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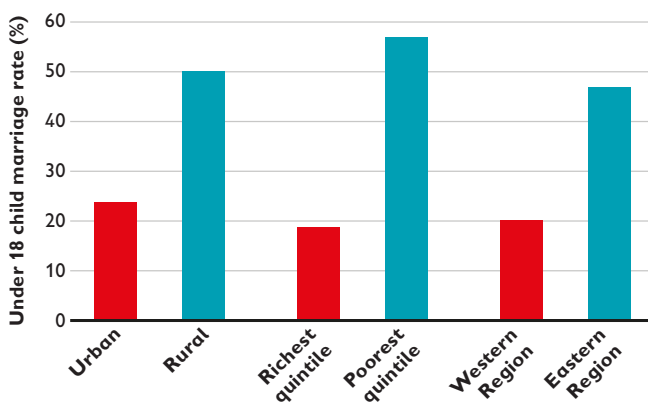
# CHILD MARRIAGE IN SIERRA LEONE

## STATUS OVERVIEW

Sierra Leone has the 19th highest child marriage rate in the world, with 13% of girls married by age 15, and 39% by age 18.<sup>1</sup>

These statistics only provide a partial picture of the extent of the problem, as many young people enter unions that are not registered as formal marriages.

Figure 1. Child marriage rates among different groups in Sierra Leone



Adolescent pregnancy is a driver of child marriage in Sierra Leone. 28% of girls and young women aged 15–19 have a child or are pregnant, and 22% have had sex with a man at least ten years older than them.<sup>2</sup>

Girls are more at risk of child marriage than boys, with a median age at first marriage of 18 for women compared to 25 for men.<sup>3</sup> Girls at risk include those who are:

- in poor and in rural areas – child marriage rates are 57% among the poorest fifth of rural girls
- in the Eastern, Southern and Northern Provinces, where child marriage rates are over 40%, compared to 20% in the Western Province
- from certain ethnic groups
- vulnerable, including as a result of disability, sexual abuse and/or commercial sexual exploitation, and separation from parents.

## THE DAMAGING IMPACTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage is an extreme violation of children's rights, with negative impacts for children and families as well as for society and the economy.

In Sierra Leone, teenage pregnancy and child marriage often trigger a vicious cycle of deprivation and disempowerment for girls, with many marriages characterised by violence and servitude. Affected girls usually drop out of school, depriving them of learning and economic opportunity later in life. Child mothers are vulnerable to mental health problems, often have sexual and reproductive health complications due to having babies before their bodies are ready, and their children are more likely to die young or be malnourished.

Ending child marriage and reducing teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone would yield considerable benefits for the country, helping to lower population growth and build a healthier, more productive workforce.

Research suggests that, by 2030, at the global level, ending child marriage could generate more than \$500 billion in benefits annually from lower population growth, and an additional \$100 billion through reduced deaths and a reduction in severe malnutrition among young children.<sup>4</sup>

# TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS

**African Union campaign status:** joined in 2016

**Sustainable Development Goals Target:**  
**To end child marriage by 2030**

On track to meet target: **No**

While child marriage rates decreased from 48% to 39% between 2008 and 2013, the country needs to increase the rate of progress by a third to meet the SDG target.<sup>5</sup>

Under the SDG framework, governments pledged to **Leave No One Behind**. This means child marriage must end for all segments of society, and the furthest behind groups should be reached first.

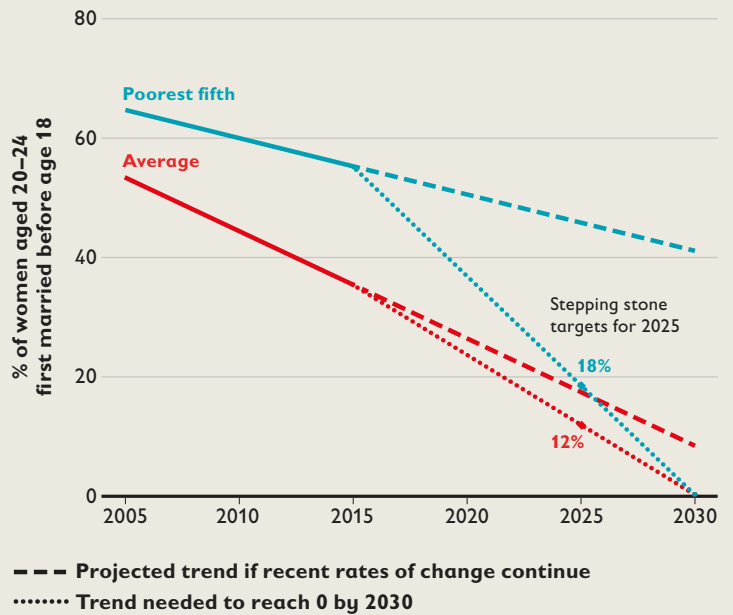
To achieve these commitments, Sierra Leone should set stepping stone targets for groups with the highest rates of child marriage.

