Leh Wi Lan
Improving Secondary Education in Sierra Leone

Report on trends in response by relevant authorities to reported cases of gender-based violence (GBV) and school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV)

February 2021

Views reflect partners' findings and recommendations and are not the official position of the British High Commission in Sierra Leone.

Contents

Acronyms

DD	Deputy Director
DIO	District Inclusion Officer
DSO	District Support Officer
DSTI	Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation
FCDO	Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FSU	Family Support Unit
GATE	Girls' Access to Education
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GEC	Girls' Education Challenge
JSS	Junior Secondary School
LWL	Leh Wi Lan
MBSSE	Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education
MGCA	Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs
RVS	Reducing Violence in Schools
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SLP	Sierra Leone Police
SPC	Strategic Partnership Committee
SRGBV	School-Related Gender-Based Violence
SSO	School Support Officer
SSS	Senior Secondary School
TCoC	Code of Conduct for Teachers and Other Education Personnel
TSC	Teaching Service Commission
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

Definition of terms

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) or Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is any harmful act of sexual, physical, psychological, mental, and emotional abuse that directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately. Although women and girls are the main victims of GBV, this can affect other vulnerable groups, such as children. GBV includes: physical violence, verbal violence, psychological violence, sexual violence, socio-economic violence, domestic violence or in intimate relationships, harassment and sexual harassment. Examples of GBV are early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and trafficking for sex or slavery. GBV is sometimes also referred to as Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV).

School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV)

School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) refers to acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes and enforced by unequal power dynamics. It can affect both girls and boys. SRGBV has very real consequences in learners' lives, ranging from low self-esteem and depression, to early and unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV. This violence also has a serious impact on educational outcomes, with many students avoiding school, achieving below their potential, or dropping out completely. Examples of SRGBV are corporal punishment, sex for grades and bullying.

Summary

Leh Wi Lan (LWL) is programme funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to support the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) in Sierra Leone to improve learning outcomes for young people at secondary level and to increase the enrolment, retention and well-being of girls and children with disabilities in school. The programme works with all government and government-assisted junior secondary schools (JSS) and senior secondary schools (SSS) nationwide.

LWL supports MBSSE to address school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) by establishing School Safety Systems to prevent, report and respond to any form of violence children may experience in and around schools. These School Safety Systems are linked to the national response systems for gender-based violence (GBV). To ensure timely and effective referrals to the national response systems, LWL supports MBSSE to establish clear referral pathways and reinforce coordination with all the stakeholders.

This report originally aimed at providing information on current trends in response by relevant authorities to reported cases of gender-based violence (GBV) and school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) on the base of data on reports collected through district level consultations in January 2021. Due to the poor quality of the data available, the focus of this report has shifted to an analysis geared towards providing recommendations for the way forward to improve SRGBV case management. To achieve consensus on a unified referral and response mechanism, findings were presented to MBSSE and its partners of the GATE-GEC/GLADI Steering Committee, that ensures coordination among stakeholders working on reducing violence in schools.

Evidence suggests that most GBV and SRGBV cases are reported in urban areas, while people in rural areas are confronted to barriers to access to the reporting systems. The data collected also indicated that GBV reports have not significantly increased during the covid-19 emergency. However, participants to the district consultations agreed that GBV and SRGBV are still underreported across the country. Stakeholders denounced a lack of clear referral pathways and coordination among institutions, in particular on SRGBV, associated to a limited capacity to document cases and collect relevant data.

The recommendations provided focus on the need of building the capacity of the stakeholders to respond to SRGBV, by training individuals for improved case management but also by strengthening the information systems by creating a dedicated platform to report and manage SRGBV cases more efficiently. MBSSE and the GATE-GEC/GLADI Steering Committee provide immediate feedback to these recommendations and agreed to work on strengthening coordination among stakeholders. The LWL team will support MBSSE to further address the recommendations included in this report.

