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# CHILD MARRIAGE IN SIERRA LEONE AND GUINEA

CULTURAL ROOTS AND GIRL CENTRED SOLUTIONS



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

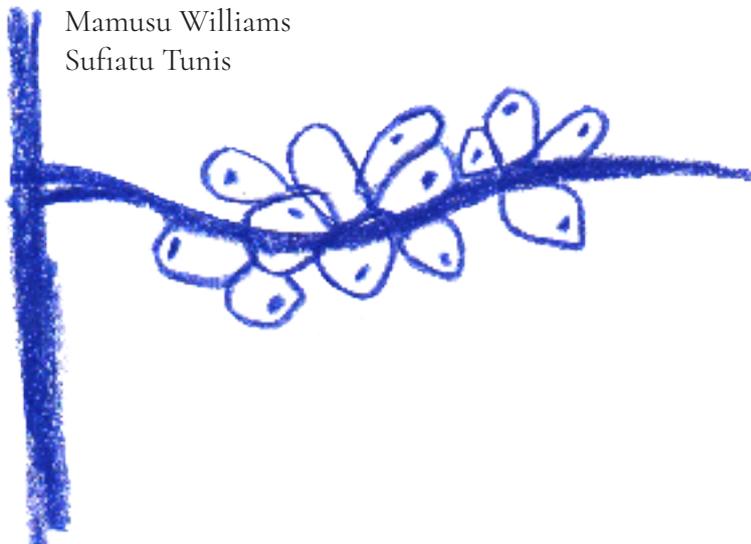


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The research was lead by Rosa Bransky, co-founder of Purposeful Productions, along with Jessica Enoch and Cecily Long. To find out more about the organization and our work, please go to [www.purposefulproductions.org](http://www.purposefulproductions.org)

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# INTRODUCTION



Child marriage exists across cultures, it is forced upon girls at different ages, in different places, by different people, and for different ends. It is a practice that exists irrespective of faith; the countries with the highest rates of child marriage are home to the world's three biggest religions.

It disproportionately affects poor girls, but is forced upon the girls of wealthy families too. Child marriage is intimately linked to poverty, and yet poverty reduction programs have not brought about its wholesale decline. Girls who are able to remain in school are more likely to marry later, and yet education has not been the golden solution many expected.

Child marriage occurs in countries where the political classes condemn it, and in countries where they endorse it. It is forced upon girls as young as two and as old as 17. It is bound up in a myriad of rituals.

Looked at this way, child marriage is a complicated, confusing and amorphous issue that feels impossible to pin down.

And yet, in another sense, there is a strikingly simple explanation for the existence and persistence of child marriage, and a singular factor that unites these competing forms.

Child marriage is bound up with, and is inseparable from, patriarchal oppression. It is merely one manifestation of sexual violence against girls, and it exists within a broader universe of cultural, structural, social, political and economic violence against women and girls. Child marriage exists because patriarchy exists.

More concretely, Child marriage is a symbolic act that exists as part of society's toolkit for containing a girl's sexuality within confines that are deemed socially safe. As the most visible outward sign of a girl's sexuality, pregnancy has come to represent uncontained sexuality and has become the flashpoint for its associated social shame.

This no doubt informed by the fact that in Sierra Leone - and Guinean communities along the Sierra Leone border - child marriage is in fact forced upon girls who are past the age of puberty.

This means that the link between child marriage and sexual control in these communities is deeply and fundamentally entrenched: it is foundationally a method of controlling girls' burgeoning sexuality and enforcing social and sexual norms of femininity, at a time when patriarchal institutions are most sensitive to the potential loss of control over a girl's sexuality. In parents' and authority figures' minds, the drive to child marriage is a negative one, based not on a positive articulation of what marriage is or can be, but on a fear of what lies outside it for teenage girls.

In the lived experience of girls, this socio-cultural need to control sexuality manifests in a lack of meaningful choices across many levels of life. The cultural norms of control affect the choices a girl is offered and, even more fundamentally, the choices she can imagine for herself.

Cultural narratives about control make it more appealing for families, parents and communities to close off options for girls, and more frightening for them to leave them open. They mean that structural opportunities, school in particular, merely reflect back the socially normative and do not always provide meaningful, genuine possibilities for girls.

And ultimately, they affect the choices girls can envisage for themselves, creating ambivalence and indeed often a fatalism about a lifetime of oppression - of which marriage is just one element.

Any attempts to end child marriage strategically and for the long-term must take into account and challenge the culturally normative nature of child marriage. This means undermining the very same patriarchal culture that drives and justifies it. And this in turn means focusing our attention not on existing sites of power but instead on increasing the power and choices of and for girls.

In a context in which their voices have been systemically shut down, the aim of this work is to bring to the fore otherwise no system will give them equal access.

Girls need their collective voices to be heard, loud and clear, at the community level. And before she can speak, she needs to believe that her words are worth hearing.

# THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM: SIERRA LEONE AND GUINEA



The elimination of child, early and forced marriage has become one of the main targets towards achieving Gender Equality under Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals. Across the world, national legislation enshrines 16 or 18 as marrying age. The Sierra Leone Child Rights Act prohibits marriage under the age of 18, regardless of whether the marriage is carried out under formal, customary or religious law. In Guinea, 18 is also the minimum marriage age for both boys and girls, independent of parental consent.

Yet in these two countries – as well as in much of the rest of West and Central Africa – child marriage remains stubbornly high, part of a complex and interlocking web of violations against girls.

Sierra Leone is one of the countries chosen for the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Program to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage – it has the 15th highest child marriage prevalence region globally, with 44% of girls married before age 18 and 18% married before age 15 (UNICEF, 2016). UNFPA have highlighted that child marriage in Sierra Leone is linked to poverty, lack of education and geographical area. And with the country only just recovering from the Ebola epidemic of 2014/15, the situation for Sierra Leone generally, and for girls in particular, can appear bleak. And yet, the child marriage rate has constantly declined during the past years, from 56% in 2006 (UNFPA, 2012) to 44% in 2016 (UNICEF, 2016). And with a range of civil society organizations and charities re-engaging in Sierra Leone in the wake of Ebola, now is the time to act to accelerate this decline.

In Guinea, 63% of girls are married before 18 – the 5th highest prevalence rate globally. The prevalence of child marriage is particularly high in Upper Guinea, with 76% of girls marrying before 18 (UNFPA, 2012). The development landscape differs starkly from Sierra Leone – as with much of French-speaking Africa, Guinea has been somewhat sidelined by INGOs. A 2007 ICRW study identified only one intervention there to end early marriage. From a Guinea perspective then, this research represents a starting point, and a rallying cry to the international development community to bridge this gap. The situation may be challenging, but tackling the scourge of child marriage is particularly vital in countries like Guinea, seemingly a hostile climate for intervention. Without focusing on these challenging contexts, we risk creating a dichotomy between countries where the practice is in decline and those where it is consolidating or rising.

As such, this piece of research focuses on Sierra Leone and a border area within Guinea. To an extent, this is a pragmatic decision as much as a strategic one. Sierra Leone and Guinea are neighboring countries with a porous border, hosting relatively nomadic populations who have often spent time in both places. These geographies do not represent discrete dichotomous examples, but instead form a spectrum, with border areas in particular representing a convergence of practices from both countries. As such, we chose to undertake research in locations on either side of the border. The intention is that this will enable us to create a more holistic picture of life for married and pregnant girls and those at risk of marriage and teenage pregnancy in this part of West Africa.

# OUR APPROACH



We are not starting this research in a vacuum: much has been written on this topic already, particularly in Sierra Leone. But what characterizes this work is an attempt to draw a line from cultural drivers, to their impact on girls, to girl-centered solutions. This philosophy informed our multi-phased research methodology – we sought to understand what child marriage represents in culture, as well as its reality in lived experience.

## 1. CULTURAL THEORY



We started by using cultural theory and engaging experts in the field to generate global hypotheses for the persistence of child marriage. We facilitated a workshop with key local practitioners working in the field in Sierra Leone and Guinea to localize these hypotheses. Concurrently, we embarked upon a semiotic analysis of the codes of childhood and marriage. This type of analysis looks at the materials that culture makes, and so helps us to place people's motivations, beliefs and decisions in a wider context, exposing the embedded cultural forces that drive behavior and yet which people may find it hard to articulate themselves. We ultimately cross-referenced this semiotic analysis with findings from our face-to-face research, helping us to paint a picture of how cultural practice plays out on the lived experiences of girls.

## 2. FACE TO FACE RESEARCH



### A. WITH GIRLS

The global hypotheses acted as inputs to create prompts for face-to-face discussion, which took place in Sierra Leone and Guinea over three weeks in March / April 2016. Our full approach and sample is outlined in the appendix. The core of our methodology was semi-structured discussion groups and individual ethnographic interviews with 150 girls to hear in-depth about the reality of their lives.

### B. WITH BOYS AND THE COMMUNITY

To understand the lived context in which child marriage persists, we needed to go broader. As such we spoke to 50 boys in group discussions; we convened eight community conversations; we held four intergenerational conversations with women; and we undertook a number of informal convenings with men. We were also able to hold a number of meetings with Imams, priests, and traditional leaders including district and Paramount Chiefs across villages and towns.

### C. WITH COMMUNITY LED GIRL ACTIVISTS AND NGOS

In each location we sought to understand the existing grassroots responses to child marriage, to identify how we could bolster and build on these, and – crucially – ensure girls are positioned at the heart of solutions. We met with the key local NGO and often government actors in each location, to understand what work is being done for girls, and where those closest to the field believe the gaps are.

### 3. TOWARDS SOLUTIONS



This approach enabled us to develop a perspective on country-wide programming and what is needed to bolster work on the ground. We also used successful grassroots activity as the basis for further semiotic analysis, enabling us to create generalizable principles rooted in what we have already seen working.

# OUR RESEARCH LOCATIONS



In Sierra Leone, the research was carried out in partnership with the Sierra Leone Adolescent Girls Network.

Formed in 2011 to amplify and unite the work of organizations working for and with girls, the network is made up of leading grassroots national organizations, INGOs, Ministries and UN Agencies. The network works through a unified plan, employing evidence-based tactics, to target and recruit the hardest to reach girls in the hardest to reach communities across every district of Sierra Leone. Together, the network manages about 500 safe spaces and reaches over 30,000 of the poorest girls (often out of school, not living with either parent married or girls with children) in over 300 communities.

As well as providing thought leadership through the process, network partners facilitated the recruitment of research participants and local decision makers including Soweis, Paramount Chiefs, and government officials.

The level of access we were granted – and the openness with which girls shared their stories – is a testament to the deep roots these partners have laid down in their communities.

In Guinea, where our scope was smaller, we worked with AGUIAS, an NGO that runs a 116 phone number for victims of forced marriage and domestic slavery, and provides safe houses and counseling services for girls fleeing forced marriage. AGUIAS supported our access to girls and other stakeholders in Mamou, on the Guinea / Sierra Leone border.

# OUR RESEARCH LOCATIONS



## MOYAMBA DISTRICT



Moyamba has a very high rate of child marriage: according to 2013 DHS data, 23.4% of girls are married by 15, almost double the national rate. Over 50% of girls are married by age 18. It has a population of 300,000, for whom job opportunities are limited and food security is increasingly unstable. It has a relatively positive history of female leadership and many female Paramount Chiefs. Within the District, we visited Moyamba Town, and several villages, including Bauya, a former stop on Sierra Leone's now defunct railway.

## MAMOU – GUINEA



Mamou is a city and sub-prefecture in a valley of the Fouta Djallon area. It acts as an important transport hub - all vehicles going to the Fouta Jallon, the forest region or Haute Guinée have to travel through it. It has one of the country's highest child marriage rates – recent World Bank data suggests 30.5% of girls are married by 15 and 61.9% before 18 (World Bank, 2016).

## KAMBIA DISTRICT



In Kambia, 21.7% of girls are married by 15, above the national average. This rises to 66.6% of girls married by the age of 18 – the highest in Sierra Leone (UNICEF, 2010)]. The District borders Guinea and is roughly 70% Muslim, made up of several ethnic groups including the Fula. The economy largely revolves around agriculture, and there is significant cross-border trade with Guinea.

# KOINADUGU DISTRICT



In Koinadugu, 21.5% of girls are married by 18, and 57.7% by 18. It is the largest District within Sierra Leone and many of its villages are extremely isolated and very difficult to access. According to the World Food Programme, 65.7% of the population are food insecure (WFP, 2011). It is overwhelmingly Muslim and home to some of Sierra Leone's Muslim schools. It is also site for gold mining, and we saw several temporary mining settlements on our travels through the region.

# BRIEF VIEW ON CURRENT LITERATURE: UNRAVELLING THE CAUSAL LINKS



The qualitative evidence on child marriage globally tends to retain a focus on structural child marriage drivers, predominantly a lack of education. And yet this sort of approach can be problematic, not least because it is particularly difficult to pull apart correlation and causation. The extent to which a given structural factor like education or family income is a cause or consequence of child marriage, or indeed the degree to which both are caused by some third factor, have not been well articulated. Secondly and relatedly, these kinds of analyses can often ignore or underplay the role of culture in which these structures are created.

