



“Educating girls and women is the best way to fight poverty and build peace.”
Irina Bokova, Director General, UNESCO, 2015



Street Child 2015 / 2016

GIRLS SPEAK OUT

THE STREET CHILD NATIONAL CONSULTATION
ON ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION IN
SIERRA LEONE

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FOREWORD

Education is a universal right, regardless of gender or wealth. Yet in Sierra Leone, girls face significant barriers to access that right. In “Girls Speak Out”: the National Consultation on Adolescent Girls’ Education (NCAGE), Street Child consulted over 2000 girls in Sierra Leone about their experiences of education, about the barriers they face, and about the potential solutions to those barriers. It is striking that the adolescent girls we spoke to overwhelmingly want to go to, and stay in, school. They used the opportunity of this report to appeal for help.

Our major finding was that income poverty is the principal barrier, meaning families either cannot, or choose not, to pay the - often unpredictable - costs of sending their girls to school. Sierra Leone’s low health outcomes mean it is common for girls to lose their primary caregiver. The loss of financial support and encouragement is a major cause of girls dropping out of school. Lack of parental care and encouragement in education was an important theme of the consultation.

The barriers to girls' education in Sierra Leone are both complex and diverse. It can be tempting to focus on the issues that are most emotionally charged or seemingly urgent. But in a country where there are so many barriers, the weighting of the barriers is even more important when choosing what action to take. The single largest call from this consultation is clear: girls want help fighting poverty so they can go to school.

Many barriers identified by girls are inter-related and gender sensitive. Girls reported that boys’ education and learning is often prioritised over girls. They reported that once a girl is married or a mother, her education is no longer seen as important. Yet Sierra Leone has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the world, and the median age of marriage is just 17 - with many girls marrying even younger.

These barriers have a significant impact on girls’ education. Secondary school completion rates are low nationally, but the difference between girls and boys is stark: only 14% of girls reach the last year of secondary school, compared to 32% of boys. Yet the benefits of educating girls and women are transformative. With education, income increases and access to basic services improve - with impressive results not just for girls and women, but also for their children. Educated girls and women have fewer children, later. They are less likely to be poor, and their children are less likely to die before the age of five.

Change needs to happen. One in ten out of school girls we interviewed had never accessed any kind of formal education. Despite having an average age of 16, over half of them were unable to read and write. Data indicates that girls drop out increasingly from class 6 of primary school, around the time of adolescence, at precisely the time when they begin to achieve basic literacy.

The possibility for change exists. Significant achievements have been made in Sierra Leone in education over the past 15 years, with increased primary and secondary enrolment, and gender parity at primary level.

This report has given Sierra Leonean girls the opportunity to speak out about their education. In September 2016, Street Child plans to launch a programme shaped by this report, to support 4000 girls in Sierra Leone to successfully make the transition to secondary school.

We call for other education actors in Sierra Leone to respond to the girls' appeal for support. We hope that this report will be a useful tool in shaping that response.

Megan Lees-McCowan, Head of Programmes - West Africa, Street Child UK

Girls are often more disadvantaged than boys in Sierra Leone. They are vulnerable to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse all of which are likely to cause more dire consequences than may be the case with boys. Most cultures do not favour or support investing in girls' education over boys. Whenever a family is faced with making a decision on who to keep in school, when they are faced with economic difficulties, girls are frequently the more disadvantaged gender.

Why should girls always be the ultimate losers in education? Pregnant girls are likely to drop out of education and are often left to support their babies alone, whilst boys continue in school. In Sierra Leone the issue of 'sex-for-grades' is unique to girls. The issues are often complicated: the health risks, the missed opportunity to continue schooling, stigma from society and rejection from family members; all these make it very difficult for girls to not only continue schooling, but also to get opportunities for better livelihoods and a decent employment in future.

Bringing out these issues, demonstrates Street Child of Sierra Leone's commitment more than ever before. We are committed to supporting the reintegration of out-of-school children into school or non-formal education, but also to ensure that girls – as well as boys – do not miss out on the opportunities they deserve.

The data has already begun shaping our programming. We are launching a major focus on vulnerable girls in upper primary school because one of the saddest messages in this report is the data that shows that girls only really start to establish useful levels of learning and skills in late primary and early Junior Secondary School – but this is precisely the stage where drop-out rates begin to spike. When you realize that helping girls who might otherwise have dropped out of late primary to manage just a year or two of secondary education can be the difference between a lifetime of literacy and numeracy – it motivates you.

We call on other development actors, child protection agencies and the Government of Sierra Leone to make good use of the findings of this report, to help shape the interventions and to support opportunities for increasing girls' education in Sierra Leone.

Sia Lajaku-Williams, Programmes Director, Street Child of Sierra Leone

FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

- + More than **1 in 10 out of school girls** interviewed had **never enrolled in school**. 30% had never enrolled in secondary education
- + Only **half of out of school girls were able to read and write**, compared to **77% of in-school girls**
- + **46%** of girls in Class 4 had not yet achieved a basic level of reading and writing
- + **1 in 5 in-school girls** reported having **dropped out at some** stage in their education to date
- + The examination years of Class 6 and JSS 3 show a notable spike in drop out for both OOS and in-school girls
- + Yet an accelerated rate of learning was observed amongst the target group during the transition stage between primary and secondary (Class 5 – JSS 1)
- + **84% of out of school girls said they wanted to go back into education** during their structured interviews
- + **Income poverty was rated as the primary barrier** to adolescent girls' education across structured interviews (cited by 40% of girls as their personal reason for dropping out) and focus group discussions (91% of focus groups cited it as a top five barrier)
- + The **loss of the primary caregiver** and **teenage pregnancy** were rated highly by girls as principal barriers to education in both structured interviews and focus groups, with **early marriage** and **lack of parental encouragement** also ranking highly



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i. Acronyms

ACAP	– Assessment Capacity Report
BECE	– Basic Education Certificate Examination
CRC	– Convention on the Rights of the Child
CEDAW	– Convention on the Elimination of all Discrimination against Women
DFID	– UK Department for International Development
EFA	– World Declaration on Education for All, Jomtien, 1990
ESP	– Education Sector Plan
EVD	– Ebola Virus Disease
FGD	– Focus Group Discussion
FFC	– Future for Children
FGM	– Female Genital Mutilation
GoSL	– Government of Sierra Leone
ICESCR	– International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
Incheon Declaration	– The Incheon Declaration on Education 2030
JSS	– Junior Secondary School
NPSE	– National Primary School Examination
MDG	– Millennium Development Goal
MEST	– Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
MSWGCA	– Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs
NCAGE	– National Consultation on Adolescent Girls’ Education
OOS	– Out of School
SCoSL	– Street Child of Sierra Leone
SDG	– Sustainable Development Goal
SSS	– Senior Secondary School
UN	– United Nations
UN CESCR	– Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
UNDP	– United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	– United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	– United Nations Children’s Fund
WASH	– Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

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ii. Acknowledgements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Girls Speak Out”: The Street Child National Consultation on Adolescent Girls’ Education in Sierra Leone (NCAGE) was carried out by Street Child of Sierra Leone (SCoSL), a national child protection and education actor. The goal of this consultation has been to better understand the barriers to adolescent girls’ education - from the perspectives of girls themselves - and explore their potential solutions. The “NCAGE” stands out as one of the first consultations of such scale to be undertaken in Sierra Leone and its timing, in both the global and the Sierra Leonean context, is critical.

The importance of educating girls and women is at the core of the post-2015 global education agenda. Underpinning the new Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education, and the Incheon Declaration on Education 2030 is the recognition that the education of women and girls has a positive multiplier effect on progress across all development areas (UN, 2015)¹.

Yet Sierra Leone is one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of gender, ranking 145 out of 188 countries on the UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index (2015)². Moreover, there is compelling evidence to suggest that extra investment in girls is urgently needed. **Girls in Sierra Leone are markedly disadvantaged in education compared to boys.** Although data shows enrolment at primary level to be at near gender parity, girls’ retention rates and learning outcomes are lower than boys at all levels (Government of Sierra Leone, 2013)³. Gender disparity rises at the point of transition to Junior Secondary School (JSS)⁴, with key gender-specific issues such as early /forced marriage, teenage pregnancy, transactional sex, and sexual abuse, as well as cultural attitudes to girls and their education impacting upon girls’ retention and learning outcomes during adolescence.

SCoSL undertook an in-depth participatory consultation with over 2000 girls across its 32 urban and rural programme locations in all 14 districts in Sierra Leone, as well as with boys and community stakeholders. The field research was conducted over a two-week period in October 2015. Consultation was carried out through structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) on girls’ access, and continued access, to quality education, as well as barriers to learning once in school. The goal of the NCAGE was also to inform future Street Child programming, and it is hoped that the report will be useful to other actors working in education in Sierra Leone.

The findings of the Street Child NCAGE are clear.

INCOME POVERTY }

Overwhelmingly identified as the most important barrier to adolescent girls’ education by the out-of-school (OOS) girls’ focus groups and the in-school girls’ focus groups.

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1. [The Millennium Development Goals Report](#), 2015
 2. [Human Development Report 2015](#), UNDP, 2015
 3. [Sierra Leone Education Country Status Report](#), GoSL supported by UNESCO et al, 2013
 4. ‘Girls’ access to and completion of lower secondary education in Sierra Leone: PPA Building Skills for Life Baseline Report’, unpublished internal document, Plan Sierra Leone, 2011

Income poverty was overwhelmingly identified as the most important barrier to adolescent girls’ access, retention and learning in education. This finding is not unprecedented. Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 181 out of 188 countries on the UNDP Human Development Index in 2015. In terms of income poverty, 57% of the population is still estimated to be living on less than US\$1.25 a day (UNDP, 2015). Family poverty has deepened during and since the Ebola crisis, although the effects are not yet fully known.

In practice, income poverty means that many families are unable to afford to send their girls to school, or choose not to spend extremely meagre resources on their girls’ education. Previous studies have found that 48% - 56% of households who do not enrol their children in school in Sierra Leone do not do so for lack of money for fees and other school-related costs, (WFP, 2011; UNICEF, 2008).

In most locations, our research teams conducted Focus Group Discussions with the following number of groups:

In total, our research teams held:



In total, 143 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 991 out-of-school (OOS) girls and 1058 in-school girls, supported by short structured individual interviews with the girls across 17 major towns and 15 rural chiefdoms.

5. [Human Development Report 2015](#), UNDP, 2015
6. [Human Development Report 2015](#), UNDP, 2015.
7. [Socio-Economic impact of the Ebola Virus Disease in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Policy Notes Volume 1, Numbers 1 – 5](#), UNDP, 2014
8. Education Sector Plan quoting the Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment, World Food Programme, 2011 and a 2008 UNICEF survey of children.

The research teams conducted a further 81 FGDs with boys and stakeholders (of the community, including chiefs, teachers, parents, religious leaders, business owners and police officers) in each location, to help contextualise the girls' views and build a comprehensive picture of the issues.

During this consultation, income poverty was cited as a barrier to education in every single one of the 226 FGDs. 40% of out of school girls cited income poverty as the personal reason they themselves had dropped out of school, as did 40% of the in-school girls who had previously dropped out. The overwhelming majority of in-school girls FGDs (95%) and OOS girls' FGDs (88%) ranked income poverty in their top five barriers to education.

Data collected shows a spike in drop out rate in the last year of primary school and junior secondary school respectively. This may relate to the NPSE and BECE examination fees associated with Class 6 and JSS 3 respectively, as well as increased social responsibilities.

The number one suggested solution to barriers in girls' education was financial assistance: money for school fees and materials, and income generation for caregivers as top solutions. A high majority of boys groups (88%) and stakeholder groups (83%) also ranked income poverty in their top five barriers, all of whom also proposed financial-based solutions in their FGDs. Groups discussed seed lending, farming support, small business support and loans as possible methods by which to generate such income. Assistance to parents to gain employment, with an emphasis on 'self reliance', was also suggested.

Discussions also explicitly linked income poverty to a number of gender-specific issues, including teenage pregnancy, early / forced marriage, sexual abuse, child labour, and cultural attitudes towards girls and their education. Focus groups reported some families pressuring their daughters to find a 'boyfriend' to help support the girl financially, particularly during the economic difficulties suffered during the Ebola crisis – from which teenage pregnancy then resulted.

Close to half of urban OOS girls reported the loss of a primary caregiver as the reason for dropping out of school, as a linked but discrete issue to income poverty, and 31% of rural OOS girls. Well over half of OOS girls' FGDs (57%) ranked it in their top five barriers compared to a third of in-school girls FGDs. It is common for children to lose their primary caregiver to illness or accident. In 2013 310,000 children in Sierra Leone had lost one or both parents to any cause (UNDP, 2015)⁹ and according to Street Child's recent research, 12,023 children lost their primary caregiver during the Ebola crisis (Street Child, 2015)¹⁰.

9. [Human Development Report 2015](#), UNDP, 2015

10. [The Street Child Ebola Orphan Report](#), Street Child, 2015.

The issue was disproportionately reported by girls in urban areas with 47% of urban OOS girls reporting, in their structured individual interviews, that they had dropped out of school due to the loss of a primary caregiver, compared to 31% of rural OOS girls. This may be due to the deeper social ties in rural communities compared to urban communities. Focus groups reported that friends or relatives may take in the girls, but discrimination, exploitation and abuse is more likely to ensue than in the case of a biological child. This in turn was reported to deeply impact on girls' ability to attend, remain or learn in school.

Almost 1 in 10 OOS girls reported that the personal reason they had dropped out of school was teenage pregnancy, and a high majority of OOS girls' (80%) and in-school girls' (74%) focus groups ranked teenage pregnancy in their top 5 barriers to education. In 2013 Sierra Leone's teenage pregnancy rate ranked amongst the ten highest in the world.¹¹

Stakeholders' and boys' groups highlighted girls' 'sexual urges', and noted that lack of knowledge or access to family planning often resulted in teenage pregnancy. It is of note that access to free family planning as a solution to the barriers to adolescent girls' education was ranked relatively highly by OOS girls, with 42% of FGDS placing it in their top five solutions. FGDS also linked teenage pregnancy to the lack of schools in rural areas, forcing girls to travel long distances or stay away from home, leaving them more vulnerable to sexual abuse.

The girls' FGDS reported the lack of parental care and encouragement in education to be a major barrier to their own education. A third of focus groups raised improving parenting as one of the five most important solutions to improving girls' learning, and in their individual interviews 13% of in-school girls believed parental encouragement and supervision would improve their learning in school - the second most popular solution. Girls reported instead being held primarily responsible for the burden of domestic chores in the home and pressured to work to bring extra income into the family by farming, selling goods on the street, and in some cases, through transactional sex. All impacted on their ability to study or attend school.

Underpinning these findings is the notably low level of education amongst parents: three quarters of OOS girls and two thirds of in-school girls reported one or both parents had never attended school. FGDS reported parents' lack of education and illiteracy to be a strong causal factor in the lack of understanding of the importance of education, and its related demands such as home study, regular attendance, and progression through the education system.



11. 'Rapid Assessment of Pregnant Adolescent Girls in Sierra Leone,' UNFPA, 2015. See also [Out-of-School Children of Sierra Leone](#), UNICEF, 2008 which found 38% of girls under 18 to have given birth.



Over half of girls' focus groups (53%) ranked early marriage in their top five barriers to education and 7% of OOS girls reported dropping out due to early / forced marriage. Sierra Leone has the 11th highest rate of child marriage in the world¹². Pressure on girls to marry early was also often explicitly linked to family poverty, being seen as a means to reduce the financial burden on the family. FGDs noted that not only did girls tend to drop out of school once married but that families also had low expectations about girls' futures, causing discrimination against them at the point of access to school in favour of other siblings.

Cultural attitudes towards girls' education in the home and community were pinpointed by many FGDs as a barrier to education. Interestingly, the stakeholders FGDs rated the lack of value for education as a key barrier to adolescent girls' education, with close to half (45%) ranking it in their top five. This was not a barrier articulated by the girls' FGDs themselves. Nor was it supported by the individual interviews: 75% of OOS girls expressed a desire to return to school and almost all of the remaining 25% desired skills or vocational training. Rather this view may be indicative of a culture of low expectations in regard to girls' education: girls were said to have "weak brains" and lack intelligence, and all groups rated peer group influence highly.

The practice of 'money / sex for grades' in school was reported as a major barrier to access, and also learning. Girls reported teachers coercing girls, particularly those who are unable to pay extra schooling costs, to have sex in exchange for good grades or promotion to the next class. 20% of girls' FGDs reported sexual harassment and abuse as one of the top five barriers to adolescent girls' education, whilst a further 13% reported teacher misconduct, including bribery for grades.

The NCAGE revealed differences between urban and rural locations. Income poverty was perceived as a larger issue in rural areas whilst loss of a primary caregiver was reported to be a greater issue in urban areas: 100% of rural in-school groups ranked it in their top 5 barriers. Parental illiteracy, early / forced marriage, distance to secondary schools and conditions for after school study were issues affecting rural areas more. In some rural locations, the lack of a local secondary school was the principal barrier and the construction of a school the top solution. For example in Nieni chiefdom, the nearest JSS was reported to be 21 miles away.

The NCAGE revealed significant differences between the OOS and in-school girls' priorities, perhaps because whilst the OOS girls were more focused on overcoming the barriers to

12. [State of the World's Children 2015](#), UNICEF, 2014

access to education, the in-school girls were more focused on overcoming the barriers to learning in education. Whilst both groups rated financial support and parenting solutions highly, the in-school girls also rated improving school facilities, the availability of learning materials and teacher training highly whilst the OOS girls focused on income generation support for caregivers and family planning.

Over 1 in 10 out of school girls interviewed, with an average age of 13, had never enrolled in school. 1 in 5 in-school girls reported having dropped out at some stage in their education so far, with the examination years of Class 6 and JSS 3 showing a notable spike in drop out for both OOS and in-school girls. 84% of out of school girls said they wanted to go back into education during their structured interviews. Of the 16% who did not want to return, the large majority (76%) reported being unable to read and write at all. Given the option, 75% of girls preferred to re-enrol in formal education whilst 25% preferred skills training. *“Just because we drop out, doesn’t mean that we don’t want to go to school!” Adarla, 19, Kono OOS FGD*

Only half (54%) of out of school girls were able to read and write, compared to 77% of in-school girls, based on self-reporting and a very basic test. According to the simple measures of literacy used, however, a notably accelerated rate of learning is observed during the transition stage between Class 5 and JSS 1. Yet 43% of out of school girls interviewed had never entered secondary education.

In general, the Street Child NCAGE finds adolescence to be a period of high risk in girls’ education. Barriers to education such as early / forced marriage, teenage pregnancy, transactional sex, sexual abuse, child labour and negative cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) become more acute during adolescence. These factors disproportionately affect girls, and impact upon their continued access to and retention in school, and upon their learning outcomes.

Girls used the opportunity of the consultation to directly appeal to the government and NGOs for support. ‘We the girls are suffering to learn. So the government should provide for us.’ *Mabinty, Kambia, 12 years old*

Participants appealed to government and schools to eradicate informal and formal school fees, which leave girls so vulnerable to harassment for money or sex, and to enforce laws preventing child labour and sexual abuse; girls have asked for support from their parents, to advocate with and support them to be able to keep them in school.