Introduction

1. The School Safety System

The UK Aid funded Girls' Access to Education (GATE) programme commenced in 2016 to support vulnerable girls to conclude their basic education cycle by transitioning to and completing JSS. In October 2018, GATE was integrated into the LWL programme to contribute to LWL's aim of supporting MBSSE with the provision of free quality secondary education by adding a focus on girls and children with disabilities in both JSS and SSS. Capitalising on the GATE experience, the new programme design intended to address the most significant constraints on the educational opportunities of girls and children with disabilities, among which school safety was identified as a critical issue.

To ensure the right of all children to safe learning environments and protection from SRGBV, LWL supports MBSSE to establish School Safety Systems to reduce any form of psychological, physical and sexual violence in school and around schools. These School Safety Systems consist of:

- the dissemination of the Reducing Violence in Schools (RVS) guide that teachers and principals read and discuss together in school-based Teacher Learning Circles. The RVS guide provides information on how to prevent, report and respond to SRGBV, linking up the school with the national response systems;
- a school-based reporting mechanism for SRGBV that allows students to report issues to school mentors or through anonymous notes collected in suggestion boxes placed in each school;
- the establishment of School Safety Committees (SSC) that meet regularly to respond to reports from mentors, from the suggestion box or immediately in the case of emergencies.

In addition to that, schools conduct an annual School Safety Assessment and teachers annually sign the Code of Conduct for Teachers and Other Education Personnel in Sierra Leone (or Teachers' Code of Conduct, TCoC). In these regards, LWL has supported the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) for the dissemination of the revised teachers' code of conduct to all JSS and SSS teachers.

LWL supports schools to establish Girls' and Boys' Clubs where students are guided to discuss topics that affect their learning and well-being, such as violence in schools, sexuality education and life skills. Information about school safety and the SRGBV reporting system is further shared with the school community through murals painted in each school.

The School Safety Systems and related activities are supported in each school by the principal, vice principal and two teachers, a female and a male, appointed as school mentors; schools where female teachers are not available have appointed a community member as female mentor. The LWL programme provides continuous guidance through sixteen district inclusion officers (DIOs), one per district of Sierra Leone, and two hundred school support officers (SSOs), who monitor each school regularly.

2. The Strategic Partnership Committee meetings

Established by MBSSE, the Strategic Partnership Committees (SPC) are tasked with the responsibility to address child protection and school safeguarding issues at district level. The SPCs are facilitated by the deputy directors (DD) of the MBSSE and their members include: representatives of the Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs (MGCA), the DD of the TSC, members of the Sierra Leone Police Family Support Unit (FSU), traditional leaders and organisations working on GBV and SRGBV issues.

SPC meetings were held from 11 to 15 January across all the 16 districts. The LWL DIOs participated to these meetings to collect information on how the relevant authorities respond to SRGBV reports as well as reporting on recommendations from the SPCs on the way forward.

3. The GATE-GEC/GLADI Steering Committee

The GATE-GEC/GLADI Steering Committee ensures coordination between the UK Aid funded Girls Access To Education (GATE) – Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) project and LWL. While LWL aims at improving safety and learning outcomes for all children in secondary schools, with a focus on girls and children with disabilities, the GATE-GEC project aims at supporting specifically marginalised girls and children with disabilities in six districts (Kenema, Kono, Kailahun, Moyamba, Karene and Port Loko) to complete primary school and transition into junior secondary school.

The GATE-GEC/GLADI Steering Committee is co-chaired by the Deputy Minister of MBSSE and the Education Policy Adviser of FCDO. In addition to ensuring coordination between programmes, the Steering Committee reviews thematic issues related to inclusive education and fosters high-level dialogue linked to the programmes' outcomes, and therefore linked to the inclusive education of all children irrespective of their gender and abilities or disabilities. Members of the Steering Committee include representatives of MBSSE, MGCA, FCDO, LWL, GATE-GEC and UNFPA.