## CHILD MARRIAGE AND EDUCATION



International statistics from developing countries suggest that girls with primary education are twice as likely to marry or enter into union as those with secondary or higher education. Furthermore, those with no education are three times more likely to marry or enter into union before the age of 18 as those with a secondary or higher education (UNFPA, 2012). No or low educational status is therefore a risk factor for child marriage and teenage pregnancy, and higher educational status is protective (ICRW, 2007; Brown, 2012). Girls' education level has been identified as the most important factor associated with girls marrying before the age of 18 (ICRW, 2007).

The 2010/2011 Sierra Leone School Census Report shows that girls move on to secondary school at a lower rate than boys and that girls drop out of secondary school at a higher rate than boys (Plan UK, 2013). In Guinea, around a third of girls are enrolled in lower secondary school, and only a quarter of the female youth population are literate. Overall in Guinea, 70% of women with no education married as children, compared to 55% of women with primary schooling (Plan UK, 2013).

It is indisputable that supporting girls to enter and remain in school leads to a range of positive outcomes for girls and their communities. And yet, as we have highlighted, the causal link between child marriage and education is not entirely neat. It should be clear at least that child marriage is a cause as well as a consequence of school dropout: "child marriage elevates school dropout rates for girls" (Plan UK, 2013). To look at one of our geographies of interest: as UNICEF (2016) make clear, while the Government of Sierra Leone is committed to providing universal primary school education for all children, current policy prohibits visibly pregnant girls from attending school.



*“The ban on pregnant girls attending mainstream schools is being enforced, in some cases, through humiliating and degrading treatment of girls. Amnesty International interviewed girls who had experienced or witnessed others being subjected to degrading procedures by teachers and others in positions of authority, such as nurses. For example, girls have, publicly, had their breasts and stomachs felt by adults on school premises to see if they are pregnant. Some girls have been compelled by their schools to take urine tests.”*

- AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL (2015)

And whilst such a formal ban does not exist in Guinea, the ultimate impact of child marriage and teen pregnancy on girls' education is generally the same.

*“My parents cared about education, so they asked my husband to let me stay in school but soon I became pregnant so I had to drop out.”*

- GIRL MARRIED AT 12, MAMOU, GUINEA



*“I was married at 13 when at school. As soon as I went to my husband I got pregnant. I gave birth and one week later I went to take an exam, but taking care of the baby really stopped school.”*

- MARRIED GIRL, MAMOU, GUINEA

School is not a simple, singular solution to the problem, and too narrow a focus on education can blind us to the deeply embedded socio-cultural enablers to child marriage.



*“There is a strong association between education on the one side and later marriage and pregnancy on the other. However, association is not the same as causation. The data do not indicate the direction of influence or the wider influences at play.”*

- BROWN, 2012

# CHILD MARRIAGE AND POVERTY

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As with education, there is a strong association between poverty and child marriage. Across developing countries, child marriage is most common among the poorest households (IRCW, 2007). Internationally, more than half (54%) of girls in the poorest 20% of households are child brides, compared to only 16% of girls in the richest 20% of households (UNFPA, 2012).

The association is certainly borne out in Guinea: amongst the wealthiest women aged 20-24, 25% married before the age of 18, compared to 75% of the poorest women. For the wealthiest women, marriage is delayed by an average of at least two years (Wetheridge and Antonowicz, 2014).

Again though, the relationship between poverty and child marriage is not a simple one. To illuminate this with an example, Bolivia is a country with a GDP of \$33.54 billion (similar to Cote D'Ivoire or Democratic Republic of Congo) and has seen rapid change in terms of political structure and urbanization. Despite having nearly half the country living under the poverty line, child marriage levels at 15 years of age are just 3% (and 22% by 18 years of age) (UNICEF, 2016). Similarly, Djibouti is country with a GDP of \$1.743 billion (similar to that of Central African Republic or Cape Verde) but has just 2% married by 15 years of age (and only 5% by 18 years of age) (UNICEF, 2016).

## GENDERED POVERTY

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Economies are not neutral structures. In Sierra Leone and Guinea, as with the rest of the world, the socio-cultural coping mechanisms associated with poverty play out very differently for girls and boys. Indeed, gendered poverty – that is, the very precise ways in which girls' experience, adapt to, and attempt to survive within a context of patriarchal economic structures and institutions – requires further attention.



*“Women experience structural exclusion in societies that perceive them as inferior and subordinate to men. In developing and developed countries alike, a disproportionate number of women experience relative poverty. Social exclusion of women in some societies is related to several factors, including their marital, health or employment status. The unequal possession of power and ownership of resources result in a greater risk of poverty among women”*

– UN, 2010

Within the context of patriarchal structures, it is the very perception of a girls' bodily value that can lead families to marry their daughters as a way to earn income through a dowry, or used as a means for settling familial debts or disputes, or securing social, economic or political alliances (Lee-Rife et al, 2012; UNFPA, 2012; Plan International Australia, 2014). Marriage relieves parents of the economic responsibility for girls and allows them to extract value from their bodies (Lee-Rife et al, 2012; Brown 2012; CCLC, 2015).



*“Poverty has long been articulated as the foremost reason for CEFM but if poverty is the reason, why are boys not marrying as early as girls? Sexuality and gender are central concerns of early and child marriage. Yet these issues have been sidelined”*

—GREENWORKS, 2015

## CHILD MARRIAGE AND THE LAW

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Much of the international NGO activity on child marriage has taken place at the level of legal advocacy – specifically, it has concentrated on efforts to raise the legal age of marriage for girls. And recent research by Maswikwa, Richter and Nandi (2015) reports that the prevalence of child marriage is 40% lower in countries with consistent laws against child marriage than in countries without consistent laws against the practice. However, these authors admit that this does not imply causality and indeed that focussing on the legal age of marriage can be close to irrelevant in countries like Sierra Leone where many marriages are customary and traditional:



*“Marriage laws in Sub-Saharan Africa are governed not only by statutory laws, but also by customary or religious laws that may be contradictory and may contravene international or regional human rights agreements. In addition, many Sub-Saharan African countries allow exceptions to laws regarding underage marriage. Almost all of the countries surveyed allow marriage at a younger age with court approval or under exceptional circumstances. Determining how often these exceptions are used is difficult, given the general paucity of marriage data on the continent.”*

—MASWIKWA, RICHTER AND NANDI (2015)

At the very least it should be noted that Sierra Leone and Guinea both have national laws that set 18 as the minimum age for child marriage, and yet the practice continues.



*“Despite the commendable first steps that the government of Sierra Leone has taken to eradicate child marriage, enforcement efforts have yet to significantly reduce the practice in rural areas.”*

– PLAN UK, 2013

More fundamentally, whilst we do not disagree with the importance of an enabling and encouraging legal environment, an overly discrete focus on the age of marriage ignores the way in which child marriage exists as a symptom of more widespread oppression of women and girls. Enabling girls to marry at 18 if these remain harmful and imbalanced unions is not our desired outcome. What’s more, this focuses us too narrowly on legal marriage, when in fact girls are being trapped in a range of damaging situations, often without any formal ratification. Once again, too singular a focus on the age of marriage ignores the way in which it exists as part of a web of oppression against girls and women.

## AN ALTERNATIVE READING

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In short, this is not simply a story of the law or poverty, and education alone will not be the golden bullet many promise. Instead, this study attempts to unravel the way in which child marriage is rooted in – and exists as a manifestation of – all forms of gender discrimination and sexual violence against girls and women.



*“Violence in Sierra Leone is shaped by a number of factors related to cultural attitudes, the history of conflict, the political environment and donor interventions. Influenced by these factors, women in Sierra Leone are subjected to numerous kinds of violence, which are often interrelated. This includes domestic violence (physical, economic and emotional/psychological), communal/cultural violence, sexual violence and structural violence. Interviews revealed that domestic violence and customary practices (such as female circumcision and child marriage) are considered the most common forms of violence. Women’s experiences of violence, however, often do not fit neatly into one category, but rather span a number of interrelated forms.”*

– ODI, 2012



*“Respectful marriage is when they go and ask your family and then they have to go and sign a paper with the police. We don’t see anyone in our town doing this respectful marriage.”*

- GIRL, 14, MOYAMBA

Child marriage is an outgrowth of a set of cultural anxieties and practices that center around controlling girls’ fertility, sexuality and freedom. Whilst factors such as education and poverty both correlate and have complex (and reciprocal) causal relationships with child marriage, sexual control is the direct root of it.

Even if the raising of the age of marriage could be achieved without a more wholesale understanding of sexual control, tackling early marriage in isolation would not necessarily reduce the other ways that sexual control and violence impacts girls and women. Infant and maternal mortality would no doubt decrease, but that would not automatically mean girls are able to live in their full power. Postponing marriage does not necessarily change the unequal and exploitative nature of marriage once it is entered into. Similarly, an unwed teenage mother is not necessarily in a better position than a married one, especially if the social stigmatization of girls’ sexuality (when not sanctified through marriage) persists, and when mothers’ ability to provide for themselves independently is limited.

It is therefore crucial to understand the specific manifestations of patriarchy in order not just to reduce the incidence of early marriage and associated public health problems, but to improve the lot of girls overall.

Such strategies will aim to create cultural conditions where early marriage is a less logical and appealing choice to girls and their families – but the real test of their success will be whether they improve, rather than just delay, girls’ experience of desire, marriage, sex, and childbearing.

# CHILD MARRIAGE AS CULTURAL PRACTICE



Across the world, female sexuality has long been perceived as a threat to the social order. Entrenched patriarchy has rendered female sexuality feared and disdained. Girls and women are believed to have innate power when it comes to sex, based on a perceived imbalance of sexual desire between men and women. In a context where girls and women have been forcibly distanced from power, anything seen as “innate” in this way represents a threat to the social order. Thus, female sexuality emerged globally as a key battleground in social relations centuries ago. From this base, it has been deployed according to the needs of powers in particular historical contexts.

Specifically, in former colonized countries like Sierra Leone and Guinea, dominant male sexuality has long been a tool of control. According to Brenner (1999), “Because those who would orchestrate the national narratives in the present are always concerned with securing control over the national future as well, reproduction and the family are especially sensitive political issues.” And in colonial regimes all over the world, “sexual violence was constitutive to the threat of colonial encounter” (Wieringa and Sivori, 2013). This established the framework in which power was consolidated as countries moved into independence: “narratives of revolutionary takeovers invariably feature a plethora of male heroes whose conventional masculinity is a powerful symbol of a people’s will to self-government [and] the patriarchal family represents the promise of a civilized society” (Wieringa and Sivori).

Particularly in their role as mothers, women are considered to hold the moral fate of the nation in their hands. In contrast, men are seen as pioneers of the economic, political, and social innovations associated with modernisation; they are not burdened with the moral baggage of the past to the extent that women are. This places the weight of maintaining ‘traditional values’ on women’s shoulders.



*“Because women are so closely linked in public discourse with the family, their failures and indiscretions in the domestic sphere are often portrayed on a collective scale as menaces to the well-being of the pillars of the state. If the women are good, the state will also be good, but if the women are ruined, the state will be ruined as well.”*

– BRENNER, 1999

The use of sexuality as a tool of control was laid bare in Sierra Leone during the rebel war. The Sierra Leone civil war (1991-2002) was one of chaos, without clearly delineated good and bad. Shortly after the war ended, Human Rights Watch (2003) presented evidence of horrific abuses against women and girls in every region of the country by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF), as well as other rebel, government and international peacekeeping forces. It is estimated that 17% of those displaced by the conflict experienced sexual assault of some form (Physicians for Human Rights, 2002) and that up to 250,000 women and girls experienced some form of sexual abuse (HRW, 2003).



*“Survivors not only live with the severe physical and mental health consequences of the abuses suffered, but also fear ongoing non-conflict-related sexual violence, largely perpetrated with impunity”.*

- WE'LL KILL YOU IF YOU CRY: SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE SIERRA LEONE CONFLICT, HRW, 2003

Furthermore, in West Africa generally, sexual control as a maintainer of tradition is embodied in the tradition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). FGM is hugely complex and contested and cannot be given exhaustive consideration here. However, at the very least we must note the extent to which it is inseparable from the social rituals of marriage. For most cultures that practice FGM, the ritual is a precursor to – a marker of – a girl's readiness for marriage, bound up with notions of purity, piety and control.



*“Teen pregnancy and child marriage have gone up here because we couldn't do the initiation during Ebola. Bundo is good because it reduces a girl's sexual appetite. If we cut off all the girls' clitorises, things would be better.”*

- PARAMOUNT CHIEF, KOINADUGU

At its heart, the practice is born out of the same profound patriarchy that justifies the marriage of children.

And like many practices so harmful to girls, FGM and the initiation more broadly have become such an intrinsic part of culture that to challenge them can appear to represent a threat to the entire fabric of society.

*“Although many parents do not see any benefit in the practice, it would be inconceivable for them to disrespect ancestral customs.”*

– PLAN UK, 2006



Both Islam and Christianity justify these narratives of patriarchal sexual dominance, and it is true that Islam in Guinea is more singular and hard-line. However, it is vital to notice how both globally, and more locally, religion has been co-opted by authoritarian regimes to justify patriarchal oppression. As Fish (2002) argues, “Patriarchal social order in Muslim societies has an ironic character, since it cannot be accounted for in scriptural terms”. In this context, we can begin to understand the ways in which the religious intersects with the political, to form a toxic mix for girls - a mix ultimately rooted in a culture that has been co-opted for insidious ends.

