act:onaid

Changing the world with women and girls

Shifting the power:
advancing girl-led research

CHAPTER 2

TEENAGE NETWORK
Equality in Education, Health & Leadership
www.teenagenetwork.org

Contents

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

Adolescent girls living in poverty around the world face unequal power dynamics that profoundly affect their daily lives. These imbalances hinder their ability to receive necessary support and make autonomous decisions about various aspects of their lives.[1] Structural inequalities, which are often rooted in colonial legacies, impact what constitutes their rights and their capability to assert them, including the right to be heard, to access quality education and information, to receive support services and to utilise community spaces, make decisions about their bodies, and live free from violence.

In times of crisis, girls are often on the frontline, simultaneously disproportionately affected and bearing greater responsibilities within families and the wider community, yet their voices are discounted or unheard. Despite their safety, well-being, and health being under threat,[2] they have little access to protection systems and safety nets.

Adolescent girls are facing widening education gaps, increased risk of violence and harmful practices, and greater unpaid care responsibilities at home, which all exacerbate the existing inequalities they already endure. Economic insecurity has also hindered[3] many girls' ability to meet their basic needs, such as access to healthy food and menstrual hygiene products.

Nigeria
■ Jigawa
■ Abuja

Sierra Leone
■ Freetown

Too often, assumptions are made about girls' needs, and the international development sector is frequently criticised for portraying girls – especially those in the majority world – as needing 'rescue'.[4] However, girls are powerful agents of change. They understand the transformations they wish to see and have the solutions to achieve them. There is an urgent need to balance recognising the complex challenges faced by girls and young women in various contexts with acknowledging their voices and agency.

This collaborative participatory action research project endeavoured to employ an intersectional feminist and decolonial approach, coupled with a power framework rooted in the core belief that girls hold solutions and power individually, but especially when they come together, to daily create change, disrupt systems, and challenge patriarchy and unequal power dynamics. The methodology prioritises knowledge and ideas of girls and solutions in the programmes and policies that affect their lives. Following these principles, this girl-led research was designed and conducted in collaboration with groups of girls who identified research questions relevant to the issues pertaining them, themes and methods, collected and analysed data, and contributed to and validated this final report. Girls were also involved in developing recommendations to key decision-makers at different levels.

It is important to note that a decolonial approach in this feminist, participatory action, girl-led research does not view the issues identified by girls as isolated issues needing only in-country solutions. Our decolonial approach to research implies reciprocity and co-responsibility, in particular about making visible how present-day issues in the Global South, in this case those identified by girls, are linked to continuing exploitative actions and policies from the Global North.

Before further examining the research and its findings, it is important to mention that ActionAid UK has a commitment to intersectionality, tolerance and respect, and rejects all forms of violence, hate, stigma and discrimination. This includes any form of discrimination based on gender expression and identity. ActionAid UK supports the most marginalised women and girls in the world. Thus, when we talk about women and girls, we include trans women and girls. However, this particular research was led by cis women and girls, as were the rights holders who were interviewed.

This research builds on from Girl-Led Research Phase One[5] carried out in 2021 by girls in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Ethiopia. The research looked at the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent girls and young women in the three countries.

Through this latest research, girls aimed to generate findings that could influence their lived realities and provide tools for their advocacy with families, communities, and decision-makers. Through the research process, and supported by mentors, girls strengthened their leadership and research skills for future projects. They also crafted strategies to share their findings and recommendations. These strategies included organising community events, setting up community billboards, and participating in radio talk shows to highlight key findings.

This report begins with a context setting that provides an overview of the current situation for adolescent girls' rights in both Sierra Leone and Nigeria. It then presents the key findings from the research conducted by the girls in their communities in the two countries on the topics they identified that most affect them. It concludes with recommendations for governments, donors, national and international organisations, community members, and practitioners.

Why ActionAid is focusing on girl-led research.

ActionAid's feminist research guidelines[6] reflect our approach to conduct research in a way that is participatory and shifts power. As such, ActionAid strives to do research that puts girls' perspectives at the forefront, validates their knowledge and connects them with decision-makers so that they can create their own change by advocating for their needs. Girl-led research aims to provide an opportunity to shift power back to girls – building a sense of self-confidence, providing opportunities to connect with peers, mentors, and supporters, and to take action to share research results and express their power to make change.

Girl-led research also aims to challenge ideas around what is considered solid social research when it comes to understanding girls' needs, aspirations, and well-being. International development actors have been criticised for making assumptions about girls' aspirations and sometimes instrumentalising girls' voices and narratives around their lives. For example, some actors might hold a common assumption that all girls want to become educated, raise families, and earn income, and run projects that

follow an economic growth agenda that does not necessarily act in girls' interests[7]. Similarly, international development actors have also been criticised for spreading stereotypes portraying girls of colour from the Global South as subjects that need 'rescue', which can then contribute to harmful neo-colonial ideas. The way in which girls' own stories are framed and presented, therefore, requires careful consideration.

Girl-led research should involve girls leading in all stages of the research – defining their own agenda; being supported to design the research tools; collecting and analysing data; and disseminating the results to the audiences relevant to the changes they want to see. Girls should be carefully supported in that process, as studies have shown[8] that young people can sometimes be barred from participation in studies if they are considered not capable of behaving in a sufficiently 'adult'-like manner, and that research can be dominated by adults' agendas, assumptions, perspectives, methodologies, and aspirations.

In this girl-led research, girls are recognised as the experts in the issues that directly affect them, and ActionAid's commitment to appropriately compensate girl researchers for their time and dedication to feminist research is observed. Costs were covered for transport and food, as well as ongoing mentorship from partner organisations, in addition to technical support and knowledge-sharing spaces.

1. Why ActionAid uses a decolonial research framework: Girls' collective knowledge as both a knowledge resource and a source of power

ActionAid's feminist research guidelines[9] and methodology are centred on an intersectional feminist lens. This approach recognises that gender inequality is inseparable from other forms of oppression. Complementing this intersectional lens, a decolonial perspective highlights how these systems of oppression have been, and continue to be, shaped by colonial and neo-colonial processes. This perspective aligns with and extends the critical insights of Black and Southern feminism, emphasising how historical and ongoing colonial practices manifest in various forms, including power dependence and historical injustices.[10]

Adopting an anti-racist, feminist, decolonial approach to girl-led research means challenging and deconstructing research practices that reproduce coloniality of knowledge (meaning what is considered legitimate knowledge for a Global North/ Western eye), and that have shaped girls' views and experiences to build diverse ways of creating knowledge collectively with other girls.

A decolonial approach in this context also means practising critical reflexivity with girls. Therefore when challenging individual and collective generalised thinking it is important to acknowledge that coloniality continues to shape the way we see the world, and what knowledge we value and what knowledge we reject or dismiss. For example, lived experience is traditionally dismissed by Western academic models and not considered a form of knowledge (often deemed just an opinion) when it should be regarded as well-informed testimony that illuminates realities.[11] In this case, the girls' experience should be seen as the backbone of knowledge to the solutions relevant to their realities.

A decolonial approach in girl-led research means being aware of different power dynamics at play to give a fuller picture of the injustices experienced by girls in all their various forms and what has led to them. In other words,

unveiling the origins of intersectional systems of oppression[12] that girls experience. This includes how discussions were had around ideas of privilege and positionality that we all hold before, during, and beyond the research, and how the girls were intentionally conscious about their own positionality and did not let their privilege fuel bias in their analysis.

Girl-led research informed by decoloniality challenges homogenising views about people, communities, and countries involved in the process, as very often those views are formed by colonial frames.

2. Methodology

The methodology used ensured that intersectionality and a decolonial approach are cornerstones of this research methodology, which, while using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, recognises that coloniality has impacted the academic and research space, where experiences and knowledge of people from the Global South/Majority world are often mined by academic institutions in the Global North/Minority world through a data collection lens and without advocacy aims, undermining people's power as political subjects. In contrast to a decolonial approach, research that has used more of a localisation oriented approach has also viewed communities in the Global South through a homogenous lens, overlooking intersectionality (racism, ableism, LGBTQIA+ discrimination, xenophobia, and class-based discrimination) and overlapping power held by different groups within communities.

Feminist participatory action research is political, and, as such, this research has challenged the power dynamics both between the girl researchers themselves and within the broader context of where the research was carried out. This includes facilitating spaces

I am not your data

I am not your data, nor am I your vote bank,
I am not your project, or any exotic museum object,
I am not the soul waiting to be harvested,
Nor am I the lab where your theories
are tested,
I am not your cannon fodder, or the
invisible worker,
or your entertainment at India habitat center
I am not your field, your crowd, your history,
your help, your guilt, medallions of
your victory,
I refuse, reject, resist your labels,
your judgements, documents, definitions,
your models, leaders and patrons,
because they deny me my existence,
my vision, my space,
your words, maps, figures, indicators,
they all create illusions and put
you on pedestal,
from where you look down upon me,
So I draw my own picture, and invent my
own grammar,
I make my own tools to fight my own battle,
For me, my people, my world, and my
Adivasi self!

~Abhay Xaxa, 2016 – [13]

where all those involved in the research can question and challenge positions of power or privilege, and positionality to avoid reproducing colonial power dynamics.

Decolonial, intersectional, feminist girl-led research is centred on the voices, experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of diverse girls,

especially those most marginalised and excluded within communities and beyond. It challenges and deconstructs practices that perpetuate the coloniality of knowledge and seeks to create knowledge collectively instead. It ensures that girls have the tools and support to lead in conceptualising, designing, analysing, and disseminating research every step of the way, and that every stage and output is co-created with the support of research mentors and ActionAid Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and the UK. The research mentors – women leading girl-led organisations from the areas where the research took place – ensured guidance and safeguarding of the girls, and worked on strengthening power within, and power together, as well as providing spaces for reflection on the entire process, both on the methodology and personal journeys of change.

The methodology emphasises building solidarity with other girls, youth, women's rights[14] and feminist organisations, focusing on ethics, safety, and safeguarding. Reflexivity in research approaches was encouraged, promoting self-critical introspection among researchers to acknowledge the subjectivities they bring to their work. This approach defies norms that restrict girls and young women from occupying decision-making spaces and influencing policies related to their lives. It also rejects the idea that research (in any form) can be objective.

To carry out this process, the project team drew on the literature and learnings from the first iteration of girl-led research on how to shift power to girls in communities to lead at every stage of the research process, in a way that is both intersectional in practice and analysis. This ensured that each stage is accessible for girls with disabilities, and various levels of literacy and school access, and that girls who identify as having a disability lead in designing the

initiative and reducing barriers that affect them and others. This included ActionAid's own decolonial and intersectional research principles. Mentors worked with the girls to identify power and to shift it at different levels of the girls' ecosystem (parents, communities, schools) so that girls could fully participate in the research process with full support, and without fearing any backlash from their environment.

Lessons from phase one were incorporated into the design of this iteration, including girls not needing to select pre-set themes from a literature review, instead they brainstormed with the mentors on the themes they wanted to focus on and then carried out the literature reviews on those. This meant that from the outset the research was girl-led. In phase two emphasis was also placed on decolonisation approaches; in its first phase the project started by recognising that girls hold the knowledge about their contexts and the solutions to the challenges they face, therefore rejecting research that privileges Eurocentric knowledge only and challenging whose knowledge counts. In phase two the project aspired to incorporate decolonisation approaches into all stages of the research, from recognising oral knowledge in knowledge reviews, to framing the research training in a way that prompts continuous reflection about the colonial origin of many of the current social norms and gender roles to avoid further replicating and reproducing colonial power dynamics during data collection and analysis.

Feminist participatory action research takes the shape of a cyclical process of action, observation, reflection and planning. Each research stage, from the initial identification of the research community to the final collective advocacy for social change went through this iterative process.

ACTION

OBSERVATION

REFLECTION

PLANNING

Feminist participatory action research
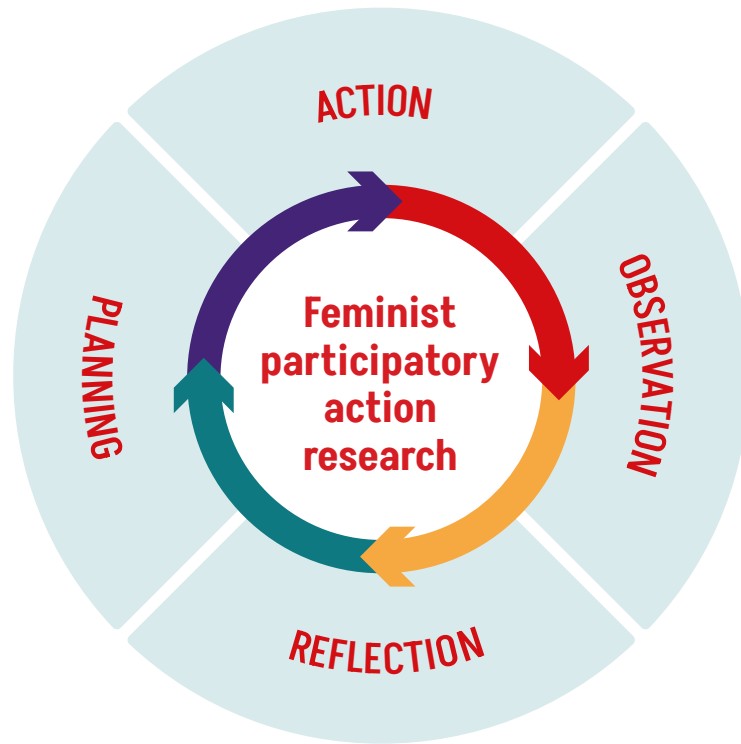
Stage 1: Identification of the research community

Staff from ActionAid Sierra Leone and ActionAid Nigeria teams identified the communities where to conduct the research, connected with local women's rights organisations and they jointly identified the research mentors and appointed the girl researchers.

Stage 2: Co-design of research tools, methodologies and processes

Research mentors from Abuja and Jigawa in Nigeria, and Freetown in Sierra Leone, alongside ActionAid staff co-created a series of online workshops on decolonial feminist participatory action research methods. These were then shared with the girls through in-person workshops to ensure that they had the tools to identify their research questions and felt prepared to lead the research data collection and analysis. The training of trainers in the girl-led research methodology was designed to foster a deep and critical reflection on the colonial origins of social norms and gender roles through an intersectional lens.

Stage 3: Co-identification of research questions

Following the online workshops, the facilitators guided the girls through an iterative process of examining their realities by posing a series of reflections about specific issues identified by the girls. These questions aimed to uncover the underlying power dynamics and societal constructs by asking: Who benefits from the situation, and how? Who is harmed, and in what ways? Who holds the decision-making power regarding the issue? Where can we find additional information about this? What actions can we take to instigate change? Are there other perspectives or experiences related to this issue?[15]

During the training, mentors encouraged the girls to delve deeper into whether the issues they identified were symptomatic of broader systemic problems. This was achieved by continually questioning the 'why', to peel back the layers of each issue to its core. For instance, if the girls expressed that their opinions were not valued in their communities, the facilitators might explore the power dynamics and mechanisms for being heard or becoming a leader: Is it due to their age, gender, land or resources ownership, access to education, or perceived public speaking abilities? Or is it due to their ethnicity or economic background? All these reflections are meticulously documented to inform the decolonial analysis phase. The aim of the training was to make sure that the girls understood that coloniality has influenced our perceptions of knowledge, and that they recognised both academic and non-academic knowledge as valid and legitimate forms. The training aimed to shift power to girls by acknowledging them as experts in their own realities and capable of initiating change in their communities.

Stage 4: Inclusion of ethical and safeguarding protocols

Ethical considerations and safeguarding protocols with clear referral pathway were established to ensure the co-researchers and community members' safety, well-being, and confidentiality. These included obtaining informed and continuous consent, ensuring anonymity where necessary, and being sensitive to the potential risks associated with sharing personal experiences. Informed consent was obtained from the girls and their parents/guardians through community adult mentors. Girls were provided with adequate information about the project, its process, and the end use of their data and contributions. Researchers were trained to handle disclosures of trauma or abuse sensitively and to provide appropriate referrals to specialised services.

Stage 5: Participatory data collection

Data collection methods were designed to be participatory and create spaces for dialogue, emphasising collaboration. Numerous techniques were used to focus on qualitative data, such as focus groups, participatory mapping, and storytelling sessions, which made spaces for the girls to share their experiences and insights in a supportive environment. This methodology allows for the recognition that there are multiple forms of legitimate knowledge, including the experiential knowledge of girls not in formal education. Sessions were conducted in Pidgin, Krio or Hausa, recognising the role of vernacular languages in decolonial forms of knowledge.

Stage 6: Participatory data analysis

The analysis phase focused on integrating insights from the literature review, providing time for the research mentor to incorporate decolonial perspectives into the data analysis. To ground the analysis in a decolonial framework, analysis workshops began with narratives or stories derived from the literature review and the research. These narratives served as a foundational basis for the girls to analyse the data they collected, thus ensuring that the analysis remained rooted in decolonial theory and practice.

Research mentors then supported the girl researchers in discussing and writing up the findings through a thematic analysis workshop to analyse the findings of the research and the challenges and benefits of conducting the research themselves. In these workshops girls also reflected on how the findings related to their own experiences and, as a result, quotes from both community members and from the researchers themselves are presented in the findings sections. This analysis produced through the research workshops has been used to draft the present report. To further support girls in leading the research, ActionAid staff also set up a safe and reassuring peer space where girls could meet, provided remuneration for the girls, and facilitated opportunities for girls to connect with women's organisations. These spaces were made accessible in terms of disability needs times that were possible with school and care work, and measures were taken to ensure the girls' safety.

An important part of the research process was also ensuring that girls and young women were able to use the results to spark dialogue with peers and in their communities and lead their own process of change. With support from the mentors, the girls designed their own strategies to share their findings and recommendations.

In line with decolonial research that emphasises that narratives should be owned and led by people from communities where research is carried out and that the preferences of women and girls should be central, the research outputs were not confined to traditional reports and the girls were able to choose the formats that best supported their advocacy, such as textiles, legends, and storytelling. This flexible approach respects and highlights the diverse ways in which knowledge can be shared and disseminated.

Stage 7: Collective advocacy planning

After analysing the data, the girls identified stakeholders and the changes they wished to advocate for in the girl-led action phase of the process. This is where girls will take action on the issues identified from the research to make changes at community level, for example by asking: Who has power? Who are their allies and can change the status quo? What kind of advocacy can be led by girls? What attitudes or behaviours would girls like to change?

3. A power framework for working with girls

Following a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) approach, this research project includes a power analysis, which focuses on intersectionality and draws on various theories to outline four types of power that influence girls' lives across public and private spaces and manifest in formal and informal rules of behaviours, institutions, and relationships – from girls' relationships with friends, family and partners that impact their everyday lives, through to more formal relationships with service providers, leaders, and policy makers. This includes reviewing how, if at all, girls can exercise these types of power. The framework also outlines how working towards power equalities can help move from a situation where girls are discounted or invisible, to one where their

communities, families, and other supporters are working towards building power together – a place where girls would have the ability to make meaningful, strategic choices about their lives.

Creating spaces for girls to access advanced data collection and research tools significantly shifts power back to girls by equipping them with the knowledge that enables informed decision-making and effective self-advocacy. These tools allow girls to gather and analyse data about issues affecting their lives, providing evidence-based support for their arguments and helping them challenge existing narratives about their capabilities and roles. The collaborative nature of data collection fosters networking opportunities, building supportive communities and platforms for collective action. In addition, as girls conduct and present their own research, they gain visibility and recognition in academic, policy, and public spheres, leading to increased respect and influence. These tools also enable girls to identify systemic patterns of inequality, make informed decisions about their futures and create counter-narratives that contribute to a deeper understanding of their realities. This knowledge can be shared with peers, creating a cycle of sharing power.

The intersectionality component of the FPAR methodology further reinforces this framework since inequality, and thus power imbalance, is a product of the intersection between gender and other social markers of difference, such as ethnicity, age, level of education, marital status, religion, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability, to mention a few.

a. Five types of power shape girls' lives
Power over: used to dominate, subordinate and control. Girls cannot influence issues that impact them, can't control their bodies, their

time, and their life choices. They experience fundamental rights violations.

Power within: linked to a sense of self-worth, self-knowledge and self-determination. Girls understand that they have value, know their rights, and feel a sense of possibility and choice about their own futures.

Power with: involves building a sense of collective strength among peers and with other groups. Girls can meet with other allies to build friendships, understand their common and unique issues, and strategise ways to support each other.

Power to: refers to the potential of every person to shape their life and world, and their ability to learn and to act towards meaningful change. Girls can speak out and influence the decisions that impact their lives in the home, community, and decision-making forums.

Power under[16]: describes how trauma survivors and individuals who have endured discrimination, abuse, oppression or trauma often adopt authoritarian or oppressive behaviours when they attain positions of power. Given that most girls face discrimination throughout their lives, with many enduring abuse and violence, it is not surprising that power under manifests frequently in girls' expressions of power, and they may unintentionally incorporate power under practices, potentially compromising the very goals they aim to achieve.

