



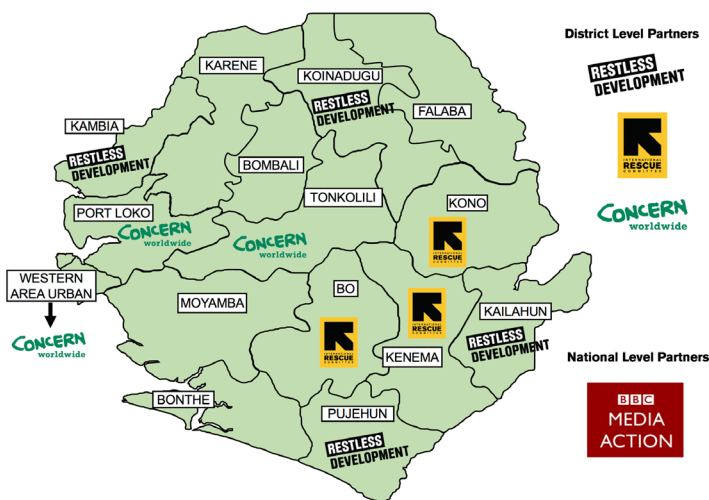
BASELINE RESEARCH BRIEF

Contextual Background and Learning Needs of Out-of-school Adolescent Girls in Sierra Leone

Results from the Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient Programme

BACKGROUND

Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER) is a UK Aid-funded Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) project in Sierra Leone. The LNGB window is focused on reaching the most educationally marginalised girls: those that are out of school (OOS) and lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. EAGER is implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in partnership with Concern Worldwide, Restless Development and BBC Media Action in ten Districts across Sierra Leone. The project duration is approximately four years, beginning in February 2019. EAGER targets out-of-school, adolescent girls aged 13-17—those who have never attended school or who have dropped out early—and who are subject to social marginalisation.

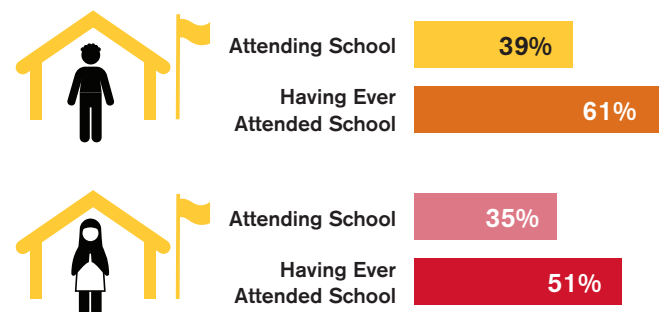


Literacy levels and educational attainment across Sierra Leone are low, and even more so for women. **In 2015, the percentage of males attending school and having ever attended school was 39% and 60%, respectively, compared to the percentage of females attending school and having ever attended school at 35% and 51%, respectively.¹ The literacy rate for males stands at 58% compared to 41% for females.²** Much of the gender disparity in education begins in adolescence, when more value begins to be placed on girls' domestic roles, rather than their education. This is evident in the widening gender disparity later in the education system, with more girls than boys dropping out as they move through Junior Secondary and Senior Secondary School.

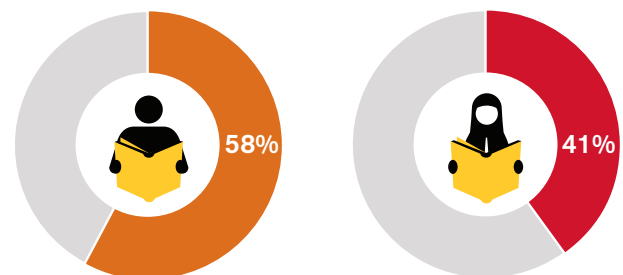
The reasons are multiple and inter-related, and the West Africa Ebola outbreak from 2014-2016 compounded many existing barriers. During the Ebola outbreak and closure of schools for 8 months, many families lost a primary earner, leading to an increase in child labour. Early marriage often marks the end of girls' education. Teenage pregnancy, as a result of abuse, transactional sex, lack of information on reproductive health, early marriage or otherwise, has been a persistent barrier to education; 15.5% of girls and women between 12-25 report pregnancy as a reason for dropping out of school.³ The rate of teenage pregnancy spiked during the Ebola outbreak, as school closures likely resulted in reduced protection of girls. EAGER is aligning with the Government of Sierra Leone's National strategy for the reduction of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage (2018-22), to target these issues.

