Researching livelihoods and
services affected by conflict

Social norms and the problem of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone

Learning from an SLRC action
research project

Briefing note

Clare Castillejo, Stephanie Buell, Regina Bash-Taqi,
Lisa Denney, Tania Fraser, Muallem Kamara and
Henrietta Komora

May 2021

Secure
Livelihoods
Research
Consortium

Written by
Clare Castillejo, Stephanie Buell,
Regina Bash-Taqi, Lisa Denney,
Tania Fraser, Muallem Kamara and
Henrietta Komora

Cover photo: Teenage patient at Makeni Regional
Hospital, Sierra Leone, Abbie Trayler-Smith

About us

The **Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC)** is a global research programme exploring basic services and social protection in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Funded by UK aid from the UK Government (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO), with complementary funding from Irish aid and the European Commission (EC), SLRC was established in 2011 with the aim of strengthening the evidence base and informing policy and practice around livelihoods and services in conflict.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the lead organisation. SLRC partners include: Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Feinstein International Center (FIC, Tufts University), Focus1000, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Wageningen University (WUR), Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, Nepal Institute for Social and Environmental Research (NISER), Narrate, Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka (SSA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Women and Rural Development Network (WORUDET), Claremont Graduate University (CGU), Institute of Development Policy (IOB, University of Antwerp) and the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS, Erasmus University of Rotterdam).

SLRC's research can be separated into two phases. Our first phase of research (2011–2017) was based on three research questions, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity under conflict

Guided by our original research questions on state legitimacy, state capacity and livelihoods, the second phase of SLRC research (2017–2019) delves into questions that still remain, organised into three themes of research. In addition to these themes, SLRC II also has a programme component exploring power and everyday politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For more information on our work, visit: www.securelivelihoods.org/what-we-do

Abbreviations

ART	action research team
CDHR	Centre for Democracy and Human Rights
EMAP	Engaging Men in Accountable Practice
FGM	Female genital mutilation
GBV	gender-based violence
IRC	International Rescue Committee
NGO	non-government organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
ToC	theory of change

Contents

1   Introduction

This briefing note summarises learning about the problem of teenage pregnancy and the social norms that fuel it that emerged from the *Adaptive Approaches to Reducing Teenage Pregnancy in Sierra Leone* action research project. This was a two-year project that accompanied three international NGOs in Sierra Leone - Concern Worldwide, International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Save the Children -   as they trialled adaptive programming approaches to address the social norms that drive teenage pregnancy.

The briefing note begins with an introduction to the project, followed by a summary of existing evidence about the problem of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone. It then discusses what has been learned from the project about the social norms and behaviours that drive teenage pregnancy and entry points for changing these, including in relation to attitudes towards girls; girls' decision-making power; the role of other actors; and different types of sexual relationships. The note goes on to examine learning that has emerged from the project about how change in social norms can happen, including by building on norms already in flux and examples of positive deviance,[1] and by supporting the emergence of alternative norms. Finally, it examines challenges related to resistance that these programmes faced.

---

1   Positive deviance is behaviour that deviates from dominant norms with a positive intention or effect.

2 The action research project

The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) has been undertaking research on teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone since 2016, supported by Irish Aid. This research found that, despite existing evidence about the range of drivers that fuel the problem of teenage pregnancy, most programming on this issue has been based on a limited theory of change (ToC) that focuses on strengthening individual knowledge, attitudes and skills of girls to enable them to avoid pregnancy.[2] Inevitably this approach has limited impact as it "over-emphasises girls' power and agency over their circumstances and behaviour, while minimising the role of social and cultural factors such as severe poverty, limited acceptable economic and social options for girls, and gendered power imbalances." (Denney *et al.*, 2016:vii). SLRC research identified that "a more holistic and strategic approach is required in order to promote change in the underlying norms and attitudes that fuel teenage pregnancy" (Castillejo, 2018:3). This means widening the range of stakeholders that programmes work with, as well as addressing the ways in which institutions at multiple levels shape norms and attitudes about gender, sex and teenage girls.

Recognising the need to move beyond traditional programming approaches and learn about what alternative approaches might work, Irish Aid encouraged Concern, IRC and Save the Children to develop an adaptive element within their wider teenage pregnancy programming. This meant integrating a new component of work in their existing programmes that would be specifically adaptive, allowing the teams to trial different ToCs, to learn more about the problem of teenage pregnancy and what works in addressing it, and to adapt strategies in response to this learning (see adaptive programming briefing note).