4. Limitations
Several limitations are worth bearing in mind when considering the research findings.

Firstly, despite high-quality training in various participatory research methods, the girl researchers reported feeling inhibited at first

POWER OVER

POWER UNDER

POWER WITHIN

MY RIGHTS

5 TYPES OF POWER IN GIRLS' LIVES

POWER WITH

POWER TO
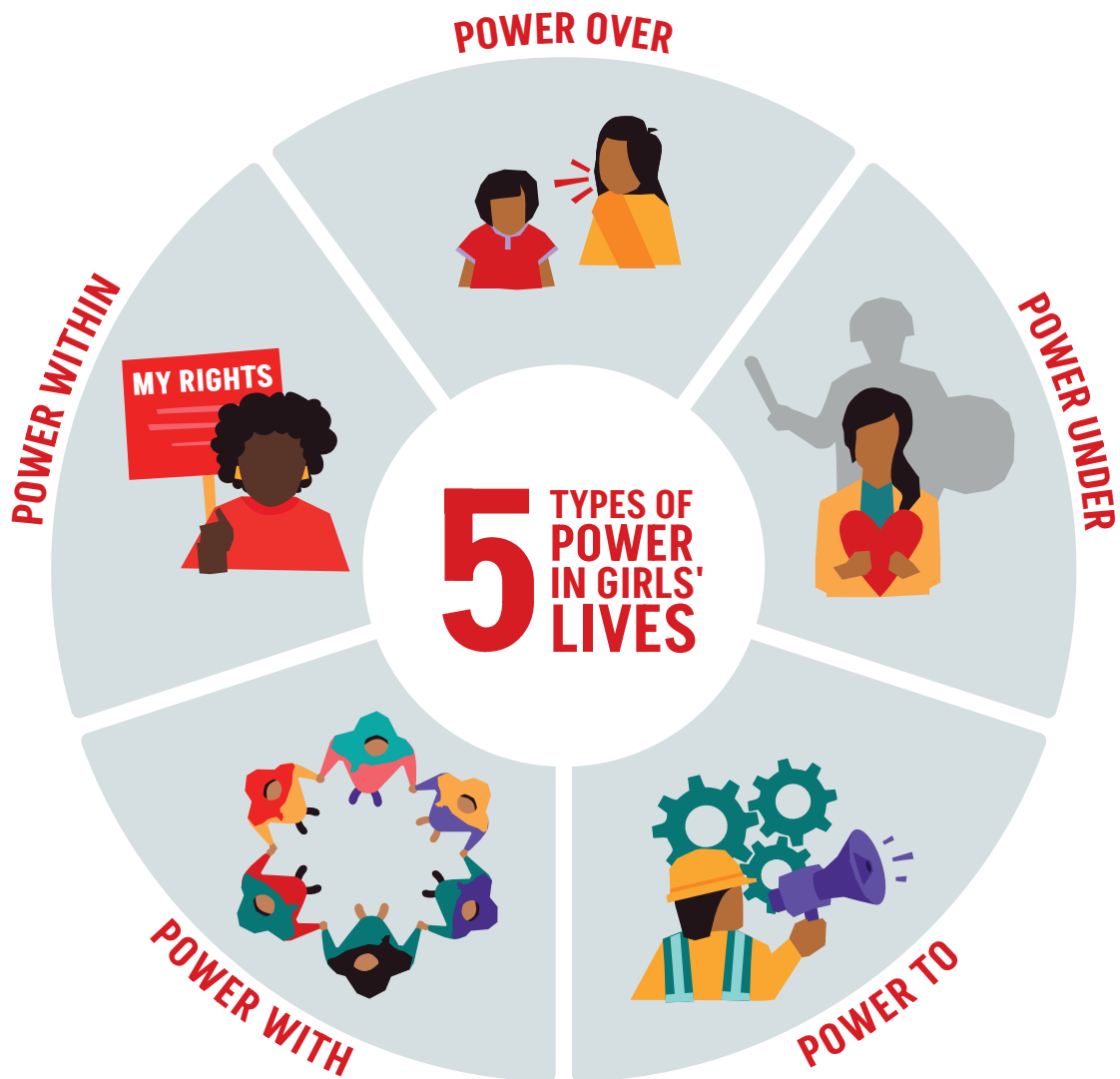
when interviewing men community members. This reflects the existing unequal power dynamics between adults and young people as well as between men and women. The researchers also reported a lack of cooperation from men and lack of support by family members (fathers and brothers) and friends who discouraged the girls from joining the research activities.

In addition, some co-researchers[17] who agreed to join the research had low literacy levels and required assistance in reading and understanding the research questions. While this is a positive element as it removed barriers for people with low literacy levels to take part in the research, the team believes that there might be some instances where the co-researchers

responded to an interpretation of the questions rather than the questions themselves. As a result, adopting participatory methods that required longer engagement proved to be particularly challenging.

Secondly, because of the time commitment required by the research process, the girl researchers had a challenging time balancing their own schedules, such as school hours, with the time required to engage in the research process. Even though this is not a limitation of the research per se, it is worth mentioning as a constraint that the girl researchers had to face when joining the training sessions, conducting the interviews via their mobile phones, conducting the research, and analysing the data. Financial support was provided to

ensure that the researchers had enough credit on their mobile phones for research and for safety reasons.

Thirdly, the qualitative research involved a small number of co-researchers across rather different contexts and geographies. As such, findings provide a rich narrative about girls' lives in their specific contexts. The girl-led and participatory nature of the research also meant that girls designed their own research questions and approaches in each context. While this is in many ways a strength of the research, it also means that the type of data available in each location vary, making it challenging to compare results across the three localities. Nevertheless, it has been possible to identify common themes centred on the systemic injustices faced by adolescent girls in many parts of the world. These themes are explored in the Summary of Findings and Recommendations sections.

5. Ethical and safeguarding considerations and learning

The research teams worked diligently to achieve the research objectives while minimising any risk of harm. Ethical procedures were developed to protect all groups involved in the research, guided by three core principles:

1. Respecting individuals at all stages of the research process.
2. Minimising harm to researchers and co-researchers.
3. Maximising benefits to adolescent girls.

As part of this process, ActionAid staff first provided information about the project and obtained initial informed consent from the girl researchers and their parents or caregivers. They also engaged other community members, such as community gatekeepers, to ensure the safety of researchers and community members throughout the research process.

Before commencing the research, ActionAid staff ensured that basic care and support for survivors of gender-based violence and were available locally, and child protection concerns were addressed, and they mapped out referral pathways. All staff, mentors and girl researchers were trained in concepts of safety and power, as well as in survivor-centred approaches and safeguarding. This training included recognising indicators of distress during interviews, understanding which follow-up questions to ask or avoid, and safely reporting any voluntary disclosure of abuse and exploitation. Trained women mentors were present to handle sensitive discussions around abuse or violence and to support the researchers if they needed access to basic follow-up care or psychosocial support, or if they wished to withdraw from the research. ActionAid's Global Safeguarding Team was also available to provide additional support to mentors as needed.

All data collection was conducted in safe locations that did not draw unnecessary attention, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. All identifiers, such as names and contact details, were removed from researchers' notes, communications products, and research reports. In small communities where ensuring full anonymity was not always possible, the research teams mitigated this by avoiding the collection of individual stories and inviting community members to reflect on the general situation of girls in their community.

2. Context setting: adolescent girls in Sierra Leone and Nigeria

This review carried out by ActionAid Nigeria and ActionAid Sierra Leone in collaboration with the Nigeria-based Baba Azimi Foundation, Teenage Network and an independent consultant from Sierra Leone and with the girl researchers, aimed to provide an overview of six of the key barriers to adolescent girls' rights within Sierra Leone and Nigeria. Through the review, it became clear that it remains challenging to find data on girls' rights, as such data is often not disaggregated or does not exist. A literature review was conducted on the topics the girls chose to explore for the research around teenage pregnancy, child marriage, drug abuse, gender norms and bias, etc. West African sources were prioritised and the sources consulted included government reports, NGOs working in Sierra Leone, Sierra Leonean authors, news agencies, etc. Regional sources were also sought. For global context, global sources such as United Nations' (UN) reports were consulted. This section presents the findings from this review and some of the predictions of what could be found through the data analysis.

1. Education and gender disparities

Education remains a critical challenge for girls in both Nigeria and Sierra Leone. In Nigeria, significant regional disparities exist, with the northern part of the country experiencing lower school attendance rates for girls. With only 47.3% of girls attending school in some northern regions, the situation is particularly dire for marginalised groups, such as nomadic girls, hawkers, married girls, and those in remote areas.[18]

In Sierra Leone, while initial school enrolment rates for girls are high, there is a sharp decline in secondary education. The 2015 Population and Housing Census revealed that the gross enrolment rate for girls in junior secondary school was 93.0% compared to 100% for boys, dropping further to 40.4% for girls in senior secondary school versus 55.4% for boys. This decline is attributed to numerous factors, including child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and socioeconomic pressures.[19]

2. Child marriage and teenage pregnancy

Child marriage remains a prevalent issue in both countries. In Nigeria, Save the Children (2021) reported that 44% of girls were married before their 18th birthday, with 17% married before age 15. The practice is particularly widespread in Northwest Nigeria, where over half of the girls are married by age 15, and over 80% by age 18 (Erulkar and Bello, 2007).

Sierra Leone faces similar challenges, with UNICEF data indicating that 3 in 10 young women were married before 18, amounting to 923,000 child brides. Maswikwa (2015) reported that 44% of women aged 20–24 were married before age 18.[20] Teenage pregnancy is also a significant concern, with a prevalence rate of 22.1%.[21] These issues are interconnected with poverty, cultural norms, and limited access to education.

3. Sexual and gender-based violence

Both Sierra Leone and Nigeria report high rates of gender-based violence. In Nigeria, up to 52%

of women have experienced domestic violence. Sierra Leone's situation is equally concerning, with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2024) citing that 62% of women aged 15–49 report having experienced physical or sexual violence. The country's history of civil war has had a lasting impact on gender-based violence, with horrific atrocities committed during the conflict period.[22]

4. Socioeconomic exclusion and poverty

Women and girls in both countries face significant socioeconomic challenges. In Nigeria, a study on Gender Disparities in Asset Ownership revealed that only 11% of women own a house and only 12% own land.[23] Women spend an average of 13 hours daily on unpaid care work, limiting their economic opportunities.[24]

In Sierra Leone, poverty disproportionately affects rural areas, with the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) in rural areas more than double that of urban areas.[25] This poverty contributes to various issues, including child trafficking and transactional sex among adolescent girls.

5. Historical and cultural context

The impact of colonialism and patriarchal norms has had an enormous impact on the status of women and girls. In Nigeria, the colonial period entrenched gender disparities and discriminatory practices, sidelining Indigenous histories and the legacies of important women leaders. This has resulted in a lack of role models for girls in history and the perpetuation of systemic biases.

Sierra Leone's history, including its civil war and recent health crises, like Ebola, has exacerbated structural inequalities and discrimination against women and girls. The society is described as 'deeply gendered' with socio-cultural norms governing attitudes and behaviours that result in gender inequality.[26]

6. Legal frameworks and policy challenges

Ratified international treaties across Sierra Leone and Nigeria:

1. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC): The CRC ensures girls' rights to education, health, protection from abuse, and freedom from discrimination, fostering their full development and participation in society.
2. African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child: This charter explicitly addresses issues facing African girls, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), and promotes girls' rights to health, education, and protection from exploitation.
3. Convention 182 on Eliminating the Worst Forms of Child Labour: This convention protects girls from the worst forms of labour, including sexual exploitation, trafficking, and hazardous work, promoting safe and supportive environments for their growth.
4. Commitment to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[27]: The SDGs promote gender equality (Goal 5) and quality education (Goal 4), aiming to eliminate practices like child marriage and ensure girls have equal access to resources and opportunities.

⚖️ **Sierra Leone national legislation geared towards protecting the rights of children:**

1. **Child Rights Act, 2007:** The Child Rights Act ensures that girls are protected from abuse, exploitation, and discrimination, guaranteeing their rights to education, health, and protection from harmful practices like child marriage.

2. **Sexual Offences Act, 2019:** This Act criminalises sexual violence, including rape and sexual exploitation, thereby safeguarding girls from sexual abuse and ensuring justice for victims.

3. **Devolution of Estates Act, 2007:** The Devolution of Estates Act ensures that girls, especially daughters, inherit property on equal terms with sons, promoting gender equality in inheritance rights.

4. **Anti-Human Trafficking Act, 2005:** The Anti-Human Trafficking Act protects girls from trafficking, forced labour, and exploitation, and provides mechanisms for their rescue and rehabilitation.

5. **Registration of Customary Marriage Act, 2007:** This Act aims to regulate customary marriages, which helps protect girls from early and forced marriages by ensuring legal safeguards and consent.

6. **National Policy on Radical Inclusion, 2021:** This policy ensures the inclusion of marginalised groups, including girls, in all aspects of society, advocating for their rights to education, employment, and participation in governance.

7. **School Health Policy, 2020:** The School Health Policy supports girls by promoting their access to health services and education, addressing issues like menstrual health, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender-based violence.

8. **National Strategy for Out-of-School Children, 2022:** This strategy addresses barriers to education for girls, particularly those out of school due to poverty, gender bias, or early marriage, ensuring they have access to education.

9. **Comprehensive School Safety Policy, 2023:** This policy protects girls in schools by creating safe environments free from violence, bullying, and harassment, ensuring their right to learn in a secure space.

10. **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2024:** This Act makes child marriage illegal in Sierra Leone, protecting girls from early marriage and its associated risks, ensuring that they can enjoy their childhood, education, and development.

Up until the very recent Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2024[28] was enacted to ban child marriage and thereby make it a criminal offence for anyone to contract marriage for persons under the age of 18,[29] there was conflicting legal provisions when it came to child marriage: The Customary Marriage Act, 2009[30] allowed for child marriage with parental consent, conflicting with the Child Rights Act, 2007,[31] which set the minimum age at 18.

⚖️ **Nigerian national legislation geared towards protecting the rights of children:**

1. **Child Rights Act (CRA), 2003:** The CRA ensures that girls are protected from exploitation, abuse, and discrimination, and guarantees their rights to education, health, and freedom from child marriage and harmful practices.

2. **Labour Act, 1974:** This Act protects girls from exploitative child labor by prohibiting employment of children under the age of 12 and regulating work for older children to ensure it does not interfere with their education or well-being.

3. **Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015:** This law combats human trafficking, particularly protecting girls from being trafficked for sexual exploitation, forced labor, or other harmful purposes.

4. **Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015:** The VAPP Act criminalises all forms of violence, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, protecting girls from gender-based violence, domestic abuse, and harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM).

5. **Compulsory, Free, Universal Basic Education Act, 2004:** This Act guarantees girls the right to free and compulsory education up to junior secondary level, helping to eliminate barriers that prevent girls from attending school.

6. **National Health Act, 2014:** The National Health Act ensures access to healthcare for girls, including maternal and child health services, and addresses issues like sexual and reproductive health to improve their well-being.

7. **Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc) Act, 2015:** This Act protects girls from online exploitation, harassment, and abuse by criminalizing cybercrimes, including cyberstalking and child pornography.

8. **Nigeria's National Social Protection Policy, 2017:** This policy aims to reduce poverty and risk, particularly for girls, by providing social safety nets, access to education, and protection from exploitation and violence.

Many states in Nigeria have enacted their own child protection policies, which align with the CRA but also address local challenges such as child marriage, child labour, and street children.

Similarly to Sierra Leone, Nigeria also faces challenges with inconsistent laws and the persistence of customary practices that undermine efforts to protect girls' rights. The need for consistent legal frameworks and effective implementation is emphasised as crucial for addressing issues like child marriage and gender-based violence.[32]

While both the Nigerian and Sierra Leonean governments have made efforts to address the challenges faced by women and girls, significant obstacles remain as highlighted by the gaps between policy and societal changes. These include deep-rooted cultural norms, poverty, inadequate implementation of laws, and the lingering effects of historical events, such as colonialism and civil conflict.

Recently, the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act 2022 was passed in an effort to shift the power towards women across Nigeria. Governments since the civil war have made strides to address the issues of education, the gender gap in education, and poverty by developing and implementing policies such as a five-year poverty-reduction road map and the Agenda for Prosperity. However, these efforts made by the State are often met with implementation gaps and other challenges.

3. Girl-led research teams: experiences and key findings

Trigger warning: this and the following sections may contain depictions and mentions of gender based violence, including physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. Reader and participant discretion is advised.

"

My biggest learning was knowing my journey and learning from my mistakes.

Girl researcher in the Jigawa team

Data collection for this research took place in urban and rural communities in Jigawa state and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in Nigeria, and in Freetown in Sierra Leone. Across the three locations, 42 adolescent girls aged 12–19 were part of the research teams for this project, 7 in Abuja, 11 in Jigawa, and 15 in Freetown.

This section first considers their experiences and initial learning. It then looks at their findings, country by country, across the thematic areas they have identified. In each location, the girl-led research teams decided on their own research questions and focus and gathered and analysed the data themselves. Therefore, not all the research teams have highlighted findings across the same thematic areas or from all the areas identified in the literature review. The findings sections are based on the reports from the analysis workshops the girls conducted with their mentors and were then written up into the country findings sections by ActionAid. In the write up, authors have retained the overall character of the analysis

and have tried to retain the girls' own words as much as possible. The final content of this report has been validated by the girls and their research mentors.

One of the primary goals of girl-led research is to shift the balance of power back to them. After concluding the data collection, the girls took time to reflect on their experiences and shared their insights (Annex 1).

1. Findings from Jigawa, Nigeria

Researchers in Jigawa collected data using focus group discussions and participatory tools, such as daily activity charts, body maps, community maps, friendship circles, and the intergenerational relationship tool. They also conducted interviews via a mobile app. They gathered insights from various groups – girls, men, boys, and women – to understand their distinct perspectives on issues affecting girls.

Prior to collecting the data, the researchers identified themes such as child marriage, mental health, freedom from violence, education, and money and resources. The girls' research revealed overarching issues across these themes, which were then explored more in detail:

1. The girls' lack of power to make choices or decisions about their lives.

2. The undermining of girls' issues by most of the community members, including other girls.

3. The negative perceptions of girls in their communities.

4. The unequal treatment of girls compared to boys.

These issues both cause and reflect the persistent undermining of girls' power by parents, friends, teachers, community members, faith leaders, and service providers.

Girl-researchers and co-researchers collaboratively examined the root causes and contributing factors of these issues. They then explored potential solutions and developed concrete recommendations.

Theme 1: Girls' issues viewed as 'insignificant'[33]

A fundamental barrier to addressing challenges faced by girls is the denial of the existence of such challenges, or lack of recognition of their significance. This is evident by the fact that the research themes that were identified and set by the girl researchers in the initial phase of the research, prior to the data collection, were not identified as challenges by those who then took the survey. Ahead of the beginning of the research, the girl researchers identified several pressing problems faced by girls in their societies. These include barriers to education, child marriage, challenges in menstruation management, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health rights, lack of control over money and assets, and gender-based violence. These problems were then included in the data collection survey and, interestingly, once the survey was completed, the data revealed that most women and girls (61% of girls and 100% of women) who participated in the research did not consider those issues to be key challenges as they did not select any of them

in the related survey question. Similarly, all the men interviewed stated that there were no significant concerns affecting girls.

At the beginning of the research, 39% of the girl researchers believed that child marriage is an issue for girls in their community, and 22% believed that lack of education is a problem, stating several barriers to access to education in both urban and rural communities in Jigawa. Such barriers include the lack of money and resources to pay for school fees, uniforms, or books; the need to work as hawkers and assist with farm work and animal rearing; and family traditions that only allow boys to attend school. Another 22% –three girls aged between 12 and 15 and one aged 18 years old, all in formal education – think that challenges in menstruation management and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health rights are the major problem for girls.

In contradiction to the results from the data collection survey mentioned above, once the interviews started and the co-researchers were asked to list some of the issues that they thought girls were facing (through open questions rather than selecting options from a survey), 100% of women identified menstruation management, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health rights, education, and child marriage as the primary challenges girls face in their communities and, when further exploring some of the barriers,, all women from rural areas noted that chores, including housework, farm work during the rainy season, and animal rearing, hinder girls attending school.

Among the interviewed men aged 31–73, 40% reported child marriage and education as issues faced by girls, and 20% stated that lack of money and assets are the main issues affecting girls in their communities. Half of the boys interviewed acknowledged that child

marriage and lack of resources are significant issues for girls, both of which limit their educational opportunities.

Theme 2: Education – Perception and beliefs about girl's education versus boys' education

"

A girl's education is important for her and the life of her children.

12-year-old girl from an urban area.

Perceptions and beliefs about girls' and women's education vary across different groups of community members. Girls view education as crucial for self-awareness, discipline,

community development and the future well-being of their children. Men have mixed opinions; some acknowledge the benefits of education that they have seen in their relatives who are women and girls, others believe girls should focus on vocational skills, while a few think education leads to immorality.