At school level, gender-based violence is evident, with violence occurring both on the way to school and in school (perpetrators can include male teachers, peers and older students).⁴ About 45.5% of all women in Sierra Leone have suffered some form of violence, and again the prevalence of violence against women and girls significantly increased during the Ebola outbreak.⁵ The EAGER Programme is operating in this context to support the Government of Sierra Leone's commitment to SDG5, gender equality, by empowering girls who have missed out on formal schooling and providing them with alternative opportunities to thrive and reach their full potential.

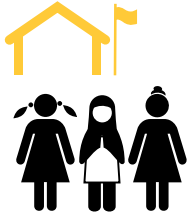
Attending School Rate:



Literacy rate:



WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?



- High prevalence of out-of-school adolescent girls
- Limited learning opportunities appropriate for out-of-school girls
- Restricted inclusive education opportunities for girls with disabilities
- Lack of foundational literacy and numeracy skills limit future opportunities
- Limited viable opportunities for social and economic empowerment
- Restrictive socio-cultural gender norms



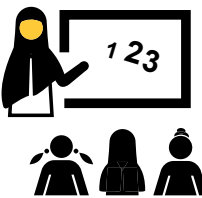
WHAT ARE WE DOING?



- Safe spaces and learning spaces established in 500 communities
- Community-based mentors and facilitators recruited and trained to deliver learning programme
- Tailored learning curricula and teaching and learning materials developed
- Individual mentoring and support funds provided to assist girls in transition
- Community and boys' groups established to support girls' education and empowerment
- Radio shows promoting girls' education and empowerment broadcast on local and national stations



WHAT WILL WE ACCOMPLISH?



- OOS adolescent girls aged 13-17 enrolled and attend learning sessions for 11 months, across 3 cohorts (7,500 girls in Cohort 1, increasing to 12,500 in Cohort 2)
- 2600 mentors and 1345 facilitators trained and deliver functional literacy and numeracy, life and business skills sessions
- Individual transition plan developed and pursued by every girl
- 5 months of individual mentoring will provide guidance for every girl during transition
- Community groups develop action plans to support girls' education and empowerment
- 108 radio shows and 32 episodes of a short-format radio drama produced and broadcast



WHAT ARE THE CHANGES WE EXPECT TO SEE?



- Improved learning outcomes in literacy, numeracy, life skills & SEL, and business skills
- Ability to apply functional literacy and numeracy skills to real-world scenarios
- Successful transition to economic, learning, household, or community empowerment
- Greater awareness and understanding of issues facing OOS adolescent girls
- Improved community-level structures to support OOS adolescent girls



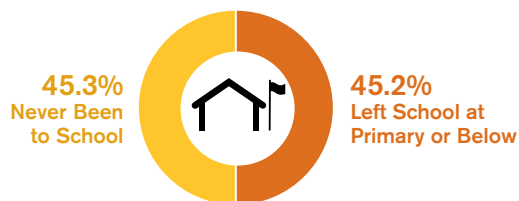
WHAT IS THE IMPACT?



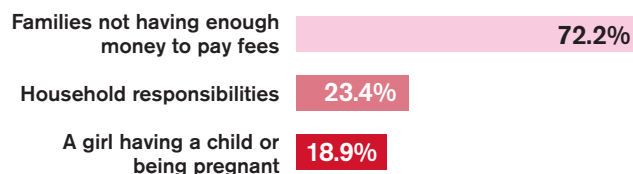
- Improved economic and social outcomes for girls
- Enhanced capability for self-actualisation
- Increased psychosocial wellbeing
- Greater support and accountability for girls' education and empowerment

WHO DO WE WORK WITH?