By 2025, child marriage rates should be no more than:

- **18% for the poorest girls** (compared to 46% if current trends continue)
- **15% for rural girls** (compared to 24% if current trends continue).

Efforts to end child marriage must be combined with efforts to tackle teenage pregnancy.

Figure 2. Child marriage trends in Sierra Leone



## HOW PROGRESS IS BEING ACHIEVED

**While there is still a long way to go, Sierra Leone has made progress in addressing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in recent years, including by:**

### Strengthening the legislative and policy framework

- The 2012 Sexual Offences Act prohibits sexual activity with children (anyone under the age of 18, including those in a marital relationship). The 2017 Child Rights Act prohibits marriage for anyone under the age of 18, among other protective provisions for children. However, this is undermined by the 2008 Customary Marriage Act, which allows marriage under 18 years with parental consent. Progress towards reconciling this discrepancy has been slow.
- Some traditional leaders have passed local bylaws to ensure pregnant girls are supported by the baby's father or his family to return to school and care for the child, whether or not they are in formal union.

### Reducing adolescent pregnancy

- The National Free Healthcare Initiative gives Sierra Leonean girls the right to maternal and

reproductive health services if they are pregnant, nursing, or have children under five, although access barriers remain.

- A new national strategy to address teenage pregnancy (2017–21) is forthcoming, replacing the previous strategy which ran until 2015. For the first time, this includes a component to address child marriage.
- Momentum on the national discourse on adolescent pregnancy is building, with growing recognition of its importance for the development of the country, including by the Ministry of Health.

### Political leadership

- A number of leaders are helping to spearhead progress, including the Ministry of Justice, the Law Reform Commission, the First Lady and a number of progressive Paramount Chiefs.

### Initiatives that have had demonstrable impact around the world include:

- **Girl-centred programming:** Ensuring girls have safe spaces to come together to share their experiences, learn about their rights and gain the confidence, tools and networks they need to hold leaders to account
- **Movement building:** Supporting girls to connect, convene, make their voices heard and exert influence
- **Multi-level initiatives to challenge attitudes:** Programming to explore social norms and harmful

practices at different levels of the community, including with girls and boys, families and community leaders

- **Engaging with traditional leaders:** Supporting the development of progressive bylaws on child marriage
- **Gender-responsive budgeting:** Training officials to ensure that government spending addresses

the specific needs of individuals from different socio-economic groups

- **Investing in health, education and protection:** Ensuring that all girls have access to quality sexual and reproductive health services and quality education, and are protected by strong child protection systems.

## BARRIERS TO ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN SIERRA LEONE

### Legal inconsistencies and lack of enforcement of the law

While laws in Sierra Leone prohibit child marriage, implementation is weak. The process to address contradictions between these laws and the Customary Marriage Act, which allows children to marry with parental consent, has been slow. Many rural communities respect customary leadership and bylaws more than national law.

### Social norms around gender and adolescence

Many communities believe girls become women in adolescence, with readiness for marriage determined by physical development. Motherhood outside wedlock is a cultural taboo, with marriage reducing the risk of this occurring among adolescent girls. Investment in a girl's education is widely viewed as unnecessary or benefitting her husband's family.

### Gendered poverty, crisis and transactional sex

Poverty in Sierra Leone has been exacerbated by decades of civil war and the Ebola crisis, and women and girls often lack the resources and decision-making power needed to make safe choices. Marrying

daughters early gives poor families one less child to support. Transactional sex, often with older men, can provide vital income. This is driving high teenage pregnancy rates, which are undermining attempts to end child marriage, as marriage is often viewed as the only way to render early motherhood socially acceptable.

