

**"IF YOU GO INTO THE BONDO
SOCIETY, THEY WILL HONOUR
AND RESPECT YOU"**

RESEARCH ON FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN
FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE

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Bondo Society is a secretive tradition of women in Sierra Leone that is steeped in mythology, but it has the genital mutilation of young girls and women as a central pillar. Even talking about the Society, women believe, puts them at risk of 'curses' and 'demons'.

Though many community leaders in Sierra Leone excuse these acts of violence against women and girls within Bondo Society as cultural and traditional, and therefore not subject to open criticism or question, these acts are a clear breach of women and girls' human rights, and they are illegal under international law and treaties, many of which have been signed by Sierra Leone's government.

The secrecy and taboo surrounding Bondo Society is preventing communities from tackling the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). It is a key reason why eight out of ten women and girls over 15 years in Sierra Leone have undergone some form of FGM. This research study examines why FGM persists in Sierra Leone, and its links with the Bondo Society initiation rites.

PEER research allows participants to gather qualitative information and opinion from their friends, and their friends' friends, to create a better picture of an issue. The method is particularly appropriate for subjects that are considered taboo, such as sexual issues and FGM.

This research reveals that Bondo Society continues to be a powerful driver of FGM in Sierra Leone. The mythology and secrecy surrounding the practice continues to stand in the way of tackling FGM on a wide scale.

More widely, poverty, gender discrimination, lack of education and cultural expectations of young women in Sierra Leone are continuing to promote Bondo Society in its current form, and preventing change that would save women and young girls from abuse.



WHAT IS BONDO?

Bondo is a secretive society that is integral to the culture for women living in Sierra Leone. The Society, which is more like a sisterhood or cultural identity than a club, aims to prepare young women for adulthood, their traditional role as housewife, spouse and mother, and recognises their move towards maturity and puberty. It is regarded as necessary by many communities, and young women who go through the Bondo initiation are celebrated and accorded a high social status.

While Bondo is regarded as an opportunity for women to bond and protect each other within Sierra Leonean society, FGM is central to the initiation process. Women and young girls who become part of the Bondo Society have to undergo FGM.

Though this practice is recognised as a violation of the rights of women and girls by the UN, it is legal, and widely practiced, in Sierra Leone. An estimated eight out of ten women in the country have undergone FGM. In 2015, Sierra Leone ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which commits countries to combat gender based violence including FGM, but local legislation has not yet been put in place to prevent it from happening. The Sierra Leone Government Agenda for Prosperity calls for legislation banning the initiation of girls under 18 years, however this has not yet come into force.

Because the Bondo Society is closely associated with secrecy, curse, taboo and cultural tradition, it is very hard for those working against FGM to 'break in' to address the norms surrounding it, nor challenge behaviour that leads to young women undergoing the practice.

This research project aimed to begin to break down some of the taboos and secrecy surrounding the Bondo Society, to establish the context and reasons for the Society's rituals, the opinions of women and men who support or carry it out, and what might be done to change the practice to reduce harm to women and girls, while maintaining their traditions and cultural identity.

WHAT IS FGM?

FGM is a procedure which involves the partial or complete removal of the female genitalia for non-medical purposes. It is also known as female circumcision and female genital cutting. In Sierra Leone, FGM is regarded as a necessary step for women to enter adulthood – though this initiation into ‘adulthood’ may take place when a girl is as young as 13 years old.

FGM is practiced across the globe. The types of FGM are categorised by the World Health Organisation as:

Type 1 – the partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce;

Type 2 – the partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (excision);

Type 3 – narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and sealing the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris (infibulation);

Type 4 – all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical reasons, such as pricking, piercing, incision, or scraping and cauterization.

Type 2 is the main form of FGM practised in Sierra Leone, although some cases of Type 3 has been found among some ethnic groups. However, the minority Creole communities who reside mainly in Freetown do not practise FGM.

FGM has harmful implications for women’s health over the long and short term. Immediately after undergoing FGM girls can experience severe pain, excessive bleeding or haemorrhage, difficulty passing urine, and infections.

