A STUDY ON CHILD MARRIAGE IN SIERRA LEONE

MAY – AUGUST 2015

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN
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<tr>
<td>ASJP</td>
<td>Access to Security and Justice Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>BECE</td>
<td>Basic Education Certificate Examination</td>
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<td>CBO</td>
<td>Community Based Organization</td>
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<td>CFN</td>
<td>Children’s Forum Network</td>
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<td>CRA</td>
<td>Child Rights Act</td>
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<td>CMA</td>
<td>Customary Marriage and Divorce Act</td>
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<td>CWC</td>
<td>Child Welfare Committee</td>
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<td>FGD</td>
<td>Focus Group Discussion</td>
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<td>FSU</td>
<td>Family Support Unit</td>
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<td>GOSL</td>
<td>Government of Sierra Leone</td>
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<td>IEC</td>
<td>Information, Education and Communication</td>
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<td>JSS</td>
<td>Junior Secondary School</td>
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<td>KII</td>
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<td>LUC</td>
<td>Local Unit Commander</td>
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<td>MEST</td>
<td>Ministry of Education Science and Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>M &amp; E</td>
<td>Monitoring and Evaluation</td>
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<td>MOU</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding</td>
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<td>MSWGCA</td>
<td>Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children’s Affairs</td>
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<td>NCC</td>
<td>National Commission for Children</td>
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<td>NGOs</td>
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<td>PC</td>
<td>Paramount Chief</td>
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<td>SLP</td>
<td>Sierra Leone Police</td>
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<td>SRH</td>
<td>Sexual Reproductive Health</td>
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<td>SSO</td>
<td>Social Services Officer</td>
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<td>SSS</td>
<td>Senior Secondary School</td>
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<td>TV</td>
<td>Television</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children's Fund</td>
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<td>WASSCE</td>
<td>West African Senior School Certificate Examination</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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a. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The office of the National Commission for Children expresses immense gratitude to the Access to Security and Justice Program (ASJP) for the invaluable moral and financial support that bolstered this exercise and made it a success. We remain grateful for the industry and support with which ASJP’s Voice and Accountability Advisor, Mrs. Alice M Lahai and team accorded the NCC team in all the various districts visited.

We accordingly express our sincere thanks to the Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA) particularly the Director of Children’s Affairs Madam Kadie Buya Kamara, Deputy Director Mrs. Joyce Kamara and the Senior Social Services Officers in Koinadugu, Pujehun, Kono and the Western Area Rural Districts for the immeasurable support towards the planning of individual meetings, Focus-group-discussions, Key informant interviews and the District Dialogue Sessions.

We are grateful to all those who made it a priority to be involved in the various group discussions and exclusive interviews in Musaia in the Folosaba Dembelia Chiefdom, Sinkunia in the Dembelia Sinkunia Chiefdom, Sandor and Nimikoro chiefdoms, Sahn Malen and Barri Chiefdoms and Waterloo and Tombo communities. We are equally thankful for the active involvement and support demonstrated by Traditional and Religious Leaders, Government officials, women’s groups, NGOs, CBOs, children and all those from the various chiefdoms who participated in the District consultative dialogue sessions and various Radio Programmes.
b. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The fact finding research conducted by the National Commission for Children (NCC) with support from Access to Security and Justice Programme (ASJP) is representative of the nation. A mixed method was used: primary qualitative data collection through KIIs, FGDs, and Consultative Dialogues backed up by secondary quantitative data derived from MEST and FSU. The survey is mainly conducted to get firsthand information that gives supportive evidence on the causes and prevalence of child marriage in the country and to recommend appropriate interventions that would ensure access to justice for victims of child marriage and minimize the practice in its entirety.

In summary, the study reveals that child marriage is generally practised at all levels and by different categories of individuals. However, the underlying reasons were found to be diversified and interrelated.

Responses from participants’ perception on the practice revealed that it is strongly conventional and a valuable option for girls. Most communities are not aware of the severity of this offence as compared to other incidents of child abuses. Generally, laws governing child marriage are unfamiliar and this has been strongly linked to the prevalence of the act. Different categories of participants generally condoned the practice giving examples of family members, relatives and neighbours who were considered victims of child marriage. Interestingly, it was found out that the basis for such perception is grounded on society’s respect and value of the institution of marriage. Marriage is considered to be a formal arrangement between two families sealed with a dowry or bride price.

Thus marriages were not alluded to any special terminology such as ‘child marriage’. This to a large extent proves community’s notion that it is a normal and acceptable practice ‘marade nar marade’. It should be noted that very little statistical data is available on child marriage.

