

# **"In Their Own Words"**

*Girls from Sierra Leone on Sexuality, Pregnancy and Services"*



**IPPF** International  
Planned Parenthood  
Federation

**FORWARD**  
*Safeguarding rights & dignity*

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Funded by: International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and the Sigrid Rausing Trust

## **International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)**

IPPF is a global service provider and a leading advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. IPPF is a global network of Member Associations, and works in over 170 countries - providing and campaigning for sexual and reproductive health care and rights. IPPF is one of the world's largest organisations; providing more than 7 million services each year to women, men and young people. IPPF was formed in 1952 at the Third International Conference on Planned Parenthood in Bombay, India.

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

FORWARD was founded in 1985 as an African Diaspora women's campaign and support charity that works to safeguard dignity and advance the sexual and reproductive health and human rights of African women and girls. By working together with individuals, communities, and other organizations, FORWARD works to transform harmful practices and improve the quality of life of vulnerable girls and women. FORWARD's vision is that women and girls live in dignity, are healthy, and have choices and equal opportunities to fulfil their potential. This is done through public education, training, research, community mobilization and advocacy action.

## **Planned Parenthood Association of Sierra Leone (PPASL)**

Created in 1959 PPASL is a member of IPPF and has transformed itself to better fit the needs of a society feeling the effects of a decade long civil war. Prior to the years of turmoil, PPASL's main goal was to counter the high fertility rate by giving access to family planning information. Although PPASL continues to offer information about family planning, they are now involved in offering more inclusive sexual and reproductive health services.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Planned Parenthood Association of Sierra Leone (PPASL) a member of International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) expresses its appreciation to the Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (FORWARD) for leading on the "Girls at Risk Project". Many thanks to IPPF our principal partner funding agency for their continued support to our Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRH&R) programme interventions, particularly to Ms Doortje Braeken and Dr Seri Wendoh who developed the concept.

The Executive Director of PPASL, Mrs Selina Ade-Williams, also wishes to acknowledge the contributions made by the local consultant in Sierra Leone; Mrs. Owolabi Bjalkander, the PPASL Director of Programmes; Mr David Williams and the PPASL Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, Mr Thaim S. Kargbo, the Lead Coordinator. Thanks to Ms Betty Makoni, Chief Executive Officer of Girl Child International who facilitated the confidence building training. Their expertise and input made a huge difference to the project.

A special thank you to the Peer Supervisors- Dorine Conteh, Stella Koroma, Mary Stevens, Magdelene Beah and the Peer Researchers: Mariama Bangura, Rebecca O. Seale, Ramatu Kamara, Salamata Bangura, Adama S. Kargbo, Juliana Kalokoh, Marian Tucker, Sadiatu Kallon, Kadiatu Jabbie, Hannah M. Whenzle, Nadia Senesie, Fatou S. Conteh, Esther Kai-Conteh, Edna Thomas, Josephine Kanu from the following areas of Freetown, Red Pump, Lumpa and Waterloo; their enthusiasm, dedication and courage made the research which informed this booklet possible.

Our final appreciation goes to the research and support team at FORWARD who worked on the research and booklet, Ms Kate Norman the lead consultant researcher, Ms Naana Otoo-Oyortey – Executive Director, Ms Naomi Reid – Africa Programme Officer, and Ms Annalina Kazickas – Intern, FORWARD.

# FOREWORD

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), works world-wide to improve access to sexual and reproductive health services to young people. We focus on supporting the sexual rights of people, especially young people. Young women and girls are our main priority especially the vulnerable and underserved. Every year we provide over two million services to young people through our 155 Member Associations.

World-wide gender divisions and inequalities continue to have a powerful effect on how girls and young women make decisions which affect their future. Millions of girls are denied both voice and choice, and are confronted daily by sexual violence, unwanted pregnancy and child marriage. Many are not able to say yes or no to sex, to decide to use contraception, to marry, to have a child, to visit a health service, or to choose to stay in school. Girls are often viewed as a burden, while their brothers are considered assets. But until girls are seen by families, communities and decision makers as having the same worth as boys we cannot achieve sustainable development in the world.

IPPF has partnered with FORWARD on the project Girls at Risk in Sierra Leone to work directly with young women and girls, pregnant and young mothers and their peers to find out the challenges they face. The results are inspiring and convincing. We are certain that listening to their voices to understand their needs and wishes is the best way to transform their lives and the situation they live in. This project shows that girls want to make their own decisions, and they have the capacity and the right to do so, all that is needed is to provide them with skills, tools and guidance.

I hope this information will inspire you to make the voices of underserved girls and young women to be heard. We want to thank the Netherlands Government for funding the project and the team at FORWARD for their hard work to train and support the girls in their work. Finally I would like to thank the Member Association of Sierra Leone and the young women and girls who participated in the training and the research and ensured that this booklet illustrates the realities of their lives. Their journeys will inspire us all into action in the years to come.

