



Ending Child Marriage in Sierra Leone: A Bold Approach for Change



Save the Children.

Progress Report: May–September 2022

Hon. Catherine Tarawally and other Members of Sierra Leone Parliament join Save the Children's advocacy efforts, signing a public commitment to end child marriage at a high-level meeting in Freetown in May 2022.



Seizing the Moment to Make a Difference for Girls

Adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in Sierra Leone pose a dire threat to girls, preventing them from realizing their full potential in all aspects of their development. In Sierra Leone, one-third of all girls are married before their 18th birthday – and this number is even greater in rural districts. The country is home to 800,000 child brides, 400,000 of whom were married before age 15.¹ Maternal mortality there is higher than in Afghanistan, and newborn survival rates are among the lowest in the world. Pregnancy complications are the number one killer of girls in Sierra Leone, accounting for a quarter of all deaths of girls age 15-19.²

Yet this is also an incredibly hopeful time in Sierra Leone, one trending decidedly toward positive change. Recently, the country has made a number of promising decisions and policies that greatly benefit women and girls. A law criminalizing marriage before the age of 18 was enacted in 2018. Education is now free for all, and the nation's education budget is 22% of national income. Passionate and competent national-level leaders like the current Ministers of Education and Gender & Children's Affairs are determined to move the country forward, emphasizing the schooling and protection of the country's youngest citizens. With such accelerated progress and an increasingly favorable socio-political environment, **now is the time to eradicate child marriage in Sierra Leone.**

Save the Children is enormously grateful to our donor-partners for enabling us and the communities we serve to seize this pivotal moment. Thank you, friends, for your partnership in our innovative, community-led Ending Child Marriage pilot in Sierra Leone, launched in September 2021.

As of September 2022, \$905,000 has been raised toward the overall goal of \$1.5M to carry out this critical two-year initiative.

At the one-year mark, we are pleased to report on significant progress in the rollout of this multifaceted project, that has three critical elements.

- **“Grass-tops” Advocacy** – Focusing on passing and influencing the implementation of legislation, policies and practices at the national, district and local levels that help prevent and respond to child marriage and gender-based violence.
- **Grassroots Activism** – Conducting research to understand the unique factors leading to child marriage in the pilot area, Kailahun District; engaging local power holders, community leaders, men and boys, and others as allies; and working hand in hand with communities to create and implement action plans to end child marriage.
- **Replication and Scale Up** – Developing a model based on what we learn from this pilot and existing Save the Children technical guidance. These learnings will build upon other successful early marriage efforts to create a scalable template to be used in diverse settings with high child marriage rates around the world.

As you will read, over the past several months we have expanded our efforts in the realm of advocacy and legislation to support **top-down change**. We have been working closely with members of Parliament to analyze how funding is or is not being spent on child marriage prevention and response. And we have been connecting national-level parliamentarians who champion the issue to leaders at

¹ Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2017.

² WHO Maternal Deaths Surveillance and Response Report, 2017.

the regional and local levels, to discuss how best to allocate local funding and coordinate actors to counter child marriage.

We have also made great strides in our efforts to support **bottom-up change**, working with the 15 previously identified pilot communities in the rural district of Kailahun – where 45% of girls marry before age 18, the highest rate in the country³. We have completed research inside these communities to uncover the most significant local drivers of child marriage, created a Social and Behavior Change strategy based on the findings, and begun implementing that strategy. Each phase of the pilot process within the 15 communities is grounded in a community-led approach in which the communities themselves identify the factors driving child marriage and, with the support of Save the Children, lead the charge to achieve the results *they* want to see.

Thank you for standing beside Save the Children as we take on this complex challenge, our eyes trained on creating truly transformational change. It is with the utmost gratitude for your partnership that we share the following report on the recent progress of the Ending Child Marriage pilot in Sierra Leone.