Considering other factors influencing the practice, teenage pregnancy and weak educational facilities were found to be a strong determinant of child marriage. Far distances to schools especially at secondary level and low quality of teaching offered in schools in the chiefdoms cause girls to move away from their parents in pursuit of better educational opportunities. This exposes them to sexual abuse and exploitation. Furthermore, it was observed that most of the girls are betrothed to the men who impregnate them.

Poor parenting was also raised as a concern affecting the welfare of girls. Interviews revealed that parental support and guidance are minimal in most homes. This was supported by the fact that some parents concentrate more on their sources of income and value their sources of livelihood much more than their children. To shift their responsibility to men in better financial positions who show interest in their daughters is a common feature in the society.
Finally, the ineffectiveness of laws against child marriage was linked to the reasons for impunity. The process of ensuring justice for the victims is slow and the capacity of law enforcement officers to respond to child marriage is low.

Conclusions from the findings revealed that there are significant misconceptions and ignorance of the laws against child marriage. This coupled with the inconsistencies in the laws against child marriage leads to compromise and thus the prevalence of child marriage in the Sierra Leone society.
1. INTRODUCTION

Child Marriage is a formal or informal union entered into with an individual before reaching the age of 18. It has a lot of negative implications on girls in particular and the society as a whole. It affects in the majority girls especially those from very poor socioeconomic situations. Girls drop out of school thus depriving them of education and meaningful work. They suffer health risks associated with early sexual activity and childbearing. This contributes to high rates of maternal and child mortality as well as sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. They are more likely to be victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and social isolation. Child marriage devastates the lives of girls, their families, and their communities perpetuating the cycle of poverty. It is believed that most of these girls who are given into early marriages if given the opportunity to be educated and to develop to their fullest potential will become better people in society and will make their own meaningful contributions to the development of the country.

The practice of child marriage in Sierra Leone is predominant in many parts of the country. According to two different surveys conducted by UNICEF in 2013 and the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2008, seventy percent (70%) of teenage girls in Sierra Leone are married (WHO 2008), and over 10% of girls are married before age 15 and over 30% are married before age 18 (UNICEF 2013). One of the effects of the recent Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone was an increase in teenage pregnancy which resulted to a number of children reportedly married off by their parents.

Sierra Leone has enacted legislations to prevent child marriage. Article 34 (1) of the Child Rights Act 2007 states that the minimum age of marriage whether formal or informal shall be eighteen (18) years. Article 2 states that no person shall force a child - to be betrothed; to be the subject of a dowry transaction, or to be married. Notwithstanding these legislations, the issue of early marriage remains one of the greatest challenges still affecting rural women and girls.

Enforcement of the laws, however, remains the biggest challenge. Despite the existence of the Family Support Unit (FSU) of the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) in all the district headquarter towns and some chiefdoms in Sierra Leone, complaints against child marriage have been very low due to the fact that most child marriages are either done informally or in secrecy, a suggestion as to why Child Marriage matters are rarely prosecuted in the country. In 2015, there were only two cases charged to court in Freetown.

Even though very few matters are reported and in some instances brought to the public domain these matters normally die a natural death during the investigation process.

The National Commission for Children (NCC) was established by an Act of Parliament in 2007 as an independent body to assume several functions in monitoring the realization of children’s rights in Sierra Leone. These include: to monitor and coordinate the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; to oversee the implementation of Part III of the Child Rights Act and to advise
Government on policies aimed at improving the condition and welfare of children in Sierra Leone compatible with the CRA, the UNCRC and the ACRWC.

In line with this mandate and as a first step to initiate discussions on enforcement and better implementation of legislations against Child Marriage, the Commission, fully supported by the Access to Security and Justice Program (ASJP), initially undertook a fact-finding mission to the Koinadugu district in the Northern part of the country. Koinadugu was selected because it reportedly has the highest incidence of Child Marriage in the country.

The study revealed that the practice is a reality in the district and is influenced by a multiplicity of factors ranging from traditional/cultural to social, economic and religious factors. These factors are linked with weak law enforcement, lack of educational opportunities, poor parenting, negative attitudes of children and religious and traditional beliefs. For instance, there were indications that many children and their parents wished to delay marriage but because they lacked the requisite options such as availability of schools or vocational institutions for girls in their communities to further their education they are left with no option but to marry off their daughters for fear of pre–marital pregnancy or for financial benefits and rewards to the family. It was also evident that many communities are unaware of the legislations against child marriage. The practice is rarely viewed as an offence but rather as a culturally legitimate practice making room for continuity. The few cases that were reported by communities are left unattended due to compromise and long distances between villages and the district headquarter towns to report a matter.