Doortje Braeken  
Senior Adviser Adolescents/Young People  
IPPF, London

# INTRODUCTION

*"I want a place where girls will be happy. Somewhere that will help us to prevent teenage pregnancy, show us how to have a good life and be happy"*

## (Young girl, Freetown)

In Sierra Leone, poverty, gender inequality, early sexual initiation and sexual violence affect girls' and young women's ability to make informed choices on their sexual and reproductive health. The social taboos on sexuality education and the lack of access to information and services makes the situation worse. Many girls do not have the self-esteem and confidence to make decisions on sexual matters. This can lead to unwanted pregnancies and other negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

These challenges that vulnerable girls face are often ignored by policy makers, families and community leaders. There is need for urgent actions to give girls an opportunity to improve their sexual and reproductive rights and wellbeing as well as needed access to information to protect their rights.

**"In Their Own Words: girls from Sierra Leone on Sexuality, Pregnancy and Services"** highlights the lives of girls and young women in poor communities in Freetown, Sierra Leone. It shows the situation of teenage pregnancy and young mothers and the challenges they face in their daily lives. It provides information, personal stories of girls and shares their aspirations and ideas for improving their lives.

This booklet forms part of a project supported by IPPF and FORWARD in partnership with PPASL on "Empowering girls at risk". The aim of the project is to better understand the lives of girls and provide a medium for increasing the voice and participation of girls.

The quotes and photographs are based on the research and training.



# LAWS THAT AFFECT RIGHTS OF GIRLS IN SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone has signed a number of international and regional human rights laws and introduced national laws to protect rights of girls. However there are problems with these laws because they are not properly enforced. The following laws in Sierra Leone are about rights of girls and women:

- The Domestic Violence Act of 2007 makes domestic violence illegal and punishable by up to 2 years in jail and a fine.<sup>i</sup>
- Forced and child marriages were made illegal in 2007 by the President. The Registration of the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act makes marriage of girls before the age of 18 illegal but over 60 percent of girls are married before the age of 18 years.<sup>ii</sup>
- The Child Rights Act of 2007 and the Domestic Violence Act of 2007 both forbid the torture or other cruel, inhuman treatment or physical abuse of children but there is no law against female genital mutilation (FGM) which affects over 90% of girls and women in Sierra Leone.<sup>iii</sup>
- Abortion is illegal but is allowed when it is to save the life of the mother, preserve the physical health of the mother and/or preserve the mental health of the mother.



# THE GIRLS AT RISK PROJECT IN SIERRA LEONE

## Why did we do the project?

Teenage pregnancy is a major problem in Sierra Leone and causes 40 percent of maternal death.<sup>iv</sup> While this situation is attributed to risky sexual behaviour, early sexual initiation, child marriage and low use of contraception, there are other factors that put girls at risk. To better understand how to address this problem of high teenage pregnancy it is important to hear the views of girls themselves.

Many girls at risk of teenage pregnancy live in poverty, have little support from home and do not have access to much needed sexual and reproductive health information and services. Teenage pregnancy puts girls' at increased risk of sexually transmitted infections including HIV. Younger girls are often more affected by the effects of teenage pregnancy. For many girls, teenage pregnancy and early child birth means an end to their education, and increased poverty.

"The Girls at Risk Project", is a project which was implemented by IPPF and FORWARD in partnership with Sierra Leone Member Association PPASL. This project set out to assess the situation, experiences and effects of teenage pregnancy and early motherhood on girls in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The aim was to improve the sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and young women and also make their situation visible. The project ran from December 2009 to December 2010.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Find out the beliefs, views, attitudes, and experiences of girls at risk and support them to network and access information.
- Understand more about sexual life, early pregnancy and motherhood and its impact on the lives of girls and women.
- Learn how young women perceive and use the sexual and reproductive health services available to them.
- Understand better the future aspirations of the young women and girls and their opinions on what should be done to support better the needs of pregnant girls and those at risk.

## What activities did we do?

The project worked with 20 girls and young women aged between 15 and 23 years from the following areas of Freetown; Lumpa, Waterloo and Red Pump. A number of activities were done to give the young women skills, including interview skills. A local consultant was recruited to lead the sessions and provide back up support to the girls. PPASL coordinated the recruitment of the girls and helped supervise the girls when they were doing the interviews in the community.

The project was made up of two parts. First the training and research involved the 20 peer researchers and peer supervisors who were selected from the communities, many had experienced teenage pregnancy. The second part of the project was the confidence building training which included selected peer researchers, the supervisors and staff from PPASL from the selected regions.





