

## SAFE TO LEARN PROGRESS 2019-2023 - SIERRA LEONE

### Call to Action Benchmark Assessment

The Safe to Learn Call to Action is a global commitment to end violence in, around and through schools. It sets out a shared 5-point policy agenda for governments, civil society, development partners and the private sector: implement laws and policies, strengthen school-level prevention and response, promote behaviour change and shift harmful social and gender norms, invest resources effectively, and generate and use evidence.

The Call to Action is operationalised through a set of benchmarks, informed by international child rights frameworks, United Nations guidance and minimum standards, and good practice from the field of child safeguarding and child protection. The benchmarks provide guidance to implement the Call to Action, setting out the accountabilities of the education sector and providing a framework for measuring progress. By meeting these benchmarks, countries can systematically address violence as a barrier to learning and uphold children’s rights to safety, protection and education.

This report reviews national progress against the Call to Action benchmarks for the period 2019 to 2023. The report was developed based on a desk review of national policies, plans and partner program documents. Progress against each benchmark was then rated by the government, in coordination with the UNICEF Country Office. The assessment can be used by stakeholders to identify priorities for future action and to strengthen national efforts to create safe and enabling learning environments for all children.

**Benchmark Met:** **Yes**, **In Progress**, **No**, **Unable to Assess**, **N/A**

#### Call to Action area 1: Implement laws and policies

##### Benchmark

##### Benchmark Met

#### 1.1 The national government includes prevention of violence in around schools as a specific strategy in education sector policies, plans and budgets.

Yes 

The Education Sector Plan 2022-2026 includes violence prevention in its Objectives 3 and 4 and connected issues under Objective 2. Outcomes under objective 3 include targeted support to establish and ensure referral pathways in schools for reporting and addressing sexual and gender based violence and ensuring effective system to provide counselling and psychosocial support to children, especially pregnant girls and sexual and gender based violence survivors. Objective 4 specifically aims to establish educational environments that are secure, healthy, and conducive to learning, with outcome 4.2 specifically aiming to ensure that educational institutions are free from all forms of violence and abuse. This involves a clear emphasis on adhering to Sierra Leone’s laws and the Teacher Code of Conduct, explicitly prohibiting Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and abuse, including corporal punishment in schools. The plan also outlines popularizing the School Safety Policy, offering guidance and counseling services to higher education students on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) issues, and reviewing higher education staff handbooks to ensure they incorporate ethical standards, SGBV considerations, and grievance redress mechanisms. Objective 2 includes teacher training on gender-transformative pedagogy and inclusive education as well as on comprehensive sexuality education.

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) adopted a Comprehensive School Safety Policy (March 2023) which has a section on safety against child abuse that aims “To ensure learners are safe from any form of physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and neglect by teachers, peers, parents, or community members by taking a whole school approach.” There is also a Radical Inclusion Policy (2021) [National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools - MBSSE Policy Tracker](#), with its [Implementation Plan Radical Inclusion Implementation Plan - MBSSE Policy Tracker](#) that includes prevention and management of violence around schools. There is also a framework on Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM) and a guidance and counseling framework.

Gender budgeting is a priority, and the Ministry of Finance (MOF) established a centre for gender responsive budgeting, and it is also working on child-friendly budgeting.

### **1.2 There is explicit prohibition of corporal punishment in schools, and policies are in place to support positive discipline and effective classroom management.**

In progress 

In April 2023 Sierra Leone explicitly prohibited corporal punishment of children in schools by enacting the [Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act, 2023](#).

Sierra Leone has established national codes of conduct for school staff and [implemented policies promoting positive discipline](#). The 2020 Code of Conduct (CoC) for teachers, issued by the Sierra Leone Teaching Service Commission (TCS), outlines standards of professional behaviour for teachers and other education personnel in their relationships with learners, colleagues, parents, and the general public. It also provides principles to guide professionalism and promote a [positive learning environment and the well-being of learners](#). The Code of Conduct has a provision on zero tolerance for corporal punishment. Since 2020, over 26,185 teachers in government and government-assisted schools have been trained on the code of conduct and positive discipline. Currently, this training is provided at the in-service level, but not yet at the pre-service level. However, discussions are ongoing to incorporate this training into the pre-service education of teachers.

However, and despite these policy advancements, corporal punishment remains widespread in schools. A study by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Institute for Development (IfD). The study found that new teachers, in particular, use corporal punishment, especially flogging, to assert authority. Students may face physical punishment for reasons such as lateness, incomplete work, noise, disobedience, and fighting. Additionally, the study mentions that in some cases, [teachers demand bribes for better grades and resort to physical punishment if students do not comply](#).