Whether based in religious ideologies of sexual purity, or nationalist ideals for the stable propagation of the state, these discourses can be appropriated to deny women and girls autonomy over their bodies. The emphasis on community cohesiveness, and against atomizing discourses of individual autonomy, is played out under these conditions, in narratives of collective judgment and social compliance to harmful norms. Community moves from being a source of solidarity to a source of shame, and positive deviance can be challenging to model. A fundamental understanding of the self as fluid, as part of a social body, is hijacked to ensure girls’ obedience.

And it is here that we see the inextricable link between teenage pregnancy and child marriage. As a religious and civic ritual marker, marriage has the power to bestow upon or deny the social legitimacy of pregnancy – within marriage it is safe, clean and of significant communal benefit, outside marriage it is chaotic, dirty, and a threat to the social order. Child marriage is thus inherently social, and inherently symbolic: a containment tool exercised by families, communities and the nation to uphold the moral order.

# BELIEFS VS. BEHAVIOR: THE PREGNANCY AND MARRIAGE FORMULA

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Having said this, the nature of the social response to this fear of female sexuality is impacted by recent historical contexts and events: because although the recitation of patriarchal beliefs is near universal, at a behavioral level, things manifest quite differently.

In Guinea particularly, but in other, more closed communities in Sierra Leone too, the expected, socially normative response to sexual control, where marriage happens quickly after puberty is the norm. This can be summarized as the marriage --> pregnancy formula

On the other hand, throughout Sierra Leone, but particularly in the south, extremely high levels of pre-marital teenage pregnancy are driving post-fact marriages. This can be described as the pregnancy --> marriage formula

How can this diversity of experience be understood? What explains the generation of teenage mothers who have been allowed to become pregnant before they can be – in the eyes of society – safely contained within marriage? How have society's sexual rules been so flouted in practice?

## CRISIS VS STASIS

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The impact of social chaos on behaviour cannot be underestimated. Specifically, in those places faced with the worst of civil war and Ebola, beliefs have been trumped in practice by economic and civil crisis. Sierra Leone's war was characterized by chaos without clear good or bad. It was a war of an estimated 50,000 child soldiers with 25% of the fighting children female (Burman and McKay, 2007). Girls and women who did not directly fight at the front lines served as war bush wives, while demobilization efforts from the international community focused mainly on boy child soldiers. In so many ways, events violated socially normative belief structures. Reverence for age was turned upside down, symbolised most acutely by the image of the nine-year-old child commander.

As we've seen, the extreme prevalence of rape and other sexual violations during the war was a particularly tragic manifestation of male sexual domination over women. And yet the extremity and variety of sexual crimes committed – including by child soldiers on women old enough to be their grandmothers and adult soldiers on girls young enough to be their daughters – were a direct challenge to those beliefs that prize community solidarity and cohesiveness. In particular, some of the worst crimes were committed within communities and even families. Whilst in the past, a rape of a woman would have been seen as a violation of her entire family, this was no longer the case. The rules that formerly governed male sexual domination had been entirely cast aside.



*“The rebels sought to dominate women and their communities by deliberately undermining cultural values and community relationships, destroying the ties that hold society together. Child combatants raped women who were old enough to be their grandmothers, rebels raped pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and fathers were forced to watch their daughters being raped.”*

- HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2003

Chaos reigned. The war caused deep and profound poverty: between 1980 and 2000, the country's GDP per capita was halved, from a mere \$500 to \$250. While all of Sierra Leone was devastated by war, the south, where the Revolutionary United Front initially invaded in 1991, was particularly scarred.

Today, poverty data maps closely to those areas in Sierra Leone hit hardest during the war. And it is here that the least regulation of social control was observed during the fieldwork for this project. As a compounding force, Ebola struck Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia in 2014. In Sierra Leone, Ebola deepened issues left behind by the war, placing an extraordinary burden on fragile public services and social institutions, and ultimately reigniting crisis behaviors.

On the other hand, in many of the communities visited, social life and cultural practice have remained more stable – and as such more tightly in line with socially normative beliefs. This is especially the case in Guinea, where Islam has absolute authority, and has been effectively appropriated by the state to serve its end.

## ‘FLUX’ VS ‘FIXED’ COMMUNITIES

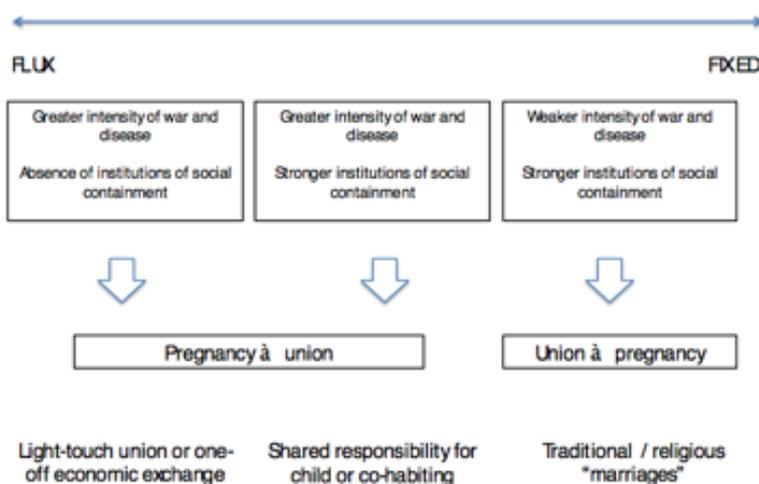
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As such, we see a spectrum of behaviour from ‘flux’ to ‘fixed’. In general, the most ‘flux’ communities are those that experienced the greatest intensity of war and disease, with a corresponding absence of institutions of social control. Of course, these two things are often intimately linked. At the local level, the RUF rebels generated political and institutional instability by specifically targeting chiefs for massacres, burning schools and courthouses, and scattering the civilian population. Young RUF recruits were often deliberately sent to attack their own home villages, leaving deep scars within their families and communities (Keen, 2005).

As such, we see a spectrum of behaviour from 'flux' to 'fixed'. In general, the most 'flux' communities are those that experienced the greatest intensity of war and disease, with a corresponding absence of institutions of social control. Of course, these two things are often intimately linked. At the local level, the RUF rebels generated political and institutional instability by specifically targeting chiefs for massacres, burning schools and courthouses, and scattering the civilian population. Young RUF recruits were often deliberately sent to attack their own home villages, leaving deep scars within their families and communities (Keen, 2005). Somewhere in the middle are those communities that have experienced a similar intensity of war and disease, but where stronger institutions – particularly religious and civic - are able to re-impose an element of social control. Often these kinds of communities are also more geographically isolated – meaning stronger institutions with a clearer locus of power.

Beyond this, there are those areas in Guinea which were not impacted by Sierra Leone's rebel war, and where strong supporting institutions, particularly from the mosque, keep a stranglehold on the community in the name of tradition.

This socio-cultural context explains the nature of union patterns observed:



Whilst those more 'fixed' communities have been lucky, relatively, having avoided the horrors of war, they do provide a more challenging cultural context for creating change for girls, with behaviour more tightly linked to socially normative beliefs that are deeply entrenched. On the other hand, in the more 'flux' communities in Sierra Leone, structural factors intersect with gendered poverty to create a chaotic landscape for girls, where they are forced to extract value from their bodies in order to survive. At the same time though, the extreme misalignment of behavior and beliefs means that cultural norms have already become unstuck, and could therefore represent a fruitful site for intervention.



*“It is now widely recognised that conflict throws gender roles and relations into flux, and that women and men are affected differently by conflict. As a result, space can be created for the renegotiation of gendered stereotypes and the consolidation of gains made by women during conflict.”*

- INTERNATIONAL ALERT, 2007

# MARRIAGE PRACTICES



## A) PREGNANCY → UNION



In the most 'flux' communities, teen pregnancy is rife. According to UNICEF (2013), there is a 68% pregnancy rate among sexually experienced teenage girls, with a mean age of 15. Overall, in 2013, 28% of girls aged 15-19 years were pregnant or had already given birth at least once (UNFPA, 2015). This figure has risen sharply since the Ebola outbreak.

There are several factors that render teen pregnancy outside marriage more likely. In areas decimated by war and disease, there is a pervasive culture of transactional sex – reflecting the deeply gendered nature of poverty. Over a third of Sierra Leonean girls agree that a man spends a lot of money on a girl, she should have sex with him (NBI, 2015). Poverty can drive girls to enter into sexual relationships with men who provide them with food, money, clothing, or some other material benefit in return for sex (Plan UK, 2013). In addition, sexual relationships are a means of securing tangible benefits like school fees or clothing (Plan UK, 2013; Farzenah, 2013).

Underlying all of this is a lack of knowledge of and access to contraception. Girls' access to sexual and reproductive health services, information and goods, including post-rape health care, has been a persistent problem predating the Ebola crisis. According to the Demographic and Health Surveys Program, only 6.7% of the 2.6 million female population in Sierra Leone were using modern contraceptive methods in 2008 (DHS, 2008). During the height of the Ebola epidemic the pre-existing difficulties for girls wishing to access services were acutely exacerbated.

Pregnancy is of course the most explicit signifier of uncontained female sexuality. As such, in 'flux' communities where deeply embedded patriarchal beliefs have not changed at the same rate as behaviors, there remains the desire to deal with, and make sense of, out of wedlock pregnancy. Or, put more simply, in much of Sierra Leone, pregnancy causes child marriage, and not the other way around.



*“Early marriage is the consequence of teenage pregnancy rather than early marriage being a reason for teenage pregnancy. This result shows alignment with other data sources about the initiation of early sex and teenage pregnancies in Sierra Leone.”*

- KONING, JALLOH-VOS, KOK, JALLOH, HERSCHDERFER

From the community's perspective (and especially amongst traditional authorities and institutions), teenage pregnancy per se is not the problem. Rather, it is the fact that it exists outside of a sanctified union that causes alarm: a social inconsistency that needs to be managed. The social 'management' of girls who have become pregnant is evocatively brought to life in the stigmatization of pregnant school girls. This represents a desire at the very least to put on an ostensible show of society's beliefs – to claw back some of the gap that has emerged between social beliefs and real, lived behavior.

How does this play out for girls? Whilst some girls are left without any support following conception, generally a range of local social practices – dependent on the strength of social institutions – define the response to pregnancy. We witnessed a range of these responses to pregnancy, from more fleeting to deeper and long-lasting:

- I. One-off payment to the girl's family based on school fees already paid
- II. Boy stays out of school for the length of pregnancy
- III. Short term imprisonment of boy with effective by-laws (normally resolved by fine)
- IV. Girls' school fees paid for a year after she has finished weaning the baby
- V. Ongoing financial relationship
- VI. Cohabitation

In colloquial Sierra Leonean krio, the term 'answer belly' [literally to acknowledge the pregnancy] is a catch-all to describe these various arrangements, practiced in an almost bewildering array of forms. This ambivalence towards the ultimate nature of the containing institution points towards the ultimately symbolic role of marriage – a post-hoc fact that attempts to make the messy ordered and contained.



*“Once a girl has had sex with a man, this man automatically becomes the girl's boyfriend and lover, irrespective of the force that was used. Society and families support this behaviour. The man who has sex with a minor (through rape or 'consent') may be brought to the police station or a local authority like a chief. The immediate next step is that the parents of the girl and the family of the man/boy negotiate the payment of compensation. Once the families agree the family of the girl will withdraw the complaint. The primary concern of parents and guardians seems to be avoiding that the girl's reputation is spoiled by making the boy/man own up to be the father of the child and pay compensation.”*



*“They pulled the boy to court and because he pulled me out of school he has to pay Le1.6 million. The case will be settled on Friday. The money goes to my people. They said they’re going to send me back to school, but I don’t believe them.”*

– UNMARRIED MOTHER, 15, KOINADUGU

*“It’s always ‘answer belly’. We don’t know who had a wedding.”*

– GIRL, 12, MOYAMBA



*“Child marriage is bad, but ‘answer belly’ is good. We do sensitisation training against child marriage... and we make boys ‘answer belly’.”*

– ELDER WOMEN, MOYAMBA

*“But the man he always says, ‘I don’t really marry you, I just answered belly because of the pressure.’”*

– GIRL, 13, MOYAMBA



*“The paramount chief, he put a law where if any boy gets a girl pregnant and the girl has to sit out of school, then the boy has to sit out too.”*

– COMMUNITY MEMBER, MOYAMBA



*“There was no money for school for a year, so then a man came and said he wanted to marry me. He said he’d help with school. He came and tied Kola. He was already married. I was the second wife. In this town they put Kola and you don’t go to their house straight away, they give you a date to come back. They lend the women once Kola has been given, then the idea is that he can come back later with the full bride price. The baby I had with him got very sick, but the man wouldn’t give money to help, so I had to come home to get help from my parents. He hasn’t come again to see me. It’s been four months and we’re not married.”*

– UNMARRIED MUM, 15, KOINADUGU



*“The education secretary for the district got me pregnant when I was 12. He did ‘answer belly’, and he gave me Le20,000 per month. Then they said I had to go work for him to prove I should be his wife. I cooked food and took it but the wife got angry and threw the food, which is against the town laws, so the chief fined them Le50,000. Then the chief called him back and ask him why I was cooking for them every day. The man said he didn’t know. In the end, he told the chief he didn’t want me or the child.”*

– UNMARRIED MOTHER, 14, KAMBIA

In some communities, pregnancy outside marriage has become so widespread that pregnancy has actually become a necessary pre-cursor to marriage.