---

2   It is important to note that the current national strategy for the reduction of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage seeks to overcome this limited approach through a strong emphasis on community ownership of efforts to address adolescent pregnancy and on work with a wider range of stakeholders.

An action research team (ART) made up of Sierra Leonean researchers from the Institute for Development (IfD) accompanied by SLRC researchers at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) provided ongoing support to the partners as they developed these adaptive programmes and documented the learning that emerged from them (see action research briefing note). All three partners chose to focus their adaptive programmes on different aspects of the social and gender norms that drive the problem of teenage pregnancy, recognising that this is a critical but under-addressed area where it would be useful to generate more knowledge about what works. Box 1 summarises the ToCs identified by the three partners on which their respective adaptive programmes were founded.

Box 1: Initial theories of change identified by partners

Concern: Even with improved knowledge and attitudes, adolescent girls are unable to take decisions relating to key drivers of teenage pregnancy. Influencing the actual decision-makers on teenage pregnancy can improve the outcomes of adolescent-focused teenage pregnancy programming.

IRC: Girls will reach their full potential if parents, caregivers and boys understand and respect adolescent girls' rights and allow them to take part in decisions that affect their lives.

Save the Children: Adolescents and youths can challenge social and gender norms that influence teenage pregnancy by identifying influencing factors and working to address them.

3 Existing evidence on teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone

New knowledge has been generated in recent years about the problem of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone and the factors that drive it.[3] However, this knowledge base still remains limited, in particular regarding how vulnerabilities to teenage pregnancy interact, how they vary for different categories of girls and different types of sexual relationships, and how they are shaped by the broader institutional and social context. The partners drew on this existing evidence base, as well as on their own field experience, in order to determine the focus of their adaptive work and to develop their TOCs and intervention strategies. It is hoped that learnings from this project will help to build upon and deepen this evidence base.

Existing evidence documents the importance of interconnected social norms and economic factors in driving teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone. These include the prevalence of transactional sex, patterns of girls working or living outside the family home, and expectations that older girls should provide for themselves. Likewise, deeply ingrained practices of female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage, and expectations that girls should be obedient to men all fuel teenage pregnancy (de Koning *et al*., 2013), as do cultural taboos against discussing sex, high levels of peer pressure, and access to pornography. High rates of sexual violence also drive the problem, exacerbated by a climate of impunity in which victims are blamed, families prioritise compromise over prosecution, and justice responses are weak and inaccessible (Denney *et al*., 2016).

Weak service provision emerges as a major factor that intensifies the problem of teenage pregnancy, particularly in rural parts of the country (Castillejo, 2018). Sexual and reproductive health services can be inaccessible due to distance, cost, stigma and poor availability of contraceptive products, while myths about side effects of contraception also reduce their take up. Likewise, social-work services generally lack the capacity to follow up with vulnerable girls. Meanwhile, the school system – instead of providing protection for girls from pregnancy (Presler-Marshall and Jones, 2012) – often increases girls' vulnerability to teenage pregnancy due to sexual abuse within school, an absence of comprehensive sex education, lack of safe transport to school or older girls being sent away to school.

---

3   See, for example, Bransky *et al*. (2017); De Koning *et al*. (2013); Denney *et al*. (2016); UNICEF (2015).

Critically, there is evidence that, following the civil war, norms related to gender and sex in Sierra Leone are in flux, with traditional norms existing alongside newer attitudes (Bransky *et al.*, 2017). Such shifts can provide opportunities for advancing new, more empowering norms that can help protect girls from pregnancy – for example, related to adolescent girls staying in school. This is something that was explored by partners in their adaptive projects. There is also evidence that moments of national stress can exacerbate the problem of teenage pregnancy. During the 2014–2015 Ebola epidemic, rates of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone were widely perceived to have increased, due to a combination of heightened rates of sexual violence, increased sexual activity amongst out-of-school youth, and greater financial pressure driving transactional sex. There have been concerns that the Covid-19 pandemic may have a similar effect on teenage pregnancy, although evidence from the partner programmes so far suggests this is mostly not the case (see SLRC brief Adapting through Covid-19: lessons from teenage pregnancy programmes in Sierra Leone).

