








# SIERRA LEONE CASE STUDY

Review of Technology-Based Interventions  
to Address Child Marriage and Female  
Genital Mutilation

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# SIERRA LEONE

## SIERRA LEONE OVERVIEW

	<b>Child marriage prevalence<sup>1</sup></b> (girls married before the age of 18 years, as a proportion of all girls)	30%
	<b>FGM prevalence<sup>2</sup></b> (proportion of women and girls aged 15–49 years)	83%
	<b>Internet users<sup>3</sup></b>	–
	<b>Mobile phone ownership<sup>4</sup></b>	–
	<b>Level of government support for digital literacy<sup>5</sup></b>	–

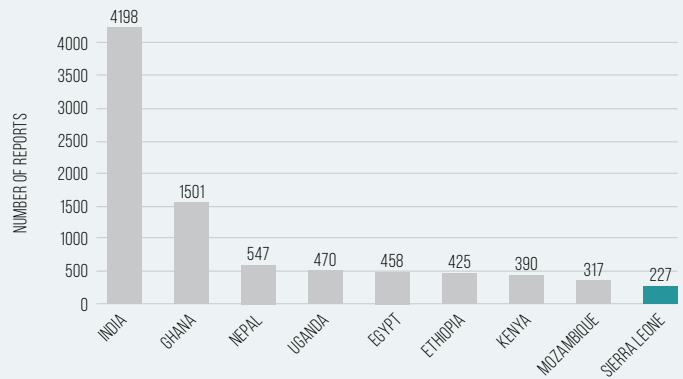
## NEWS ABOUT HARMFUL PRACTICES: WORD CLOUD MAPS AND NUMBERS OF REPORTS

**FIGURE 1.** GDELT word cloud. Most common words portrayed in the reports of the global media for both FGM and child marriage in Sierra Leone (2014–2022)

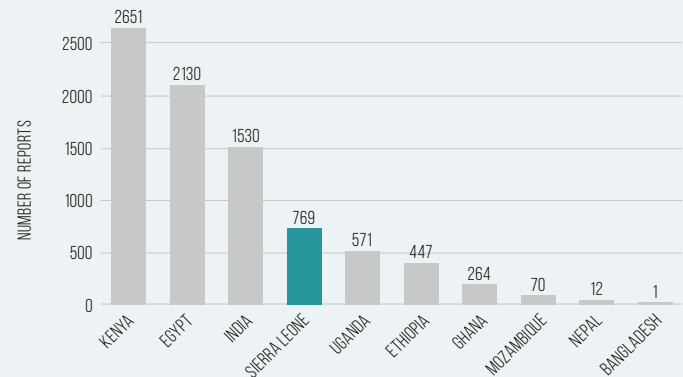


**Note:** This word cloud map was produced with data from the Event Database of the GDELT project, which monitors the world’s broadcast, print and web news in over 100 languages; identifying the people, locations, institutions, topics, publications, sentiments, numbers, quotations, pictures and occurrences linked to events worldwide. After filtering the database for a comprehensive pool of keywords related to FGM and child marriage and technology in Sierra Leone, the most common words portrayed in the reports related to these issues are mapped in a country word cloud. The bigger the font size, the more frequently the word appears.

**FIGURE 2.** Number of reports covering the topic of child marriage in Sierra Leone, compared with other countries (2014–2022)



**FIGURE 3.** Number of reports covering the topic of FGM in Sierra Leone, compared with other countries (2014–2022)



**Note:** After filtering the GDELT project database for the actors, actions, and associated reports pertaining to child marriage and/or FGM in Sierra Leone, it can be observed that there are a total of 227 reports corresponding to child marriage and 769 reports corresponding to FGM in the country.