*“If you’re 18 and you haven’t had a baby, people are asking ‘what’s wrong?’”*



– GIRL, 14, MOYAMBA

*“We’re all women because we’ve given birth. Without that you can’t be a woman. I have friends who haven’t had a baby, and they are not women.”*

– UNMARRIED MOTHER, 15, KAMBIA

## B) UNION → PREGNANCY

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*“If she starts showing bad signs I would marry my daughter off from 12, but reluctantly.”*

– TEACHER, MAMU, GUINEA



*“Answer belly’ isn’t proper marriage... and the kid will grow up badly.”*

– UNMARRIED GIRL, 15, KOINADUGU

*“You can tie a rope around a cow and control it, but not a girl. That’s why you have to marry her before 15. If she commits a sin after that you are equal in that sin as a parent.”*

– IMAM, KOINADUGU

In more traditional and religious communities, particularly those in Guinea where the authority of Islamic institutions is absolute, religious and customary marriages take place in an attempt to ensure that a girl is married before there is any risk of pregnancy. These marriages are often associated with a younger marriage age and large age gaps between the girl and man – with the average spousal age difference in Guinea being 14 years. Marriage prior to pregnancy is also the most common arrangement within polygamous unions, which affect approximately 25% of girls 15-19 (Girls Not Brides, 2016).



*“You are free with your parents until you are sent to be married at 14. Then you are in a kind of hell. The first child is the start of the suffering, because the child bearing is constant.”*

– MARRIED WOMAN, MAMOU, GUINEA

Where marriage is pre-planned like this, it remains very much a union of two families. Each side will investigate the other, with an emissary usually in the form of an uncle sent to a girl's natal home to carry out an investigation: questions related to a girl's purity and piety are the most critical. In both Guinea and Sierra Leone, these types of marriages are associated with a 'bride price', although their monetary value is not nearly as high as in other West African cultures.

## 'MARRIAGE', 'UNION' AND BEYOND...



The existence of these varied and differentiated marriage customs highlights a wider point about marriage amongst less economically advantaged communities in Sierra Leone and Guinea: the absence of formal unions. Very few legal marriages take place, and indeed very few in the community could recall a marriage that had taken place with legal endorsement.



*"Marriage is when you have a ring and a dress. No, our sisters never got that."*

- GIRL, 13, MOYAMBA

Instead, the source of legitimacy of a marriage union is the associated transaction that takes place between the two families.



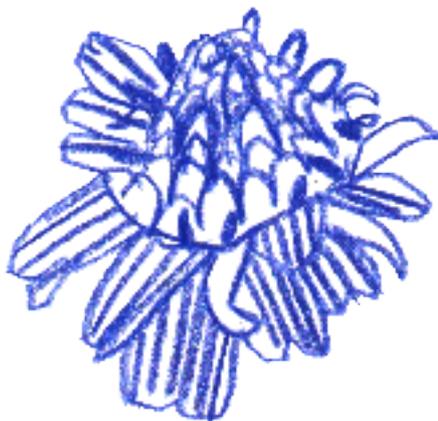
*"I got her pregnant first. I was 20, she was 15. My woman was from a different town so they charged me more."*

- MARRIED MAN, KAMBIA

*"Every step is negotiable."*

- COMMUNITY MEMBER, KAMBIA

In the next sections, we will explore the very real ways in which cultural fear of girls' sexuality – as policed by society - creates a direct pathway to marriage. And we will also look at the ways in which we might be able to transform that experience of control via culturally rooted solutions, helping girls chart new paths, and imagine a different kind of future.



# LIFE FOR GIRLS

## AN ABSENCE OF MEANINGFUL, POSITIVE CHOICE



### GIRLS, CONTROL, AND CHOICE

In the preceding sections, we brought to life the cultural forces that drive life for girls in Sierra Leone and a Guinean community along its border. We focused the analysis around the social control of girls' sexuality – playing out across multiple aspects of life, justified by religion and politics, and impacting understandings of gender, the propagation of the nation state, the social self, and the construction of perceived social judgment in girls' and families' minds.

We saw this social control meeting its ultimate apotheosis in pregnancy, the visible (and therefore social) manifestation of girls' private sexuality.

While the control of sexuality manifests at the level of symbolic cultural life, it has direct consequences for girls' lived experience. The cultural norms of control affect the choices a girl is offered and, even more foundationally, the choices she can imagine for herself.

Cultural narratives about control make it more appealing for families, parents and communities to close options for girls, and more frightening for them to leave them open. Ultimately, they affect the choices a girl can envisage for herself: creating, as we will see in this section, not just ambivalence but fatalism about marriage.

The choice landscape – the extent to which choice is limited for girls in different ways - differs according to where their community is situated on the 'fixed' versus 'flux' spectrum, impacting to some extent the nature of solutions required.

Our task now is to understand where they encounter these moments of control, and what forms they take. When they appear, how do they restrict and depreciate girls' options, and how could we build in more, better, and healthier potential choices for girls.

# LIFE FOR GIRLS IN 'FLUX' COMMUNITIES



*“Child marriage is bad, but ‘answer belly’ is good. We do sensitisation training against child marriage... and we make boys ‘answer belly.’”*

– ELDER WOMEN, MOYAMBA

Girls in more ‘flux’ communities are in survival mode. Cultural norms of sexual control result in highly gendered coping mechanisms, forcing girls to extract value from their bodies. Whilst girls who have babies will generally be in some sort of ‘answer belly’ arrangement, these are often so ad hoc or temporary that to describe them as marriages or unions is deeply inaccurate. Girls may be living with their own family but with some sort of ongoing agreement with the father of their children. They may sometimes be living with a man or his family. But very often, their circumstances force them to have sex with more than one man. Marriage as we know it is simply not on the agenda.

## GENDERED POVERTY



Sierra Leone is one of the world’s poorest countries, ranking 179th out of 188 countries in the Human Development Index in 2016. Poverty is widespread, with a GDP per capita of \$693. Approximately 70% of young people are underemployed or unemployed and an estimated 800,000 young people today are actively seeking employment (UNDP, 2016). This extreme poverty impacts worst on girls.



*“I can’t go to school because I have no shoes or uniform. I live with my grandparents who have no money. Primary school education is supposed to be free but they make us pay.”*

– UNMARRIED GIRL, 12, MOYAMBA



*“Boys will get a job regardless of their education, but girls struggle.”*

– UNMARRIED SCHOOL GIRL, 15, MOYAMBA



*“The girls come to school and they are doing well, but the parents take them out to marry. The farmers especially have no money, so they take the girl children out of school.”*

– MALE COMMUNITY MEMBER, KAMBIA

*“Parents will buy school books for boys but girls are expected to fend for themselves.”*

– COMMUNITY GROUP, MOYAMBA

In the most ‘flux’ communities, Ebola compounded already desperate levels of poverty - and those worst positioned to deal with its effects suffered the most.

*“Women and men are differentially affected by Ebola, with women in the region taking on particular roles and responsibilities as they care for the ill and bury the dead, and as they navigate ever-diminishing livelihood options and increasingly limited health resources available to pregnant women. Furthermore, structural preconditions in ‘development’ itself have deepened these gendered fault lines”*

– IDS, 2015

In essence, girls are distanced from social assets: money; school materials; job opportunities; mobility and more. And the gendered response to poverty means that she accesses these assets via the only tool society tells her is available – her body.

# TRANSACTIONAL SEX AS PART OF VILLAGE ECONOMIC ECOSYSTEMS



Broadly, where few options are on the table for either boys or girls, both look to use the (perceived) intrinsic assets they have.



*“Boys can find jobs but girls like us can’t do the same jobs because we’re less strong.”*

– UNMARRIED OUT OF SCHOOL GIRL, 12, MOYAMBA

*“If the man comes you say yes, because there’s money. That’s really why I let him. If I had money for myself I’d never go.”*

– TEENAGE MUM, 15, KOINADUGU

*“It’s all about money. Most of us want to go for boys our age, but we’d go for an older man if he had more money.”*

– UNMARRIED SCHOOL GIRL, 16, MOYAMBA

More specifically, girls are exchanging sex for four key assets in Sierra Leone.

## A) SEX FOR STRENGTH



Eking out a living in economically decimated villages is hard physical work. In a context where girls and boys have been taught that strength is the domain of men – where boys have been taught that strength is power - this power is wielded freely and lauded over girls.

Below is an extract from a conversation with a group of teenage-mothers in a rural village in Moyamba:



*“We have a girls’ sand collective.”*

*“We dig sand together in the pit and then we sell the sand in bags at the roadside.”*

*“It takes one week to dig all the sand that we will sell and take to the road.”*

*“So we take it in turns by digging the sand and one week one of us gets the money, and the next week the other gets the money and it goes in a circle like that.”*

*“But the sand is too heavy for us to carry to the road.”*

*“So we get a boy to carry the sand.”*

*Researcher: “And why does he help you do that?”*

*“Well the girl who gets the money that week has to do things for him.”*

*Researcher: “What sort of things?”*

*“Well we have to go round the corner with him [euphemism for sex].”*

*- TEENAGE MOTHERS, MOYAMBA*

After this conversation, we met with an unmarried group of boys in the same village, all of whom were in loose 'answer belly' relationships. So we brought up the question of the sand collective. The answer was heartbreakingly simple:



*"Well we all have to use ourselves, we use our strength and they use their womanhood."*

- TEENAGE BOY, MOYAMBA

Explicit in this answer is the way in which the whole community – and boys in particular – have absorbed patriarchal norms of value and power.

And this fact comes to life vividly in the vengeful – and explicitly sexual - male response to any perceived shifting of the power balance between girls and boys.



*"Boys are starting to resent the recent NGO emphasis on girls so they are making them pregnant as retaliation."*

- COMMUNITY GROUP, MOYAMBA

*"There are lots of organizations helping girls here, but us boys aren't getting help. We seize the favored status of girls by getting them pregnant. It gets them out the way for financial resources."*

- BOY, 17, MOYAMBA

In Sierra Leone, as we have shown, there has been a recent and visible NGO focus on girls – in the form of safe spaces based around girls' clubs and role models, as well as more direct provision of assets like schoolbooks. Boys and men we spoke to explicitly articulated the economic incentive for them to make girls pregnant in this context and thereby regain the assets and associated power for themselves.

As well as being driven by calculation we witnessed a deep sense of vengeance implicit in this male response, based on a perceived injustice at the norms of sexual control being violated. Where girls are given 'things' for 'free', boys have to exploit their bodies to access assets, or so their logic goes.

Indeed, aware of how much things have changed in Sierra Leone – accompanied by the deep desire to return to a ‘purer’ less chaotic time - we should note how girls can be seen as a convenient platform on which other elements of “traditional” life are upheld.

Particularly, the language of ‘human rights’ is used – pejoratively – to stand for any western, modern influence that must be opposed. The narrative of the community has dichotomized so that human rights come to stand for anything that is inconsistent with the life of the community, including excessive freedoms for girls. The association between these two ideas provides an insidious justification for reasserting control.



*“If I don’t send my child to school, I’ve broken their rights, but if I don’t have the money what should I do?”*

– POLITICAL LEADER, MOYAMBA

*“Even in the Qur’an we have human rights, but everyone has their duties. We are different from the white people. These things like pornography that have come: this isn’t our culture. Human rights without human responsibility leads to problems.”*

– PARAMOUNT CHIEF, MOYAMBA

In reality though, human rights operate predominantly at a linguistic level – they are articulated in the positive only by NGOs and government. They provide a convenient symbol of modernity without offering any tangible benefit. And all this means that girls rarely see the advantages, but are dominated in their name.

For the community, the following applies:

## HUMAN RIGHTS

Western  
Individual  
Harmful  
Freedom for girls

## TRADITION

Ours  
Collective  
Restorative  
Control over girls

But INGO communications do have a lot to answer for. In one rural community center in Moyamba, during an inter-generational discussion with girls, mothers and grandmothers, the inevitable ‘anti-human rights’ narrative reared its head. And we had some accidental stimulus to help deepen our understanding of the perceived problem. Plastered across the walls were a series of INGO-commissioned posters outlining various child ‘rights’:

“Every girl has the right to a private toilet”

“Every child has the right to eat fresh fruit and vegetables everyday”

“Every child has the right to live in a loving family”

It is not hard to see how frustrating these messages must be for parents living in emergency and post-emergency settings, and how profoundly discordant they are with reality on the ground.



*“Yes, well everyone has the right to food but there is no food, so why do they tell us these rights? These rights are for their country not ours.”*

- GRANDMOTHER, MOYAMBA

Ultimately, success will depend on making it clear that more choice for girls does not have to come at the expense of dearly held customs, and that the idea of choice (or rights) for girls can still be fostered in difficult economic situations.

## B. SEX FOR MOBILITY

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In Sierra Leone, the ‘okada’ (motorbike) driver has become king of the countryside in a context where movement between villages is extremely difficult. This is particular true in the South - as the home of the political opposition, basic infrastructure like paved roads and transport have been chronically underfunded under the current administration.