4 Learning about the social norms that drive teenage pregnancy

Social norms are powerful shared beliefs about what is typical and appropriate behaviour in a valued reference group that are enforced through positive or negative sanctions – notably approval or disapproval (Heise and Manji, 2016). Evidence suggests that social norms are a more powerful influence on behaviour than individual knowledge or attitudes. This means that negative behaviours – such as many of those that drive the problem of teenage pregnancy – cannot be changed at the level of individual knowledge and attitudes alone, which is what much programming in this area often seeks to do (ibid). In turn, gender norms are shared beliefs about gender differences and roles that reflect and contribute to gendered inequalities in the distribution of power and resources (Marcus and Harper, 2015).

All three of the partners' ToCs are based on a recognition that discriminatory gender norms play an important role in driving the problem of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone, and their adaptive programmes all seek to shift these norms in different ways. Learning from the partners' programmes has borne out these overarching assumptions about the role of social and gender norms in driving the problem, as shared beliefs about what is typical and appropriate behaviour for men and women, families, and teenage girls and boys emerged as key drivers in the communities where partners are working.

4.1 Attitudes towards and expectations of girls

A number of clear patterns emerged across all three programmes regarding how beliefs about and expectations of teenage girls drive the problem of teenage pregnancy. The most central of these is the widespread expectation that once girls reach adolescence, they should begin to meet their own material needs as well as help to provide financial support for their family. This belief, which was deeply entrenched across all the project communities, relates to a wider set of norms and behaviours regarding the low value of girls to their families and limited family investment in daughters.

The expectations that girls should fund their own needs, combined with the lack of opportunities for girls to earn money through labour due to norms about what work girls can do, was reported by all partners to be a primary driver of teenage pregnancy – it forces girls to engage in transactional sex to access goods for themselves (notably food, clothes, menstrual hygiene products or transport) or to obtain money or food for their household. For example, IRC staff observed that when they gave girls menstrual hygiene products, this reduced the need of some girls to

engage in transactional sex to access such products. The partners also reported that the norm that teenage girls contribute to family finances resulted in girls being sent out to sell goods through hawking, putting them at risk of sexual harassment, violence or exploitation.

Norms regarding when girls are old enough to have sex were also reported as driving teenage pregnancy across the various communities. Where Save the Children and Concern are working, programme staff reported that girls are understood to be ready to begin sexual relationships once they have undergone the ceremony that initiates them into *Bondo*, the women's secret society. In the Concern community, it was also reported that girls are considered to be ready to engage in sexual relationships once they begin to menstruate. Across all the communities it was widely reported that sex and pregnancy are viewed as proof of maturity and fertility among adolescents, which results in peer pressure to engage in sexual relationships. Interestingly, the root cause analysis that formed part of the Concern programme development process identified that, when girls drop out of school, they enter a 'limbo' state where they are neither children nor adults. For some, work represents the primary conduit to achieve adult status but, for others, childbearing and marriage is the only route to being recognised as an adult (Newbury, 2020).

Another set of beliefs that shape girls' vulnerability to teenage pregnancy across these project communities relate to **ideas about femininity and how women and girls should behave**. In particular, the belief that women should be submissive to men is pervasive, which makes it harder for girls to express their needs, or to resist control or abuse by men. However, the overwhelming perception of adolescent girls across all the project communities appeared to be in sharp contrast to this ideal of submissive femininity. Most community members, girls themselves, and in some cases programme staff, largely perceived adolescent girls as engaging in sex because they are disobedient and greedy for material goods, with pregnancy viewed as an individual moral failure of the pregnant girl and a source of shame. Girls were widely viewed as having much more agency to choose whether to engage in sex or use contraceptives than was in fact the case. For example, a common opinion was that girls should focus on their studies and ignore the advances of men in order to avoid pregnancy, without recognition of the social and economic factors that make this difficult for many girls.

It is important to note that while there were common patterns in terms of attitudes and expectations of girls across and within the project communities, there were

also important and unexpected differences. For example, Save the Children found a significant difference between the urban community in Murray Town, where stigmatising and discriminatory attitudes to girls were more pronounced, compared to the semi-urban community it works with in Waterloo. While the reason for this is unclear, it was suggested that it might relate to the stronger history of NGOs working in the Waterloo area. If this is in fact the reason, it means that sensitisation efforts by NGOs over time are reshaping attitudes to some extent. Meanwhile, although IRC staff found that attitudes towards girls were largely negative, they also found that some adolescent boys displayed far more sympathy towards girls than was typical within the community. These boys recognised that teenage pregnancy is a broader problem that they play a part in creating, rather than just a failing on the part of girls. Such positive deviance in terms of attitudes can be built on for wider norm change, as discussed below.