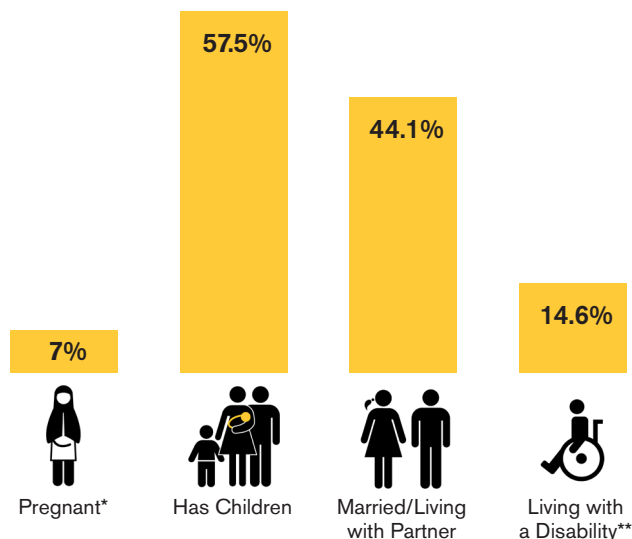
Educationally Marginalised:



In the past, girls have experienced the following barriers to education:



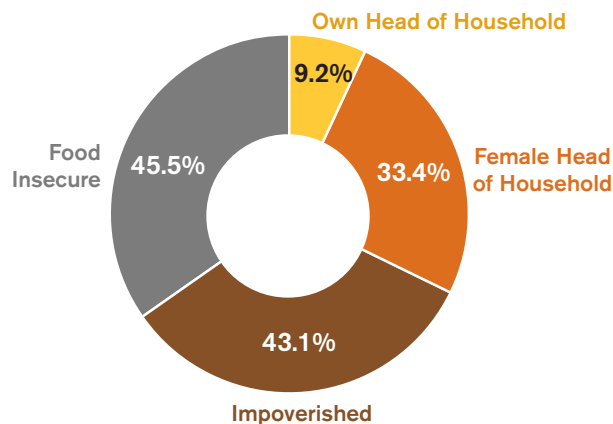
Socially Marginalised:



*Data source: community mapping of beneficiaries

**60% of whom qualify due to daily experience of anxiety or depression

Economically Marginalised:



RESEARCH, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

Together with IMC worldwide, IRC are conducting an impact evaluation of the EAGER programme on girls' outcomes in terms of literacy, numeracy, business and life skills/SEL, alongside qualitative exploration of girls' lived experiences and project participation, and of the wider communities' attitudes towards girls' education and empowerment.

The baseline evaluation of EAGER (November-December 2019) used a convergent mixed methods design, where quantitative and qualitative data collection occurred simultaneously. The evaluation design includes a pre- and post-test assessment of a group of treatment girls. Surveys and learning assessments, including a head of households survey, caregivers surveys, a girls' survey, the Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA), the Out-of-school Youth Literacy Assessment (OLA) and a battery of life skills assessments, were conducted with 2,084 beneficiary girls from 215 communities, and their caregivers or head of households for quantitative data collection.

The qualitative component, which included key informant interviews and focus group discussions, aimed to provide context and depth to the findings of the quantitative impact evaluation and increase validity by triangulating findings. Qualitative data collection relied on a purposeful approach across 10 communities (1 per each of the 10 implementation districts) and reached 441 individuals (247 females and 194 males, including 144 beneficiaries).



PHOTO: AUBREY WADE/IRC

BASELINE EVALUATION FINDINGS

Baseline Literacy Performance:

Literacy proficiency was measured using an adapted OLA (Out-of-school Youth Literacy Assessment), with a focus on assessing functional literacy performance. Subtasks included listening comprehension, real life reading, letter names, familiar words, oral passage reading and comprehension (two difficulty levels), and dictation. Scores became progressively poorer as girls moved through literacy tasks.