The okada driver represents the only means of moving between isolated villages (indeed many of the places we visited required four or five hours travel on rough roads in 4x4 vehicles to access them). The value of movement in any society means that okada drivers are imbued with significant power – and this is something they exercise freely and with pride over girls.



*“Maybe I’ll give her a ride one or two times for free, but she knows what is coming next and she can’t keep having things for free!”*

- OKADA DRIVER, MOYAMBA TOWN

*“He has the most sex of all of us! [all boys laugh]. We have to work for it but he just gets it for free!”*

- TEENAGE BOY REFERRING TO OKADA DRIVER FRIEND, MOYAMBA DISTRICT

In this context, girls are forced to exchange sex for mobility on an almost daily basis. This is particularly the case because villages often have highly singular “specialized” economies which means trading with neighboring villages is obligatory. Girls’ role in the village’s fragile economy actually necessitates transactional sex.



*“Those okada drivers you have sex with them to go to school, to go to the market, even if you need to go quickly fetch something... They don’t make you do it every time but you can only get so much for free...”*

- TEENAGE MOTHER, 16, MOYAMBA DISTRICT

Indeed, these drivers are so mobile – as compared to the general population – that they often have ‘girlfriends’, and indeed children, dotted around the countryside... leading some in Sierra Leone to start referring to the ‘scourge of the okada driver’.



*“I live with my man and our baby but he’s gone all of the time, riding around. I know he has women in other places and also babies. Sometimes he goes for weeks and doesn’t come back.”*

- TEENAGE MOTHER, IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH AN OKADA DRIVER, MOYAMBA DISTRICT

Cultural norms of control have made girls believe that they could never drive the bikes themselves – indeed we heard this explicitly from girls many times.



*“If a girl became a bus driver or okada rider people would call her foolish.”*

– UNMARRIED SCHOOLGIRL, 16, MOYAMBA

At the close of the civil war the INGO community also unwittingly reinforced the gendered access to mobility, when thousands of boy-child soldiers were given motorbikes in exchange for disarmament, setting a precedent for gendered ownership over transport systems.



*“In a way the conflict in Sierra Leone has come full circle. It began with young fighters roaring the diamond towns in eastern Sierra Leone, in the early days of an insurgency that mopped up unemployed young people and inducted them into a dangerous world of armed combat. Eleven years of war attacked traditional if problematic rural solidarities, and questioned many social values. The young combatants are once again roaring about provincial Sierra Leone. But this time the tool is not the AK-47 but the Honda trail bike taxi.”*

‘FROM WEAPONS TO WHEELS’, PETERS, 2007

## C. SEX FOR SCHOOL

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The culture of transactional sex and the distortion of power pervades even those areas where girls might be considered safe – epitomized in the damaging practice of ‘sex for school’. A majority of girls we met in the south of Sierra Leone, but also in Koinadugu, had been asked for sex by a teacher in return for the right to attend lessons, passing the year, or a higher mark, and this has been evidenced more broadly. Staying in school after puberty can – in some cases – increase the risk of exposure to violence, sex and early pregnancy (Wetheridge and Antonowicz, 2014).



Researcher: *“So all of you have been asked to have sex with teachers?”*

*“Yes one time or another we all got asked by the teachers.”*

*“Not always sex but things like sex.”*

*“Sometimes you laugh and say no and they go away, but some of the times you have to.”*

*“It depends what it’s for. Like if you don’t have the school fees that’s more serious than other small things.”*

*“Even the father of this baby I’m holding is the teacher.”*

-GROUP OF TEENAGE MOTHERS, KOINADUGU

Many of the girls we met were desperate to stay in school (particularly after the large gap in education that resulted from school closures during Ebola). And many had parents that ostensibly supported their continued education.



*“My family they say I can stay at school but they don’t help with the school fees except sometimes. They don’t ask how I stay in school but it should be obvious.”*

- TEENAGE MOTHER, KOINADUGU

There are an almost bewildering number of fees girls have to pay in Sierra Leone to stay in school – payment systems designed by individual teachers or headteachers to supplement the paltry wages teachers receive.



*“You think you’ve paid the fees then there are some new ones the next week. Then your parents get angry because you’re always asking for money they don’t have.”*

- GIRL IN SCHOOL, MOYAMBA TOWN

## D. SEX TO SUPPORT THE FAMILY

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*“Of course, mothers know – where do they think their daughter gets money?!”*

- MARRIED WOMAN, KOINADUGU

Many parents display significant ambivalence when faced with a daughter earning small amounts of money through sex. While mothers’ struggle morally (and emotionally) with the reality of transaction sex, they are also conditioned to extract value from girls’ bodies in the same way as the rest of society.

As has been extensively referenced in the literature, girls are expected to contribute economically to the household, while boys and men are most likely to spend their money externally.



*“Sons they spend their money here and there and expect you to be happy when they contribute, girls make sure the family eats.”*

- COMMUNITY MEMBER, KAMBIA

This has been internalized by girls themselves.



*“My mother will ask me to go out and get something [to eat]. She knows the only way to get something. She doesn’t say it but she knows. I can’t come back empty-handed or everyone will be hungry that day.”*

- GIRL, 15, MOYAMBA DISTRICT

This phenomenon, created by economic necessity, also intersects with notions of childhood and ageing in a way fundamentally at odds with the notion of the innocent child whose rights should be protected

*“Now I have earned the right to sit here resting because I worked so hard.”*

- GRANDMOTHER, KAMBIA DISTRICT

*“I am respected I hope for the things I do in this community, but the respect starts with age and wisdom.”*

- VILLAGE CRIER, KOINADUGU

*“These girls, they have it hard and as they grow older it gets easier because respect comes.”*

- GRANDMOTHER, MOYAMBA

As we have seen, girls are having transactional sex for many reasons: to support the family; stay in school; to access male strength; and even to travel a mile down the road. This is by no means an extensive list, but it does start to point us towards the specific drivers of transactional sex – which, as we will see in the next sections, most often leads to pregnancy and ultimately to ‘marriage’.

## TRANSACTIONAL SEX, CONTRACEPTION AND PREGNANCY



Not only is transactional sex deeply damaging in and of itself, but in a context where access to contraception and knowledge of its purpose is minimal, it inevitably leads to pregnancy.

The impact of this situation is worsened by lack of availability and lack of understanding of contraception.



*“I’ve heard of condoms but boys never want to use them.”*

- UNMARRIED GIRL, 14, KAMBIA.

*“I got the implant in secret – my man would kill me if he found out!!”*

- UNMARRIED GIRL, 25, MOYAMBA

Access to contraception is low. Girls' access to sexual and reproductive health services, information and goods, including post-rape health care, has been a persistent problem predating the Ebola crisis. According to the Demographic and Health Surveys Program, only 6.7% of the 2.6 million female population in Sierra Leone were using modern contraceptive methods in 2008 (DHS, 2008).

Schools in Sierra Leone typically provide no education about issues such as the health risks of unprotected sex, how to prevent unwanted pregnancies, or consent (Plan UK, 2013; Farzenah, 2013). There is generally low awareness about contraception in rural Sierra Leone, and in some communities, the topic of contraception is taboo (Plan UK, 2013). In one study (NBI, 2015) only 16% of young participants had talked to parents about sex, with those with the lowest knowledge five times more likely to become pregnant as teenagers (NBI, 2015).

Furthermore, in a context of sexual control, there is significant male resistance to contraceptive use generally, and condoms specifically.



*“It’s so hypocritical but men will respect a woman more if she has fewer kids, but if I told my man I was using contraception he’d call me a prostitute.”*

– UNMARRIED MUM, 21, MOYAMBA

Myths that women who use condoms must be ‘prostitutes’ are pernicious. Many of those women who we saw using contraception were doing so in secret from their ‘husbands’ and ‘boyfriends’. They are practically managing to keep their family size more stable and in doing so maintaining an element of control over their own lives, but in a climate of fear and secrecy.

On the plus side, there is an increasing NGO focus on sexual and reproductive health, and this is trickling down to girls.

*“I believe we can control the teen pregnancy issues with intensive family planning.”*

– NGO MEETING



*“Having lots of children is not in fashion.”*

– UNMARRIED MUM, 17, BAUYA, MOYAMBA DISTRICT

*“If I could give advice to my younger self? It’s too hard to say don’t have sex... but at least use contraception – maybe the implant.”*

– UNMARRIED MUM, 17, KAMBIA

This in turn means there are some positive signs of greater receptiveness to contraceptive use, especially amongst girls. According to a UNICEF report a small percentage (9.2%) of girls between 15 and 19 who had more than one sexual partner during the last twelve months reported to have used condom the last time they had sex (reported in Farzenah, 2013). We heard many girls we spoke to speaking more positively about various types of contraception including the implant and condoms.



*“I saved my own money to buy a ‘captain band’ [implant]. My mum found out recently but she didn’t mind. She was proud that I can stay in school.”*

- UNMARRIED SCHOOLGIRL, 18, KOINADUGU

In fact, the desire for contraception becomes most pronounced – and acceptable – for girls who already have a baby. Below is an extract from a conversation in Koinadugu with a group of teenage mothers who have returned to school.

*“All of us we’ve had babies and we managed to get back to school because of the chief... the chief made the men pay back school fees.”*

*“So now we won’t get pregnant again because we fought to be at this school and we are determined to finish our education.”*

*“We won’t get pregnant by using the ‘captain band’ [implant]. Some of us saved up for it [equivalent of \$3] and Marie Stopes gave some of us it for free... ‘captain band’ is the best thing that happened in this community.”*

- GROUP OF TEENAGE MOTHERS, KAMBIA

## A WORD OF CAUTION

Increased knowledge alone is not the answer. Whilst there have been a range of initiatives aimed at ‘sensitising’ girls about their use of contraception, until they are genuinely able to access family planning services (this means services they can afford, and that are easily accessible), and until they have meaningful opportunities to provide for themselves financially (so that transactional sex is not the only option), ‘sensitisation’ will never be enough.



*“Increased knowledge does not invariably lead to behavior change. Girls in Sierra Leone are often limited by a lack of knowledge and education, but this is far from the only constraint and improving their knowledge should not be assumed to lead to change. They may lack geographic or financial access to resources such as contraception and sexual and reproductive health advice; they may lack the power to say no to a peer or older man who wants sex. They may perceive their need for the money, food or other resources accessible through transactional sex as a more immediate or justifiable purpose than the avoidance of sex and pregnancy. Teenage girls’ behavior and decisions are thus informed not only by their knowledge, but also by a range of other factors that mediate that knowledge.”*

- SECURE LIVELIHOODS RESEARCH CONSORTIUM, 2016

## MARRIAGE AS RESPONSE TO ALL OF THIS CHAOS



*“Child marriage is bad, but ‘answer belly’ is good. We do sensitisation training against child marriage... and we make boys ‘answer belly’.”*

- ELDER WOMEN, MOYAMBA

We have repeated this quote a number of times, because we believe it sums up succinctly the challenge of tackling child marriage in Sierra Leone against a backdrop of social chaos and economic disaster. ‘Answer belly’ – the ‘flux’ communities’ equivalent of child marriage - is not the problem, it is an imperfect patched-together solution.

Across our conversations with the more progressive traditional leadership structures – town criers, village elders, village, district and Paramount Chiefs – we heard how great strides have been made in narratives around child marriage from a legal perspective. We heard that marriage below the age of 18 is bad (although few can articulate why) and that child marriage is against the law. Whilst these progressive voices are in a minority, they certainly exist in Sierra Leone.

The issue is that in ‘flux’ communities, pregnancy comes first, and even the most progressive of the community members do not know what to do about it.



*“I am a progressive man, I was a parliamentary member to ECOWAS. I returned here to serve my people. I have personally paid for at least 20 girls in the community to go to school... I fight the Imams on this child marriage nonsense... But these girls I sent to school: 14 of them got pregnant... What am I to do?... Now it’s my job to ensure these boys support these children.”*

- PARAMOUNT CHIEF, KOINADUGU

All of this demands that we look critically at cause and effect – if child marriage (in the very loosest sense) is a response to pregnancy, which itself comes about because of various forms of transactional sex girls are forced to engage in, all because of a lack of assets and an imbalance of power, where should we be focusing our attention?

## WHAT COMES NEXT: LIVING IN AN ‘ANSWER BELLY’ ARRANGEMENT



Despite the initial appearance of betterment, for girls pushed into a union from a position of zero assets, the life that follows can be extremely tough.

*“If there is a crisis your man will use your illiteracy against you... and if you’re not educated he’s much more likely to cheat. I’ve seen that happen with my sister and she’s so miserable.”*

- UNMARRIED OUT OF SCHOOL GIRL, 12, MOYAMBA



*“When men see economically empowered women they don’t treat them badly. But girls like us – we are ignored or beaten.”*

- UNMARRIED MOTHER, 19, MOYAMBA

The only certainty of 'answer belly' is that it is uncertain:

*"Now I've got too many girls pregnant. Maybe five. I 'answered belly' once because you can only do one at a time unless you're a rich man. Maybe I'll do another one later on."*

- TEENAGE BOY OKADA DRIVER, MOYAMBA



*"I have one girl I live with and different girlfriends in villages around the town. When she makes me angry or starts demanding too much I go to the next one."*

- TEENAGE BOY, MOYAMBA TOWN

But still there is a certain pride and social cache when it does happen, because having a man acknowledge a pregnancy is by no means certain.

