

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



The Sierra Leone government and, in particular, Her Excellency the First Lady, Madam Fatima Maada Bio, have shown an extraordinary commitment and political will to support actions that can end the human-rights violation of child marriage, driving significant momentum toward that end. Government leaders are implementing a dedicated approach to ensuring all girls – including young mothers and pregnant girls – receive an education. The First Lady plays a leading role in the region in speaking out against child marriage and has reached 95,000 children, parents and government leaders through Sierra Leone’s *Hands Off Our Girls* campaign. In addition, the Child Rights Act, which is currently under review in parliament, now includes the prohibition of child marriage.

Right now, Sierra Leone is well-positioned to make a profound shift in addressing child marriage and changing the social norms that surround it. Growing momentum within the country presents an extraordinary opportunity for 100 Strong to have a shared impact on this critical issue, by creating an enabling environment where girls are supported and can pursue alternative choices and opportunities.

We invite you to join us in the fight to end child marriage in Sierra Leone, and hope you will consider investing together toward a collective \$1.5 million, multifaceted pilot program. As of July 2021, our donors have contributed a generous \$870,000 toward this goal, which will enable us to launch the first year of activities beginning on September 1. We are seeking an additional \$630,000 in funds to bring the project through its second and final year.

About Child Marriage in Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, the drivers of child marriage are rooted in poverty, lack of access to education, pervasive gender inequality and discriminatory gender norms and beliefs. As a result, the rate of child marriage in Sierra Leone is staggering, with 39% of all girls married before they turn 18.¹

The phenomenon is fueled by very high rates of adolescent pregnancy – 38% of girls have given birth by age 18.² Equally important, experience shows adolescent pregnancy increases in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In Sierra Leone, if a girl is not married and becomes pregnant, the perceived “best solution” is marriage or another arrangement between the girl and the child’s father (who is typically at least 10 years her senior³) in an attempt to legitimize the pregnancy and preserve the family’s reputation. There is also a significant “blame culture” surrounding girls who become pregnant, and there is stigma that limits access to services, including

¹ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/sierra-leone/#:~:text=39%25%20of%20girls%20in%20Sierra.child%20marriage%20in%20the%20world.>

² UNFPA 2016

³ Coinco, Emily: A Glimpse into the World of Teenage Pregnancy in Sierra Leone; UNICEF 2010.

protection, sexual and reproductive health and information, as well as services to treat sexually transmitted diseases.

Our Vision for Girls

We are working toward our vision of a Sierra Leone where the law protects the right of a girl to grow up, access education and have a say in determining her path in life. She lives in a society in which no woman or girl faces discrimination, suffers violence or marries before her 18th birthday, and every last girl fully enjoys her right to survive, learn and be protected from harm.

How We Will Make Change Happen, Together

A key focus of Save the Children's **current** work in Sierra Leone is empowering women and girls as agents of change. This includes life-skills training, enabling access to sexual and reproductive health services, support for returning to school, help with starting a business and engagement of girls as community champions against child marriage.

Yet, we know that empowering girls is only part of the solution. Local context and drivers – such as high rates of teenage pregnancy and deeply entrenched cultural beliefs among both men and women in Sierra Leone – are key to informing the multifaceted solutions needed to realize more robust results on ending child marriage.

We seek to build on our foundational work by taking the next important step: creating an environment that supports justice and equal opportunity for girls. In the end, we envision all parties coming together to create a tipping point whereby child marriage is no longer accepted, and girls have alternative choices and the ability to pursue them. With your investment, we expect to reach 12,000 women, girls, men and boys – and through our advocacy efforts – thousands more.

Your support of this project will help to:

- 1. Pass legislation that will deter child marriage and influence the implementation of laws and policies against the practice.** Our first objective is to create a legal environment in Sierra Leone that prevents any loopholes that would allow child marriage to occur. To that end, we will undertake activities leading to the realization of legal frameworks relevant to ending child marriage, including final adoption of the Child Rights Act with language prohibiting child marriage.
- 2. Engage community leaders, men and boys as allies to challenge harmful norms and promote positive practices around gender and marriage.** The reason why engaging men and boys is important is that Sierra Leone is a predominantly patriarchal society. Key influencers, especially at the community level, tend to be male. Also, there is a socially condoned sense of entitlement attributed to men and boys, which leads them to be key actors in sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation, underage sex and transactional sex that results in adolescent pregnancy.

We will work at the grassroots level to give people of all genders opportunities for frank discussion about their beliefs around marriage and gender roles. The program design that follows must be created in collaboration with community leaders, local partner organizations and participants. This includes working closely with Paramount Chiefs –

power-holders at the local level – to develop local-level bylaws on preventing child marriage and, importantly, to see to enforcement of those laws. Once one Paramount Chief establishes a local bylaw, it is easier to influence others to follow.

We will also conduct baseline research and social and behavioral analysis to gain a nuanced understanding of the drivers of social and gender norms in the pilot area. Using this information, we will work in partnership with key stakeholders as identified by the analysis to develop a plan and toolkit of approaches to address child marriage. The toolkit could include project activities that engage men and boys around improved knowledge and skills on gender-equitable relationships, sexual and reproductive health, and gender-based violence.

- 3. Develop evidence we can use to replicate the approach and scale it up across Sierra Leone and in other countries in Africa.** The success of this pilot project has the potential to attract significant sources of funding to scale up our integrated approach. Moreover, Save the Children’s regional and international presence, as well as our regional and global advocacy capacity, provide an outstanding platform for replication of successful models of programming and advocacy in an international development context. There are numerous countries in Africa with soaring numbers of child marriage, which are even more exacerbated by COVID-19. Piloting this intervention in Sierra Leone will enable us to build evidence for our strategy and leverage institutional funding to scale it up in other countries in Africa.

Where We Will Implement

Save the Children proposes to focus this pilot in Kailahun, an impoverished district in the Southern region of Sierra Leone. Bordering Guinea and Liberia, Kailahun was devastated by more than a decade of civil war in Sierra Leone. Recovery was barely under way when Ebola arrived in 2014, causing more death and devastation. The Sierra Leone Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2019, found that the district has an incidence of multidimensional poverty of 77.6% and an 81.3% incidence of poverty for those 14 years and younger.⁴



Why Save the Children

Save the Children stands out for our experience and expertise, and our ability to develop innovative solutions that are designed and driven by the communities in which we work. For more than 20 years, we have worked holistically within Sierra Leonean communities to identify root causes of gender inequality, develop effective approaches, show evidence of their efficacy and scale up best practices.

Please Join Us in the Fight Against Child Marriage

With you at our side, we can – and will – change the lives of girls in Sierra Leone and beyond, empowering them to live fully empowered lives and to shape their own futures. Thank you!

⁴ OPHI, 2019. https://ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Sierra_Leone_MPI_2019_final.pdf