### **1.3 The roles and responsibilities of the Ministry of Education in response and referral to incidents of violence are clearly set out in the multi-sectoral national child protection policy framework.**

Yes 

The MBSSE 2023 Comprehensive School Safety Policy entails three relevant pillars, including: 1) Safe schools' facilities and learning environments; 2) Disaster risk reduction in schools and 3) Protection from violence and other forms of abuse in and around schools.

The Teaching Service Commission had already adopted (in 2017) professional standards for teachers before the endorsement of the Safe to Learn Call to Action in 2019. The Radical Inclusion policy and its implementation plan further reinforce these efforts.

Sierra Leone developed several key frameworks to address sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The revised [National Referral Protocol](#) on sexual and gender-based violence (NRP on SGBV), which provides clear guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of line ministries and partners, including the Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education and the education sector. It will work in conjunction with other critical policies and tools such as the National Strategy for Response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence which is still in draft.

In 2014, the then Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Children's Affairs adopted a Child Welfare Policy, and the current Ministry of Social Welfare is working at its implementation in collaboration with other line ministries including the MBSSE and communities. Child welfare committees were established at community level for implementation.

A SRGBV Working Group has been established at both central and local levels to facilitate collaboration among key actors. Additionally, the National Committee on Gender-Based Violence, led by the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, brings together line ministries and partners to address GBV issues at the central level. Complementing these initiatives is the draft National Strategy for Response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. At the district level, child protection and GBV steering committee meetings are held monthly in all districts. The Girls Education Movement (GEM) supports the Ministry of Education (MoE) in children's education and protection. School safety committees are also in place.

#### **1.4 The country has endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration and in situations of armed conflict is implementing the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.**

Yes   
Unable to assess 

Sierra Leone endorsed the [Safe Schools Declaration](#) in 2015.

The Teachers Code of Conduct includes a provision which highlights that schools should be free from arms and ammunitions.

The country has been in peace, and Safe to learn was unable to assess whether the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict have been brought into domestic policy and operational frameworks as far as possible and appropriate. Many institutions were established to address peace in Sierra Leone, including Human Rights Commission, National Commission for Democracy, National Council for Civic Education and Democracy, National Peace Cohesion Commission, National Commission for Small Arms and light weapons.

Sierra Leone has developed the third generation of the National Action Plan for the implementation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security.

### **Call to Action area 2: Strengthen prevention and response in education systems and schools**

#### **Benchmark**

#### **Benchmark Met**

#### **2.1 Key violence prevention strategies are embedded in curriculum-based activities for children.**

In progress 

The [National Curriculum Framework and Guidelines for Basic Education in SL - MBSSE Policy Tracker](#) has civic education as a subject relating to children's rights and responsibilities, recognizing diversity. The MBSSE also has an [Adolescent Health and Life Skills Manual and guidance on Comprehensive Sexuality Education](#), which has now been updated to Child and Adolescent Health and Life Skills. Development of stand-alone material for this is ongoing at Basic Education level. Training for teachers and school quality assurance officers is ongoing to support the implementation of the curriculum content.

Some schools integrate teachings on children's rights, particularly focusing on themes related to SRGBV.

#### **2.2 Child safeguarding principles and procedures are in place in schools, inclusive of codes of conduct, and safe recruitment standards.**

In progress 

There are free reporting mechanisms, such as toll lines of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (dial 8060) and of the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (116).

As mentioned in the sections above, the 2020 Code of Conduct (CoC) for teachers, issued by the Sierra Leone Teaching Service Commission outlines standards of professional behavior for teachers and other education personnel in their relationships with learners. The in-service training for school staff regarding their obligations for child safeguarding including reporting and response obligations is in place. However, the pre-service training is not in place yet. There are national guidelines to assess teachers' suitability for working with children. The Teachers Service Commission (TSC) has a Directorate that conducts Teacher's licensing examination and recruitment. This process ensures teachers are screened before recruitment.

The 2023 Education Act includes provisions for guidance counsellors, boards of governors, Community Teachers Associations, and school management committees, which serve as checks and balances to ensure safety in and around schools. Additionally, Girls Education Movements, Mothers Clubs, and Child Welfare Committees support and monitor the implementation of these guidelines.

The MBSSE and TSC have conducted in-service teacher training related to SRGBV on: 1) teacher obligations regarding child safeguarding, and 2) violence reporting and response referral pathways for districts and schools across the country.