The consequences of FGM are also felt throughout a woman’s life, as the practice can cause problems with urinating, menstruation and sexual intercourse. Certain types of FGM can also have severe consequences for women’s maternal health, leading to complications during childbirth and even infertility.¹

FGM is also associated with psychological implications including post-traumatic stress disorder, genophobia (the physical or psychological fear of sexual relations or sexual intercourse) and a decrease in sexual pleasure.

FGM has been classified as a human rights violation under international law. FGM violates a woman’s right to health and bodily integrity (Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). It is also considered a form of violence against women under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women. The practice falls under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. FGM also violates the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Regional treaties also identify FGM as a harmful practice. These include the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, known as the Maputo Protocol, which came into effect in 2005 and to which Sierra Leone is a signatory.

However, there is currently no legislation in Sierra Leone that bans, punishes or prevents FGM itself, nor its role in the Bondo Society’s initiation process. In the past few years, a number of traditional chiefs have started to put in place by-laws within their communities to ban ‘child bondo’ or initiation of girls under 18 years.

¹ OHCHR, UNAIDS, UNDP et al (2008), *Female genital mutilation: An Interagency Statement*

PEER RESEARCH

PEER (Participatory Evaluative Ethnographic Research) is a research methodology that is particularly effective when working with marginalised groups and on sensitive issues, and generates qualitative responses that can inform practice, interventions and advocacy. In the PEER approach, participants are trained to carry out in-depth, conversational interviews with friends they select from their social networks.

Using the PEER method allows researchers to gain insights into sensitive topics that are typically difficult to research such as sexual behaviour, gender relations and power dynamics within households and communities.

PEER was used to gain a clearer idea of practices and attitudes towards FGM and the Bondo Society in Sierra Leone because it gave women an opportunity to talk in private with friends about subjects that are traditionally taboo, secretive and embarrassing.

PEER researchers were recruited from the community in Freetown, and they each carried out two interviews with girls from their social networks. The PEER research aimed first to establish the context in which the women lived – their daily lives – before moving on, in a second interview, to more difficult subjects, including FGM, the Bondo Society and its changing influence.



WHAT WE DISCOVERED ABOUT THE BONDO SOCIETY AND FGM

From the PEER research, some key themes emerged regarding the Bondo Society, FGM and the position and rights of women in Sierra Leonean society.

Daily life for women

In Sierra Leone, life for women is affected by gender inequality, poverty, lack of rights, and poor educational opportunity. Sexual abuse and violence against women and girls are prevalent.

Interviewees spoke about many girls feeling held back, and being deeply frustrated by their situation. This was because girls have a low social status, and were reliant on men (fathers, boyfriends or husbands) for money and permission to do things.

“This community doesn’t want anything good for girls and young women, like they don’t want girls and young women to be educated, travel abroad, to have big business, all they want to hear is that girls and women are getting pregnant, idle, marrying early or dropping out of school etc. This community is full of negative activities for young women and girls.”

“There is no good road in the community, no good school. When there is an election everyone will be saying vote for me, I am the right person, after that day you won’t set your eyes on them again. In this community there is no health centre, even if sickness attacks a person at midnight there is no hospital or clinic that that person can be taken to. There is a lot of child mortality and death in this community.”

Significantly, young women are expected to contribute income to their family, but because of lack of education and skills, many are forced into prostitution, or ‘nothing goes for nothing’ relationships, in which a ‘boyfriend’ would pay a young woman for sex, so she could give it to her family. Young women then become pregnant and are rejected by their parents and society as a result. Instead of empathy and support, women are regarded as having ‘gone wayward’ and are thus subject to further abuse.

If a girl's family is unable to provide for her essential necessities, then this girl will have a boyfriend. If this girl asks her boyfriend for money there is a saying that goes like this; 'nothing goes for nothing,' so before giving the money, he too will require something from her and such requirement is unprotected sex and this will eventually lead to pregnancy.



"I know of a young woman who was harassed from a particular guy, which led to rape. Because of that she lost her pregnancy and marital home and also had to change her environment because her husband said it was too embarrassing for him that five men raped his wife and the provocation of people around him, so he ended up packing her back up to her parents."

"There is a girl who is sexually harassed by a man, the man is a teacher, he asks the girl to visit him at his house, the girl visits him and he asks her to have sex with him so that he can pass her. She agreed to have sex with the teacher and later she noticed that she was pregnant, she told the teacher about it, the teacher denied the pregnancy so the girl is sexually harassed and also her future is destroyed."