## THE CONTEXT OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND FGM IN THE COUNTRY

In Sierra Leone, FGM is a widely accepted practice used to initiate girls around the age of puberty into womanhood.<sup>6</sup> According to the 2019 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey, 83 per cent of women and girls aged between 15 and 49 years have undergone FGM, which represents a decrease from 90 per cent in 2013.<sup>7</sup> FGM is deeply entrenched in cultural and religious beliefs, with 68 per cent of women and girls who have heard about the practice believing that it should be continued.<sup>8</sup> Some of the reasons for performing FGM are that it is deemed as a way of curbing women's and girls' sexual appetites and preparing them for marriage. After undergoing FGM, girls are prepared for marriage by being taught about a woman's responsibilities within the home (e.g., domestic chores), as well as their roles and duties within the secret society to which they belong to.<sup>9</sup> The initiation ceremonies are led by these women secret societies in the country known as the Sande Society – located in the south of Sierra Leone – and the Bondo Society – located in the north.<sup>10</sup> These societies have such great influence on decision-makers that certain political actors are reluctant

to abolish FGM, as they consider it to be deeply entrenched in the country's culture and identity.<sup>11</sup> These societies are also barriers to preventing and eliminating FGM, considering how they are inextricably linked to contemporary political life in Sierra Leone.

As for child marriage, an estimated 800,000 child brides reside in Sierra Leone, with half having been married before the age of 15 years.<sup>12</sup> Globally, Sierra Leone ranks as the 18th highest prevalence of child marriage, with 30 per cent of girls aged 20 to 24 years old married before age 18, and 13 per cent married before age 15.<sup>13</sup> Despite data showing that the practice of marrying young girls has been slightly declining over the past 25 years, child marriage continues to be a human rights concern. As UNICEF notes, if the current rate of progress persists, 27 per cent of all girls in the country will marry before turning 18 in 2030.<sup>14</sup> Among other factors, some of the causes contributing to the persistence of child marriage in Sierra Leone include high levels of poverty, lack of access to education, pervasive gender inequality, and discriminatory gender norms and beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Child marriage is also exacerbated by the high rate of adolescent pregnancy in the country, with 30 per cent of girls recorded to have given birth by the age of 18.<sup>16</sup>

## THE TECHNOLOGY ENVIRONMENT IN SIERRA LEONE

It is critical to assess the technological landscape in Sierra Leone, considering that access to electricity and the internet, as well as digital literacy and skills retention, are pivotal in enabling the success of tech-based interventions to mitigate both child marriage and FGM. According to the World Bank, electricity is a precursor to technological interventions, but only 26.2 per cent of the population has access to electricity.<sup>17</sup> In 2020, only 18 per cent of Sierra Leone's nearly 8 million population were internet users (measured by the proportion of households that have access to the internet and that have used it in the past 12 months). Although this is a relative increase from 2017 where 13 per cent of individuals were internet





users, progress has been incremental and the country still ranks far below sub-Saharan Africa's regional average of 30 per cent.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of mobile device ownership and access, mobile cellular telephone subscriptions (i.e., subscriptions to a mobile telephone service) stands at 86 per cent, slightly higher than the regional average of 83 per cent across sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>19</sup> There has been a continued expansion in mobile broadband coverage, with 80 per cent of the population covered by at least a 3G network. Mobile phones are used by most people in Sierra Leone compared with other media platforms. Access to mobile phones in the country stands at 87 per cent and 80 per cent for men and women respectively. Mobile phone penetration is also widespread in rural areas at 78 per cent, where residents (including women) are more likely to have access to a mobile phone than to television, newspapers or the internet. However, these high figures do not translate into high levels of smartphone penetration. The majority (52 per cent) of adult Sierra Leoneans who are mobile phone owners own basic phones without features such as the internet and other applications.<sup>20</sup> Young men living in urban areas are also more likely to use social media applications and only a third of the total number of social media users in Sierra Leone are women. Thus, although mobile phones are the medium with the greatest potential to reach a significant portion of the population, calls, SMS and voice-based services are more suited to expanding the reach to include more marginalized groups.

In terms of digital literacy, Sierra Leone is ranked below the global average with a score of 3.15 on a scale of 1 to 7, the latter being the highest score. Although the country has experienced a year-on-year average growth rate of 6.88 per cent in digital skills among the population, progress has only been gradual. As in many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the gender digital divide still persists and is attributed to prevailing social and economic barriers such as illiteracy, disparities between



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men and women in income and education, as well as restrictive gender roles and other forms of discrimination.<sup>21</sup> Despite the challenging circumstances in Sierra Leone, the government recognizes the importance of developing the technological landscape of the country in contributing to human capital and overall national progress. Over the years, there has been a growing competitive mobile market and the government is working to improve internet connectivity in the country. Through the passage of a new telecommunications law, the government has made it easier to access wholesale networks and facilitate an enabling environment for infrastructure expansion and ICT development.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the government launched its own Digitization for All strategy to transform the country into an innovation and entrepreneurial hub, while the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education established a curriculum empowering students with foundation ICT skills.<sup>23</sup> In collaboration with Giga and UNICEF, greater internet connectivity will also be provided to public schools across the country to improve access to digital learning.