Learners were divided into three groups in terms of literacy skills: 1) 40% could not correctly identify any letters, 2) 35% achieved letter recognition but could not read or comprehend proficiently, and 3) 25% who could not read proficiently but could answer simple, real-world comprehension questions. While many test-takers demonstrated pre-literacy skills, 88.9% of respondents achieved a 'non-learner' score and only 1% achieved a 'proficient learner' score on the final test (dictation).

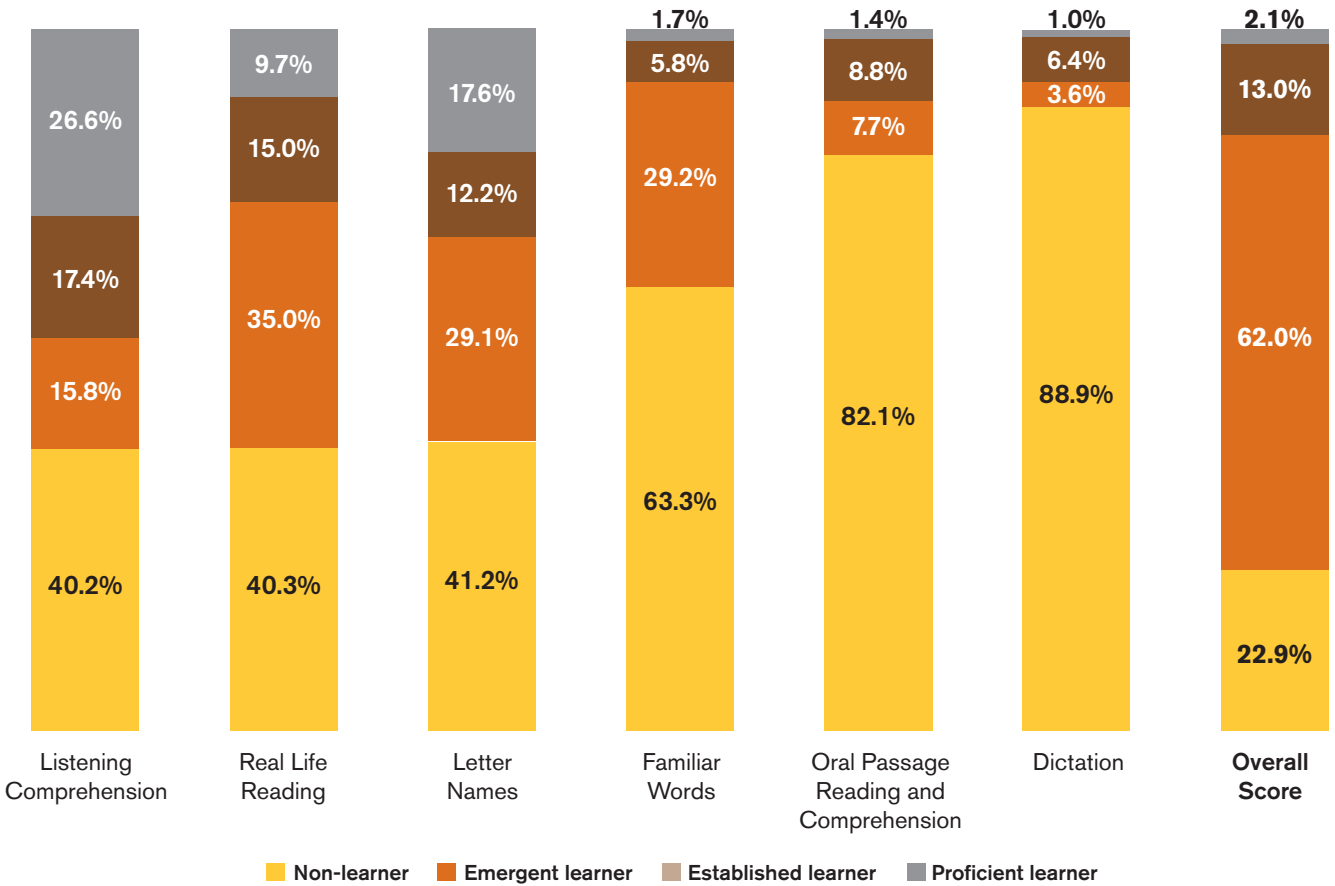
All subtask results are presented according to four skill categories: non-learner, emergent learner, established learner, and proficient learner, based on the percentage of questions correctly answered

