



Multi -Dimensional Implications of Out of School Girls in Sierra Leone

Policy Brief

April 2022

Introduction

This Policy Brief describes the out of school children (OOSC) phenomenon in Sierra Leone, including the contributing factors. The brief analyzes the multidimensional implications of out-of-school children, especially, girls with a focus on educational attainment and earnings, and human capital development, drawing from wider sources. The brief also examines selected and tested interventions in Sierra Leone, including accelerated education interventions implemented to tackle the problem. The concluding paragraph of the brief delineates, actionable recommendations to reduce the number of children who are out of school in Sierra Leone.

Data Source and Methods

Different sources of information mainly publications from UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank were searched for and utilized based on their relevance to the topic under review. Additionally, government administrative information such as the 2015 population census, the MICS report of 2017, and school-based statistics such as the EMIS' Annual School Census were also utilized. Government-based reports such as the Education Sector Plans and OOSC reports were also used to inform this Policy Brief¹.

Out of School Children (OOSC) Situation in Sub Saharan Africa

According to the UNICEF (2014) Report on out-of-school children in West and Central Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of education exclusion, with more than one-third of the world's OOSC

¹ for the purpose of this policy brief, OOSC children are defined as children of primary or lower secondary school age who are not enrolled in primary or secondary education; including 'the number of children in pre-primary education and in non-formal education' (UIS, 2005)

(98 million) with the majority (53%) of them being girls. It is estimated that one-fifth of children between the ages of 6 and 11 in sub-Saharan Africa are out-of-school, one third aged 12 to 14 are out-of-school and about 60% of children between 15 and 17 are not in school.

The Phenomenon of Out-of-School Children in Sierra Leone

The trend in OOSC in Sierra Leone according to the Multiple Indicator Cluster survey (MICS 2017), shows that the number of children out-of-school increases with higher level of schooling. Whilst the share of children out-of-school at the primary level was recorded at about 18%, that for junior secondary school (JSS) was recorded at 19% and that for senior secondary school at 36%. The proportion of out-of-school children who are females is comparatively lower than that for males at the primary and JSS age categories. Not surprisingly, at the Senior Secondary School level, there are more females who are out-of-school (39.7%), compared to males (31.4%); this is largely due to teenage pregnancy, and because girls are more likely to be withdrawn from school to enter informal marital unions.

Table 1: Share of children in and out of school by level and gender in Sierra Leone

School Level	In School (%)			Out of School (%)		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Primary	79	84	82	21	16	18
JSS	36	36	36	20	18	19
SSS	30	28	29	31	40	36

Source: MICS, 2017

The Drivers of Education Exclusion in the Sierra Leone Context

The impact of the civil war, and the Ebola Virus disease have each in their own way had devastating effects for adolescent girls in Sierra Leone. The country saw an increase in teenage pregnancy and many

girls had to drop out of school as a result of this (Graham et al., 2021). According to the 2016 assessment of OOSC in Sierra Leone, about three out of every ten out-of-school girls (28.6%) are excluded from education because of teenage pregnancy (GoSL & UNICEF, 2016), early and forced marriage or the need to earn an income to sustain their families. Data from the Sierra Leone 2013 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) and the 2017 MICS, show that in 2017, 28.2% of girls aged 18-22 years had married as children and 29.1% had their first child before the age of 18. The impact of COVID-19 and school closures on school attendance and adolescent pregnancy has not been established. Save the Children predicted a 25% increase in the rate of adolescent pregnancy during school closures, as a result of COVID 19 (MBSSE, 2021). Available evidence shows that girls' educational attainment, child marriage and early child bearing are closely related. Once a girl is married or pregnant it is difficult for her to continue with her schooling. The existing statistics indicate that if child marriages were ended, teenage pregnancies will be substantially reduced. In essence, keeping girls in school would lead to major reductions in the prevalence of both child marriage and early pregnancy. A publication by Brookings (2021) analyzing the power of investing in girls in Sierra Leone estimates that each additional year of secondary education reduces the risk of child marriage by 10 percentage points, and that of early child bearing by 4 percentage points.

The Economic Consequences of OOSC for Human Development

In general, the lack of skilled manpower in developing economies has been cited as one of the main constraints for development (Todaro & Smith, 2012; 2015). Low educational attainment of girls

has negative impacts not only on themselves, but also on their children, families, communities, and societies, which affect development outcomes, thereby hindering the advancement of nations. The human capital theory puts forward the concept that investments in education increase future productivity.

A study conducted by Thomas & Burnett (2015) on the economic cost of OOSC, found that the costs associated with not educating children who are out of school is significantly greater than the investments needed to provide universal primary education. The study further found that for some of the countries studied, "these costs exceed the value of an average year of economic growth" (p.6).

Existing social norms and barriers which discourage women from fully participating in the educational system, also hinder them from tapping into labor market opportunities, resulting in them lagging behind their male counterparts in terms of economic empowerment. When girls drop out of school and cannot further their education, they contribute to the already existing poverty cycle in which they find their parents.