However, a nationalistic understanding of child marriage in the other regions was recommended after the fact-finding in Koinadugu as one region cannot be representative of the entire country. Hence, the National Commission for Children with support from Access to Security and Justice Programme extended this fact-finding exercise to various regions of the country including Kono in the East, Pujehun in the South and Waterloo and Tombo in the Western Area Rural District to better comprehend issues relating to child marriage.

The fact finding team was comprised of three organizations including the NCC, MSWGCA, and ASJP. The NCC team for Pujehun and Koinadugu was led by its Commissioner Mrs. Olayinka Laggah and the Deputy Commissioner Mr. Mohamed Konneh led the teams in Kono and Western Rural Districts. Other members of the NCC team included the Commission’s Chairman and the Paramount Chief representing the Council of Paramount Chiefs, the Monitoring and Evaluation Officers, the Advocacy and Communications Coordinator and one social worker. The MSWGCA team was led by the Director and Deputy Director of the Children’s Affairs and two Senior Social Workers whilst the ASJP team comprised of the Voice and Accountability Advisor Mrs. Alice M. Lahai supported by the Accountant and other support staff in the various districts visited.
The entire exercise successfully engaged different stakeholders at various levels to help identify factors leading to the lack of law enforcement and the levels of awareness on the effects and consequences of child marriage within the various communities.

1.2. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.2.1. Rational
There is no known effort to compile information on approaches to reduce child marriage or even develop systems to ensure that the legislations against the practice in Sierra Leone are widely disseminated, enforced and complied with. Understanding and addressing the factors that influence a girl getting married early can help guide efforts at reducing child marriage and so mitigate its unwanted consequences. The right intervention can help in filling gaps in understanding the complexities of child marriage in its prevention and in identifying best practices for replication and scaling up. Child marriage is believed to be inextricably linked to poverty, and a family's economic status strongly determines if their daughters will be married early. Child brides have less access to schooling and well paid jobs. Cut off from educational and economic opportunities, girls who marry young are more likely to be poor and remain poor thus eliminating child marriage could contribute to broad efforts to reduce long-term poverty.

The NCC is hopeful that even though child marriage is entrenched in some of our traditional and cultural practices, and in some cases misinterpreted or mixed up with religion, change is possible.

It is believed that girls and their parents want to delay marriage but lack options, therefore, this initiative by the NCC to understand the negative causes and effects of child marriage on the lives of young girls is timely. It is hoped that information provided will put government and service providers in a better position to change the perception of people about child marriage and demand the enforcement and compliance of existing laws subsequently minimizing and discouraging the practice. The NCC is optimistic that with the proper blend of effective interventions such as pressuring duty bearers to understand the consequences of child marriage in the development of a country and subsequently taking concrete steps in minimizing it, the Sierra Leonean girls will have the opportunity to enjoy their basic rights and develop to their fullest potential.

1.2.2. Objectives of the study
The main objective of the study was to get firsthand information on the causes for the prevalence of child marriage within the various districts and to recommend appropriate interventions that would strengthen access to justice for victims of child marriage as well as to minimize or eradicate the practice in its entirety.

The specific objectives were:-
To engage different stakeholders at various levels in the respective target areas in order to have a fair insight into the situation of child marriage in the district, for the purpose of effective planning and prioritization of interventions; 
- To identify the factors leading to the lack of enforcement of laws on child marriage within the formal justice sector.
- To develop appropriate interventions that would strengthen access to justice for victims of child marriage.
- To engage members of the public via the media on the adverse effects of child marriage in the society.

1.3. METHODOLOGY
The entire study utilized a mix of strategies and was based on the collection of primary qualitative data from semi-structured in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions. This was climaxed by a District consultative dialogue session with various stakeholders including traditional and religious leaders, government officials, women’s groups, victims of child marriage, children and Justice Sector Non-Governmental Organizations and Community Based Organizations (NGOs/ CBOs) working in Koinadugu, Pujehun, Kono districts and Western Area Rural. The information was gathered from a total of 21 chiefdoms within the Pujehun and Kono Districts and four communities in the Western Area Rural District. Information gathering also extended to the general public through live phone-in radio discussion programmes on various radio stations in the districts visited and responses from listeners collated.