The findings of this report were presented to the GATE-GEC/GLADI Steering Committee on 4 February 2021 to achieve consensus on a unified response mechanism for SRGBV.

Trends in response to reported cases of GBV and SRGBV

1. Data Collection

The data included in this report has been collected during the SPC meetings by the LWL DIOs; cases were reported mainly by the FSU, followed by reports received by schools. It has to be noticed that the LWL programme completed the roll-out of the RVS guide to support the establishment of the School Safety Systems in JSS in January 2020. On 31 March, in the framework of the covid-19 emergency response, the Government of Sierra Leone closed all schools until a partial reopening in July, only for children in exam classes. Regular activities resumed only with the beginning of the new academic year in October 2020. Immediately after school reopening, the LWL programme ensured support to MBSSE for the establishment of the School Safety Committees in SSS. Due to the school closure, in 2020 most of the cases of violence and abuse were not reported in school. In addition to that, due to the recent establishment of the School Safety Systems, only limited, not comparable data is available from the schools. On the other hand, the FSU disposes of large amount of data. For these reasons, this report focuses on both GBV and SRGBV reported by both schools and the FSU.

Each SPC agreed on how to group the different categories of offences, listed them and provided the number of reports per category. The SPCs then highlighted specific issues and provided recommendations to improve the management of GBV and SRGBV cases, from prevention to response and reporting. A solid analysis of trends has not been possible due to the poor quality of the data collected, and that made the focus of this report shift to an analysis aimed at providing recommendations for the way forward to improve SRGBV case management. The reasons of the poor quality of the data have been identified as follows:

- *Unclear definitions of the offence categories and of the general terminology.*
Many stakeholders are not familiar with the general terminology (GBV, SGBV, SRGBV) and most of them do not have a good understanding of the offence categories. In these regards, the offence categories that the SPC attempted to use are those in use by the Sierra Leone Police (SLP), that do not differentiate between GBV and SRGBV.

- *Manual data collection.*
The data collection at school level is entirely manual and referrals to relevant authorities are mainly done orally or in a paper form. Figures are collected, moved and summed manually. The SLP and FSU record their report manually and then input it in their own information system at a later stage. This increases the risk of mistakes, especially associated to the lack of training of the stakeholders on data collection and archiving.

- *Fragmentation of information systems.*
Reports collected through the School Safety System are mainly referred to the deputy director of MBSSE and TSC in the districts or to the local FSU or SLP. MBSSE and TSC do not have any common information system, and their system are not linked to the FSU or SLP. This leads to the risk of a duplication of reporting.

- *Lack of use of the data collected at school level.*

The reports collected at school level are generally referred to MBSSE, TSC, FSU or SLP, but no use is currently made of the statistical data (number of reports, type of offence, demographics). The regular collection of such statistical data would represent an incentive to improve the quality of the data collected.

2. GBV/SRGBV cases reported by the SPCs for 2020

The tables below show the number of GBV and SRGBV cases reported by the SPCs per district, then grouped by region; figures include reports from schools and from the FSU. To monitor the consultations, MBSSE set up quality assurance teams comprising the district DD of MBSSE, a member of the district education office (supervisor or inspector) and the LWL district support officer (DSO). MBSSE also mobilised a roving monitoring team from the Freetown headquarters to complement the local quality assurance teams.

District	GBV/SRGBV cases reported
Tonkolili	316
Koinadugu	118
Bombali	2,749
Kambia	279
Port Loko	777
Karene	225
Falaba	12
Kenema	930
Kailahun	725
Kono	815
Bo	3,972
Moyamba	171
Bonthe	117
Pujehun	346
WU	4,495
WR	1,083
Total	17,130

Figure 1 GBV/SRGBV cases reported by the Strategic Partnership Committees for 2020