4.2 Girls' decision-making power

Evidence suggests that girls have limited decision-making power over their lives, and particularly over issues that affect their vulnerability to teenage pregnancy (Denney *et al.*, 2016). All three partner programmes seek to enhance girls' ability to make choices that protect them from pregnancy, with the IRC programme focusing most directly on strengthening girls' decision-making power, specifically within the family. From initial research that IRC undertook to inform its programming (IRC, 2020), it emerged that girls in its project communities tend to have limited decision-making power within the home, but that this varies depending on the issue. For example, girls are given some choice of what school to attend but very little say over whether they continue at school or have to drop out. IRC also found that adolescent girls living with parents have significantly less decision-making autonomy than those living with intimate partners, suggesting that girls living with partners are perhaps viewed as having greater status as an adult.

Decision-making both about when to have sex and whether to use contraception are key issues affecting girls' vulnerability to pregnancy. As discussed above, social norms and economic factors significantly limit girls' ability to choose not to engage in sex. A lot of programming on teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone has focused on enabling girls to make decisions to protect themselves by using contraception. This programming has focused on providing information and access to family planning services without necessarily addressing wider norms and attitudes, and the power imbalances

that limit girls' ability to make independent decisions about contraception.

For example, Save the Children staff reported that a **high level of stigma around contraception use** means that girls are reluctant to get contraceptives from the health centre, where confidentiality is not protected. Instead, girls from these communities prefer to buy contraceptives from informal pedlars, who often sell expired products and are not able to advise on proper use. In the communities where both Save the Children and Concern work, it was reported to be the boyfriend or male partner that generally pays for contraception, giving them decision-making power over whether and when contraception is used. Despite this, however, Save the Children staff reported that there is an entrenched belief that contraceptives are the girls' responsibility and that girls are held responsible for ensuring that a pregnancy does not occur. Meanwhile, IRC reported girls' intimate partners tend to believe that their girlfriend must be promiscuous if she is using contraception. IRC programme staff suggested that an important entry point can be work with intimate partners to explain why girls should have access to contraception and how this is of benefit to both themselves and their girlfriends.

Interestingly, programme staff across the three partner organisations expressed quite different beliefs about the **extent to which girls can exercise agency and make decisions to avoid pregnancy**, particularly in relation to transactional sex. While some programme staff described girls as wilfully choosing to engage in transactional sex because they want a lot of things, others saw girls entirely as victims who are being exploited because of their poverty and lack of power, or as girls exercising one choice among a limited set of poor options. This demonstrates the importance of developing a ToC that is grounded in a realistic understanding of girl's ability to use agency and make choices, of continually checking the validity of assumptions about girls' decision-making that inform programming choices, and ensuring a shared understanding among staff of these issues.

4.3   The role of other actors

Many interventions to address teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone have focused heavily on engaging girls, based on an assumption that girls will be able to make choices to avoid teenage pregnancy if they have sufficient knowledge, confidence and skills (Denney *et al.*, 2016). However, work with girls can only be part of the solution, given the powerful role of other actors in shaping girls' vulnerability to pregnancy.

All three of the partners' ToCs are based on a recognition that effectively tackling the problem of teenage pregnancy involves engaging with a wider set of actors who influence girls' lives and teenage pregnancy outcomes. Concern works with a range of actors in the wider community who influence the problem of teenage pregnancy; IRC works with girls' families to strengthen their decision-making in the household; and Save the Children works to address norms and attitudes among male and female youth. The three programmes have offered some interesting insights about the role of these wider actors in shaping vulnerabilities to teenage pregnancy and how interventions can engage with them.

The range of actors who influence teenage pregnancy outcomes appears to be very broad. As part of its programme design process, Concern and its local partner Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR) developed an 'influencer map' of all those who play a role in shaping the problem of teenage pregnancy. This identifies some actors who are often overlooked by programmes working in this area. For example, it highlights the important role of grandparents and teachers as adults who can potentially support and advise girls, and who can play an influencing role within communities because of their high status as elders or as educated individuals.[4] This 'influencer map' has been used as a basis to develop interventions that will test which of these actors are most important to engage with and how best to do so.

In their initial research to inform programming, both IRC and Concern identified that parents and caregivers are among the most important actors shaping girls' vulnerability to pregnancy. Communication between girls and parents on issues of relationships and sex was found to be very limited and often took the form of telling girls to avoid relationships and instead to focus on their education. However, this message to girls is contradictory to the actual implicit expectations of parents that adolescent girls engage in transactional sexual relationships in order to get resources for the

---

4   It is important to note that although teachers have potential to play a positive role in reducing teenage pregnancy, reports of sexual abuse and sexual coercion of teenage girls by teachers are widespread in Sierra Leone. Any interventions that engage with teachers must take account of this reality.

household, and it is also unrealistic given the limited educational opportunities for girls.