in each subtask. Per LNGB Guidelines, the four categories are calculated as Non-Learner (0 percent correct); Emergent (1-40%); Established (41-80%); Proficient (81-100%).

Qualitative focus groups and interviews also explored girls' desires to improve their skills as well as parents' hopes for their children. Both girls and caregivers (male and female) strongly indicated that they would like the girls to learn to read. Most of the specific examples provided related to functional skills (e.g. reading signs, text messages, documents for signature, and reviewing children's progress in school). In focus groups, girls perceived their improvements in their general learning skills as an opportunity to gain independence, to support their family and their parents, and to keep themselves from being fooled by others:

“ I want to know how to read and write so that I will not give my child's report card to some[one] to read and explain to me. I will follow up on the progress of my child without involving a third party. - GIRLS, FGD, KONO ”

Figure 1. Foundational Literacy Skills



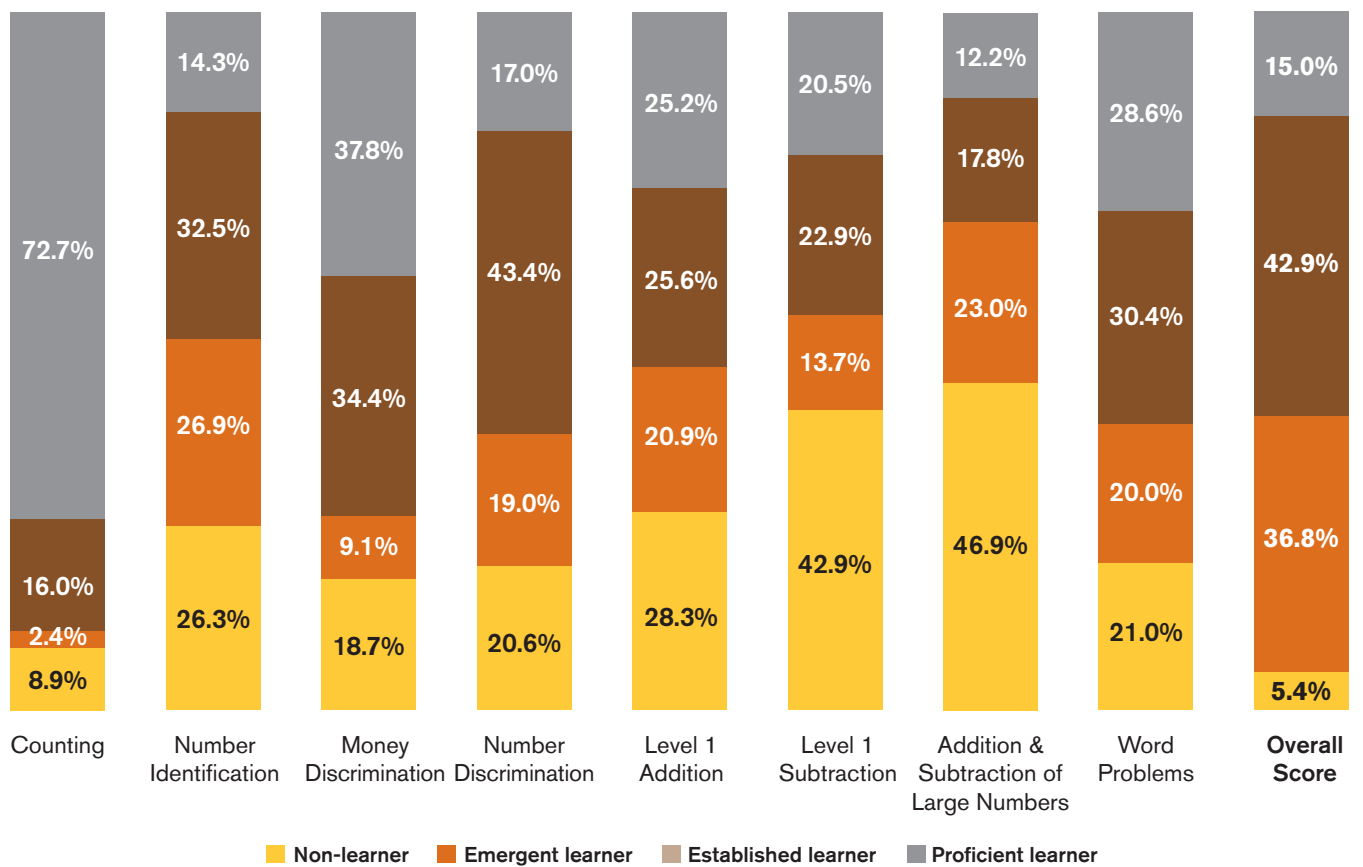
Baseline Maths Performance:

Foundational numeracy skills were assessed using an adapted EGMA assessment, again with an emphasis on real-world examples. Girls performed best in the subtasks of counting, money and number discrimination, and word problems. Overall, scores in numeracy were higher than those for literacy; 9% of girls received a non-learner rating on the simplest subtask of counting, with no items answered correctly, and 26% on the number identification task. On average, test-takers performed slightly better on the real-world settings items; this is particularly true for girls who had never been to school, suggesting that measuring abilities using both real-life examples as well as more traditional assessment methods best captures abilities of out-of-school girls.

Girls and their caregivers expressed a clear desire to learn numeracy skills during focus group discussions, although this was not as strong as for literacy skills. Examples provided of why these skills were important included counting money, giving change, keeping track of finances, recording measurements and using the telephone.

“ One can do business if he/she knows how to calculate well. If you are supposed to give someone Le 1,000 change but you give the person Le 9,000 change then, you are making a loss. This project should come and teach us how to read and write, calculate so that we can be able to support our families and make profit in doing business. - GIRLS, FGD, KONO ”

Figure 2. Foundational Numeracy Skills



Baseline Life Skills and SEL Performance:

The life skills component of the baseline study assessed girls' proficiency on seven sub-topics, incorporating social and emotional learning, social resources and health-related knowledge. Girls demonstrated a weak to moderate awareness on the wide range of knowledge, attitudes and skills assessed by this tool.

Hostile Attribution Bias, Emotional Dysregulation, and Conflict Resolution questions were adapted from IRC's Social-Emotional Response and Information Scenarios (SERAIS) tools, with question items stemming from three stories of different scenarios that were read to girls. On average, 58.8% of girls assumed hostile intent in ambiguous situations—which research shows is highly associated with aggressive behaviours. In terms of emotional response, 30.7% of girls indicated that they would act in anger when confronted with socially challenging situations, with a further 9.8% reporting that they would experience high levels of sadness; both of which indicate emotionally dysregulated responses. More positive outcomes were noted for conflict resolution, with two-thirds of girls (67.7%) suggesting problem-solving methods for dealing with conflict. Whilst physical or verbal aggression were comparatively a small percentage of the responses (4.3% on average), 10% of respondents suggested an aggressive strategy on at least one story.

Health-related questions demonstrated substantial health knowledge, but with significant room for improvement. Girls performed most strongly in their ability to name times when handwashing is important (78.7%), followed by their knowledge of sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention. Three-quarters of girls (74.9%) could name one place to get STI testing, and 71% could name a place to get family planning services. Despite knowing

about community resources, only 18.4% of respondents could name two methods of STI prevention. A notable finding was that 45.5% percent of respondents could not name two healthy ways to manage stress in their life, which may be related to the high prevalence of anxiety and depression amongst beneficiary girls. Of those who could name at least one healthy response to stress, the most commonly named strategy was talking with a friend (46.6%).