BACKGROUND

Global strategy on girls' education

Access to education is recognized as both “a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights,” and is considered “the primary vehicle by which socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities” (UN CESCR, 1999)¹³. Education is a fundamental human right enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 10 of The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires states to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in education.

Girls' education is regarded as the most effective means of combating many of the most profound challenges to human development (UNICEF, 2004)¹⁴. It is considered a strategic development investment as evidence shows that girls' education brings a wide range of benefits not only for the girls themselves, but also for their children, their communities and society at large (World Bank, 2014)¹⁵. Studies have shown that girls who attend secondary school have better economic prospects, have fewer and healthier children, and are more likely to ensure their own children go to school. Moreover, education reduces the rate of violence against women¹⁶.

The Incheon Declaration on Education 2030 (Incheon Declaration) (UNESCO, 2015)¹⁷, along with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (UN, 2015)¹⁸, set the current global agenda for education, building upon, and seeking to complete Education For All (EFA)¹⁹ and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)(UNESCO, 2000)²⁰. They put education, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at the centre of the agenda. In particular, SDG4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and SDG5 seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (UN, 2015).

The education of women and girls has a positive multiplier effect on progress across all development areas (UN, 2015)²¹ Globally, significant progress has been made – 98 girls for every 100 boys are now enrolled in primary schools in developing countries (UNGEI, 2014)²². Outside sub-Saharan Africa, the gender composition of the out-of-school contingent is broadly even although 9% of children of primary age remain out of school (UNICEF, 2015)²³. Poverty remains the

13. [General Comment No. 13](#), UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1999

14. [The Multiplier Effect of Educating Girls](#), UNICEF, 2004

15. [Girls' Education](#), World Bank, 2014. See also [State of the World's Children 2004](#), UNICEF, 2003

16. [Girls' Education in the 21st Century](#), World Bank, 2008.

17. [Incheon Declaration, World Education Forum 2015](#), UNESCO, 2015.

18. [The Sustainable Development Goals, UN](#), in force January 2016.

19. [World Declaration on Education for All \(EFA\), Jomtien, 1990](#)

20. [The Dakar Framework for Action](#), UNESCO, 2000.

21. [The Millennium Development Goals Report](#), 2015

22. [Sierra Leone Country Programme Document 2015 – 2018](#), UNICEF, 2015.

23. [25 Years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), UNICEF (2015)

biggest barrier to education, but disadvantages, including gender and living in rural areas, are cumulative²⁴.

Globally, gender differences are now widest at the level of secondary education, where the acquisition of cognitive skills is crucial for national economic growth and gender inequalities in both learning and earning outcomes persist²⁵. Boys are still 1.55 times more likely to complete secondary education than girls²⁶.

National strategy on girls' education

Sierra Leone is party to the CRC, CEDAW and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child²⁷. At a national level, the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone recognizes education as a fundamental right for all citizens²⁸. The Education Act (2004) sets out the legal framework for all levels of education in Sierra Leone, recognizing the right of every citizen to basic education (6 years of primary and 3 years of Junior Secondary (JSS) schooling) and making it compulsory and free in government assisted schools²⁹.

The Child Rights Act (2007) also stipulates the rights of the child to education, including adequate classroom facilities, materials and trained teachers. It sets out a child's right to protection from exploitative labour, including labour if it deprives the child of its education³⁰. The Teacher Code of Conduct (2009)³¹ sets out standards of professional behaviour for teachers, which includes a requirement to establish and maintain zero tolerance for all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse, and child labour.

The Sierra Leone Government's Education Sector Plan 2014 – 2018, "Learning to Succeed" (ESP)³² sets out the Ministry of Education's plans to strengthen opportunities for education in Sierra Leone. The ESP estimated the need for a 56% increase in capacity to achieve universal primary education.

Before the Ebola crisis, there were an estimated 233,000 children of primary age out of school (GoSL, 2013)³³ and a survey following the reopening of schools after the Ebola crisis found that 13% of school-aged children were not attending school (World Bank, 2015)³⁴.

24. ["No Girl Left Behind – Education in Africa"](#), UNGEI, 2015

25. [Girls' Education in the 21st Century](#), World Bank, 2008.

26. [Girls' Education](#), World Bank, 2014

27. [The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child](#), 1990

28. [The Constitution of Sierra Leone](#), 1991

29. [The Education Act](#), Sierra Leone, 2004

30. [The Child Rights Act](#), 2007

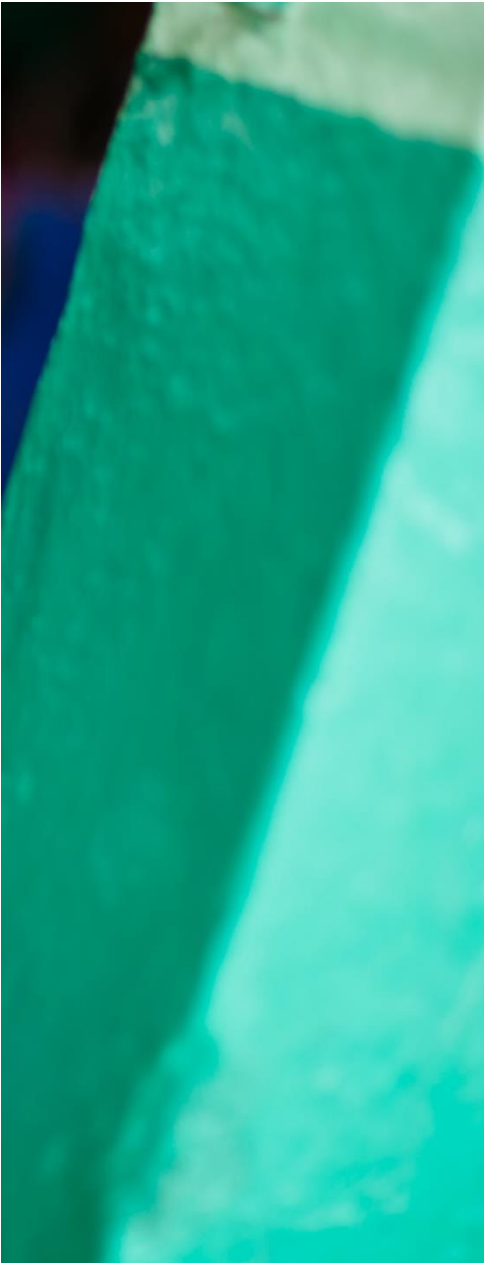
31. [The Teacher Code of Conduct](#), 2009

32. [The Education Sector Plan 2014 – 2018](#)

33. [Sierra Leone Education Country Status Report 2013](#), GoSL, supported by UNESCO et al., 2013

34. ["The Socio-Economic Impacts of Ebola in Sierra Leone"](#), World Bank (2015)





Girls' retention rates are lower than boys' at every level. **Although 86% of children access grade 1, only 14% of school-aged girls access SSS 3, compared with 32% of boys** (GoSL, 2013)³⁵. Moreover, girls have significantly lower learning outcomes than boys at all levels (GoSL, UNESCO, 2013)³⁶. Girls systematically underperform in nearly all standard examinations (ESP, 2013)³⁷ and whilst the literacy rate for youth (15 – 24) is 72% for males, it is only 54% for females in Sierra Leone (UNICEF, 2014)³⁸.

Although the effects of the Ebola crisis and the collapse of the iron-ore industry on Sierra Leone's economy are not yet fully known, it is estimated that Sierra Leone's GDP will have contracted by 23.5% in 2015, with an estimated GDP loss of US\$1.4bn³⁹. It is reasonable to assume that this will impact on the extent to which the government can increase capacity and raise the primary completion rate.

Importantly, The National Ebola Recovery Strategy for Sierra Leone 2015 – 2017 noted that the Ebola crisis has reversed government efforts aimed at increasing women's empowerment (GoSL, 2015)⁴⁰. Girls' education in Sierra Leone is particularly important given that Sierra Leone is one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of gender parity. It currently ranks 145/188 on the gender inequality index (UNDP, 2015)⁴¹. Although gender parity has been achieved at primary level, there is a need to address both the retention rate of girls in school and their learning outcomes⁴².

35. Country Status Report, GoSL, 2013.

36. [Sierra Leone Education Country Status Report](#), GoSL supported by UNESCO et al, 2013

37. [The Education Sector Plan 2014 - 2018](#), GoSL

38. [State of the World's Children 2015](#), UNICEF, 2014

39. ["Update on the Economic Impact of the 2014 -2015 Ebola Epidemic in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea"](#), World Bank (2015). See also ["UPDATE 1-Sierra Leone economy to shrink one-fifth amid mining crisis- IMF"](#) predicting Sierra Leone's economy will contract by 21.5%. See also, ["Ebola in Sierra Leone: Economic Impact and Recovery"](#), Dr Peter Davis, DFID/Adam Smith International (2015)

40. [National Ebola Recovery Strategy for Sierra Leone](#), GoSL, 2015.

41. [Human Development Report 2015](#), UNDP, 2015

42. [The Education Sector Plan 2014 - 2018](#)

AIMS OF THE STREET CHILD NCAGE

The Street Child NCAGE is an in-depth participatory consultation across every district in Sierra Leone. Its aims are:

- 1** — to inform Street Child’s potential policy and programme decisions in relation to adolescent girls’ education;
- 2** — to help girls in Sierra Leone to speak out about education, and make their voices, views and stories heard;
- 3** — to publish and disseminate the findings of the report, and provide a useful source of information for all actors in girls’ education in Sierra Leone and beyond.

Street Child of Sierra Leone (SCoSL) has been acknowledged as the only education NGO with an active presence in every district and major town in Sierra Leone (MEST, 2015). As such, it is uniquely placed to conduct nationwide research.

In October 2015, SCoSL staff, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs (MSWGCA) and partner organisations from across Sierra Leone came together in Freetown to develop and design the consultation and to plan its implementation. The Street Child NCAGE was publicly announced on Friday 9 October 2015 as a national consultation into the barriers to adolescent girls’ education and the potential solutions to such barriers, to be undertaken across all regions of Sierra Leone.

The field research for the Street Child NCAGE was carried out over a 2-week period between 19th – 30th October 2015 by 5 trained research teams, comprised of SCoSL staff and partner organisations. Research into existing studies both in Sierra Leone and internationally was also commenced. The teams travelled to the 14 districts of Sierra Leone across all of SCoSL’s 32 active programme locations, in 17 major towns and 15 rural chiefdoms.

Participants were selected by teams of local SCoSL staff, and identified through Street Child’s extensive local networks, and its relationships with local authorities, schools and child welfare committees. Girls between 6 and 20 were interviewed. The average age of the in-school girl participants was 14 years old, and the average age of the OOS girl participants was 16 years old.

Locations were chosen for perceived prevalence of low income families, and mostly in locations where Street Child already has existing relationships. Due to access and Street Child’s spread, more of the participants were from urban locations rather than rural ones.

The Street Child NCAGE used two principal methods to understand the barriers to access to, retention in and learning in education for adolescent girls:

1

Short structured individual interviews (lasting about 5 – 10 minutes) with 991 OOS girls and 1058 in-school girls to understand their personal experiences and:

- to establish when and why the OOS girls had dropped out of school and what they thought would help them return;
- to establish if the in-school girls had dropped out of school at some point, why they had done so and how they had been able to return;
- to establish what the in-school girls thought would help them learn;
- to establish the comparative learning outcomes between the groups.

2

224 FGDs, each with approximately 10 participants, across the 32 locations (each lasting 60 – 90 minutes). 143 FGDs were with 991 OOS girls and with 1058 in-school girls, so that in most areas the research teams were able to conduct at least two FGD with OOS girls and at least two FGDs with in-school girls. 81 FGDs were with boys and with stakeholders (at least one with boys and one with stakeholders in each location) helped contextualise the girls' views and build a comprehensive picture of the issues.

Each FGD followed the same format and had two sections. The first section focused on barriers, the second on solutions.

In the first section, the focus groups were asked:

[1] what do you consider to be the barriers to adolescent girls accessing, remaining and learning in education?

After the focus groups had had a comprehensive discussion on the issues preventing girls from accessing, remaining and learning in education, the groups were asked to rank the five issues they considered to be the principal barriers to adolescent girls' education from 1 to 5 in order of importance, with 1 being the most important.

The results from the FGDs were then collated and presented in the following ways:

- The relative weighting of each barrier to adolescent girls' education: the relative importance the focus groups attached to an issue, according to the ranking of the issue from 1 to 5, in order of importance.
- The aggregate number of first place rankings: the number of focus groups ranking each barrier to adolescent girls' education as the most important, according to the ranking of the issue from 1 to 5, in order of importance.
- The incidence of each barrier to adolescent girl's education: the number of focus groups ranking each barrier from 1 to 5, in order of importance.



The second section of each FGD focused on recommending potential solutions. Each group was asked:

[2] What do you consider to be the solutions to adolescent girls accessing, remaining and learning in education?

During the FGDs the groups were asked to rank the issues they considered to be solutions to adolescent girls' education from 1 to 5 in order of importance, with 1 being the most important.

The results from the FGDs were then collated and presented, as with the barriers, in the following ways:

- The relative weighting of each solution to adolescent girls' education: the relative importance the focus groups attached to an issue, according to the ranking of the issue from 1 to 5, in order of importance.

- The aggregate number of first place rankings: the number of focus groups ranking each solution to adolescent girls' education as the most important, according to the ranking of the issue from 1 to 5, in order of importance.
- The incidence of each solution to adolescent girl's education: the number of focus groups ranking each solution from 1 to 5, in order of importance.

Each FGD thus had both quantitative as well as qualitative outcomes.

A moderating team of five executive staff moved between research teams to ensure consistency and quality and most regional research teams held daily debriefing sessions to evaluate the day's work. Half way through the NCAGE all the teams met to discuss preliminary findings.

Focus group facilitators were chosen for their extensive experience working with the target groups and many were trained social workers. Wherever possible during the consultation, women led focus groups for girls and men led focus groups for boys.

Desk research on adolescent girls' education, education in Sierra Leone and global trends in education was undertaken by the Street Child UK team to contextualise the findings of the NCAGE.

Data input and analysis was undertaken by SCoSL's database team and Street Child UK, who carried out the write up of the report in collaboration with the moderating team and research team leaders.



- 1. Discussion on barriers to education for adolescent girls
Discussion on solutions to education for adolescent girls**



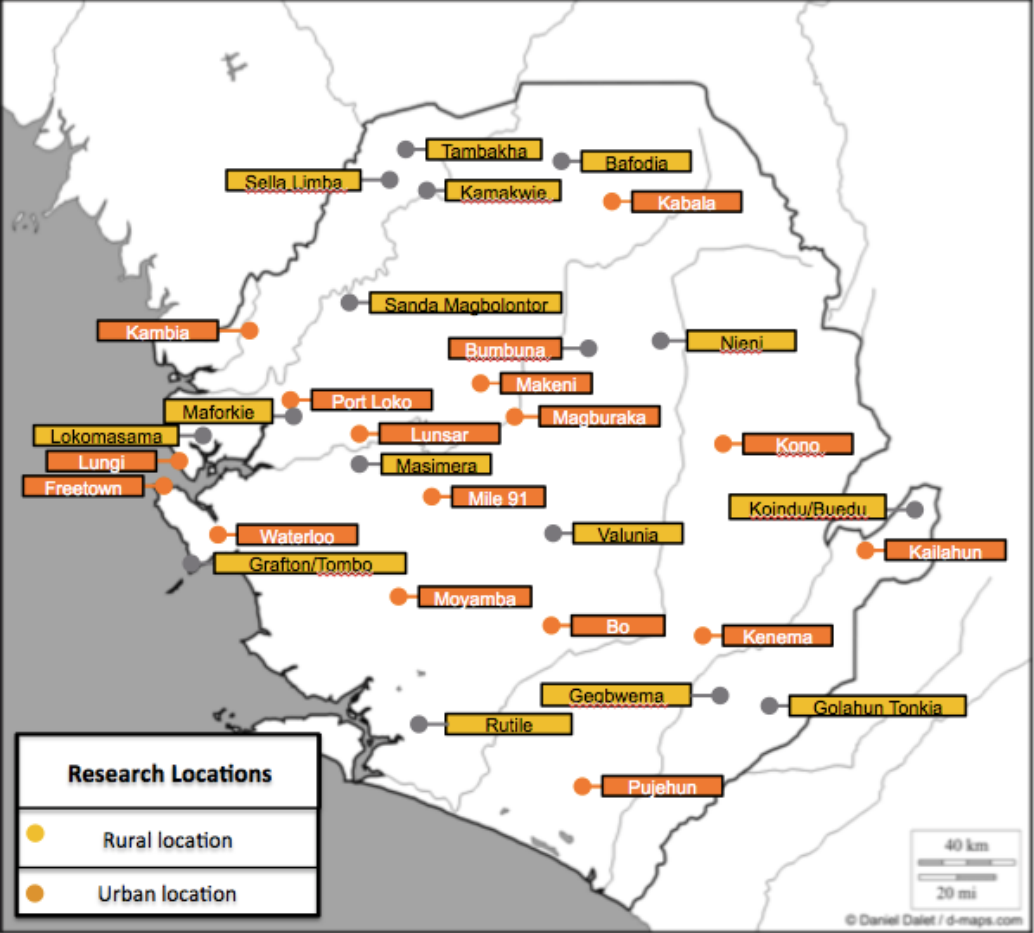
- 2. 1-5 Ranking agreed for key barriers/solutions**



Each FGD lasted 60 – 90 minutes

**FOCUS GROUP
DISCUSSION FORMAT**

LOCATIONS
Street Child of Sierra Leone’s 32 project locations



Focus Group	Rural	Urban	Total
In- School Girls	25	49	74
OOS Girls	25	44	69
Boys	16	26	42
Stakeholders	17	24	41

Interviews*	Rural	Urban	Total
In-School girls	375	683	1058
OOS girls	293	698	991

*Structured Individual Interviews

Child Protection Statement

The consultation was carried out in accordance with the Street Child and Street Child of Sierra Leone child protection policies. Permission for interviews and photographs were granted by an adult caregiver or social worker. For child protection purposes the names and locations of each child were changed within the report.

Limitations

The Street Child NCAGE was carried out in two weeks, a timeframe that was possible thanks to the extensive field staff at SCoSL's disposal and their expertise in carrying out similar research such as the Street Child Ebola Orphan Report 2015 and the National Headcount of Street Children in Sierra Leone 2012.

The limitations of time meant that structured individual interviews with girls were necessarily short. Moreover, despite training and oversight by research team leaders in facilitation and note-taking, the level of skill in recording rich detail and an ability to draw out the underlying issues under discussion was markedly better in some teams than others.

Although all girls were given the opportunity to speak to a woman on particularly sensitive issues⁴², insufficient numbers of female staff meant many structured individual interviews were conducted by men. Similarly, many of the FGDs were facilitated by male staff. However, all those facilitators were trained in child protection and working with girls, and had several years' experience in the field of social work, mitigating the effect upon some of the girls' responses.

It is worth remarking that there was a trend towards somewhat homogenous answers within focus groups across the country. For example, the phrases 'peer group influence', 'trained and qualified teachers' and 'sex for grades' were expressed frequently, if somewhat interchangeably, in discussions. This may indicate the influence that prevalent Government and NGO language and advocacy has had on respondents, and is perhaps an issue that would warrant separate research.

