and low levels of confidence.

Furthermore, women activists, supporters and leaders caught in the midst of flashpoints of political violence are prone to experiencing gendered forms of violence, as well as gendered consequences, including loss of livelihood, stigmatization and insecurity, where this happens.

We note in our research below that structural barriers that block women’s entry into mixed-sex politics start from a young age. Because of their exclusion from spaces where politics, business and important community affairs are discussed, and because of their need to labour almost continuously, girls and young women are less likely to experience the informal socialization into politics from the early age that boys are. The effects of this experience must be considered on

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24 African Development Bank, Sierra Leone Country Gender Profile, (2011), p.6-7
the willingness and capacity of women, later in life, to take on political roles that position them against powerful and outspoken men. For several years, civil society and development partners have been lobbying government and educating the public on the 30% target and the ultimate goal of having ‘50/50’ representation between men and women. However, parliamentary representation by women in 2011 stands at 12.9%. Female representation in Local Councils remains low as well. Local Council Ward Committees, envisage equal representation and engagement in planning and community mobilization by women and men. However, Ward Committees have not been very active in carrying out their role.

**Budget contribution for gender**

Gender is not consistently mainstreamed into government planning and budget allocations. The budget contribution to the Gender and Children’s Affairs departments of the Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children’s Affairs in 2012 is Le 469.1million, or 0.1% of non-salary, non-interest recurrent expenditures. More information is needed on gender related budget expenditure at the central and local levels.

National policy and legal framework for gender

Gender equality has long been on the development agenda in Sierra Leone. In 1988, Sierra Leone ratified CEDAW, the international human rights treaty protecting the rights of women. Gender is defined as a priority in the Agenda for Change, the country's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) for 2008-2012, including the government's commitment to institute a 30% quota for women in all elective and appointed positions, to review discriminatory laws, to domesticate Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and to establish an independent gender commission.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs contains a Gender Department, which is responsible for mainstreaming gender into other line ministries, through a network of gender focal points. At the regional level, the civil servants from Ministry of Social Welfare are there to support gender mainstreaming in districts, through monitoring, training and other functions. District Councils contain Social Welfare Committees, with members responsible for gender. However, challenges relating to fiscal decentralization and limited human resource capacity mean that gender equality is part of the content and practice of development planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation at local and regional levels to an extremely low extent.

The Ministry formulated a National Gender Strategic Plan 2010-2013, which outlines the following six priorities:

1. Capacity Building, Management and Oversight
2. Women's Participation in Governance
3. Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
4. Research, Documentation and Information and Communication Technology
5. Women's Empowerment
6. Gender Budgeting and Accountability

The Ministry has also put forth a National Action Plan on Security Council Resolutions 1325 on Women Peace and Security, and 1820 on Sexual Violence (SiLNAP) which sets out priority actions for 2010-2014.

Implementation of the above plans is thought to be constrained, though no review has yet taken place. However, part of the problem may relate to the lack of clarity in the relationship between the SiLNAP and the above NGSP, in terms of results and implementation.

The NGSP is based on two prior policies: the National Gender Mainstreaming Policy (2000) and the national Policy on the Advancement of Women (2000). However, Ministry officials agree, the policies are now outdated and in need of review, to fit the current context.
The Legal Framework

Sierra Leone is governed by three types of law, all of which impact gender matters: formal, customary and Muslim law. The legal framework protecting women is defined by the three Gender Acts, passed in 2007. It grants women protection under all three sets of laws. These new laws comprise the Domestic Violence Act, the Devolution of Estates Act and the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act.

Teale (2009) discusses how the three Gender Acts and the Child Rights Act together transform family law in Sierra Leone and that, if properly implemented, they have the potential to radically alter the position of women's and children's rights. Each law represents a fundamental break with discriminatory practice. “Prior to 2007 domestic violence could only be prosecuted under the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861 as wounding or grievous bodily harm, but domestic violence was not in itself a criminal offense.”29 Under customary law, domestic violence was acceptable as long as it was reasonable, and did not result in wounding. The new law covers violence within a domestic relationship, and provides protection for partners in formal and informal unions, as well as for other family members including children. It defines domestic violence very broadly to encompass physical or sexual abuse, economic abuse, emotional, verbal or psychological abuse, harassment and intimidation, and conduct that is harmful and endangers safety, health and wellbeing, or undermines a person's privacy, integrity or security, or detracts from a person's dignity.30 It allows for civil measures, including protection orders to oust violent partners from the home or to oblige maintenance payments for the partner and children, though in practice these are difficult to implement. It also requires free medical treatment and certificates for victims. The law has provided legal backing for the Family Support Units (FSU) of the police, established in 2001 to handle family matters.31

The Devolution of Estates Act 2007 deals with issues of inheritance, and “the distribution of property when a person dies intestate, or when unreasonable provisions in a will can be changed to provide for dependants.”32 Because property ownership is in large part passed on through inheritance, the law was anticipated after the main dominated structure of property ownership. Until this law was passed, under inherited British law, 100% of a woman’s estate could be inherited by her husband, but only 30% of a man's estate would go to his wife. Under Muslim law, women are not allowed to administer property. Customary law varies, but in prevailing practices, ownership of property reverts to a man's family. A widow is required to marry her brother-in-law in order to retain access to property (widow inheritance). The current law requires men and women to inherit equally from each other. Polygamous marriages provide that female partners inherit according to their time and contribution to the marriage. The law also applies to unmarried couples who have cohabited for at least 5 years.33 However, the Devolution of Estates Act (2007) applies only to “private individual” property, thereby offering little protection to rural women who work on family and chieftaincy land governed by customary practices.

30 The Domestic Violence Act 2007, s. 2.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
The Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2007 provides protection for women and girls, against early and forced marriage and against abandonment. It sets 18 as the legal age for marriage, requires consent of both parties and provides that applications for spousal and child maintenance be of a reasonable level. Furthermore it requires that marriages be registered, and that bridewealth given in marriage does not have to be returned upon divorce – a practice that has limited the ability of women to leave bad marriages. 34

The Child Rights Act of 2007, like the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, sets the minimum age for marriage at 18, introduces a requirement that both parties consent, and criminalizes forced marriage. A notable omission in its drafting is any provision proscribing female genital cutting. Strong opposition to the proposed clause was voiced during Parliamentary hearings on the Child Rights Bill. The controversial clause was dropped in the drafting stage in an effort to push through legislation. The Child Rights Act also represents a step towards making fathers responsible for their children, by removing outdated maximum limits on payments on maintenance cases. 35

Two other bills that should significantly enhance the legal protection of women are being discussed in Parliament. The Sexual Offences Bill is expected to finally define rape, issues of consent, and other sexual offences, including incest and sex trafficking offences.

Community perceptions obtained in this study that incidents of rape are decreasing are difficult to verify with recorded data. Rape is a hidden statistic because currently, acts of coerced sex are only considered rape if carried out on women over 18. Any sexual related crime to a girl under 18 is treated as an “Abuse of Young Girl,” falling under the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act (1965). The new law should eliminate this distinction. It should also provide more appropriate sentencing guidelines – though alarm has been raised that proposed measures would be detrimental for women. 36 Domestic Violence carries a low sentence (maximum 2 years), so that if injury results, offences are normally treated under the Offences Against the Person Act (1861), under which a perpetrator can be charged with wounding with intent, a sentence that carries 10-15 years imprisonment.

The Matrimonial Causes Bill will review all related laws for customary and civil marriage (Christian and Muslim). It is expected to deal with cases related to alimony and support for children, and to address certain harmful customary practices such as that whereby men are expected to marry women whose virginity they have taken because they have tampered with another’s property.

A third bill awaiting hearing in Parliament, that has the potential to radically alter the male-dominated configuration of power in Sierra Leone is the Gender Equality Bill. The bill, which proposes electoral measures 37 to guarantee 30% representation of women in all elected and appointed positions, was championed by President Ernest Bai Koroma on International Women’s Day in 2011, looks unlikely to be passed in Parliament before the elections because of the reluctance of male MPs to relinquish safe seats to female candidates.

