

# INFORMATION BRIEF

## Keeping Girls Safe and Included in Sierra Leone's Secondary Schools



**The Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) is committed to creating a fair, equal and prosperous society where all children and young people are able to access education. However, evidence shows that girls and other marginalised learners, such as pupils with disabilities, are often discriminated against and deprived of their right to safe, inclusive, and quality education.**

The Radical Inclusion Policy sets out the vision of Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) for ensuring that every child—including pregnant girls, parent learners – regardless of their level of poverty or whether they live in an urban or rural environment can live and learn safely and with dignity.

Leh Wi Lan (LWL), led by MBSSE, is a programme funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to support GoSL's drive 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. This briefing summarises the specific progress and learnings of Leh Wi Lan and its partners towards the Ministry's goal of improving girls' safety and inclusion at school.

### **Girls face significant structural barriers, including school-related gender-based violence, to fulfilling their educational potential**

In Sierra Leone, as in many contexts, boys outperform girls in examinations. Recent learning assessments show that, compared to boys, significantly fewer girls reach the expected knowledge level for JSS, either for English or Maths, and that gaps in learning levels between boys and girls widen as they move to SSS. This gap has been further exacerbated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Girls face barriers inside and outside the classroom to fulfilling their potential - caused by poverty, lack of infrastructure and access to menstrual hygiene products and harmful social norms. Within school, these barriers may also include violence and inadequate teacher training or pedagogy.

School-related gender-based (SRGBV) has a significant impact on students' ability to participate in and complete school and adolescent girls are some of the pupils most at risk of becoming victims of violence. Other factors that increase vulnerability to fulfilling educational potential include living in a rural area or having a disability, learning difficulties or special educational needs.

**“... It's about equity and access. Children must find school to be the safest place in their lives. And schools remain safe for girls while they are facing sexual and gender-based violence at home and in the community,”**

**David Sengeh, Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education and Chief Innovation Officer for the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation**

## A national School Safety System to address school-related gender-based violence

To ensure the right of all children to have a safe learning environments and protection from SRGBV, Lei Weh Lan is supporting MBSSE to establish School Safety Systems to prevent, report and respond to any form of psychological, physical and sexual violence in school and around schools.

The UNICEF GATE project had successfully introduced School Safety Committees and a SRGBV reporting system through suggestion boxes in JSS. To strengthen this approach and trust Le Wi Lan, led by MBSSE, has established School Safety Systems in JSS and SSS. The principal, vice principal, a female teacher (or a 'Community Mama' where female teachers are not available) and a male teacher are appointed as school mentors to support the system in each school. A key part of the system is 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 what violence is, alternatives to corporal punishment as well as on how to prevent, report and respond to SRGBV, linking up the school with the national response systems. The school-based reporting mechanism now allows students to report issues to school mentors or through anonymous notes collected in suggestion boxes placed in each school and each year sees a School Safety Assessment undertaken.

Leh Wi Lan has also supported the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) to disseminate the updated Teachers' Code of Conduct (TCoC), annually signed by staff, to 18,917 JSS and SSS teachers through sessions held at the district level where each teacher received a printed version of the document. Braille versions were also available and there were dedicated session for teachers with sight impairments.