42. And in several cases, social workers made appointments to follow-up with issues in the coming days and weeks.

FINDINGS: DATA

Good learning outcomes depend on:

- + **access** to education,
- + **retention** in education, and
- + **quality** in education (through decent environments, contents and processes).

Access to education

It remains the case that some girls never set foot in the classroom indeed **13% of participants in the NCAGE's OOS girl FGDs had never enrolled in school**. Many more had been unable to access JSS and only 26% of girls had been able to enrol in SSS.

Amongst the OOS girls interviewed:

- 13% of girls had never enrolled in school
- 30% of girls had never enrolled in JSS
- 74% of girls had never enrolled in SSS
- 100% of girls had never completed SSS

Siblings

Girls were also asked whether they had siblings of school going age, and whether they were enrolled in school. **81% of girls reported having at least one sibling out of school**⁴³.

-
- 77% of in-school girls reported having at least one sibling out of school
- 85% of out of school girls reported having at least one sibling out of school
- 42% of 4550 siblings of school going age were reported as out of school by OOS girls
- 35% of 5007 siblings of school going age were reported as out of school by in-school girls
- It is possible that this figure is overly elevated. Though interviewers emphasized that the question related to siblings of school going age only, some girls may have reported siblings not of school going age.

CASE STUDY: Agness, Bo

Eleven year old Agness lives at Bandajuma Layout, in Bo district. She lives with both parents and eight siblings. Her father is a wheelbarrow pusher in the city, and the mother sells cooked rice around the community. Neither of her parents ever went to school or had any education.

43. It is possible that this figure is overly elevated. Though interviewers emphasized that the question related to siblings of school going age only, some girls may have reported siblings not of school going age.

GIRLS SPEAK OUT
STREET CHILD 2015 / 2016



Agness is in school, attending class 3 of the Municipal Primary School, and five of her siblings are enrolled all in primary school (2 boys and 3 girls). Three of her siblings are not in school because of lack of money.

“Yes, maybe I am lucky I go to school, but I am not glad the others can't. My family needs money. Maybe my mother could work at the market.”



Retention in education

A closely related issue is the retention of girls in school. According to the data collected from the 991 OOS girls by the research teams during the NCAGE, of the 87% who had initially enrolled in school, they had become increasingly likely to drop out of primary school, JSS and SSS as they progressed, rising from 4% in classes 3 and 4 to 22% in JSS 3.

Moreover, the data collected revealed that there were notable **spikes** in the drop out rate:

[1] rising from 7% in class 5 to 14% in class 6, the last year of primary school, just before sitting the National Primary School Examination (NPSE), and

[2] rising from 12% in JSS1 to 22% in JSS3, the last year of JSS, just before sitting the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE).

**OOS girls structured individual interviews:
 Drop out rate by class (%)**



The NCAGE revealed that dropping out of school was also a significant issue for the 1056 girls who were currently in school. **22% reported that they had dropped out at some stage of their education**, although they had been able to re-enrol at a later date.

Number of OOS girls who reported one or both parents had never enrolled in school:

77%

Number of in-school girls who reported one or both parents had never enrolled in school:

66%

The NCAGE structured individual questionnaires with in-school and OOS girls asked girls whether their parents went to school, and when they dropped out. A remarkably high 77% of out of school girls reported that one or both of their parents had never enrolled in school at all. In comparison, 66% of in-school girls - a still high percentage - responded that one or both of their parents had never attended school.

Illiteracy rates in Sierra Leone are high – less than half of the population is literate, and particularly high amongst women. 38% of women are able to read compared to 59% of men (UNESCO, 2013)⁴⁴ This finding supports existing data that suggests a correlation between parental illiteracy, and school enrolment and retention, in particular of the mother (UNESCO, 2013). Data from the structured interviews also showed that out of school girls were more likely to have out of school siblings of school going age.

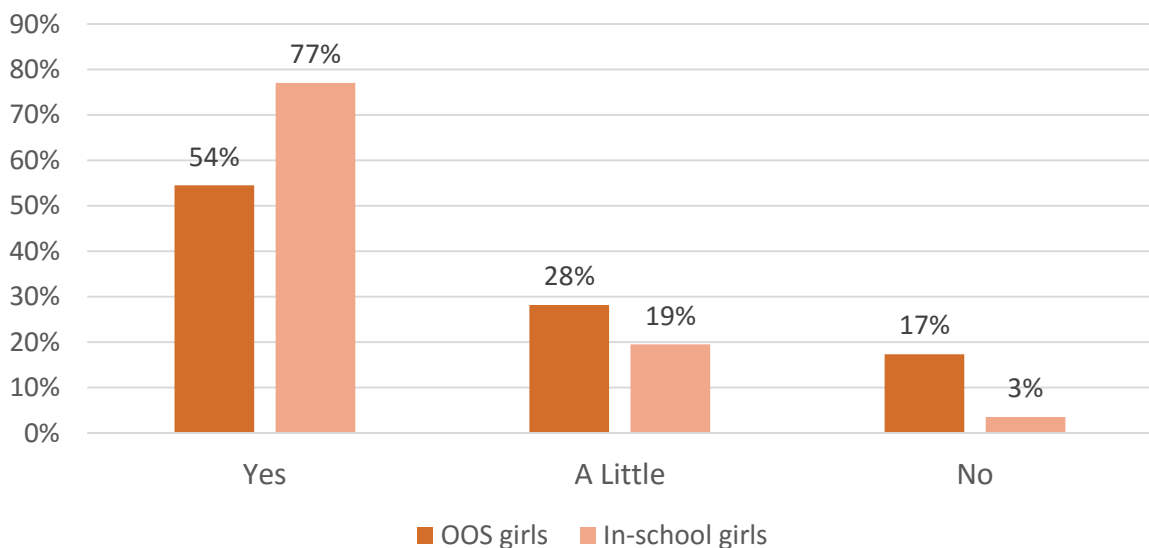


44. www.uis.unesco.org/literacy/Documents/UIS-literacy-statistics-1990-2015-en.pdf Adult and Youth Literacy 1990-2015

QUALITY IN EDUCATION: LEARNING OUTCOMES
Structured individual interviews

During the Street Child NCAGE, interviewers conducted a very simple reading and writing test with the OOS and in-school girls. The test was corroborated by the girls self-reporting as to whether they were able to read and write. As expected, there was a clear advantage to being in school when it came to basic reading and writing ability. 97% of girls who had never been to school were unable to read and write at all. Only 54% of OOS girls were able to read and write a few basic words, compared to 77% of in-school girls. 17% of OOS girls were unable to read and write at all, compared to 3% of in-school girls.

**NCAGE OOS and in-school girls:
Comparative reading ability**



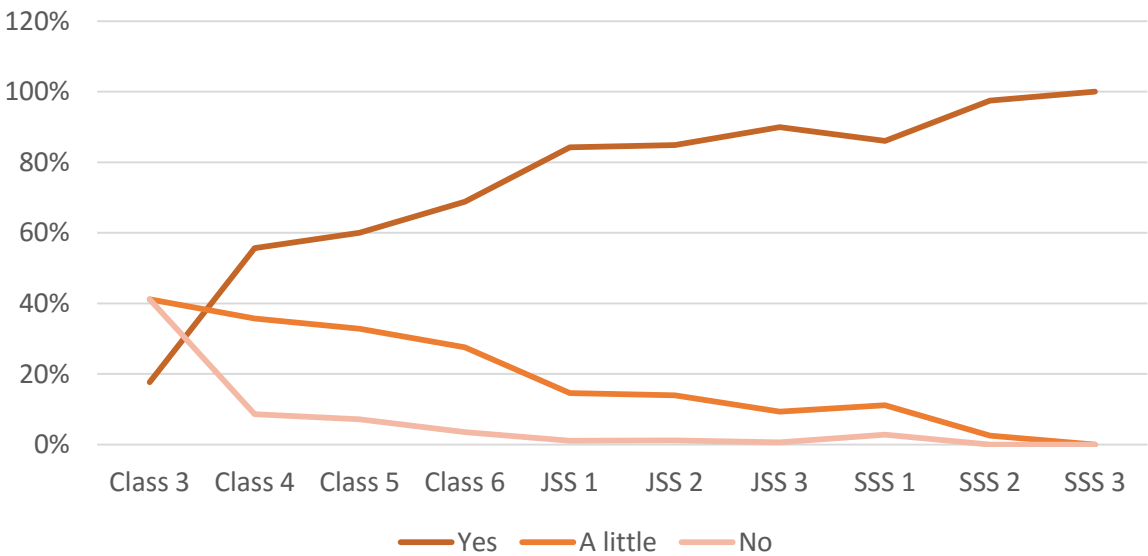
Predictably, the results of the basic reading and writing tests show a clear increase in ability to read and write as the girls progress through the classes and this trend is reflected amongst both OOS girls and in-school girls. The NCAGE data shows that the ability amongst OOS girls to read and write rises significantly once they had completed JSS1, from 35% to 52%. A similar spike was observed for the in-school girls, from 69% to 84%.

It is a critical finding of the NCAGE that girls start dropping out from school at the very moment they are on the brink of acquiring essential life skills in numeracy and literacy.

NCAGE OOS Girls: Ability to read and write by education level reached at point of dropping out



NCAGE In-school girls: Ability to read and write by education level

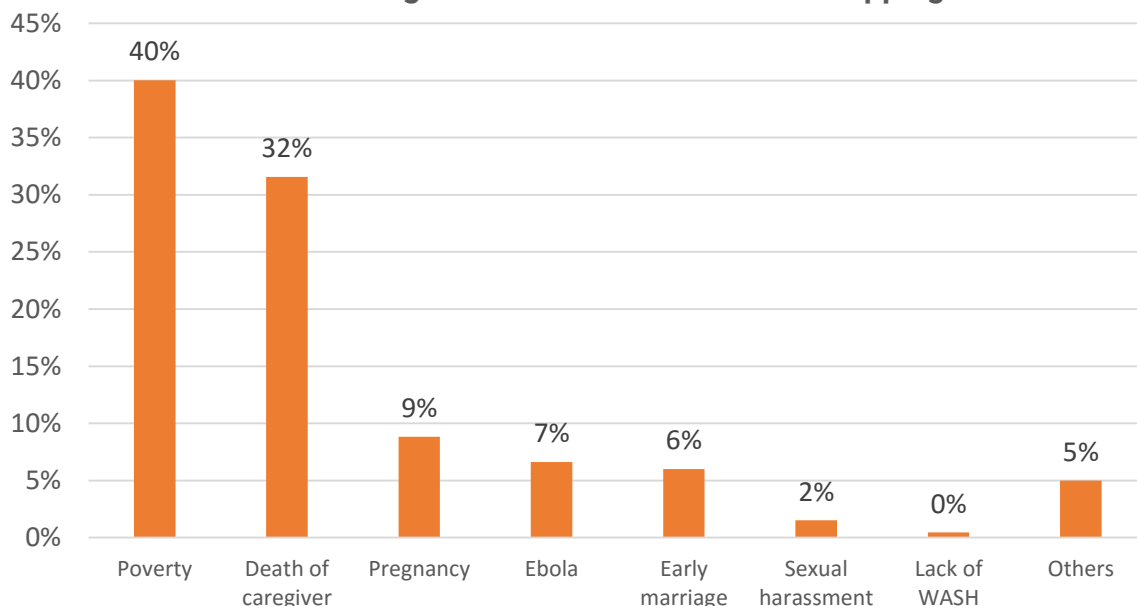


BARRIERS TO QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Personal reasons for dropping out of school

- 991 out of school girls were asked why they personally had dropped out of school
- 40% cited poverty, 32% the death of a caregiver and 9% teenage pregnancy.

NCAGE OOS girls: Individual reasons for dropping out



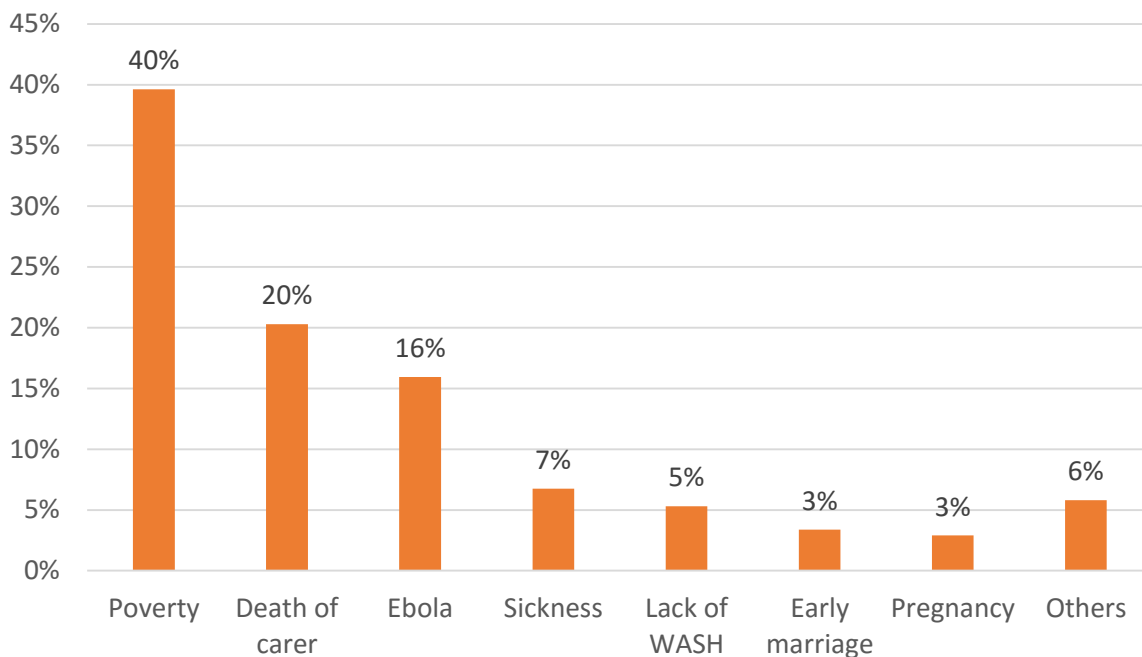
In-School Girls

- The 22% of school going girls that had dropped out of education at some stage were asked why they had dropped out
- Like the OOS girls, 40% cited poverty, 20% reported the death of a primary caregiver to be the primary factor and 14% cited Ebola⁴⁶
- It is notable that significantly fewer in-school girls cited teenage pregnancy (3%) and early marriage (3%) than the OOS girls. This may indicate that if a girl drops out of school due to pregnancy or early marriage she is less likely to later return.

The reason given of ‘Ebola’ may be slightly inflated by girls interpreting the enforced nationwide school closure between September 2014 and April 2015 as a period of ‘drop out’ - although interviewers were instructed to discount this as a period of dropping out.

⁴⁶ The reason given of ‘Ebola’ may be slightly inflated by girls interpreting the enforced nationwide school closure between September 2014 and April 2015 as a period of ‘drop out’ - although interviewers were instructed to discount this as a period of dropping out.

NCAGE In-school girls: Individual reasons for dropping out



BARRIERS TO EDUCATION
Focus Group Discussions

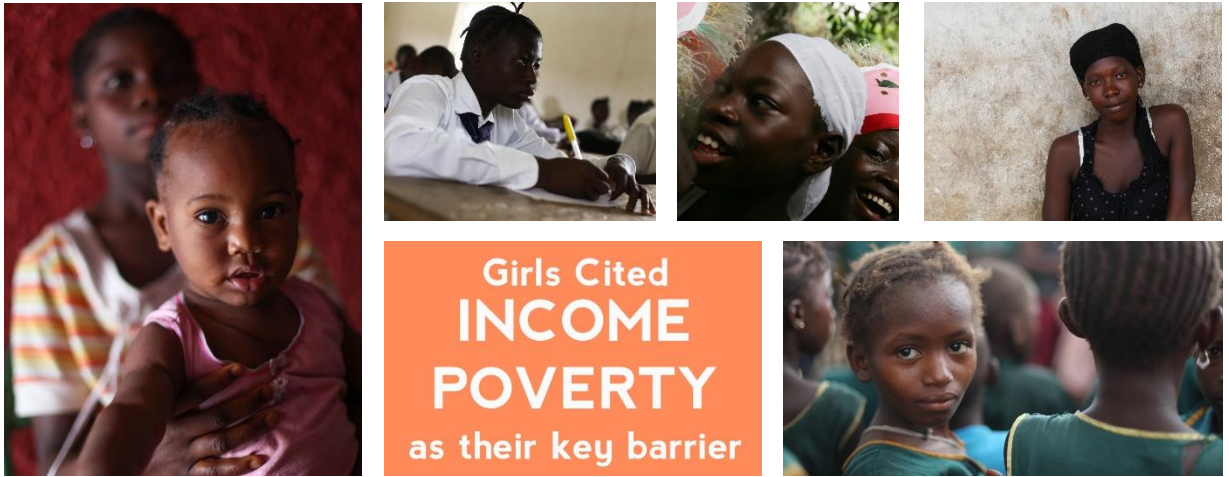
OOS and In-school Girls’ focus group discussions

Both in-school and OOS FGDs overwhelmingly identified income poverty as the top barrier to adolescent girls’ education; by its relative weighting, by the aggregate number of first place rankings, and by its incidence in the focus groups’ top five⁴⁷. 95% of the in-school girls’ FGDs and 88% of the OOS girls’ FGDs placed it in their top five barriers to education.

Teenage pregnancy was identified by both the OOS and the in-school focus groups as the second most important barrier to adolescent girls’ education by all three measures, with the OOS groups ranking it slightly higher⁴⁸. 80% of the OOS girls’ group and 74% of the in-school girls’ focus groups placed it in their top 5 barriers to education.

47. OOS girls’ FGDs gave income poverty a relative weighting of 73% and 49% ranked it as the primary barrier to education. In-school girls’ FGDs gave income poverty a relative weighting of 79% and 57% ranked it as the primary barrier to education.

48. OOS girls’ FGDs gave teenage pregnancy a relative weighting of 58%, and 23% ranked it as the primary barrier to education. In-school girls’ groups gave teenage pregnancy a relative weighting of 56% and 20% considered it to be the primary barrier to education.



The results show a notable distinction between the in-school and OOS girls' focus groups with respect to what they perceived to be the third and fourth barriers to adolescent girls' education. The OOS girls' ranked the **loss of a primary caregiver** as the third most important barrier to education with 57% of groups ranking it in their top 5 barriers to education⁴⁹.

