



Government of Sierra Leone

Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education

Press Release

Sierra Leone to Champion Education Plus- a new Global Initiative to Accelerate Adolescent Girls and Young Women's Empowerment

Sierra Leone has become the first African country to commit to the Education *Plus* Initiative, a new game-changing drive to respond to the undeniable gender inequalities that put adolescent girls and young women in our countries at greater risk of acquiring HIV, impeding school completion and school-to-work transitions.

"As Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, I am pleased to announce our firm commitment to this initiative co-led by five women Heads of UN agencies - UNAIDS, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNFPA and UN Women as we move to charter new paths and policies out of the Covid-19 pandemic to a more equal country. The multi-sectoral initiative represents a human rights-based, gender-responsive action agenda for adolescent girls and young women to lead healthy, secure and fulfilling lives while paving their way to vibrant futures," said Hon. Dr. David Moinina Sengh.

Through the Education Plus initiative, the Government of Sierra Leone will properly and adequately plan and address the essential elements of empowerment that every adolescent girl and young woman should be entitled to in their transitions to adulthood:

- 1 Completion of quality secondary education
- 2: Universal access to comprehensive sexuality education
- 3: Fulfilment of sexual and reproductive health and rights
- 4: Freedom from gender-based and sexual violence
- 5: Successful school-to-work transitions and young women's economic empowerment

Why Education Plus?

Education plus is a high-profile, high-level political advocacy drive to accelerate actions and investments to prevent HIV centered on the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women and the achievement of gender equality in sub-Saharan Africa. Covid-19 impact on Sierra Leone and many other countries has been immense. To build back better societies to include everyone, as we focus on recovery, requires us to acknowledge the gendered impact of this health crisis on the lives of different people and communities and then deploy evidence-based responses.

The pandemic effects on education are well documented, and we know that girls are less likely than boys to return to school after such an unprecedented crisis. Even before the pandemic, we were already far from equal access to education, many adolescent girls and young women were out of school and now risk not returning. With the heightened risks of gender-based violence, early pregnancy, maternal mortality and harmful practices under COVID-19, we must tailor our responses to the urgent and long-term needs in the education system and beyond.

Child marriage is a challenge to be must address. Close to 40 percent of girls are likely to have a baby by age 19, with over 70 percent of all SGBV survivors being below 15 years (UNICEF 2017). The HIV epidemic in Sierra Leone calls for doubled efforts for gender equality. Currently, infections among adolescents and young women aged 15-24 years, HIV prevalence is thrice (1.5%) as high compared to men and boys of the same age (0.5%).

These figures are not accidental. That's why our government fully backs this ambitious approach to ensure secondary school completion for all children by 2025. Evidence has shown that keeping girls in school longer and ensuring violence-free environments is associated with significantly reducing the risk of acquiring HIV power dynamics that put many girls at risk of violence and HIV infections is critical in this strategy.

Building momentum on past interventions

Critical to the government's commitment to Human Capital Development, His Excellency President Julius Maada Bio has prioritized education with the Free Quality School Education program (FQSE), thereby increasing enrolment sharply. However, our secondary school enrolment and completion for girls has been lagging. In 2015, 31,132 of the 60,624 who dropped out of primary school were females and 118,010 of the 231,677 in secondary school were females. It is estimated that 13.61% of girls dropped out of secondary school in 2017.

On 30 March 2020, the government overturned a ban on pregnant girls attending school, and we introduced a new policy focused on the Radical Inclusion of all children in the education system. We have developed the national Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) policy and curriculum to support this radical inclusion policy. Teachers' training is underway for the roll-out of age-appropriate CSE. Currently, our government budget allocation on education is at 22%, the highest ever over the years.

The President recently launched the national gender equality and women empowerment policy, the male engagement strategy, six new one-stop center for SGBV response. The Sexual Offences Act 2019 addresses impunity by increasing the penalties for perpetrators and centering the needs of victims of sexual violence to get justice. The First Lady Fatima Maada Bio has supported the efforts of youth and women's movements in the "Hands Off Our Girls" campaign to end rape, teenage pregnancy, and maternal mortality.

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary School Education (MBSSE) has increased the utilization of the Global Partnership for Education Grant from 10 to 30 percent over the past 12 months. We have established over 30 new early childhood centres, strengthened the capacity of 5000 teachers and distance learning as part of COVID-19 response and the roll-out of the zero schoolgirl pregnancy campaign.

New commitments

Our past achievements and progress have been possible with support from trusted, consistent partnerships. Our renewed commitment requires bold scaled-up investments, and we are hoping for renewed partnerships to make gender equality more than a promise but a lived reality.

We know the benefits to girls, their communities and the country that Education Plus brings and are committed to increasing their prospects for securing jobs and higher incomes young women. We will offer the solid leadership necessary to make the changes ahead to ensure that by 2025 we have all children completing secondary education in violence-free environments; extend the vital Sexual and Reproductive Health rights and services to adolescent girls and young women to enable them to transition from childhood to adulthood empowered, safe and healthy.

Working together we must do things differently to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. Our pledge to Education Plus is in line with actualizing the African Union Agenda 2063 and extending rights and services as affirmed in the AU Youth Charter. We look forward to the support and partnerships with our multilateral and bilateral partners, international NGOs and meaningful engagement with adolescent girls and young women in planning, implementing and monitoring to make Education Plus a success in Sierra Leone.



DAVID WS BANYA
SENIOR PERMANENT SECRETARY