## The Research

The participatory research method used was chosen because of its effectiveness towards reaching marginalized groups and facilitating the discussion of difficult issues. The researchers who are called peer researchers are trained to do the research themselves. This helps get more in depth information from their peers, which may not be told to outsiders. The young women were trained over four days in interview skills, and helped to develop the questions for the interviews and to practice how to interview. Girls also had the chance to practice using a camera and were required to take pictures of their community as part of the information gathering. This method allows better access to communities and helps girls involved to also get to know each other and build their confidence.

The research questions focused on the following areas:

- 1) Why are girls living in poor communities in Freetown so at risk of teenage pregnancy?
- 2) What is the impact of teenage pregnancy and early motherhood on these girls' lives?
- 3) What do girls say about the availability of appropriate services and information?

The interviews took place over three months and each girl interviewed three of her friends three times on the three areas of the research. The girls were awarded certificates as part of their graduation as peer supervisors and researchers, this was an important step in the girls empowerment as it gave them a sense of achievement. A final workshop was held with the girls after the interviews which helped girls to discuss their experiences in the research, share information and problems and agree on what was needed to support girls. The research helped the peer researchers to become empowered as experts on issues facing girls at risk in their community.





## Drama

Girls were encouraged to use drama activities including role plays. The drama helped the girls to use creative skills to share experiences and show a number of situations during the training workshops as well as during the stakeholder meeting. This use of drama enabled girls to use more innovative and creative ways to share personal stories and stories from the research.

## Stakeholder meeting

The final meeting was organised by the girls to share the research findings from the study. The supervisors and peer researchers played a major role in this meeting, including the panel discussion on the main findings from the research. This half day meeting was attended by the senior staff of PPASL and other programme staff and officials from government ministries and other organizations. This stakeholder meeting helped the peer researchers to share what they had learned using pictures, role plays and quotes from the research.



## Confidence Building Training

A four day girls' empowerment and confidence building training was organised in July 2010. Participants were selected by programme staff from PPASL, and included four of the peer supervisors and two peer researchers. The method used for the training included group discussions, films, photo stories and presentations. This training explained empowerment; how to empower girls to become leaders; gender based violence; different forms of behaviour; promoting self-esteem and setting up and running girls clubs and programmes. Participants were supported to develop their CVs; assess their presentation skills and to develop their own action plans on girls' programmes.

## What were the benefits of this project?

The research results helped to better understand the situation of girls at risk of teenage pregnancy, their lack of rights and access to services and information. The issues raised and support that the girls requested will help develop the right programmes needed to support girls' access to services and information, enabling them to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies and make informed decisions about their bodies, their future and that of their children.

The confidence building training gave the girls a chance to express themselves, to learn skills and build confidence and helped them to understand their situation and rights. The drama also gave the girls another way of expressing themselves which was culturally relevant within their community. With the peer training the girls can pass on the skills and knowledge they learnt to other girls. This is a better way of ensuring what they learnt will positively impact on other girls' lives. The training on girls clubs and networks has helped girls to set up their own network. This will enable them to continue to support each other and to reach out to more girls at risk in their communities.





# GIRLS LIVING IN POOR COMMUNITIES IN FREETOWN

This section provides a summary of the research findings and voices of girls on their social life, their experiences and what makes them vulnerable to teenage pregnancy; poverty and the impact of teenage pregnancy.

## Poverty

Poverty was mentioned by many girls as a main cause of high teenage pregnancy in Freetown. Girls talked of the daily struggle of families to provide food and basic items including school fees for their children. Poverty robs young girls of their childhood. Many girls are responsible for most of the housework; many reported waking up as early as three or four each morning to do their house chores before going to school.

Many parents were unemployed or worked long hours for little pay. Unable to get the financial support they need from parents, many girls are forced to 'self support' - looking for ways to earn money.



Many of the girls say they find different boyfriends to help meet their needs in exchange for sex. Unless they are very lucky to find themselves a 'rich man' – one man alone is not able to support all their needs.

*"Girls in our community do prostitution to feed and clothe themselves. They sell their pride and their body because of money."*

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*"You ask your mum for something and when she can't give it to you, you ask one of your boyfriends, but he definitely won't give it to you unless you sleep with him. "Nothing for nothing!."*

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*"Some girls say that poverty is bad and it can affect them in terms of sickness, trouble, and even to buy some basic commodity. They say that there is no job for them to do in their area so they can hardly have something to feed on."*



## Family pressure on girls to earn money

Often the pressure to support the family can drive girls out onto the street to get money. Many parents do not question where girls get their money. Many girls feel they have no other choices for getting their needs met. In situations where parents do not pressure their daughters to bring money home, their failure to support and discipline their daughters could also put them at risk. Some girls expressed views that their parents were not to blame as they were doing their best but that teenage girls can be very stubborn.