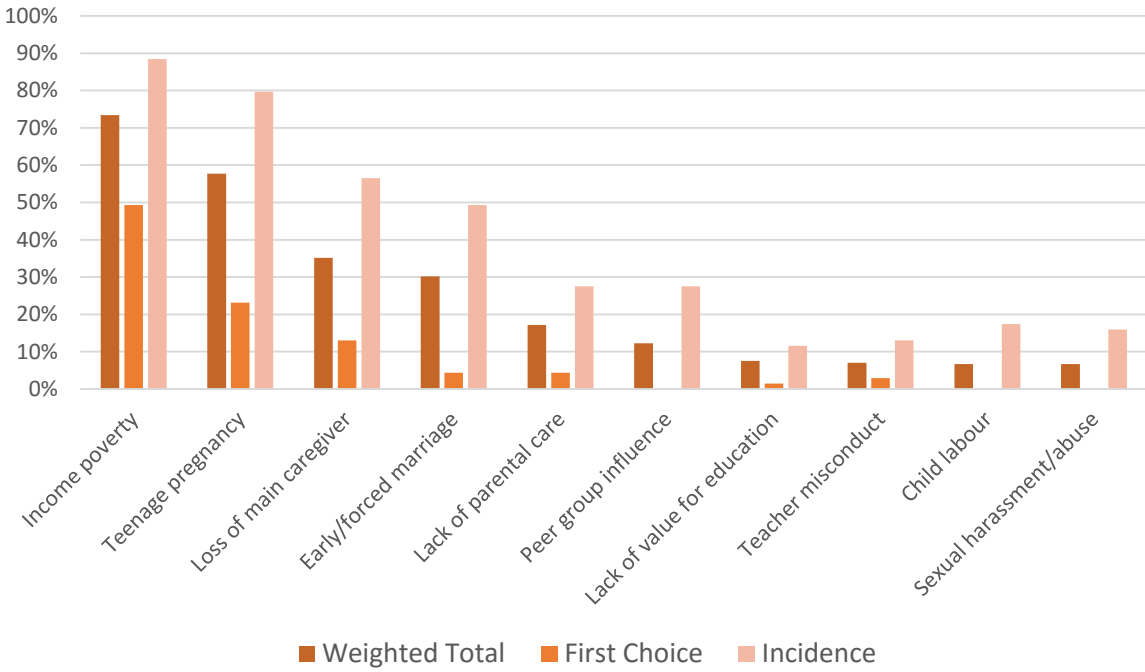
The in-school girls in contrast perceived **early marriage** to be the third most important barrier to adolescent girls' education with 55% ranking it in their top 5 barriers to education⁵⁰. The results were reversed for the fourth barrier, with OOS girls ranking early marriage fourth and in-school girls ranking the loss of a primary caregiver fourth⁵¹. The results may thus indicate a mismatch between what in-school girls fear and what OOS girls have experienced.

Lack of parental care and supervision was identified by both the OOS and the in-school focus groups as the fifth barrier to adolescent girls' education⁵². The OOS girls' and in-school girls' groups also rated **peer group influence, teacher misconduct, child labour and sexual harassment or abuse** in their top barriers to education.

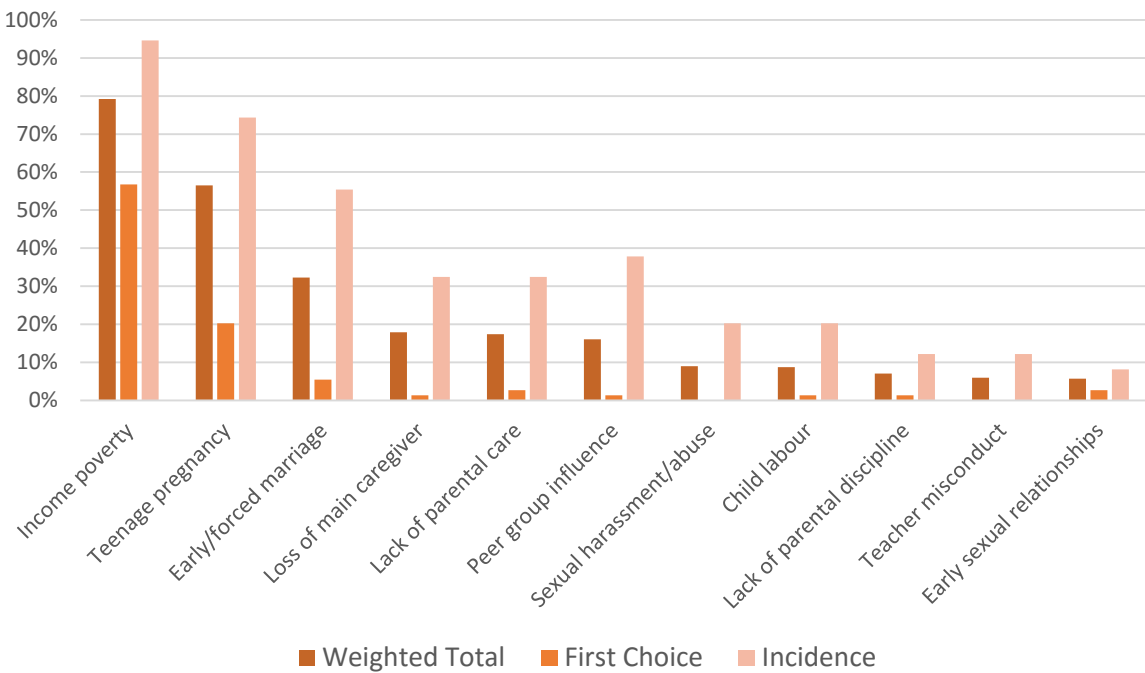
It is interesting that the OOS girls' groups ranked **lack of value for education** seventh whilst it did not feature in the in-school girls' top ten barriers. Instead the in-school groups ranked **sexual harassment or abuse** more highly than the OOS girls' groups and included **lack of parental discipline** and **early sexual relationships** in their top barriers to education.

-
- 49. OOS girls FGDs gave loss of a primary caregiver a relative weighting of 35%, with 13% of groups identifying it as the primary barrier to education.
 - 50. In-school girls FGDs gave early marriage a relative weighting of 32%, with 5% ranking it as the primary barrier to education.
 - 51. In-school girls' FGDs gave the loss of a primary caregiver a relative weighting of 18%, 1% ranked it the primary barrier and 32% ranked it in their top 5 barriers. OOS groups gave early marriage a relative weighting of 30%, 5% of groups ranked it as the top barrier, and 49% ranked it in their top 5 barriers.
 - 52. In-school and OOS FGDs gave lack of parental care and supervision a relative weighting of 17%, 4% of OOS groups and 3% of in-school groups rated it the most important barrier and 28% of OOS groups and 32% of in-school groups placed the issue in their top 5 barriers to education.

NCAGE OOS Girls' focus groups: Top ten barriers



NCAGE In-school Girls' focus groups: Top ten barriers

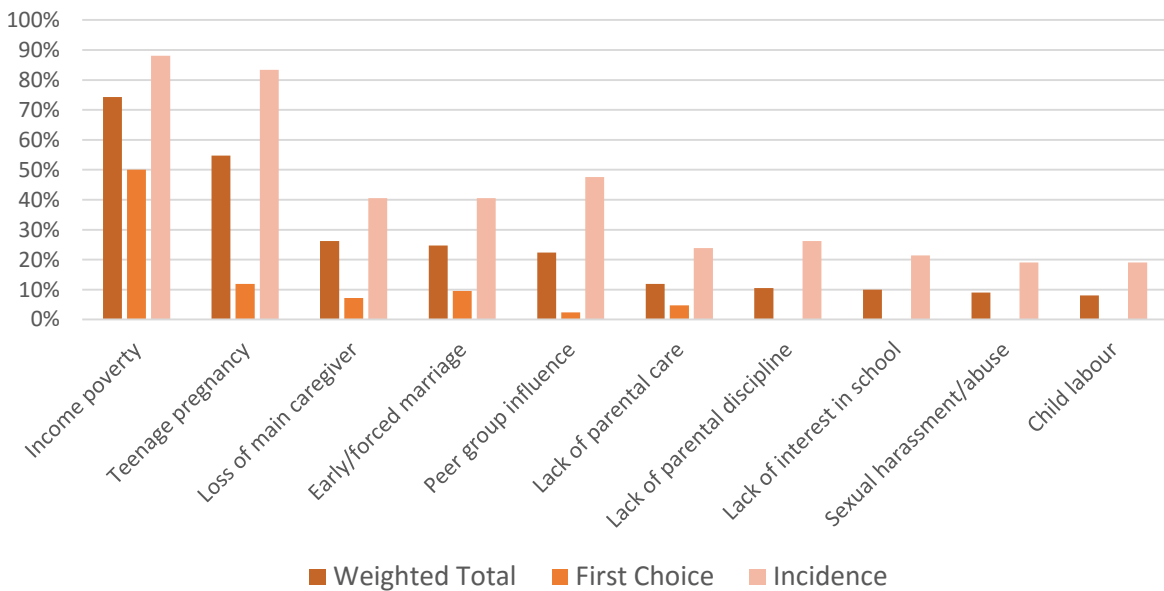


BOYS' FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Like the girls the boys also rated **income poverty and teenage pregnancy as the top two barriers to girls' education** by all three measures. 88% of boys FGDs placed income poverty in their top 5 barriers to education⁵³ whilst 83% of boys' FGDs placed teenage pregnancy in their top 5 barriers⁵⁴. The boys' FGDs identified the **loss of a primary caregiver** as the third barrier to adolescent girls' education⁵⁵ and **early marriage** as the fourth barrier⁵⁶.

It is a notable that the boys' FGDs ranked **peer group influence** more highly than the girls' FGDs, with 48% of groups ranking it in their top 5 barriers. It is also notable that the boys' FGDs ranked **lack of parental care and supervision, lack of parental discipline** and **lack of interest in school** above **sexual harassment and abuse** and **child labour**.

NCAGE Boys' focus groups: Top ten barriers



- 53. The boys' FGDs gave income poverty a relative weighting of 74% and 50% of groups ranked it as the primary barrier to education.
- 54. The boys' FGDs gave teenage pregnancy a relative weighting of 55% and 12% of groups ranked it as the primary barrier to education.
- 55. The boys' FGDs gave the loss of a primary caregiver a relative weighting of 26% and 40% ranked it in the top five barriers. 7% considered it to be the primary barrier.
- 56. The boys' FGDs gave early marriage a relative weighting of 25% with 40% ranking it in their top 5 barriers to education and 10% of groups considering it to be the primary barrier to education.

STAKEHOLDERS' FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The stakeholders' FGDs also rated income poverty as the top barrier to adolescent girls' education by all three measures⁵⁸. 83% placed it in their top 5 barriers. Like the girls' and boys' FGDs the stakeholders' FGDs considered **teenage pregnancy**⁵⁹, and **lack of parental care and supervision**⁶⁰ to be top barriers to adolescent girls' education. However, in contrast, the stakeholders did not rank the **loss of a primary caregiver** highly.

Interestingly, the stakeholders' FGDs rated the **lack of value for education** as the second primary barrier to education, with 45% of groups placing it in their top 5 barriers⁶¹, in contrast to the OOS girls' FGDs who ranked it seventh and the in-school girls' FGDs who did not include it in their top ten barriers. Similarly, both the boys' and the stakeholders' FGDs perceived adolescent girls' **lack of interest in school** to be a top barrier to education.

Yet this barrier was not articulated by the girls' focus groups and does not appear to be supported by the girls' responses in their structured individual interviews: 84% of OOS girls expressed a desire to return to school and almost all of the remaining 16% (of whom 76% were unable to read or write) desired skills or vocational training.

Whilst girls may be reticent to report a lack of interest in education, the perception of boys' and stakeholders' FGDs with respect to lack of value for education and lack of interest in school may be indicative of a culture of **low expectations in regard to girls' education**. In a similar vein, the stakeholders' FGDs **rated peer group influence** as a more important barrier than the girls' or the boys' FGDs⁶².

It is also of interest that the stakeholders' FGDs did not include **sexual harassment or abuse, child labour or teacher misconduct** in their top ten barriers to adolescent girls' education. Instead, they included the more structural problems of a **lack of qualified teachers** and **no local school**, which did not feature in the girls' top 10 barriers.

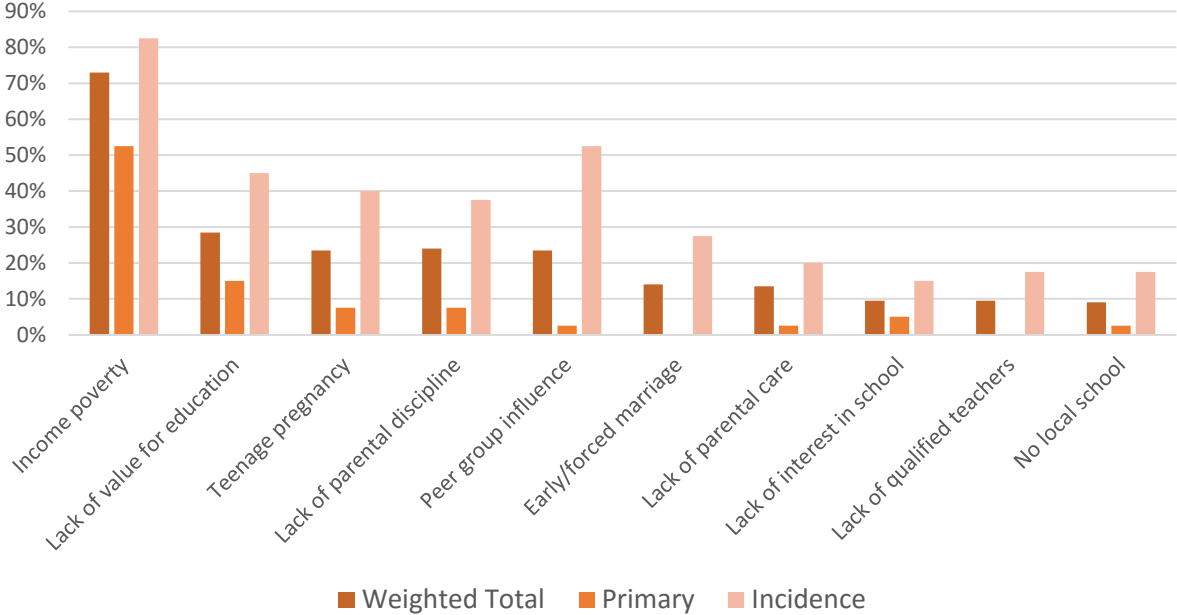


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- 58. The stakeholders FGDs gave income poverty a relative weighting of 73%, with 53% ranking it as the primary barrier to education.
 - 59. The stakeholders' FGDs gave teenage pregnancy a relative weighting of 24% with 8% ranking it first and 40% placing it in their top 5 barriers.
 - 60. The stakeholders' FGDs gave lack of parental monitoring or discipline a relative weighting of 24% with 8% of groups ranking it first and 38% placing it in their top 5 barriers.
 - 61. The stakeholders FGDs gave lack of value for education a relative weighting of 29%, with 15% ranking it as the primary barrier.
 - 62. Stakeholders' FGDs gave peer group influence a relative weighting of 24%, 53% placed it in their top 5 barriers to education and 3% ranked it as the primary barrier to education.





NCAGE Stakeholders' focus groups: Top ten barriers



PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO EDUCATION FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

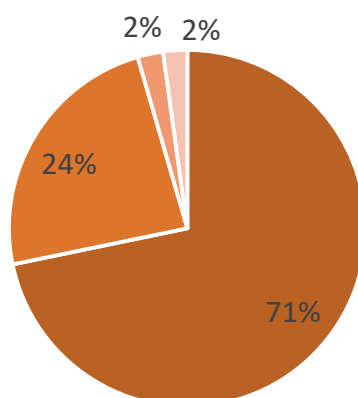
Structured Individual Interviews

OOS GIRLS

OOS girls were asked two principal questions relating to their future education during their structured individual interviews. Firstly, they were asked whether they wanted to return to school, and secondly, what would help them to return to school.

- In response to the question as to whether they wanted to return to school, 84% of the OOS girls responded that they wanted to go back to school.
- It is notable that of the 16% (119 girls) who did not wish to return to school, 76% were unable to read and write
- 71% of OOS girls identified **scholarships (school fees and school materials)** as the primary solution to education barriers. A further 2% identified the closely linked **income generation**.
- 25% of OOS girls identified **skills training**, with almost all the girls who had said they did not wish to return to school selecting specified skills or livelihood training as what would most help them.
- 2% of OOS girls identified **advocacy with parents** as aiding their return to school.

NCAGE OOS girls: What would help you go back into education?



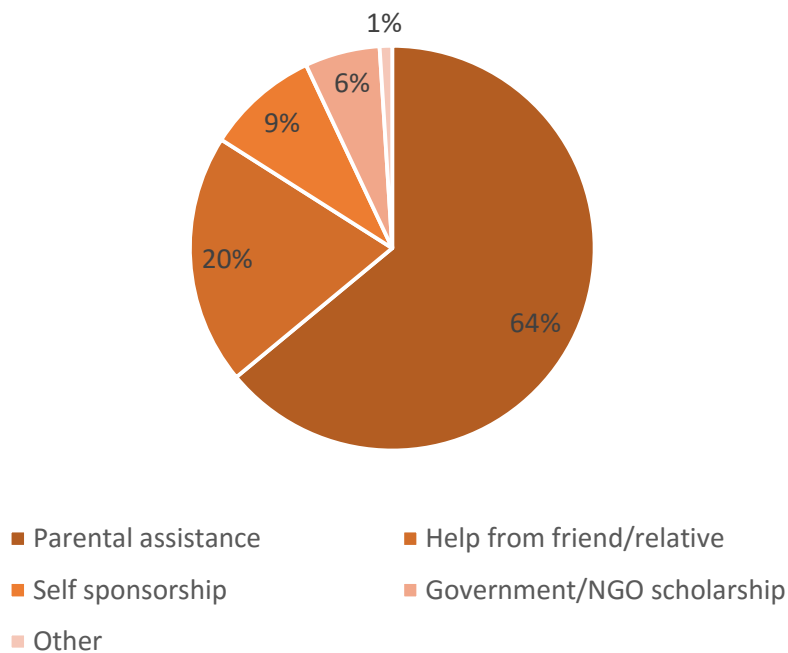
■ Scholarship ■ Skills training ■ Income generation ■ Advocacy with parents

IN-SCHOOL GIRLS

The 22% (210 girls) of in-school girls who had reported that they had dropped out of school at some point were asked how they had been able to return to school. **It is notable that all the reasons are essentially financial.**

- 64 % of girls cited **parental assistance**, with 15% of them specifying that their parents had been able to start or improve a business.
- 20% cited **help from a friend or a relative**.
- 9% cited **self-sponsorship**, saying they had supported themselves in school through petty trading or farming.
- Only 6% said they had been assisted by a **government or NGO scholarship**.

NCAGE In-school girls: How were you able to go back to school?

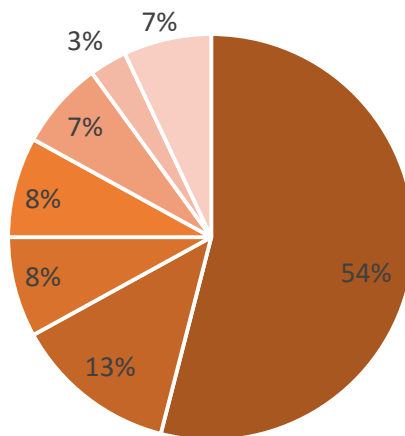


In-school girls were also asked what would help them improve their learning in school.

- 54% of the in-school girls identified a **scholarship** as the primary solution to improving their learning in school.
- It is highly notable that the second most popular solution to improve their learning in school, for 13% of the in-school girls, was **parental encouragement and supervision** – which perhaps reflects a culture of low expectations towards girls learning – an issue articulated in the FGDs.
- 8% identified **taking responsibility for their own study**

- 8% identified **improving school facilities and learning materials** as the best solution to improving their learning in school.
- 7% of the in-school girls said that **increased access to trained and qualified** would most improve their learning in school
- 3% said that **counselling** support would be of most benefit.