## MAPPING OF TECH INTERVENTIONS

The interventions mapped in this section stem from an initial landscape exercise conducted jointly by UNICEF and UNFPA, followed by a systematic review of publicly available data and information on technology-driven and technology-enabled interventions addressing child marriage and/or FGM in Sierra Leone. The compiled information was curated and complemented with insights emerging from key informant interviews conducted with local stakeholders.

### CODING TYPE OF INTERVENTION

[☉] Technology-driven intervention/solution (tech is a core element)

[●] Technology-enabled intervention/solution (tech is secondary to the intervention, there are other non-tech components)

## ♀ FEMINIST LENSES

The seventh column of the interventions table below identifies how organizations have included feminist lenses into the design and implementation of the interventions by highlighting four key aspects:

1	Consultation with experts and/or community leaders	Consultations with gender or thematic experts and/or local leaders were conducted during the development, implementation, and/or monitoring and evaluation of the interventions.
2	Consultations with target group(s)	The interventions incorporated, at any stage, consultations with the populations targeted, especially girls and women of different ethnicities, ages, sexual orientations, classes, and other social markers.
3	Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) instruments	Monitoring and evaluation activities were carried out to measure the intervention's progress and sustainability, and/or to generate disaggregated information, gender-sensitive/responsive indicators, and/or gender analysis frameworks.
4	Women- and/or girl-led organization(s)	The intervention was designed and/or implemented, partly or completely, by a women- and/or girl-led organization(s).

Additional descriptive information about the feminist lenses and potential intersectional approach (i.e., addressing ethnicity, language, class or other aspects of the target group's identity) is provided within the table, following the general description of each intervention, which can be identified by the use of this symbol [♀]. This analysis is based on information collected during semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders and/or publicly available information.

## ANTI-FGM DOCUMENTARIES / 2002 – ONGOING / ☉

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPE OF TECHNOLOGIES USED	FEMINIST LENSES
N/A	Amazonian Initiative Movement	FGM	Matotoka Town	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual level empowerment</li> <li>Family and community engagement</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Film screen</li> <li>and projector</li> <li>YouTube</li> </ul>	N/A <sup>24</sup>

Rugiatu Turay, one of Sierra Leone's most well-known anti-FGM campaigners and founder of the Amazonian Initiative Movement, has been using film screens and projectors to show documentaries about FGM in remote villages of the country and several of these documentaries are also available on media platforms such as YouTube. In one of the screenings, her audience reached 100 people, including men, women and even elderly women who perform circumcision as part of girls' initiation into the Bondo society. She uses the documentary to inform and raise awareness about the risks and harms of FGM to girls, and by speaking with care and respect with all of those involved in the practice, including *soweis* (senior women in Bondo societies), parents, girls and village chiefs. She proposes alternatives to continue Bondo rituals without performing genital mutilation.<sup>25</sup>

## ADOLESCENT SAFE SPACES FOR LIFE SKILLS TRAINING / 2018 – ONGOING / ○

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPE OF TECHNOLOGIES USED	FEMINIST LENSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● UNICEF</li> <li>● UNFPA</li> <li>● Irish Aid</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Women in Crisis Movement</li> <li>● The National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy</li> </ul>	Child marriage & FGM	Port Loko, Kambia, Bonthe, Tonkolili, Koinadugu, Pujehun	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Individual level empowerment</li> <li>2. Service development and strengthening</li> <li>3. Family and community engagement</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mobile phones</li> <li>● Radio</li> <li>● Tablets</li> </ul>	N/A <sup>26</sup>

Through the Joint Programme, UNFPA supports the Women in Crisis Movement and empowers vulnerable women and girls through better reproductive health, skills training and safe spaces. One major achievement of the programme is the establishment of 160 safe spaces in districts where child marriage is most prevalent. Moreover, in 2017, with UNFPA support, 7,333 vulnerable girls received life skills mentoring and education on the pitfalls of child marriage, teenage pregnancy and other harmful practices, and 340 mentors were trained.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the efforts employed by UNICEF and UNFPA to end child marriage through the Global Programme, around 3.9 million mobile phone users received messages on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and SRH, and 3.5 million people were reached through the radio programmes of the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy.<sup>28</sup> Finally, with financial support from Irish Aid under the auspices of the Global Programme, 97 electronic tablets were donated to Women in Crisis and Restless Development. The tablets contained recorded sessions with information about quality health and life skills education. This was an innovative way to hold interactive sessions and reach out to adolescent girls with relevant information on child marriage and FGM.<sup>29</sup>