*"My first baby wasn't 'answer belly' but my second one was, so I'm now lucky."*

- TEENAGE MOTHER, MOYAMBA



*"My parents didn't have the power to make him 'answer belly' so I feel really bad."*

- TEENAGE MOTHER, MOYAMBA

The result of this uncertainty – the total lack of permanence of 'answer belly' – means that many girls find themselves in multiple unions and sexual interactions simultaneously and over the course of a lifetime.

## IN SUMMARY



We have heard about the various forms of union in ‘flux’ communities in Sierra Leone – almost all of which result from pregnancy in some way or another. Child marriage, in this case, is an explicit symptom of a compounded set of problems – economic crisis, gendered poverty, patriarchal power structures, gendered access to infrastructure, and a lack of contraception. It should be clear – in the case of the ‘flux’ community at least – that child marriage is an outgrowth of a much, much bigger issue. In this context, focusing too singularly on the symptom will only serve to entrench the problem further.

## A SEED OF HOPE: FEMALE SOLIDARITY



While life for girls in many of the poorest communities we visited in Sierra Leone was extremely bleak, there is a strong sense of solidarity amongst girls, and social isolation is less pronounced than in many other countries.



*“We don’t just meet up via BRAC, we have our own club. We meet every Sunday and we each contribute 2,500 Leones – 2,000 as standard and 500 for emergencies. It was just one of the girls in the group who started the club... being poor gives us ideas!! It means there’s always some help if things go wrong, which is a huge source of relief.”*

– UNMARRIED GIRL, 18, KAMBIA

Across Sierra Leone, girls have historically organized into collectives around work, child-care and savings. Organic collectivization is socially permissible and a critical source of social solidarity for girls. In fact, in some cases, the civil war actually led to the creation of stronger institutions of female solidarity.



*“Despite extreme difficulties during the civil war, women cooperated and formed networks to improve access to basic needs such as health and income-generation. They were also increasingly responsible for the welfare of their extended families, even during displacement as the number of female-headed households increased. In addition to developing coping strategies, many Sierra Leonean women were also active in organising and participating in civil society peacebuilding efforts within their communities, and they have continued to play an important role in advocating for peace at the local, national and regional levels.”*

- INTERNATIONAL ALERT, 2007

Some of the most effective NGO activity in the region harnesses this organic female solidarity.



*“Through the BRAC clubs, we’ve acted as mentors to push girls to go back to school.”*

- UNMARRIED MUMS, MOYAMBA

*“Even though Action Aid actually come and give us things we need, I prefer being part of a BRAC club as it’s more fun and more long-term.”*

- UNMARRIED MUM, 17, KAMBIA

Those girls who are part of these report on their truly transformational impact.



*“Playing football with the BRAC club has brought us so much cohesion. Girls who might not even talk to each other cheer each other on.”*

- UNMARRIED GIRL, 18, KAMBIA

They provide girls with education about what really matters to their lives. They increase their self-esteem. And perhaps most importantly, they provide them with social capital and links to other girls.

## A SEED OF HOPE: NORMS IN FLUX



Chaos is not the same as freedom. But nonetheless, within the chaos there are far fewer cultural restrictions on girls' movement. As we have seen, it is in more 'flux' communities that lived behavior is detaching from traditionally held beliefs.

And while the community tries to claw back this gap by reciting the socially normative, there is an evident opportunity to exploit the challenge to social norms that this changing behavior represents. Concretely, it was in the more 'flux' communities that we heard girls articulating a greater range of possible futures. We saw encouraging examples of language of ambition and aspiration. They are able to, at least in theory, imagine other sources of respect for a grown woman beyond marriage and motherhood, and they have occasionally seen powerful role models in their communities.



*“There are other sources of respect for girls apart from getting married and having babies. For example, if she’s well behaved, well-educated and makes money, people in the community will look up to her.”*

- UNMARRIED BOARDING SCHOOL GIRL, 17, MOYAMBA TOWN

*“My ambition is to be a doctor.”*

- UNMARRIED BOARDING SCHOOL GIRL, 16, MOYAMBA TOWN

*“Empowerment is the new paradigm!”*

- UNMARRIED MOTHER, 19, KAMBIA

Of course, while extreme, gendered poverty persists, the key will be supporting girls to access opportunities that can enable them to make a reality of these aspirations.

# LIFE FOR GIRLS IN 'FIXED' COMMUNITIES



At the more 'fixed' end of the spectrum, the cultural norms of control do not just affect the choices a girl can access but also profoundly limit the choices she can imagine for herself.

Whilst girls may have escaped the extreme poverty of survival mode, they are nevertheless living in severely circumscribed situations financially. In both Sierra Leone and Guinea, over half the population lives in (extreme) poverty, and as we know, this is worse for girls. These circumstances conspire with deeply embedded norms of social control to place firm limits on what girls can truly imagine for themselves.

As a consequence, girls exhibit at best ambivalence, and at worst an internalized acceptance about the role of marriage in their futures – there are simply no other meaningful opportunities that girls can conceive of and that society will approve.

In this section we explore life for girls in these 'fixed' communities in more detail, and the girl-centered solutions that are needed in order to provide more choice generally, and around marriage specifically.

There exist few realistic alternative representations of mature, socially-accepted womanhood to which girls from traditionally-minded backgrounds can aspire. Whilst we know that (sufficient) assets and resource provision could start to shift girls' attitudes, being able to genuinely conceive of different futures requires that these are socially sanctioned and modeled.



*There's an impressive minister who built the school and hospital in this town. But a woman I look up to from the community? I can't think of any."*

- UNMARRIED SCHOOL GIRL, 15, KOINADUGU

*"There's a girl who was born in this community and did really well and now lives in America. How could I become like her? I guess by staying in school..."*

- UNMARRIED GIRL, 13, KAMBIA

Education, while increasingly aspirational, is not yet given the same cultural value as marriage, which is conceived of as the ultimate, desirable, end in itself. This may be why some families are choosing to delay marriages until later (e.g. until the completion of a junior secondary level schooling) but ultimately retain the desire that their daughter should engage in a marriage as soon as possible after some agreed, arbitrary level of 'sufficient' education. And ultimately, this points to a pronounced conceptual gap around the answer to the question of 'what comes next' for girls after school.

So, while school can ostensibly appear to offer an alternative to child marriage, it is inherently temporary – and as such it does nothing to plot an alternative future. If marriage is seen as guaranteeing a successful shift from 'childhood' into 'womanhood', the 'schoolgirl' is a more ambiguous category. Hale (2008) argues that the emergent category of 'schoolgirl' is a 'liminal phase' where girls are "constrained between two identity positions" (child vs. woman). This means it is most commonly conceived of as a short-term, temporary identity that "will end when somebody else decides it will end" either by lacking money for further school expenses or via marriage. Thus the 'autonomous individual' schoolgirl in the end concedes to the reality of her social role as a wife, and the expectation that she will submit to her husband's authority.



*"After school finished, of the 22 girls whose school fees I had funded, 14 became pregnant."*

– PARAMOUNT CHIEF, SINKUNIA, KOINADUGU DISTRICT

In this context, positing school as a supposed 'alternative' can actually just make things more confusing. It results in a mixed message that must be negotiated: on the one hand girls are expected to stay in school but eventually it's more important that they will also be married and produce children. In this context, school is a decoy that can present the illusion of progress, even though the ultimate destination for girls will be the same as before. In addition to this there is an added injustice: if a superficial emphasis has been placed on education, girls feel like failures when they are not able to continue with school, even though in reality they are merely conforming to the one available option.



*"In this community girls are stigmatized when they marry early, because here in this town there is shame in dropping out of school."*

– UNMARRIED MOTHER, KOINADUGU

In short, whilst on the surface it may look as if girls in these supposedly more progressive communities are choosing to marry early, in reality this is not a choice being made from a set of meaningful alternatives for the future.



*“Why would you even ask if I want to get married?! Of course I do.”*

- UNMARRIED BOARDING SCHOOLGIRL, MOYAMBA TOWN

*“It’s not good to marry at this age. It wouldn’t be our wish, but when your parents die or you have nothing, then you have to.”*

- GIRL MARRIED AT 14, KAMBIA

And at the furthest end of the spectrum we see the wholesale inability to imagine a different future:



*“They give you to a man, and you have no choice. Generally, there is no love in the marriage – women are objects for men.”*

- WOMAN AGED 15, MAMOU

*“We all want to get married. We feel deeply sorry for our sisters who don’t get married.”*

- GROUP OF MARRIED GIRLS, MAMOU

It is at the most ‘fixed’ point on the spectrum that the problem is, in some ways, most profound. As we have seen, there is the tightest alignment here between beliefs and behavior – with fewer dissonances where the roots of behavior change may be located. Norms have solidified over time and play out particularly tragically for girls.

In particular, many girls are literally unable to imagine a future for themselves that does not mean becoming a wife and mother.



*“It’s difficult to talk about the future because people believe Allah has a plan for them.”*

– NGO PARTNER

Within these cultures, there is an absolute conceptual void when it comes to imagining a path to womanhood: girls navigate a predetermined set of social categories limited to ‘girl/daughter’, ‘schoolgirl’ or ‘wife.’ As we have seen, there is a wholesale lack of alternative, culturally endorsed, pathways for girls, and this is particularly pronounced in Guinea.



*“Being ready for marriage is not being a child.”*

– GIRL MARRIED AT 13, MAMOU

Norms of social control mean marriage has come to be perceived in these communities as inherently desirable. And this has been internalized by girls, who have been fed a series of justifications for marriage that they fluently repeat back:

*“For me it’s better to be with my husband because to be married is natural.”*

– GIRL MARRIED AT 12, MAMOU



*“If you’re a girl and you’re unmarried, you’re an unfinished building with no doors or windows... anyone can come in and out – it’s not just about sex, they can take advantage. Whereas if you’re married you have a defender.”*

– GIRL, 14, KOINADUGU

In particular, they articulate a deep desire to have children: someone who will love you, never leave you, look after you, and who represents your legacy.



*“The best thing about marriage is having kids. Your man might leave you but your kids never will.”*

– MARRIED WOMAN, MAMOU

Correspondingly, there exists amongst girls a deep shame about being unmarried or without a partner. Some girls are able to conceive of not marrying at the conceptual, intellectual level, but internalized norms of social control mean that this can appear very frightening.

*“If you are not married, you’re simply not accepted by society.”*

– UNMARRIED MOTHER, 22, MAMOU, GUINEA



*“If a girl never marries the Imam won’t pray at her funeral, and the family won’t want her around, especially at Ramadan.”*

– MARRIED WOMAN, KOINADUGU

It is not that there are no models of deviance, but instead that norms punish deviance extremely harshly. As an extreme example – we met a number of girls who had become pregnant with ‘love’ boyfriends, but the parents had refused to allow them to marry as punishment for their transgressions.



*“I want to marry the father of my baby but my parents won’t accept that because it’s obvious we’ve had sex before. I need to marry a stranger.”*

– UNMARRIED MOTHER, 22, MAMOU

In this most extreme example, we see the explicit control of female sexuality play out in a way that feels tragically punitive. Girls who have found 'love matches' on their own, have become pregnant, and have boyfriends who want to acknowledge the pregnancy and marry are instead forced to wed strangers. Here, the social fear of pre-marital sex is so profound that even the institution of marriage cannot make the relationship ordered and clean again. Explicitly, marriage can only be sanctioned if sex between the spouses happens after the fact. And implicitly, girls are being punished for daring to exercise control over their own bodies.



*“Because we had sex before, the marriage would never be pure. To have a pure marriage meant that I had to marry another man even though I had a baby so everyone knew I wasn’t a virgin.”*

- UNMARRIED MOTHER, 19, MAMOU

These conditions – the lack of possible futures and the perceived desirability of ‘pure’ marriage – create an enabling environment for child marriage. The fear of early pregnancy, which sits at the heart of society’s endorsement of child marriage, is invoked to suggest that a girl risks never marrying unless she does so early.



*“Girls are getting married too early, but some are getting married too late.”*

- IMAM, GUINEA

This enabling environment is supported by religion. Whilst the notion of the Prophet marrying a child is not as oft-espoused as it is in other parts of the Islamic world, there is widespread belief that the Qur’an endorses marriage from puberty.



*“From that time of puberty she is sanctioned to get married. If you don’t do it and she become pregnant you will be judge by God and by the community.”*

- IMAM, GUINEA

Troublingly, we heard this internalised by some girls too:



*“Getting married early or not is a matter of destiny.”*

– GIRL MARRIED AT 13, MAMOU

Traditional law also plays a role. The idea that the development of breasts (specifically the ability to hold a coin underneath them) indicates readiness for marriage is pervasive across Sierra Leone and Guinea.

This derives from the traditional way in which readiness for initiation was determined; in the past, the shift to adulthood was marked culturally via the initiation of young people into the poro (male) and bundu (female) secret societies. As such, the boundary of childhood and what follows is highly gendered, and comes earlier for girls than for boys.

While it is true that declining numbers of families are proactively marrying their daughters at the first sign of puberty, knowledge and past experience of this practice exists as an accessible part of culture ready to justify child marriage against detractors.



*“The failure to view early marriage as a problem is chiefly what accounts for its persistence.”*

FORD FOUNDATION, 2012

Corresponding with the paucity of cultural images for girls to aspire to, it is also the case that few people or sources are practically explaining their pathway to adulthood.