NCAGE In-school girls: What would improve your learning in school?



- Scholarships
- Parental encouragement & supervision
- Take responsibility for own study
- School facilities/learning materials
- Trained & qualified teachers
- Counselling
- Other

Focus group discussions

Girls' Focus Groups

The OOS and in-school girls' FGDs identified **scholarships (school fees and materials)** to be the primary solution to the barriers to adolescent girls' education with 69% of the in-school girls' groups and 67% of the OOS girls' groups ranking it in their top 5 solutions⁶³. The OOS girls' FGDs ranked a linked financial solution, **advocacy with the Government for free education** in fifth⁶⁴.

However, beyond the top solution, there are notable distinctions between the priorities of the OOS and in-school FGDs, which can be attributed to the differences in their educational circumstances and priorities.

For example, the OOS girls' FGDs identified **income generation support for caregivers** as the second most popular solution⁶⁵. In contrast, the in-school girls' FGDs ranked **income generation support for caregivers** comparatively lower, in fifth place⁶⁶. The OOS girls' FGDs rated **family planning** as the third most popular solution⁶⁷. In comparison, the in-school groups rank **family planning** eleventh⁶⁸.

The in-school girls' FGDs instead ranked **improving school facilities and the availability of learning materials** as their second most popular solution⁶⁹, a solution that the OOS girls' FGDs ranked seventh. The in-school groups also identified **teacher training** as their third most popular solution⁷⁰, a solution that did not feature in the OOS girls' FGDs top ten solutions.

It is worth noting that both groups ranked solutions focused on improving **parenting** fourth⁷¹. Focus groups' suggestions included parenting workshops, advocacy with parents on care and education of girls, and education of parents.

63. The in-school girls' groups gave scholarships a relative weighting of 58% with 43% ranking it first. The OOS girls gave scholarships a relative weighting of 54% with 32% ranking it first.

64. The OOS girls' FGDs gave advocacy with the government a relative weighting of 20%, 16% ranked it their top solution and 23% placed it in their top 5.

65. The OOS FGDs gave income generation support for caregivers a relative weighting of 29%, with 16% of groups ranking it first and 38% of groups including it in their top 5.

66. The in-school FGDs gave income generation support for caregivers a relative weighting of 19%, with 11% of groups ranking it first and 28% of groups including it in their top 5.

67. The OOS girls' FGDs gave family planning a relative weighting of 23% with 42% of groups placing it in their top 5, and 7% of groups ranking it their top solution.

68. 16% of in-school girls' FGDs ranked family planning in their top 5, and 1% ranked it their top solution.

69. The in-school FGDs gave improving school facilities and availability of learning materials a relative weighting of 22%, with 39% of groups including it in their top 5, although only 3% of the groups ranked it as their top solution.

70. The in-school girls' FGDs gave teacher training a relative weighting of 21%. 8% of groups ranked it their top solution with 35% of groups ranking it in their top 5.

71. The OOS groups gave improving parenting a relative weighting of 22% and the in-school girls' groups a relative weighting of 19%. 7% of both groups ranked it as their top solution, with 39% of OOS girls' groups and 34% of in-school focus groups ranking it in their top 5.

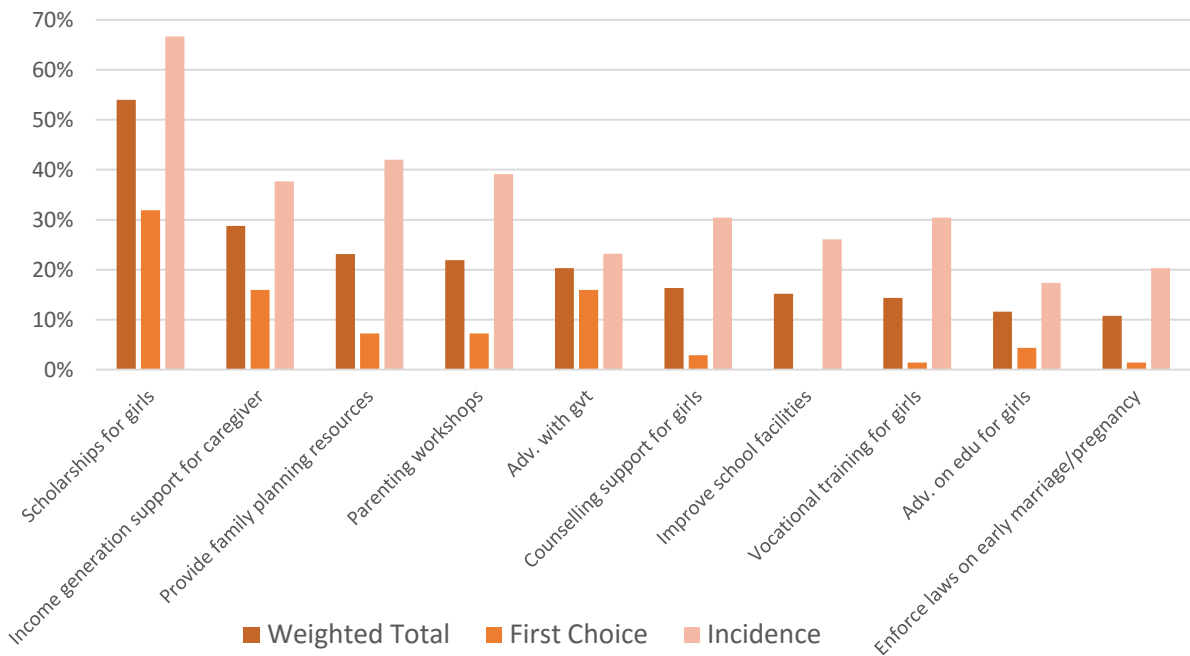
GIRLS SPEAK OUT

STREET CHILD 2015 / 2016

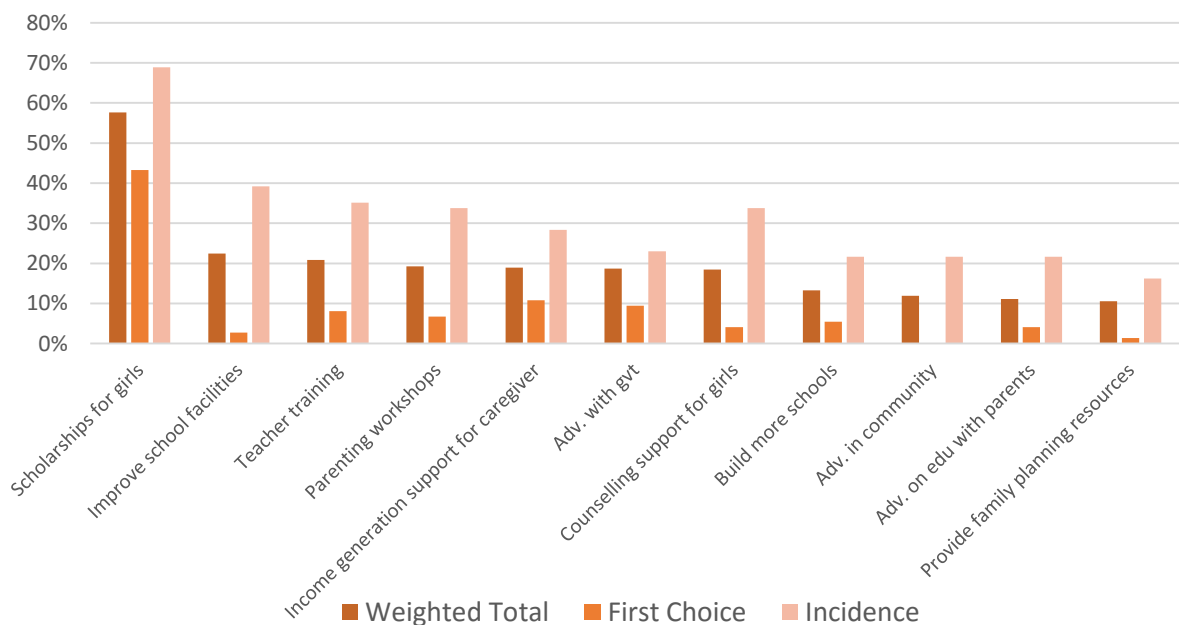


The results of the **NCAGE** thus indicate that there is quite a contrast between the in-school girls' and OOS girls' priorities. Whilst the in-school groups focused on solutions that have the greatest impact on girls' learning in education by improving the quality of education, the OOS groups focused on solutions that have the greatest impact upon girls' access to and retention in education.

NCAGE OOS girls' focus groups: Top ten solutions



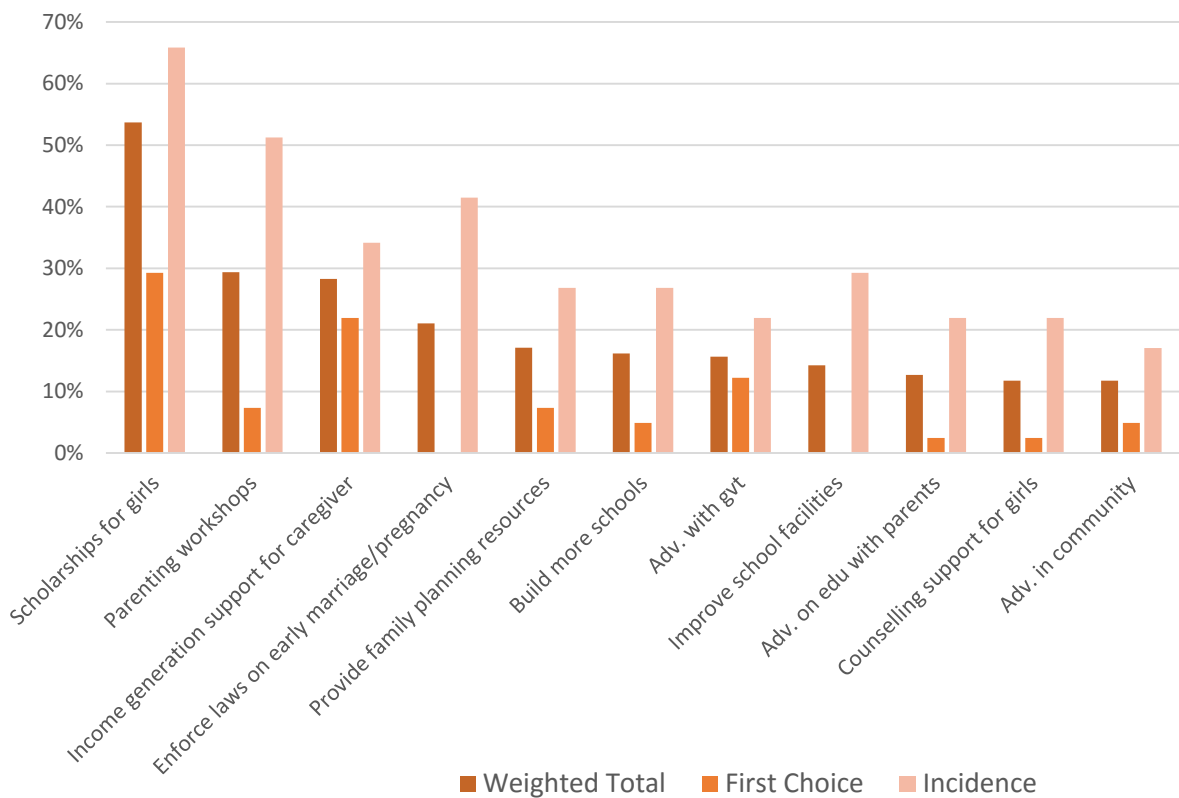
NCAGE In-school girls' focus groups: Top ten solutions



Boys' Focus Groups

Like the girls' FGDs, the boys' ranked **scholarships** as their top solution⁷². The boys' FGDs ranked solutions focused on improving **parenting** second⁷³ and **income generation support for caregivers** as their third solution⁷⁴. The boys' FGDs ranked the **enforcement of bylaws on early marriage** as their fourth solution⁷⁵. The boys' FGDs ranked **family planning** fifth⁷⁶.

NCAGE Boys' focus groups: Top ten solutions

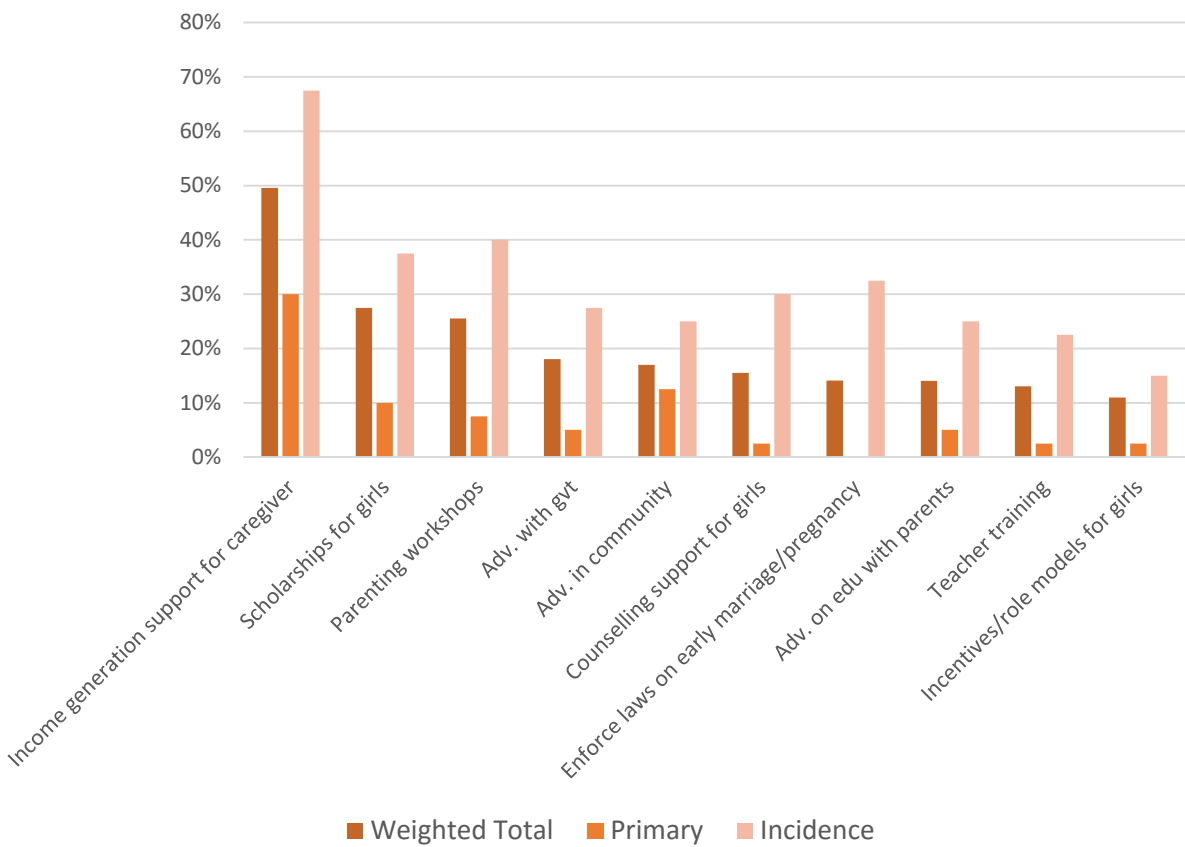


- 72. The boys' FGDs gave scholarships a relative weighting of 54%, with 29% of groups ranking it first, and 66% placing it in their top 5.
- 73. The boys' FGDs gave parenting solutions a relative weighting of 29%, with 51% placing it in their top 5, and 7% ranked it as their top solution.
- 74. The boys' FGDs gave income generation support for caregivers a relative weighting of 28% with 22% ranking it as their top solution and 34% ranking it in their top 5 solutions.
- 75. The boys' FGDs gave enforcement of laws on early marriage a relative weighting of 21% with 41% of groups ranking it in their top 5. None of the groups ranked it the top solution, however.
- 76. The boys' FGDs gave family planning a relative weighting of 17%. 7% of groups ranked it first, with 27% ranking it in their top 5 solutions.

Stakeholders' Focus Groups

In contrast to the other FGDs, the stakeholders' FGDs prioritised **income generation support for caregivers** above **scholarships** as the top solution⁷⁷. Both solutions are financial and the contrast might be attributed the groups' interests.

NCAGE Stakeholders' focus groups: Top ten solutions



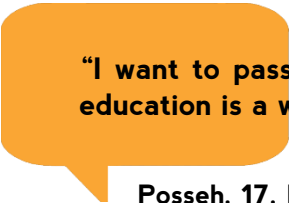
77. The stakeholders FGDs gave income generation support for caregivers a relative weighting of 50% with 30% ranking it first and 68% of groups ranking it in their top 5. The Stakeholders gave scholarships a relative weighting of 28%, with 10% of groups ranking it first and 38% ranking it in their top 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The Street Child NCAGE has found there to be many barriers to education across a range of sectors. However, the results of the Street Child NCAGE indicate that **income poverty was overwhelmingly identified as the most important barrier** to access to, retention in and learning in education for adolescent girls. In one of the least developed countries in the world, with an estimated 75% of the population living on less than US\$2 a day (UNICEF, 2008)⁷⁸, this result may seem unsurprising. However this does not detract from its importance.

Girls in school and out of school used the opportunity of the consultation to appeal to NGOs, government and their parents to send them to school. These barriers are real and experienced by girls of all ages: 86% of the 991 OOS girls interviewed indicated that they wish to return to education, but are currently unable.



“I want to pass the BECE and progress with my education. A woman with an education is a woman with substance.”

Posseh, 17, Kono OOS FGD

In many ways income poverty is not gender-specific. Family poverty and loss of a caregiver affect boys as well as girls in the family (although several focus groups reported that in poor families, expenditure on boys’ education may be prioritized over girls) Yet **poverty also affects girls in gender-specific ways**: FGDs explicitly linked poverty to issues of early /forced marriage, teenage pregnancy, transactional sex and vulnerability to sexual abuse, all of which impact upon girls’ access to and retention in school, and upon their learning outcomes.

These issues are discussed further below and are additional barriers to adolescent girls’ education. Therefore, although income poverty was identified as the most important barrier in the NCAGE, the **issues preventing adolescent girls from accessing, remaining in and learning in school should be seen as related and interconnected.**

BARRIER: Income poverty

The **girls’ perceptions of income as the most important barrier to adolescent girls’ education was supported by their personal experiences**, as well as boys’ and stakeholders’ perceptions. Income poverty, the inability of families to pay for their girls to go to school, was mentioned in every one of the 226 FGDs. 95% of the in-school girls’ groups and 88% of the OOS girls’ groups ranked it in their top 5 barriers, with 100% of rural in-school groups ranking it in their top 5 barriers.

40% of the OOS girls cited income poverty as the principal reason they had dropped out of school during their structured individual interviews, as did 40% of the in-school girls who had dropped out at some stage. 88% of the boys' and 83% of the stakeholders' FGDs also ranked income poverty in their top 5 barriers. The FGDs' responses as to the best solutions to adolescent girls' accessing, remaining in and learning in education also corroborate the finding that income poverty is the key barrier to adolescent girls' education.