In 2021, the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), UNICEF and Plan International tested the whole-school minimum standards approach in Sierra Leone, based on lessons learnt from Zimbabwe. The Minister of Education has officially approved these minimum standards for integration into the country's education approach to addressing school violence. [1] The Gender Unit of the MBSSE oversees the implementation of gender responsive policies in schools. There is also a community of practice on child safeguarding, including in schools and communities, that brings together a coalition of NGOs, UN agencies and governmental institutions.

Anti-violence clubs were established in basic and secondary schools.

Schools use various mechanisms to report School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV). The most widespread, present in all schools and initiated by the Leh Wi Lan Project, is the suggestion box allowing students to submit anonymous notes. However, these boxes proved ineffective due to their placement near staff rooms, and were seldom opened, resulting in a lack of follow-up actions. SRGBV safe spaces have been established by IRC through GIZ/UNGEI/UNICEF partnership funding in Kenema and Kono. E-referral pathways and training of women in various communities to serve as case management workers were also established. Other reporting avenues include students and parents directly reporting incidents to the principal, especially in cases where the principal is supportive, and mother's clubs and mentors whom children can approach with their concerns. [2]

### **2.3 Each school has at least one focal point who is capacitated to provide front-line mental health/psychosocial support to children experiencing violence.**

Yes 

The MBSSE in collaboration with the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education (MTHE) and Universities had developed a curriculum on guidance and counselling at national pre-service level. At in-service level a framework has been developed on guidance and counselling, mentoring and mental health. School mentors are placed in all schools and guidance counsellors in fewer schools. Some secondary schools offer psychosocial support. UNICEF and partners in 2020, distributed training manuals on safe school protocols and psychosocial support (PSS) to more than 900 master trainers. These trainers were then tasked with training 24,000 teachers. [3]

### **2.4 The physical environment in and around schools is safe and designed with the well-being of children in mind.**

In progress 

The government is taking steps towards ensuring the safety and well-being of children in and around schools. The MBSSE adopted a [School infrastructure and catchment area planning policy 2021](#) and a [Comprehensive Safe School Policy 2023](#). All schools have a working committee called the School Safety Committee, as noted in the National Annual school census report.

## Call to Action area 3: Shift social and gender norms and promote behaviour change

### Benchmark Met

#### 3.1 There is wide dissemination and engagement with stakeholders to build knowledge and appreciation of child rights and laws prohibiting violence.

In progress 

The dissemination of the Teachers Code of Conduct and the promotion of positive discipline through the training of members of the District Local Chapters of the Girls Education Movement (GEM) Committees is a positive step towards building knowledge and appreciation of child rights issues in the country. Additionally, all districts have community bylaws that prohibit violence against children. There is a national School-Related Gender-Based Violence-Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) communication strategy, supported by UNICEF. Other agencies developed manuals to support community engagement and information, education and communication materials.

#### 3.2 Specific, evidence-informed interventions are researched and implemented, addressing social norms that drive key forms of violence and/or helping children manage risks.

In progress 

The 'Report on findings from the School-Related Gender-based Violence (SRGBV) Action Research in Schools and Communities' Study (2022) sheds light on the significant risks that children face in schools and communities. Currently, UNICEF Sierra Leone and other partners are working closely with the government to implement some of the critical recommendations from the study in schools and communities across the country.

The SRGBV-SBC Communication Strategy, the [Education Sector Analysis](#), Leh Wi Lan baseline research on SRGBV and the [National Out of School Children Study](#) were used to inform interventions to address violence in school.

#### 3.3 Young people, parents, teachers, and community members in and around schools are engaged and active on school violence.

In progress 

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Teaching Service Commission, Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, International Rescue Committee and other agencies, civil society organizations and community-based organizations are supporting various interventions to engage and support community members, young people, parents, and teachers on school violence. UNICEF, the Irish Aid, the United States Agency for International Development, the World Bank, the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, the Gender at the Centre Initiative, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ - German Corporation for International Cooperation) have been supporting these initiatives.

## Call to Action area 4: Invest resources effectively

### Benchmark

### Benchmark Met

#### 4.1 Domestic resources allocated to support interventions and capacity building activities to prevent and respond to violence in schools.

Unable to assess 

UNICEF collaborated with the Ministry of Finance in 2022, resulting in the inclusion of child budgeting in the [2022 National Budget Call Circular](#).

N/A 

#### **4.2 Development partners provide resources targeting national or subnational level to end violence in schools, investing in effective approaches.**

In progress 

Various development partners are engaged in addressing violence in school, including donors, United Nations and INGOs. International Rescue Committee, Plan International, World Vision, Save the Children, and Education NGO consortium on ending violence in school, are actively engaged in ending violence in school and collaborate with both the government and local partners. Child Fund and [the Daindemben Federation](#) have supported [School-Based Violence Prevention Programme \(SBVP\) through collaboration between the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary School Education](#). UNGEI and UNICEF have undertaken a pilot programme and action research in 2021 and 2022 to address SRGBV and integrate Whole School Minimum Standards into national efforts against SRGBV.