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Interviews with UNDP and Open Society Justice Initiative
37 Reserved seats and safe seats for women (e.g. in party strongholds)
Discriminatory provisions in the law are still in existence, notably, a claw-back clause that prohibits discrimination, except in matters relating to ‘adoption, marriage, divorce, burial, devolution of property, on death or other interests of personal law’ and in situations where customary law applies.”  

In 2007 a Constitutional Review Commission recommended the abolition of discriminatory provisions. Changes to the Constitution require a referendum, but so far this has proved too politically sensitive for any government to address.  

The existence of this clause continues to provide a legal basis for discrimination against women, as in the case of Elizabeth Simbiwa Torto, a female aspirant to Paramount Chief in Kono. Her High Court appeal to overturn a decision by the chieftain council denying her inherited right to run because of her sex and custom, was rejected.

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), though ratified in 1988, has yet to be fully domesticated by act or resolution of Parliament into the laws of Sierra Leone. As such, its provisions cannot be invoked before any court, tribunal or administrative authority.

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38 Constitution of Sierra Leone 1991, section 27(4)(d) and (e).
Evolving gender norms and relationships

Old patterns of discrimination against girls and women persist alongside new aspirations of empowerment: for education, social respect and financial autonomy. Girls confront changing social expectations, relations and institutions. Adolescent girls struggle to navigate conflicting societal demands about feminine morality and the need to contribute to the household income in the context of educational demands, low income-earning ability and postponement of marriage. As a result, their livelihood and coping strategies normally involve transactional sex. In this context, both girls and women are less protected, and more exposed to new patterns of vulnerability such as sexual exploitation, early pregnancy, HIV, school dropout, intimate partner violence and abandonment of mothers and children.

Meanwhile, young men face a new socio-economic reality, but are judged by traditional version of masculinity, of the patriarch who represents the household, who makes all important decisions and who commands respect based on his ability to provide for dependants. This norm conflicts with the reality adolescent boys and men face of underemployment, the coping strategies of girls, and changing legal norms about women's rights. The resulting fears and insecurities men hold about themselves and their ability to maintain authority and credibility affect their attitudes and behaviours towards women, and children, their own health and the overall stability of society.

Tensions between men and women in the home, the community and larger society is at the heart of women and children's heightened vulnerability, with consequences for their health, education and personal development outcomes.

Increased vulnerability of girls

Conceptions of femininity have traditionally highlighted traits that serve and prepare women for their roles in married and reproductive life, such as stoicism, discipline, and subservience to men. Social and physical practices for enhancing femininity such as secret society initiation and female genital cutting reinforce these norms. Secret, female-only Bondo and Sande societies have served as an institutional rite of passage into womanhood, transmitting skills for efficient and harmonious household management. The rite of cutting has traditionally been performed to enhance aesthetic ideals of femininity, to curb sexuality and thus to counter perceived inherent tendencies towards promiscuity and infidelity. The beliefs and practices around femininity (and masculinity) that are reproduced within secret societies generate strong social cohesion and validation of identity for women and girls.

While these traits, practices and institutions continue to be central to the prevailing notion of femininity, new conceptions of femininity are being added as mindsets change under the effects of development, awareness raising processes, media influences and interpersonal encounters and knowledge exchange. Adolescent girls aspire to complete secondary and tertiary education, to do office jobs that generate comfortable income for themselves and their families, that afford
In several ways, the actual position of girls and women in society has improved. In some centres, the role of microcredit and business support for women has contributed to their relative economic empowerment. Increasingly, parents value education for their girls. In addition, attitudes and behaviours that girls and women nowadays consider to be acceptable also contribute to their autonomy. Courting and marriage practices have changed dramatically. Traditional arranged, early and polygamous marriages are decreasingly common. Girls value the ability to choose their own partners, without mediation, and to be able to initiate and end dissatisfactory intimate partner relationships at will. They are also increasingly wary of factors that can derail their dreams such as unwanted pregnancy, and to a lesser extent, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

Girls and young women are also arguably more vulnerable than they were in the past. The changing social environment makes them more susceptible to teenage pregnancy out of wedlock, and less likely to have access to necessary family and community support systems when male partners fail to provide for them and their children.

**Transactional sex and relationships as a dominant coping mechanism**

*Pass pass*, a krio term for going from person to person in a community, is one of many terms associated with transient relationships. Girls explained their alternative use of the term ‘*pass pass*’ to refer to their practice of cultivating multiple relationships with adolescent boys and men who can give them small amounts money to help meet their financial needs and wants. This is perceived to be a dominant coping and livelihood strategy among adolescent girls. It applies whether they are in or out of school, and whether or not they have another source of income. The strategy was articulated by a 14 year old girl in Class 5 in rural Koinadugu, who explained that she and other girls juggled multiple boyfriends by hiding new boyfriends from the main boyfriend. “*Wi di gal pikin nae dae able kip to wan man*” (We girls can’t keep to one man.)

The immediate interests of girls and young women seeking multiple relationships are monetary. When asked to choose between three types of men, most girls said they would favour an unattractive but wealthy man whom they assumed would fund their education, over other more attractive suitors who later abandon them pregnant, or ones who had less money and no potential to assist them financially. Although often made out to be exclusively materialistic, girls are also motivated by future concerns about the dependency, insecurity, hardship, abuse and neglect they associate with long term monogamous relationships.

Clearly this behaviour breaks with traditional social norms about marriageable femininity. Its risky nature is manifested in the way girls construct themselves towards each other and towards adults. Researchers encountered a mix of defensiveness, shamefulness, justification, denial, matter-of-factness and even bragging when this topic discussed in focus groups. One girl who was extremely animated about this topic was silent about it when she later joined a group of adult women discussing problems of fidelity and abandonment. The existence of
intergenerational tension between women and girls on this issue is an area for further, delicate, probing and strategizing.

In some circumstances girls have find themselves in situations where such quasi-games with boyfriends become more serious coping and hustling strategies. One of these situations happens when girls leave their families and rural villages to continue junior and senior secondary school in district headquarter towns, where they have little or no social capital.

Ironically, the same institutional change that is helping young women to benefit from expanded educational possibilities and future prospects is also making them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, early pregnancy, abandonment and a downward spiral of insecurity. The Government policy of free education for girls for primary and subsidies for junior secondary school (at diminishing transfers per term from Form 1-3) helped to make education accessible to lower income groups. However, adolescents from poorer families often have no means of meeting the expenses associated with living independently in a cash economy such as rent, food, books, uniforms, clothes, candles, assignment fees, and even tuition fees that are meant to be subsidized. For most girls (including ones with other means of income generation) coping to stay in school involves total or in-part reliance on one or more boyfriends who provide them with varying amounts of cash and food.

As a consequence of this coping strategy, adolescent girls attending JSS in Koidu agreed that there is "sex wey u enjoi" and "sex wey u fo bear" which is the sex to which they reluctantly consent that makes them feel bad. Although girls agreed that “likeness” for a boy or man often plays a role in starting a relationship, they also admitted to their low level of power in negotiating sex within these relationships, that is often based on financial dependency. As one girl put it “If you no mit, I no go gi u moni” (If you don't have sex, he won't give you money), "you just have to accept it if you need the money." In this position, girls have reduced power to negotiate the terms of sex. While some girls in urban Koidu had support from male partners to use popular contraceptive implants or the “captain band” protection against sexually transmitted diseases is not a high concern. Boyfriends prefer not to use condoms. Even where physical and financial access to sexual and reproductive health services was not a problem, some girls feared that going to a sexual health clinic would impeach their

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40 So called for its resemblance to the football captain's armband.
feminine morality. Girls in primary and junior secondary schools in Koidu agreed that one tangible change that could have a great positive impact on their lives would be to have the option of continuing secondary school closer to their villages. This would enable them to rely on familial support networks for a longer period of time.