Below details the methods used:-

1.3.1. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)
A total of 27 FDGs were conducted in all the districts for different categories of people including religious and traditional leaders, women and children resident in the chiefdoms selected. Two chiefdoms each were visited in Kono, Pujehun and Kono Districts as well as one community in the Western Rural Area. Similarly, FGDs were also conducted with child protection agencies operating in these districts. Different topic guides were developed for the various categories of FGDs conducted.

1.3.2. Semi-structured in-depth key informant (KI) interviews
A total of 17 interviews with stakeholders from various institutions whose work involve protecting the rights of the child were conducted in all the regions. These were done with the help of semi-structured question guides. Institutions targeted included: - the Family Support Unit (FSU), Magistrate Court, Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MEST) District Offices, District Council Offices and District Medical Officers.
1.3.3. **District Consultative Dialogue**

The key findings gathered from all focus group discussions and key informant interviews fed into a one day District Consultative Dialogue forum held in each focal district. The various sessions drew participants from relevant stakeholders including traditional and religious leaders, government officials, women’s groups, Child-led organizations, Justice Sector NGOs/CBOs and children from additional 14 chiefdoms that were not initially part of the FGDs in all the three districts visited.
2. KEY FINDINGS

A. KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

This section summarizes findings presented by the FGDs and KI interviews categorized by themes.

2.1. Awareness, Knowledge and Views

The levels of awareness about child marriage within the three districts varied slightly with different interpretations mainly dependent on customs. Most community members in the East and South see child marriage as a normal act originating from their traditional practices. Whilst few are generally aware of child marriage as an offence, it was comprehensively observed that deliberate violation of the act is persistent. This is supported by the fact that most communities continue to justify that circumstances such as an occurrence of teenage pregnancy, economic status of parents, the traditional belief that a grown up woman should preferably live with her husband rather than her parents and the unavailability of development opportunities in their localities lead to child marriage. With regard knowledge of child marriage, communities are not widely informed on its implications and only relate sensitization against it as a means to promote girl child education without much regard to the impact on the child’s health, and that it is an offence and an abuse on the rights of the child.

On the other hand, it was evident that some participants specifically noted that child marriage is currently uncommon and has reduced in their communities over the past years. They, however, noted that child cohabitation is on the increase resulting from teenage pregnancy. Nevertheless, it was observed that girls in the different communities are affected disproportionately by willingly opting to marry, forced into marriages or informal cohabiting. In Koinadugu, it was noted that in instances where the parents refuse dowry it is as a result of a breach of their traditional beliefs or resentment and not because the practice is viewed as an offence.

The children’s knowledge to seek justice by reporting cases to FSU or other child protection bodies was minimal.

2.2. The Educational system

It was evident that the current anomalies in the educational system to some extent contribute to the prevalence of child marriage. The unavailability of educational opportunities and the lack of trained and qualified teachers in most schools constituted a common gap in the educational system at all levels.

The long distances from communities to schools causes parents to delay enrolment of girls in school at the required age (6years). Also as a result of this, girls get tired and exhausted after walking long distances to and from school resulting in them becoming very irregular.
The unavailability of technical and vocational institutions, junior and senior secondary schools in the chieftoms causes parents to send their children to bigger towns to acquire higher education. There is very little supervision by guardians with whom the children stay in big towns; enough resources are not provided by parents for the care of their children with these guardians; in some cases parents have to rent accommodation for their children. These children who are left unsupervised and given limited support are mostly victims of teenage pregnancy and consequently end up being given out in marriage. Girls without guardians in the big towns or whose parents cannot afford to send them to schools in the big towns automatically drop out of school.

Although the fact finding could not provide an in-depth national quantitative data analysis on the number of qualified and unqualified teachers, data obtained from the MEST office in Pujehun District for 12 chieftoms and analyzed depicts a very small number of qualified teachers. There are only 263 qualified teachers as compared to 877 unqualified teachers in 316 schools. 92% of these schools are in the primary level, 7% junior and only 2% in senior secondary school levels. This low level of trained and qualified teachers is linked to low competence, high failure of girls at public exams, low progression rate and eventual dropout among girls which prompts most parents to marry off their daughters as the most viable option. In Musaia in the Koinadugu district, there is only one junior secondary school that has only two qualified teachers - the principal and the vice principal. The remaining teachers are community volunteers.

Although the education law provides that parents should send their children to school, it is apparent that some parents being uneducated do not value education. Thus they do not see it as a priority. These parents value their sources of livelihood, provide very little supervision and financial support to facilitate schooling. Children in Pujehun explained that at night their parents prefer to accommodate their livestock (sheep, goat, fowls etc) in their parlor to prevent them from being stolen and allow their children to sleep in outside rooms in the verandah with no protection. In Tombo, a boy explained that asking parents for money to buy fishing materials is always approved than asking for money to buy learning materials.