Region	GBV/SRGBV cases reported
South (Bo, Bonthe, Moyamba and Pujehun)	4,606
East (Kono, Kailahun and Kenema)	2,470
Western Area (WR and WU)	5,578
North East (Tonkolili, Koinadugu, Bombali and Falaba)	3,195
North West (Port Loko, Karene and Kambia)	1,281
Total	17,130

Figure 2 GBV/SRGBV cases reported by the SPCs for 2020 by region

The highest number of cases has been reported in Western Urban Area, followed by the Bo and Bombali districts. This could be determined by the higher population density but also interpreted as sign of more accessible reporting systems. For the same reason, the extremely low number of reports from the Falaba district can be considered a sign of as a serious issue of access to reporting systems. The figures suggest that is more likely for people to report cases in urban areas, while districts that are largely rural record the lowest numbers.

The victims of abuse are mostly women and girls, with the perpetrators being men and boys, normally from the same community of the victim. The perpetrators of SRGBV are generally teachers, other pupils, commercial motorbike riders and community members. Transactional sex is a common practice across Sierra Leone: sex for gifts, sex for favours, sex for grades. Poor parenting and abandonment are also common factors increasing the vulnerability of children, in particular girls, and therefore contribute to the increase in GBV and SRGBV cases.

3. GBV cases reported to the FSU

Among all the information systems (MBSSE, MGCA, TSC, FSU/SLP), the FSU has the most solid, comparable data. Figures shared by the FSU national database officer indicate a modest increase of less than 3 percent in GBV cases reported from 2019 to 2020 across the 16 districts. From January to October 2020, a total of 10,655 cases were reported to the FSU across the country while in the same period of 2019, a total of 10,356 cases were confirmed[1]. The FSU records do not disaggregate GBV and SRGBV. The data indicates that GBV reports have not significantly increased during the covid-19 emergency.
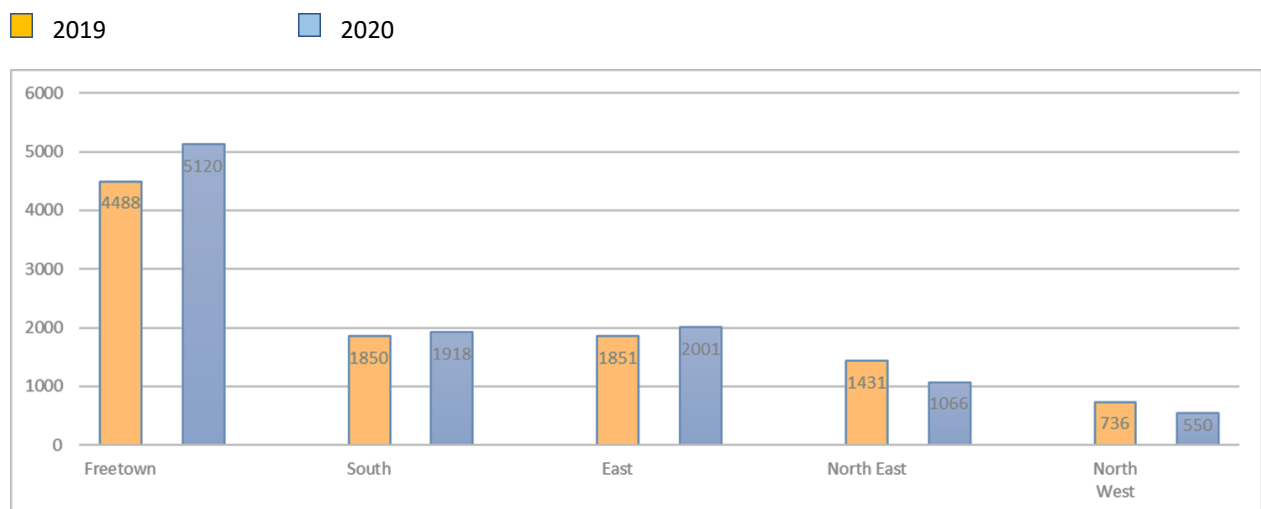

Figure 3. Chart of the GBV cases reported to the FSU across the regions in 2019 and 2020 (January-October)

4. Unreported cases of GBV and SRGBV

Participants to the SPC consultations generally agreed that GBV and SRGBV cases continue to be underreported across the country. A few reasons why cases are not reported were identified:

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[1] Data for the period November-December 2020 is not available yet.