Teenage pregnancy and transmission of sexual diseases were also mentioned by the interviewees. In addition to lack of sexual education, they noted a lack of access to education more generally for girls and women. Women were prevented from going to school by their parents because of gender norms, tradition, poverty and fear of their girls 'going wayward'.

"Girls are not allowed to go to school because of traditional customs and religious beliefs because for example, her father says that girls should not go to school because they will learn bad things in school... parents want them to go into early marriage because of customs and tradition."

"The adult people always have the thinking that school is not for girls but for boys. If you spend all your resources on a girl child at the end it will all go because she will later come with pregnancy as a result."

"People say that girls are not allowed to go to school because if they are educated, they will be like bosses over their husbands. They will not respect their husbands."



WHY GIRLS GO INTO THE BONDO SOCIETY

The Bondo Society is a cultural norm in Sierra Leone. It is what is naturally expected of young women; it is what young women expect for themselves; it is what fathers and husbands demand of women. Those who do not undergo the Bondo Society initiation are regarded as outcasts, rejecting their identity and history. Pressure for girls to join the Bondo Society comes from a whole multitude of places: 'from your conscience, your family, and community as a whole'.

Bondo (and its practices) are deeply entwined with the cultural expectations and unequal treatment of young women in Sierra Leone. For example, sending girls to be initiated into the Bondo Society and therefore to undergo FGM, is said to help protect a girl's virginity and prevent them from becoming sexually 'wayward'. The practice itself is said to prevent them from becoming promiscuous and unable to remain faithful to their husband.

"The good things about Bondo for the young women and girls is that once you joined the Bondo you are one step secured from teenage pregnancy."



"Some of the people are saying they send their girls and young women to the Bondo Society to reduce sexual feeling."

"The elders say Bondo helps to reduce sexual feeling, and minimises prostitution and teenage pregnancy."

The whole experience of Bondo is regarded as necessary preparation for marriage in Sierra Leone. There girls are taught how to cook, housekeep and look after their husbands and children.

"People say when young girls and young women come out of the Society their lives and behaviour changes, they learn to respect their elders, they learn about their African tradition and culture. They learn how to take care of their husbands, they learn how to cook and also to take care of themselves."

"Once a young girl completes her initiation she is considered ready for marriage. It is our culture and traditional practice for a girl child born in our community to go to the Bondo Society because that is the time they will find their husband."

Initiation into Bondo is seen as necessary for the progression of women, in terms of their own self-worth and worth to the community. In a poor society where girls face such hardship, Bondo is one of the few times in their lives when girls are celebrated and at the centre of attention.

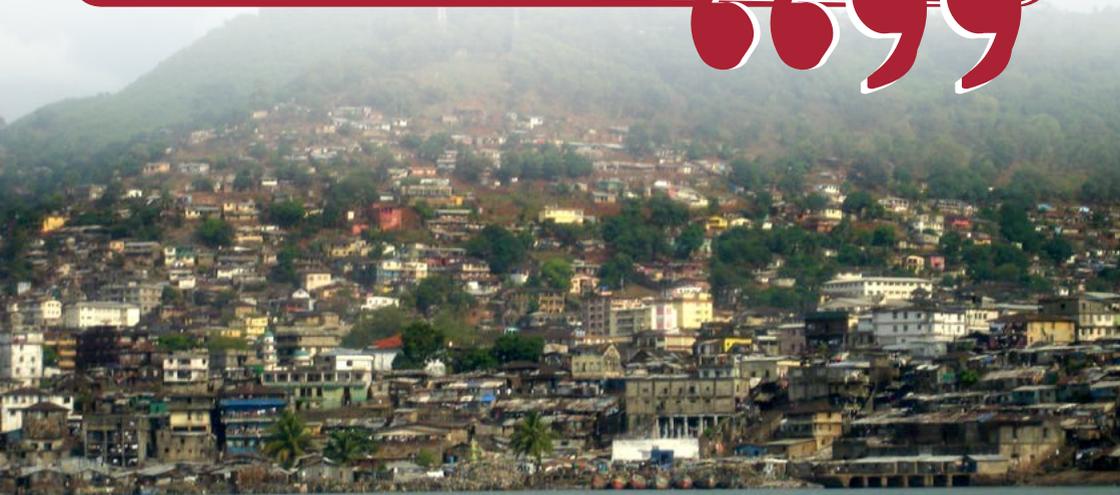
“Young girls learn the value of being a woman.”