Similarly, the interest of some girls to pursue education is very low and no different from the attitude of their parents. Most girls are unaware of their potential, have a very low self-esteem and do not understand their rights. This makes them vulnerable to abuses of various kinds. It was clear from the adults and children that girls are introduced to sex at a very early age and prefer early childbearing rather than protecting themselves.
against abuse and pursuing their education.

2.3. Law Enforcement

The law against child marriage is available though not consistent with other related laws such as the Customary Marriage Act. It should be noted that in such circumstances the Sexual Offences Act could be used as a deterrent.

Findings revealed that there is a significant misconception on the laws against child abuse which leads to compromise breeding a culture of impunity. This could be supported by the fact that in 2015, the Police only charged 2 incidences of child marriage. Child marriage complaints were found to be handled by community authorities or leaders. Community bye-laws and other regulating laws that should prevent child abuse incidents were evidently absent in most of the communities. Although the Chiefs claimed that they had bye-laws, most of the people interviewed did not know about the existence of these laws. It is also evident that the reporting system is very weak due to the limited coverage of FSUs in communities and also unavailable logistics to facilitate investigation or victims attending court proceedings.

The ineffectiveness of child abuse laws also extends to the lack of workplace policies or ethical standards against child abuse including the non-compliance with the teacher’s code of conduct. It was observed that perpetrators of child marriage were mostly miners, fishermen, industrialized farming employees, private company workers including community/volunteer teachers.

2.4. Poor Parenting

The findings highlighted poor parenting as a high contributing factor to child marriage in all the districts. This includes poor supervision, minimal support towards the welfare of their children and the misconception of child right laws. Most parents believe that child right laws promoting expression of opinion by the child and condemning child labour and physical abuse have left them incapable of nurturing and

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A law enforcement officer shares his experience - ‘When we ask the age of girls, parents claim their child is already 18 years or they will pretend not to remember their children’s birthdays’

‘Most of the problems we have start from the homes because if parents leave their children to take care of themselves, they will definitely act like adults’
disciplining their children. These laws, they claim, do not make children responsible for their actions.

It was similarly noticed that there is a great shift in parental responsibilities when girls reach the age of puberty. Parents encourage men that are financially strong to marry their daughters. It was observed that parents based their decision to marry off their daughters on signs of puberty rather than the age of the girls. These parents believe that girls should support the home and help take care of their siblings.

Indeed parents were generally blamed for child marriages done in secrecy rather than the weak enforcement of laws. Furthermore, parents were found to be unaware of their duties to ensure their children enjoy their rights and are protected from child abuse such as child marriage. The FGDs and KII revealed a significant number of single parents who are mostly incapable of caring for their children singlehandedly, thus influencing them to shift their responsibility to men.

2.5. Traditional Practices and Religious Beliefs

The research further revealed that traditional practices and religious beliefs significantly influence the decisions of parents and children with regard child marriage. This was particularly prevalent among the Fullah, Madingo and Susu ethnic groups. The high respect and value placed on virginity with the accompanying spiritual blessings on the parents on the wedding day is great among regions.

The attitude of men to women whereby mothers have no say in decision making encourages the practice of child marriage in communities. Mothers have no say if fathers decide to marry off their daughters.

Results from the FGDs further revealed that traditional practices and religious beliefs empirically influence the prevailing practice of child marriage. Some of the key beliefs highlighted are as follows:-
- It is forbidden or haram for a girl to get pregnant out of wedlock.
- It is inappropriate for a grown-up girl who is neither in school nor engaged in anything to stay at home with parents. For instance, it
was observed that prior to Ramadan, girls are married off especially if they are not meaningfully engaged.
- Due to the fear of potential pregnancy, many parents give their children into early marriages to avoid being disgraced by the child.
- The perception of men towards women. Men still think the right place for women is in the kitchen.

2.6. Sexual and Reproductive Health Services
The study also noted that parents and duty bearers believed that sexual reproductive health services provided for girls are inappropriate and inconsistent considering the age of consent and other sexual offences laws. FGDs and KIIs revealed that ethical standards were totally ignored while offering family planning services to school going girls as young as 15 years.

2.7. Peer Pressure
Lastly, it is also apparent that children are negatively influenced and misled as a result of peer pressure. Children admire their peers that have had children. Children were not knowledgeable of their rights and responsibilities as they themselves mostly infringe on their rights by willingly accepting to cohabit with men.