The crisis of masculinity

Traditional notions of masculinity in Sierra Leone are of a “big” man who heads his large household and is the main breadwinner and provider of food. Respect is also accrued with age, marriage, children and the extent of familial or communal responsibility. Access to resources through income, or position, is therefore a key factor in fulfilling this prevailing masculine ideal. In a context of high unemployment and limited possibilities to escape poverty, most young men are frustrated with their inability to live up to the traditional version of masculinity. Many young men compensated with titles, or positions that lacked substance. A friendly greeting between young men often involves an address by military, business or leadership title such as ‘general’, ‘chairman’, ‘chief’ or ‘senior man’. Projecting success through clothes and the accumulation of status symbols and associations is another common tactic in social positioning known as ‘bluffing’.

Figure 3. Gym in Koidu, Kono.

Signs of the struggle by young men to achieve the dominant version of masculinity are also embedded in the cultural landscape, appearing as slogans on shared taxis and poda podas such
as “No job no respect,” and the aspirational sentiments of pop music lyrics, such as Kao Dinero’s “Anything you need girl, anything you wish girl. No worry, I go get am for you. Say bye to suffa, I go treat you proper,” and Nigerian artist P Square who sings about a girlfriend who eats, or “chops” his money, but adds “I don’t care, cause I get am plenty.”

“There is no true love”

The complex of male insecurity due to poverty is heightened by inability to achieve a stable association with a woman in life. Discussions reveal that men perceive jealousy of other boyfriends as one of the main sources of conflict within their relationships. Young men expressed their frustration that ‘there is no true love’, because of the transactional nature of relationships that characterize the poverty of their environment. They expressed frustration that women are mainly motivated to get into relationships for money, and by their inability to meet gendered expectations: ‘Wey u no get money, dey no want u’ (when you do not have money, they do not want you), and that once they did establish a relationship, that they could not cope “the demand past the supply!” An often quoted saying by Sierra Leonean women exemplifying their financial dependency on men is “One man nae dae fill up box!” (Meaning one man cannot fill a box, e.g. of clothes, shoes and accessories).

At the same time, adolescent and older “youths” express a degree of understanding and sympathy for girls and women in this position, who “are used to man dependence” for survival. Men in this situation are perhaps more understanding than prior generations of the need for both partners to move on, which is normally related to the limits of a man’s ability to provide: “We u no get for gi am, lef am. Le I go. Le I no strain.” (When you don’t have enough to give to her, leave her. Let her go [to another man]. Don’t let her strain.)

Gender equality in the home

Adolescent boys and male youths have mixed feelings about the affirmative action campaign for women's equal access to elected offices, and about the implications this holds for intra-household power struggles. On the one hand, they feel threatened that women's rights are encroaching on their own traditional rights and privileges. Furthermore, openly breaking social conventions on the strictly gendered division of labour can brand a man as “foolish,” damaging his credibility among other men. Gendered norms about the male head of the household remain strong, including his responsibility for all important decisions, such as when to ‘stop having children,’ and all matters of ‘external relations’.

Men fear that assisting in the home projects an image of defeat that can damage their credibility as men, particularly towards other men. Young men reflected that for older generations of men strict social norms were in place restricting men’s involvement in the domestic realm: “dey no for work for oman, na oman for work for dem.” (They didn’t work for women, women worked for them.)

On the other hand, the notion of “50/50” partnerships offers a much needed source of relief from their traditional role of sole financial provider. A 27 year old operator at Koidu Holdings
stated the benefits of partnership in a relationship come from helping each other in times of need “If I do not have, and you earn money tomorrow, then you provide for us.” This sentiment was echoed by young men in Mannah and Koidu. They acknowledged that in these “Millennium days” they may be, in some areas, among the first generation of men to be crossing over traditional barriers; for instance most young men in urban centres living without female partners or relations cook for themselves (“do boys cook”). Younger men also understand the similar situation of their peers and are less likely to judge each other for adapting to new realities.

Even more progressive men who can understand the need for greater gender equality in the home continue to harbour concerns about public face. The operator tempered his support for helping partners in the home by stating his understanding that new domestic arrangements not come to the attention of neighbours, “Le o no pull d secret na do.” (Let’s not expose the secret). Similarly male farmers in Mannah welcomed the idea of a wife or partner procuring the larger part of household finances, but they shared concerns about public image: “D community fo fil d man na d provida. Oman for go to the back. Man shoul d be expose.” (The community should feel the man is the provider. The woman should go to the back; the man should be exposed.)

Men also fear the loss respect and authority in relationships where they are not the main financial contributors. These anxieties are reflected in stories told by men about other men whose wives or partners who have the economic “upper hand” and who have abused this financially secured power to dominate and disrespect them. In one story, a woman providing for her husband stayed out late one night without telling him where she was going, considered an extreme act of discourtesy and defiance. When questioned she snapped that she doesn’t owe any explanation for her actions – ‘Noto mi dae fid u?!’ (Is it not I who feeds you?) Due to the differential livelihood strategies and options of men and women, men in urban areas can frequently find themselves in the position of having to borrow money from female partners. Young men expressed their frustration that judgmental societal attitudes are not adjusting to the economic hardship that most men face: “If d oman gi u one bloc, all man sabi! Dis attitude fo change.” (If the woman gives the man 100Le everyone knows! This attitude needs to change.)

**Box 1. The 50/50 Backlash**

According to married women, men have begun appropriating the “50/50” discourse on affirmative action for women to justify inequities; for instance, invoking the slogan when pressed to meet financial responsibilities, to say that if women want equal rights they must now pay for half of expenses. Women say their financial responsibility in the home has increased with the added expenses of child education, which they are frequently expected to meet out of their own income. Women farmers in Mannah town, Koinadugu, remarked on how practices have changed: “Fos tem, man use to fid d omen, now omen dem fid d man,” (In the past the man used to feed the women, now women feed the man.) In both the farming and city contexts, women described the injustice of bearing the brunt of day to day expenses related to clothing, feeding and educating children. While women, particularly girls and young women, value their right to “do anything a man can do,” there is also a fear among some that 50/50 is backfiring, because it is provides men with an argument for reducing their financial responsibilities in the home.
Rigid conceptions about gender roles have created burdensome constraints for young men. Younger and more educated generations of men see the benefits of more equal partnership within relationships, particularly in terms of the ability to help each other financially in times of need. As with women and girls, the generation gap between elderly, adult and adolescent men presents an opportunity for reflection on an evolving masculine ethos that befits the changing circumstances.

**Intimate partner violence**

With most men unable to live up to dominant notions of masculinity, other behavioural markers can take on greater significance, such as physical strength, protection of the family, sexual prowess, authority and dominance. Studies show domestic violence towards women can be an attempt by men to “acquire relevance through violent activities” (Martinez et al.). This observation would seem to have some relevance to this context. In the communities where this research took place, there was debate about the extent to which intimate partner violence of men against women is decreasing, or whether it continues virtually unabated. Due to awareness raising and fear of imprisonment, incidents of violence against women are perceived by both women and men to occur with less frequency. However violence continues to be a method of redressing power imbalances in male-female interactions. Women of all ages in Mannah and Koidu said that violence used to be a greater problem, and that nowadays men have ceased to beat their wives out of fear of going to the police. Young men in junior secondary school in Mannah agree that violence is an unacceptable and punishable response to conflict in a relationship. However, other girls and women felt that violence against women continues to happen. As one girl in rural Mannah remarked, “Violence against women has not changed. If you give a woman chop money and she doesn’t cook, he can beat her. If she doesn’t brook and supposed to, he can beat her.” Other conflicts that can lead to physical abuse are related to refusal of sex, jealousy over other partners, money, and the effects of alcohol.