“All girls and young women want the attention, love and to be noticed in the community that motivates them to go to the Bondo Society.”

“Women go through it so they can reach a high position in society.”

“In some provinces, if you have not been initiated, you are not allowed to be talking and sitting among those who have attended. You will not even be allowed to go to certain places in the provinces or villages.”

“Girls and young women want to join the Bondo Society because they want to be associated with others who are part of it, they don't want to be discriminated against by others. For some women they go through Bondo because they want to contest in elections and if the people in that area noticed that she is not an initiate they will not vote for her and so because she wants to win the election with their votes she will go through it.”



WITCHCRAFT AND SECRECY

Much of the Bondo Society is understood to be influenced by the spirit world, with interviewees speaking about being 'initiated into the witchcraft kingdom'. To enter Bondo, they understand, puts them at risk of 'curses' and 'demonic effects'.

"The bad thing about Bondo is it sometimes affects the girls and young women spiritually and it sometimes causes girls and young women to be witches."

"[Initiated girls] get bad luck and spiritual curses affect them and they will become famous witches."

Secrecy and taboo surrounds Bondo Society, giving it its strength and preventing challenge or question of its practices. Both men and women are forbidden, or feel unable, to speak about Bondo and what goes on within the Society.

Nevertheless, PEER participants felt able to voice that often only the 'good' side of Bondo was spoken about.

"When [leaders of the Bondo Society] find anyone talking about Bondo they will give the individual sickness for the rest of his life, sickness like stomach problems and stop their manhood from functioning with everlasting bad luck. So this has made them stop talking about Bondo Society."

"When men talk about the Bondo Society people feel that they have committed an abomination, so they will be charged or fined items like sheep, goats, palm oil, wine and often a huge amount of money."

"People always tell girls the good things about Bondo and leave out the negative ones."

"They even take [the secrecy of Bondo] so high that you can't even dare to talk about it in a bad way."



UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF FGM

This secrecy protects the Society and contributes to its appeal and intrigue, but the role of FGM in Bondo is even more hidden. This secrecy strengthens the myths about the consequences of speaking about FGM publicly.

Interviewees stated that FGM was the most significant aspect of initiation into the Bondo Society. Significantly, the women interviewed were also aware that FGM was dangerous, risking women's health. Many had stories to tell of young women injured or who had died as a result of the practice.

"Female circumcision is the most harmful cultural practice that contributes to early marriage of girls in the community. It can affect them in so many ways like early marriage and dropping out of school. It is also related to violation of the rights of the girl child and that is major concern."

"After Bondo one girl's parents did not wait for her wound to be healed, they took her straight to a man's house to get married. The man also did not wait for her wound to heal instead he had sex with her by force and the girl started bleeding and her bleeding didn't stop. They took her to some native doctors, the doctor tried all he could but he could not help the girl and after several days of bleeding she died."

"The bad things about the Bondo Society process is that it can easily transfer disease from one person to another because most of the time they don't have enough instruments that they use to carry out the initiation ceremony for the number of girls they are initiating."





PIKIN (CHILD) BONDO AND THE LAW

The issue of Pikin Bondo was a recurring theme in the PEER interviews. This is the initiation of girls under the age of 18, including young children and even babies, into the Bondo Society. Many felt that Pikin Bondo was wrong, and more harmful for younger girls than for others.

“People’s thoughts about Pikin Bondo are that it is very bad because it involves the removal of the ditoris. You know at that time the child will be very young so it will affect them badly and greatly. The children will still be growing up and if they don’t allow them to grow well it will hinder the process of their growth.”

Some interviewees reported that it was felt in communities that Pikin Bondo was wrong, not necessarily because of the violations inflicted on the girls, but because they would not be old enough to enjoy the benefits of the Bondo Society initiation and learning.

