



**Defence for
Children International**
the worldwide movement for children's rights

Contribution to the report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on realizing the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 32/20 of the Human Rights Council

This submission is based on work of Defence for Children International in **Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone**, as part of the Girl Power Programme (2011-2015) and the Girls Advocacy Alliance (2016-2020). In addition, the submission incorporates findings of DCI-Sierra Leone's report "*A Mountain to Climb: Gender-Based Violence and Girls' Right to Education in Sierra Leone*" (May 2015)¹. The research conducted by DCI-Sierra Leone, together with Barbara Robinson of the University of Essex, fully integrated the participation of girls and highlights issues and priorities identified by girls.

While progress has been made in all three countries to increase the rate of girls engaged in primary schools, numerous barriers to the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl remain. Poverty, gender stereotypes, gender-based violence and unsafe and inadequate school environments, represent crucial issues in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Moreover, DCI has noted that girls and young women continue to enjoy less secondary and tertiary education than boys and young men. Unequal access to education, including technical and vocational training and education (TVET), lead to a high concentration of women in the informal economy, i.e in the lower echelons of the labour market. Weak economic opportunities for girls and young women often push them to look for other means of income, increasing their exposure to situations of abuse, violence and exploitation.

With the adoption of the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** the world has agreed to "leave no one behind". The SDGs clearly recognize that there is a need to more explicitly address the challenges related to the right to education, particularly regarding quality and equity in education. Human Rights Council resolution 32/20 stressed that "education is a multiplier right that empowers women and girls to make choices to claim their human rights, including the right to participate in public affairs, and to participate fully in the making of decisions that shape society", and expressed a determination to "continue to make the progressive realization of the right to education a reality for every girl". Such recent developments fall in line with principles enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which ensure that girls' right to education (art. 28 & 29) is guaranteed through the principle of non-discrimination (art. 2), the best interests of the child (art. 3) and the right to life and development (art. 6).

Barriers to girls' right to education

Poverty remains a key underlying factor that continuously represents a major barrier to education. Many families, in particular those living in slums and rural areas, are unable to prioritize the educational needs of their daughters due to financial constraints and the need to meet their most basic needs. Day-to-day survival therefore prevails over investment in the long-term future of girls. Poverty and parental

¹ Available to download at: http://www.defenceforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/GBV-and-Girls-Right-to-Education-in-Sierra-Leone_May2015_EN.pdf



attitudes² also often lead to the involvement of girls in exploitative (sexual) relationships, and therefore increase school drop-outs.

Gender stereotypes and the low status of girls and young women represent a major hindrance to girls' access to education. Girls are often used as "household helps" and/or street vendors, therefore echoing the failure to prioritize the educational needs of girls. In addition, girls are exposed to various forms of discrimination and **gender-based violence** (GBV) that continuously hold them back from enjoying their right to education. Traditional harmful practices, especially Female Genital Mutilation (FGM/Cutting)³ and Child, Early and Forced Marriage are crucial factors leading to girls' disengagement from school. Girls and community members interviewed by DCI-Sierra Leone commented that early marriage⁴ is hugely damaging to girls' right to education, because girls are seen as forfeiting their rights as children once they become married 'women'⁵. The issue is not just linked to a culture where girls are expected get married at an early age, but also a fear amongst parents that their daughters may get pregnant out of wedlock, bringing 'shame' upon their families.

Other forms of gender-based violence such as sexual violence and abuse, combined with difficult access to and subsequent low-rate of contraceptive use, have led to high rates of **teenage pregnancy and early motherhood**, which have a profound impact on girls' ability to stay on in education. DCI has noted in the three countries shortcomings when it comes to take appropriate measures for girls. For example, DCI has noted that during the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, thousands of pregnant girls⁶ were refused access to public schools and/or placed in "specific" schools, with little regard to their best interests. In Liberia and Ghana, DCI has noted that despite legislations in place allows for pregnant girls and young mothers to attend school, social stigma and weak knowledge about these laws push pregnant girls to drop-out from school and do not encourage young mothers to reintegrate the educational system⁷.

The realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by girls continues to face barriers through the failure of authorities to provide **safe, accessible and non-discriminatory school environments** for girls. Occurrences of (sexual) harassment, abuse and violence continue to affect girls both on their way to and at school. In schools, girls can be faced with situations where teachers will ask for sexual favours in exchange for good grades, while the non-provision of adequate and separated toilets and sanitation

² Some girls would engage in exploitative sexual relationships to cope with the inability of their parents to meet their most basic needs, while parents can also push their own daughters into prostitution or other exploitative situations in order to support themselves or their families.

³ In Sierra Leone, 90% of girls and women aged 15 to 49 years have undergone FGM: <http://data.unicef.org/resources/female-genital-mutilation-cutting-country-profiles/>

⁴ Here we include both formal and informal forms of child, early and forced marriage. In the three countries, the lack of harmonisation between national and customary laws does not allow to effectively tackle the issue.

⁵ Especially due to the symbolic role of such practices, which mark the transition into womanhood and therefore annihilate girls' educational needs.