### Poor access to health, education and protection services

- **Sexual and reproductive health:** Use of condoms is low, despite widespread availability, with male partners tending to determine use. There are often supply shortages for other contraceptives.
- **Education:** Child marriage is both a cause and a result of girls dropping out of school. School culture often reinforces gender norms, and there are reports of girls being pressured to exchange sex for school fees.
- **Child protection:** Budget for the Ministry of Social Welfare is inadequate. Law enforcement mechanisms are underfunded, including the Family Support Units of the police force.

## IN HER WORDS: THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

*“What faces this community now is early marriage and teenage pregnancy. Illiteracy causes early marriage, teenage pregnancy. Illiteracy causes those things because if you're not educated to know what to do, you send your girl child to early marriage. You force her to go to men and boys for money if there is no food at home. You force your girl child to do things she's not supposed to do – things she must not do at the moment. She must wait. But those are the things that we are facing due to lack of education facilities.”* Dorothy,\* 13, Freetown

Dorothy\* used to live with her aunt, who made sure she got a good education. When her aunt died of Ebola, Dorothy lost her main source of financial and emotional support. She recently passed the Basic Education Certificate examination, which meant she could graduate to Senior Secondary School. She is covering her education costs with the proceeds of her grandmother's sales of drinking water, which are quite limited. Despite the challenges, she is committed to getting a good education, and hopes to become an accountant.

\* Name changed to protect her identity



# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCELERATING PROGRESS

The Sierra Leone government should establish a national action plan for ending child marriage, preferably integrated with the National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy. This should contain clear, time-bound actions to:

## 1) Invest in girls

- **Health:** Break the link between child marriage and pregnancy by ensuring a reliable supply of contraceptives across all health centres; training health workers to provide adolescent-friendly family planning services; and implementing the new National Policy for Community Health Workers.
- **Education:** Integrate comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education into the national curriculum and train teachers. Ensure pregnant girls can continue school, support young mothers back into education and training, and end impunity for exploitation of children in schools.
- **Protection:** Ensure that there is a consistent, well coordinated, survivor-centred and reliable response to sexual and gender-based violence that is led by the government and reduces impunity.
- **Finance:** Increase budget allocation to the Ministry of Social Welfare, and undertake gender-responsive budgeting across all Ministries.

## 2) Empower girls and advance gender equality

- Prioritise training for all public sector employees working with adolescent girls and their communities on gender equality and the socio-cultural drivers of child marriage.
- Run teenage pregnancy awareness and prevention programmes, including engaging parents, especially men and boys, to address norms that place responsibility for early pregnancy on girls.
- Accelerate the process of harmonising legislation on the age of consent for child marriage.

## 3) Ensure accountability to girls

- Establish mechanisms for girls (including child mothers) to engage meaningfully in policy and decision making at district and national levels, and to make their voices heard.
- Improve the disaggregation, quality, coverage, regularity and accessibility of data on child marriage and adolescent pregnancy and their drivers.

## REFERENCES

Unless otherwise stated, all data in this briefing has been processed by Save the Children from the DHS Household Survey for Sierra Leone (2013), available at:

<http://dhsprogram.com/what-we-do/survey/survey-display-450.cfm>

'Child marriage rate' refers to the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in a union before age 18, unless otherwise specified.

Disaggregated data cited in this briefing is available from Save the Children's GRID tool at: <https://campaigns.savethechildren.net/grid>

Unless otherwise stated, all policy analysis in this briefing has been drawn from Bransky, R. (forthcoming) *Child Marriage in Sierra Leone*, Save the Children.

<sup>1</sup> Ranking from UNICEF child marriage data, February 2017, available at: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF International (2014) *Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2013*.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF International (2014) *Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2013*.

<sup>4</sup> Wodon, Q., Malé, C., Nayihouba, A., Onagoruwa, A., Savadogo, A., Yedan, A., Edmeades, J., Kes, A., John, N., Murithi, L., Steinhaus, M. and Petroni, S. (2017) *Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report*, World Bank and ICRW.

<sup>5</sup> All data in this section and for the trends graph has been calculated by Save the Children from DHS survey data points between 2008 and 2013.

Save the Children is campaigning for an end to child marriage through our global campaign, **Every Last Child**. In Sierra Leone, we're campaigning for teenage mothers to survive, learn and be protected.

Find out more at: <https://campaigns.savethechildren.net/country/sierra-leone>