“Pikin Bondo is not encouraged in my community because the child will not know why they’ve taken her there in the first place, she will not know the value of the Bondo Society because she is not yet fit to make a decision and she will have no respect for culture and tradition.”

However, it was also expressed that some parents preferred to put their daughters through the Bondo process while still young, because it would be easier to influence them to go, compared to when they are older. But many PEER participants regarded this process as likely to result in girls being resentful of their parents and their actions.

In Sierra Leone, Pikin Bondo is illegal and is outlawed by a number of by-laws in different regions. The PEER participants showed a good knowledge of this illegality, and said their communities knew too.

Communities who knew about the law generally thought that the law was a good thing, mainly because it empowered young girls to grow up and make their own decisions about whether to enter the Society. Some highlighted that the law could be used to prevent young girls from undergoing the Bondo initiation and FGM. Fear of the law was cited, though only one participant was aware of an actual prosecution.

“Some people in my community know that there is a law banning child Bondo and that if anyone put their children into Bondo before the age of 18 they will be prosecuted by the law. They say that girls should be allowed to reach the age of consent and they can decide if they would like to go or not.”

“People think that this law is good, it will reduce the amount of girls that will be joining Bondo every year and will also help young children who are uneducated to know their rights and stop anyone abusing or misusing their rights.”

“Girls and young women like this law, because some go into this society because there is no way out, they can’t fight it or talk for themselves, so that makes them to be pleased with this law that gives them power.”

THE FUTURE OF BONDO

PEER interviewees were asked about how they saw Bondo developing in the future, and what it would take to change tradition to protect young women from FGM. It was clear that most participants already believed FGM was wrong and action should be taken to prevent it in the Bondo Society.

However, many interviewees said they believed the Bondo Society was as strong as ever in their communities, and it would be hard to change it.

"In our community we want to change the Bondo Society tradition but there is no way to change it, people say that it is their own traditional beliefs and culture so there is no way to change it in our community."

"In our community Bondo is still common because people are refusing to change their attitudes and this is one of the biggest challenges we have in our community."

However, some expressed that their own communities had seen the error of FGM and Bondo Society, and that they had 'moved beyond it'. It is regarded as old fashioned or only a rural practice.

"Bondo is not common in her community. Because there is no place for that in her community and people don't even talk about Bondo in her community."

"Bondo is not common in my community because as the times are changing the people are also changing."

Participants also noted key reasons for the practice of Bondo reducing were improvements in technology, campaigning and awareness raising, and better medical education and advice. Finally, they said a change in Christian theology towards the practice was influencing communities.

"The Bondo Society is now less in my community due to rapid development in the world and civilisation, and medical advice that Bondo can serve as a disease carrier especially for HIV and AIDS."

"This [Bondo] is changing because of some of the sensitisations that are been carried out by organisations and because the world is gradually changing and people are moving with the times."

"Bondo is less in our community due to religious sensitisation, like the spreading of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. This helps minimise Bondo in our community because they are saying it is not written in the Bible that girls and young women go to the Bondo Society."

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE STUDY

It is notable that many women and young girls already have negative views of the Bondo Society not only because of the physical act of FGM, and its violation of their rights, but because women are pressured to join it. The Society is connected with women being prevented from opportunities to become educated and successful, and their ability to bring themselves out of poverty. Those reasons appear to trump the health risks of FGM as women's key concerns about the Bondo Society.

The recommendations outlined below are based on the findings from this PEER, alongside learning from FORWARD's interventions in Sierra Leone and Africa more broadly. The complex causes and consequences of FGM in Sierra Leone reflected in the findings highlight the need for a holistic approach to tackling the practice. These recommendations are organised into four main groups: further broadening knowledge and understanding of the Bondo Society; tackling the existing problem; creating an enabling policy environment; and establishing new positive social norms.

However, any solution – if it is to be successful – must also respect culture and tradition, aiming not to replace or eradicate cultural identity, but to influence it to reject practices that are harmful and pose a risk to women and girls' lives.

TACKLE THE EXISTING PROBLEM

Further understand the relationship between Bondo Society and FGM – This research has been a unique opportunity to explore the practices and behaviours of Bondo Society. There is still more work to be done however to investigate the link between the Bondo Society and FGM.