Summary of Key Activities Since May

National/Legislative Level (“Grass-Tops”)

“Grass-tops” advocacy is an essential component of our project. Working closely with government leaders and other influential figures, we champion the passage of national laws, policies and budget allocations to fight child marriage. Our goal is to foster a strong legal and social framework that upholds equal rights for girls and outlaws all forms of gender-based violence, including child marriage.

A high-level meeting in Freetown in May 2022 brought together parliamentarians from the Gender and Child Rights Oversight Committee and Paramount Chief Members of Parliament for an important advocacy activity. These representatives shared examples of the negative impacts of child marriage and reaffirmed their commitment to closing legal loopholes to end this harmful practice. At the end of the meeting, parliamentarians signed the “Commitment to End Child Marriage,” to support laws protecting girls and eradicating the damaging practice. (See cover page image.)

This was a significant step. Yet despite expressions of political will, there are several challenges to creating real and lasting change, such as achieving final passage of the stalled national Child Rights Act, which would ban marriage under age 18. Our Budget and Political Economy Analysis, as detailed below, also revealed chronic underinvestment by the government in Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and other services critical to addressing the issue of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage.

Budget and Political Economy Analysis

We conducted an analysis of the true impact of recent political commitments and legal reforms in the lives of children, families and communities in Sierra Leone. We looked at policies to determine which ones have affected child marriage rates, and we examined socio-cultural issues that negatively impact efforts to eliminate child marriage. Finally, we considered whether policies are receiving adequate funding from the government to be effectively implemented.

³ National Demographic Health Survey, 2019.

We discovered that, despite commitments, necessary actions are not taking place and budgeted money is not being spent. For example, although 0.11% of the total budget was allocated for the health sector to target child marriage in 2020, just 0.09% of the money was actually spent on it. In 2021, 0.03% was earmarked for this purpose, and only 0.01% was actually spent. Additionally, we learned that in the past four years, not a single case of child marriage has been heard in Sierra Leone's magistrate or high courts.

In order to make headway against child marriage, we must expose this lack of investment and attention to the issue. We must help catalyze proper government spending to fight child marriage, push forward on the implementation of policies to end the devastating practice, and enable the voices of youth, including child mothers and child brides, to be heard at the highest levels.

Training Youth Champions to Advocate

Following the presentation of the above findings, we conducted a two-day gender responsive and diverse training for 27 youth advocates (12 female aged 11-18; 15 male aged 13-18), or “champions,” hailing from Kailahun communities most affected by teenage pregnancy and child marriage. The training aimed to strengthen their advocacy and communication skills for future high-level engagements, where they will hold decision makers to account for current budget allocations to address adolescent pregnancy and early marriage and call for more substantial financing to end harmful practices.

In the coming months, we will support these young champions to engage directly with leaders and lawmakers.

Community Level (“Grass-Roots”)

While nationwide legislation must indeed be passed in Sierra Leone to criminalize child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence, the existence of a national law does not guarantee that it will be followed in communities around the country. To bring harmful practices to an end, communities themselves must be motivated to come together to stop them. This is precisely why the application of the Ending Child Marriage pilot at the community level is so important, and why efforts must be driven by the communities themselves, rather than by Save the Children.

Importance of Foundational Research

As reported in the prior progress report, working with the Kailahun District Chairman, Paramount Chiefs, and other community leaders, Save the Children identified and invited 15 Kailahun communities to take part in the pilot. For each of these communities, the first step to creating a plan to halt child marriage was to understand the underlying contexts, practices, and assumptions – or “drivers” – enabling child marriage to occur. Save the Children helped to facilitate this understanding through foundational research.

Foundational research is crucial to the Ending Child Marriage pilot for several reasons.

- It helps to build trust and a collaborative partnership between us and the communities.
- It ensures that communities are part of the process from the very beginning.
- The findings provide vital guidance on the drivers of child marriage and the ways in which communities, with the support of Save the Children, can address and curb the practice.