## UNLEASHING THE POWER OF ADOLESCENT GIRL'S NETWORK THROUGH INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (UPAG/ICT) / 2007–2009 / ○

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPE OF TECHNOLOGIES USED	FEMINIST LENSES
Internet Society (ISOC)	ChildHelp Sierra Leone	Child marriage	Freetown	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Individual level empowerment</li> <li>2. Service development and strengthening</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Computers</li> <li>● Internet facilities</li> </ul>	N/A <sup>30</sup>

In partnership with ISOC, ChildHelp Sierra Leone has provided technology to schools aiming to keep female students enrolled and encouraging education to prevent child marriage. One of the organization's most successful projects was named 'Unleashing the Power of Adolescent Girls' Network through Information Communication Technologies' (UPAG/ICT). The project provided digital literacy training and technology to male and female students from different communities located in three districts. An evaluation of the UPAG/ICT programme for the 2008/09 academic year revealed that over 90 per cent of the young women interviewed after the project reported they had learned new information that empowers them. Additionally, ChildHelp has provided scholarships, computer training and access to the internet to approximately 600 young women per year. Between 2007 and 2008, the project serviced more than 450 students through ISOC funding. In 2009, the project reached 600 underprivileged females and 300 males.<sup>31</sup>

## DEVELOPING RIGHTS-BASED AND EMPOWERING APPROACHES TO MOBILIZE (DREAM) ACTION TO END FGM / 2014–2017 / ☉

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPE OF TECHNOLOGIES USED	FEMINIST LENSES
Forward United Kingdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Girl2Girl Empowerment Movement</li> <li>• Advocacy Movement Network</li> </ul>	Child marriage & FGM	Freetown	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Individual level empowerment</li> <li>2. Family and community engagement</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Computers</li> <li>• Radio</li> </ul>	N/A <sup>32</sup>

DREAM Action to End FGM was a four-year project implemented through a partnership between advocacy Movement Network and Girl-to-Girl Empowerment Movement (G2G). The project aimed to build a protective environment for girls to be free from harmful traditional practices and SGBV. G2G supports and educates girls about their rights, as well as on SRH particularly through leadership and ICT training and through broadcasting awareness campaigns on local radio stations. The project reached 7,744 girls and women at risk of and affected by SGBV, 1,985 front-line workers and policymakers and 16,372 community members in four districts of Sierra Leone. In the period between November 2016 and April 2017, 14 child marriages were stopped in the communities where the project was implemented.<sup>33</sup>

## PUBLIC EDUCATION INITIATIVES THROUGH THE MEDIA / 2016 – ONGOING / ☉

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPE OF TECHNOLOGIES USED	FEMINIST LENSES
N/A	Forum Against Harmful Practices (FAHP)	Child marriage & FGM	Nationwide	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Individual level empowerment</li> <li>2. Family and community engagement</li> <li>3. Legal and policy systems interventions</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social media (Facebook, WhatsApp)</li> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Radio programmes</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consultations with experts and/or community leaders</li> <li>2. Consultations with target group(s)</li> <li>3. Women-led organization</li> </ol>

FAHP is a coalition that works towards mitigating harmful practices through culturally appropriate approaches such as dialogues, meetings, training and public education. Media is a key component of its interventions, and it conducts training with journalists to ensure that culturally friendly language is used to report on sensitive issues such as FGM. Given that radios are easily accessible in Sierra Leone, FAHP also airs anti-FGM radio jingles translated into local languages. In terms of social media, the use of Facebook and WhatsApp groups also help in the dissemination of information on FGM. These applications also facilitate the establishment of school clubs and help provide educational links for the teachers as mentors to guide their activities. Together with the Ministry of Health, FAHP aims to mainstream the issue of FGM as a health issue through these educational interventions that involve journalists, politicians and public schools. FAHP's community engagement in rural areas also includes FGM initiators themselves who have dropped their tools, though the funding needed to provide them with alternative sources of livelihoods proves to be a limiting challenge.