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 181 out of 188 countries on the UNDP Human Development Index in 2015⁷⁹. In terms of income poverty, 57% of the population is still estimated to be living on less than US\$1.25 a day (UNDP, 2015)⁸⁰. Youth unemployment or underemployment is estimated to be 70% (UNDP 2015)⁸¹. In practice, this level of income poverty means that many families are unable to afford to send their girls to school, or choose not to spend extremely meagre resources on their girls' education. Studies have found that 48% - 56% of households who do not enrol their children in school do not do so for lack of money for fees and other school-related costs. (WFP, 2011; UNICEF, 2008)⁸².

In Sierra Leone family poverty has deepened during and since the Ebola crisis, and presents an acute threat to the education of the most vulnerable children (World Bank, 2015)⁸³. After just the first six months of the Ebola crisis it was estimated that household incomes had been reduced by nearly 30% as a result of the crisis, with the most severe burden falling upon the poorest. For the 57% of the population estimated to be living on less than US\$1.25 a day, the 'day equivalent' loss in per capita income equated to not having income for the basics for 169 days⁸⁴. Although the effects of the Ebola crisis and the collapse of the iron-ore industry on Sierra Leone's economy are still not yet fully known, it is estimated that Sierra Leone's GDP will have contracted by 23.5% in 2015, with an estimated GDP loss of US\$1.4bn⁸⁵.

The results of the NCAGE echo previous findings on disparities in education due to gender, socio-economic status and location. The structured individual interviews indicate that income poverty as a barrier to education appears to disproportionately affect girls living in rural areas. 41% of OOS girls in rural areas identified poverty as the deciding factor for dropping out of school compared to 29% in urban areas.

79. [Human Development Report 2015](#), UNDP, 2015

80. [Human Development Report 2015](#), UNDP, 2015.

81. [About Sierra Leone](#), UNDP, 2015

82. Education Sector Plan quoting the Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment, World Food Programme, 2011 and a 2008 UNICEF survey of children.

83. [Socio-economic impacts of Ebola in Sierra Leone June Word Bank Group](#), 2015

84. [Socio-Economic impact of the Ebola Virus Disease in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Policy Notes Volume 1, Numbers 1 – 5](#), UNDP, 2014

85. "Update on the Economic Impact of the 2014 -2015 Ebola Epidemic on Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea", World Bank (2015). See also "UPDATE 1-Sierra Leone economy to shrink one-fifth amid mining crisis- IMF" predicting Sierra Leone's economy will contract by 21.5%. See also, "Ebola in Sierra Leone: Economic Impact and Recovery", Dr Peter Davis, DFID/Adam Smith International (2015)

86. [The Agenda for Prosperity](#), (The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper III), GoSL, 2013. See also [The Sierra Leone Education Country Status Report](#), GoSL, 2013

These effects have been found to be cumulative: in 2013, over 90% of urban boys in the top economic bracket were enrolled in school, compared to 60% of poor rural girls aged 6 - 14. Very few of the poorest rural girls ever complete secondary school – 1% compared 56% of urban boys from the richest families (GoSL, 2013)⁸⁶.

HUNGER



Though income poverty was highlighted as the main issue, ‘hunger’ was often linked to, or conflated with, poverty. An inability of parents to meet the girls’ basic needs at home, let alone finance their education, highlights the depth of poverty in which many families find themselves. The World Food Programme found that before Ebola almost half the population – 3 million people – were vulnerable to food insecurity. During Ebola this was estimated to rise substantially, so that 72% of the population – 4.8 million people – were considered vulnerable to food insecurity⁸⁷.

Hunger was separately raised as an issue in 7% of all girls’ FGDs, with rural OOS girls’ groups considering it a barrier most often (16%), followed by rural in-school girls’ groups (12%), although none of the groups rated it their primary barrier. School feeding programmes were suggested as a solution in 18% of girls’ FGDs.

86. [The Agenda for Prosperity](#), (The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper III), GoSL, 2013. See also [The Sierra Leone Education Country Status Report](#), GoSL, 2013

87. [“Food Insecurity on the Rise”](#), World Food Programme, 2015. See also [“The Socio-Economic Impacts of Ebola in Sierra Leone”](#), World Bank, 2015, estimating 2/3 of households to be insecure during EVD.

Although primary school is nominally free in Sierra Leone⁸⁸ **the direct and indirect costs of schooling in Sierra Leone remain high.** Focus groups added that school costs in other ways: school uniform, textbooks, exercise books and stationery are required throughout, as well as lunch every day, all of which represent an expense. In addition to the cost of school materials, an increasing level of **termly secondary school fees** are levied from JSS 1 upwards, significantly adding to the cost of the girl's education.

Girls may attend one of the many unapproved schools in Sierra Leone, which charge pupils in order to pay teachers. Even in approved government schools, teachers levy charges for learning materials, exams or classes, to supplement or supply their salary. Focus groups noted that **informal school charges** are often levied on pupils, with two focus groups placing the specific issue of excessive school charges in their top five barriers to adolescent girls' education.



“My grandmother cannot pay for the extra pamphlets I need to study for school. I don't have money for lunch.”

Mariama, 12, Makeni in-school FGD

Other research strongly supports the NCAGE finding that income poverty is the primary barrier to adolescent girls' education. A study undertaken by Plan UK in 2013 highlighted the immense pressure upon students to pay extra fees or hidden costs. Studies show that children living in the poorest 20% of households are three times more likely to be out of school (UNESCO, 2007). And a study undertaken in the aftermath of the Ebola crisis found that children's primary concern about returning to school was that their families could not afford school fees. (Save the Children et al., 2015)⁸⁹. UNICEF has estimated that sending one child to primary school in Sierra Leone would cost a family 25% of its annual income, whilst a child in class 6 would cost the family 29% of its annual income (UNICEF, 2008)⁹⁰.

Data collected from structured individual interviews with OOS girls showed **notable spikes in the drop out rate in examination years** both in class 6, just before sitting the NPSE and in JSS3, just before sitting the BECE. This may be attributed in part to the inability of families to pay the extra costs associated with those years, which can include extra classes, extra school materials and examination fees.

88. The Free Primary Education Policy, 2001 and [The Education Act](#), Sierra Leone, 2004

89. [Children's Ebola Recovery Assessment: Sierra Leone](#) (Save the Children, World Vision International, Plan International & UNICEF, 2015)

90. [The Out-of-School Children of Sierra Leone](#), UNICEF, 2008

“I couldn't go to JSS 3 because it was more expensive. There is the BECE exam. My mother couldn't pay for it.”

Kadiatu, 17, Bo OOS FGD

The FGDs top suggested solutions related primarily to **money for school fees and materials**, referred to most often as **'scholarship'**. There was some discussion that the Government, or NGOs should provide such scholarships, especially for vulnerable children such as orphans. Most often, and particularly in the girls' focus groups, the respondents did not specify the provenance of a scholarship however, indicating that the financial assistance could come from any source, including their parents.

The proposed solution, **advocacy with the Government for free education**, should also be regarded as a closely linked financial solution to the barrier to adolescent girls' education presented by income poverty. It was the second most popular first choice solution for the OOS girls' groups, alongside income generation for caregivers, although it featured in less of the groups' top 5 solutions.

Moreover, the OOS girls' focus groups identified the closely related **income generation for caregivers** as the second most popular solution with 38% of the OOS groups ranking it in their top 5 solutions. The comparatively lower ranking by the in-school girls' groups of income generation support for caregivers and advocacy for free education may be a reflection upon their focus on solutions that would improve learning, as opposed to the OOS girls' groups focus on solutions that would have the greatest impact upon access.

Rural OOS girls groups ranked income generation for caregivers as a solution more highly than urban OOS girls groups⁹¹, perhaps reflecting the lack of access to third part support. It is also of note that the urban OOS girls' groups ranked advocacy with the Government more highly than the rural OOS girls' groups, giving it a relative weighting of 23% compared to 15%. This may reflect the perception in rural areas that the Government does little to meet their needs.



91. Rural OOS girls' FGDs gave income generation support for caregivers a relative weighting of 38%, with 28% of groups ranking it first and 44% of groups ranking it in their top 5 solutions. In comparison, 24% urban OOS girls' groups gave it a relative weighting of 24%, with 9% of groups ranking it first and 34% of groups ranking it in their top five solutions.



Stakeholders ranked income generation most highly, and placed three financial-based solutions in their top five. Income generation support for the primary caregiver was the top proposed solution, followed by scholarships. All groups discussed seed lending, farming support, small business support and loans as possible methods by which to generate such income. Assisting parents gain employment, with an emphasis frequently placed on 'self reliance', was also suggested.

The perception that some form of **financial support** is key to enabling adolescent girls access, be retained in, and learn in education is supported by the personal experiences recounted through individual structured interviews with the 2000 girls. 71% of OOS girls responded that a '**scholarship**' would help them return to school. Although only 6% of the in-school girls who had been OOS stated that a **scholarship** had enabled them to do so, 64% of them had been enabled through **parental assistance**, and 20% through **the support of a friend or relative**, and 9% through **self-support**. Moreover, 53% of the in-school girls identified a **scholarship** as the solution that they believed would most improve their ability to learn.

This data from the NCAGE may support other research findings that girls' schooling seems to be more responsive to shifts in income and prices than boys' schooling, and that demand for schooling in rural areas responds most to changes in income and the proximity of available schools. The abolition of school fees, targeted scholarships and cash transfers for poor families, have thus been especially advantageous for raising girls' educational enrolment in rural areas (World Bank, 2011)⁹². UNICEF has reported that one of the most important programmes to assist in the narrowing of gender disparities has been the provision of scholarship and incentive programmes to young girls, to allow them to complete primary education and continue on to secondary school (UNICEF, 2008)⁹³.

Moreover, girls revealed that income poverty and an inability to pay for the extra fees or hidden costs affects adolescent girls in gender-specific ways. Income poverty was also explicitly linked in the FGDs to the issues of **teenage pregnancy, child marriage and sex for grades**.

This NCAGE finding is supported by other studies that have shown that the inability to pay for extra fees or hidden costs is linked with teachers coercing female pupils for sex, money or gifts in exchange for grades (Plan, 2013)⁹⁴. This may be expected to have a significant impact on learning, with a lack of incentive to pass exams.

92. [Learning for All, World Bank Education Strategy 2020](#), World Bank, 2011 See also, "The Power of Educating Adolescent Girls" (Lloyd 2009) for an examination and analysis of policies and programmes that aim to promote adolescent girls' education.

93. [The Out-of-School Children of Sierra Leone](#), UNICEF, 2008

94. 'Building Skills for Life Case Study: Girls' experience of violence in schools in Bombali and Moyamba,' unpublished internal document, Plan UK (2013)

“If I want to study then it is for me, it is to better me; if I want to promote [to the next class], it is nothing to do with that, I must sleep with [the teacher] or think of a way to pay...”

Fatmata, 17, Bumbuna in-school FGD

BARRIER: Loss of a primary caregiver

The loss of a primary caregiver was the second most common response in the girls’ individual structured interviews to why they had dropped out of school, with 31% of the OOS girls and 18% of the in-school girls who had dropped out at some stage, citing it as the principal reason.

It is common in Sierra Leone for children to lose their primary caregiver to illness or accident. In 2013 310,000 children had lost one or both parents to any cause (UNDP, 2015)⁹⁵ and according to Street Child’s recent research, 12,023 children lost their primary caregiver during the Ebola crisis (Street Child, 2015)⁹⁶. The FGDs reported that **this shock (loss of income, relocation, new caregiver) often causes children to drop out of school.**

CASE STUDY

ISATU, 15, Kabala

“I am an Ebola orphan. My mother who was my main caregiver died of Ebola. My father died a year ago when I was at primary school. Immediately after his death I dropped out of class 3 as my mother could not pay my school fees. She engaged me in petty trading and that allowed me to return to school.

“After my mother’s death I came to live with my uncle and his wife. I am responsible for all the domestic work before I go to school. After school I have to sell cake. If I do not, I will not go to school. I lack encouragement at home.

“I sleep on a mat in the parlour of the three-room apartment. I eat once a day, usually late in the evening after the day’s sale. I often get sick with toothache. I have been taken to the hospital for medication but mostly I am treated with local medicine. I get used clothes from friends and my aunt’s daughter.

“I want a scholarship so that I can further my education..”

95. [Human Development Report 2015](#), UNDP, 2015

96. [The Street Child Ebola Orphan Report](#), Street Child, 2015.

It is of note that **the loss of a primary caregiver was reported as a greater issue in urban areas than in rural areas.** In the structured individual interviews, 47% of the urban OOS girls reported that they had dropped out of school due to the loss of a primary caregiver compared to 31% of rural OOS girls. This difference may be attributable to the fact that in urban areas, families tend to be dependent on a primary caregiver's wage, or equivalent (i.e. their individual economic activity, such as selling) whilst in rural areas families' economic lives are more collective (living off the land), so the loss of a single caregiver is potentially less disruptive than in urban areas. It is also the case that a family living in an urban setting may have less strong extended family and community ties in the area in comparison to rural areas.

The OOS girls' focus groups ranked the loss of a primary caregiver as a significantly more important barrier to adolescent girls' education than the in-school girls. 57% OOS groups ranked loss of a primary caregiver in their top 5 barriers compared to 32% of the in-school girls' groups, who ranked **teenage pregnancy** and **early marriage** more highly. This data perhaps suggests that whilst the in-school girls fear early or forced marriage might remove them from education, the **OOS girls' experience is that the loss of a primary caregiver is in fact more often a barrier to education.** It may also reflect the prevalence of current NGO and Government advocacy and discourse on teenage pregnancy as a major issue. In their structured individual interviews comparatively fewer girls attributed the cause of being out of school to teenage pregnancy than the loss of the primary caregiver.

The boys' focus groups recognised the importance of the loss of a primary caregiver with 40% including it in the top five barriers. However, it is of interest that the stakeholders' focus groups did not include the loss of a primary caregiver within their top 10 barriers to adolescent girls' education. Their second barrier was rather the **lack of value for education.**

Because the extended family network in Sierra Leone is strong, often the child is taken in by a relative. Of the in-school girls who had dropped out of school at some stage, 20% had been able to return to school with the help of a friend or relative. However, focus groups reported in particular that when a girl's care and education becomes the responsibility of an **extended relative** (e.g. aunt, uncle or stepmother) their needs may be prioritised less than other children in the family, and the child may be neglected and / or abused.



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97. This trend was replicated by the OOS and in-school girls' focus groups, with the loss of a main caregiver being ranked most important to urban OOS girls' groups, 57% of whom ranked it in their top 5 barriers. It was least important to rural in-school girls' groups, of whom only 24% ranked it in their top 5 barriers.
98. 9% of OOS girls and 3% of in-school girls who had dropped out at some stage attributed the cause to teenage pregnancy.



“Some caregivers don't get on well with someone's else's child. A bad stepmother - child relationship can make girls drop out of school.”

Anonymous, Yengema (Kono rural) OOS FGDs

It is worth noting in this regard that some FGDs who highlighted **parenting workshops** as a solution to adolescent girls education often singled out foster and step-parents as being in particular need of support, mediation and counselling. However, the extra burden on the household (for example in the case of many Ebola orphans) may mean that the new caregiver – however willing - is unable to afford the schooling for the extra children.

“Both my parents are dead and now I live with my uncle. He says that I must sell for a whole year before I can go back to school.”

Fatmata, 17, Makeni

However, some orphaned girls reported living in **child-headed households**, where no adult caregiver has been able to take responsibility for the care of the child. In these situations, SCoSL's own experience is that girls' vulnerability is most acute of all, dependent on handouts from neighbours and well-wishers. The ongoing lack of income in this case can present a serious risk not only to the girls' education, but even to their survival, in particular due to lack of food.

“The only way to eat is when our aunt gives us some money or some food. She sells palm oil around the village. My sister and I do not have any business. My sister would like to sell pap if we have money.”

Maimouna, 15, Bo

95. [Human Development Report 2015](#), UNDP, 2015

96. [The Street Child Ebola Orphan Report](#), Street Child, 2015.

BARRIER: Teenage Pregnancy

Teenage pregnancy was ranked by both the OOS and the in-school focus groups as the second barrier to adolescent girls' education - 80% of the OOS girls' groups and 74% of the in-school girls' focus groups ranked teenage pregnancy in their top 5 barriers to education. Teenage pregnancy is an important barrier to adolescent girls' education, the structured individual interviews revealed that **9% of OOS girls had dropped out of school due to teenage pregnancy.**

The data on individual causes of drop out indicates that it is not as significant a barrier in practice as income poverty and the loss of a caregiver. However, comparatively fewer in-school girls (3%) attributed the cause of a previous drop-out to teenage pregnancy. This appears to confirm the specific difficulties involved in returning to school after having a child.

Teenage pregnancy is considered a national and community-wide problem in Sierra Leone. In 2013 the country ranked amongst the ten highest rates in the world⁹⁹, with 34% of all pregnancies in Sierra Leone attributed to teenage girls (GoSL, 2013)¹⁰⁰. High pregnancy rate has been identified as a strong contributing factor as to why school-aged children drop out of school (UNICEF, 2008)¹⁰¹. A study found that 13% teenage mothers had never been to school and 55% had dropped out and not returned since becoming pregnant (UNICEF, 2010)¹⁰².

Sierra Leone also has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world (Amnesty International, 2009)¹⁰³. Pregnancy is the leading cause of death for adolescent girls, and the youngest girls are particularly at risk (WHO, 2012) - 40% of maternal deaths in Sierra Leone are as a result of teenage pregnancy (GoSL, 2013)¹⁰⁴. It is further estimated that one third of teenage pregnancies end in (unsafe) abortions (WHO, 2012).

99. 'Rapid Assessment of Pregnant Adolescent Girls in Sierra Leone,' UNFPA, 2015. See also [Out-of-School Children of Sierra Leone](#), UNICEF, 2008 which found 38% of girls under 18 to have given birth.

100. "[Let Girls be Girls, Not Mothers!](#)" [National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy 2013 – 2015](#), GoSL, 2013. A '[Research briefing: Knowledge, Attitude and Practices of family planning in 13 districts of Sierra Leone](#),' Marie Stopes, 2013 found that whilst 95% of 15 – 35 year olds reported being currently sexually active, just 45% reported using a contraceptive method.

101. [Out-of-School Children of Sierra Leone](#), UNICEF, 2008

102. A Glimpse into the world of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone, UNICEF Sierra Leone, 2010. See also, "[Young People in Sierra Leone Today, Challenges, Aspirations, Experiences](#)", Restless Development Sierra Leone, 2012

103. Lives Cut Short: Make Pregnancy and Childbirth Safer in Sierra Leone, Amnesty International (2009)

104. "[Let Girls be Girls, Not Mothers!](#)" [National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy 2013 – 2015](#), GoSL, 2013



The enforced closure of schools during Ebola led to a reported rise in teenage pregnancies (DCI, 2015)¹⁰⁵. Estimates vary widely, but preliminary results from a rapid assessment conducted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on adolescent pregnancy indicate that more than 14,300 girls in Sierra Leone became pregnant during the Ebola crisis¹⁰⁶. Moreover, Ebola is reported to have led to a 30% increase in maternal deaths and a 24% increase in newborn deaths because patients did not access health care centres (VSO, 2015)¹⁰⁷.