Research Approach

Our research study was conducted in spring 2022 in two Kailahun communities. Participants included Paramount Chiefs, religious leaders, Soweis (initiation leaders), women leaders, health workers and other members of the community, including youths and adults who had experienced adolescent pregnancy and child marriage. While none of the participants were persons with disabilities, the Sierra Leone Country Office actively promotes participation of persons with disabilities and ensures appropriate access.

Research Results

Our research confirmed that *pregnancy and child marriage are inextricably linked* in the Kailahun communities and uncovered three main drivers of adolescent pregnancy:

1. Adolescent girls or their families wishing to elevate their challenging economic circumstances through relationships with men.
2. Boys and men seeking sexual relationships with girls under the age of 18.
3. Harassment and coercion of girls by men for the purposes of sex.

Families may seek to better their economic circumstances by marrying off a daughter to an older man or may be pressured into doing so. A man or slightly older boy may directly coerce girls themselves into sexual activity, or girls may attempt to assert premature independence or achieve a better financial situation by engaging in transactional sex or relationships with older men. They may also enter into relationships with boys their own age.

Regardless of how it occurs, in Sierra Leone when a young girl becomes pregnant, early marriage usually follows, sealing her fate. She is then subject to a host of dangers that go hand in hand with adolescent pregnancy, adolescent motherhood, and child marriage. She and her child face significant health risks during pregnancy and childbirth, including death. Inevitably the young mother's education is cut short. Her childhood is effectively over. Hope for a positive future is often lost forever.

Taking the research a step further, together with the communities we identified two major factors contributing to early pregnancy:

1. Living in poverty.
2. Enduring complex circumstances at home, including harsh discipline and a misunderstanding by adults who believe that adolescents are emotionally and physically mature.



In September 2022, Save the Children CEO Janti Soeripto, Board Chair Brad Irwin, and Trustees Corinne Basler, Debra Fine, and Raj Kumar visited Save the Children's programs in Sierra Leone. In Kailahun, a 10-hour drive from the capital Freetown, they spoke to young women and girls about the drivers of child marriage and our work supporting them to create change. An 11-year-old shared how she gained the confidence in our "safe space" to tell her parents she did not want to get married and wanted to stay in school. A 17-year-old said she had gone back to school, while also taking care of her small son. Young people and their communities desire a future free from child marriage, and Save the Children is dedicated to helping them achieve it.

Thus, while it is not uncommon for girls to have sought out the circumstances that led them to pregnancy and ultimately to early marriage, it is important to understand the full context in which these girls are making their limited choices. We must also recognize that these are children, girls as young as 12 and 13 years old, who deserve a childhood and the opportunity to reach their full potential without the burden of early motherhood or marriage.

Putting Research into Action

With the research complete and the findings in hand, Save the Children and the 15 Kailahun pilot communities are armed with an understanding of the nuanced, local drivers of child marriage. We are now working with each community to help them move through a community-led process of translating this information into action, through Save the Children’s Community Action Cycle.

Our work in Kailahun with Paramount Chiefs, religious and traditional leaders, parents and young people (girls and boys) is making a difference.
-Janti Soeripto, CEO, Save the Children US

Already underway, our **Community Action Cycle** will mobilize the communities themselves to develop and implement concrete actions to counter child marriage.

Groups Engaged in Community Action Cycle

Project Team	District Mobilization Team (DMT)	Community Action Group (CAG)	Broader Community
Save the Children’s team in Sierra Leone working on the Ending Child Marriage pilot.	<p>A team of district-level stakeholders who set up Community Action Groups, and work closely with them to facilitate and drive the community action process.</p> <p>Includes individuals from the Ministry of Gender Children Affairs, Children’s Forum Network, Ministry of Education, National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy, and Kailahun District Council.</p> <p>There are two DMT teams: Team 1 covers Kissi Teng and Mandu Chiefdoms; Team 2 covers Peje Bongre and Yawei Chiefdoms.</p>	<p>A group of 10-15 community-level stakeholders most affected by and interested in the issues of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage who will be the core team working to develop community action plans.</p> <p>Includes Paramount Chiefs, traditional and religious leaders, youth including girls who have experienced adolescent pregnancy and child marriage, parents of adolescents who have experienced adolescent pregnancy, teachers, and community health workers.</p>	Community members in each of the 15 pilot communities, who participate in their respective communities’ community action plan.