Create new safe spaces to discuss Bondo – It's clear that speaking about Bondo is extremely taboo and some even fear the repercussions of speaking against it. The inability to talk about Bondo is preventing dialogue in families, communities and among decision makers. More needs to be done to create a supportive environment where people can freely discuss Bondo in order to demystify it and discuss the future of Bondo freely.

Undertake PEER studies with other segments of the community – This study has successfully engaged with young girls and women on the topic. It would be useful and appropriate to carry out similar studies directly with other community members including mothers and fathers to gain even greater insights.

Establish clubs and networks to empower and support girls and women – Clubs and networks provide members with information, skills, services and support from their peers and relevant professionals. Members can also share their concerns, ideas and experiences. Girls Club and network members can speak out about FGM as an abuse of their rights, to influence decision makers at all levels.

Engage with communities and influential people within them – Substantial time and resources must be invested in building trust and relationships with communities to facilitate critical reflection and behaviour change. Expecting one family or individual to abandon the practice is unrealistic due to the pressure exerted by the community for all to conform and stigma experienced by those who choose to reject FGM.

Work with women and men – Despite being labelled ‘women’s business’, gender inequality is key to the continuation of the practice of FGM. Men must be engaged to understand the negative implications of FGM for girls, women and also for themselves. They must be supported to find ways to sensitively break the taboo around FGM and renounce it in the process.

Support FGM survivors alongside prevention initiatives – Girls and women who have already undergone FGM must not be overlooked. Special measures must be taken to ensure that efforts to highlight the benefits of discontinuing FGM do not stigmatise girls who have undergone it.

CREATE AN ENABLING POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Strengthen laws and disseminate information about them – It is clear that there are inconsistencies in knowledge within communities about what the current laws are and their implications. Community members need to be informed about what violations of the law look like and how to report them. Perpetrators should be educated about the penalties of acting illegally.

Comprehensive legislation prohibiting FGM – It is crucial that Sierra Leone passes robust and holistic legislation to effectively prohibit FGM irrespective of age.

Structures and resources to ensure legislation is implemented – Safeguarding structures must be introduced and adhered to by educational institutions, health facilities and law enforcers. Relevant professionals must be able to confidently refer or manage cases of FGM. Political will is needed at a national, regional and local level to ensure its implementation is prioritised.

Share lessons regionally – Lessons learned should be shared from other regional countries where they are already further along with the discussions around how best to maintain local culture while also promoting girls’ rights, health and education.

ESTABLISH NEW POSITIVE SOCIAL NORMS

Economic and educational empowerment – Empowerment through employment and education is central to FORWARD’s approach because of its transformational potential. Women with access to, and control over, economic assets are less likely to undergo FGM in order to get married before the age of 18. Positive examples from the community, or other communities or countries, should be used to highlight new aspirations for women, which do not require a breach of their rights.

Providing a platform for alternative role models – Efforts should be made to find more positive role models of successful and respected girls or women who have not been through Bondo initiation to challenge the misconception that only those who have been through Bondo initiation enjoy a positive trajectory through life.

Alternative rites of passage – The positive aspects of the Bondo Society should be celebrated and promoted by actors aiming to tackle FGM. The Bondo Society could have an important role to play as an empowering institution for women if the learning aspects were adapted to this aim. It is possible that sexual and relationship education could replace the FGM ceremony.



FORWARD

FORWARD (Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development)

FORWARD is a leading African women-led organisation working on female genital mutilation, child marriage, and other forms of violence against women and girls in the UK and Africa. For over 30 years, we have been committed to safeguarding the rights and dignity of African girls and women. We do this through community engagement, leadership development, training of key professionals, generating research and international advocacy.

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Girl2Girl Empowerment Movement (G2G)

Girl2Girl Empowerment Movement (G2G) is a young-women led organisation based in Freetown, Sierra Leone. G2G has created a safe space for girls and young women living in slum areas to develop leadership and life skills and access information and support to become agents of change. G2G helps amplify girls' voices in policy spaces and undertakes local level actions to shape a safe and enabling environment for all girls to thrive. In particular, G2G focusses on girls and young women affected by and at risk of FGM, child motherhood, teenage pregnancy, and sexual abuse.

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