♀ This intervention integrates an intersectional feminist approach by involving FGM experts and gender specialists in the design and implementation, in addition to the organization itself being women-led. Moreover, the interventions are adapted to different profiles of women in terms of age and social class.

## SUPPORT TO ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT IN SIERRA LEONE (SAGE) / 2016 – 2023 / ©

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPE OF TECHNOLOGIES USED	FEMINIST LENSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● KoBo Toolbox</li> <li>● Purposeful United Kingdom</li> <li>● United Kingdom Government</li> <li>● Community Action to Restore Lives</li> <li>● Daindemben Federation</li> <li>● Munafa M'Patie Federation</li> </ul>	Purposeful Sierra Leone	FGM	Bonthe, Moyamba, Bombali, Karene, Falaba, Western rural districts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Individual level empowerment</li> <li>2. Service development and strengthening</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mobile applications</li> <li>● Mobile phones</li> <li>● Internet</li> <li>● Radio programmes</li> </ul>	N/A <sup>34</sup>

SAGE aims to help adolescent girls in Sierra Leone by strengthening their livelihoods, improving their SRH, and creating a more enabling and empowering environment for them. The programme has two components. First, Karo Kura Girls' Circles aims to provide 15,450 vulnerable, out-of-school girls aged 10 to 19 with increased numeracy, literacy and social-emotional skills.<sup>35</sup> The second component called 'Reducing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence' aims to reduce the prevalence of SGBV, FGM and child marriage in targeted communities and build the evidence base in responding to these issues. Through an engaging radio programme and media platform called 'Karo Kura', the programmes reached girls, their communities and a wider audience across the country. The programme explored gender norms and specific challenges faced by girls. Based on the 2021 Annual Review, 618 mentors were recruited and had access to training videos and materials via their smartphones and six shows aired with information on pregnancy and contraception.<sup>36</sup> Due to limited access to electricity, solar-powered radios were used by the girls to listen to dramas and talk shows.

Additionally, since its inception, the Girls' Circle Programme has supported approximately 15,000 girls in Sierra Leone. For easy communication, the mentees were given 700 smartphones.<sup>37</sup> The Girls' Circle mentors and mentees have been able to communicate their feedback on the programme and content through the KoBoToolbox smartphone application. Also, through this application, the mentees were able to share stories on the issues of child marriage, FGM and other GBV-related topics. Purposeful continues to use KoBoCollect to gather data and feedback from mentors every week, ensuring that the programme remains girl-led and relevant<sup>38</sup>



## ENDNOTES

- 1 DHS (2019), as cited in UNICEF (2022a), *Sierra Leone country profile*
- 2 DHS (2019), as cited in UNICEF (2020e), *Sierra Leone country profile*
- 3 Statistical data not available
- 4 Statistical data not available
- 5 Statistical data not available
- 6 Amnesty International (2012)
- 7 DHS (2013), as cited in UNICEF (2016)
- 8 DHS (2019), as cited in UNICEF (2020e), *Sierra Leone country profile*
- 9 Bjälkander et al. (2013)
- 10 Fanthorpe (2007)
- 11 Fanthorpe (2007); Letouzé et al. (2022)
- 12 UNICEF (2022a)
- 13 DHS (2013), as cited in UNFPA Sierra Leone (2018)
- 14 UNICEF (2022h)
- 15 Save the Children (2021)
- 16 MICS (2017), as cited in UNICEF (2022h)
- 17 World Bank Data (2020p)
- 18 World Bank Data (2020n)
- 19 ITU as cited in World Bank Data (2022a)
- 20 BBC Media Action (2016)
- 21 Bhandari (2011)
- 22 ITU (2017)
- 23 Giga (2021)
- 24 Organization/intervention not interviewed
- 25 Hairsine and Anthony (2021)
- 26 Organization/intervention not interviewed
- 27 UNFPA Sierra Leone (2018)
- 28 UNICEF (2022h)
- 29 UNFPA Sierra Leone (2018)
- 30 Organization/intervention not interviewed
- 31 1 World Connected (2020)
- 32 Organization/intervention not interviewed
- 33 Forward UK (2022)
- 34 Organization/intervention not interviewed
- 35 UK DFID (2021)
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 KoBoToolbox (2021)

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