**Case 1. A case of domestic violence and attempted murder dies before reaching court**

Ayesha, is a nurse and a mother of two children, and the victim of an attempted murder that took place in the west end of Freetown in May 2011. Witnesses present at the scene of the crime described hearing intermittent cries coming from a vehicle. Upon approaching it they defined the screams as cries for help, and they then saw a man choking his wife with his hands in the back seat of their car. In the ensuing moments they summoned the police and ensured the man did not flee, while the man retreated and proclaimed his innocence.

In the ensuing drama, police failed to take note of the bruised and unconscious woman in the back seat, distracted by the angry declarations of innocence of the perpetrator. One of the witnesses checked the woman’s pulse and alerted the police that she needed urgent medical attention. When the perpetrator refused to allow his car for this purpose, both witnesses assisted the officers to lift her body into the police vehicle, and collected her personal belongings for safekeeping. The perpetrator was left at his car and was not hand cuffed or seen to be taken to the police station, which was walking distance from the crime scene.
When Ayesha regained consciousness in the intensive care unit, she recognized the witness, which triggered a dramatic outpouring from the events. She wept while explaining the story: she and her husband had been returning from a social gathering when he decided to drop her off and go see his girlfriend. In the ensuing argument, she snatched his phone, and he proceeded to bite her arm and then strangle her as she moved progressively into the back seat. As he did so, she begged him to spare her for the sake of the children. He continued to hold her, repeating that she would die that day. She jumped back to the war, a time when she had been kidnapped and raped by the rebels. "I thought it would be different after the war, but it's not." Nurses at the facility heard her weeping and reprimanded her harshly. She had received no counseling, and the nurses, who had not been briefed on her situation, expressed no sympathy. The witness learned from Ayesha that her husband had entered the hospital that morning to intimidate her and discourage her from pursuing action. When questioned, the police officer on duty at the police station dismissed the issue as "a marital dispute." A paralegal who followed up the case confirmed that the event had not even been registered in the logbook.

In the following week, Ayesha made it clear that she feared her husband and she did not want to see him again. This was not the first time he had been violent towards her, or threatened to kill her. In the past she had initiated action, but had been encouraged by family members on both sides to settle out of court. Her husband had promised never to abuse her again. The witnesses, and a counselor accompanied Ayesha to the FSU where they registered police statements. In addition, the witness held photographs of her wounds taken hours after the attack to document the crime and assist her in taking future action. Free legal aid and counseling services were sourced, and a lawyer initiated the process leading to a restraining order and pressured the police to follow through on criminal proceedings.

The perpetrator continued to pursue his wife at the hospital, despite a request that he be forbidden access. It was here where Ayesha's counselor heard him shout "Who are the police to tell me I don't have the right to beat my wife!" Then suddenly Ayesha dropped the case. In a radical u-turn of her initial decision, she announced her decision to move back to her husband's home. These were the reasons she shared: 1) Her father advised her not to take any action for the time being, 2) She did not want to disrupt the lives of her children, who were in a good school and had friends in the area, 3) She would not be able to afford rental accommodation to the standard to which her children and she were accustomed on a single salary, 4) Her plans to return to school to complete a nursing degree that would increase her earnings, that her husband was due to fund would be derailed, 5) She was used to bearing difficult situations. When the witness and friend asked her if she really thought the situation would change, she responded that she could only pray that it would.

Her husband is a high profile man, who holds a position of distinction in his church and who holds a sought after job in that grants him access to additional benefits. His power as a man, and as an influential man in a relatively strong financial position enabled him to pay off police and even the victim’s own family, thus enabling him to act with impunity for a second time. Months after this incident the victim called the witness in tears again when the husband continued to beat and threaten her. Artwork created by her children that were shown to the witness depict their mother in tears.

*This case was not part of the data collection done for this situation analysis, however it was deemed highly relevant. The researcher witnessed and documented the case and obtained permission by the survivor to use it in this study on the condition that identity be protected.*
From polygamous to polyamorous relationships

Polygamy in Sierra Leone, whereby a man takes multiple wives, is increasingly unpopular among young women, who refuse to bear the emotional and financial hardship involved in sharing a man with other wives. It is also losing relevance to young men, who fear the strain of providing for numerous dependants now that the burden of financial care has increased to cover food, educational and caring costs.

At the same time, among adolescents and youth in particular, it is possible to observe a shift towards informal polyamorous relationships. Other factors driving this trend may include the combination of early sexual debut with delayed marriage, and transactional sex as a coping strategy for many girls and young women. Despite the similarities with polygyny for men, who must provide material benefits to each additional girlfriend, they stress the difference of keeping girlfriends, which is an informal and fluid arrangement. The study found that for men, factors motivating polyamorous relationships are more varied than those of women, including respect from peers, avoiding sexual intercourse with a wife who is nursing to avoid harming the infant (bamfa), coping with conflict, and managing transient relationships with girlfriends who require multiple partners to meet financial needs.

Among adolescent and adult mothers, this dynamic fuels household insecurity and leads to frequent abandonment by fathers. Elderly women in the study commented how marriage used to provide stability and predictability in their household arrangements. In the past, their husbands provided for them, but now their daughters are frequently abandoned. The rules are changing, but what they are, and their impact on the security of women, girls and boys in particular, warrants further enquiry.

Box 2. Abstinence between couples during lactation

Traditionally couples have avoided sex during the period when mothers are nursing infants. The avoidance of bamfa, as it is known, is based on the widely held belief that the sperm released during sexual intercourse with a nursing woman can contaminate breast milk and weaken and kill (bamfa) the child. This belief is held equally in the rural and urban contexts, and across age and sex groups. Mothers in Koidu added that another reason abstinence in the marriage practiced at this time is to encourage optimal spacing out of children, though these reasons are very much intertwined as most women do not know that conception is not possible during exclusive breastfeeding.

This is a period of time where it is totally accepted that the husband will seek out other sexual relationships. Strong norms exist against a woman’s prerogative to begrudge a man other sexual relationships during this time, and that a woman must "bear" this period with grace. At the same time, she expects that her husband should continue to support her emotionally and financially.

A young mother in Koidu reflected that perhaps it is necessary to “encourage” one’s man “small small” by occasionally having sex with him to prevent him from seeking love in the street. Young male farmers in Mannah village, Koinadugu, explained that having sex with a condom can
prevent contamination of breastmilk and thus, harm to the baby (banfo). They also explained that this can indirectly reduce conflict with their partners due to jealousy over other girlfriends.

The WHO advises women to exclusively breastfeed their children for the first six months, though many women continue to breastfeed for over a year. However, the impact of this period of abstinence on the health of the woman, and on the couple’s relationship, must be considered. On the surface, these dynamics appear to contribute to mistrust and jealousy within monogamous and polygamous relationships. However, it is not clear to what extent these dynamics are felt by people to contribute to other problems considered to be significant, including mistrust between the sexes, neglect of wives and children by men, culminating in abandonment. This behavioural pattern also has implications for sexual and reproductive health. It is likely to increase the risk of exposure of women to HIV and other STIs – both the lactating mother or wife, whose husband is seeking love elsewhere, and for the temporary girlfriend with whom he is less likely to discuss condom use and family planning.

These beliefs and dynamics have implications for strategies for promoting breastfeeding, as well as for preventing HIV/AIDS. There is a clear need not only to take account of false beliefs, but to address underlying gender roles and dynamics that increase women’s vulnerability.

**Limited opportunities for leisure by girls and women**

Leisure time for men in rural and urban settings is institutionalised. In farming communities, adolescent boys and fathers have leisure time after they return from the fields and wash, while they are waiting for the women to prepare the evening meal. During this time, and again after dinner, they are free to play football, go fishing, drink poyo, play drafts, or watch a film. In cities, it is only men who can be observed throughout the day at popular ataya bases, where they are able to sit, drink tea, and exchange information on the latest political business and sports news.

In contrast, women are expected to labour continuously throughout the day, fitting in time for socializing and relaxation around their daily productive activities. Women’s time for relaxation involve points in the day where they must interact with other women in their labour, such as water sources, markets, cooking and hairdressing spaces.