The Thomas & Burnett (2015) study of about 20 countries cited above, found that the projected cost of OOSC in Mali and Nigeria, was estimated at over two years of average GDP growth. Using a sample of low- and middle-income countries, the study found that countries with higher female school enrollment tend to have higher incomes per capita. The analysis shows that a 10% increase in female secondary enrollment results in a 0.3% increase in income per capita. The study further shows that a 10% reduction in the rate of female children out of school would lead to a 0.5% increase in GDP per capita.

An earlier study by Özpolat and Yıldırım (2009) also found that education of women has a positive effect on economic growth, especially in developing countries. A cross country empirical study on the effects of female education on economic growth further found that female labour force participation rate is a significant factor for annual per capita income growth (Oztunc, 2015). In Nigeria, the annual GDP growth rate would be 3.5 percent higher if girls were as economically active as boys (Chaaban and Cunningham, 2011).

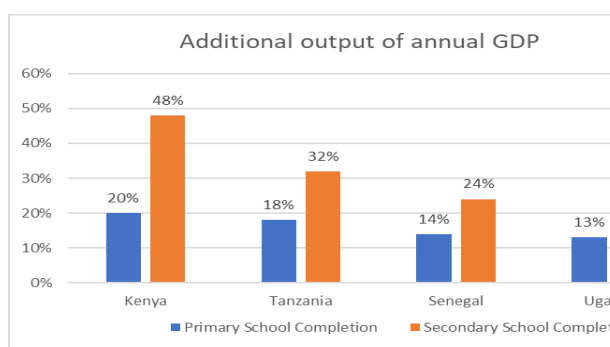


Figure 1: Additional Output as a result of educational attainment (Source: Chaaban and Cunningham, 2011)

Figure 2 above shows the additional output that countries can realise if girls are able to complete primary and secondary school. Completing primary school for girls in Kenya, Tanzania, Senegal and Uganda, could result in additional output over their lifetimes equivalent to 20%, 18%, 14%, and 13% of their country's annual GDP, respectively. Increasing this to secondary school completion, further increases their contribution to annual GDP. If girls are able to complete secondary education in the countries mentioned above, they would contribute 48%, 32%, 24%, and 34% more to their economies over their lifetimes (Chaaban and Cunningham, 2011). A World Bank policy paper series examining the cost of not educating girls on standards of living, concluded that women with secondary and tertiary education are more likely associated with higher labor force

participation, and especially full-time work. In addition, women with secondary and tertiary education report higher standards of living compared to those with primary education or lower. For example, women with a secondary education are less likely to state that they do not have enough money to buy food versus women with primary education or less (World Bank, 2018)

Educational Attainment and Earnings

Low educational attainment among girls will exclude them from high earning and professional jobs. According to Wodon et al. (2018), this results in reduced earnings, which in turn leads to a loss in human capital wealth, and consequently in losses in the asset base that can enable countries to generate future income. The study further found that across 12 countries in Africa, women who marry early because of dropping out of school and entering into child marriage, have earnings that are on average 8% lower than if they had married later, resulting in a loss in national earnings.

Each additional year of education is expected to result in an increase of 14.9% in earnings. Using the model that looks at level of education attained, it was found that women with primary education earn only marginally more than those with no education, while women with secondary education are expected to earn almost twice more than those with no education, and women with tertiary education are expected to earn almost four times as much as those with no education (Wodon et al., 2018).

Returns to female secondary education were found to be 15 to 25 percent higher for women than men in Thailand, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire (Schultz, 2002).

Making Education the Centre of Human Capital Development in Sierra Leone

The Sierra Leone 2018-2020 Education Sector Plan (ESP) specifies interventions across the four areas of *access, equity and completion; quality and relevance; systems strengthening; and emergency preparedness and response* as a way of improving the sector.

The introduction of the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme implemented in government-assisted schools in 2018 has improved access to schooling. National school enrolment recorded a growth of 34% between June 2018 and June 2019 (an additional 680,000 children entered or came back to school) after a decline of 4% was recorded between 2017 to 2018 (MBSSE, 2019). Whilst this was attributed to the free education policy, it is noted that retention remains a risk, given that the FQSE policy does not address indirect school costs. Indirect costs associated with schooling (for example, the purchase of school uniform, footwear, and school bags), will hinder retention through the various levels of schooling.

Table 2: Retention Rates by School Level and Gender

	Male	Female	Total
In Primary from Class 1 to Class 6	38%	37%	38%
In Secondary from JSS 1 to JSS 3	87%	86%	87%
In Secondary from SSS 1 to SSS 3	59%	61%	60%

Source: Annual School Census Report, 2020

Since 2010, Sierra Leone prohibited pregnant girls and teenage mothers from attending school. In March 2020, the current administration announced a termination to the ban to ensure that girls have the same access to education as boys, under the FQSE policy.