"

Education is good for them, we can see the benefit from our kinswoman.

Elder man in a rural community.

Boys also have diverse perspectives, with some emphasising the importance of education for self-development and nation-building, while others see marriage as a higher priority.

Challenges Faced by Girls: Perceptions and Realities

Before the research

Initial research themes identified by Girl Researchers as challenges to eduction

Perceptions of problems among survey participants

61% OF GIRLS

100% OF WOMEN

100% OF MEN

recognise the issues but don't see them as a problem

At the beginning of the research

Key issues believed by Girl Researchers to impact Girls (initial phase)

39% believed child marriage was a problem

22% focused on menstruation and reproductive health issues

22% identified barriers to education

During the research

Issues identified in open-ended interviews by Community Members

100% OF WOMEN IDENTIFIED

education, child marriage, menstruation management, and sexual and reproductive health as key challenges

Rural women noted household and farm chores as additional barriers.

MEN AGED 31-73

40% mentioned child marriage and education

20% mentioned lack of money/assets

Perceptions and beliefs about boys' and men's education reflect a range of views across different groups. Girls generally see men's education as highly important, believing it enables them to support their families, help others with practical tasks and contribute to community development. Some consider it more crucial than girls' education as they see men as future breadwinners. Men share this belief, emphasising their role as heads of households and citing religious teachings that prioritise mens' education. Boys see education as essential for future employment and to help the poor and sick. Women's views are divided; some believe that educated men will, in turn, educate their wives, while others dismiss boys' education as unnecessary.

Men acknowledge that parents, especially fathers, play a crucial role in either supporting or hindering their daughters' education, with some fathers prioritising farm work over school attendance during harvest periods. Boys recognise child marriage and poverty as significant barriers to girls' education. Women point to the demands of farm work and animal rearing, as well as logistical issues, like the lack of writing materials and teachers, and the far distance to schools, which discourage them from sending their daughters to school as significant factors.

"

During harvesting period, girls are supposed to help in the farms too so they may not go to school during this time.

35-year-old man from a rural area.

Family, friends, and community play significant roles in influencing girls' education, often in restrictive ways. Girls feel that discussion of their education is sometimes viewed as taboo by the community, creating a cultural barrier. Men believe that girl friends can discourage girls from continuing their education by encouraging them to marry instead. Boys note that if certain community members disapprove of a girl's education, they may pressure her parents to withdraw her from school and persuade her friends to discourage her from attending. Women did not provide input on this issue.

Girls' analysis
Improving girls' access to education requires coordinated efforts from various stakeholders, as reflected in their perspectives. Girls suggest raising awareness about the importance of education for both them and their parents, preventing them from hawking, and securing more sponsorships from the government and communities. Men believe that mothers should take an active role by asking their daughters about school regularly. Boys emphasise the need for sensitisation efforts targeting both girls and parents, teaching girls' skills to fund their education, providing government scholarships, and building more schools. Women advocate for supplying reading and writing materials, ensuring adequate teaching staff, and reducing farm work obligations to allow more time for education.

"

Girls' access to education can be improved by ensuring her mother should ask her about school every time she returns from school.

45-year-old man from an urban area.

Enabling girls to pursue education further

involves inspiring them through the examples of their peers, providing necessary school materials, and improving school infrastructure. Boys and women agree that sensitisation, skills training, government scholarships, and better school facilities are key factors that can motivate more girls to attend school and succeed.

A larger group of 50 girls was interviewed, and the majority (44%) believed that girls' education is crucial for their own lives and the lives of their children, fostering self-awareness, discipline and community development. Similarly, the women interviewed agreed that educating girls is beneficial because it enables them to educate their own children, encapsulating the belief that 'educating a girl equates to educating the whole world'. However, 22% of girls stated that girls' education is not as important as boys' education, while 60% of men believed it was detrimental, leading to immorality. Other communities members who are men thought it was acceptable but preferred girls to learn a skill or engage in petty trade, and 54.5% of boys felt that educating girls was unnecessary since girls would eventually marry, making it pointless to invest in their education.

While the quantitative data show that most women community members are in support of girls' education and most men community members are not, as seen above, once again the focus group discussions data reveal a more complex reality where there are several barriers to girls fully enjoying their right to education, especially when there are linkages to the practice of child marriage.

Data

Perceptions and Beliefs about Girls' Education vs. Boys' Education
Interviews with 50 Girls, Women, Men, and Boys in the community

Beliefs Supporting Girls' Education

44% OF GIRLS — Girls' education is crucial for their lives and the future of their children, fostering self-awareness, discipline, and community development

" **Educating a girl equates to educating the whole world**

Beliefs Against or Questioning Girls' Education

" Girls should learn a skill or engage in petty trade instead

60% OF MEN — Girls' education is detrimental and leads to immorality

54% OF BOYS — Girls' education is unnecessary as they will eventually marry, making it a pointless investment

22% of Girls also held negative views

Theme 3: Menstrual health and hygiene: effective information and management of menstrual health and hygiene

Information about bodily changes, particularly concerning menstrual health and hygiene, is acquired by boys and girls through various sources. Girls primarily learn from their mothers, friends, mentors, aunties, and teachers at Islamiyya (Islamic evening schools). Urban girls typically ask their mothers and friends for guidance, while rural girls often feel too embarrassed to discuss these matters with their parents, waiting until they are married to seek advice from their husbands or their brothers' wives or simply managing their menstruation on their own without informing others.

Men acknowledge that they do not know who girls talk to about menstrual health but believe that Islamiyya teachers are the main source of such information, and the only ones equipped to explain these topics to girls. Women similarly point to Islamiyya schools as essential in providing this information as well as their brothers' wives and sisters as key sources of guidance on menstrual health and hygiene.

Girls feel that family, friends, and the community can significantly influence their menstrual health by creating pressure on their parents. When a girl starts menstruating, some community members may urge her parents to remove her from school and arrange for her to be married. Men and women did not provide responses on how these factors influence girls' menstrual health.

Girls' analysis
Easing access to menstrual materials for girls involves several key strategies according to different perspectives. Girls suggest that shops should be located near their homes to make it easier to purchase these items and that there should be increased support for providing menstrual products. Men propose providing trainings for women on skills and business opportunities so they can earn money to buy these items for themselves and their daughters. Women also advocate for easily accessible shops to purchase menstrual products.

Improving girls' menstrual hygiene and health requires comprehensive approaches. Girls call for better health education opportunities, support from women's organisations for menstrual products and education, and the creation of support groups or committees focused on menstrual health. Women emphasise the need for educating and sensitising girls on healthy menstrual habits and securing support for menstrual hygiene materials. Men did not provide specific responses on this topic. This links into access to information on comprehensive sexuality education, and the stakeholders who are obligated or volunteer to provide this education to adolescents, mainly schools and civil society. Comprehensive sexuality education has been under threat in the past two years, during which there was an attempt to expunge it from schools' curriculum in Nigeria in 2022.[34]

Theme 4: Child marriage: gendered perceptions

Perceptions and beliefs about child marriage vary among the different groups surveyed. Girls have mixed views: some see it as a form of worship (Ibadah) that brings spiritual rewards, while others are concerned about the challenges young girls may face, such as managing household chores and responsibilities, which can lead to difficulties in the marriage. Some girls also believe that it is beneficial for a girl to be settled in her husband's house. Men generally view child marriage positively, considering it a practice in line with the Sunnah of the Prophet[35] and a

respectful tradition for women. Women also see child marriage as appropriate, emphasising that it is important for a woman to be in her husband's house.

The perceptions about child marriage for boys differ from those for girls. Girls generally believe that child marriage is not suitable for boys because they need to mature and be capable of guiding and supporting their wives. They argue that boys should be fully grown to effectively lead and be respected by their spouses. Men and women also share this view, agreeing that boys should not be married early.

Girls who marry early often face significant challenges, according to their own perspectives. Some report experiencing harsh treatment from their husbands, including lack of food, physical abuse, and even divorce. These issues often stem from the girl's perceived failure to meet expectations, such as respecting in-laws, performing household chores, or maintaining cleanliness. Health problems, like vesicovaginal fistula due to childbirth, and harassment from in-laws or co-wives are also noted concerns. In contrast, men and women

typically do not acknowledge these challenges, believing that child marriage does not present significant issues. This highlights how the intersection of gender, age, and religion can sometimes be used to confer power to men over women and girls.

Child marriage can present various issues for husbands and in-laws as well as the young brides themselves. Girls highlight that if a young bride suffers from complications like vesicovaginal fistula (VVF), her husband might not provide the necessary care, instead sending her back to her parents for support and potentially remarrying. Men believe that a girl should already be knowledgeable about managing household responsibilities and marriage before entering into it. If she lacks these skills, it is expected that she should return home to learn them, which creates additional problems for both her and her new family. Women also point out that if a young bride falls ill, she is unlikely to receive adequate care from her in-laws or husband, further exacerbating her problems.

"

Girls should be only married when they reach 18 to 19 years and not younger.

13-year-old girl from a rural area.

📊 *Girls' analysis*

The rationale for marrying adolescent girls early, as viewed by girls, men, and women includes several reasons. Girls believe that child marriage can ease their parents' concerns and help the girl mature quickly, adopting adult responsibilities and caring for their (older) husbands effectively. Men see child marriage to instil responsibility in young girls. Women argue that marrying a girl off early can prevent issues such as unmarried teenage pregnancy and

outspoken behaviour, believing that marriage will make her more compliant and respectful.

A girl who is married early is also perceived differently among other girls, men, and women depending on their respective perspectives. Girls have varied views: some believe that a girl who is married early will be happy in her new role, while others feel she may experience sadness due to the loss of educational opportunities and other childhood experiences. Even though girls may adapt to marriage without significant issues, some girls think the experience would be challenging because they may lack skills like cooking and cleaning. Men generally believe that child marriage will make the girl very happy, especially if her husband provides adequately for her, ensuring her well-being and satisfaction. Women also tend to view child marriage positively, believing that the girl will be happy in her new role.

Family, friends, and the community significantly influence child marriage. Girls observe that community norms and cultural expectations pressure families to marry off girls at a young age to avoid harassment and social stigma. Friends contribute by sharing uplifting stories about child marriages, which can encourage others to follow suit, and by urging their peers to express a desire for early marriage to their parents.[36]

"

Friends contribute a lot in child marriage because if a girl is married early, she will be telling her friends good stories about her marriage and that will influence them to also get married early.

15-year-old girl hawker in an urban area.

"
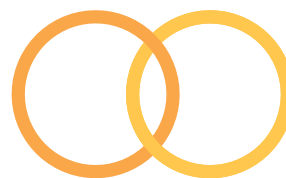
Friends also encourage their girlfriends to tell their parents that they want to get married.

14-year-old girl from a rural area.

Women also note that friends often highlight the benefits and happiness of child marriage to entice others, creating a ripple effect. Additionally, parents may feel guilt or a sense of failure if they delay their daughters' marriages, leading them to succumb to pressures from family, friends, or community to marry their daughters off sooner than planned.

"

The girls should be allowed to choose who they want to marry that will help make their marriages better.

17-year-old girl from an urban area.

Addressing the issues related to child marriage requires a multifaceted approach. Girls suggest that raising awareness among community members and parents about the negative impacts of child marriage, alongside implementing laws to prevent it, is crucial. They also advocate for educating communities on the importance of girls' education and demonstrating the adverse effects of child marriage to parents. Men believe that delaying marriage until girls are more mature will lead to better outcomes. Women agree that girls should be allowed to complete their education before marriage.

Girls believe that that marriages should occur only after girls reach the age of 18 or 19, and that they should have the autonomy to choose their own spouses, which could contribute to more successful marriages. Girls also suggested that, in the eventuality where girls are forced to marry while underage, they should receive some training to learn marital skills. Men suggest that educating girls about the significance of marriage is important, while women emphasise the need to highlight the value of education and the consequences of child marriage to ensure girls are better prepared for their future.

Theme 5: Access to and control of money and other resources

The question of whether it is right for a girl to have money and resources elicits varied perspectives from different groups of community members.

Girls generally view it positively, believing that having her own money would allow a girl to address her personal needs without relying on others. They also see it as a way for a girl to contribute to her family by helping her parents financially. Similarly, women strongly support the idea, highlighting that having money is essential for a girl to buy personal items, such as kitchenware and clothes, contributing to her independence and well-being.

"

It is right for girls to have money and resources so that she can solve her personal issues without asking anyone like buying pads, inner-wares, shoes, bags, etc.

16-year-old girl from a rural area.

Men have mixed opinions. Some agree that it is

beneficial for girls to have money and resources, as it can be helpful for managing personal and family issues. However, others are concerned that access to money might lead to immorality or misuse. They suggest that while some girls may use money responsibly to address household issues, others might only use it for personal needs without contributing to their husbands.

Boys believe the appropriateness of girls having money depends on the source. Money obtained from legitimate sources is seen as beneficial, but if a girl becomes accustomed to having money and then faces financial difficulties, there is a concern that she might resort to unethical means, like stealing.

Girls' analysis

Resources are used by girls for a variety of purposes, including addressing their personal needs, such as purchasing menstrual materials, buying clothes, shoes, and other essential items, as well as assisting their parents. Men often perceive that women primarily use money for community ceremonies and personal items, such as shoes and clothes. They suggest that girls should allocate their resources to assist their husbands, fathers, and children. Women view resources for girls as important for helping their parents, meeting their own needs, such as buying clothing and shoes, and acquiring kitchenware in preparation for their marriages, or helping their husbands. Boys also focus on personal needs and expenditures for events like family wedding ceremonies and emphasise the importance

of using resources to support both parents and children.

"

Yes, girls should have their own money because we already see that when they get money, they use it to help themselves, help their parents, buy schoolbooks and materials, buy menstrual materials, buy clothes and shoes and other things that they need.

13-year-old girl from a rural area.

Several strategies can be implemented to make sure that girls can access more resources. Girls suggest that providing training and capital, highlighting the importance of financial resources, and creating opportunities for them are key steps. Men propose establishing training centres for skills and vocational education, alongside offering capital and educating girls about the significance of having resources. Boys recommend giving advice on money management, supporting girls with capital, raising awareness among parents about the need for resource access, and implementing government programmes aimed at shifting the power into girls' hands.

Data

Sources of income and resources by gender	
Girls and women	Financial support from parents Running small business Hawking goods Performing domestic work Government employment
Girls and women	Government assistance programmes Support from husbands Farm produce
Boys and men	Government work Personal businesses Financial support from parents Handiwork

Theme 6: Safety and freedom from violence

Girls encounter various forms of violence at home, in the community, and at school. At home, they face issues such as food scarcity, physical abuse, and excessive domestic duties like dishwashing and fetching water. In the community, they may experience harassment while travelling to school, insecurity, and even rape, particularly if they are poor or uneducated. At school, they are subject to harassment from men teachers, corporal punishment for minor errors, and sexual advances that may lead to abuse if rejected. Men observe that girls endure beatings, emotional abuse, sexual harassment, and general mistreatment, including physical punishment known as 'kulle'.[37] Boys reported similar problems, such as domestic violence, harassment en route to school, insecurity, and rape. Women also underscore violence through inequality, harassment, and rape. The treatment of girls who are survivors of gender-based violence is characterised by significant stigma and discrimination from various perspectives. Girls report that they are often blamed for the violence they endure, viewed as immoral, and subjected to widespread discrimination. They experience stigma, lack of support, and gossip within their communities, leading to their isolation and the fostering of an environment of hostility towards them. Men observe that girls

who have experienced gender-based violence are generally discriminated against and stigmatised, with their suffering being linked to perceived immorality. Boys also note that these girls face ongoing isolation and harassment because of their victimisation. Women similarly highlight that girls who have survived gender-based violence face discrimination and stigma both at home and in the community, leaving them without peace or support in either setting.

Girls' analysis

Across all groups – girls, men, boys, and women – there is a consensus that men are the primary perpetrators of violence. When girls or women commit violence, they report facing severe punishment and harsh treatment. Men ensure these individuals are punished and labelled as immoral, with no support provided; instead, they are reported and punished to serve as a deterrent to others. Men confirm that girls or women who commit violence are indeed punished. Boys observe that the severity of punishment varies depending on the offence, while women also agree that punishment is administered, though details on the treatment are not specified.

The treatment of boys and men who commit violence is viewed differently. Girls note that these perpetrators often escape punishment and tend to shift the blame onto the girls if incidents are reported. Men believe such individuals operate without fear of consequences. Boys indicate that the level of punishment corresponds to the nature of the offence, while women agree that boys and men who commit violence are punished, though they do not elaborate on the specifics of the treatment.

Similarly, across all groups – girls, men, boys, and women – there is a consensus that there are currently no services available for survivors

of violence. To enhance access to support services, girls suggest educating leaders and establishing dedicated places where cases of violence can be reported. Boys also propose that community leaders and government involvement could be instrumental in improving service access. However, men did not provide suggestions for improvement.

Data

Perceived causes of increased levels of violence against women and girls (by gender)	
Girls and women	Drug abuse (by men and boys) Indecent dressing (by girls and women) Lack of education Absence of power to resist the abuse Absence of power to report the abuse Lack of (men) protectors – this is especially true for girls with divorced mothers who often experience increased level of harassment and discrimination Lack of education and awareness
Boys and men	Indecent dressing (by girls and women) Lack of education Poor moral upbringing Headstrong attitudes Bad influences from friends Drug abuse (especially among men) Poverty (with unemployed individuals more likely to engage in violent behaviour) Lack of peace at home Hawking Inadequate community security Insecurity

Recommendations from girls for enhancing protection against violence

Girls recommend protecting girls from violence through education about their rights and appropriate actions against perpetrators. They also suggest addressing violence committed by hawkers specifically. Girls believe that self-protection involves being content with what they have, avoiding asking for money or gifts from boyfriends, and not remaining silent about violence. They emphasise the importance of reporting incidents to community leaders and appropriate authorities, and pursuing education. To achieve this, girls recommend educating leaders, providing dedicated reporting spaces, and fostering open community discussions about the negative impacts of violence.

Women highlight the importance of dressing decently as a preventive measure. They also stress the need for punishment for perpetrators and adequate security measures. Women propose supporting girls in reporting violence and taking appropriate actions.

Men agree on the importance of education. Boys advocate for educating girls on recognising harassment and violence, as well as protecting them from harmful individuals. Both support reporting violence to community leaders, while boys additionally suggest involving parents, the police, and ensuring that offenders are punished.

To encourage girls to speak out about violence, men suggest showing girls the implications of violence to motivate reporting. Boys believe in creating specific places for girls to discuss their issues.

Theme 7: Mental health and well-being

Signs of mental health concerns in girls include isolation, frequent crying, and persistent anger. Men identify isolation and silence as key indicators. Boys note that mentally unwell girls may become unusually silent, unhappy, and introverted, particularly if they were previously extroverted. Women also recognise isolation, quietness, and frequent crying as signs of mental health issues.

For boys and men, signs of mental health issues may include aggressive behaviour, such as shouting at siblings or partners, and frequent conflicts. Boys observe that talking to oneself can be a sign, while women note that persistent anger and aggressive behaviour are common indicators.

To address girls' mental health issues, girls suggested that mothers provide advice, actively listen, and regularly check in on their daughters' concerns. Men advocate for offering care and support to affected girls. Boys recommend that parents and families offer support and address the needs of the girls. Women stress the importance of providing care and concern.

In addressing mental health issues more broadly, girls recommended that the government play a proactive role, including facilitating access to education and mental health support services. Girls should be allowed to pursue their interests and receive appropriate medical and psychosocial support when needed.

📊 *Analysis and data*

The causes of mental health issues among girls are diverse and complex. Girls frequently cite poverty, including a lack of financial resources, as a major factor. Additionally, lack of access to menstrual health and hygiene resources and stigma around menstruation as well as domestic violence can lead to psychological distress, particularly when these problems are not openly discussed. Men often attribute mental health challenges to overthinking and problems at home, which can contribute to high blood pressure and other mental health concerns. Boys point to several causes, such as child marriage, lack of peace at home, parental absence or orphanhood, breakups with boyfriends, inadequate parental support regarding education, and feelings of inadequacy compared to peers. Women link mental health issues to overthinking related to marital problems, such as conflicts with spouses or in-laws, and the burden of caring for multiple children without adequate financial support.

Specific stressors contributing to mental health issues in girls include differential treatment by co-wives, neglect when ill, stress related to marriage, and harassment at home. Men highlight family issues and lack of care as significant stressors. Boys mention factors like drug addiction, ridicule at school, child marriage, partner infidelity, and lack of care. Women also identify harassment and health issues as specific stressors.

When it comes to mental health issues in boys and men, girls generally perceive that men face fewer mental health problems compared to women, although they experience stress from job loss and lack of education. Men attribute their mental health problems mainly to financial struggles. Boys identify factors such as lack of education, unemployment, and parental denial of marriage as contributing to mental health issues, with some viewing these problems as partly determined by fate. Women also point to financial difficulties as a significant cause.