*"High teenage pregnancy is because of no home attention. Single parents definitely find it harder-they are always at work and not around to discipline their children."*





*"Parents commonly put pressure on their daughters to get money from men. If you have a boyfriend and you talk to him your mother says 'does he give you money?' If not, do not even talk to him. Find a man who will pay you. I know a family, the daughter is fifteen, her breasts are not yet full on her chest, they gave her to the man who is past 35- they gave her to him for money."*

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*"If you are beautiful in a poor family your parent will pressure you. They will say there are lot of men coming your way, why can't you make provision for the family? The family will force you, even if you don't want it. Use what you have to get what you want. This happens in poor families all over, especially poor families and single parent families. If the man proposes to a beautiful young girl to have sex with him, even if she says no he may go and discuss it with her mother. Even if that girl go out late at night and never come home, they will never question her because she is the one bringing the money. The day you go out and you come back without money- heh- you will be under fire."*



## Teenage pregnancy: caused by lack of opportunities for girls'

Girls growing up in poor communities in Freetown often have very limited options. Many view pregnancy and motherhood as their only options. Dropping out of school early is also common for girls, in many situations parents do not value girls education and put pressure on girls to marry early. Lack of employment opportunities also forces girls onto the street to find money but also due to lack of anything better to do the girls choose to become pregnant.



*"School dropout is high among our girls because parents do not care much about girl child's education."*

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*"Employment in the community for girls is not easy because I have seen many people who are educated but did not secure a job, not to think of them who are not educated."*

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*"Girls say there is unemployment for them in the community so that is the reason why they turn to prostitution so that they can be able to feed themselves."*

## Impact of war on lives of girls

Sierra Leone emerged from a decade long civil war in 2000. The war resulted in many deaths and displaced over two million people. The devastating effects of the civil war and high migration to Freetown have increased poverty and unemployment levels in the city. Sierra Leone is ranked one of the poorest countries in the world.<sup>v</sup>

The civil war destroyed families, left children with no education or parents and many were sent to live with relatives. In many cases, living with relatives put an extra burden on the extended family. Many of the girls talked of the extreme violence they faced over the years and how this contributed to the breakdown of family and social values. Rape was used as a weapon of war, resulting in physical and mental problems and unwanted pregnancies.

*"The rebel war has affected so many girls because some parents were killed some were captured at the age they did not know their parents and now some are orphans, some become prostitutes so the war affected a lot the lives of a girl child."*

*"The war affected the life of many young people in the community. Some forcibly rape and use brutality on them which lead most of them having unwanted pregnancy with fatherless baby."*



# GIRLS EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL MATTERS AND TEENAGE PREGNANCY

The responses from the study confirmed that girls are engaging in sex often termed “mummy and daddy business”. Many girls do not have correct information on sexual matters including pregnancy. Sex is often not discussed openly within families. Also many parents lack information on sex education and are not confident to talk to their children about sexual matters. Girls who move to the city from rural areas can be at greater risk of teenage pregnancy and under more pressure to have unprotected sex as they often live with extended family and need to earn income to support themselves.

## ‘Man Business’

According to the research findings engaging in sexual relationships and early sexual activity is common in Sierra Leone. Responses to the question on “man business” showed that girls often had multiple relationships. This could either be for love or simply for survival and was linked to girls ability to negotiate safe sex, prevent pregnancy, or choose to be pregnant. Some girls also said beating was normal in relationships.



*“if their boyfriends do not beat them it means that they do not like them.”*



*"It is common for girls to have sex with people they don't want to have sex with. They say 'close your eyes and bite the centipede'-it is for a greater goal than the actual act. An unpleasant thing, you just have to get on with it. These sugar daddies, they come along as the cotton tree, big and strong and able, to assist your family. So you have sex with him even if you don't want it."*

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*"It is best for a girl to have as many boyfriends and sugar daddies as possible. We say, 'John buys di trousers, Peter go buy di top' and we say 'one close, not di full up box.'"*

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During the focus group discussion girls stated that they often enjoyed sex with their younger partners- some want "rough riders who give good sex and some different styles... chicken on the plate, wheel barrow." Older men on the other had had fewer styles and gave little time for sexual matters. Girls did not want their serious boyfriends to give them money after sex and saw this as a sign of a prostitute and not a relationship.

## Peer Pressure

With the breakdown of family ties and in many cases the absence of any family, the pressure from peers on teenage girls was found to be very high. This often had a strong impact on girls' decision making, early sexual initiation and unprotected sex.