Promising Accelerated Education Programmes in Sierra Leone

Whilst the FQSE programme encourages those who are not in school to enroll, children who have been out of school for two years or more need the appropriate support to allow them to catch-up and re-enter the school system.

It is in this context that the introduction of accelerated education programmes complement government's effort to increase enrolment and reduce the rate of OOSC. In Sierra Leone, the BRAC – Sierra Leone Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) initiative undertaken between 2014 and 2016 at the height of the Ebola crises, sought to raise young women's economic empowerment in Sierra Leone. The intervention provided about 4,700 women with a protective space (a club) where they can find support, receive information on health and reproductive issues, and vocational training. The analysis of the behaviours in intervention and control villages showed that younger girls in control villages are more likely to spend significantly more time with men, out-of-wedlock pregnancies rise, and as a result, they experience a persistent 16 percentage points drop in school enrolment post-crisis. These adverse effects were almost entirely reversed in 'treated' villages because the BRAC intervention enabled young girls to allocate time away from men, preventing out-of-wedlock pregnancies and enabled them to re-enrol in school post-crisis (World Bank, 2019).

Save the Children International is one of the NGOs that have implemented an AEP in the Southern Region of the country. The AEP programme which was implemented in Pujehun district, targeted older children (350 Boys & 350 Girls) who had dropped out of school for a certain number of years, including pregnant girls. The beneficiaries

were enrolled at 3 levels (a compression of the 6-year primary school curriculum): Level 1 (Grade 1&2); Level 2 (Grade 3&4); Level 3 (grade 5&6). The "pupils" enrolled in level 3 were supported to take the National Primary School Education (NPSE) exams for transition into secondary school. In 2018, 82% of beneficiaries transitioned to formal schooling at the JSS level. (Save the Children AEP Sierra Leone, Original Design)

EduAid is also providing an AEP, to meet the requirements of OOSC and contributing to improving access to education across the country. There are also about 60 Community Learning Centres (CLCs) across the country, which receive government grants, to help children return to formal schooling as well as offering vocational training.

Discussion

Sierra Leone is ranked 182 out of 189 countries in the 2019 Human Development Index and poverty levels remain high with 57% of the population living on less than US\$1.22 per day.

The level of educational attainment amongst girls is low, and this is mainly attributed to the high rates of child marriage and early childbearing, which intensifies the challenges of dropout rate among girls.

Despite the increase in school enrolment, as a result of the FQSE, and the parallel support through accelerated education programmes (AEPs), there are still children enrolled in school, who are at risk of dropping out and not having an opportunity to complete their education. Girls who drop out of school early, will experience a life path of which will see them married off at an early age or have children early, which can contribute to high population growth, which impacts

negatively on a country's economy (Wodon et al., 2018).

The relationship that exists between educational attainment, child marriage, early childbearing and the risks involved for girls as young mothers and for their children, indicates that not educating a girl child can be costly.

The costs associated with dropping out of school or not attending school and rather entering child marriage, estimated in terms of losses in human capital wealth, are high. Women marrying early at the expense of their education, was found to result in a loss in human capital wealth of about US\$63 billion across 12 countries studied (Wodon et al, 2018).

As in previous studies undertaken in the African region and at global level, the economic costs of not investing enough in adolescent girls in Sierra Leone are large. A reduction in fertility by ending child marriage could generate millions of dollars in gains in standards of living. Moreover, the earnings of additional women working today could be as high as 71 million dollars in purchasing power parity, had they not married young. Ending child marriage could also generate savings for the government, which can be invested in improving quality services and in turn will enhance human capital and generate further economic benefits (Brookings 2021).

Recommendations

1. **Tackling underlying factors keeping children out of school is a shared responsibility between Government, NGOs and Civil Society.** The Government and partners need to intensify efforts to address the underlying factors, responsible for early child marriage and teenage pregnancy, which trigger a vicious

circle of deprivation and disempowerment for girls.

2. Complete the Unfinished Agenda:

The Free Quality Education is an exceptional policy by the government. However, some children from extremely poor homes might not benefit from the scheme at all or drop out eventually because parents are not able to meet the indirect costs such as school uniform etc. Government should consider expanding the benefits of the scheme to include the provision of at least two sets of school uniform and one pair of foot wear as additional incentives for children attending school in rural and disadvantaged areas.

3. Education Innovators should be supported by government to implement quality alternative education programmes;

in order to assist children who have been out of school for two years or more to allow them to catch-up and re-enter the school system. Eligibility for funding support to innovators should be tied to compliance with set quality standards, established by the government.

4. Strengthen Strategies to Enhance Education for children with special needs:

The Government to have in place more special education needs schools and teachers who can help nurture students with special needs to progress smoothly through the primary level, and eventually get integrated at the secondary level.

5. Building the Knowledge Base- More empirical evidence is needed on 'demand' and 'supply' factors that combine to still keep children out of school in spite of the FQSE initiative of government. The government in collaboration with university and research institutions should also support research of promising AEP so as to assess their effects and contribution to reducing the OOSC phenomenon.

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