In summary

Girl researchers observed a significant disparity in how girls and boys are perceived across both urban and rural communities. They noted that girls' choices and needs are rarely prioritised compared to boys', particularly in education. Boys' education is often given precedence, and girls are valued more for their future roles as wives than for the potential personal and societal benefits education can offer them and their families.

Contradictions in attitudes towards child marriage were also evident. While both men and women argued that child marriage might lead to increased happiness and responsibility for girls, they also acknowledged the potential problems if girls failed to meet their marital duties. This perspective often frames the challenges faced by girls in terms of their impact on men, fathers, or parents, rather than considering the girls' own well-being and perspectives. A 12-year-old researcher questioned this double standard, noting that girls' issues are frequently viewed through the lens of those in power rather than from the girls' experiences.

Another contentious point was the assumptions surrounding girls' access to resources. A 16-year-old researcher observed that older men and younger boys often believe that while it may be acceptable for girls to possess resources, these should primarily be used for household needs or supporting their husbands. There is a prevalent belief that if resources do not directly benefit men, then girls' access to them is deemed unnecessary. She challenged this assumption by highlighting that girls

with access to resources did not resort to theft when money was lacking, countering the belief that girls would steal under such circumstances.

Further inequalities were evident when discussing resource allocation. Men often deemed money and resources less important for girls than for boys, justifying this by suggesting that girls should support their fathers with educational expenses, while boys were not expected to do so. This pattern of differential treatment underscored a broader trend where girls face more severe consequences for similar issues, while boys often receive more lenient treatment.

The girl researchers also noted significant disparities in treatment between girls and boys based on their findings from interviews and focus group discussions. They observed that girls often face harsher treatment compared to boys in various contexts. For instance, during discussions with rural girls, a 12-year-old researcher was surprised to find that they did not recognise certain forms of violence, such as denial of education, as harmful. This suggested that some girls might not identify all forms of violence as such and emphasised the need for awareness about the different shapes violence manifests, including structurally.

The researchers concluded that there is a consistent effort to undermine girls' power, choices, and decisions. A 19-year-old researcher noted that societal norms and traditions, often justified by religious beliefs, are frequently used to control girls. She critiqued the use of religious justifications for child marriage, pointing out that such interpretations overlook broader teachings about education. She argued that greater awareness of these teachings could encourage girls to pursue education rather than child marriage.

Another researcher described how urban men were initially reluctant to engage in focus group discussions, often resorting to tradition or religion to avoid deeper inquiry. This reluctance to engage in meaningful dialogue reflected a broader trend of using tradition and religion to suppress discussion about girls' issues.

A 16-year-old researcher shared her personal transformation, noting that her research experience had changed her views. She observed that many people attempt to control girls' decisions, limiting their potential for change. Conversations with hawkers revealed a desire among girls to pursue education or start businesses rather than focus solely on marriage. She expressed concern that without the freedom to make significant decisions, girls might continue to face the same challenges as previous generations,

2. Findings from Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria

The girl researchers in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) identified three major thematic areas around which they conducted the research: education, digital access, and safety and gender stereotypes that impact girls' economic sustainability. Within these, corporal punishment was identified as a major challenge girls experience in school; the perception that access to digital devices 'spoils girls' (meaning they become sexually active or interested in sex) was identified as the major reason for the digital gender divide; and unequal access to inheritance sharing was deemed to lead to

poverty, tolerance of domestic violence – as girls with no money or means to sustain themselves become dependent on their husbands for financial sustenance – and high school drop-out rates.

Researchers in FCT engaged with 65 co-researchers by using participatory tools, such as community mapping, daily activity trackers, and intergenerational dialogue.

Theme 1: Education

The girl researchers observed that corporal punishment was a major challenge to girls' education in their communities. This was a critical area of focus for the girl researchers who shared stories about a child who developed symptoms of physical disability because of a corporal punishment. The researchers also identified hotspots for sexual violence in the community, which sometimes are along the roads that lead to the girls' schools.

Expanding further within the topic of education, sexual and reproductive health surfaced as a sub-theme, for example, around the shared responsibility of schools and mothers to educate girls about menstruation and hygiene.

Girls' analysis

The researchers found that reasons girls like going to school included acquiring reading and writing skills, learning new things, being corrected when they are wrong and because school helps them acquire moral behaviours. Reasons why girls do not like school include teachers using abusive words towards them and issuing tough corporal punishments, such as manual labour, cutting grass, doing frog jumps, and holding a squat position for an extended period of time.

"

What I don't like about school is that teachers used to give us punishment that is not for children.

11-year-old girl (co-researcher).

Corporal punishment, poverty, the perception that men education should be prioritised over girls' education, school-related sexual violence, and teenage pregnancy have all been identified as reasons why girls drop out of school.

In relation to teenage pregnancy, the community members were asked whether they receive sufficient information as part of their education about their personal hygiene, menstrual cycle and how to manage sexual relationships. Responses showed that girls are knowledgeable about hygiene, including menstrual hygiene. However, community members indicated that the reasons why girls do not practise good hygiene are lack of information, laziness, and procrastination. They also believe that educating girls about menstruation and hygiene is the duty of mothers, with schools offering a supporting role.

The girls noted that menstrual pads are expensive and unaffordable. They use diapers/nappies in place of pads because it is cheaper, and they work and save up to buy pads. A significant number of the community members asked would rather borrow money from their friends to buy nappies rather than asking their fathers. In situations when they cannot afford nappies, they use clothes.

The girls said that when they have questions regarding their menstrual health, they are more comfortable asking their mothers, teachers, and deputy school administrators – who are

generally concerned with extracurricular activities – making it easier for girls to talk to them on topics outside academic studies. They also expressed desire to learn how to calculate their menstrual cycle.

Girls also believe that hawking and sending girls on long distance errands or at night increases the likelihood of sexual abuse, which can lead to pregnancy.

Data

- 2 out of the 5 girls interviewed missed classes during the previous term because of inability to pay school fees and transport.
- 5 out of 8 girls are not comfortable about asking for money for sanitary pads from their fathers.
- The girls believed that everywhere in the community represents a potential risk for girls.

Theme 2: Digital access and safety

The girl researchers observed that adolescent boys, older women, and men within the community shared negative perceptions about the use of digital devices by girls. They observed a deep-seated stereotype against girls displayed by the boys during this research.

The girl researchers believe that the internet offers more opportunities than dangers to girls. They believe that girls can be free from online dangers if they receive adequate orientation on how to use the internet in a safe and productive way. They also believe girls need to learn how to leverage the internet to achieve financial sustainability.

Girls' analysis

Both adolescent boys and girls agreed that girls have less access to digital platforms. The table below illustrates the different

Obstacles to girls' access to education

2 OUT OF 5 GIRLS missed classes due to financial challenges

5 OUT OF 8 GIRLS are not comfortable about asking for money for sanitary pads from their fathers

Girls feel unsafe in various community spaces

CHIEF'S PALACE

MARKET

SCHOOL

POLICE STATION

HOME

FIELDS

perceived uses of the internet by boys and girls as per the data collection:

Girls are believed to use the internet for:	Boys are believed to use the internet for:
Learning about fashion and how to dress in a fashionable way	Learning skills on how to generate income
Acquiring skills like tying gele (head coverings), make-up, baking, cooking	Sewing new styles for their clients (if they are tailors)
Building self-confidence and learning how to be polite	Doing school assignments and tasks
	Character development

Both girls and boys agreed the internet is a primary source of information about their sexual and reproductive health. Girls learnt from the internet how to calculate their menstrual cycle, and how to use protection when having sexual encounters. They also googled symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases they were too afraid to ask questions about in their community. Boys stated that they search the internet to understand their bodies and to research substance abuse and how to avoid it.

During the analysis it was noted that it is highly important to engage boys in positive masculinity, challenging beliefs that girls that use phones are willing to have casual sexual encounters.

Data
- 10 out of 10 boys have a personal digital device compared to 6 out of 10 girls.
- On average, boys spend 37.5 hours/week on digital platforms while girls spend 22.5 hours.
- Boys believed that access to digital platforms lead to 'promiscuous behaviour' from girls, while the girls disagreed.

"

While the boys are at work and only spend their leisure time playing games and for money making activities online, girls are at home chatting and waiting for a man that will treat them as queens while the boys are hustling.

18-year-old adolescent boy.

"

The internet taught me how to use condoms. I now use protection; I don't do skin to skin any more.

19-year-old girl.

"

If girls use phone, dem go quick spoil.

17-year-old boy.

Theme 3: Gender stereotypes and socioeconomic exclusion
The girl researchers observed that women, girls, and men differ in what they consider to be resources (intended as facilities or infrastructures) available for people to use within the community. For example, the facilities identified by men are: recreational centres, the farmlands, the Chief's palace (like a town hall), the healthcare centre, and the mechanic village.
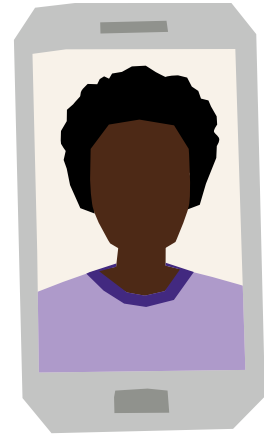
Device Ownership

Personal device ownership

6 OUT OF 10 GIRLS
own a mobile device

10 OUT OF 10 BOYS
own a mobile device

Weekly screen time

boys' screen time

37.5 HRS

22.5 HRS

girls' screen time

Boys' think

" Digital platforms encourage promiscuity

By contrast, all the recreational centres are classified as hotspots for sexual harassment by women and girls who also did not consider the mechanic village as a facility because only the men have vehicles. Similarly, only men identified the Chief's palace as a resource because women are not included in the chieftaincy roles and are not allowed to participate in their meetings. Instead, women identified the healthcare centre, the farmland, and the community borehole as the key resources available to them within the community.

The research also shows a marked difference between the lifestyles of women and men within the community. Men spend more time than women on learning. Women spend an average of 20 hours per week on household chores compared to zero hours for men, who do not engage in household chores at all. Both men and women engage in income generation activities, such as trading and farming in a similar manner. However, even though both women and men spend time in money-making activities, women do not engage in leisure activities like men do. On average women spend 8.5 hours on leisure activities compared to men's 51 hours.

Research also found another area where gender stereotypes and socioeconomic exclusion of women manifested is land ownership, which includes inheritance laws and land sharing.

Girls' Analysis

All the community members of the intergenerational dialogue agreed that women are not included in the Chief's council. There is a Moggajia in the community who is the leader of the women's group and who is responsible for disseminating the decisions made by

the Chief's council (comprised of men) to the other women in the community, without, however, being involved in the decision-making processes.

The interviews showed that women and girls believe that they do not have access to the Chief's palace, and that the women within the community felt marginalised. However, the men maintained that palace was accessible to all, and that it was the women who have refused to use the hall. The community Chief also claimed that women are welcome to use the palace for their meetings, but they are not allowed to sit on the Chief's seat or participate in the community leadership meetings.

Using the human box activity,[38] it was found that that men and boys, and women and girls have different views about leadership. Women and girls hold humility, truthfulness, godliness, non-judgement, and open mindedness in high regard while men consider a 'well respected person, straightforward, well-behaved, disciplined and not "a -criminal"' as the ideal leader. This is reflected in how the leadership council of the community is selected, whereby influential and rich men are often considered as leaders.

On the matter of land ownership, during the study, men maintained that it is not traditional to share land with women. They initially admitted that in a context such as the one in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), where women's land is usually taken by the government and non-Indigenous people (such as influential people who are not originally from FCT, including corporations and Western businesses), it is believed that the men are more likely to preserve the lands and the local heritage than the women. Men believe that women, are more likely to sell or hand over their lands when getting married, thus impacting the territorial spread of their clan.

In their words: 'When husband house sweet the women, they will sell the land. If we all sell lands like that very soon we will lose all our inheritance.'

When asked about instances where land is sequestered by the government and compensation is given to the family, the men maintained that they would not share the compensation equally with the women.

Data
- 10 out of 10 community members agreed that women and girls are excluded from inheritance sharing.
- 10 out of 10 believed women are excluded from leadership.
- 5 out of 10 men believed the Chief's palace was accessible to all.

"

Tradition is tradition, women cannot be included in the leadership council.

A man community member

"

Have the women ever come to the palace and they were chased out?

19-year-old boy

"

The palace is not a kitchen that women will be carrying chairs around.

Village Chief.

Community perspectives on Gender and Inclusion

Inheritance exclusion

10 OUT OF 10
agree that women and girls are excluded from inheritance sharing

Leadership exclusion

10 OUT OF 10
agree that women are excluded from leadership

CHIEF'S PALACE

5 OUT OF 10 MEN
believe the Chief's palace is accessible to all
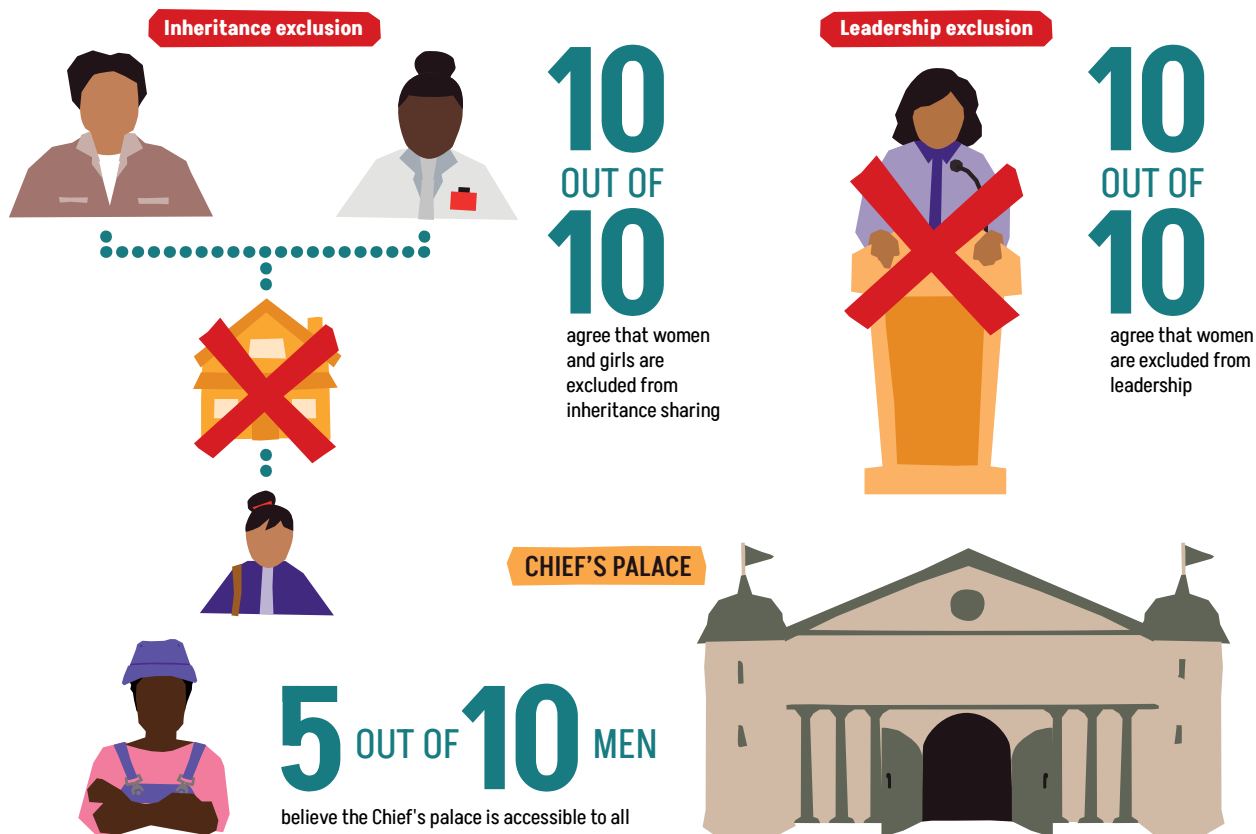
Findings from Freetown, Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone
Freetown

In Sierra Leone, the girl led research engaged a wide range of girls in different circumstances: single mothers, pregnant girls, girls with disabilities, orphans, girls living with both parents, girls who live alone without caregivers, in-school girls, not-in-school girls, not-in-school before and married girls from marginalised communities namely, Looking Town, Sorie Lane, Uptown Bar, Kuntorloh, and Kola Tree, all in Western Area, Sierra Leone. The girl researchers themselves are also from these communities.

The quantitative data from the questionnaire showed that among the co-researchers, 59% were in-school girls, 41% out-of-school girls, and girls that were previously in school or school dropouts. Of this 41%, girls living with both parents made up 9.1%, girls living with their mother only was 20.5%, girls living with father only was 4.5% and girls living with neither parent, 65.9%. These girls were mostly living with either an uncle or aunt, 34.1%, or grandparent(s), 25.0%. Of the total number of co-researchers 22.7% were living with a disability, 4.5% were married girls, 31.8% were single mothers, and 13.6% were pregnant.

Focus group discussions were conducted in all the communities and drew from a range of community actors and stakeholders. Three sets of groups were engaged: women, community leaders, and institutions.

Although the findings have been presented as

Profile of Co-Researchers and Community Engagement
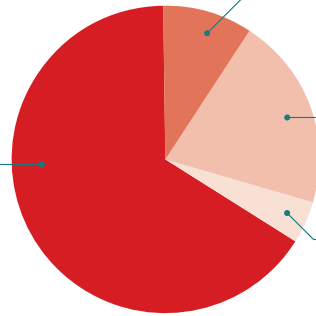
Demographics of Co-Researchers

59%
In-School Girls

41%
Out-of-School Girls

SCHOOL

Out-of-school Girls

65.9%
living with neither parent

9.1% living with both parents

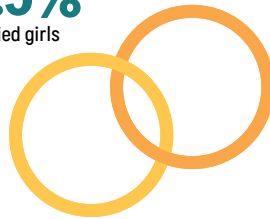**20.5%** living with mother only

4.5% living with father only

Additional demographics

22.7%
with a disability

4.5%
married girls

31.8%
single mothers

13.6%
pregnant girls

overarching 'themes', these are overlapping and intersect with one another. Single mothers, out of school girls, pregnant girls, and girls with disabilities were also found to be at increased risk of poverty, dropping out of school, domestic violence, and being mocked or bullied.

Theme 1: Impact of financial difficulties on girls' well-being and education

Sierra Leone faces significant socio-economic challenges, with over 64% of its population experiencing multidimensional poverty. This issue is particularly acute in rural areas where poverty rates are higher than in urban settings. The economic hardships faced by families often lead to increased risk for girls, including risks related to trafficking and exploitation.

Girls' analysis

The girls' analysis revealed two major themes when it came to economic hardship: sex work[39] and education. Financial difficulties push girls into sex work, which in turn affects their education. Girls facing poverty are often coerced into transactional sex, where they are exploited by older men for money.

"

Sometimes if I do not have money, I go to the street. And men do not give money for free. They sleep with you.

19-year-old, Kuntoroloh Community.

Girls in poverty, especially orphans or those with single parents, often lack the support to meet their needs, leading them to the streets where they are exploited. The girl researchers highlighted that single parents struggle to care for their children, and orphaned girls are often inadequately cared for by relatives after losing their parents.

The research indicates a normalisation of the exploitation of girls, particularly those who are orphaned, out of school, or impoverished. Some girls from poor families are encouraged or forced to contribute financially, sometimes leading to labour exploitation, sexual commodification, or even child marriage. This is especially true when families believe marrying off their daughters will alleviate financial burdens, though men often fail to fulfil promises.

Transactional sex increases girls' risks, including violence and sexually transmitted infections. This risk is compounded by power imbalances in relationships with older men and is exacerbated by community and familial compromises, inadequate law enforcement, and political stagnation.

Focus group discussions showed that some parents, particularly those from wealthier backgrounds, coerce their daughters into marriage for financial gain. This practice is influenced by cultural norms that prioritise the preservation of family honour, often resulting in child marriages, particularly in rural areas where traditional views dominate. However, urban areas are increasingly influenced by advocacy on girls' rights and education.

The link between transactional sex, child marriage, and teenage pregnancy is significant.[40] Early marriages diminish sexual autonomy and impact long-term agency, with women who marry as children having less sexual autonomy than those who marry as adults.

Economic hardship can severely impact girls' access to education, increasing their risk to teenage pregnancy and child marriage.

"

Like now, my stepmother and I have problems. I am responsible for myself now. I do not have money to cater for my needs. We are about to sit to the BECE Exams, and I do not even have money for classes [extra lessons]. Since this morning, I haven't eaten.

15-year-old girl.

Girls from marginalised communities face even more significant challenges due to intersecting identities. Many live in single-parent households, especially those headed by mothers, which amplifies the economic struggles. A significant percentage of these girls live without one or both parents, highlighting the economic difficulties they face.