School mural displaying part of the teachers' Code of Conduct

## Improving children's understanding of SRGBV and sexual and reproductive health

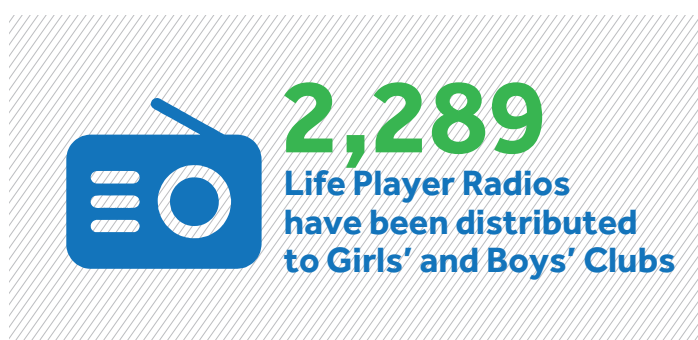
The limited number of existing gender-segregated Girls' Clubs and Boys' Clubs, facilitated by teachers, had mainly proved ineffective. Le Wi Lan has supported MBSSE to establish a new model of Girls and Boys Clubs in all secondary schools. The sessions, guided by one girl and one boy plus guests, promote respect, equal participation and discussion around gender-based violence, including how to identify it, address it and report it, in a friendly, engaging and enjoyable environment. They are based around 17 pre-recorded radio episodes which introduce topics related to SRGBV, sexual and reproductive health and life skills for adolescents. 2,289 wind up and solar powered 'Life Player Radios' have been distributed to the Girls' and Boys' Clubs so far. Information about school safety and the SRGBV reporting system is further shared with the school community through murals painted in each school which depict the roles and rights of school staff and students. In addition, given the increased vulnerability of adolescent girls during the pandemic, Le Wi Lan also supported the development and broadcasting of specific radio episodes in Krio to engage the public on topics related to discrimination and gender-based violence.

## Access to safe sanitary products

In Sierra Leone, many adolescent girls miss a few days of school every month when they have their period because they cannot afford safe sanitary products. They can lose up to the 20% of their school year as a result, significantly impacting their educational outcomes. MBSSE, with help from Le Wi Lan, scaled-up the successful UNICEF/FCDO GATE programme pilot, which distributed reusable pads to JSS in two districts (Kono and Tonkolili), to cover JSS and SSS nationwide. Kits were distributed first to JSS in 2019, with the Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, David Moinina Sengeh launching the roll out to SSS in October 2020. Now every girl in every public senior secondary school in Sierra Leone has access to reusable pads to ensure they can come to school and continue their learning during menstruation. Over 300,000 girls in JSS and SSS have received the LWL hygiene kits as a result.

## Changes to classroom practice informed by teacher research

Fostering a classroom culture that enables all pupils, irrespective of their social status, ethnicity, gender, or disability to participate meaningfully is one of the most important steps in creating inclusive learning environments. However recent ground-breaking teacher research has identified that teaching practice in Sierra Leone's schools is still not sufficiently inclusive nor gender responsive. Assumptions and prejudices about gender can lead to girls being unable or anxious to speak up. Simple strategies and adaptations to practice developed by teachers themselves for their peers have been shown to improve this. To foster the participation of girls in school, Lehi Wi Lan has developed a Gender Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) to strengthen the capacity of MBSSE, TSC and teachers to provide equal opportunities to girls. The dissemination of the GRP in schools is planned for the school year 2021-22.



## Supporting sustainability of the new school safety and inclusion initiatives

Lehi Wi Lan has purposefully developed the skills and capacity of local staff to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions to address school safety and inclusion. MBSSE inspectors have also been briefed on safeguarding, gender responsive approaches and disability inclusion through Learning Circles. However there is more to do to embed inclusive and safe practices in secondary schools, including increasing the number of female role models in schools and incentivising change makers, for example by offering a Reducing Violence in School Guide certificate. Analysis suggests that most GBV and SRGBV cases reported thus far are in urban rather than rural areas, suggesting issues of access to the national reporting systems. Gaps have also been identified in teachers' capacity to document cases and collect relevant data, and there is a lack of clear referral pathways among institutions. Lehi Wi Lan is working with MBSSE to establish clear referral pathways and roles and responsibilities to improve capacity and coordination among stakeholders on SRGBV.

## Platform for success

Lehi Wi Lan's impact on the process and practices that support safety and inclusion in Sierra Leone has been significant, though it has only been possible because of the vision and commitment of the Government and, in particular, MBSSE. The UKAid funded Lehi Wi Lan programme will continue to target resources and expertise at inclusion and school safety order to support the Government's Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme spearheaded by President Bio, which aims to develop the human capital in the country by ensuring inclusion and equal educational access and participation for all children.

Lehi Wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) is a six-year (2016-2022) UK Aid-funded programme aimed at improving English and maths learning achievement in all secondary schools, especially for girls. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Mott MacDonald or Oxford Policy Management



Girls' and Boys' Club Session