- victims and witnesses of abuse do not trust the confidentiality nor the efficiency of the existing reporting systems;
- victims and witnesses do not report violence for fear of reprisals, and that particularly valid for children in school;
- the national reporting systems are not easily accessible, in particular to people with disabilities.

5. Response to reported cases of GBV and SRGBV

According to the reports from the SPC consultations, participants lamented a lack of clear referral pathways for GBV and SRGBV, aggravated by weak coordination among stakeholder. At school level, the TCoC promotes and enforces "zero tolerance for all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse, physical and humiliating forms of punishment, psychological abuse, and child labour in the school environment"[2] as per the Child Right Act of 2007; it invites teachers to report misconduct by listing potential reporting channels without however providing clear referral pathways nor assigning roles and responsibilities about the case management for SRGBV.

Nationwide, the School Safety Committees generally have limited capacity to document and respond to SRGBV. The same limited capacity in terms of data collection and case management is found among MBSSE and TSC staff, due to a general lack of specific training and efficient information systems to support the SRGBV case management at district and at national level. In practice, SRGBV cases reported through the School Safety Systems are currently referred by the schools either to the MBSSE DDs, the TSC DDs or the FSU. However, no case has been reported as closed by the MBSSE DDs or the TSC DDs.

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[2] The Code of Conduct for Teachers and Other Education Personnel in Sierra Leone, 2019

Recommendations from the SPC consultations

The following are recommendations addressed by the SPCs to MBSSE to improve SRGBV referrals and case management:

- Establish clear referral pathways for SRGBV that outline roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders (School Safety Committees and school management, MBSSE, TSC, MGCA, SLP, FSU, etc…);
- Work towards an increased coordination among stakeholders at district and national level on the prevention of SRGBV and SRGBV case management;
- Create links with MGCA's Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) response strategy;
- Set up an online reporting system for SRGBV to improve data collection and enable more effective communication between the districts and Freetown;
- Engage in awareness raising on GBV/SRGBV at community level and in schools;
- Strengthen SRGBV data collection across all 16 districts;
- Train relevant staff (including FSU) on SRGBV in each district;
- Link with MGCA to support safe homes for the victims of GBV/SRGBV.

Conclusions

This report was presented to the GATE-GEC/GLADI Steering Committee chaired by the Deputy Minister of MBSSE in February 2021. The presentation was followed by a conversation focused on providing feedback on the recommendations and agreeing on a way forward.

The Deputy Minister of MBSSE recognised the weaknesses of the reporting system for SRGBV in place and agreed with the recommendations on the need of strengthening the data collection and training education professionals on SRGBV case management. She pointed out that the creation of an online reporting system for SRGBV should a priority and added that this could be complemented by the revitalization of MBSSE's hotline, currently not operational. Finally, the Deputy Minister manifested her support to an increased coordination among MBSSE, MGCA, TSC and FSU on SRGBV. The Assistant Director of the MBSSE Gender Unit added that guidance counsellors have been established by the 2004 Education Act to work in schools and communities, but they are currently not in place. She invited the partners of the Steering Committee to work towards restoring these roles.

The representative of MGCA also agreed on the need of improving coordination among ministries and stakeholders on GBV and investing in data collection. She reported that MGCA is now working with the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) on harmonising the data collected by the ministry on GBV.

The LWL team renewed their engagement on preventing, responding to and reporting SRGBV; the programme will support MBSSE to address all the recommendations included in this report and share progress with the GATE-GEC/GLADI Steering Committee.