With Ministry support, a new 12-month phase from May 2023 extends to additional schools, involving capacity building for administrators, teachers, and parents, empowerment of women teachers, and interventions for reporting mechanisms, referral pathways, and healthy peer relationships. Additionally, with funding from the Irish Government and GIZ, UNICEF has been supporting the government for many years on violence against children/child protection, education and social and behaviour change. [4]

Over the course of 2021, UK FCDO contributed to address violence in and around schools through bilateral programmes. [5] MBSSE in partnership with the Free Education project secretariat is implementing gender responsive interventions in schools and communities to end violence in schools.

#### **4.3 There is private sector engagement in the provision of financial and non-financial resources including technical support, expertise and advocacy towards ending violence in schools.**

In progress 

The Council of Churches, Catholic Relief Services, Don Bosco Fambul, Rokel Commercial Bank had provided funds for the development and implementation of violence prevention and response interventions in various districts in the country. Mobile companies such as Orange and Africell support schools with sanitary pads, and funds for construction of school fences.

### **Generate and use evidence**

#### **Benchmark**

**Benchmark Met**

#### **5.1 Information and reporting of incidents allow for disaggregated baseline information and monitoring of trends and that reflect needs and gaps in the system.**

In progress 

The Gender-Based Violence Information Management System plus (GBVIMS+) ([Guidance on Implementing GBVIMS+ for Government Actors | UNICEF](#)), the e-referral pathway ([Digital E-referral Pathway App | UNICEF](#)) and PRIMERO – a case management tool supporting children’s rights – are all in place.

The Family Support Unit (FSU) in 2022 upgraded its information system and improved support systems for survivors for the cases they are handling, and this data is transmitted to the national level. Experts analyze this information to notify relevant organizations about the violence being perpetrated and the system also helps in identifying [areas where child violence is most prevalent](#). Leh Wi Lan uses their 'tangerine platform' to collect data on SRGBV in the school community.

## **5.2 There is regular data collection on prevalence and forms of violence in schools using methods that follow high ethical standards.**

In progress 

Between June 2021 and January 2022, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Institute for Development (IfD) conducted a study on gender-based violence in schools, funded by USAID under the 'School-Related Gender-Based Violence' project. This initiative, a collaboration between UNGEI and UNICEF Sierra Leone, aimed to support partners Community Initiatives for Rural Development (CIFORD) and Humanity and Inclusion (HI). The research involved creating maps during focus group discussions to identify and prompt discussions on SRGBV risk areas.

A Demographic and Health Survey was carried out in 2019 (SLDHS) by Statistics Sierra Leone on behalf of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation. The last Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) were conducted in 2017. The Annual School Census and the Education Sector Analysis report include data on violence.

## **5.3 Decisions on replication and scale-up of violence prevention initiatives are based on evaluations of trialled models and approaches.**

In progress 

The implementation of the recommendations from the Whole-School Action Research study and the Out of School Children study and strategy is in progress. This includes supporting training of teachers, community structures and other relevant stakeholders on the Teachers' Code of Conduct and on Positive Discipline in nine districts.

Sierra Leone School-Based Violence Prevention Programme (SBVP) was adapted from a successful initiative in Honduras. Implemented thanks to the collaboration between the MBSSE, ChildFund, and the Daindemben Federation, the SBVP model involves four components: child-focused, educator-oriented, caregiver-focused, and school/community aspects. The child component emphasizes socialemotional learning and information on violence protection. Educator components aim to enhance skills in preventing and responding to violence, while the school/community aspect addresses risk factors.

UNGEI Whole school Approach-minimum standards are now being used by other organizations in Sierra Leone to address SRGBV.

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This report is updated as of December 2023.

## Notes and References

- [1] Safe to Learn. Annual Progress Review. September 2022
- [2] UNICEF Girls' Education and Gender Community of Practice, internal meeting 1, 2023. Report on findings from school-related gender-based violence action research in schools and communities in Sierra Leone January 2023. UNICEF Sierra Leone- SRGBV - Field Research Findings
- [3] UNICEF Sierra Leone End Year Summary Narratives and RAMs covering year 2020
- [4] Safe to Learn Country Engagement Task Force mapping 2023
- [5] Safe to Learn Annual Progress Review September 2022