As boys age, their space for leisure and autonomy expands, while that of girls contracts. Girls also have more limited options than boys for playing sports, and have more difficulty
negotiating field space than boys. They are also more constrained in terms of their free time, due to the need to balance school and household responsibilities. A girl’s autonomous space for personal development contracts further when she becomes a mother, at which point she is expected to distinguish herself from children and maintain authority. Many girls accept this transition with reluctance. As one adolescent mother put it: “I want to play, but now that I have passed the [child] stage I have to do what [the adults] say.” The same applies to women’s involvement in development and political related youth activities, after pregnancy and childbirth, women tend to drop out of these activities and keep a lower public profile.

Particularly in rural communities, outside school and work, there are few opportunities for healthy, positive interaction of girls and boys. As a farmer in Mannah town, Koinadugu observed: “When you go to school, only the teacher you can learn from. But with a community centre, you learn from each other. [Our children can] know themselves better. Have discussions that affect them.”
*Case 3. A young woman challenges conventions*

Adama is a twenty-one-year-old from a poor family; one of eight children to her mother, her father’s second wife. She has successfully completed her penultimate year of secondary school, and her best subject is maths.

She is unusual because she is a female football star in the diamond mining District, and former captain of the Diamond Queens. She’s also known for riding a motorbike in a place where only young men can be seen riding them as taxis.

Adama takes care of her mother and siblings, as well as own educational and living expenses and those of her small sister. She manages these expenses through her activities and popularity. By playing football and riding a rented bike, she has attracted scholarships, and support from individual male and female sponsors who “like her style”. “Through football, I survive,” that is - through the social connections she establishes and navigates, rather than through any type of salary.

Her dream is to be a professional footballer. She lives out her strong views about the campaign for women’s equality “Le wo fett 50/50. Wetin u, man, dae do, oman dae do am,” (Let us fight for the 50/50. What you, man, can do, women do it!) she proclaims at our meeting. Adama got her first motorbike through an INGO. She used it to finance her own bike rental and to kick off form Kono Young Women Bike Riders’ Association. She is now encouraging other young women to ride bikes.

In other ways Adama is not so different from other girls. At the time of meeting her she explained that she keeps a far distance from her boyfriend due to “small confusion”. He is an older man, who has helped finance her education since Junior Secondary School. She explains that they came together initially because of “likeness”, but also due to the financial stress she faced because she had no one to assist her. He watched her play ball and liked her, and has been nice to her. It was after they started seeing each other, she says, that she discovered he was polygamous and had 9 children. When she discovered, she broke off the relationship. But in time she took him back; as her elder, she felt she needed to comply with his wishes. This time, however, she says she has now broken up for the last time.

When asked, Adama says she has always been strict about practicing safe sex; but at the same time, she says fears getting tested at the sexual health clinic where she may be recognized and then stigmatized. She does not think about marriage because she wants to play football, she wants her team to be supported, and she wants to help her family out of poverty. She wants women’s sports to receive the level of public same attention and planning as male sports. She wants more competitions; she wants to be stretched.

Six months after this interview, Adama, now voted the Chairlady of the Kono Bike Rider’s Association, continues to forge a path for other young women.
Constrained income generation of women

Women's lower access to income generating possibilities reinforces their reliance on men and their deference to male authority. Research by IFAD and FAO (Nenova et.al: 2011) on gender in agriculture in the East highlights the additional constraints faced by women in terms of their food security and productivity.

Women headed households frequently lack the cash to hire labour for activities requiring intense physical strength normally provided by men such as brushing and clearing vegetation and forest. Labour on the farm is defined by the agricultural calendar and seasonality, as well as by gender norms. Whereas men may do the bulk of strength-requiring activities, women's labour inputs tend to be more time consuming and continuous throughout the agricultural calendar, such as weeding and watering crops. Women also exert more energy in the fields due to the burden of childcare. They frequently carry infants and heavy toddlers on their backs while bending over in the fields to avoid leaving them alone at home, or to roam around the ground where they may be harmed by poisonous snakes, (Nenova: 2011).

In agriculture, women's income generation is also affected by the crops they manage and control. Men and women manage separate farms that differ in the value and frequency of harvest. While men prioritize higher value crops, women's crops prioritize “fast money” that helps the meet most expenses relating to the welfare of the household, and which provide vital hunger breakers throughout the year, (Nenova et.al: 2011). The same study found that a significant motivation for women only farmer based organisations is to stop problems of male dominance and abuse of powers that are experienced in mixed sex groups, as well as for the benefits of mutual support for members experiencing difficulties. Compared to mixed sex FBOs, women's FBOs however face the inequity of hiring male labour, normally at extortionate cost, (Nenova et.al: 2011).

Women's ultimate responsibility for the care of the household, even during periods of cash and food shortage, constrains their choice of livelihood activities in all livelihood sectors. We observed the same pattern in alluvial mining in Koidu. Diamond mining, a high risk and high return livelihood lottery, is a job done by young men, many of whom migrate to these areas in the promise of escaping poverty. In comparison, small-scale gold mining, an arduous low-risk but steady income earner, is dominated by women.

Washing sand is arduous work, done under the open sky and hot sun. Women, and also girls and boys stand in stagnant and flowing pools of water while they work, frequently bent over to sift and wash the sand. As with petty trading, gold mining enables women to underwrite the high risk economic activities of husbands and provides a safety net during periods of prolonged male unemployment. It garners a reliable income of 30-60,000Le per day, though it will never exceed 100,000Le. Gold, they explained was “chop” (food) and diamond is “gentry” (rich).
One woman explained how her husband had spent more than 4 years looking for diamonds and not being able to provide for the family, while she upheld them: “Yesterday I buy one bag rice but no money for plassas. Mi man no able ep.” Despite their hope that their men would find success, they were skeptical about diamond wealth: “Diamond no dae kam again” (the diamonds are gone).

Diamond mining is a business where profits increase as value is added up the chain, but women have not managed to break through to higher levels in the industry requiring capital investments. Although a few women have begun to hold licenses, none hold the position of supporters (financiers), mainly due to lack of capital. Women tend to survive on the periphery of the economy, engaged predominantly in petty trade, small business, commercial sex work and in aspects of the mining industry. Men’s skilled labour tends to tap into larger segments of the market, such as mechanic repair work, carpentry and tailoring, compared to soap making and gara tie dying. Okada driving is another relatively high earner that is done almost exclusively by young men.

No comprehensive study of the gendered dimensions of the labour market has been done to take stock of the opportunities and challenges women face for entering into non traditional livelihoods, to guide vocational training and education options, as well as employment policy and strategy. Equally important for ascertaining women’s general level of empowerment is a more detailed understanding of women’s access to credit and level of debt burden, and the relative success of various strategies that are being implemented for enhancing the financial productivity of individual and groups of women.
Ten strategies for advancing gender equality

1. Empower adolescent girls and promote their rights

Girls are more empowered and yet more vulnerable now than in the past. Changing societal expectations and deteriorating social institutions that used to offer a measure of protection have little to replace them. This leaves girls more exposed to SEA, STIs including HIV, early pregnancy, school dropout, abandonment by male partners and family, and societal marginalization. Particular categories of girls, such as those who commute to district headquarter towns for secondary who lack financial resources and protective social networks, and girls who are out of school, are at higher risk.

Furthermore, adolescent girls can sometimes get lost amidst categories. Neither "women" nor "youth" (in the often male-centred usage of the term), their perspectives and voices, too often, are mediated by others. There is a need to explicitly target adolescent girls, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable categories.

Girls need to know their rights and to determine their own needs, priorities and strategies for empowerment. Government and civil society actors should build solidarity and mutual support among adolescent girls by facilitating the creation of safe and non-judgmental environments for them to share their concerns, seek information, challenge convention and develop positive notions of femininity that suit their values, aspirations and current realities. Development partners at all levels should engage them as agents, not victims, by connecting them to resources for their own empowerment and self-directed action.