Phases of Community Action Cycle

Phase	Key Actions	Status / Timing
Phase 1: Prepare to Mobilize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project Team conducts meetings with national- and district-level stakeholders, receives buy-in on the research findings, introduces the Social Behavior Change strategy, provides an overview of approaches to be used, and identifies stakeholders for District Mobilization Teams (DMTs). Project Team trains DMTs on the Community Action Cycle process, as facilitators, and on Phase 2. 	Complete
Phase 2: Organize the Community for Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DMTs conduct orientation meetings with community leaders and community members in each of the 15 pilot communities. DMTs form Community Action Groups (CAGs) with 10-15 members in each group. DMTs orient CAGs on the Community Action Cycle process and their roles and responsibilities. CAGs and DMTs create a manifesto of values, commitments to action and a vision for the future, to be shared across the pilot communities. 	Nearly Complete
Phase 3: Explore Issues & Set Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DMTs present findings from formative research to CAGs and validate them, adding/amending as needed for each community. DMTs and CAGs prioritize the drivers of child marriage to be addressed in each community. 	Ongoing
Phase 4: Plan Together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DMTs and CAGs develop community action plans to address the drivers of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage. CAGs present Community Action Plans to each community, tweak plans with input from the community, and engage community stakeholders to participate. 	November
Phase 5: Act Together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project Team provides any needed capacity building and other support for CAGs and community members to be able implement and monitor their Community Action Plans. CAGs and communities implement the activities in their Community Action Plans. CAGs hold monthly meetings for ongoing planning, adaptation, and monitoring of activities and changes resulting from them. CAGs participate in quarterly meetings with other CAGs to exchange experiences and accelerate the pace of change across the pilot communities. 	November
Phase 6: Evaluate Together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project Team, DMTs, CAGs, and community members meet to celebrate successes and recognize achievements. Project Team, DMTs, and CAGs evaluate changes resulting from community actions. Sustainability planning begins, in consultation with community leaders and CAGs. 	December

Preparing to Scale Up: Once the final phase is complete, the District Mobilization Teams will share the pilot's learnings with district- and national-level leaders and begin to launch the Community Action Cycle in new Kailahun communities. National-level advocates will use this information to push for more national-level laws and resources to expand successful actions to end child marriage in Kailahun and other districts.

Looking Ahead

Over the next 2-3 months, the Save the Children project team will support each community to complete phases two and three of the Community Action Cycle, to complete the training of Community Action Groups (CAGs), and prepare and support CAGs as they go out into their communities to better understand the issues at play and prioritize the drivers of child marriage.

Then, perhaps most excitingly, over the next few months the CAGs will plan and implement *concrete actions* to address adolescent pregnancy and early marriage in their communities, phases four and five. CAGs will closely monitor and document these actions and the changes that result. We are particularly excited to share these concrete actions and the progress they are beginning to achieve in the next report.

Meanwhile, Save the Children will continue advocacy efforts using evidence from our Budget and Political Economy Analysis. We will support youth champions as they campaign for increased government investments to end child marriage and address adolescent pregnancy. Through high-level engagements, we will also continue to engage parliamentarians, Paramount Chiefs, and other key decision-makers to hold government to account and push for stronger policies to protect girls.

Finally, Save the Children will bring these two elements together – our efforts at the national level and those at the community level. We will bring policy makers into the communities to highlight the realities of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy and bring attention to the community efforts driving change.

Voices from the Communities

Statistics and research can only go so far to convey the impact of any given program. Those whose lives are affected offer true insight on daily realities and how our collaborative work is making a difference.