3. SUMMARY OF STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

During the discussions, it was clearly observed that only three formal reports were made on child marriage incidents in Sierra Leone yet it is widely practised. Very few reported instances were managed by local authorities and community members including CBOs or NGO.

The strategies utilized to respond to child marriage are summarized; Promotion of Child Rights Legislations, Engagement of structures at the community level and Collaboration.

3.1. Promotion of Child Right Legislations

Engagement with stakeholders including community members indicated that they were aware of the occurrence of child abuse incidents. Although there were varied responses, it was clear that attempts have been made by NGOs and CBOs to promote laws against child abuse, which includes child marriage. Promotion of laws against child abuse targeted parents, children, school administrators, private sector workers, community members and leaders including traditional,
tribal, and religious heads. As a result, Mamie Queens have stopped marriages involving children.

3.2. Engagement of structures at community level

Most participants expressed that availability of legal or social structures in some areas helped address incidences of child abuse. The discussions were hinged on the effectiveness of law enforcement facilities and community protection systems that were positioned to support and enhance justice through providing relevant education, monitoring or supervision and maintaining a feedback mechanism. Comparisons were specifically made on how community structures were able to support enforcement of laws during the Ebola outbreak. These structures have been instrumental in reporting incidences of Sexual Penetration through the intervention of the Chiefs/Religious leaders/Tribal Heads, women and youths/children.

The presence of FSU (and other legal bodies) to some extent helped reduce incidences of child abuse in their communities as people had easy access to law enforcement structures and had shorter distances to cover during the reporting, investigation and follow-up of child abuse matters.

3.3. Collaboration

Collaborative processes and coordination of child abuse incidents were also discussed lengthily by participants. Participants stated instances when families were jointly supported by NGOs/CBOs and other child rights protection bodies to ensure justice for victims of abuse. Working collaboratively with social workers and personnel from the health and law enforcement sectors helped utilize expertise from the different players as well as harness and mobilize resources to accomplish a common objective.

It was noted that child abuse cases were effectively managed when professional law enforcement officers and social service providers intervened.
4. **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 **Conclusion**

From our findings it can be concluded that there are many factors contributing to the prevailing practice of child marriage in the regions visited. In fact Pujehun District appears to be the most tolerant, readily accepting and condoning the practice. There was no known intervention by individuals or groups to prevent child marriage. Rather they conveniently attributed the prevalence practice to teenage pregnancy, early puberty and a shift of parental responsibility.

Added to these are other contributing factors discovered in the other regions. These range from tribal and religious practices, unavailability of educational facilities and weak law enforcements.

However, it was evident across communities and law enforcement agencies that child marriage cases though widely practiced is unreported and subsequently unprosecuted. This lays the foundation for compromise. Child Marriage is seen as a normal option linked to tribal and religious beliefs. Acceptance appears to be on the increase and taking different dimensions.

Child marriage defined as a formal marriage or informal union before age 18\(^1\) is now mostly practiced as an informal union usually taking the form of forced or optimal child cohabiting.

Weak law enforcement was also found to be an underpinning cause of child marriage. Participants expressed the view that levying charges on perpetuators or those who compromise child marriage issues will help reduce the number of child marriage cases. It should be noted that the police can only investigate if a matter is reported which hardly happens. The contradiction in the Child Right Acts, 2007 and the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2009 which allows children at 16 to get married with parental consent was also an issue of great concern.

It should be noted however that though the tendency is to lay emphasis on traditional and religious practices to a large extent these views lend themselves to misinterpretation.

From our findings, it can also be concluded that child marriage perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Communities and chiefdoms in the regions visited are underdeveloped, the children are deprived of their rights to education and are not allowed to grow to their fullest potential. However, it should be emphasized that poverty has never been the main reason for parents to marry off their girls as there are still people who though poor yet ensure their children are fully educated.

The Children cannot be left out as their attitude towards life and material wants is seen as a contributing factor to the practice.

\(^1\) UNICEF
On the whole, we can conclude that ending the practice of child marriage is strongly dependent on joint collaboration at all levels with specific emphasis on the attitude of parents and the children themselves.