The government discourages teenage pregnancy: according to President Ernest Bai Koroma, *“If girls are able to stay in school, postpone marriage, delay family formation and build their capacity, they will have more time to prepare for adulthood and participate in the labour force before taking on the responsibility of parenting¹⁰⁸.”* In April 2015, the MEST issued a decree excluding visibly pregnant girls from mainstream education and from sitting exams (Amnesty, 2015)¹⁰⁹, in effort to dissuade their peers from becoming pregnant.

It should be reiterated that the barriers preventing adolescent girls from accessing, remaining in and learning in school should be seen as related and interconnected and teenage pregnancy was linked to the barrier of **income poverty**. Focus groups reported some families pressuring their daughters to find a ‘boyfriend’ to help support the girl financially - particularly during the economic difficulties suffered through the Ebola crisis – which may result in teenage pregnancy. Focus groups reported the related issue of sexual harassment and abuse by older men, including teachers.

Other studies have reported that girls gained access to resources by engaging in **‘transactional sex’** with older men, at times with the encouragement of their families,

105. [A Mountain to Climb, Gender-based violence and Girls’ Right to Education in Sierra Leone](#), Defence for Children International, 2015. See also [‘Ebola Needs Analysis Project: Sierra Leone Multi-sector Needs Assessment Report ENAP’](#), ACAPS, April 2015 reporting that an increased risk of teenage pregnancy was perceived to be a major consequence of school closures, especially in low and medium exposure districts.

106. [In Sierra Leone, working with communities to curb teenage pregnancies](#), UNICEF, 2015. See also, [‘Teenage Pregnancy after Ebola in Sierra Leone: Mapping Responses, Gaps and Ongoing Challenges’](#), Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, 2015. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology policy statement, School Reopening Sub-Group – Special Needs Pregnant Adolescent School Girls, 2015 estimated 3000 girls had become pregnant. [“Shamed and Blamed, Pregnant Girls’ Rights at Risk in Sierra Leone,”](#) Amnesty, 2015 estimated the number to be “far higher”. Irish Aid reported that teenage pregnancy increased by up to 65% in some target communities due to the socio-economic conditions imposed by the outbreak, [Assessing Sexual and Gender Based Violence during the Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone](#), UNDP, 2015.

107. [Exploring the Impact of the Ebola Outbreak on Maternal Health Services in Sierra Leone](#), VSO, 2015

108. [Let Girls Be Girls, Not Mothers! National Strategy for reduction of Teenage Pregnancy, 2013 – 2015](#), GoSL, 2013

109. [“Shamed and Blamed, Pregnant Girls’ Rights at Risk in Sierra Leone,”](#) Amnesty, 2015.

during the greater financial difficulties brought about by Ebola¹¹⁰. It was reported that younger and more vulnerable women and girls were pursued and coerced by men who could not get sex elsewhere due to the ‘no touch’ policy promoted by GoSL during the crisis (UNDP, 2015)¹¹¹. Similarly, UNICEF has reported families ‘encouraging’ their daughters to have ‘boyfriends’, to provide an extra pair of hands with the farming, which at times leads to pregnancy (UNICEF, 2008)¹¹².

The focus groups also linked teenage pregnancy to the lack of a school in rural areas, forcing girls either to travel long distances to school, or stay with extended family or friends near to the school. In both sets of circumstances, perhaps due to a **lack of parental supervision**, a girls’ vulnerability to sexual abuse and consequently teenage pregnancy rises.

The boys’ focus groups supported the girls’ perceptions that teenage pregnancy is a key barrier, giving it a similar ranking. But the stakeholders’ groups ranked teenage pregnancy less highly, behind income poverty, lack of value for education and almost equal to lack of parental control or supervision, with 40% placing it in their top 5 barriers.

The FGDs revealed **cultural attitudes** towards teenage pregnancy to be both complex and contradictory. Groups discussed the growing pressure, once a girl sexually matures, to begin having children. Other research supports the finding that physical development is the principal signifier of age in Sierra Leone, rather than age (Yale Law School et al., 2013)¹¹³. At the same time, once out of school, a girl’s education is significantly deprioritized, and the pressure is on her to bring in a source of income. Motherhood is also stigmatized in the home and in the classroom. The girl may be forced to leave home and find care within the family of the father of her child.

“Giving birth is competitive. If you haven’t given birth, you are not a real woman. People treat you differently if you have a baby and return to school. This is why many girls choose to stay home. But we also laugh at girls who haven’t given birth. There is pressure from both directions.”

Adarla, 20, Kono OOS FGD

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110. [‘Teenage Pregnancy after Ebola in Sierra Leone: Mapping Responses, Gaps and Ongoing Challenges’](#), Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, 2015
111. [Assessing Sexual and Gender Based Violence during the Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone](#), UNDP, 2015.
112. [Out-of-School Children of Sierra Leone](#), UNICEF, 2008
113. [Before their time: Challenges to Implementing the prohibition against child marriage in Sierra Leone](#), Yale Law School, Plan UK and Plan Sierra Leone (2013)

CASE STUDY

Kadiatu, 17, Mile 91

“Teenage pregnancy is one of the biggest reasons that girls drop out in Mile 91. It happened to my best friend. We were in form 3 together and were very close. Things changed though when she stopped attending class to go to clubs instead. I knew she was meeting men there and then people began saying she’d fallen pregnant. Our other friends and me asked her about it but she denied she was pregnant.

“Then she was absent when we sat our BECE.

“I went to her house and, finally, her mother told me she was pregnant. She had gone to Freetown to have the baby.

“After she came back, she stayed away from school. She never resat her BECE. Then her baby fell sick and she went to the man that had got her pregnant to help with the medicine. But he denied it was his baby.

“Her family was able to care for her as they had the means. And even though I don’t think her or her family had a passion for education, eventually she decided she would go back to school. But the Principal wouldn’t allow her to return. I don’t know why or what his reasons were.

“There were three or four people pregnant when we sat our BECE. I think I know why it happens but I can’t understand it. Those girls think ‘life is short, we might as well enjoy it.’ But they rarely return to school. It must be hard to concentrate anyway when you’re thinking about your baby at home.

“If I could do anything to help this situation, I’d develop counselling for young girls to sensitise them and help encourage them to stay in school.”

It is of note that **access to free family planning** was identified by the OOS girls’ groups as the third most popular solution to addressing the barriers to adolescent girls’ education, with 42% of groups placing it in their top 5, compared to only 16% of in-school groups. Stakeholders’ and boys’ groups in particular highlighted girls’ ‘sexual urges’, and some noted that recreational sex, coupled with lack of knowledge or access to family planning, also resulted in teenage pregnancy. **Sex education in schools** was also raised as a potential solution in a minority of groups.

SECRET SOCIETIES, CULTURAL PRACTICES & FGM



Studies have emphasised the connection between Bondo (secret society) initiation ceremonies which symbolise a girl's transition to adulthood, and which include FGM and learning how to take on the responsibilities of being a wife and early marriage, teenage pregnancy and dropping out of school¹¹⁴. Girls as young as 12 participate. During Ebola, FGM was banned in effort to contain infection rates, but Sierra Leone currently has the fourth highest rate of FGM in the world with 90% of women aged 15 – 49 having undergone FGM (UNICEF, 2016)¹¹⁵.

Girls focus groups referred to 'negative/traditional/cultural beliefs and/or practices' as a barrier to education, including secret society participation (which necessitates FGM), as well as widespread belief in witchcraft, which can result in ostracisation of girls from school. 10% of girls' focus groups cited negative cultural beliefs/practices as one of the top five barriers to education.

The practice of FGM was only explicitly referred to in a few stakeholders' groups, and this likely reflects the extent to which the practice is taboo in Sierra Leonean society. FGDs reported that once Bondo has been completed, however, this is the point at which sexual maturity is perceived to be reached, and the girl is ready for marriage (regardless of age or progress in school). It is SCoSL's own experience that in 'Bondo' season, when initiations take place, attendance in rural schools in particular is heavily affected for several weeks.

114. [Out-of-School Children of Sierra Leone](#), UNICEF, 2008

115. [Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting: A Global Concern](#), UNICEF, 2016. See also [Country Profile, FGM in Sierra Leone](#), 28 Too Many, 2014

BARRIER: early / forced marriage

Early marriage and/ or forced marriage was identified by both the OOS and the in-school focus groups as an issue related to, but distinct from, teenage pregnancy, and as the third barrier to adolescent girls' education. 53% of the girls' focus groups ranked it in their top 5 barriers to education.

This is borne out by the data from the structured individual interviews. 6% of OOS girls stated that **early marriage** was their primary reason for dropping out of school. Far fewer (3%) of the in-school girls who had been out of school at some point had been able to return to school after marriage, although some had been sent back to school by their parents and one by her husband.

Although marriage of a child below the age of 18 is prohibited by the Child Rights Act 2007, Sierra Leone has the 11th highest rate of child marriage in the world¹¹⁶. 18% of girls are married by 15 and 44% by 18 (UNICEF, 2014)¹¹⁷. The socioeconomic consequences of child marriage are dire – school dropout rates for girls and maternal and infant mortality rates increase dramatically¹¹⁸.

CASE STUDY

Isatu, 16, Mile 91

"I used to live in Shenge. Life wasn't easy after my father died. My mother went crazy and was unable to look after me. She couldn't send me to school.

"Then my Uncle said I should move to stay with my Granny in Mile 91 as no one in Shenge was able to care for me. It was hard though. Nobody could give me money for transport so I had to struggle to get money for the journey.

"Now I live in Mile 91 with my Granny. She's blind. I sell cassava cake to survive and provide for our family. I can't attend school because I have to make money. If I could do anything though, I would get skills training and become a tailor.

116. [State of the World's Children 2015](#), UNICEF, 2014

117. [State of the World's Children 2015](#), UNICEF, 2014

118. [Before their time: Challenges to Implementing the prohibition against child marriage in Sierra Leone](#), Yale Law School, Plan UK and Plan Sierra Leone (2013)

Girls are **coerced into marrying early** by their families, or by older men, at the age of 17, 16, 15, or sometimes even younger. The FGDs highlighted **income poverty** to be a contributing factor in this regard, with families seeking hand over the care of their daughters, and girls agreeing to marry older men in hopes of escaping their current impoverished situation, indicating that income poverty affects adolescent girls' education in gender-specific ways.

The focus groups indicated that early marriage also led to families having **low expectations about girls' futures**, and thus discrimination at the point of access to school in favour of other siblings. Many focus groups reported that once the girl was married, her place was considered to be in the home. This view was emphasized most strongly in rural areas. Another study, which also reported high incidences of dropouts between classes 4 to 6, partially attributed this to pre-arranged customary marriages taking place after initiation in the **cultural practice** of Bondo¹¹⁹.

“A girl’s education is a waste because they definitely have to go to their husbands.”

Anonymous, Koindu stakeholder FGD

The focus groups' suggested solutions to the issues of **child labour**, as well as **teenage pregnancy, early and / or forced marriage** focused on two principal interventions: **enforcement of child protection laws and advocacy within the community**. Creation and enforcement of bylaws was seen as most effective; a quarter of all focus groups placed this in the top 5 in relation to early marriage and teenage pregnancy, compared to 12% on advocacy.

CASE STUDY

AdiKalie Sorie Bangura, Town Chief
Samaya, Tambakha chieftdom, North Sierra Leone

“There are many difficulties in keeping girls in school in Tambakha. There is no Senior Secondary School and the distance girls must travel is a problem. When children are sent out of the community to go to school there is no-one to help them. Girls are particularly vulnerable. Girls also drop out of school in the area because they run after boys and get pregnant.”



119. [Out-of-School Children of Sierra Leone](#), UNICEF, 2008

“The current Paramount Chief is very progressive and is focused on improving education. He has ensured that by-laws have been passed to fine or imprison those responsible for making an under-age girl pregnant.

“If parents take a child out of school without good reason they will be fined. Since the laws came into effect last year there have been no teenage pregnancies reported in Samaya and there has been a reduction in absences due to farm work. However, in order to truly support girls’ education Tambakha needs a Senior Secondary school.”

BARRIER: Lack of parental care and supervision

Parental attitudes towards the child and towards education may be a somewhat neglected area in terms of current government and NGO initiatives. Although no OOS or in-school girls stated that they had personally dropped out of school for lack of parental care and supervision, it was identified by the girls’ focus groups as a primary barrier preventing girls from accessing and remaining in education and from learning whilst there. Solutions focused on **improving parenting was raised in over 30% of the focus groups** as one of the five most important solutions.

Respondents raised the issues of **neglect, lack of care and lack of encouragement in education** and more generally, and discussed the consequences of a **lack of parental supervision, monitoring and discipline** in relation to girls’ behaviour both in and out of school.

“The responsibility for children’s desire to learn is with the parents. Discipline is lacking in so many homes.”

Anonymous, Stakeholder, Mile 91

Whilst the boys’ focus groups did not rank the lack of parental care and supervision quite so highly as the girls, the stakeholders’ focus groups ranked it virtually on par with **teenage pregnancy**. The groups discussed the linked issue of a **lack of value for education**, which the stakeholders’ focus groups rated most highly as their second barrier to adolescent girls’ education¹²⁰.

The groups also discussed the contribution of a **high parental illiteracy rate** to a lack of understanding of the importance of education, and its related demands such as home study, regular attendance, and progression through the education system. This is reinforced by the findings of the NCAGE, that an average of 72% of girls reported that one or both parents had never been to school.

120. compared to an issue that came seventh in the OOS girls’ groups and did not feature in the in-school groups’ top ten barriers.

Girls' groups reported that a primary caregiver's requirements upon girls to undertake **child labour**, be it domestic or commercial, was indicative of **parental attitudes to education**, as the girl's value as domestic or commercial labour was valued above their education. Moreover, 13% of in-school girls felt **parental encouragement and supervision** would improve their learning in school, the second most popular solution, in the structured individual interviews.

The groups highlighted the need not only for **community advocacy** on education, but specific one-on-one **counselling support**. They also appealed for parenting workshops, advocacy with parents on care and education of girls, and education of parents to teach parents how to support their child in education, and to avoid parental neglect. This was seen as particularly relevant in the case of **foster and step-parenting**, where familial ties were weaker.

BARRIER: Child Labour

Although no girls reported dropping out of school due to **child labour** in their structured individual interviews, 9% of the in-school girls who had dropped out at some stage reported being able to return through self-sponsorship. Moreover, child labour was reported as one of the top five barriers to education in 26% of girls' focus groups.

The Child Rights Act (2007) sets out a child's right to protection from exploitative labour, including labour if it deprives the child of its education.

Child labour is a wide-spread issue in Sierra Leone; UNICEF found 87% of children participating in a study in 2008 to be involved in at least one form of labour. Moreover, a study reported a direct correlation between Ebola and the closure of schools and increases of child labour and exploitation. Children reported taking on new roles and responsibilities to supplement household income. (Save the Children et al., 2015)¹²¹.

Two types of child labour were discussed in the focus groups. The first was **child labour for income generation**, either petty trading (principally in urban areas) or farming (in rural or peri-urban areas). Girls reported using petty trading as a way of raising the money for school, either full time, or in the evenings. Girls reported an effect of child labour was not having time or energy for study in the evenings, and being erratic or late in attendance at school.

The second type of child labour discussed was **domestic work**. Girls reported being primarily responsible for the burden of domestic chores in the household, over and above the boys. For example, girls reported being expected to cook, wash clothes and care for small children in the home.

121. [Children's Ebola Recovery Assessment: Sierra Leone](#) (Save the Children, World Vision International, Plan International & UNICEF, 2015)

“I sell cassava cake to survive and provide for our family. I can’t attend school because I have to make money. If I could do anything though, I would get skills training and become a tailor.”

Mariatu, 15, Kambia

The FGDs perceived petty trading and farming to be a greater issue than domestic work, as it was considered to present a greater barrier to access to, and retention in, school, whilst domestic work was considered to present a barrier to learning, due to its negative consequences on attendance and home study.

Under the system of **wardship (*Mehn pikin*)** children in poor families may be sent to live with more affluent relatives or friends, where they are vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and abuse (Keen, 2005)¹²². The child may be made to do all domestic work, alongside or instead of, going to school. Two focus groups specifically raised the issue of **internal child trafficking** as a top barrier to education. SCoSL’s experience is that many street-connected children are fleeing *Mehn pikin* arrangements. This response is supported by other studies. UNICEF, for example, has reported that children living with extended family members or caretakers are twice more likely to be involved in domestic child labour. (UNICEF, 2008)¹²³.

BARRIER: Harassment and “Sex For Grades”

Harassment in school was raised in focus groups as a major issue affecting adolescent girls’ education. 20% of girls’ focus groups reported sexual harassment and abuse as one of the top 5 barriers to education. Separately, 13% reported **misconduct by teachers** as one of the primary barriers to education. 2% of OOS girls cited sexual harassment as the reason they dropped out of school. Girls also reported **sexual harassment and abuse outside of the classroom**, by boys their own age, and by also older men in the community.

In Sierra Leone although the Sexual Offences Act (2012) protects girls from abuse, including from people in authority, up to 85% of the population of Sierra Leone falls under the system of customary law and the jurisdiction of local courts, rather than the general law. Moreover, communities often resort to informal law, where decisions are made by the Chiefs rather than going through the courts.

122. Keen, D., “Conflict and Colusion in Sierra Leone,” 2005. See also, Cline-Cole, R. and Robson, E., “West African Worlds, Paths through Socio-Economic Change, Livelihoods and Development,” 2005

123. [The Out-of-School Children of Sierra Leone](#), UNICEF, 2008

124. [The Sexual Offences Act](#), 2012

125. [Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone](#), 2007, International Alert

Focus groups discussed the widespread lack of enforcement of the laws, and the arbitrary meting out of punishments; those with means were often able to protect themselves. The groups thought that prevailing negative attitudes towards girls and gender stereotyping contributed towards the lack of protection the law offered to girls in practice.

Girls reported that in many cases, especially where the girl was unable to pay for extra costs of schooling, including exams, girls were harassed to provide **sex for grades** or to be promoted to the next class. It was noted that this could have a **negative impact on studying**, as girls could, or believed they could, only get good grades by bribing teachers. This is borne out by the campaign launched in April 2015 by the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy, entitled “No Sex for Grades Campaign”¹²⁶.

Linked is the issue of **corporal punishment** in schools. Girls reported excessive physical or psychological punishment - being beaten or asked to kneel down for hours, being asked to work on teachers’ farms as a punishment for not doing an assignment, lateness or being unable to pay an extra charge on time.



126. [Health Ministry launches “No sex for grades campaign”](#), Ministry of Health and Sanitation, 2015



“Teachers flog us seriously and ask us to go outside during examination to do jobs for them”

Anonymous, Kailahun rural, in-school girls FGD

However sexual harassment and abuse were not limited to the classroom. Girls reported abuse by boys their own age and older men in the community, and often by those in positions of power. Rape was raised as a traumatic event which may affect a girl’s ability to attend and remain in school. Boys’ attitudes to girl-specific support in the FGDs was sometimes negative and revealed the importance of engaging men and boys in combating the barriers to girls’ education.

“Girls have more privileges than us in school so we impregnate them so that we will all be at the same level.”