As girls reach adolescence, their "safe spaces become increasingly confined, restrictive, enclosed and domestic." There are few spaces, particularly in rural communities, where it is socially acceptable for adolescent girls to reflect upon and question expectations, beliefs and practices, to share common concerns, to affirm their own values, and to take action, without fear of being judged by peers or elders of either sex. Participatory learning and action processes that facilitate these possibilities for girls should be encouraged across sectors.

Local Government actors, and development partners need to go beyond sex-disaggregation in community consultations, and to recognize the specific concerns, needs and pathways to empowerment adolescent girls have which differ from those of younger girls and adult women. It is important for them to own and drive the use of their own spaces, whether for discussion and information seeking, for productive activities, or for leisure, sport and creative pursuits. Whether in or out of school, groups of adolescent girls need to be linked to resources to take action, to enable them to meet their basic needs.

The GOSL should take the lead in supporting adolescent girls, in collaboration with its development partners, by enabling girls to facilitate a vision of development that promotes and protects their rights, and to ensure that that vision is implemented and enforced. Based on this vision, it needs to provide the appropriate guidance to Local Councils and NGOs, and to restrict projects, bye-laws and approaches that violate their rights (e.g. a national regulation banning

pregnant girls from sitting West African Examination Council exams\(^{42}\); a programme awarding scholarships to virgins that polices the sexuality and morality of girls\(^{43}\). All levels of government and traditional authority should also promote the participation of adolescent girls as full and legitimate partners in development planning, monitoring and evaluation. Girls should also not have to compete with predominantly male "youth" in these processes to have their voices heard.

Established women’s rights organizations need to ensure meaningful inclusion of younger and less socially connected adolescent girls in their agenda setting activities, to reflect their concerns, priorities and preferred strategies. NGOs working on general "youth" activities should strive to disaggregate adolescent girls in all aspects of their projects.

2. Address key gaps in service delivery that enhance the vulnerability of adolescent girls

Key gaps in the provision of social services increase the marginalization and vulnerability of girls: including junior and senior secondary education, adolescent friendly sexual reproductive health services, comprehensive response services for gender based violence, including psycho social counselling. An analysis of bottlenecks in key services is needed to identify targeted actions for more gender and age responsive service delivery across sectors.

Nonetheless, a number of key gaps emerged in this study: The Government of Sierra Leone should remove financial barriers to girl’s attendance, completion and performance at secondary level while mitigating risks to their protection. School fees and related expenses should be dropped for both girls and boys. In addition to parity, there is a need to address the systemic harassment of girls, including pregnant teenagers, that happens in and around schools. As part of the enforcement of the Teacher’s Code of Conduct, girls and boys need access to safe and supportive reporting mechanisms and whistle blower protection for cases of sexual exploitation and abuse in schools, as well as opportunities to share experiences with their peers and to reflect on and challenge gender norms that pressure girls into sex for grades. Giving girls and boys direct access to improved counseling services services, help lines, radio programmes to help realize others like them in the country experience the same problems. The 2010 National Education Policy stipulates that every school should have a Guidance Counselor to provide guidance to young people on social issues, and in terms of subject choices and career guidance. Most schools allocate a teacher for this role, but these are often overstretched with other activities.

The protection needs of adolescents, especially girls, living away from home in order to attend school also require a response strategy that girls themselves inform. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology should demonstrate efforts to address gender disparities at all levels of the education system, by setting targets and actively recruiting and promoting female teachers and administrators, particularly in rural areas.


In terms of the response capacity for SGBV, there is a need for a better overview of who is doing what, and a coordinated strategy to improve the system. Bottlenecks to protection include fees for medical examinations and treatment for SGBV victims, lack of police capacity to levy correct charges on cases and to respond appropriately to SGBV cases, shortage of SGBV treatment facilities and adequately trained staff at peripheral health units, lack of witness protection, lack of resources to cover costs associated with attending court appearances for victims, case backlogs and unregulated court fees.  

Under the Government’s Free Health Care policy, treatment is extended nationwide to lactating and pregnant mothers and children under five. However, survivors of SGBV continue to face demoralizing barriers in seeking medical examination and treatment, including distance, illegal charges, untrained and uncaring health care workers. The Ministry of Health and Sanitation’s Reproductive, Newborn and Child Health Strategy (2011-2015) is a strong foundation upon which to build a gender equitable response. It includes strategies to:

- deliver comprehensive adolescent/youth friendly sexual reproductive health services,
- reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies among women of reproductive age,
- reduce the number of unsafe abortions including treatment of cases of complication from unsafe abortion,
- reduce the maternal and neonatal mortality and morbidity due to pregnancy and child birth,
- improve the nutritional status of women and children, including adolescents,
- reduce the incidence and prevalence of STIs including HIV and AIDS,
- eliminate all forms of SGBV and other practices that are harmful,
- reduce the number of infectious and non-infectious conditions of the reproductive health system.

It also includes a cross-cutting strategy to ensure gender responsive programming and implementation, including an emphasis on the role of men in parenthood. Gender activists should support and monitor the full implementation of the RNCH Programme.

3. Cultivate positive versions of masculinity for boys and men

Boys and men cannot be expected to sustainably alter behaviours and attitudes that are harmful towards women without linking this to positive masculine identities that resonate with them and to which they aspire.

Young men in this study expressed a strong desire to discuss gender issues from their own perspective, as a way of validating their own choices and male identities. One young man even used the discussion as a way of seeking relationship advice. Male-specific gender concerns, such as the inability to establish a trusting relationship with girls, whom they generally perceive to seek income from multiple partners, need to be addressed holistically, in the context of wider gender roles and dynamics.

Young men should be encouraged to reflect upon their relationships with other men, including peers and elders, and on their relationships with women, to deconstruct their identities and

44 Notes from the Launch of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence, 25 November 2011, Bintumani Conference Hall.
behaviours, and to name their anxieties, their shames, and their hopes. Men and boys should be encouraged to identify positive, age-appropriate versions of masculinity that validate the core values that enable them to treat women and girls with respect, while affirming their male identify. Development partners should build upon existing social capital of men's networks and spaces such as informal gyms, football fields, ataya bases, payo bars and other hang outs to promote healthy lifestyles, peer support and to reinforce positive notions of masculinity that exist in the midst of poverty.

As with women, “men” are a highly differentiated social category. Where possible, NGOs should seek to facilitate solidarity, reflection, positive identities and ethos, as well as empowerment among peer groups of boys, adolescents and among the upper bracket of youth before promoting interaction with older men and with girls and women. Adult groups of men should be engaged on their role as fathers and husbands, drawing upon positive notions of their role as protectors and providers to create pressure for other men to conform to positive behaviours.

Development partners in different sectors should seek opportunities and strategies for integrating activities in their projects that facilitate the transformation of masculinities among boys and men as part of gender mainstreaming efforts (e.g. into projects on HIV/AIDS, nutrition, health, WATSAN, elections, agriculture, business development).

Overall, women and girls suffer disproportionately from the lower status accorded to them in Sierra Leonean society. However, gender cuts both ways, meaning that there are specific contexts where boys and men experience gendered forms of discrimination. While promoting the empowerment of girls and women, it is also essential for government and development partners to monitor and address social issues that discriminate against boys, such as juvenile justice, specific forms of child labour, low school attendance and SGBV against boys.