4.2 Recommendations

- NCC to engage all relevant stakeholders in a high-level meeting to present findings and recommendations and discuss the way forward.
- The National Council of Paramount Chiefs to develop and enforce bye laws against child marriage, sexual abuse and other components of the Child Rights Act.
- Advocate for improved educational services and opportunities in the regions.
- To develop a strategy and action plan against child marriage in Sierra Leone.
- Encourage the promotion of the Child Right Act 2007, the Sexual Offences Act, 2012 and other related Human Rights legislations with emphasis on the responsibilities of parents and children through community-based interventions and media programmes.
- MSWGCA to expedite the resuscitation of the Child Welfare Communities (CWCs) in all communities.
- Inter-religious council to engage their members to distinguish between tradition and religion with regard child marriage and to also encourage them to influence change on perceptions on child marriage.
- Target tribal heads especially Fullahs, Mandingos and Susus to talk to their people to change their perceptions on child marriage and to put premium on educating their children.
- To engage fishermen, mining and other relevant private companies, teachers (especially community teachers) and other categories of probable perpetuators on laws against child abuse.
- Mentorship programmes and leadership and life skills training to be provided for girls.
- Educate young people currently complicit in the practice of early marriage for them to be empowered to resist early marriage and its implications.
ANNEX 1

FGD/KI Topic Guide

1. **Key Informant Interviews**

   a. **Police officers based at the Kabala Police Station and police posts in nearby chiefdoms.**
      
      1. Please tell us your perspective about child marriage within your operational area?
      2. Have there been any reported cases of child marriage?
      3. How frequent has it been reported?
      4. How you handle such cases?
      5. Can you please explain the procedures you used to investigate a child marriage case that was charged to court?
      6. Do you have a database/record of any child marriage case?
      7. What do you think are the reasons or challenges in handling child marriage cases?
      8. What policies are you aware of that are against child marriage?
      9. In your own perspective, are these policies been effectively implemented?
     10. What do you think are the gaps or lapses?
     11. What do you think should be done to ensure that CM policies are enforced? (By Community and Government).
     12. What kind of support do you need to be able to prevent child marriage?

   b. **The Magistrate - Magistrate Court.**
      
      1. Please tell us your perspective about child marriage within your operational communities?
      2. Has any reported CM cases been charged to court?
      3. Can you explain the proceedings used to persecute a CM case that was charged to court?
      4. Do you have any database/record of child marriage incidences?
      5. How frequently are child marriage cases been charged to court?
      6. What do you think are the possible reasons or challenges why CM cases are not charged to court?
      7. Is the CM legislation been effectively enforced?
      8. If not, what are the reasons or lapses or gaps?
      9. Are you aware of any norm that condones child marriage in your community?
     10. What kind of support do you need to effectively enforce CM cases?
     11. What can you recommend to government and other policies implementers that will help to effectively enforce CM policies?

   c. **Education Officer/Principles of schools**
      
      1. Please tell us the status of educational opportunities in your community?
      2. Do you think the available educational opportunities are enough? If no, why and how?
      3. Do you have any data that have compared the enrolment and retention rates of girls to boys in your area?
4. If there is a difference, please tell us some of the possible reasons or challenges affecting girl child education in your area?
5. Please tell us how you perceive child marriage in your district?
6. How frequently do girls drop out of school as a reason of child marriage?
7. Has the school administration/guidance and counsellor teacher ever been involved in the proceedings of a CM case? If yes, please tell us how you helped the situation
8. In your own view what other educational opportunities are needed to motivate girls to continue their education and also prevent them from marrying at an early age?
9. What additional support do you think should be done to ensure girls are prevented from getting married at an early age?
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell us relating to child marriage that we have not discussed?

d. District council/DO/Marriage Registration

1. What is your perspective about child marriage in your community?
2. Are you aware of child marriage incidence in your community? If yes, how frequent have you noticed it?
3. Have you helped in solving these issues?
4. How effectively have you ensured that systems to enforce polices against Child Marriage are available in your community?
5. If systems are not available, what are the possible reasons or lapses?
6. What other challenges do you encounter in supporting the implementation of policies against CM?
7. Have your office ever stopped the registration of a marriage?
8. Have you ever been involved in the proceedings or investigation of a CM case? If yes, please explain
9. Are you aware of any norm that condones child marriage in your community?
10. As a community leader, what support do you need to ensure that girls are safe from child marriage in your community?

e. Health Workers

1. As a medical worker, please tell us the issues that girls and women face in this community?
2. Are you aware of child marriage incidences?
3. Which of these issues are prominent amongst women/girls that were married below age 18 and why is it so?
4. Do you have a database on the health issues concerning CM victims?
5. Are there any other consequences you have observed?
6. Are there effective medical services available for CM victims?
7. If a child is married and pregnant, do you provide counselling? If yes, was the husband involved?
8. If no, what other service do you provide for these CM victims?
9. Are you aware of any laws against child marriage in your community?
10. If yes please tell us your perspective about CM?
11. What do you think should be the role of the health sector in preventing child marriage?
12. What support do you need as a health worker to prevent child marriage?