*"Peer influence is strong; it makes you to have sex early. You want to become a woman and be accepted by the other girls, otherwise they will say - 'heh Holy Mary is over there, this is big women's talk, if you are kid stay over there.' You are stigmatised so you want to join and become a woman."*

*"They have pressure from the peers, pressure from the boys and they have poverty on the other side – it is hard for teenage girls to make decisions."*



## Engaging in unprotected sex

For the majority of girls teenage pregnancies are unplanned and unwanted. Few pregnancies are wanted among teenagers – they seem to just happen. Many girls typically have unprotected sex with different men; unprotected sex with different men frequently results in unplanned pregnancy, with the further complication that many girls have no sure knowledge of who the real father is.

A small number of girls mentioned that some teenage girls wanted to get pregnant as a way of keeping their boyfriends and to enable them to continue to receive the support he gave to them.

*"Some girls want to get pregnant at an early age because they do not want to lose their boyfriends."*

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*"There is a girl in my community- the parents are very poor, the father is a carpenter the mother fries food items in the market- they eventually split up because of the pressure of no money. The father could not look after the daughter's needs on his own so she turned to a man in the street who made her pregnant. After she had the baby she had to turn to prostitution to look after the child."*

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*"Born pickin na marriage" (girls who have babies often assume that they can be treated as married to the father of the baby)*

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*"Due to the use of condom, it prevents them getting pregnant which will prevent them winning the love of that men, and getting that man. So they neglect the use of condom. Especially if they have rivals, they don't want her to get pregnant and win the love before her."*



## Low use of modern methods of contraception

Although many girls do not have good information on sexual and reproductive health matters, the findings showed that some girls are aware that modern family planning methods prevent pregnancy. Some said that condoms can protect against STIs including HIV. However, many girls were not using any reliable form of contraception although were engaging in regular sexual activity. This is due to a number of reasons including- myths, traditions, religion, and not being able to ask their partners to use contraception. Girls talked about the side-effects of contraceptives, many were incorrect and based on myths that have been passed around over years.

*"Using condoms cannot make them feel sweet when sex is taking place."*



A major barrier to using condoms was because of attitudes towards girls having condoms. There is also a lot of shame associated with buying condoms and a pressure from men not to use them.

For some girls not using contraception was because of their partners' preference for 'body to body' sex. Many girls mentioned that having 'flesh to flesh' sex not only feels better but it is also a way to show your partner how much you care about them, and that you trust them.

*"Women don't use condoms to show their boyfriends how much they love them."*

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*"One of the main reasons people do not use condoms is religious reasons- no matter how much people are saying to people to use condoms, the religious leaders are telling people not to use condoms- especially Muslim and Catholic."*

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*"They are ashamed of buying condoms because of stigmatization and gossiping. As a girl if you carry condoms the men will think you are a prostitute."*

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## **"Country rope" and traditional forms of contraception**

Girls discussed the use of traditional family planning methods in particular "country rope". This is a rope which is obtained from traditional herbalists who ties a rope around a girls' waist that is supposed to have powers to prevent pregnancies. Many of the girls strongly believed in this rope, although some cautioned that the rope will only work under specific conditions. Often the girl's mother arranges for the "country rope" for her daughter at an early age.

*"You can use country rope and tie it around your waist and it will stop you getting pregnant. The female traditional healers give you the rope; you pay for it and say how long you don't want to be pregnant for. And to be honest it works – all the people believe it. We do know some people who got pregnant with the rope but that is because some people are not the real traditional people they are selling you the wrong rope."*

*"There are many traditional methods that girls can use to prevent pregnancy. After having sex they drink a cup of salt water as contraception. Or you bow down or lie sideways in a special way so you will not get pregnant."*

## Girls views on HIV/AIDS

While teenage pregnancy is a high risk among this vulnerable group of girls, many were also at risk of other sexual and reproductive health problems such as unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

Many of the girls do not perceive HIV to be a real threat. As the girls are not having sex with 'sick looking' men, they believe they are safe and that they can trust their partner. As so few are having HIV tests, these beliefs are never challenged. Also girls who did know about HIV did not see themselves as being at risk. HIV is viewed as an illness which is easily seen to the outsider and as long as the girls are not having sex with these sick looking men they believe they will not contract the disease.

*"Young people deny that there is such a thing as HIV -no one has it around here."*

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*"You can see when people have HIV they are very very sick. Only if they look sick do they have HIV."*

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*"You will know if somebody has HIV because he will get bald, he will be losing a lot of weight, he will have a rash. You will always see if someone has HIV, you know well, you can see the signs in the body. And they withdraw emotionally and don't associate with others so you can tell."*

## Sexual Exploitation, Incest and Rape

Sexual violence is very high in Sierra Leone, partly as a result of the use of rape as a weapon during the war. There is also a false myth among men that they can cure HIV/AIDS if they have sex with a virgin. Although laws exist in the country on rape, many cases are not reported and very few people are prosecuted by the courts.