4. Use sport and creative spaces to transform gender relations and empower girls and boys

Recently, in the global community of practice on sport and development, there has been a shift from advocating for gender equity in sports, towards using sports as a vehicle for transforming gender inequalities, respecting diversity and empowering girls and boys to be female and male role models. In both developed and developing countries, there is evidence that involvement in sport empowers girls. In terms of reproductive health, female athletes are less likely to demonstrate risky sexual behaviour, are more likely to use contraception and to have fewer children. In terms of their personal development, they are more likely to demonstrate higher self-esteem and self-worth, based on a greater sense of agency, improved perceptions of physical appearance and personal freedom. Sport and the arts are excellent vehicles for promoting leadership and skills development: from coaching, refereeing, league organization, to management of performing arts, not to mention exposure to international competition, including the Olympics. 45

There are a number of examples of sports programmes that have been used to raise awareness about gender norms, and which have led to supportive attitudes by male athletes and community members towards female athletes.46 Sports and the arts also provide a platform for

45 Ibid.
46 See, for example, the following associations and projects: Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) in Kenya http://www.mysakenya.org/; Moving the Goal Posts (Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda) and Parivartan: Coaching Boys into Men in India http://www.icrw.org/where-we-work/parivartan-coaching-boys-men
other kinds of peer education, including on health, diversity, while meeting the need for action and self-expression. From an experiential learning perspective, sports and creative enterprises that are directed by young women and men can promote personal development by responding to a wide range of learning needs and styles.

Sport and the arts celebrate life, merit and human excellence. Sports model the values that are instrumental to societal development: including teamwork, determination, endurance, self-discipline, honesty and mental agility. Athletes must overcome fear, self-doubt, control aggression and learn to be gracious in both victory and defeat. Artists use their voice and imagery to create, to communicate and to express, evoke and provoke human emotion; to outrage and to inspire. The respect reserved for individuals who live up to, and set, new standards is gender blind, and can be harnessed to support role models who exemplify healthy and positive versions of femininity and masculinity that the nation can uphold.

Sierra Leone has a vibrant football culture, not to mention track and field, volleyball, handball, cricket, karate, boxing and kick boxing and traditional and modern forms of choreographed and spontaneous dance, music, theatre and crafts.

There is a need for the Ministry of Youth and Sports and Local Councils to play a greater role in promoting community national and sport and the arts as a way of promoting gender equality as well as sexual and reproductive health. Donors, UN agencies should consider ways of making these kinds of initiatives viable for CSOs, including youth groups, seeking to implement them. In particular, local authorities and development partners should support girls to claim time and space for traditional and non-traditional forms of leisure and exercise. Governing sports bodies should be encouraged to be more transparent and open to the active involvement of child and adolescent female and male athletes, in planning and monitoring the success of programmes. They should also need to be responsible for actively recruiting girls and the disabled into all sports.

5. Affirm commitment to total abandonment of FGC

The UN has taken a stance promoting the complete elimination of female genital mutilation/cutting, called the Interagency Statement on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation. This position is founded upon the view that the practice discriminates against the rights of girls and women, and upon a body of evidence that all forms of cutting can have harmful immediate and long-term consequences to the health of girls and women. It promotes the need to take action, by engaging in processes of social change that address the root causes of the practice.

In its most recent concluding remarks, the CEDAW Committee urged the GOSL to:

...enact without delay legislation prohibiting female genital mutilation and to ensure that offenders are prosecuted and adequately punished. It urges the State party to strengthen its awareness-raising and educational efforts, targeted at both men and women, with the support of civil society, to eliminate the practice of female genital mutilation and its underlying cultural justifications...

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In Sierra Leone, however, a unified approach based on the goal of total elimination of FGC has yet to emerge. Due to a combination of resistance, and regard for the high degree of sensitivity of this issue, FGC has not been taken on by Government, and there is fragmentation caused by conflicting views and approaches among actors, including women’s rights activists, CSOs, national and international development agencies and the donor community. For the past several years, there has been a discussion among these actors over the ultimate goal of FGC interventions, and the best strategies to pursue.

FGC in Sierra Leone is a deeply entrenched cultural practice that is closely associated to female secret societies, which are enclaves of feminine authority, power and identity. With the end of the civil war, mass initiation ceremonies became a mechanism for healing rifts, reconfiguring social relations and solidifying community cohesion, (Coulter 2004; Fanthorpe 2007). They also became a powerful vehicle for voter mobilization by politicians who sponsored mass initiation ceremonies, (Fanthorpe 207). With elections on the horizon in 2012, already reports have been made of politically backed mass initiation ceremonies.\(^{50}\) FGC has been considered too politically sensitive to legislate against. In 2007 MPs voted to drop a provision proscribing FGC from the Child Rights Act. As a result, interventions currently focus primarily at the grassroots level.

Recently there has been a push to address the ‘supply side’ of FGC, by focusing attention on the soweis (women who perform cutting). Some development actors\(^{51}\) have supported the formation of associations of soweis at district level, to use their influence to discourage cutting under the age of 18. Alternative livelihoods for soweis is also part of this strategy. In theory, when girls turn 18, they should have the choice about being cut. This approach addresses a number of the social dynamics of abandonment, by involving influential and respected community members and by celebrating positive aspects of the culture. While it is too early to assess the impact of this approach, it can safely be said that it does not address root causes. Furthermore, given the lack of programmatic clarity about what happens when a girl turns 18, the risks for girls and women must be considered. In the Sierra Leonean context, particularly in remote rural areas, girls have little decision making autonomy over their own bodies, let alone over a practice that affects the social status of their families. It is doubtful that a girl in these circumstances can give free and informed consent – or refusal.

A comparative study\(^{52}\) of five African countries that have experienced abandonment of FGC among pockets of populations with high prevalence, finds that the decision to have a child undergo FGC/to undergo FGC oneself is a social decision that takes into account social expectations, rewards and sanctions for conformity and non-conformity; in other words, it is a social norm. It cannot be equated, as has sometimes been argued, with an individualistic decision that is taken to validate an individual’s sense of identity (e.g. a woman returning from

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\(^{51}\) UNICEF has taken an adamant stance against the age of consent position.

\(^{52}\) ‘The Dynamics of Social Change: Towards the abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Five African Countries’ 2010, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre
the diaspora to undergo FGC). Sustained abandonment is a complex social process rather than a decision based on the preferences of an individual or a family.53

Under the “age of consent/choice approach”, there is a risk that a dangerous and discriminatory practice will merely be postponed until the age of 18, because the expectations and pressures placed on girls to be cut will not have changed. This risk is enhanced by the confusion that abounds among many actors promoting this approach: as to whether it ultimately aims to achieve total abandonment, or whether the aim is to promote freedom of choice for girls and women who want to undergo FGC.

There is a need to go beyond interventions that aim to stem the supply of soweis willing to cut girls through non-formal regulation, and to place greater emphasis on stemming the demand that drives the social practice – the issue of parents who want their daughters to be cut because of the status attached to being part of the social group of initiated women, and because of the stigma attached to being uninitiated and excluded. There are proven strategies for promoting the abandonment of FGC. These approaches address demand by appealing to fundamental social norms held by parents and communities (e.g. the motivation to seek what is best for the child). By facilitating reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of a practice, and the development of alternatives, this process eventually leads to the development of new social norms (e.g. a girl’s body born complete and should be allowed to grow complete and unharmed). When communities are committed, abandonment can take place relatively quickly. The dynamics of abandonment are numerous and interrelated; however, several good practices include:

- the use of intergenerational dialogue on issues of concern that involve respected community leaders (female, male, religious, youth),
- community conversations and deliberations that make linkages between human rights and local values and aspirations,
- organized diffusion through kinship, family, trade, religious and other social networks and media support for local efforts
- coordinated abandonment at community level,
- multisectoral strategies with targeted actions at all levels,
- sustained action.

There is a need by civil society organisations, activists and leaders inside and outside government who champion gender equality, including the UN family, to reach a consensus on the ultimate goal of their engagement on FGC, and from there, to develop appropriate and coordinated strategies that address the root causes of the practice. Any commitment that falls short of total abandonment calls into question commitment to the human rights of women and girls: to equality, health, security, physical integrity, to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; and their right to life when the procedure results in death.55

Furthermore, compromise positions which tolerate FGC under certain circumstances (e.g. age of consent) generate confusion at all levels and undermine efforts to create a new social norm.