Anonymous, Yengema, Kono rural, Boys FGD

The importance of **sexual harassment** and **abuse** as a barrier to education is supported by other studies which reported that nine out of ten students in primary and secondary schools had experienced some form of violence with two thirds of girls reporting at least one or more form of sexual violence (Concern et al., 2010)¹²⁷ and that violence was the second most important factor, after poverty, in keeping adolescent girls and boys out of school (Plan, 2011)¹²⁸. Sexual abuse and violence and the prevalence of transactional sex is considered a serious and pressing issue in JSSs, inhibiting girls’ opportunities to learn (Reilly, 2014)¹²⁹. The issue of **commercial sex work** was raised in a small number of girls’ focus groups (5%) as a barrier to education.

It is of interest that the OOS girls’, boys’ and stakeholders’ groups all suggested the **enforcement of bylaws on early marriage and pregnancy** as an important solution to the barriers to adolescent girls’ education. There is evidence to suggest that the raising of awareness on girls’ rights can lead to a reduction in abuse, for example the classroom practice of sex for grades (Reilly, 2014)¹³⁰.

127. [Study on School-related Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone](#), Concern et al (2010)

128. ‘Girls’ access to and completion of lower secondary education in Sierra Leone: PPA Building Skills for Life Baseline Report’, unpublished internal document, Plan Sierra Leone (2011)

129. Reilly, A., Adolescent girls’ experiences of violence in school in Sierra Leone and the challenges to sustainable change, *Gender & Development*, 22:1, 13-29, 2014

130. Reilly, A., Adolescent girls’ experiences of violence in school in Sierra Leone and the challenges to sustainable change, *Gender & Development*, 22:1, 13-29, 2014

COUNSELLING FOR GIRLS



32% of girls' focus groups suggested that counselling support for girls was an important potential solution to the issues facing girls to access a quality education. In discussion, focus groups suggested that schools could establish a **counselling unit**, run by **female teachers**. These would offer advice and support on issues affecting girls, including sexual harassment and abuse. Of schools surveyed, only 30% of schools were reported to have a counselling unit. Counsellors would also act as **role models for the girls**.

Focus groups also noted that parents and relatives had an important role to play in counselling and supporting girls in education.

OTHER MAJOR THEMES

There is an important second layer of themes. Firstly, there are issues which arose in only a small number of groups but were often ranked very highly – i.e. in that community, this was a principal barrier to education. Secondly, there are issues which are commonly experienced, and arose in most discussions, but were ranked quite lowly i.e. they were not a principal barrier to education.

Lack of school/distance to school

The distance to the nearest secondary school, particularly in the absence of a local school, was raised as a top 5 barrier to education by 11% of all focus groups. In a number of rural communities in particular, it was clear that **a lack of secondary (especially senior) school in the local community** was the principal localized issue: 8 groups in 6 rural communities highlighted this as the primary barrier to girls' education. 18% of all focus groups pinpointed school construction as a top solution to improve girls' access to education.

The World Food Programme's 2011 Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment (CFSVA) found that 14% of households reported distance or lack of school as the reason for not enrolling their children in school¹³¹. The Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan (2014-2018) reports that secondary schools are particularly lacking; 15 chiefdoms were without a junior secondary school.¹³²

CASE STUDY

Aminata, 13, Baomahan

Aminata is 16 years old and is currently out of school. She hasn't been to school since passing her NPSE [end of primary school exams] because the nearest JSS is over 2 hours away in either Makeni or Bo. She will need support and accommodation as well as school fees and school materials in order to go to school at such a distance. Aminata is desperate to go back to school, and stated, 'I want to be somebody more'.

131. [The State of Food Security and Nutrition, Sierra Leone](#), WFP, 2011

132. [The Education Sector Plan 2014 - 2018, GoSL](#)

Discussions highlighted that the lack of a local school might mean that girls may have to walk for several miles to school, placing them at risk of **sexual harassment** and **abuse** along the way, particularly from *okada* (motorbike) riders seeking to persuade the girls to exchange sex for transport.

In remote chiefdoms, such as Tambakha and Nieni, where the distance to the nearest school is very great, girls have to relocate to the nearest town if they are to continue their education. This causes difficulties in terms of costs of lodgings and transport, and in terms of the girls' care. Away from parental support and supervision girls were reported to be vulnerable to teenage pregnancy, abuse and to dropping out of school.

RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES FOR SCHOOLING



The preference for **Koranic schools** in predominantly Muslim communities (particularly in Bo, Kono and Pujehun districts) was also raised as an issue in relation to quality and breadth of education. It was reported that in these schools, learning of Arabic and the Qu'ran is prioritized over studying for and passing the national NPSE and BECE, and this has an effect on learning.

In addition, though not ranked as an issue of top importance, some focus groups reported that families prefer to send girls to schools of their own faith, even if the school was much further away than the closest school of another faith. The risks associated with further travel may in turn have an impact on the girls' access and retention in school.

POOR ATTITUDES TO GIRLS' EDUCATION

“Supporting a girl child to get education is like supporting another man’s house.”

Anonymous, Buedu, Kailahun rural, Stakeholder FGD

Poor attitudes to girls’ education, and to education in general, were reported in 11% of girls’ focus groups as a top 5 barrier to education. A **lack of value for education in the wider community**, who did not prioritize education, was also reported, particularly in remote rural areas. Families preferred their children to go straight to work on the farm or to undertake domestic work than to spend time in school. This also applied to low attendance in school, particularly in periods such as Bondo (secret society initiation) and harvests.

“My parents live in a remote village very far away so I am staying with my aunt in Kumala. I have never been sent to school, and there are no children going to school in my household. I have no interest in going to school, but I do want to learn a skill.”

Bamba, 12, Nieni chiefdom, OOS girls FGD

Awareness raising and advocacy in the community was highlighted by 21% of focus groups as a potential solution. Attitudes towards girls’ education as a less worthy investment were also notable. Girls were described as having ‘weak brains’ – often by girls themselves and there was a perception that girls lacked intelligence. **Cultural beliefs around a girl’s place in the home** were anecdotally reported as being stronger in Muslim communities. Though negative attitudes towards girls and their education were more commonly expressed in rural focus groups, they were also present in urban focus groups.

“The female sex is the weaker sex. She cannot concentrate without food, whereas boys can. She is just not resilient.”

Anonymous, Kissy, Stakeholder FGD

Focus groups reported that **girls' own self-belief** was low in relation to education; many believed that they were not worth educating as much as boys. In 4% of girls' FGDs, this was rated as a top issue, and was frequently linked to the **lack of role models** in school, at home and in the community. 5% of girls' groups suggested **incentive measures** to support girls in schools. These included reward for attainment in school, leadership positions for girls, girls-only debating societies and role modeling by women with leadership positions in the community.

“There is no competition among girls here, no leadership role, so I think it is better to support boys.”

Anonymous, Buedu, Kailahun rural, stakeholder FGD

Peer group influence / lack of incentive to stay in school

The phrase '**peer group influence**', or in its Krio equivalent '*padi padi business*', was mentioned in most FGDs¹³³. Girls were said to be influenced by their peers, particularly by close friends, to drop out of school. Dropping out and poor attendance was also attributed by many to the **distraction of social activities** - 'mobile phones', 'clubbing' and the watching of 'pornographic films'.

A **lack of discipline in classrooms**, and a **lack of parental supervision at home** was linked to this issue. Girls were reported – often by stakeholders and boys – to be drawn by money, through relationships with older men or through business, and the desire to buy phones, clothes and other goods. A linked issue to poor attitudes to girls' learning is the perception amongst the stakeholders' and boys' focus groups in particular that girls **lacked interest in or value for education** amongst girls of school going age.

Some FGDs, particularly OOS girls, reported a **lack of incentive to stay in school**. If a girl failed to move up to the next class, pass exams, or did not understand classes, then she might lose interest and leave school. 8% of FGDs also raised 'provocation' or **bullying** as a top barrier to attendance. All focus groups suggested **advocacy with girls, parents and the community on the value of education**, and **counselling support** for girls as solutions to the barriers to adolescent girls' education.

133. 33% of girls', 48% of boys' and 53% of stakeholders' groups ranked peer group influence as one of the top 5 barriers to girls' education.

WASH



Water, sanitation and health were not raised as significant issues in many of the focus groups, although the **lack of WASH facilities** was discussed in some groups, and health facilities in school were raised as a top five potential solution for girls' education in 6 focus groups. Three focus groups in total placed WASH in the top five barriers and solutions. **Shame to attend school whilst menstruating** was also raised in three schools in the Western area. This suggests that the FGDs did not consider the lack of WASH to be a major barrier to the access to, retention in, or learning in school for adolescent girls.

This result was corroborated by the structured individual interviews, where none of the OOS girls cited lack of WASH facilities to be the cause of their dropping out whilst 5% of in-school girls stated that it was the cause of their temporary absence.

There is a dissonance between the usual importance placed on WASH facilities at school when discussing factors affecting adolescent girls' education and the results of the NCAGE. One study, for example, reported 50% of girls drop out of school due to poor WASH¹³⁴. Although it is unknown for how long these girls were absent due to lack of WASH, a study in 2012 reported that 10% of girls who had reached the menarche in Sierra Leone had missed on average 4.2 days of school in 3 months as a result of menstruation (UNICEF, 2012)¹³⁵.

It may be that lack of access to WASH is considered usual - UNICEF, for example, reports that 34 per cent of the rural population practices open defecation¹³⁶. It is also possible

134. 'Human Development Report – Beyond Scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis', UNDP (2006) cited in '[Prioritising Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Ebola Recovery: For health, life and dignity.](#)' Oxfam International, 2015.

135. "[WASH in Schools Empowers Girls' Education in Freetown, Sierra Leone, An Assessment of Menstrual Hygiene Management in Schools](#)", UNICEF, 2012

136. '[25 Years Progress on Sanitation and Drinking Water, 2015 Update and MDG Assessment](#)', UNICEF, 2015

that the issue was not raised due to embarrassment or shame (particularly where a male social worker was present). However, in general, other culturally sensitive issues such as sexual harassment and family planning were raised frequently.

A lack of trained and qualified teachers / school facilities

Although the issue of trained and qualified teachers did not feature very highly in the discussions on barriers – only 2% of girls’ focus groups and 5% overall raised this in their top five, it was given much greater weight in terms of solutions. 25% of girls’ FGDs raised teacher training as a top five solution in terms of girls’ education. Unsurprisingly, this issue was assigned more importance by in-school girls than OOS girls, with 10 in-school girls focus groups, who were naturally more focused on reducing barriers to learning rather than access, giving it top or second position, compared with only 2 OOS girls’ groups.

Linked to this issue was **improved teacher pay and school approval**, which 13 girls’ focus groups placed in their top five solutions, understanding that poor conditions led to extra school charges and harassment for money by teachers. A small number of focus groups and interviewees also noted the desire to have **more female teachers** in school, from the perspective of role modeling, less harassment, and counseling. Gender specific teacher training and enforcement of a teaching code of conduct has been linked in other research to a reduction in bribery for better grades (Reilly, 2014).¹³⁷

“I wish there were more female teachers because the men teachers try to lead us astray.”

Anonymous, In-School Girl, Lunsar

The **poor state of learning facilities** and **lack of school materials** were also highlighted in many groups – 5% of girls’ FGDs rated this issue as a top five barrier to education. Libraries, recreational facilities and increased number of classrooms were all solutions mentioned in focus groups.

137. ‘Reilly, A., Adolescent girls’ experiences of violence in school in Sierra Leone and the challenges to sustainable change, *Gender & Development*, 22:1, 13-29, 2014

Vocational/skills training

16% of OOS girls reported in their structured individual interviews that they did not wish to return to school. 25% of OOS girls said they would prefer to undertake **skills training** such as hairdressing, driving, catering or a petty trading business, to school. Almost all the girls who had said they did not wish to return to school preferred skills training, and 16% of girls' focus groups placed vocational training in their top 5 solutions.

Some FGDs noted that vocational training was seen as an inferior educational option to schooling however, for girls unable to achieve a formal education. It is significant that in the NCAGE, of the 16% (119 girls) of the OOS girls who did not wish to return to school, 76% were unable to read and write. This high figure suggests a **particular gap in literacy and numeracy for girls undertaking skills training.**

After-school study/ extra classes

10% of girls' focus groups highlighted **extra exam classes** and **improved conditions for home study as** a potential solution to their barriers to quality education. This was raised primarily, but not exclusively, amongst in-school girls. Rural areas tended to emphasise the lack of electric light for home study in the evenings.

The proposed solution of improved conditions for home study should be regarded as linked to the parenting issues, discussed above, in particular the lack of parental understanding as to the importance of education and its related demands of home study, regular attendance and progression through the educational system; the perceived value of girls as providers of domestic or commercial labour; and the girls' FGD's appeal for the education of parents as to how to support their child in education, and for parental encouragement and supervision.

URBAN AND RURAL TRENDS

There are great differences between many aspects of life in rural and urban Sierra Leone. It is appropriate to highlight that in several areas of discussion, priorities and perceptions differed significantly between girls in rural and urban areas. They included:

Income poverty perceived as larger issue in rural areas: Although about half of both urban and rural girls' focus groups identified income poverty as the top issue, the issue appears to disproportionately affect girls living in rural areas. 41% of OOS girls in rural areas

identified poverty as the deciding factor for dropping out of school compared to 29% in urban areas.

Loss of a primary caregiver reported as a greater issue in urban setting: 47% of urban OOS girls reported that they dropped out of school due to the death of a primary caregiver, compared to 31% of rural out of school girls. This may be due to the relative strength of community ties in rural areas in comparison to urban areas; and their differing economies.

Parental illiteracy somewhat higher in rural areas: The level of reported parental illiteracy rose to 82% amongst rural OOS girls, compared to 75% amongst urban respondents.

Early / forced marriage somewhat higher in rural areas: Early or forced marriage was reported to have caused 10% of rural girls to have dropped out compared to 7% of urban girls.

Distance to secondary school more of an issue in rural areas: The issue of distance in rural locations was raised most often in relation to a lack of secondary school in the local area. In Nieni chiefdom, for example, the nearest full JSS was reported to be 21 miles away.

Conditions for after-school study: were raised more in rural areas, where access to electric light was lacking, preventing the completion of homework.

OUR CONCLUSIONS

Over 2000 girls here have spoken out clearly, their voices supported by the boys and stakeholders – **the biggest barrier to the education of adolescent girls is poverty**. Girls told us that we can help more of them go to school, stay longer in school and learn more by working to remove the barrier of income poverty. **The clarity of this call is the vital finding of the Street Child NCAGE.**

Street Child has been working in Sierra Leone since 2008 to remove the barriers to education for out of school children. In its urban programme, SCoSL's holistic model provides mediation, counselling and income generation support to caregivers of vulnerable categories of out of school children. In 2015 alone, SCoSL supported over 6000 families across 17 towns with livelihood support. The finding that income poverty is the most important barrier therefore strongly resonates with Street Child's own experience and programming.

Income poverty as a barrier to education is not only about the poverty of the family itself; it also relates to the cost of education. In Sierra Leone, there are clearly **structural factors affecting the cost of schooling** that should be addressed at the national policy level. These include monitoring of schools and teachers to address the issue of informal school fees, the extremely harmful practice of sex or money for grades, and also the regular and sufficient payment of teachers.

The critical role that parental care and encouragement was given by girls in relation to their education is a key finding of this report. **The importance of parental support for girls in school is perhaps neglected in government and NGO policy and programming.** The loss of the primary caregiver was the second most important barrier to education when out of school girls reported why they themselves had dropped out of school. It is notable that this loss related both to the absence or decrease in the child's care and support – including education – and to the loss of income.

SCoSL's own experience, including in its work with over 13,000 Ebola orphans, is that **children who have lost their primary caregiver are particularly vulnerable** – whether that is the parent, grandparent or other relative. As well as the trauma of losing a relative, they suffer an increase in uncertainty and often drop out of school. Extra mediation and counselling is needed to ensure that the child is integrated with a new caregiver, and that their education is prioritized within the family.

Teenage pregnancy was a major concern across the board in focus groups. Although it featured less highly than the loss of a caregiver when girls reported why they personally dropped out of school, it is clear that **having a child is a significant barrier to being in school in Sierra Leone** from the perspective of income, need for childcare and parental attitudes to the education of teenage mothers. Girls highlighted the importance of policy and programming around family planning and sex education, as well as a reduction in the sexual abuse and harassment that is all too common, even in school.

Another structural factor concerns **attitudes towards girls' education in Sierra Leone**, which the report found to underpin many of the major barriers identified. Girls in some communities reported that where income is scarce, their education – particularly its completion - is not prioritized as much as boys. They are more likely to be expected to take on domestic labour and child care, and to be promised in early marriage, reducing incentive for study. Girls' self-confidence in regards to education was sometimes reported as low, with a lack of role models.

It is worth noting that some of the serious **structural factors affecting the quality of education were raised less frequently than might be expected**: teacher training and quality, classroom size and facilities and distance to school. This may reflect the extent to which girls perceived the question to focus on access and retention (although quality was specifically referenced). It may also be the extent to which girls consider access and retention to remain the principal challenge for girls in Sierra Leone.

Finally, the **finding underpinning the NCAGE is that adolescent girls in Sierra Leone overwhelmingly want to access their right to education**. Out of school and in-school girls appealed to government, NGOs, their parents, their communities and each other for help with their education. Most out of school girls wanted to go back to formal education, with 13% having never been to school at all, and 50% being unable to read and write. This has a potentially devastating effect on their ability to earn a living, and to access basic services for themselves and for their children.

SCoSL appeals to any major education initiatives for girls, whether led by the government, third sector or private sector, to respond to this call by adolescent girls in Sierra Leone for help with their education. We hope that this consultation report will be a useful tool in this regard.



With particular thanks and credit to the more than 2000 girls who participated in this consultation.





Street Child of Sierra Leone (SCoSL) is a leading national NGO in the fields of child protection, access to education, quality of education and financial empowerment of the most vulnerable. Uniquely, SCoSL is active in every District and major town in Sierra Leone with over 30 live project locations and more than 200 social, educational and business support officers in the field in urban and the most remote rural areas. SCoSL has been a major player in the post-Ebola ‘back to school’ effort – providing financial assistance to over 20,000 primary school children and other key assistance, such as school refurbishment and construction and supplying learning materials to a further 20,000 children. **In total, over 40,000 children are either in education, or enjoying a significantly enhanced education, as a direct result of SCoSL’s support since the end of Ebola.** In addition, over 10,000 families have received business grants and training from SCoSL staff since Ebola. During Ebola itself, SCoSL mobilised a nationwide network of over 1,700 ‘Ebola educators’ that reached over 300,000 Sierra Leoneans and provided direct food and other support to over 11,000 children who lost a key adult to the Virus. SCoSL’s other key publications include The National Headcount of Street Children (2012) and the Ebola Orphan report (2015). SCoSL’s key donors include DFID, WFP, Child Hope, Street Child UK, Plan International and Cafod.

Street Child is a UK-based international development organisation that supports partners in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nepal. SCoSL is Street Child UK’s key partner and the two organisations have been effectively collaborating together since December 2008. Whether working with children on the streets, those in rural communities that simply have no schools, or in crisis areas where children’s ability to learn has been adversely affected, Street Child is committed to transforming lives through increased access to education with a core focus on sustainable responses.

In addition, SCoSL and Street Child’s work in Sierra Leone enjoys support from Street Child USA, Street Child Espana, Street Child Italia, Street Child Nederland and Street Child Deutschland.



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