⁶ In November 2015, a report by Amnesty International estimated that up to 10,000 girls were affected by the ban on visibly pregnant girls attending school and sitting exams. Moreover, a study in 2016 by the Secure Livelihoods Consortium stated that UNFPA surveys indicate 18,119 teenage girls became pregnant during the Ebola outbreak. (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/sierra-leone-continued-pregnancy-ban-in-schools-and-failure-to-protect-rights-is-threatening-teenage-girls-futures/>)

⁷ Unmarried young mothers face particularly strong social stigma.



facilities increase the risk of sexual abuse. The lack of gender-sensitive measures as well as reporting channels for victims of abuse in schools do not allow to effectively addressing such issues. DCI particularly strives to establish and support child rights clubs⁸, including in schools, which not only allow for girls to report abuses but more importantly to support them in standing for their rights. Moreover, particularly in rural areas, girls often have to walk long distances to reach schools, exposing them to abuse and violence. Provisions of school bus services and/or the building of local accessible schools in or close to girls' communities have been identified by DCI as key interventions to reduce the risks.

Adequate facilities and materials, a relevant and holistic **curriculum** and well-trained, motivated **teachers** are crucial to ensure that girls receive an education of quality. In Bombali district, Sierra Leone, DCI runs a programme in Junior Secondary (post-primary) schools to facilitate girl's access to quality education. They have noted the following barriers to girls' equal right to education: a) reduced schooling hours, which enhance girls' involvement in domestic/street labour in the afternoon; b) insufficient⁹ and inadequate facilities; and c) lack of qualified and/or recognized teachers¹⁰. As a consequence, in these communities, a high number of girls were not able to pass the national Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), therefore abruptly ending their access to secondary school. Through its Regional Programme on Education, DCI-Sierra Leone reached an agreement with teachers to give two extra hours of lessons per day, focusing mainly on key topics such as Mathematics and English¹¹. In addition, DCI-Sierra Leone supported local schools to acquire generators to produce electricity and therefore allowing girls to study after class. While the project is still on-going, it has already been noted that the success rate for the BECE has increased and that the prevalence of teenage pregnancy and exposure to domestic activities and/or sexual abuse in the homes have been reduced.

Conclusions and recommendations

A holistic approach is needed to tackle the multiple barriers to the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl.

Measures must be taken to ensure that girls access education in the first place. **Poverty reduction and the change of attitudes towards gender roles and stereotypes** are crucial steps to begin with. In all three above-mentioned countries, DCI raises awareness among local communities about the need to ensure that girls' rights are understood and respected at all times and that investment in girls, particularly through education, is for the best interests and long-term benefit of the families, and more importantly of the girls themselves. In addition, practical measures need to be put in place to effectively address

⁸ Child rights clubs can take various forms, including boys clubs and girls' rights clubs. DCI also strives to support such child-led initiatives at community-level in complement their support to local, community-based Child Welfare Committees.

⁹ Many girls and boys have to walk 6-10 miles every day to reach the nearest school.

¹⁰ Most teachers come from the local communities and have not even completed secondary school. In other cases, like in Mapaki town, most teachers have graduated from the teachers' college but have not been approved by the government and are therefore not formally recognized and paid as they should be.

¹¹ The lessons are given free of charge by teachers. In exchange, DCI-Sierra Leone covers part of their transportation costs. The focus is on key topics such as Mathematics or English, as they are required to pass the BECE.



traditional harmful practices, such as FGM/Cutting and child, early and forced marriage, both through awareness-raising activities and the enactment/revision and implementation of relevant laws¹².

Support to community-led and child-led initiatives is crucial. In schools and communities, DCI-supported Child/Girls Rights Clubs empower girls to become active agents of change and also contribute to strengthen protection mechanisms. Community/village Child Welfare Committees and other local stakeholders also play a crucial role in promoting changes in attitudes and supporting girls' right to education. In Ghana, as part of the Girl Power Programme, mentors were assigned in communities to support girls in accessing and succeeding at school, enshrining the idea that raising girls is not just a parental responsibility but also the entire community's job¹³. States shall therefore thrive to support such initiatives and actors to bring about the necessary changes.

Practical measures must be taken to ensure that **schools are safe, non-discriminatory environments** for girls. States shall strive to ensure zero tolerance against corporal punishment, sexual harassment, abuse and violence and any other harmful, gender-based types of violence endangering girls' safety. Moreover, accessibility to adequate and appropriate study facilities must be ensured. Separation of sanitation facilities in schools and ensuring bus services to schools are examples of measures to put in place.

There is a crucial need to **improve the quality of education**, and not solely focus on the number of girls attending school. Holistic and relevant curricula, which include human rights, sexual reproductive health and other relevant topics, must be put in place to ensure that girls receive an education of quality. Building and strengthening the capacities of teachers is key, in order to ensure that they are adequately qualified. Moreover, States shall strive to reduce the gender bias in accessing Technical and Vocational Training and Education.

Measures must also be put in place to address the **specific needs of girls in vulnerable situations**, in particular pregnant girls and young mothers. Specific arrangements are needed to ensure that pregnant girls can continue to attend classes and efforts shall be made to encourage young mothers and other girls that have dropped out from school to reintegrate and re-engage in the educational system.

Overall, the realisation of the equal right to education for girls must be attained through the availability (free education, qualified teachers, adequate facilities, elimination of constraining factors such as traditional harmful practices), accessibility (non-discrimination), acceptability (appropriate curriculum and safe school environment) and adaptability (specific needs, e.g. pregnant girls and young mothers) of education to girls.

¹² Within the Girls Advocacy Alliance programme, DCI advocates for the harmonization of national and customary laws on child marriage and leads sensitization campaigns to change attitudes and create incentives for communities to renounce to such harmful practices.

¹³ For details see : Girl Power Programme, Lessons Learnt, available at: <http://www.defenceforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Empowering-girls-lessons-learnt.pdf>