2. Focus Group Discussion

a. Paramount and Section chiefs and Religion Leaders

1. Are you aware of any child marriage incidence within your community?
2. If yes, please tell us your perspective about CM?
3. As a community authority, have you ever addressed an issue of CM? If yes how and who were involved?
4. Are you aware of any state law within your community that are against child marriage?
5. If yes, how effective has the law been enforced in your community?
6. Do community members normally report CM incidence?
7. If yes, please tell us the entities or bodies that investigate CM cases and how?
8. If no, in your own perspective what are the possible reasons why people do not report CM incidences?
9. As a community authority leader, what have you done to prevent incidences of CM?
10. Do you have any norms against CM? If yes, how effective are these laws and who is involved?
11. Are the local councils involved in such laws? If no why?
12. Please tell us you procedures in officiating marriages and who are primarily involved?
13. Do you need any other support to prevent incidences of CM?
14. What can you recommend to government and other bodies working to stop CM?

b. Women’s Groups

1. As women in this community, are you aware of CM incidences?
2. What are your perspectives about CM?
3. What do you think are the possible reasons for CM within your community?
4. How have you helped in solving these concerns?
5. How do you think child marriage has affected women in your community?
6. Are you aware of state laws against child marriage in your community? If yes, please tell us how effectively has the laws been enforced?
7. Do you have any norm that is against CM in your community? How effective is the law and who are involved in enforcing the laws?
8. What actions do you take if you are aware of CM incidence? Do you report CM?
9. If no, what are the possible reasons why incidences of CM is not reported
10. Are your women involved in officiating marriages in this community?
11. Would you support a child to report if she is forced to married? Please tell us how supportive you have been in preventing incidences of CM?
12. Have your group reported any incidence of child marriage? If yes what was the outcome of the case?
13. If you want to report child marriage, who would you consider going to? Why?
14. If not reported, why?
15. Do most of the girls in this chiefdom go to school?
16. Which other opportunities do girls have in this chiefdom?
17. What do you think should be the role of women to help enforce laws against child marriage?
18. What do you think should be the role of other community stakeholders to prevent child marriage?

c. Children

1. Are you aware of CM in this community?
2. What are your perspectives about CM?
3. Please tell us in your perspective what are the reasons why CM occurs within your community?
4. Has anyone of you or your sisters been forced to married? If yes, did she marry?
5. Do you normally report incidences of CM? If yes, to whom
6. If no, what are the possible reasons that CM cases are not reported?
7. Do you think your parents would support you if you report any case of child marriage?
8. Are you aware of state laws that are against CM? If yes, how effective are these laws and who is involved?
9. Do you have any norms in the community that are against CM? If yes, how effective are these laws?
10. In your own perspective, who can handle CM cases effectively?
11. Do you all attend school? If yes, how effective is the school system is in your community?
12. Do you feel motivated to further your studies? If yes, why
13. If you are asked to marry now will you agree? If yes, why? If no why?
14. Do you think the school system is encouraging for girls? If yes or no, why
15. What other educational opportunities does your chiefdom/district have for girls?
16. What do you think should be the role of children to help prevent child marriage?
17. What other kinds of support do you need from law enforcers and other organizations to prevent child marriage?

d. CBOs/NGOs

1. Are you aware of child marriage incidences in your community?
2. What is your perspective about CM?
3. What are the possible reasons for CM?
4. Have you monitored or reported any incidence of CM? If yes, what was the outcome?
5. If no, why
6. Do community people report CM incidence? If yes, to whom
7. If no, what are the possible reasons why do not report
8. In what best ways have you worked with communities and other partners to prevent child marriage?
9. What are the challenges you have observed/experienced?
10. Do you have any success story on CM? If yes, what worked well?
11. Do you have a database of reported incidences? If there is no data on child marriage cases, why is it so?
12. What have you identified as a gap in preventing child marriage?
13. What is your opinion on school attendance for girls compared to boys in your community?
14. Are you aware of any educational opportunities for girls?
15. Which other support do you need to prevent child marriage incidences?
16. Please tell us what should be government’s priority to prevent child marriage?
17. Is there any other issue you will want to discuss?
### ANNEX 2

#### CLASSIFICATION OF PARTICIPANTS

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