6. Make gender equity a pillar of national employment and training strategies

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53 ‘The Dynamics of Social Change: Towards the abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Five African Countries’ 2010, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre
54 Please note the supply and demand terminology is not associated with the UNICEF Social Norms Approach, but is used here to describe the various strategies being tested to mitigate FGC.
55 Ibid. p.3
Under a wide range of initiatives, women and some categories of adolescent girls have been assisted to organise themselves, to save, to access credit, to develop functional literacy and numeracy as well as business management skills. These efforts should be evaluated and strengthened. There are currently a number of models for increasing women's economic power and autonomy, including group savings and loans, individual and group credit schemes, business incubation and farmer based organisations. These models should be compared and analyzed in order to determine the advantages and disadvantages to promoting women's economic empowerment.

The provision of small scale assistance to individual women and groups also needs to happen in tandem with processes that question women's place on the periphery of the economy. Planning for youth employment needs to consider the differential barriers facing girls and women in all sectors of the labour and professional job market. An analysis of gender in the national economy could provide the basis for understanding the economic consequences of a rigid sexual division of labour. New areas for professional recruitment need to be identified, with corresponding strategies to promote female recruitment and prepare girls for employability in non-traditional sectors (e.g. medical (doctors), banking, transport, logistics, engineering, secondary and tertiary teaching). Viable training and apprenticeship options for girls are needed that are linked to market demand. In the longer term, there is also a need to provide gender responsive input into discussions on developing a national competency-based qualifications framework for TVET.

At the same time, strategies are needed to combat gender based discrimination and sexual harassment of female professionals in male-dominated sectors.

Government and development partners including the UN ought to ensure that national plans for enhancing the employability of young people are gender responsive, and include distinct strategies to facilitate and promote the entry and advancement of girls and women in non-traditional sectors and jobs, and to protect and promote women and girls' rights throughout the progression from tertiary vocational training and education institutions to the workplace.

7. Promote legal empowerment and effective methods of legal awareness raising on the rights of girls and women

Efforts to promote the legal empowerment of women and girls, particularly in remote communities, need to be expanded into areas and populations that have lower access. Even for development partners not working in the specialized area of legal aid delivery, such as UNICEF, empowering girls and women and improving the lives of their children means, at minimum, connecting them to available legal resources, including legal counsel, legal awareness raising, mediation services, paralegal work and administrative advice, among other services.

There is also a need to examine and assess the strengths and weaknesses of approaches to legal awareness raising carried out at grassroots level, and to promote learning from best practice, including behaviour change communication (BCC). Field research for this paper and subsequent discussions have revealed that some of the approaches used, at minimum, lead to little transformation on the ground, and at worst, do more harm than good for women and girls by triggering a backlash among men and even boys.

The Human Rights Commission is leading the development of a national strategy to advance legal aid for women's rights in Sierra Leone. This is an opportunity to reflect on effective
methods of legal awareness raising on gender and other human rights, in order to ensure that "sensitization" methods on the Gender Acts and other legislation are internalized by target groups and promote social change, rather than resisted. In addition, the strategy should also consider the particular capacities required for providing legal assistance to children.

8. Reinvigorate the affirmative action campaign and link to a wider advocacy agenda

Despite the best efforts of a well-organized campaign, efforts to legislate a minimum 30% (M30) quota for the participation of women in all elected and appointed positions ahead of the elections met opposition in Parliament, as male MPs were reluctant to hand over safe seats to female candidates. Overcoming entrenched male resistance and power in a context where the ‘female vote’ is low will require broader alliances and stronger solidarity – across sectors, generations, urban and rural areas, and sexes. There is a need for activists to step back and re-strategize the campaign, and to amplify and redirect their voices. Activists should seize the opportunity to hold political parties publicly accountable for the number of women they field, for their position on gender issues and for any specific commitments to promoting gender equality. Now is the time, ahead to the November 2012 elections, to extract commitments from future leaders. The gender movement needs to keep a consistent message about M30, but also needs to widen the goalposts to include other priorities for women and girls, to develop a clear and consistent advocacy agenda for gender equality.

As activists regroup, they ought to take a wider view of the advocacy agenda for gender equality, by reviewing priority issues, including discriminatory provisions and omissions in the law and Constitution, concluding observations of the CEDAW and CRC and outstanding TRC recommendations, and define priority actions for each sector. Too often policymakers are blind to the gender implications of the laws they make, and resist efforts to integrate gender considerations. Gender activists need apply pressure to make sure that thorough gender analysis becomes a regular step in all policymaking and strategic planning; and relevant Ministry and watchdog capacity should be developed accordingly.

There is a need to link older unresolved issues to new emerging issues, and to facilitate the meaningful involvement of younger generations in advocacy, including of the most marginalized girls and boys. A better understanding of the profile of individual and organisational stakeholders reached by leading gender activist networks such as the Women’s Forum, the Women’s Solidarity Support Group and The 50/50 Group could help identify strategies to strengthen the impact of outreach, advocacy, and coalition building.

9. Promote cross-sector knowledge sharing and wider solidarity on gender issues

In order to enhance solidarity and cooperation, communication and knowledge sharing on developments within all of the above areas needs to be opened up and made more accessible to interested organisations and individuals. High level strategic planning processes, such as the development of the PRSP do not sufficiently involve stakeholders in mainstreaming gender into the plan and process.

56 “Sensitization” is in quotation marks to highlight the local use of the term, which has become a development cliché denoting any type of information transfer, even including ineffective and potentially harmful methods such as lecturing or preaching.
Learning, collaboration and cross-sector solidarity on gender is made more challenging by the absence of a forum and joined up channels for communication for information sharing. There is no virtual or office based hub or central repository of information on gender. More inclusive, more frequent, and more informal information exchange, facilitated by texting, email, web, combined with regular and unrestricted fora for information sharing on gender should be encouraged. A more enabling environment for knowledge sharing could help facilitate the emergence of a more connected community of practice on gender that maintains a running dialogue on issues – a community that can be easily expanded to include new members, and activated when the need for advocacy and monitoring arises. A key contribution of a community of practice on gender could be to assess progress towards jointly held goals, for instance by defining how best to measure the empowerment of girls and women in various sectors.

The body which ought to lead and oversee such an initiative is the National Committee on Gender Based Violence (NaC-GBV), the coordinating body for civil society and government communication and cooperation, which is housed in the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs. It is co-chaired by the Inspector General of the Police. NaC-GBV needs to actively expand its membership to reflect the range of actors and issues that relate to gender equality and women’s empowerment, including local government actors. The Ministry, and in particular NaC-GBV, with its network of regional focal points is in an ideal position to facilitate greater information exchange among Government, national and international development actors (both government and NGO) working in all sectors, and to identify knowledge gaps.

UN Women, as the secretariat for gender equality and women's empowerment in the UN, is also in a strong position to strengthen a community of practice on gender, by convening actors and by supporting MSWGCA to facilitate sustainable platforms for routine information sharing, learning, planning and monitoring.

10. Support the capacity of the Ministry to lead on gender equality

At the policy level, it is time to take stock of the strategic and operational framework for pursuing gender equality: of the National Gender Strategic Plan (2010-2013) and the National Action Plan for SC Res 1325 and 1820, and the twin gender policies on the Advancement of Women and on Gender Mainstreaming (2000). The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs needs to re-examine and consolidate its vision for gender equality, and to articulate a comprehensive policy that promotes the rights of girls as well as women and that guides development practice. It needs to take an active and outspoken interest in monitoring the activities and practices of bodies and organizations that violate this vision. It also needs to weigh in on the research, policy and strategy development of other ministries that have gender implications.

To do this, it needs adequate resources, especially in terms of staff skills capacity, a reactivated network of gender focal points and a functioning data management network. The Ministry and its development partners should start by reviewing progress and bottlenecks to the achievement of recommendations from previous relevant capacity assessments.
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