



Keeping Girls Safe and Included in Sierra Leone's Schools

The Government of Sierra Leone 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.

'Radical inclusion' sets out the vision of Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) vision for ensuring that every child—regardless of family origin, location, gender, or disability—is able to live and learn in safety and dignity. Led by the MBSSE, Leh Wi Lan (LWL) is programme funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to support its 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.

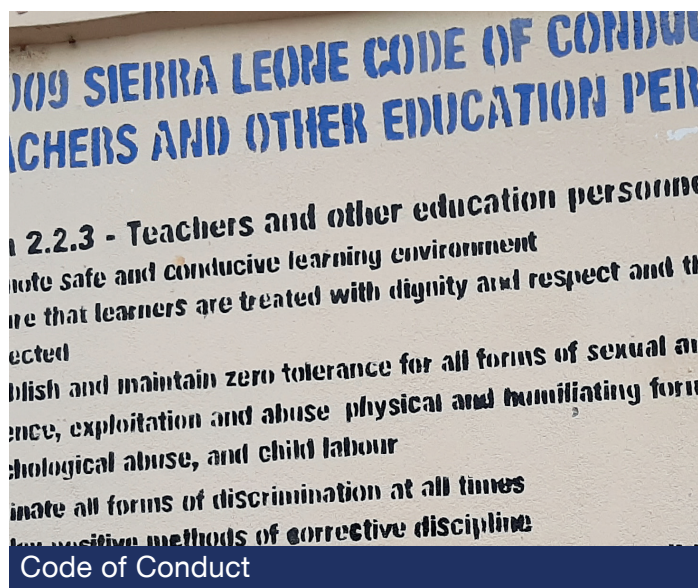
This briefing summarises the specific progress and learnings of Leh Wi Lan and its partners towards the Ministry's goal of improving girls' school safety and inclusion.



David Sengeh

"... 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



Girls face significant structural barriers including school-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 Junior Secondary School, either for English or Maths, and that gaps in learning levels between boys and girls widen as they move to Senior Secondary School. 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, infrastructure, social norms and access, for example, to sanitary pads to manage menstruation. Within school, these barriers may include violence and inadequate teacher training/pedagogy. School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) has a significant impact on students' ability to participate in and complete school. Pupils most at risk of becoming victims of violence include adolescent girls and students with disabilities, learning difficulties and special needs.

To ensure the right of all children to safe learning environments and protection from SRGBV, Lei Weh Lan (LWL) 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.

Lack of awareness of children's rights and limited access to reporting systems has led to under-reporting of school-related gender-based violence in Sierra Leone's school system

The UNICEF GATE project had successfully introduced School Safety Committees and a SRGBV reporting system through suggestion boxes in schools. To strengthen this approach, led by MBSSE, Leh Wei Lan has established School Safety Systems, which are supported in each school by the principal, vice principal and a female teacher (or a 'Community Mama' where female teachers are not available) and a male teacher appointed as school mentors. 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. LWL has also led the dissemination of the updated Teachers' Code of Conduct, annually signed by staff, (TCoC) to 18,917 JSS and SSS teachers through sessions held at districts level where each teacher received a printed (or Braille if required) version of the document. The RVS guide provides information 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.

Many children in Sierra Leone lack awareness and understanding of School Related Gender Based Violence and, Sexual and Reproductive Health.

While a limited number of gender-segregated Girls Clubs and Boys Clubs facilitated by teachers already existed, these had mainly proved ineffective. Leh Wi Lan has supported MBSSE to establish a new model of Girls and Boys Clubs in all secondary schools. With male and female hosts guiding the sessions, the Girls and Boys Clubs promote respect, equal participation and discussion around gender- based violence, how to identify it, tackle it

and report it, in a friendly, engaging and enjoyable environment. Using wind up and solar-powered 'Life Player Radios' distributed to each school, the sessions are based around 17 pre-recorded radio episodes which introduce topics related to sexual and reproductive health and life skills for adolescents. 2,289 Life Player Radios have been distributed to the Girls' and Boys' Clubs so far to the new clubs. 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 in particular during the pandemic, Lei Weh Lan also supported the development and broadcasting of specific radio episodes in Krio to engage the general public on topics related to discrimination gender-based violence.



Hygiene kit

2,289 

Life Player Radios have been distributed to Girls' and Boys' Clubs

Girls in Sierra Leone miss school because of poor access to menstrual hygiene products and poor WASH facilities.

In Sierra Leone, many adolescent girls miss a few days of school every month when they have their period because they cannot afford any sanitary products. This means that they can lose up to the 20% of their school year, which has significant impact on their educational outcomes. Previous pilots on menstrual hygiene, involving the distribution of reusable pads, to Junior Secondary Schools in two districts (Koon and Tonkolili) had proven successful, so FCDO requested Lei Weh Lan to help MBSSE scale-up the intervention to cover Junior and Senior Secondary Schools nationwide. Launched in October 2020 by the Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, David Moinina Sengeh, this initiative means every girl in every public senior secondary school in Sierra Leone now has access to reusable pads to ensure they can come to school and continue their learning during menstruation. Over 100,000 hygiene kits have been distributed so far.

Gender differences between girls and boys motivation and confidence remain apparent in the classroom.

Fostering a classroom culture which enables girls and disabled pupils to participate meaningfully is one of the most important steps in creating inclusive learning environments. However recent ground-breaking Teacher Research has identified that in Sierra Leone's schools, teaching practice is still not sufficiently inclusive nor gender responsive. Assumptions and prejudices about gender can lead to girls being systematically often 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, Lei Weh 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.

Sustainability of new school safety and inclusion initiatives is undermined without resources and expertise to support and embed new systems and practices.

Leh 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. It has introduced 200 School Support Officers and 16 District Inclusion Officers who provide external support specifically on school safety and inclusion, and monitoring on a range of areas including inclusive pedagogy. These staff have played a key role in enhancing accountability and driving inclusive practices in Sierra Leone's secondary schools.

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. 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. Lei Weh Lan is supporting the Ministry's drive to improve capacity and coordination among stakeholders on GBV by training education professionals on SRGBV case management and strengthening the information systems with a new dedicated online platform to report and manage cases more efficiently.

Platform for success

Leh 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 the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education in particular. The UKAid-funded Leh 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.



Radio lesson

Leh Wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) is a five- year (2016-2021) 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 Department for International Development, Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Mott MacDonald or Oxford Policy Management