Although the study found that girls are under great pressure from their peers and families to engage in sex, there is also a lot exploitation and abuse from men in the community. The findings indicated that often these were older men in positions of power: teachers, relatives, bosses and guardians. Girls told countless stories of men taking advantage of them, of being exploited, abused and raped, leading in many cases to sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies.

When girls discussed the reasons for rape, some said the way girls dressed put them at risk because men 'couldn't help themselves'.

*"Rape cases are still high around here. Some men even rape their own children. If you prepare the soup, you should be the first to taste it"- in other words, she is my daughter, I should be the first to have sex with her. I know of a man, the daughter is now the wife of the house. He took his own daughter as his wife. The mother was so ashamed that she had to pack out of the house. He has a child with his own daughter."*





*"We know many teachers forcing girls to sleep with them in exchange for marks to pass their exams."*

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*"Rape is fault on both sides-the women must be careful what she wears. Even if she show a little bit of breast she can get in trouble, the man cannot control himself, a standing prick has no conscience."*



## Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation (FGM) continues to be a taboo subject in Sierra Leone and this issue was only referred to indirectly in the peer interviews as “the society”. With a prevalence rate of about 90%, FGM is practiced by all ethnic groups, except the Christian Creoles in Freetown. FGM is normally performed as a rite of passage marking when a girl becomes a woman and is linked with the Bondo Secret Society.<sup>vi</sup>

The girls discussed their experiences of FGM during the focus groups discussions, many felt the practice was very important and gives girls an advantage in the community. Some were also under pressure to become part of the society and felt they may choose to undergo FGM so as to fit in and to prevent discrimination and name calling. Many felt it was done to keep their partners or husbands.

Other girls mentioned that access to internet and films had given them better knowledge of FGM and some girls were beginning to question the practice of FGM. Others were particularly concerned about the high economic costs of joining the “Bondo society.”



*"Now we all watch a film about the issue, so people are now choosing to refuse to go to the Bondo... my younger sister has said that she is not interested."*

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*"The pain is harder than delivery pain. When your daughter is going you cannot go to the bush to support your daughter. Some say it will reduce their feelings and some say it is shameful to have clitoris. If you have a rival who is in society, it is shameful to know that you do not belong to the society and the man will use that against you."*


# THE IMPACT OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND EARLY MOTHERHOOD ON GIRLS' LIVES

## Teenage pregnancy and school drop out

Education is known to help break the vicious cycle of poverty, but government policies and social pressure do not support pregnant girls or child mothers to stay in school or return to school. Some schools do not allow pregnant girls to stay in class for fear of 'influencing' and 'infecting' other girls. The result for many pregnant teenage girls is that they are either forced to drop out of school by the school authorities or their parents or they feel too ashamed to continue so they leave school. Many dropped out at a very early stage of their pregnancy.

*"Some people still have the idea that school is not for girls, so they prefer to give them in early marriage than to send them to school."*





*"Parents do not care much about girls' education they say school is not for girls it is for boys. It is common for girls to drop out of school early, but not the boys, boys are more important to finish. Girls get pregnant and drop out. Boys cannot get pregnant."*

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*"As soon as I found out I am pregnant I leave school because I feel shame- I drop out of school, I don't want the teacher or other people to know about it."*



## Social Stigma affects Pregnant Girls

Pregnant teenagers face a lot stigma beyond the classroom; they are often shunned by friends, family and community members. Girls often come under huge pressure and feel isolated and vulnerable.

*"When I am pregnant my community they are laughing at me and calling me names. They laugh at you and point fingers at you."*

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*"Many teenagers that get pregnant are shunned by their family members."*

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*"Stigmatization of pregnant girls is not good because it will make them to become ashamed of doing anything."*

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*"The consequences that girls face are that their parents drive them out of their house and they can find it very difficult to take care of their babies."*

## Unsafe Abortion

Abortion rates are very high among young women in Sierra Leone and over 80 per cent of all legal abortions performed are among women aged 15-24. Complications of abortion are the most important cause of hospitalization and maternal deaths in Sierra Leone.<sup>vii</sup>

Teenage pregnancy can cause young women to be stigmatized, dismissed from school, and neglected by family. The result is that, for many pregnant teenage girls, the first option is to attempt an abortion. Since abortion is illegal in Sierra Leone the majority of abortions are carried out using dangerous methods, some by untrained practitioners, herbalists or the girls themselves. The girls shared numerous accounts of their own and other girls' experiences. Many abortions end in death, or with the girl having long term damage including disabilities.