*“If a 50-year-old man asked a 14-year-old girl to marry? I would advise the girl to accept, because marriage is better than hanging around with boys.”*

– UNMARRIED GIRL, 12, SOYA VILLAGE, MAMOU, GUINEA

There is little solidarity amongst young girls – patriarchy rules inside and outside the family. Girls’ lives are not merely governed by social norms of control culturally but domestically – they are at home under the rule of their father and granted very little freedom. Nobody is encouraging unmarried girls to be together: there is a genuine fear that they will corrupt each other. Coupled with low school attendance, this means that very few have friends and there is an inability to speak the language of girls’ solidarity.

Girls often don’t go to school at all, so lack this opportunity to communicate with peers. Over half of the school-age girls we met in Guinea were not in school – many having never been to school at all. This corresponds with the available data – UNICEF estimate that less than a third of children in Guinea’s poorest quintile attend primary school, and this is skewed by gender.

Even the controversial bundo initiation no longer provides any ‘training’ for womanhood. The civil war and subsequent ban on gathering during Ebola has seen the rapid decline of the society, and importantly its ‘curriculum for life’ for girls.



*“In the bundo bush we used to teach them about money, agriculture, gardening for potato leaves to sell, and how to save that money. We also want to teach them lesson on public speaking.”*

– ELDER WOMEN, MAMOU, GUINEA



*“It [bundo] used to be such great training – how to prepare for life as a woman.”*

– ELDER WOMAN, KOINADUGU

While FGM endures, initiation ceremonies today can be over in a matter of hours. As one expert explained to us:



*“We have thrown the baby out with the bath water. Girls get the worst of both worlds. They’re still cut, but they get none of the information, the support from older women, the respect from the community, or the bush friends they once got. Bundo has become more and more meaningless, but there’s nothing to replace it.”*

– CULTURAL COMMENTATOR, FREETOWN, AUGUST 2015

# WHAT COMES NEXT: BEING A MARRIED GIRL



Girls don't buy into myths about marriage entirely, but instead are utterly passive in the face of them. They have very little idea of what to expect; no vision of what a good marriage should look like, and no ability to negotiate for it even if they did.



*"It's your father who decides generally. Though mine is dead so it will probably be my older brother who is still in school."*

- UNMARRIED OUT OF SCHOOL GIRL, 14, MAMOU

In the end, marriage is often very disappointing, and indeed very damaging. It is not merely the case that marriage does not conform to romantic ideals; instead, these marriages are some of the most imbalanced and damaging relationships we saw. Girls enter the marriage with almost no ability to speak up for themselves, often at a very young age. Sex and childbearing are painful, and their husbands often neglectful. Women in these kinds of marriages perceive their childhood through rose-tinted spectacles as a time of comparative freedom.



*"I pray to God to give me a better husband."*

- MARRIED GIRL, 16, SOYA VILLAGE, MAMOU, GUINEA

*"I was married aged 12. My parents cared about education, so they asked the man to let me stay in school, but soon I became pregnant so I had to drop out. I had medical problems and had to have an operation on my breasts [shows scarred breasts]. Now my husband has left to Angola, and he no longer sends money. But life is better now he has gone."*

- GIRL MARRIED AT 12, MAMOU, GUINEA

*“You are free with your parents until you are sent to be married at 14. Then you are in a kind of hell. The first child is the start of the suffering, because the child bearing is constant.”*

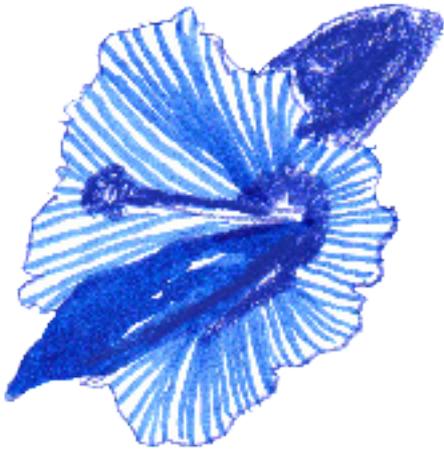
– MARRIED WOMAN, MAMOU, GUINEA

*“They give you to a man, and you have no choice. Generally, there is no love in the marriage – women are objects for men.”*

MARRIED WOMAN, MAMOU, GUINEA

*“My father gave me at 15. This man didn’t take care of me – he made me pregnant. I was too small for a baby, so they had to do a caesarean. After two years he left. I don’t know where he is.”*

– MARRIED WOMAN, MAMOU, GUINEA



# A SEED OF HOPE: WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY

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Life for girls in these most 'fixed' communities can look and feel dispiritingly tough and unchangeable. But we did see some seeds of hope in the form of organic women's groups. Currently, these become socially permissible for women after marriage.



*"We have formed an association. When bad things happen we come and dance and provide support. We created this ourselves because of our shared difficulty."*

– MARRIED WOMEN, MAMOU

*"The group helps at special times with cooking and cleaning. The objective of the group is to help each other. If you go through problems you can ask the leaders for help and they would try to find a solution. Life would not be good without the group. With this group you are never alone."*

– MARRIED WOMEN, MAMOU

*"We have an association which supports on things like funerals and name-giving ceremonies."*

– MARRIED AND DIVORCED WOMEN, SOYA VILLAGE, GUINEA

These women's own situations are very tough, and the groups are often dedicated to helping them achieve small improvements in their own lives, including negotiating for better legal and financial protection from their husbands.

However, some of the most promising things we heard from these related to their attempts to harness the group's strength and solidarity to improve things for the next generation of girls



*"My first suggestion is that we do an information campaign. We think we should be a way for more families to talk about the issues openly. We need people to spread the message."*

– MARRIED WOMAN, MAMOU



*“How to raise the children is one of the objectives of the group. For example, the group saving can pay for school fees.”*

– MARRIED WOMAN, MAMOU

*“God forbid I would marry my child. I am fighting with all of myself to get her educated, so my husband cannot intervene. Once I am in that situation, if I needed help I would contact the [micro-finance] NGO for support.”*

– MARRIED WOMAN, MAMOU

We also encountered some traditional and religious leaders speaking out for the rights of girls. It is through these types of leaders, that, if their leadership is channeled more productively for girls, significant change can happen quickly. We met inspiring Imams and teachers using the scriptures to promote gender equality; and energetic local leaders who truly hope to improve things for girls. We should be extremely wary about endorsing change that derives from these existing and highly imbalanced power structures only – but at the very least, we should recognize the importance of community-level allies in disrupting patterns of power in the service of girls.



*“Religious leaders have been successfully used before. Religious leaders have been key to making sure that religion isn’t a barrier to education. This needs to be done in a similar way. Key is message that chimes with what they believe, not against it.”*

– NGO MEETING, KAMBIA

*“Islam told us to make children learn, because it would help you today and tomorrow. Marriage just helps today.”*

– TEACHER, KOINADUGU

# MOVING FORWARD



The task ahead might look challenging. Life in Sierra Leone and Guinea is extremely tough, especially for girls. However, there is a widespread belief that in the wake of Ebola, we have a genuine opportunity to effect change, with more communities in flux, more funding coming into the region, and the experience of collaboration – between communities, government and NGOs both national and highly local - during the crisis.



*“Tools used in Ebola can be harnessed. The local organizations, the commitment and also the coalition, the way everyone worked together was absolutely key.”*

– NGO MEETING, KAMBIA

What has previously been a vicious cycle has the capacity to be turned on its head, to create a groundswell of girls who can advocate for themselves. We believe the road to transformation is twofold:

- Increase girls' access to choices
- Support girls to imagine alternatives

Moreover, the two elements work to complement each other, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Girls who have assets can think long-term about their futures; girls who have access to social networks can draw inspiration from other girls as to their choices; and girls who have alternative hopes for themselves are more motivated to ask for access to assets.

Our goal is to unite these two girl-focused strategies to amplify the voice and power of girls in their communities, and ultimately to build a movement of girls to demand change for themselves.

Cultural authorities do not give up their power unprompted; change must be demanded from below. When girls believe that change is possible, and when we support the spaces in which their voices can be heard, united and amplified, we create the possibility of a civil rights movement of and for girls. A movement that can advocate for itself, agitate for change and, in the end, provide a cultural example in itself of female solidarity, power and choice.

Now is the opportunity to act, not just to end child marriage and not just to end teen pregnancy, but to create better marriages and better families, and more fundamentally to foster meaningful choice so that girls can live in their full power.

# SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS



The remainder of this report shines a spotlight on some of the ways in which grassroots programming and movement building could support girls to access more choices and imagine new possibilities. Our recommendations are by no means exhaustive – instead we should think of them as thought starters to fuel further discussion and planning.

These recommendations are structured around the life-changing work that is already being carried out in Sierra Leone, looking at how we can scale and amplify these efforts, and how we can supplement this work.

We have structured our recommendations in this way because we believe that many of the solutions to child marriage and sexual violence already exist in culture and in current practice. We acknowledge that community advocates have been working on these issues for decades – irrespective of new global goals, shifting international funding priorities, and before Ebola drew renewed attention to the region.

Our scope was much smaller in Guinea, where we spent a shorter amount of time in one community. Nonetheless, these insights and recommendations are also crafted with Guinean girls in mind.

# SPOTLIGHT ON: SAFE SPACES



Safe Spaces, or girls' clubs, are the flagship intervention of the Sierra Leone Adolescent Girls Network. This intervention personifies our two-pronged strategy – supporting girls to access choices and imagine alternatives.

Together, Network partners are supporting over 30,000 of the hardest to reach girls across rural and urban Sierra Leone. The clubs are girl-only spaces, located a safe distance from users' homes. Girls are segmented into age-appropriate groups and attend sessions at the clubs at regular intervals. The clubs do two powerful things: they support girls to come together, to learn, play and make friends as a respite from family and community life. Fueled by content and supported by mentors, they provide basic training around things like voice and self-esteem, literacy and numeracy and more. Many of the clubs now offer access to solar lights and radios – prized assets in poor communities that normally sit under the control of men.

Mentors are older adolescent girls chosen from local communities – they are positioned as 'sisters' rather than 'teachers', and in the best cases become aspirational role models for girls across the community.

Having spent time with girls who use the clubs, and girls who do not use them, it is clear what a profound role they play in users' lives. Clubs cannot transform the experience of extreme gendered poverty and patriarchal cultural norms overnight, but it is clear that girls who access them have stronger support networks, a greater sense of their own strength, and adult allies who they can turn to for advice and support.

## WHAT MORE COULD BE DONE?

Scale up training of mentors: mentors need support to build active listening and facilitation skills, so that they have the confidence and tools to encourage conversations, keep girls talking, play games and work together. This is not always easy to achieve in a culture where age equals power, and where school systems prize learning by rote. Basic training is currently provided for club mentors, but this training needs to be built on and repeated at regular intervals. It is through this model of soft leadership that girls' solidarity can be harnessed in the most effective way. This in turn requires 'training the trainer' modules for Network partners.

Networking clubs together: bringing together girls from across the country could be genuinely game changing. Currently, the Network exists at an organizational level – but imagine if we started to think about and plan for networks of girls too. This could happen in physical space – in the form of a national girls’ conference or similar. Girl-generated communications – especially via radio and print publications – could also help connect girls together, allowing girls to hear the stories of those like them from across the country.

Support self-forming collectives: although immensely powerful, the Safe Space program only reaches a tiny proportion of girls in Sierra Leone. However, we have also seen the ways in which girls are self-organizing across the country into collectives. These collectives are socially permissible (although perhaps not in Guinea) and are of critical social, economic and practical importance to girls. By providing them with meaningful content and structure, these collectives could shift from sites of solidarity to sites of transformation.

To reach these girls, we could – for example - consider things like regional ‘roaming’ mentors who are not attached to specific spaces, but instead support a range of self-starting girls clubs throughout the country. We could also consider the role of radio in modeling female solidarity and supporting girls to come together around a common set of values. Furthermore, we could think about the role of print magazines – distributed at scale - in helping girls access a bite-sized girl-centered curriculum that they can consume together.

## SPOTLIGHT ON: SECURE LIVELIHOODS



There are some examples of livelihoods training and micro-credit loans for girls in Sierra Leone and Guinea. However, these are relatively small-scale and short-term, and have done little to disrupt the role that transactional sex currently plays in fragile village economic eco-systems. Safe Spaces are a good place to start a more extensive training program. However, girls need more than this – they need places where they can practice new skills, and an environment where they have control over the products of their labor, and this can only be achieved through training

### WHAT MORE COULD BE DONE?

The potential of land-rights programming: outside of the few major towns in Sierra Leone and Guinea, access to, and control over farmland could become a critical source of power for girls. Access to land would also need to be combined with farming practices that girls can manage alone or in collectives – without needing to exchange their bodies for male ‘strength’ to complete their tasks as we heard about earlier.

In this respect there is much to be learnt from work on girls’ and women’s land rights in the region and globally. A particularly interesting new partner to engage would be Landesa, a global center for women’s land rights.

As Landesa says, “often women’s only claim to the land they rely on for food, income, and shelter is through their relationship to a male relative... They are susceptible to displacement and exploitation because they lack control over the land they depend on...”