"

For instance, in my schooling now, if my mum does not have money, I do not go to school. She most times cannot provide lunch money or what we need.

15-year-old girl, Kuntorloh Community.

> **"**
>
> I cannot go to school when there is no money. Now I am about to take the WASSCE[41] exam, and I fear there will be no money to pay for my university education, and so I might not be able to further my education.

19-year-old girl, Looking Town Community.

This reflects the precariousness of marginalised girls living in Sierra Leone, where intersecting identities lead to multiple forms of oppression.

Theme 2: Educational disparities

Educational disparities are stark in Sierra Leone, where girls face significant barriers as they progress through the education system. While initial enrolment rates for girls are relatively high, participation declines sharply at higher levels; for instance, the gross enrolment rate for junior secondary school is 93% for girls compared to 100% for boys, dropping further to only 40% for senior secondary school. Literacy rates also reveal a concerning gap, with only 44% of women being literate compared to 59% of men.

Girls' analysis:

From the perspective of girls in Sierra Leone, these educational disparities represent a profound obstacle to achieving their dreams and aspirations. They feel that dropping out of school limits their future opportunities and perpetuates traditional gender roles that confine them to domestic responsibilities. Many of the girls recognised that educational attainment is closely linked to risk; those who are out of school are more likely to face early marriage or exploitation. They also understand that parental education levels significantly influence their own educational outcomes, leading them to

advocate for greater support for families to prioritise girls' education. Overall, girls see education as a vital pathway toward enacting their power, and are determined to overcome barriers that hinder their academic success.

Theme 3: Drug abuse

Sierra Leone is facing a drug crisis. The country's youth are living precariously and can easily slide into drug use, becoming frequent substance users. In 2024 the President of Sierra Leone, Julius Maada Bio, declared a national emergency on the prevalent use of drugs, predominantly kush,[42] by mostly young people calling it 'a death trap'. Kush is highly addictive and often leaves victims unable to lead their daily lives.

Historically in Sierra Leone, drug abuse, particularly kush addiction, has been predominantly associated with boys and men, with '90% of men admissions to the central psychiatric ward linked to kush use'.[43] However, the impact of kush addiction on women and girls should not be overlooked.

Girls' analysis

The girl researchers stated that drug use causes health problems, like swollen feet and sores, and can eventually lead to death on the streets. They noted that addiction to the drug kush is a complex issue, with many girls turning to it due to social problems, using it as an escape route. Many community members in focus group discussions shared this view but also attributed addiction to peer pressure. From the perspective of girls in Sierra Leone, the drug abuse crisis is a serious threat to their well-being and future. They are concerned about how it tears families apart, leaves them at risk to exploitation, and leads to increased school dropouts, limiting educational opportunities crucial for girls to realise their power. Girls worry about the heightened risk of

violence and sexual abuse in drug-affected communities and emphasise the need for support systems like drug abuse education, rehabilitation services, and alternative youth engagement opportunities to combat the issue.

The social consequences of addiction are vast. Drug users often drop out of school, turn to theft, and girls face higher risks of gender-based violence. These issues struck a chord with focus group members, some of whom became emotional sharing stories of their children falling into kush addiction and homelessness. One 15-year-old girl from Kola Tree Community explained, "Some girls that smoke kush, have open sores on their feet and their feet get swollen." Addiction leads to troubling behaviours, including stealing and turning to transactional sex for money. Focus group members also reported that drug users would sell their food to fund their addiction. A 20-year-old girl from Looking Town Community added, "The kush has brought disgrace. Girls get sores on their bodies, and they are living in the streets. Some of them die in the streets."

The girl researchers[44] shared disturbing insights from their interviews with some addicted girls admitting to selling their food to buy drugs. They stressed that quitting kush is difficult, as it is highly addictive. One 19-year-old girl researcher shared that a girl kush addict she spoke to said, "The drug is highly addictive and whenever she tries to stop even for some hours her body will shiver, with itching and pain all over until she takes it then she feels better and okay. She said the drug is so addictive that you can do anything to get money to buy it." Their research highlights that girls addicted to kush face not just general addiction problems, like school dropouts, theft, and health issues, but also gender-specific challenges, especially heightened risk to sexual and gender-based violence. This risk stems from impaired

judgement, economic pressures, social stigma, and fear of seeking help. The addiction worsens their exposure to criminal elements and compounds their risk of violence.

Additionally, long-term kush use damages both physical and mental health, reducing girls' ability to escape violent situations. Poverty, lack of education, and a lack of services addressing both substance abuse and violence contribute to these risks. Pregnant girls face additional health complications and stigma, which increases the likelihood of violence or neglect. Community members confirmed that drug users often die on the streets, and many girls have open sores and swollen feet. One 18-year-old girl community member from Sorie Lane Community shared, "This drug is not good. I see my fellow girls completely out of their condition. They become thin, have swollen feet. It is not good. I do not like the way I see them. I do not like the way the drug is affecting them, but I have nothing to do. I really wish this drug would be kicked out of our community."

The research highlights various issues faced by girls addicted to kush, including school disengagement, criminal activity, sexual violence, homelessness, and neglect of hygiene. Girls who leave home for the streets are often coerced into selling drugs by boyfriends who are also users. A researcher shared the case of a girl in jail for selling drugs, abandoned by her family and later released because of her pregnancy. This girl, still addicted, lives with her mother-in-law while her boyfriend remains in jail for drug trafficking. The researcher said, "She wanted to stop but she can't. She is highly addicted. She now lives with her mother-in-law, and the boyfriend is now in jail for peddling drugs too. Her case is really sad. This drug is bad. Girls are losing themselves because of it."

The girl researchers found that many addicted girls engage in transactional sex and crime to buy drugs. They observed that girls who use kush are often "unkempt," and face significant violence while living on the streets. One researcher shared the story of a girl who turned to kush after her uncle's death and was exploited by a woman who promised to send her to school but then abandoned her. She turned to the streets and began using kush, driven by stress and withdrawal symptoms. The researcher explained, "My experience of kush is that some were taking it because of the people they were living with. For instance, I interviewed a girl who decided to take the drug when her uncle, who had been taking care of her, died. She then met a woman who promised to look after her and send her back to school. She had no money and the only way she could send her to school was for her to start selling on the street, and she agreed. When school reopened the woman refused to give her any money, even to cover her basic needs. The girl decided to stop selling and live on the street. She met a man, but he was also taking kush and made her start taking it too, to ease her stress. She told me she has a pregnant friend who is taking kush and if they don't have money to buy it and they have food, they will sell the food to buy the drug. They start to get withdrawal symptoms if they don't take it for even a day. The girl said she wants to live a better life and she is ready to stop taking this drug and go back to school if only she had someone to take care of her because she has no siblings in Freetown and she was hopeful to see us again."

Theme 4: Child marriage, adolescent pregnancy and its social and health related consequence

Child marriage remains a critical issue in Sierra Leone, with approximately 923,000 child brides in the country, equating to 30% of young women being married before the age of 18. The

prevalence of child marriage is particularly concerning, as 44% of women aged 20-24 report having been married before their 18th birthday. This practice is driven by various factors, including poverty, illiteracy, and entrenched patriarchal norms.

The legal framework in Sierra Leone complicates efforts to combat child marriage; the Customary Marriage Act of 2009 permits girls under 18 to marry with parental consent, despite the Child Rights Act of 2007 prohibiting such unions. Child marriage is closely linked to adolescent pregnancy, which is a significant health concern in Sierra Leone. The country still has high maternal and child mortality rates, with teenage pregnancy being a contributing factor.[45] Early marriage often leads to early childbearing, which poses serious health risks for young mothers and their infants. According to the literature review, girls who marry early are more likely to experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth due to their physical immaturity.

It is important to note that, according to the Sexual Offences Act, 2019,[46] sexual activity with individuals under 18 years of age is legally

classified as non-consensual and criminal. However, societal norms predominantly place the onus of responsibility on girls when sexual encounters result in pregnancy, leaving them to bear the brunt of the consequences. These ramifications are multifaceted, encompassing health complications, educational discontinuity, malnutrition, and economic deprivation.

Additionally, the high rate of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone is not only a result of child marriage but also contributes to it, as pregnant teenagers may be pressured into marriage to avoid social stigma.

🔍 *Girls' analysis*

The analysis by the girls revealed that pregnant teenagers face severe social and economic challenges that worsen their risk and affect their health, education, and well-being. As one girl explained, "I was pregnant and finding food was difficult, so my child died. When I went to deliver my child, my blood level was very down."

Key themes include the social repercussions: pregnant girls are often coerced into child marriage, expelled from family homes, and stigmatised within their communities. Many are also forced out of school, and some face hostility and resentment from parents who abandon them "to teach them a lesson," as women in focus groups admitted. The economic impact is severe. Girls face poverty because families deny them support, and the fathers often refuse responsibility for childcare and financial support. This reinforces patriarchal norms that place blame solely on the girls, highlighting Sierra Leone's entrenched gender inequalities.

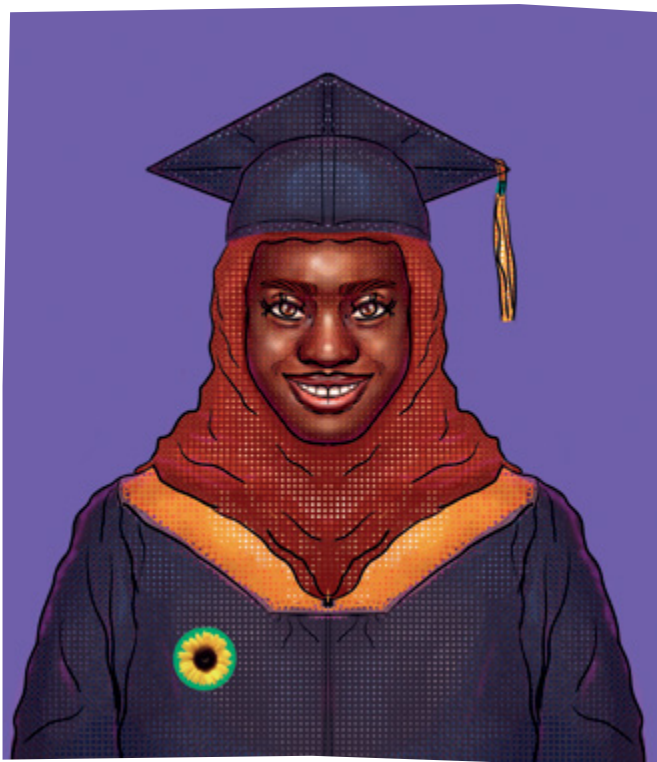Girls in Sierra Leone view child marriage and early pregnancy as major barriers to growth and see these issues as intertwined, significant violations of their rights. Many feel that early marriage interrupts education, stunts personal development, and blocks future opportunities, keeping them dependent and impoverished. Additionally, they face health risks, lack access to reproductive health resources, and have little control over their lives, making them at risk to domestic violence and abuse.

The girls see these issues as crucial to address for their realisation of rights, and the well-being of their communities.

Despite the lifting of Sierra Leone's ban on schooling for pregnant girls, they still drop out due to lack of support. Girl researchers found that many pregnant girls end up in informal, forced marriages, sliding deeper into poverty. Education suffers as a result, as early marriage typically leads to school dropouts, and even those who remain struggle to balance their responsibilities. "The man's family will most times assure the girl's family that they will look after their daughter and will send her back to school when she gives birth, but most often, they never did," one girl explained.

Poverty was identified as a major cause of teenage pregnancy and child marriage, especially affecting girls in foster care who are at risk to exploitation. The researchers highlighted specific risk factors for these girls, noting they are often manipulated by older men due to a lack of proper love and care. Girls believe they should avoid pregnancy, listen to parents, and focus on education, with some turning to petty trading to support themselves rather than risk exploitation. One participant observed, "Men do not give money for free so one has to be content to avoid all these."

Peer pressure emerged as another significant issue, with some girls feeling pressured to fit in, leading them to risky choices. "Child marriage is caused because of poverty. If your parents

women and girls. Social constructions of femininities, which ascribe caregiving roles to women and girls based on perceived 'natural' nurturing abilities, has had profound implications for girls' lives and opportunities.[47]

Cultural norms in Sierra Leone are deeply rooted in patriarchal values that govern attitudes toward gender roles and expectations. These norms often result in systemic barriers that maintain women's subordinate status within society. However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of agency among girls and the need for their involvement in decision-making processes.

Girls' analysis
The research highlights the impact of these gendered expectations on adolescent girls. The findings reflect the inequality in the distribution of household responsibilities, with girls disproportionately burdened by care work, and being primarily responsible for a wide range of domestic tasks, dedicating substantial time to these duties.

The consequences of this unequal division of labour are far-reaching. The excessive time spent on household chores significantly impinges upon girls' educational pursuits and overall well-being. This imbalance creates a cyclical disadvantage, with the potential to limit girls' academic achievements and future prospects.

"

In the morning when it is time for school, I have lot of domestic work to do. By the time I am done with them all, and be ready for school, I am already late. By the time I am in school, first and second period is

are poor, and there is someone that wants to marry you, they give you away. But girls should focus on their education," said an 18-year-old girl participant, highlighting the importance of education to avoid early marriage.

In addition, many girls expressed the pain of abandonment and social stigma. As a 17-year-old girl shared, "I am trying to connect with my parents, but they are refusing me. Because I am pregnant, they think I have no future again. They think my education is finished. I see my friends going to school, and some say they are at university now. I really wish to continue my education." Despite these obstacles, many girls are pushing back against the social challenges. While reproductive health knowledge is vital, 50% of interviewees did not mention contraception, revealing a need for more education on these resources.

Theme 5: Gender roles, cultural norms and agency
With strong links to colonial ideas of gender norms and roles, deeply rooted patriarchal systems have imposed significant burdens on

finished. Sometimes, I arrive, and it is almost lunch hour. My teachers complain. My work in school is affected because of this. My grades are getting poor/bad.

15-year-old girl participant, Up Town Bar Community.

The focus group discussions revealed that girls are often given the task of collecting water, which puts them at risk of sexual harassment and consequent pregnancy. In addition to transactional sex, men and boys solicit sex from girls as a favour in exchange for collecting water and carrying it on bikes to their homes.

"

Too much domestic work. I do domestic work all the time and hawk goods. When you go to fetch water, you must pay and sometimes the boys harass you.

17-year-old girl participant, Looking Town Community.

Many stakeholders, including women and community elders, emphasised that girls do almost all the domestic work, including water collection. They said in all their communities, water shortage is a big problem, so girls are often assigned the task to collect water. They stated that this has exposed a lot of girls to transactional sex by bike riders and boys who carry the water home for them in return for sex or a sexual relationship. The distance the girls covered to fetch water is great and in all communities in this study along hilly, steep roads.

While many of the girl researchers recognise that traditional beliefs limit their opportunities and voice within society, they also recognise the potential for change through collective

action and advocacy. Girls express a desire to challenge harmful practices while respecting cultural heritage by advocating for gender equality within their communities. They believe it is crucial for them to have a voice in decisions affecting their lives and futures; this awareness drives them to seek education and to promote their rights. Ultimately, the girls see themselves not just as victims but as active agents capable of influencing change within their societies.

Theme 6: Menstruation and girls' needs

Menstrual health and hygiene management remains a significant challenge for adolescent girls in Sierra Leone, particularly those from marginalised communities. Access to proper menstrual hygiene products, such as sanitary pads, is limited for many girls due to poverty and lack of resources. This scarcity forces girls to resort to using unsanitary alternatives like rags, which can lead to health issues and discomfort.

The inability to adequately manage their periods has far-reaching consequences for girls. It often results in school absenteeism, as girls may choose to stay home during their menstrual cycles due to lack of proper sanitary products or fear of embarrassment. This disruption to their education can have long-term impacts on their academic performance and future opportunities.

Moreover, the lack of access to menstrual hygiene products can push girls into at risk situations. Some girls resort to seeking financial help from men to purchase sanitary pads, which can lead to exploitation, sexual violence, and unwanted pregnancies. As one community member stated, "Girls like us if we don't have money, we go to men to give us money, and this causes problems in our community. Girls get pregnant and they are raped too in our community."

The use of improvised menstrual products, such as rags, not only poses health risks but also affects girls' comfort and self-esteem. As another community member shared, "When you need to buy sanitary pads, you cannot. My auntie gives us rags to use, when you use them, it can make you itch." This discomfort can further contribute to girls missing school and other activities.

📊 *Girls' Analysis:*

From the perspective of girls' research, menstruation is a source of significant stress and risk. They view the lack of access to proper menstrual hygiene products as a major obstacle to their education, health, and overall well-being.

Many girls express frustration and shame at having to use makeshift solutions like rags during their periods. They are acutely aware of the health risks associated with these practices, including infections and discomfort. The itching and irritation caused by using rags not only affects their physical health but also their mental well-being and self-confidence.

Girls recognise that their inability to afford sanitary pads puts them in precarious situations. They feel trapped between enduring the discomfort and health risks of using unsuitable materials and seeking help from men, which they know can lead to exploitation and abuse. This dilemma highlights the interconnected nature of their challenges, where poverty, lack of menstrual hygiene products, and risk to sexual violence are closely linked.

The impact on their education is a major concern for these girls. They understand that missing school due to their periods can have long-term consequences on their academic performance and future prospects. This realisation adds to their stress and feelings of inequality compared to their men peers who don't face such barriers.

Girls in Sierra Leone see the need for comprehensive solutions that address not only the immediate need for menstrual hygiene products but also the broader issues of poverty, education, and gender equality. They express a desire for:

1. Affordable and accessible menstrual hygiene products
2. Better education about menstrual health and hygiene in schools
3. Improved sanitation facilities in schools to manage their periods with dignity
4. Economic liberation programs to help them afford necessary hygiene products
5. Community awareness programs to reduce stigma around menstruation

Theme 7: Realities of orphans and girls not living with parents

In Sierra Leone, a significant number of adolescent girls find themselves living apart from their biological parents, often residing with relatives or family friends. This situation, frequently born out of necessity due to parental loss or economic hardship, creates a complex set of challenges that profoundly impact these girls' lives, education, and overall well-being. The study reveals that 65.9% of girls interviewed were not living with either of their parents, highlighting the prevalence of this issue.

Girls in these situations often face multiple layers of adversity, including exploitation and domestic abuse. Many report being treated as unpaid housemaids, subjected to excessive chores, and physical abuse. As one 16-year-

old girl recounted, "Sometimes I cannot go to school. My auntie sells cassava, and . . . Before I go to school, I have series of chores to do [she named them], then I help her with the boiled cassava business. By the time I am done, I get late for school. Sometimes, I cannot even go to school. [Started sobbing and crying.] Some days if I refuse to do some chores, she shouts [scolds] at me, she beats me..."This mistreatment often leads to educational disruption, with girls frequently arriving late to school, missing classes, or being unable to complete homework due to their domestic responsibilities. The same girl continued, "Sometimes, I get late very badly, I'll meet my classmates in class already and the teacher teaching. If the teacher allows me in class, I get flogged because I am late. Sometimes, I meet the gate closed, and cannot go in so I miss school."

Poverty and lack of basic needs are also prevalent issues for these girls. Many struggle with inadequate living conditions and lack of essential items. A 15-year-old girl from Kuntorloh Community shared, "We are suffering. Where we sleep is not OK or comfortable. I sleep on the floor. Also, most times my shoes get spoiled and when I go to school with slippers because I do not have shoes, I get driven away from school." This lack of basic necessities not only affects their comfort but also their ability to participate fully in education.

Child labour is another significant concern, with some girls forced into informal work to contribute to household income or meet their own basic needs. A 15-year-old girl from Kuntorloh Community stated, "I must hawk goods before I can eat. I do lot of domestic work. I have to sell water before I eat." This engagement in labour often comes

at the expense of their education and personal development.

Girls' Analysis:

From the perspective of girls in Sierra Leone, living with relatives or guardians instead of their parents often means enduring significant hardships that impact every aspect of their lives. They express feelings of suffering, exploitation, and hopelessness. Many girls in this situation feel trapped in a cycle of poverty and abuse, with limited opportunities for education and personal development.

These girls recognise that their current living situations are detrimental to their future prospects, yet feel powerless to change their circumstances. As one 15-year-old girl from Kuntorloh Community expressed, "My mother died, and I was with my stepmother in the village, but she was putting me through a lot. I was suffering. My sister went and took me from her, but now I am here with my sister, it is the same. I am still suffering."

Girls in these situations often struggle with conflicting emotions - gratitude towards relatives who have taken them in, mixed with frustration and sadness over their mistreatment and lack of opportunities. They yearn for education and a better life but find themselves caught between survival needs and their aspirations. The emotional toll of their situations is evident in their testimonies, with many expressing distress, shame, and a sense of isolation from their peers.

Many girls feel that their right to education is being denied, as they are turned into unpaid housemaids. They are acutely aware of the social stigma attached to their situation, as expressed by the 15-year-old girl who said, "My friends and the children in my neighbourhood

laugh at me saying I do not go to school. They say I cannot read."