Girls' beliefs that they could achieve the goals they set out for themselves was measured using the New General Self Efficacy Scale, with responses largely positive. Overall, girls scored an average of 73.1% on this scale, indicating high levels of self-efficacy. Finally, in terms of social resources and relationships, whilst the majority of girls indicated having strong peer relationships, a quarter of girls (24.8%) scored 40% or lower on the supportive relationships questions, which suggests more disagreement than agreement with gender-positive statements.

Learning Outcomes by Subgroup:

Notable findings from subgroup analysis were that, on average, girls with disabilities (including mental health issues), younger girls, girls that are married, and girls that are food insecure score more poorly on learning assessments. Unsurprisingly, girls that never attended formal schooling also demonstrated poorer outcomes. Older girls and girls from a female-headed household performed better across all components. Geographic variation is also existent, with higher ability evident in urban and peri-urban settings, and lower levels of learning in remote and border regions. It is worth noting that, due to the targeted recruitment of marginalised girls, the majority of the sample will fall into one or more subgroup and experience at least one barrier to learning.

Table 3. Differences in learning scores by key characteristic subgroups and barriers

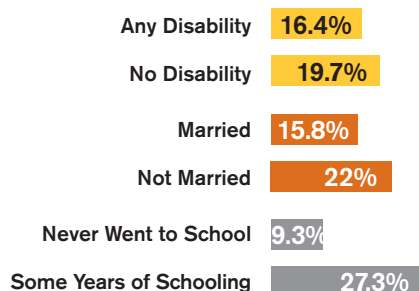
	Average Literacy Score	Average Numeracy Score	Average Life Skills Score
All girls (reference score)	19.2	47.3	65.6
Any Disability	-2.8	-5.8*	-4.5*
Mental Health (Anxiety and Depression)	-3.5	-7*	-3.8*
Under 15	-2.3	-7.4*	-2.6*
17 or more	+1.2	+2.9	+0.8
Female Head of Household	+3.3*	+1.6	+1.1*
Married	-3.4*	-2.6*	+0.7
Has Children	-0.2	+0.4	-0.8
Never went to school	-9.9*	-11.2*	-1
Impoverished	+0.1	-2.7*	-0.4
Food insecure	-0.1	-3.6*	-0.8
Beneficiary is Head of Household	-2.6	-4*	-2.8
Source: OLA, EGMA, Life Skills Assessments	N=2084	N=2079	N=2082

Note: *significantly different to the overall mean

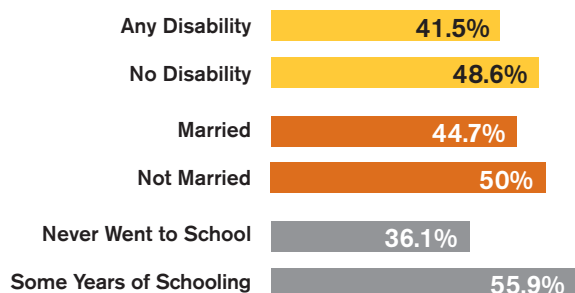
Notable Differences in Marginalisation Categories:



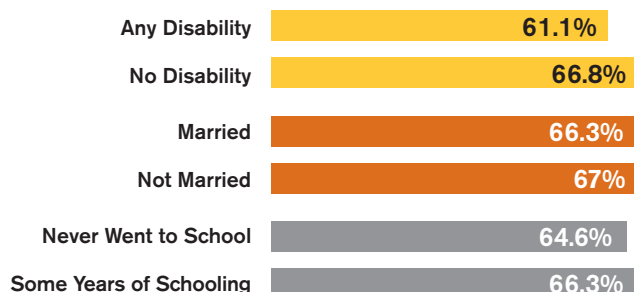
Average Literacy Score



Average Numeracy Score



Average Life Skills Score



SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

- OOS adolescent girls in Sierra Leone face specific barriers that pose challenges in transitioning to formal education.
 - High prevalence of girls who are married and have children, creating a high burden of responsibility as caregivers and significant demands on time.
 - The majority of OOS girls have never attended school or dropped out very early. This significant time lag makes transition back to school at an appropriate age-grade very difficult.
- Literacy and Numeracy levels exhibited, including foundational skills, are very low for OOS girls. This again creates a barrier for transition to formal education, skilled employment, or vocational training.
- Qualitative research demonstrated that the majority of girls and their caregivers were interested in attaining literacy and numeracy skills, but intended to apply these in everyday life, primarily for establishing independence, caregiving responsibilities, and business/income generation. Few girls expressed interest in returning to formal education. This may be attributed to the high burden of responsibility reported.
- Many girls demonstrate significant gaps in social and emotional learning, with high levels of anxiety and depression, hostile attribution bias, and moderate levels of emotion dysregulation.
- Community-based mentors tasked with teaching life and business skills sessions and supporting girls in transition (all female) demonstrated limited ability in teaching or facilitation, and lack literacy skills. Significant support and training will be required to upskill mentors to the required level.
- Some support for girls' education and social/economic empowerment was visible in communities, however this was limited to the boundaries of prevailing gender norms and roles. Notable barriers were male partners not wanting their wife/girlfriend to be educated beyond their own level, and girls not being able to make decisions for themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide additional, tailored supports for OOS adolescent girls in Sierra Leone.

Recommendations for policy and decision-makers

- Provide funding and support for Accelerated Learning Programs (ALP) to ensure that girls can acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills and be able to benefit from Free Quality School Education (FQSE) in Sierra Leone by enrolling in age-appropriate grades.
- Provide childcare and childcare support to girls who are mothers so they can have access to education opportunities and continue learning.
- Progressively extend economic assistance for education beyond school fees to cover additional expenses associated with school attendance. This will help retain girls in the education system that may otherwise drop-out.

Recommendations for NGOs and development partners

- Focused educational interventions are needed for remote and border areas, to address a notable geographic divide in available education opportunities.
- Provision of non-formal learning programmes focused on functional skills, alongside assisted vocational training and apprenticeships, should be extended to offer girls an alternative pathway when return to school is not viable.

2. Prioritise the promotion of gender equity needs and ensure that a gender lens is integrated into all government/development programmes and policies in order to drive social change.

NEXT STEPS

1. EAGER will make programme adaptations to respond to the findings of the baseline evaluation. Among others, EAGER will incorporate practices on stress management, resilience and psychological first aid to address gaps in social and emotional learning; increase focus on continuous professional development and learning clusters to enable facilitators to cater for variation in learners' ability in literacy and numeracy, and to upskill community mentors; and empower mentors to lead by simplifying learning content and incorporating more embodied learning opportunities. Additionally, EAGER will create opportunities for key community stakeholders to learn and take action in support of adolescent girls, and radio programmes will focus on addressing harmful gender norms and encouraging support for non-traditional economic pathways that girls' could pursue.
2. Mid- and endline evaluations will aim to build evidence on how the intervention worked and for whom: 1) understand the variety of experiences of stakeholders participation in the programme, and how this may differ for different subgroups of girls, 2) use monitoring and evaluation data to examine whether the assumptions of EAGER's theory of change are met during the implementation of the program and how differences in the quality of program delivery are associated with girl's learning and transition outcomes 3) longer-term qualitative case studies will track transition outcomes over time, to understand the opportunities and challenges for girls in pursuing their chosen pathway.

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ENDNOTES

COVER PHOTO: AUBREY WADE/IRC

¹ UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2017. UNICEF Statistics Sierra Leone

² Statistics Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census.

³ Ministry of Education Science and Technology, UNICEF 2016. A National Assessment of Out-of-School Children in Sierra Leone.

⁴ UNICEF 2012 Sierra Leone Statistics.

⁵ Ministry of Education Science and Technology, UNICEF 2016. A National Assessment of Out-of-School Children in Sierra Leone.