Aminata's Story: Resilience Turned to Advocacy

Aminata knows the harsh reality of child marriage all too well. At age 14, she became pregnant after a 25 year old visitor to her Kailahun community coerced her into a sexual relationship. Believing she was without another option, she went to live with him. He did not value education for girls, so Aminata stopped attending school and submitted to the wishes of this man who quickly began abusing her – even starving her.

Sadly, Aminata's baby died during childbirth. She then returned to her parents' home and begged them to send her back to school. When they agreed, Aminata dedicated herself to earning good grades and successfully transitioned from junior high to high school. Now, she is hard at work again, determined to gain admission to a technical college.

"This project is making a difference because the knowledge I get from the ECM meetings I bring back to my community. Save the Children has really tried for us."

-Aminata, Champion, Morbai Community, Kailahun

Aminata feels strongly about preventing girls in her community from enduring similar trials, so she became a champion to help girls avoid teen pregnancy. She encourages girls to focus on their educations so they can build a bright future on their own terms. She goes to the markets to speak to parents, urging them to educate their girls rather than give them up to early marriage.

It is not just young men who seek out girls to marry. Aminata says older men in the community with property or palm farms approach the chief asking for an introduction to a young girl's parents. If the parents are not willing at first, the chief helps persuade them, telling them that the older man is a friend and that they will benefit greatly by marrying their daughter to him. She adds that, thankfully, this practice is beginning to reduce, with many parents increasingly less keen to marry off their daughters under age 18.

John is Raising His Voice to Help Right a Wrong

Through the Ending Child Marriage pilot, John has become a champion in Manowa, Peje Bongri Chiefdom, where he says 6 out of 10 girls aged 14 to 16 become pregnant. In his new role, he now talks openly to people in his community, aiming to help reduce the high rate of adolescent pregnancy, drive down instances of child marriage, allow girls to continue their educations and enable them to become leaders. He holds awareness meetings with fellow champions, engaging religious leaders to educate them about the project with Save the Children.

"I am happy with the progress we are making in this pilot. Over the past few months we have started seeing a shift in attitudes toward child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. Some communities have already put bylaws in place and are speaking out against these harmful practices. In Njala, there are champions who found out about a case of child marriage. They caught the perpetrator and handed him over to the law in Kailahun Town."

-Victoria Squire, Advocacy & Policy Manager, ECM Project Lead

John's community has put bylaws in place, fining men who marry or have sex with young girls. These perpetrators are being reported to the authorities more often now.

John is grateful for the project because it has brought about a critical awareness within his community about the negative impacts of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage.

Measuring Success and Creating a Model for Change

At the very heart of this project is a vision – to realize a world in which no child marries. The first step in this process is to carry our two-year pilot to completion in Sierra Leone. Thereafter, we will analyze its effectiveness through a qualitative assessment of the change our pilot helped to create around adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in Kailahun and around the country. We will then be in a position to create a sustainable change model that can be employed throughout Sierra Leone and, eventually, elsewhere in Africa and around the world, to address the nuanced drivers of child marriage and lower instances of this devastating practice in even the most diverse and challenging contexts.

Thank You

The boldness of this project reflects the compassionate, intrepid nature of the generous partners who have put their trust and resources behind it. We have learned a great deal over the past year, including about the particular drivers of child marriage in our Kailahun pilot communities. While perhaps some of these drivers did not fit in with our previous understanding, each one is contributing to the same devastating outcomes.

Marriage for children has life-shattering, *often life-ending* consequences, no matter the context in which it occurs. Girls have a right to thrive – to live, learn, and make informed, positive choices about their futures. As women, they deserve to be able to contribute as educated, participatory, respected members of their communities.

Thank you for sharing our vision of a world in which this is possible for all girls. We look forward to your continued support and engagement as we work toward making this dream a reality in Kailahun, in Sierra Leone, and beyond.