Overall, girls not living with their parents in Sierra Leone view their situation as a significant barrier to their education, personal development, and overall well-being. They recognise the need for targeted policies to protect their rights, ensure access to education, and provide support systems that can break the cycle of exploitation and poverty. These girls hope for a future where they can have equal opportunities and the chance to pursue their dreams, free from the burdens of excessive domestic labour and economic hardship.

Recommendations from community stakeholders and community leaders

The quotations below from stakeholders from different communities show recommendations and ideas to combat drug abuse, fight teenage pregnancy and child marriage, look after at risk girls, and ensure the safety of girls in their communities.

- 'Implement comprehensive education and self-esteem counselling, as well as increasing access to affordable and effective treatment options for those struggling with drug abuse.'
- 'Public sensitisation through the media on the effects of harmful drugs. If possible, destroy all ghettos.'
- 'Rehabilitation centres should be open for victims of drug abuse, as a nation . . . The youths are the future.'
- 'There should be community engagement and sensitisation on the odds of early/child marriage. Make available financial support of at risk girl-children.'
- 'Develop community-based counselling. Create skills [for young people] to help reduce poverty in the home.'
- 'Make by-laws with regard to the girl-child.'

With regards to teenage pregnancy, the community stakeholders believed that the following measures would help control teenage pregnancy in their communities:

1. Parents being close and friendly with their daughters creates relationships of trust which can enable difficult conversations.
2. Paying more attention and taking care of them, and treating sons and daughters equally, for example, boys should be fetching water instead of girls
3. Girls should have peer group clubs in schools to support each other.
4. The community should motivate other girls to focus on and pursue their education.
5. Parents and guardians should provide for girls' needs and allow the community to also be involved in the raising of children, not solely the parents.

4. Combined summary of findings: Nigeria and Sierra Leone

Based on a literature review and detailed data gathered in rural and urban contexts in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, this research led by girls has highlighted the topics that are most relevant for adolescent girls, and the many ways in which their rights and support systems have been weakened or eroded. Across all contexts, there is an overlap with the inequalities that girls navigate in their everyday lives, fuelled by a combination of harmful social norms and individual attitudes and structural gender inequalities, as well as government responses that do not take girls' specific needs into account. This was also reflected in the disconnect between how girls' issues are perceived by governments, NGOs, and international organisations, that pre-determine what girls' priorities are in terms of high-level categories and language, which do not reflect the actual concerns most relevant to them, and which also make it difficult, or sometimes impossible, for girls to engage in advocacy, or to lead and shape work that directly affects them. This also mirrors findings from Girl-Led Research 1 in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Indonesia.

The structural gender and intersecting inequalities, government responses, and NGOs' and international organisations' perceptions of girls show that decolonisation needs to be interwoven into girl-led research from a perspective of making linkages between the issues identified by girls and the legacies of coloniality in political and economic systems change that continues to affect the daily realities of girls. This research examined the extent of agency and decision-making power available to girls. Our findings indicate that girls often face significant limitations in exercising full agency, with their life trajectories and opportunities frequently shaped by external forces. This dynamic manifests as others wielding 'power over' girls, effectively constraining their choices and potential paths. However, the research also highlights promising avenues for shifting power back to girls. The girl-led research teams reported an increased sense of agency and 'power within' after leading this study. They began identifying opportunities to build 'power with' their peers and other supporters, including plans to disseminate research findings through community events, which will continue through upcoming girl-led initiatives.

The research process itself yielded valuable long-term benefits for the girl researchers. Girls acquired leadership skills applicable to various aspects of their lives, including home, school, and recreational settings. Many expressed that they felt much more confident in their ability to conduct similar research in future, with a lasting impact on their agency and research capabilities, and a sense of self and collective power. Through hands-on experience, they were able to hone critical thinking skills, develop robust research capabilities, and cultivate an enhanced capacity for informed decision-making. This included working on essential life skills, such as time management, communication, and collective leadership, and sense of agency. The girls felt that they had gained confidence and competence through the research, and the tools to navigate spheres for advocacy.

This section of the report summarises the

various ways in which girls experience inequalities across the thematic areas identified through their research. It provides a foundation for understanding the challenges girls face in exercising agency and making meaningful choices. This section also offers specific recommendations for addressing these inequalities in each area identified, aiming to dismantle harmful structures and create safe environments where girls can more fully realise their potential and exercise their rights.

The following section of the report presents overarching recommendations on how international donors and civil society can meaningfully partner with girls and support their rights. In particular, it is important for INGOs, Global North donors, and civil society organisations to make clear the linkages between the issues girls currently face to policies and structures set up to benefit the Global North to the detriment of the Global South

1. Poverty and economic injustice

The research shows the profound impact of poverty on girls' lives in both Nigeria and Sierra Leone. In Jigawa, Nigeria, girls reported that lack of money and resources is a significant barrier to education, with some forced to work as hawkers or assist with farm work instead of attending school. In Sierra Leone, financial difficulties often push girls into transactional sex, exposing them to exploitation and health risks, such as unwanted pregnancy and child marriage, as families may see this as a way to reduce their economic burden. Those from single-parent households or living with relatives are particularly at risk to these economic pressures, often additionally facing neglect or mistreatment affecting their well-being and education. This is true especially in Sierra Leone where 65.9% of girls interviewed were not living with either parent.

The struggle to afford basic necessities, including menstrual hygiene products, is a recurring theme which directly impacts girls' health and school attendance. Resorting to using rags or cheaper alternatives like nappies/diapers can lead to further health issues. The research revealed that many girls are uncomfortable asking their fathers for money for sanitary pads, further compounding the problem.

What girls want

From their community leaders and national governments

- Invest in community hubs that work with families, key stakeholders (such as women's groups, teachers, and community leaders) to challenge negative perceptions of girls that contribute to financial difficulties. Ensure adolescent girls have access to accurate information on social protection payments and basic necessities. Provide support for girls to collaborate with collectives to demand better social protection from governments.

- Ensure community hubs are resourced effectively to support girls in exploring all available opportunities, including education, jobs, or income-generating activities, to become economically independent and reduce the risks of sexual exploitation, including Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC).

- Implement advocacy programmes that promote inheritance rights for women and girls, ensuring that community mechanisms for the inheritance of land are gender-responsive.

- Invest in vocational and digital training initiatives, provide follow-up support, develop and fund livelihood programmes, and ensure social protection benefits that

target young women to improve long-term resilience and reduce economic risk.

2. Gender norms and biases

The research reveals deeply entrenched gender norms that create significant barriers for girls' advancement. In both countries girls are disproportionately burdened with domestic work and caregiving responsibilities, which severely interferes with their education and future opportunities. In Sierra Leone, girls are often tasked with fetching water, which not only interferes with their education, but also exposes them to risks of sexual harassment and exploitation. There is a persistent belief in many communities that boys' education is more important than girls', with the expectation that a girl's primary role should be as a wife and mother. In Jigawa, Nigeria, 60% of men interviewed believed that educating girls was detrimental, potentially leading to immorality. Similarly, 54.5% of boys felt that educating girls was unnecessary, since they would eventually marry.

Girls also face stricter standards and harsher treatment compared to boys in various aspects of life, including sexual activity, experiences of violence, and decision-making power within families and communities. These double standards mean that girls who are survivors of gender-based violence often face isolation, stigmatisation, and lack of support, while boys receive care and assistance. This disparity extends to punishment for violent behaviour, with girls facing harsher consequences than boys for similar actions.

What girls want

From their community leaders and national governments

- Have meaningful consultations with civil society organisations, and local and national authorities to address harmful gender norms within the school curriculum, ensuring that the voices, experiences, and needs of girls are central to any reforms.
- Provide regular, mandatory training for health service staff to deliver compassionate, confidential care without replicating patriarchal norms.
- Enact laws and policies that recognise, reduce, and compensate unpaid care and domestic work for young women and girls.

3. Child marriage, teenage pregnancy and impacts on girls' health

The research uncovered the severe consequences of child marriage and teenage pregnancy on girls' lives. Economic pressures often drive families to push their daughters into child marriages. Pregnant teenagers and young mothers frequently face abandonment by their families, expulsion from school, and significant health risks due to inadequate medical care. The research highlighted a critical lack of support systems to enable pregnant girls and young mothers to continue their education, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting opportunities.

What girls want

From their community leaders and national governments

- Implement and fund programmes with community, families, religious leaders, and other stakeholders to ensure access to gender-sensitive services, including counselling and legal services, to prevent child marriage. Engage communities in awareness campaigns about the risks of child marriage.
- Reform conflicting laws, such as the Customary Marriage Act in Sierra Leone, to align with international treaties like the Child Rights Act to prevent child marriage.
- Invest significantly in the under-resourced public healthcare system at scale of need, ensuring that free gender-responsive healthcare meets the needs of young mothers, including access to comprehensive antenatal care and support.
- Provide access to public sexual and reproductive health services for all adolescent girls, including those who are not married. Girls reported health complications, such as VVF due to complications of childbirth and child marriage, which go untreated.
- Fund and promote community safe spaces for parental involvement in addressing girls' mental health by offering advice, listening actively, and checking in regularly. Families, especially men and boys, should offer care and support for girls affected by mental health issues.
- Advocate and fund programmes addressing broader mental health issues by facilitating girls' access to education and mental health support services. Ensure girls have the freedom to pursue their interests and receive appropriate medical and psychosocial support when needed.
- Make menstrual products affordable and accessible by providing subsidised sanitary products in schools and community hubs. Many girls report using nappies, rags or cloth in place of pads due to high costs, highlighting the need for affordable sanitary products.

4. Drug abuse crisis

An emerging crisis of drug abuse, particularly the use of the synthetic drug kush, is severely impacting girls in these communities. Girls who use drugs frequently drop out or school and face dire health and social consequences, including swollen feet, open sores, and even death, increased risk to violence and exploitation, involvement in criminal activities, engagement in prostitution, and homelessness. The research revealed that this issue is creating a new layer of risk for already marginalised girls.

What girls want

From their community leaders and national governments

- Prioritise public awareness and roll out national sensitisation campaigns through broadcast and social media on the harmful effects of drug abuse.
- Roll out a national drug prevention and recovery programme, centring on the experiences of survivors, and identifying girls at risk of drug abuse.
- Fund mental health facilities specifically designed to support adolescent girls, particularly survivors of drug addiction and girls at risk of drug abuse.

5. Perception of girls' issues

A concerning finding was that many community members, including some girls themselves, do not view issues like child marriage, lack of

education, and violence against girls as major problems. There is a tendency to normalise these issues or blame girls for problems like teenage pregnancy rather than addressing root causes. This perception contributes to the perpetuation of harmful practices and lack of action to address girls' needs.

The girl researchers noted significant contradictions in community members' views, often denying the existence of problems initially but later acknowledging them when pressed further.

In Jigawa, Nigeria, out of 18 girls interviewed, 11 reported that child marriage is not the main issue faced by girls in their community, and 15 said that access to education is not the main problem.

What girls want

From their community leaders and national governments

- Work with boys to foster understanding of girls' rights to safe communities, freedom from violence, and equality. Promote the development of healthy masculinity among boys through mandatory training in youth and community clubs.
- Work with families to address the stigma surrounding girls' mental health issues, considering the causes of their financial distress, exposure to violence, child marriage, and drug abuse.
- Support girls' decision-making by including them in key community processes and respecting their leadership and autonomy in action.

6. Educational challenges

Education remains a critical challenge for girls in both countries. Beyond financial barriers, girls face expectations to work instead of attending school, particularly in rural areas during farming seasons. The research also highlighted corporal punishment in schools as a major issue pushing girls to drop out. The quality of education and relevance of curricula to girls' lives were also raised as concerns.

In Sierra Leone, many girls struggle to balance domestic responsibilities with school attendance. Additionally, the research revealed a significant digital gender divide, with boys having more access to, and spending more time on, digital platforms compared to girls.

What girls want

From their community leaders and national governments

- End corporal punishment in schools.
- Integrate digital skills into the education curriculum.
- Provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education for both girls and boys in schools.
- Provide comprehensive training on menstrual management, including access to safe digital services to track and be informed about menstrual hygiene.
- Invest in gender-responsive public education systems to foster environments where girls can be ambitious and independent.
- Introduce initiatives that address the higher drop-out rates of girls, especially pregnant girls or those with disabilities, by ensuring access to financial services, and safe advisory, and counselling services in both schools and communities.
- Establish pathways for girls who are economically marginalised, particularly

orphaned girls and those without family support, to access education, including through provision of basic necessities such as menstrual hygiene products and meals.

7. Violence and exploitation

The research uncovered the pervasive nature of violence and exploitation faced by girls. This includes domestic abuse, sexual violence, and exploitation by older men. Girls reported a lack of support or justice when they experience violence, with many cases going unreported or ignored by authorities and community leaders. The research highlighted how societal norms and power dynamics often protect perpetrators rather than survivors.

In Sierra Leone, 62% of women and girls aged 15–49 report having experienced physical or sexual violence. Girls who use drugs or are living on the streets are particularly at risk to sexual and gender-based violence.

The research also identified 'hotspots' for sexual violence in communities, some of which are routes to schools.

What girls want

From their community leaders and national governments

- Protect girls from harassment and violence by educating them about their rights and to advocate for safeguarding pathways involving parents, the police, and community leaders, to ensure perpetrators are held to account and face justice.
- Establish dedicated spaces for girls to report abuse and receive support. Foster open community discussions on the negative impacts of violence.
- Ensure the implementation of existing child

protection laws to address violence and exploitation of girls.
- Provide adequately resourced public services to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, including access to justice and shelters.

8. Girls' resilience and agency

Girls demonstrated awareness of their rights and a strong desire for change. For example, during the research process, despite facing initial scepticism and challenges, including disrespect from peers and experiencing emotional distress from hearing traumatic stories. The girl researchers persevered, driven by a desire to understand and help address the issues facing girls in their communities.

"

Despite the draining challenges, I remained hopeful that the research can make a meaningful difference in the lives of the girls.

17-year-old girl researcher

This sentiment encapsulates the potential for girls to be agents of change when given support and opportunities.

The research also showed the resilience and agency of girls with many expressing their determination to continue their education and avoid child marriage and pregnancy, even in difficult circumstances.

The girls also pushed back against harmful practices that undermine their rights. Some girls advocated for abstinence to prevent pregnancy, showing their agency in making decisions about their bodies.

From their community leaders and national governments

- Invest in girls' decision-making and leadership by using this research to demonstrate their knowledge of their own contexts. Girls' perspectives must be valued, and their experiences prioritised.
- Include a quota for girls and women's rights organisations on decision-making steering committees and invest in nurturing girls' leadership, ensuring culturally safe approaches.
- Implement advocacy initiatives that challenge societal norms and traditions that control girls' choices and undermine their power, particularly those justified by religious beliefs and leaders, such as child marriage. Raise awareness about teachings that encourage girls to pursue education instead of marriage.

5. Overarching recommendations for donors and civil society

This report highlights the interconnected challenges faced by adolescent girls. From economic exclusion and harmful gender norms, to violence, child marriage, and limited access to education, girls often encounter systemic barriers that prevent them from realising their full potential.

These challenges require urgent, targeted and joint action from international donors and civil society who work on progressing women's and girls' rights organisations and access to justice. The recommendations that follow emphasise the importance of aligning resources, policies, and programmes with girls' needs, rights, and leadership. By addressing the intersections of economic justice, education, access to better health services, gender norms, violence prevention, and girls' resilience and agency, international actors can be powerful partners to provide resources and advocate with girls, so they can realise their rights and thrive.

In light of the findings, the role of international donors and civil society is crucial. They must provide flexible, inclusive support that dismantles the barriers limiting girls' opportunities. These recommendations outline a path for making meaningful investments that prioritise girls' voices and leadership at every stage of programme development and implementation.

1. Poverty and economic injustice

International donors and civil society must:

- Provide direct, long-term, flexible funding for the self-determined priorities of girl-led groups and activism, ensuring funding decisions are intersectional and accessible to girls in all their diversity. This helps build girls' economic independence, moving beyond the outdated narrative that girls are passive recipients of aid, and instead enabling them to develop livelihood opportunities and break cycles of poverty and violent exploitation.

- Fund programmes that recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work, particularly for adolescent girls. This addresses the unpaid care and domestic work burden placed on girls, allowing them to focus on education, their well-being and other opportunities.
- Advocate for and invest in the provision of high-quality, accessible, gender-responsive public services, working with other donors and international organisations to ensure adolescent girls have access to social protection and essential services. This enhances their economic resilience and reduces financial risk.
- Collaborate with girls' rights organisations, women's rights organisations, and feminist groups to advocate for alternative feminist economic models focused on care, well-being, and gender justice, recognising the links between poverty, gender-based violence, health, and gender justice.

2. Gender norms and biases

International donors and civil society must:
- Fund initiatives that promote decolonial approaches, which eliminate discriminatory practices and harmful gender norms in education, ensuring girls' lived experiences, knowledge, solution and strategies are at the centre of change.
- Collaborate and meaningfully participate with girls' rights organisations, women's rights organisations, and feminist groups to ensure that programmes and activities are informed by girls' voices and leadership. This is essential in challenging patriarchal norms and biases that restrict girls' rights and opportunities.
- Ensure that service providers are trained to offer girl-friendly support, especially for girls who are pregnant, those with disabilities, and those that are economically marginalised, to ensure inclusivity in service provision and to

challenge gender-based discrimination in healthcare and community support.

3. Child marriage and teenage pregnancy

International donors and civil society must:
- Fund mental health and support facilities specifically designed for adolescent girls, particularly survivors of child marriage and teenage pregnancy. This ensures girls have access to the care they need, helping them to recover and continue pursuing education or livelihood opportunities.
- Fund programmes that provide comprehensive sexual health education and sexual reproductive health services for girls, including those who are not married, to reduce the incidence of child marriage and teenage pregnancy.
- Advocate for and implement gender-responsive laws and policies that align local laws with international treaties, including the UN convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC) and The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of a Child, to protect girls from child marriage and ensure their right to education and health.

4. Drug abuse crisis

International donors and civil society must:
- Fund programmes that provide counselling, mental health support, and wellness activities for adolescent girls affected by drug addiction. This intervention helps girls recover and re-engage with their communities, improving their overall well-being and resilience.
- Resource and promote public campaigns that promote awareness and prevention of drug abuse, centring on the experiences of girls at risk. Supporting these efforts helps create safer environments for girls and prevents substance abuse from derailing their education and futures.

5. Perceptions of girls' issues

International donors and civil society must:

- Fund programmes that centre girls' leadership and expertise in advocacy and policy discussions, ensuring their participation in shaping decisions that affect them. These challenge prevailing perceptions that undervalue girls' abilities and contributions.
- Implement and fund research and advocacy that is rooted in girls' lived experiences as a legitimate source of knowledge. This fosters a more inclusive and authentic narrative about the issues girls face, shifting societal perceptions and empowering girls to lead.
- Invest in safe spaces and mentorship programmes for girls such as girls' clubs, enabling them to access support and guidance from women mentors and helping them build confidence in navigating community leadership and decision-making.

6. Educational challenges

International donors and civil society must:

- Fund holistic girls' education programmes that address barriers to education, such as family poverty, disability, and high rates of adolescent pregnancy or child marriage. This ensures that more girls can access and stay in school, reducing drop-out rates.
- Invest in gender-responsive public education systems that create environments where girls can be ambitious and independent. This includes challenging patriarchal norms in the school curriculum and integrating access and training for digital skills.
- Fund programmes and education projects that embrace decolonial approaches, which aim to eliminate discriminatory practices and prejudicial ideologies and beliefs in research methodologies and in education

7. Violence and exploitation

International donors and civil society must:

- Fund safe spaces and support programmes that provide girls with the resources and environment to report abuse and receive protection. This enhances their ability to seek justice and protection against all forms of violence.
- Ensure that all research on gender-based violence takes a survivor-centred approach and is guided by the expertise of girls' rights organisations, women's rights organisations, and feminist groups. This is key to addressing violence against girls and ensuring that response mechanisms are both effective and compassionate.
- Advocate for a clear understanding of the links between poverty, gender-based violence, and sexual reproductive health rights. Civil society must push all governments to implement laws and conventions that protect women and girls and other governments should also support this push.

8. Girls' resilience and agency

International donors and civil society organisations must:

- Provide direct, long-term, flexible funding for self-determined priorities of girl-led groups and activism, ensuring that girls are included in decision-making processes and that this facilitates their ability to lead.
- Fund programmes that mentor and safeguard girls' participation in policy spaces, ensuring that girls are equipped to advocate for the change they want to see. This fosters agency and provides opportunities for girls to engage in national and international policy discussions.
- Facilitate transnational feminist networks and alliances that support girls in building solidarity across borders. Investing in girls' leadership at both local and global levels strengthens their ability to drive change on issues such as gender-based violence,

harmful practices, and unpaid care work.