*"Some of the doctors who do the operation are not even qualified- they pretend they are to get your money but then they leave you in a bad state. Many people just cut up everything that is inside and leave it inside you. Many people die."*



*"Most girls try to take something to abort. Some are using traditional medicine; some are using ampiclox (antibiotics). I myself took ampiclox with coke, and stood up high on a mortar and jumped off to get rid of the baby. It didn't work. Some are taking blue- a chemical used for washing cloth. You mix it with water and drink it. After drinking you shake your stomach to help to get rid of the baby. I went to the man and after the ampiclox did not work he said he would inject me in the navel so I ran away."*



## Risk to girls during child birth

Many of the young mothers involved in the study were aware of the risks that pregnant teenagers and their babies faced, due to their young bodies not being matured for childbirth. Additionally many girls also suffered at the hands of hospital staff during childbirth. Even when the mother and baby make it safely through childbirth they still face health risks as they often lack the knowledge, skills and money to take proper care of themselves and their babies.

*"At hospital they flog you with hand and with cane while you are in labour. Some nurses treat you badly- as if you are not a human being because you don't have money. Even they will beat you up while you are supposed to be delivering your baby-they will beat you mercilessly, they hit you and say 'hurry up I have other things to do. I was not the one who told you to go and spread your legs in the first place."*

*"If you are pregnant when you are young you get long/ prolong labour which can result in death."*



## Teenage pregnancy and life options for girls

In general girls hold very negative views of the future for themselves and other teenage mothers. Most see teenage pregnancy as destroying all hopes for their future –and see teenage mothers as being 'useless' and unable to contribute to their community. Although there were some accounts of young mothers getting support from their families or boyfriends, for the most part the girls' stories showed that teenage pregnancy pushes girls deeper into poverty. In the short term girls are occupied with taking care of their young baby and therefore struggle to find the time to work for money, and in the longer term drop out of school losing the opportunities towards improving themselves and the lives of their children.

*"Young mothers and their babies find it very difficult to live because they hardly have their daily bread. Young mothers of babies can find it so hard – they are often the ones who get into prostitution as the only way of supporting."*

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*"Teenage pregnancy makes some say their future has come to an end and they will never make it in life."*





*"Girls are not happy about their teenage pregnancy, they can become uncaring mothers and in regard to that their babies suffer a lot and that can lead to the death of their babies."*

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# GIRLS VIEWS ON HEALTH SERVICES AND INFORMATION

## Sexual and Reproductive Health Information

For many girls the lack of information is the main cause of teenage pregnancy. Many girls are not aware of the risks they face in having unprotected sex. While some girls had received some form of sex education at school, others mentioned being involved in education awareness sessions, getting information from health care settings and hearing/seeing slots on radio or TV (although few households own their own TV). Few had had useful discussions with parents – for the most part sex was not openly discussed in the home, although some did refer to conversations with grandmothers or other older people living in the community as being helpful. Sexual and reproductive health services do exist in Sierra Leone but are limited and many schools fail to teach students adequately or from an early enough age.

*"You cannot fatten the pig on the market day – many girls are only told about sex matters during the day of marriage from their families."*


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*"Teenage pregnancy is high in our community because of loss of control of their parent and because there is no good medical services in the area."*

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*"Sometimes you will hear on the radio or television- but let's be honest if we hear a health programme we will change the channel to hear the music or on the TV to watch the Nigerian movie instead."*





*"Sex education is limited, they don't have any in primary school and yet there are girls up to the age of 14 even in primary school, plenty of them are already having sex."*

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*"It is very rare for parents to do a good job at telling children about sex. One woman she told her daughter, "do not let a man lie on top of you- if you do you will become pregnant and disgrace the family". This girl she never let a man lie on top of her- but eventually she herself climbed on top of a man and became pregnant. When the mother found out what had happened she said 'oh oh - I should have told her the whole truth."*

## Access to services

Many girls felt strongly that the services they need are not available to them and their peers. The poor signposting of services was also mentioned as a barrier by a number of the girls. They were either not aware that youth friendly services existed or they lived too far away to access the service. The 'shame' of accessing 'adult' services and further poor treatment of teenage girls by health workers were raised in the study. Stories of being judged and abused when seeking advice about family planning or pregnancy and specifically when giving birth were all too common among young girls. Girls said in general they prefer to go to the pharmacy for contraception although they have family planning service providers.

*"Some girls say that there are no support services for teenagers or young mothers so you will have to struggle on your own if you don't have people to care of you during the process."*

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*"Never used the health centre before- none of my friends have used the condom although I distribute the condom. I get from her aunt from HIV office but she does not use herself. If people go to the centre to get condoms they will not talk. It is mostly the boys who buy the condom."*

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## Girls' thoughts and aspirations of their future

During the research and the planning for the stakeholder consultation the girls were asked to express their thoughts on their future aspirations and dreams. In general most young mothers and pregnant girls did not have any positive hopes for their future, and this view was expressed by many girls. However a few felt hopeful that they could turn their lives around. The main desire for girls was to go back to school to complete their education and to get support to undertake business ventures.