When women have secure rights to land, women’s status improves and they are better able to take care of themselves, their families, and their land. Research demonstrates links between strengthening women’s rights to land and productive assets and women’s increased participation in household decision making. This has powerful continued ripple effect”

Putting girls at the heart of future economies: as new technologies are brought into communities, particularly to provide power and light, Network partners have trained girls to be the “bringers of light” – the people who know how to maintain and fix the solar lights in a given community. This is revolutionary. These kinds of jobs represent much more than economic opportunity. They also position girls as important members of the community, which in turn provides an immense amount of social capital. Ultimately this is about thinking creatively. As new opportunities open up, how can we ensure that girls can access these new roles before they become gendered and girls are shut out?

## SPOTLIGHT ON: DISTRIBUTING PHYSICAL ASSETS



During our Network convening we heard some very positive examples of the girl-centered provision of assets and resources by individual members - for example re-usable sanitary protection, mobile phones, solar panels, solar lights and radios. Such precious resources are normally held firmly in the hands of the male members of a community. Many of the Network’s partners also identify existing assets in the community and support girls to access them, such as health services or loans.

But the opportunities that the Network presents go beyond single NGOs disbursing assets. The Network could represent a consolidated distribution channel for the large-scale provision of social goods to girls, bypassing the intrinsically patriarchal channels that are currently letting girls down.

### WHAT MORE COULD BE DONE?

Coordination: most straightforwardly, this requires a coordinator for the Network, who can initiate relationships with - and act as the point of contact for – suppliers. Much could be learnt from the supply-chain systems set-up during the Ebola crisis.

Expanding ambitions: if Safe Spaces already facilitate girls' access to radios, light and power, imagine if we could expand this to larger-scale (and thus even more powerful) assets like motorbikes or rural taxis. Imagine the transformative potential of a country-wide network of girls who can access transport via their Safe Space mentors, on their own terms. This is not entirely unprecedented. On a previous trip to Sierra Leone, we met a number of girl okada riders in Freetown who talked about the strength and power of earning their own living and the solidarity that comes from transporting fellow girls.

There are clearly logistical and financial hurdles here, which would need to be explored and scoped fully. The point is that as the power and possibility of Safe Spaces and the network expand, so should we consider scaling up the kinds of assets that are put into the hands of girls.

## SPOTLIGHT ON: CONTRACEPTION AND SEX EDUCATION



Understanding of and access to contraception is vital. But we also need to help girls navigate relationships with men more healthily, and to speak up for their own sexual and reproductive rights. This means we should focus on promoting reproductive rights education from both physiological and psychological perspectives.

Throughout our fieldwork and at our convening, we heard from various NGOs who are putting sexual and reproductive health on the agenda for girls. Most encouragingly, they are going beyond simply providing contraception and pairing this with the provision of information, and advice on how to negotiate sex and relationships.

In Koinadugu, MATCOPS supports the small-scale provision of the contraceptive implant for girls - or 'captain band' as it is referred to locally. But this is accompanied by a culturally resonant narrative around the social benefits of contraception, not just to the individual girl but also to the community at large. And this has helped increase receptiveness to the contraceptive services offered and given girls the confidence to speak out about using it.

### WHAT MORE COULD BE DONE?

**Comprehensive training:** the ambition is to insert a reproductive health component into all the Network NGOs' programming on a consistent basis. And as the Network aims to become a consolidated distribution channel for the large-scale provision of social goods to girls, contraceptive services will be a critical part of this.

**Funding contraception access:** a 'captain band' is relatively expensive for girls in Sierra Leone (approx. \$3) and often requires a visit to a clinic in a larger town. In the short term, funding more wide-scale access to contraception for girls could break the immediate link between transactional sex and teen pregnancy. Marie Stopes is well-known by girls across the country and seems to be a trusted provider of contraception. A more formalized partnership would be worth investigating.

# SPOTLIGHT ON: ROLE MODELS



As we have seen, supporting girls to imagine new possibilities and different paths is a critical step in overturning a culture of control. In order to do this, girls need practical examples of what life could look like beyond motherhood and girlhood. Role models that girls can relate to and aspire to are critical in this process of re-imagining.

Across the research, but in Koinadugu in particular, we heard girls repeatedly referencing one or two inspiring women who had helped them work towards new goals and challenge the structures holding them back.

“We want to be like [head of MATCOPS], she teaches us to be brave and to do what we want... She even helps you know what to do when you want to go back to school or not get pregnant again... She earns her own living and she comes in and out in her car... She’s also quite cool and she makes us laugh... She doesn’t even have a husband we don’t think... She even got that club built for us.”

- Teenage mother, isolated village in Koinadugu

## WHAT MORE IS NEEDED?

The biggest issue currently is that the presence of role models in communities is a game of luck. Resources are so scarce amongst grassroots NGOs that the selection of particular villages in any given district is often arbitrary.

The current system also relies heavily on individual personalities. Not only is this a huge emotional burden for grassroots practitioners, but also as a solution it is ultimately un-scalable. Every girl deserves to spend time with an equivalent of the inspiring head of MATCOPS, but in the short term this will be difficult to achieve.

The role of communications: culturally relevant communications have a powerful role to play here. When executed correctly, they have the potential to amplify progressive role models at scale, ensuring many more girls have access to progressive images of femininity, and examples of what new paths could look like.

Sharing best practice: it is clear that some organizations are connecting with girls on a more profound level than others. It is often the smallest organizations that are doing the most innovative, targeted work with girls and ultimately acting as valuable sources of inspiration – but because they operate in individual regions and at relatively small scale, there is a danger that their insights are being lost. On the other hand, the bigger organizations have the footprint to reach large numbers of girls, but can feel more distanced from the communities in which they operate. The Network exists to share best practice amongst its members – work could be done to move beyond the sharing of programming tools, to the less tangible relationship-building expertise that exists amongst members. Social justice facilitation techniques could play an important role here.

Self-care for practitioners: across Sierra Leone, we met mentors, organizers and advocates who are doing difficult work with few resources and little emotional support, and they are in danger of burning out. Self-care for practitioners has a vital role to play here. We could consider looking at the NoVo Foundation Move to End Violence Self-Care Toolkit to draw inspiration.

Amplifying organic resistance: even in the most culturally entrenched communities, and in places where poverty has rendered life almost unlivable, there are stories of organic girls' resistance. These are girls who have somehow managed to beat the profound odds stacked against them, and transform their situations from within. These are not necessarily the girls who have remained in school and attained good grades, but the girls who became pregnant as young teenagers and now fight for their daughters, or who left abusive relationships and managed to survive and thrive, or who act as advocates for other girls with no training or resources. These girls represent the most powerful, radical, and fundamentally transformative type of role model - and their experiences need to be shared more widely. As we consider networking clubs together, and designing communications to project new images of femininity at scale, it is vital that we find these stories and put them at the heart of efforts to image new possibilities.

## SPOTLIGHT ON: COMMUNITY ALLIES



Community allies are vital, but for genuine change, girls need advocates who sit outside of patriarchal structures. Put simply, we need to harness the power of women for girls. Remembering that women's and girls' needs and motivations are not perfectly aligned, how can we nevertheless capitalize on solidarity amongst women and support what they are already doing to improve life for the next generation?

### WHAT MORE IS NEEDED?

Harnessing a movement of women for girls: there is already powerful work taking place to develop new generations of female leaders. The 50/50 Group runs a training program that targets organized groups of women, local councilors, traditional and religious leaders, preparing them for local political leadership. The Group creates awareness about women's rights and the negative impact of some traditional and cultural practices. It trains and works with the media to influence public perceptions about cultural and traditional practices that subordinate women. These existing structures are a potentially interesting way of harnessing a movement of women for girls. Where women are already organizing organically, how can we take this to the next level, so that they become advocates, role models and allies for the next generation?

Supporting organic-allies: outside of formal structures, we heard a number of stories about women and older girls who had transformed the experience of control and violence - from grandmothers who fought their sons to keep their granddaughters in school, to neighbors and sisters who provided safe havens from violence. These stories are both moving and inspiring, but their power is so often overlooked in formalized development structures fixated on measurement and replicability.

In this context, how can we support, reward and amplify these allies, to help normalize and model positive deviance more broadly?

# FROM A NETWORK TO A MOVEMENT



Movement builders reach beyond what is politically feasible or culturally possible in the now, to construct a new image of what the world could be. Whilst we need to be grounded and pragmatic in our short-term strategy, we also need to be bold and audacious in our long-term goals. This kind of vision is deeply motivating for activists and advocates who work tirelessly for girls, and it has the capacity to recruit new members into the fold. Movements are greater than the sum of their parts – they have a visibility and bargaining power that allows them to advocate and agitate for change in the most isolated villages and at the highest levels of government. This in turn is how we change culture from within.

Post-conflict, post-epidemic, Sierra Leone and Guinea are at a unique juncture in their histories – there is no better time to reimagine the future with girls at the heart of it.

## HOW DO WE GET THERE?

It is already happening: many of the Network's members are already movement builders, though their work is not articulated in those terms. Donor priorities have forced the most innovative practitioners – practitioners who naturally take a holistic view of social change and have an overall vision for girls – to silo their thinking and focus on short-term programmatic gains.

“They accuse me of radicalizing their girls - damn right I am! I can talk to you about our programs but the reality is I'm doing one thing which is pushing for a radical alternative for girls”

- Network Partner, Freetown Convening

Never has there been a clearer need for innovative funders who believe in the power of local advocates to change their worlds for themselves. Long-term, unrestricted grants for general operating costs would be particularly valuable here.

Projecting the vision at scale: communications and especially mass media can provide a platform to amplify the vision and values of a movement and gain visibility quickly. These kinds of communications-based platforms can act as a rallying point for new actors to expand the reach of the movement.

Creating a shared identity or language can be really useful here. One example of the power of a common visual identity is the Obama 'Change' campaign – where many small organizations were able to affiliate with the campaign whilst maintaining the integrity of their own organizational identities.

Drawing inspiration from international actors: many social commentators believe that we are living in an age of movements and an era of uprisings. In this context, what can the Network learn from other burgeoning social justice movements across the world, and how could this learning be formalized and integrated into Network strategy?

Source: Movement Strategy Centre, September 2010



# APPENDIX



## RESEARCH SAMPLE AND LOCATIONS

### Locations:

- Moyamba District:  
Moyamba Town and surrounding villages  
Bauya
- Koinadugu District:  
Kabala and surrounding villages
- Kambia District:  
Kambia Town and surrounding villages
- Mamou, Guinea  
Mamou Town and surrounding villages (Soya, Momo)

### Sample per location:

- 2 x groups of school girls 11-13 years old
- 2 x groups of school girls 14-16 years old
- 2 x groups of out of school girls 14-16 years old
- 2 x groups of out of school girls 17-19 years old
- Several informal ethnographies with married girls
- 1 x group of boys 14-16
- 1 x group of boys 17-19
- 1 community of leaders (MPs, chiefs etc.)
- 1 local community group
- 1 inter-generational female group

In each location, we were also privileged to access a number of informal conversations, with – for example - soweis, Imams and other community members.

# NGO PARTNERS



Freetown workshop

## INGOs

Restless Development – Hawa Brima  
BRAC Sierra Leone - Diane Kaine  
international Rescue Committee - Aissata Sall  
Plan Sierra Leone - Kadie Bachally-Taylor

## LOCAL NGOS

MATCOPS – Mamusu Williams – Koinadugu  
Women in Crisis – Juliana Konteh –Kailahun, Kono, Western Area  
Women’s Forum – Maude Peacock - Kambia, Bombali, Western Area  
Child Welfare Society - Alphonsus Williams - Portloko, Western Area (rural)  
Protect Sierra Leone - Edwin Bangura - Bo, Bonthe, Moyamba  
Institution for Sustainable Development - Joseph Kamara - Bonthe  
o/50 Sierra Leone – Dr. Aisha Ibrahim - all 12 districts  
United for Humanity - Naasu Fofannah-Western Area, Pujehun  
Girl Child Network - Anita Koroma

## KAMBIA

Key INGOs and local NGOs meet weekly, convened by the Ministry of Social Welfare, to discuss child protection

CAWEC (Community Action for the Welfare of Children): work with “lead mothers” in communities, give them direct support and train them to advise others on family planning (contact: [sesaymohamedau@yahoo.com](mailto:sesaymohamedau@yahoo.com))

KADDRO – Kambia District Development Rehabilitation Organization: a wide-ranging organization who work across a range of community welfare projects (contact: [medbangs10@yahoo.com](mailto:medbangs10@yahoo.com) / [bangs.med@gmail.com](mailto:bangs.med@gmail.com))

Network for Rural Development: use peer education and drama to bring to life issues in schools, particularly aiming to discourage early pregnancy

Focus 1000: <http://www.focus1000.org> - focus on the first 1000 days of a child’s life

Street Child

BRAC

# NGO PARTNERS (CONT)

## KOINADUGU

MATCOPS: work on a range of programs for girls, including safe spaces, clubs and contraception, in Koinadugu, already working closely with UNFPA and BRAC

Koinadugu Girl Education Movement: advocate for girls who drop out of school

Sustainable Nutrition and Agriculture Production: works to reduce food insecurity

Street Child

Marie Stopes

Child Fund International

## GUINEA

AGUIAS: run a 116 phone number for victims of forced marriage and domestic slavery; work with safe houses and to provide counseling

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AISSATOU BARRY

MAMADOU DIENG

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