- Ensure that every business case for funding for adolescent girls' programmes and every stage of the programme cycle requires direct consultation with girls' rights organisations, women's rights organisations, and feminist groups as part of the process
- Support research and advocacy efforts grounded in girls' lived experiences and led by girls as a valid and powerful source of

knowledge and change. This includes ensuring that all work is carried out with safety, dignity, and in secure partnerships. By enabling girls to document their experiences, donors can help them develop and implement activist strategies for change that demand structural changes on transnational issues, such as gender-based violence, harmful gender practices, unpaid care and domestic work, and more.

Annex 1: Girls' Experiences and Lesson

The girl researchers expressed their wishes to record their thoughts and experiences around the research. Here we share their words and illustrations.

Jigawa, Nigeria

KHADIJA KABEER

When I was first told about the research and that we were going to work with one woman mentor, I became very afraid thinking that I could not do it, but when I heard that the research was aimed at helping young girls like me, I became very interested and did not want to just give up. Although the fear continued, especially the fear that I could not do it and that the persons we will be talking to would not cooperate with us or they would see us as small children because they were older than us and that we were outspoken and brazen. But I had successes like support from home, school, and even the persons that I had the interviews with. Some of the challenges I faced were from my friends. If I went to school they would say, 'Oh sorry you missed so much from school today'. And the biggest challenge I faced was from my father who insisted that I don't miss school or the lessons that I was attending but my mother always supported me and made him understand the importance of my participation in the research and then he would allow me to go. What I learnt from the entire process includes that I can stand in front of many people and talk. And my power within has increased and I learnt those new tools during the training that I had never known them before. I believe girls are seen as subordinate to boys. They don't have opportunities like boys, and men can step on them anyway they want.

For example, a 13-year-old girl that is married and the husband imposes 'kulle'[48] on her is a way of

limiting her opportunities and no one will question it because it is acceptable. Working together has many advantages, like when you have the understanding of many people it is better than the understanding of just one person. And if anyone did not understand what we were doing, others explained it to her easily. I learnt that men are seen as the heads always whether at home, school, and even leadership. What I was most surprised about and did not expect was when we were conducting focus group discussions with men in urban areas, and we asked them about child marriage, they said it is very good for girls especially when they are grown and have started menstruation. This was unexpected because to me it was not beneficial at all to girls. What I knew, and what the research confirmed to me, was that all chores at home were done by girls and girls' power within is always undermined. I am excited and very happy about the next steps and really want to be part of the next stages because I want to be part of any effort that helps address girls' problems. My advice to future girl research is that boys should also be part of the research so that they understand their position to girls. My painting shows my fear on my face at the beginning of the research, then the flower shows my motivation to help girls, the tap indicates my expectations which includes the fears I felt, then the buildings are my successes. The small bush is the challenge I faced from my father, then my self-learning, then what I learnt about girls, then the importance of working together, then my perceptions about girls, then what surprised me and then what the research confirmed to me, then my excitement for the next stages, and then my advice.

ZAINAB SABO

My feelings at the beginning of the research were those of excitement and impatience, and I just couldn't wait for it to start. I thought about who we were working with, how we were going to do the research, with whom and so on. But what motivated me to continue was when we were told that it was going to bring positive change to girls' lives, and it could help me too in one way or the other. I got a lot of support from my parents and family members. Before we started, my thinking was that we were just going to ask questions to children and then collect the answers, that was all. But it turned out differently. I learnt many words that I did not know before and conducted the research with other girls without any issues or disagreements. My challenges included during the research when some of the community members like the girl hawkers, initially did not want to cooperate with us, some refused to sit down and then others were answering our questions and others were not. And we saw a similar response with men in the urban area who initially did not want to give us answers but later changed their minds and cooperated with us. What I learnt about myself as a result of this research was that I just need to believe I can do anything, and if I put my mind to it I see that I succeed. And that whatever I need to do I should stop putting fear in my heart and just believe in myself and seek success from God, nothing can stop me. I also learnt that girls are always undermined and even with their little power they always have some dream or goals that they want to achieve in their lives, but because they are hindered from doing so they lack the confidence and support to voice out their dreams and aspirations. I
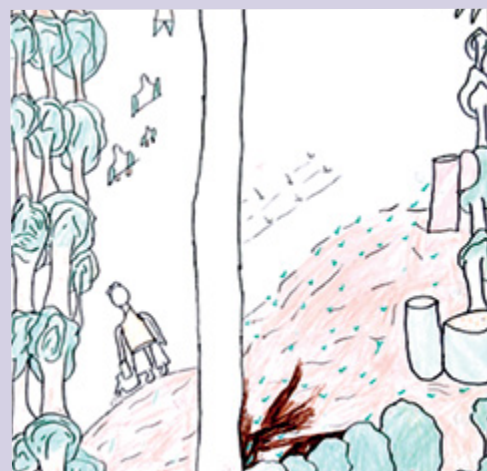
also learnt the importance of working together in that it increases our love and support for each other, it facilitates achieving success in whatever goal we come together to achieve and if one of us is facing any difficulty or challenge the group comes together to assist that person. I understood that girls' issues are not given any priority, in fact they are not seen as being of any significance. It's only boys problems that are seen as major issues. What was most unexpected for me and which I stayed a long time thinking about, was when we were asking girl hawkers on whether child marriage was good and they answered that it was. They said things like 'the best place for a girl or woman is her husband's place/house'. It was really unexpected for me seeing that we were the same age as them but their view of child marriage was that it was good for girls. What the research further confirmed to me was that most of the time anywhere you see violence happening it is to a woman and the person doing it is a man. I want to use my learnings and my power within as well as the powers of my fellow girl researchers to help fight against power over girls. I can't wait for the next stages of this research and my advice is to undertake the research not during school hours. My journey is shown through a farm. The beginning of my journey is the cart then the trees signify the support and cooperation I got from my parents
and family. The birds symbolise my successes, the grasses that are dying indicate the challenges, the fruits symbolise working together and the sun symbolises the unexpected things I learnt from the process.

FIDDAUSI SULAIMAN

When I started my fears were could I do it, would I get cooperation from community members and so on, how can I help women and girls? How can I meet them? These were the questions that came to my mind. But the cooperation and support from my parents further motivated me to participate. The cooperation and support from the research team also motivated me to continue. The successes I got were the encouragement from my parents because they were very interested in my participation in the research and would even be asking me when we will be going for it on days that we were not working. Some of the challenges I faced was when we were conducting focus group discussions with men in the urban area, they kept saying that we are small girls we can't be asking them questions and so will not give answers, and when we asked them about things that concerned women they said what were their business with women, we should go and ask women that not them. But our team insisted and explained to them the questions were the same and we had asked the same questions to other categories of community members and would be doing the same at the rural area. In the end they agreed and answered our questions. That was the toughest day in the research for me but I'm glad we overcame it through our power within and power with. Even though I want to help girls and want to understand their problems by biggest learning about myself was that there is nothing to fear. At the initial stages I was fearful of the process that I could

not do it but after I saw it as 'normal' I can do it, in fact I want to go everywhere. I feel I can do anything now. Working together is very important, because I know if I was the only one talking to the men, I would not be able to convince them when they refused to cooperate but because we were a team of four girls we collectively explained, each girl strengthening the other girl's case for the men to give an answer, and at the end we got them to agree and participate. So this event showed me how working together can bring change. I learnt that girls are perceived like this house drawing, the bigger house represents men and the smaller house represent girls or women. Girls are always seen as insignificant and important for housework only and their aspirations and dreams are always not seen as priority. I knew even before the research that men are always the top priority, but I did not think that it was an issue until now going through the research process. This was unexpected, I never thought that this was a problem. Even if men are top priority it's okay, but now I understand that even the girls want to achieve, but they are not allowed to do so, which is not right. I just want to progress every day and see myself doing more for girls and I am excited about the next stages and want to advise that the research should also be going to rural areas so that the girls can see the different issues in different ways as we saw in our own process. My journey map takes the form of a community. The smiling house is my success and unsmiling face is my challenge and the aeroplane symbolises where I want to go in life, just up, up and up.

AMINA MUSA

I was very excited about the research and one of the things that made me happy was because my parents' permission was sought before we even began. What motivated me the most was the fact that the research was about helping girls. I never thought I would be able to do it, but with my parents support this boosted my confidence a lot. I loved that there was no difference between girls and older researchers. My expectations changed also because my relationship with other girls has become better. I learnt the significance of time and how we use it. The research also taught me how I have power and how I can use it. My biggest success was from my school. After informing our principal, he supported and encouraged me to go for it and learn as much as I can. The biggest challenge were my friends who kept discouraging me about it. I never thought I could say no or say I had a different opinion about anything, the research taught me this. About myself. I also learnt a lot about girls' issues and even issues about families, and parents not supporting their children's education.

Working together also is important because you can get different ideas, unlike if you are doing it alone. Girls are taken like ants that can be stepped upon. If girls are given more opportunities, we will see more changes in our lives, but just leaving girls to stay at home doing nothing but how can they best take care of their husbands and children. Girls are facing a lot of challenges in their education and access to resources. I now understand that too many house chores on girls are also

hindrances to girls' opportunities to develop themselves. Other areas that I have seen where girls are harmed is online. I want to be part of the process that brings changes to girls' lives and to be part of awareness-raising about girls' issues.

My journey map is that of emojis. The face in the beginning shows how happy I am about the work, my sad face shows my feelings when I was told that we are going to talk to older people and my happy face is when I told our principal who encouraged me and said if there were more organisations doing this, we will see changes in our communities. The green face represents my power within, for instance I have a voice now. In the past, my elder brother used to justify that I do his chores based on that he is a boy. He goes out while we girls stay at home, so I should do his work. But I explained to him that it is unfair to ask me to his chores because we all have our powers within and is that how he will justify his own children's responsibilities and then he agreed and stopped asking me to do his chores. Then my friends were a big challenge when I told them we were having our training at a hotel they laughed and asked, 'Is that what you have become, hotel? OK, may God protect you,' as if we were doing a bad thing and that I have missed lessons and nothing will bring that back. For girls and women there are many things happening in their lives, but they will not show it and it is the research that made me understand the signs that girls or woman may be having issues, but no one tries to understand it. Working together has made me understand that it increases your success and makes the job easier. I learnt that girls have their own potential and should be allowed more opportunities. I also learnt that girls in urban and rural areas are all the same, but those in rural area face more challenges because many men in rural areas do not believe in girls' education at all. I want to be involved in creating awareness about girls' issues, especially issues of lack of education. I want to advise that future researchers should take time seriously particularly in managing their work and doing the tasks appropriately.

FIRDAUSI YUSUF

I joined the research after my parents gave their permission to be part of the research. What motivated me was that the research was about girls and finding ways of changing girls' lives and I could be part of that. I learnt about how we were going to do the work in the community, and I feared that fathers and girls were among the community members. I expected that fathers and mothers would not cooperate, but I got their cooperation. Success for me is the support from home and my mother especially encouraged me. My biggest challenge was when we met with men and they did not want to answer

our questions but by using our power within, together we were able to make them understand and cooperate with us. I learnt that I can be confident and can bring change to my community. I learnt that girls have issues but cannot speak about them. Working together is particularly important and has advantages. It is through working together that we were able to do the work without issues. Girls are seen as nothing and have no power over themselves or anybody. They are constantly told

what they should do and are always supposed to get married, take care of their husbands and homes, that is all. The most unexpected thing was when we asked women in the rural community who do girls talk to on menstrual hygiene and management and they said her sister-in-law. I was surprised by this and thought what about their mothers or aunties or even sisters? And that many girls do not even start menstruating at home but begin menses at their husband's house. I was surprised by this. Even before the research I knew that women were responsible for taking care of husbands, homes, children, and the research confirmed this. I want to see lives of girls' and women change and I want to be part of that. I am so excited about the next stages, and I want girls to be educated and girls to be happy. My advice for future research is getting girls from rural areas to be part of the research because it will also make them understand many of the issues we now understand around girls. My journey map is a forest, and the road signifies the beginning of the journey for me, the flowers are the motivation, my expectations are the smaller flowers and the trees are the reality. The birds are my learnings, the two big and small trees symbolise girls as the small tree and boys the bigger trees, the red flower is my excitement for the next stages and the mountain is the symbol for working together. The aeroplane shows my desire to keep understanding and addressing girls' issues so that we are all happy.

HAFSAT SULEIMAN UMAR

I have been very interested in these kinds of activities and was very excited, but I faced a big challenge as I could not attend the training due to exams that I was taking. Initially I thought the research was about going to villages and rural areas sensitising people about the importance of girls' education but later I found out that it also involved sitting together and having discussions on issues and conducting a workshop, learning about new tools, doing exercises like friendship circle, etc. My biggest challenge was not being part of the research at the beginning, but I have pushed myself to understand and catch up. I understand that I can help a lot of people if I put myself to it. I realise being part of the research taught me that working together makes you achieve more and what is done by many people is usually better than what is done by a single person. In my view, girls are like electrical lights switched on and off by anyone, they can't shine by themselves or on themselves while men and boys are like the sun they shine on their own and shine brighter than anyone. Girls are seen as weak and having no power and our rights are denied to us more. What I was most surprised of was at the rural community when we asked young girls like me from 12 years old on violence in their community and they said there was no violence totally. And I was shocked. How could they say there was no violence? Not even emotional violence? I could not believe it. I already knew even before the research that girls' and women's rights are always denied to them and the research confirmed it, it has not changed. I want to enlighten women girls and women on how to protect their rights and themselves. I feel excited and happy that one day I can be part of those who will

conduct Zooms or conferences on this research. My journey map is that of stars and planets. The clouds are my motivation, and the light and sun are the perceptions of girls and boys that I learnt. I also drew a symbol of boys going through life straight without obstacles, but girls have to go through chores, marriage etc., before they can achieve anything.

KHADIJA ABUBAKAR

When I heard about the research, I was very excited because schools were on holidays and I was tired of staying at home. I also became happier and motivated when I learnt the research was going to be about understanding girls' problems, I felt it was going to benefit everybody because I know women and girls have many problems that they want to be addressed. Since I was told that the research would involve older men and women in communities I became a little afraid because I have experience with working with those that are older than me they will always try to show that you don't know life, you don't understand how things are or work, but when we started it wasn't like that at all. They played and laughed with us and they constantly wanted to know how we felt about things, what our opinions were, and even with the community members I really did not feel uncomfortable, and they even prayed for us after the interviews. For me the biggest challenge was the problem we had at our community mosque where I used what I learnt from the training to go up to our teacher and talk about the issue and I was successful. Then another challenge was the first day we began the fieldwork because we had not started on time, I could not go back home until after the early evening prayer. Then the other time was when we tried to talk with hawkers and some of them indicated that they were not interested. The way they declined at first as if we were going to harm them; I felt very hurt. But eventually a few agreed and later all of them except one participated in the interview. This reinforced the concept of power over and power to again to me. That is how initially one girl was able to power over three of them but when another girl used her power within she then followed us and called the other girls who now joined her and participated in the focus group discussions. Although the girl that did not participate still came to the spot and kept discouraging them, it did not work. What I learnt of myself is that if I remove fear there is nothing that I cannot do. The biggest thing I learnt from girls is that they also want to be educated. What I learnt from working together is that it ensures achievement of goals and objectives within a shorter period of time. For instance, if only one person would be asking the questions and taking the notes and even using the tools, it would have taken a longer time to complete the tasks. But because we shared the tasks and responsibilities, we concluded the tasks in shorter periods. Girls and women are perceived as unimportant, and they are always denied or discouraged from pursuing their dreams and aspirations. They are always shown that their needs are not as important, and every opportunity is ideal only for boys or men. What I knew, and what the research confirmed to me, was that poverty is a major factor which hinders girls' access to

education. My advice to future researchers is ensuring good management of time during the research processes. My journey map is a car with a happy face symbolising my excitement, and my expectations in the form of green hearts. I thought the work and process would be challenging but it was not. The chair symbolises girls, i.e. they are always made to sit down at home as wives or mothers and not get up and pursue opportunities that will change their lives for the better. And lastly I want the research to be disseminated and not left in a book.

Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria

USMAN FAVOUR

I learnt about the research from my mom, who was a peer-educator on an ending gender-based violence project in our community. At first, I had no idea what it would entail, and I was not thrilled because I prefer studying to interacting with many people. However, the first training transformed me; we were encouraged to speak freely without fear, which I did because it felt like a safe space. My first task was data collection using the KoboCollect tool. It was my first time using KoboCollect, but I was more comfortable because I was accompanied by our research mentor. The data collection helped me understand how girls within my community truly feel about the things I also do not like. And for the first time, I felt like if girls come together, we might be able to change some things in our community through power with. This research has built my confidence, I have also learnt to be a better listener and not to be judgemental. During the data collection training, several times, I was giving advice instead of listening to what the community members have to say. I made sure I didn't repeat this, and it helped the girls within my community to trust me better. Parents now come to report their daughters to me because they see me as their mentor, and I respectfully speak with the girls first to understand the reasons behind their actions and to guide to make better decision next time. My communication skills have improved, my confidence has grown, I enjoyed the research and I'm learning new things
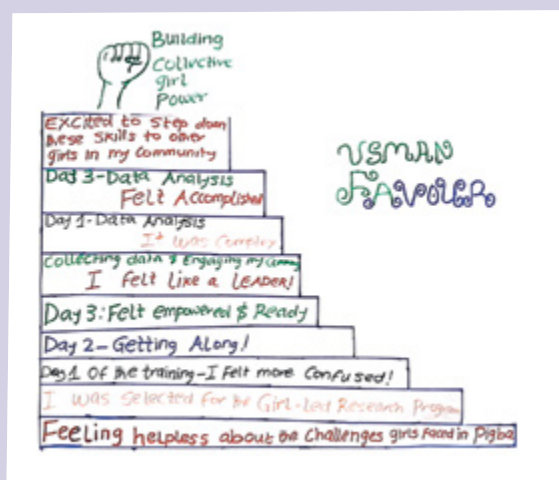
The data analysis workshop was new to me. The analysis was demanding, we analysed the tools we used for data collection: the activity tracker and the human box. I was surprised at the various information we got from the tools and how accurate they were because it painted the real pictures from my community. The KoboCollect was hard for me because I don't like mathematics, but I learnt to use Excel, pie charts, and bar charts for the KoboCollect data. I gained a lot from this research, including confidentiality, self-confidence, and self-control. Previously, I had a short temper, but now I respect my fellow researchers and listen to their opinions. I feel compelled to reach out to more girls worldwide to help stop gender-based violence, as I believe I can make a difference.

ANNABELLE JUSTICE JAMES

I'm a girl-led researcher from the Pigba Sama Community, Abuja. One day, a meeting was held for teenage girls in my community, and I was invited. They asked if I was interested in joining the girl research project and I said yes. So, they met with my mother, and she signed the consent form. On the first day of the training, we introduced ourselves with our pet names which was cool because I like it when my friend calls me my pet name. The training was super interesting and especially the penguin dance energiser, it was so funny! I remember the safeguarding exercise where I was asked to burst the balloons, I was so eager to burst it but the person carrying the ballon was doing everything possible to protect it, but I ended up bursting it! This really helped to understand the how abusers think, and everyone should prioritise safeguarding.

After that set of training, we went back to the field, did some other activities, and drew our community map. I was one of the researchers that conducted the intergenerational dialogue most of the community members were our parents, community heads, and adolescent boys and girls. Asking our community heads, older women and men questions were not very funny. I was trying hard not to offend them but the approach we used made the work easier for me. We were given cardboard to draw the community map on and to indicate the places that are dangerous for girls or any other person to go during the day and night within the community. The community map was done by the community members, and after that, we went into the discussion and difficult topics were discussed effortlessly, such as inheritance sharing, although with a lot of disagreement between the men and the women. We also gave them flip charts and told them to indicate the resources in the community and told the women to indicate where they have access and where they do not. It was so surprising that they were so much different in the indication of resources, and a lot of confusion took place because they were beginning to misunderstand each other, but it was handled in a peaceful manner because the women were angry, they do not have access to leadership positions.

My fellow researchers and I came to a conclusion that women have been deprived of some things in the community that they are supposed to have access to. Now, more than ever before, I am eager to bring change to my community to end gender inequality. I would be so happy to be one of the drivers of this change. This diagram represents what my community currently looks like and the future I dream of.

I was lucky to be selected as one of the girl-led researchers in community. I had participated in a training with Teenage Network before now and I was given a certificate, which excited me so much. So, when I got selected as a researcher, I was happy, but on getting to the training, I realised that this programme was different. The four days training stressed me to think and connect with my power within. My favourite activity was the power flower.

During the data collection, I had challenges interacting with the parents of some of the girls we collected data from. Some of the girls also did not take me seriously because they are my friends, but I was able to address them in a respectful manner without being judgemental.

Data analysis too was another unique opportunity for me. I had to listen to the conversations we recorded and identify the main issues and important quotes. Finally, I can now call myself a researcher. This experience changed my mindset, especially when I saw the difference between what girls use their phones for and what boys use their phones for and how men and women spend their times, and you can see the mental shift in my drawing. Girls can be whatever they want to be if they have access to the required education!