*"We need microfinance support- along with training for a skill, and training how to do business, how to save money, etc."*

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*"Girls at risk need education so that they will be self-reliant and self-independence."*

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# RECOMMENDATIONS FROM GIRLS FOR URGENT ACTION

The impact of teenage pregnancy and early motherhood on girls' lives is significant and adds numerous challenges and hardships to the burden of girls, many of whom are already struggling to survive. The recommendations provided here are based on what girls wanted for themselves and their peers through the study findings and focus groups discussions during the debriefing sessions and consultations.



## Provision of a supportive environment and skills

*"I want a place where girls will be happy. Somewhere that will help us to prevent teenage pregnancy, show us how to have a good life and be happy."*

*"Give them medical care and advise them on how to bring up their babies in a healthy atmosphere."*

*"They want a community centre where they can go for nutritional supply for their babies and mothers."*

*"It is very important to have employment in the area, because if there is employment in the area poverty will reduce and even some of us will be able to take care of our self rather than going to the street."*

*"Vocational training - catering, tailoring, computing - it helps them to make money for themselves, it benefits them, they can work themselves for money or get a job."*

*"We need microfinance support - along with training for a skill, and training how to do business, how to save money etc."*

## Support to continue education

*"Let them have help so that they can keep studying - most of them want to finish their education and get back to college."*

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*"Financial help to further education or, for those who do not want to go back to school, help to get other training."*

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*"Girls want to go back to school, after they have the baby they leave but then they realise what they are missing. They want a second chance"*

## Provision of safe youth space to access information

*"They would like to have accurate information on all sexual and reproductive health services so to reduce their level of risk."*

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*"We want somewhere only for young people. We don't want to meet up with our mother there. There is no privacy there and we don't feel free to say what we want. We want to speak to someone who we have confidence in, not some old person asking us a lot of questions and embarrassing us."*

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*"They need a youth centre that includes sexual health services- not just a sexual and reproductive health centre as most people don't feel they need contraception."*

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*"They want a place for girls and girls only, confidential and secret. Such as a library with books and videos. They want the information to come from peer educators, people their own age. Most of them see their future as downcast they don't see their future as bright. Show them videos of girls like themselves who have got pregnant but have made their future bright. The centre should be well furnished. Not just peer educators but also older people there who can mentor them. Also classes on how to be healthy when you are pregnant, how to eat well for you and your baby. Also after birth how to take care of yourself and your baby, raise your baby well, improve or learn parenting skills and information on how to feed a baby well."*

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## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE STUDY

- Improve signposting to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services
- Create girls only spaces to discuss sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues
- Develop programmes to target parents of teenagers to help improve parenting and communication skills around SRH
- Conduct health promotion activities to address the myths and misconceptions on sexual matters and contraception
- Undertake programmes to strengthen the confidence and self-esteem of girls, particularly those at risk
- Support at risk girls with finding alternative ways of making money
- Provide courses for pregnant teenagers and pregnant mothers to learn how to take care of their babies
- Introduce more youth friendly services at the community level
- Raise awareness of the impact of policies that make girls more vulnerable, including for example unsafe abortions, and policies that prevent pregnant teenagers from staying in school.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

High teenage pregnancy shows a failure to protect and fulfil the sexual and reproductive rights of girls. For many vulnerable girls teenage pregnancy means missing out on education, skills and opportunities resulting in a life of poverty for them and their children.

“The Empowering Girls at Risk Project’ focused on young girls who are at risk of teenage pregnancy to gain a better understanding of their situation, views on sexuality, services and thoughts on their future. The second part of the project provided training on confidence building and support for girls to start their own networks and clubs. This pilot project aimed to improve the lives of young mothers and girls at risk and also increase their knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

When the girls were asked to evaluate their role in the research many said they were more confident, had acquired new skills and were ready to take action to improve their situation. A few mentioned that they had learnt a lot about their own community and needs of other girls. A few girls said they were initially very worried about the process and found the training and support helpful.

The confidence building and girls empowerment workshops provided the girls and staff of PPASL with additional skills and tools for working with girls and young leaders. Girls went on to develop an action plan for setting up girls clubs.

This pilot project has helped to raise girls’ aspirations, expose them to other possibilities and audiences and also helped to strengthen their collective voices. Girls deserve opportunities and should be nurtured and supported through enabling policies and programmes that provide access to information, skills and supportive environment.

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# FORWARD

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