Freetown, Sierra Leone

Girl researchers in their team of four dispersed into five marginalised communities in Eastern Freetown, where they themselves are residents, to conduct the research. They showed us that girls' voices matter and building power with them to champion their issues is among the best ways that this can be done. This is not without challenges, but girls and their community mentors surmounted the challenges. The challenges faced range from emotional sensitivity or even breakdown, problems in simplifying the questions for girls that have not had the space to learn to read, and community members going off topic, to some refusing to answer some questions, being afraid, shy or nervous, and difficulty in gaining community members trust to consent to being interviewed.

"

When I went to interview it made me emotional. It made me feel bold as well. Drug abuse. We really need to fight drug abuse. During the interview I met girls my age, some were older and they are smoking kush. Some of them said it is through the kush that they have relief, and it is because they are stressed that is why they are taking it.

18-year-old girl researcher.

"

Ain't gonna lie, but witnessing the hardships and challenges faced by community members was profoundly distressing.

17-year-old girl researcher.

Moreover, some of the girl researchers who were from a different socio-cultural reality admitted to difficulties in witnessing the reality of girls who were not living with their parents or who were orphans – 65.9% of the girls interviewed lived with neither parent. These girls faced several challenges with food, clothing, and just having someone who cares about and pays attention to them. Many of these orphans or fostered girls face lot of mistreatment by their care givers and several interviewed were traumatised and found it difficult to proceed with the interview. They cried while explaining their situation.

"

Those that were afraid to talk and those that have too many traumas, the pain was too much for them to even start talking, they did not want to talk. Also recording them posed a challenge, some did not want to talk because they were being recorded. Seeking their consent was hard.

19-year-old girl researcher.

"

We feel pity for them because some of them no longer have parents, and that

leads them to live on the street, some were living with their uncle and aunty and they are maltreating them.

18-year-old girl researcher.

In addition, being girl researchers in girl-led research meant that they were at the forefront of the study. The girls themselves conducted the research, did the interviews and focus group discussions. Many of their peer co-researchers felt that it is was not important to give the girl researchers their time by granting them interviews. They also thought that they had no power to bring relief to the problems and struggles they were experiencing. Below are quotes from the girl researchers about their experiences in the field in relation to this. This touches on how girl researchers felt disrespected or dismissed by some community members, particularly because they were seen as powerless because of their age and gender. This led to the girls questioning the gender dynamics at play, reflecting on how these dynamics influenced the research process and the interactions between researchers and community members who were interviewed.

"

I was literally disrespected by a girl and so I felt maintaining confidence was required in the work . . . I felt overwhelmed. After dealing with some girls, I felt as if I would be facing more of the past obstacles from other girls. Like in the case of being disrespected, I felt as if the other girls will also try to do the same to me.

Some of them think that we just want to

know about their personal lives so they would decide to walk away instead of listening to us.

For me, the number one issue I encountered was insults. The insults were too much. When I was doing the interviews in the field the insults were many. Some people I had to beg and beg them. Some do not want you to record them. They tell you there is no use in doing all this because they have nothing to benefit, and that we are giving them nothing. The humiliation and insults were many. They will insult you first before they agree to the interview.

The girls' experiences in the research process (the interview and focus group discussions) were quite eye-opening, making them reflective about the world around them, resilient and motivational about standing up and making a change no matter how small they think they are.

"

Witnessing the extent of the challenges and hardships faced by the girls made me reevaluate my understanding of the world and my place in it. I also felt a deep sense of responsibility to the girls and my community, which is both empowering and burdensome.

17-year-old girl researcher.

"

I felt the need to continue the research to know more about the problems of teenage girls out there and finding ways to help them.

18-year-old girl researcher.

Gaining the respect and trust of the girls was also a real struggle. The girls thought that because I was their age mate I do not have any way to help them.

17-year-old girl researcher.

"

Poverty leads to child marriage. Teenage pregnancy leads to loss of lives, and drug addiction leads to mental problems.

Girl researchers, Group 2 (in their group presentation about learnings from data collection).

Dreams of a better tomorrow are, indeed, universal, transcending age, gender, belief, and ethnicity. This shared aspiration reflects our inherent human resilience. The girl researchers involved in this study, despite encountering numerous challenging narratives from their peers, maintain a sense of hope and optimism for the future of girls in Sierra Leone and globally. Their vision encompasses a world where girls have equal access to education, irrespective of their family circumstances; where robust protections are in place to safeguard girls from harm; where teenage pregnancy no longer claims young lives; and where girls can fully realise their potential, unhindered by their place of origin. This forward-looking perspective, emerging from those directly

engaged with the harsh realities on the ground, underscores the indomitable spirit of these young researchers and their unwavering commitment to positive change for girls everywhere.

> **Despite the draining challenges, I remained hopeful that the research can make a meaningful difference in the lives of the girls.**

17-year-old girl researcher.

> **Advocate for girls. Engage elders to stand up for girls. Protest violence against girls.**

Girl researchers, Group 1 (in presenting the way forward in the analysis workshop).

Bibliography

Abbagana KK. (2013) The role of key elements in educational planning and development in Nigerian western school system. Journal of Education and Policy Review. 5(2):19–26.

The Abidjan Principles (2024) Abidjan Principles on the Right to Education https://www.abidjanprinciples.org/

ActionAid (2020) ActionAid's feminist research guidelines. ActionAid International.

ActionAid. About Reflection Action. https://www.reflectionaction.org/pages/about-reflection-action/

Action Coalition Youth Leaders National Gender Youth Activists Youth Task Force (2021) Young Feminist Manifesto: A bold and transformative vision for change, Generation Equality Forum.

Ajala T. (2016) Social construction of gender roles and women's poverty in African societies: the case of the Nigerian woman. International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies. 4(2):1–10.

Batliwala S. (Year unknown) All about power: Understanding social power and power structures. All-About-Power.pdf (creaworld.org)

Beoku-Betts J. (2016) Holding African states to task on gender and violence: Domesticating UNSCR 1325 in the Sierra Leone National Action Plan. Current Sociology, 64(4):654–670.

BONews (2024) Period poverty in Nigeria: Girls with disabilities are falling behind in education. bonewssng.com

Budu E, Ahinkorah BO, Seidu A-A, Hagan JE Jr, et al. (2021) Child marriage and sexual autonomy among women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence from 31 demographic and health surveys. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 18(7):3754, p.7. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073754

Caron C. and Margolin SA. (2015) Rescuing girls, investing in girls: a critique of development fantasies. Journal of international development. 27(7).

Chakma T. (2023) ActionAid Feminist Research Webinars – Feminist research as politics and power: shifting power and decolonisation, 5 September 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blNOOsXcr-g

Chant S. and Sweetman C. (2012) Fixing women or fixing the world? 'Smart economics', efficiency approaches, and gender equality in development, Gender & Development, 20(3), 517–529. doi: 10.1080/13552074.2012.731812

Erulkar and Bello (2007) The Experience of Married Adolescent Girls in Northern Nigeria. The Experience of Married Adolescent Girls in Northern Nigeria

Falb KL, Tanner S, Ward L, et al. (2016) Creating opportunities through mentorship, parental involvement, and safe spaces (COMPASS) program: multi-country study protocol to protect girls from violence in humanitarian settings. BMC Public Health. 16(231). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-2894-3

Gaventa J. (2006) Finding the spaces for change: A power analysis. IDS Bulletin. 37(13). https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2006.tb00320.x

Gender analysis of asset inequalities within rural households in Ogun State, Nigeria. (PDF) Gender Analysis of Asset Inequalities Within Rural Households in Ogun State, Nigeria. (researchgate.net)

Girls not Brides (2024) Knowledge is power: Youth-led research to address power dynamics in knowledge and advocacy processes to end child marriage and promote girls' education in West Africa. https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/knowledge-is-power-youth-led-research-child-marriage-girls-education-west-africa/

Gonzalez L.(2020) Por um feminismo Afro-latino-americano. Primavera Para as Rosas Negras. 314. ISBN 978-65-5782-005-6

Goulds S. et al. (2020) Free to be online? Girls' and young women's experience of online harassment. Plan International.

Jones N. et al. (2019) Qualitative research toolkit: GAGE's approach to researching with adolescents. Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.

Kabeer N. (2005) Gender equality and women's empowerment: a critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. Gender and Development Journal. 13(1):13–24.

Kush: Sierra Leone's new illegal drug. (2022). https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-60260738

Marriage Age Laws and the Prevalence of Child Marriage and Adolescent Birth: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa: Minimum Marriage Age Laws and the Prevalence of Child Marriage and Adolescent Birth: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa – PubMed (nih.gov)

Mass burial for unidentified drug victims in Sierra Leone, Mass burial for unidentified drug victims in Sierra Leone (the-star.co.ke)

Moletsane R. et al. (2021) Ethical practice in participatory visual research with girls: Transnational approaches, Social Sciences | Free Full-Text | Child-Led Research: Questioning Knowledge (mdpi.com) https://doi.org/10.3167/9781800730335

National Human Development Report 2019. https://www.undp.org/sierra-leone/publications/national-human-development-report-2019.

National Strategy for Out of School children in Sierra Leone https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Sierra-Leane-National-OOSC-Strategy.pdf;

Nyawo Kama B. (2023) The impact of war experience on psychological well-being amongst adolescents in Sierra Leone. MSc. thesis. https://docs.neu.edu.tr/library/9556295474.pdf

Nuwabaine L, Sserwanja Q, Kamara K. (2023) Prevalence and factors associated with teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone: evidence from a nationally representative Demographic and Health Survey of 2019. BMC Public Health 23(527). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15436-x

Obaje HI. et al. (2020) Ending Child Marriage in Nigeria: The Maternal and Child Health Country-Wide Policy. Journal of Science Policy & Governance. 17(1). https://www.sciencepolicyjournal.org/uploads/5/4/3/4/5434385/obaje_etal_jspg_v17.1.pdf

Pincock K, Jones N. (2020) Challenging power dynamics and eliciting marginalised adolescent voices through qualitative methods. International Journal of Qualitative Methods.19:1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920958895

Prevalence and factors associated with teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone: evidence from a nationally representative Demographic and Health Survey of 2019: Prevalence and factors associated with teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone: evidence from a nationally representative Demographic and Health Survey of 2019 | springermedicine.com

Prohibition of Child marriage Act, 2024, Sierra Leone. Available at Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2024 – SierraLII

Realizing Children's Rights in Sierra Leone. https://www.humanium.org/en/sierra-leone/

The Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, 2007. https://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2009-01.pdf

Rodriguez et al. Girls to the Front: A snapshot of girl led organizing, Mama Cash, FRIDA – The Young Feminist Fund.

Roglá J. (2021) Navigating the Ethics of Human Subjects Research. In Huddleston RJ, James P, Jamieson T. (eds), The Handbook of Research Methods in International Relations. Edward Elgar Publishing. Microsoft Word – 37 Rogla FINAL v.2 – Nov 18 2021.docx (globalevaluationinitiative.org)

Sierra Leone: Act No. 7 of 2007, The Child Rights Act, 2007 https://bettercarenetwork.org/library/social-welfare-systems/child-care-and-protection-policies/sierra-leone-act-no-7-of-2007-the-child-rights-act-2007#:~:text=The%20Child%20Rights%20Act%20of,on%20the%20Rights%20and%20Welfare

Sierra Leone Gender Laws Research Report (2018) Advocacy Brief: Assessing the impact of the three Gender Acts in Sierra Leone www.dfa.ie/media/missions/sierraleone/newsandevents/Advocacy-Brief.pdf

Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census Thematic Report on Education and Literacy: UNFPA Sierra Leone | Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census Thematic Report on Education and Literacy

Spivak G. (2003). Can the Subaltern Speak? Die Philosophin. 14(27):42–58.

Statistics Sierra Leone (2017) Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census Thematic Report on Gender. statistics.sl/images/StatisticsSL/Documents/Census/2015/sl_2015_phc_thematic_report_on_gender.pdf

Sunday E-A. (2022) Removal of sex education from curriculum: Is Nigeria scoring another own goal? The Guardian. 13/11/2022.

Taiwo A. (2016) Social construction of gender roles and women's poverty in African societies: the case of the Nigerian woman. International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies. 4(2):1–10. https://doi.org/10.15640/ijgws.v4n2p1 UN Sierra Leone (2014) Our Work on the Sustainable Development Goals in Sierra Leone. Sustainable Development Goals | United Nations in Sierra Leone

Wilson K. (2011) 'Race', Gender and Neoliberalism: changing visual representations in development. Third World Quarterly. 32(2):315–331.

Endnotes

1 Ajala T. (2016) Social construction of gender roles and women's poverty in African societies: the case of the Nigerian woman. International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies. 4(2):1–10.

2 Falb KL, Tanner S, Ward L, et al. (2016) Creating opportunities through mentorship, parental involvement, and safe spaces (COMPASS) program: multi-country study protocol to protect girls from violence in humanitarian settings. BMC Public Health. 16:231. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-2894-3.

3 BONews Service. Period poverty in Nigeria: Girls with disabilities are falling behind in education. Period Poverty in Nigeria: Girls With Disabilities are Falling Behind In Education – BONews Service (bonewssng.com).

4 Spivak, G. (2003) Can the Subaltern Speak? Die Philosophin. 14(27):42–58. Wilson K. (2011). 'Race', Gender and Neoliberalism: changing visual representations in development. Third World Quarterly. 32(2):315–331.

5 Girl-led research report_FINAL.pdf (actionaid.org.uk)

6 ActionAid. (2020). ActionAid's feminist research guidelines. ActionAid's feminist research guidelines. ActionAid International

7 Chant S. Sweetman C. (2012) Fixing women or fixing the world? 'Smart economics', efficiency approaches, and gender equality in development. Gender & Development. 20(3):517–529. doi: 10.1080/13552074.2012.731812.

8 Pincock K and Jones N. (2020) Challenging power dynamics and eliciting marginalised adolescent voices through qualitative methods. International Journal of Qualitative Methods.19:1–11.

9 ActionAid's feminist research guidelines | ActionAid International

10 Gonzalez L. (2020) Por um feminismo Afro-latino-americano. Primavera Para as Rosas Negras. 314.

11 Chakma T. (2023) ActionAid Feminist Research Webinars – Feminist research as politics and power: shifting power and decolonisation, 5 September 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blNOOsXcr-g

12 Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989 to describe how systems of oppression overlap

13 Roglà J. (2021) Navigating the ethics of human subjects research. Microsoft Word – 37 Rogla FINAL v.2 – Nov 18 2021.docx (globalevaluationinitiative.org)

14 The mentors in Nigeria reflect this approach, as they are part of women's and girls' rights organisations.

15 These questions, alongside the questions presented in the paragraphs below, were guided by Cecilia Cordova Liendo, Decolonisation Lead at ActionAid UK.

16 Batliwala S. (Year unknown) All about power: Understanding social power and power structures. All-About-Power.pdf (creaworld.org)

17 To clarify, Decolonial Feminist Participatory Action Research refers to those traditionally known as research participants, as co-researchers instead, meaning those who led the research process ActionAid Feminist Research webinar series: 5-7 September | ActionAid International

18 Abbagana KK. (2013) The role of key elements in educational planning and development in Nigerian Western School System. Journal of Education and Policy Review. 5(2):19–26. Page-19-26_2299_.pdf (cenresinjournals.com)

19 Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census Thematic Report on Education and Literacy: UNFPA Sierra Leone | Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census Thematic Report on Education and Literacy

20 Marriage Age Laws and the Prevalence of Child Marriage and Adolescent Birth: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa: Minimum Marriage Age Laws and the Prevalence of Child Marriage and Adolescent Birth: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa – PubMed (nih.gov)

21 Prevalence and factors associated with teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone: evidence from a nationally representative Demographic and Health Survey of 2019: Prevalence and factors associated with teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone: evidence from a nationally representative Demographic and Health Survey of 2019 | springermedicine.com

22 Beoku-Betts J. (2016) Holding African states to task on gender and violence: Domesticating UNSCR 1325 in the Sierra Leone National Action Plan. Current Sociology, 64(4):654–670. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116640459

23 Level of asset ownership by women in rural North-East and South-East Nigeria Level of asset ownership by women in rural North-East and South-East Nigeria - ScienceDirect

24 Gender analysis of asset inequalities within rural households in Ogun State, Nigeria (PDF) Gender Analysis of Asset Inequalities Within Rural Households in Ogun State, Nigeria. (researchgate.net)

25 National Human Development Report 2019 https://www.undp.org/sierra-leone/publications/national-human-development-report-2019.

26 Nyawo Kama B. (2023) The impact of war experience on psychological well- being amongst adolescents in sierra leone. MSc Thesis. https://docs.neu.edu.tr/library/9556295474.pdf

27 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 interconnected global objectives established by the United Nations in 2015 to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all by 2030, addressing challenges like poverty, inequality, climate change, and peace.

28 'Prohibition of Child marriage Act 2024, Sierra Leone. Available at Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2024 – SierraLII

29 National Strategy for Out of School children in Sierra Leone https://mbsse.gov.sl/wpcontent/ uploads/2022/08/Sierra-Leane-National-OOSC-Strategy.pdf; Sierra Leone Gender Laws Research Report (2018) Advocacy Brief: Assessing the impact of the three Gender Acts in Sierra Leone www.dfa.ie/media/missions/sierraleone/newsandevents/Advocacy-Brief.pdf

30 The registration of customary marriage and divorce act, 2007 https://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2009-01.pdf

31 Sierra Leone: Act No. 7 of 2007, The Child Rights Act, 2007 https://bettercarenetwork.org/library/social-welfaresystems/child-care-and-protection-policies/sierra-leone-act-no-7-of-2007-the-child-rights-act-2007#:~:text=The%20Child%20Rights%20Act%20of,on%20the%20Rights%20and%20Welfare

32 Obaje HI. et al. (2020) Ending child marriage in Nigeria: The Maternal and Child Health Country-Wide Policy. Journal of Science Policy & Governance. 17(1). https://www.sciencepolicyjournal.org/uploads/5/4/3/4/5434385/obaje_etal_jspg_v17.1.pdf

33 A term used by one of the girl-researchers.

34 Sunday E-A.(2022) Removal of sex education from curriculum: Is Nigeria scoring another own goal? The Guardian. 13/11/2022

35 The Sunnah of the Prophet refers to the traditions and practices of the Prophet Mohammad. It encompasses his sayings, actions, approvals, and disapprovals. Muslims consider the Sunnah as a model for proper conduct and a source of Islamic law and moral guidance, second only to the Qu'ran. It provides practical examples of how to apply Islamic teachings in daily life, covering aspects such as worship, social interactions, and personal behaviour

36 https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/knowledge-is-power-youth-led-research-child-marriage-girls-education-west-africa/

37 In Hausa language. A practice that involves married women being secluded in their homes, often only allowed to leave for specific reasons and usually only with permission from their husbands.

38 The human box activity refers to a group exercises used to explore gender and power relations among people.

39 Although the original term used in the research was "prostitution", "sex worker" is less stigmatising, as it recognises that sex work is work. Prostitution carries connotations of judgement and immorality. Many people who sell sexual services prefer the term "sex worker" and find "prostitute" demeaning and stigmatising, which contributes to their exclusion from health, legal, and social services. Sex workers sell sexual services in order to earn a livelihood. The vast majority of sex workers choose to do sex work because it is the best option they have. Many sex workers struggle with poverty and destitution and have few other options for work.' https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/understanding-sex-work-open-society

40 Budu E, Ahinkorah BO, Seidu A-A, Hagan JE Jr. et al. 2021. Child marriage and sexual autonomy among women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence from 31 Demographic and Health Surveys. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 18(7):3754. Page 7. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073754. 42 West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination.

41 West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination.

42 Kush in Sierra Leone is a mixture of cannabis, fentanyl, tramadol, formaldehyde and – according to some – ground down human bones. Not to be confused with the drug of the same name in the USA which is quite different. Kush: what is this dangerous new west African drug that supposedly contains human bones? (theconversation.com)

43 Kush: Sierra Leone's new illegal drug. BBC News https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-60260738

44 The girl researchers went to the field in three groups together with their community mentors. No girl conducted an interview alone, community mentors and other girl researchers were present to provide support and camaraderie. The mentors were trained on safeguarding, and ensured the girls were protected and not put in harm's way. No real incident of violence or safeguarding issues occurred throughout the data collection exercise and beyond. The challenges faced were overcome because the girl researchers and their mentors were trained on how to navigate any arising problem.

45 Nuwabaine L, Sserwanja Q, Kamara K. et al. 2023. Prevalence and factors associated with teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone: evidence from a nationally representative Demographic and Health Survey of 2019. BMC Public Health 23, 527. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15436-x

46 https://www.parliament.gov.sl/uploads/bill_files/THE%20SEXUAL%20OFFENCES%20BILL%202019.pdf

47 Unpaid care and domestic work | ActionAid UK

ActionAid UK

33-39 Bowling
Green Lane
London EC1R 0BJ