Mothers emerged as particularly important in shaping girls' vulnerability to pregnancy. This is because they can play a key role in providing girls with information and advice on sex and contraception. However, they often do not do this both because mothers themselves often lack information about sex, pregnancy and contraception and because of widespread social taboos about discussing these issues. IRC staff also reported that mothers are often the most likely person to encourage daughters to engage in sexual relationships with men who can offer money for the family, as well as the most likely to encourage early marriage. IRC found that mothers are largely held responsible for their daughter's behaviour and are blamed if their daughters become pregnant.

Fathers are seen as less directly involved with daughters or with the problem of teenage pregnancy. IRC, in particular, found that fathers are largely absent from girls' lives and their main role is in providing discipline, for example forbidding girls to go out at night. They are generally not considered responsible for a daughter's pregnancy in the way that mothers are. However, it became clear in IRC's dialogue sessions with the community that where fathers do not provide sufficient resources to feed the family, this creates an economic pressure on mothers and daughters that can lead to girls engaging in transactional sex or to girls being married off early.

The differing extent to which mothers and fathers are seen as responsible for teenage pregnancy is a result of discriminatory gender norms and beliefs about men's and women's spheres. Overall, it appears that there are high expectations of mothers both from communities and from NGOs and others working on these issues. Mothers are expected to support their daughters and provide them with information about sex and relationships, despite the fact that these women were often girl brides who themselves were given little information, and that they may be caring for many children and managing a heavy workload. It is important that programming engages with this reality, while not further entrenching the belief that girls' welfare and behaviour is the sole responsibility of female caregivers.

IRC identified that **girls' boyfriends and intimate partners are very important actors that are often overlooked in programming on teenage pregnancy.** In IRC programme communities, most of the older teenage girls are not married but live with intimate partners. Programme staff reported that these intimate partners influence girls' decisions more than their parents do, and that work with them can be a potential entry point to support and empower girls. IRC also found that younger teenage boys have an important role to play, both because with support these boys can recognise their potential to be part of the solution to teenage pregnancy and because these boys will grow up to be husbands and fathers themselves with a key role in perpetuating gender norms within the family. IRC staff saw such boys as potential future agents of change, and reported that work with even pre-adolescent boys can be very valuable in changing gender discriminatory attitudes and behaviours.

Grandparents have not generally been considered as actors with relevance to the problem of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone, although their role as influencers in relation to teenage pregnancy has been recognised in other contexts. Staff working on the Concern programme reported that adolescents often have a close relationship to grandparents and confide in them when they have problems. However, it appears that the message grandparents currently give to young people about relationships and sex is often unhelpful, either because it is highly stigmatising, provides inaccurate information on sex and contraception, or encourages transactional sex. The Concern programme will trial working with grandparents to see if they can become a source of useful information and support for girls, given the existing strong relationships they have to granddaughters. Concern also wants to explore how grandparents might engage with parents on issues related to teenage pregnancy and whether they can influence the ways in which parents communicate with their children about these issues.

Religious and traditional leaders emerged across all three programmes as having an important role to play in relation to the problem of teenage pregnancy. These leaders are highly influential in communities and play a central role in perpetuating social and gender norms as their approval or disapproval carries significant weight. The Concern root cause analysis (Newbury, 2020) found that religious leaders generally tell the community that it is immoral to talk to girls about sex, and Concern is keen to work with these leaders to get them to encourage parents to talk to their children about relationships and sex. Meanwhile, research carried out by the youth participants in the Save the Children programme found that Islamic religious leaders stress the need to marry girls young to avoid pregnancy outside marriage, while Christian religious leaders told communities that it is against God's will for girls to use contraception.

Meanwhile **traditional leaders, such as chiefs, were reported across all the projects as playing a very influential role** both in determining outcomes for girls who are pregnant, and in creating impunity for perpetrators of sexual violence towards girls. Programme staff reported that chiefs frequently fail to enforce bylaws related to sexual abuse. They also tend to encourage families to compromise in cases of teenage pregnancy, often resulting in pregnant girls being pushed into early marriage and further childbearing and having their future prospects limited. Chiefs have immense influence within communities and their failure to uphold girls' rights or to enforce bylaws in cases of teenage pregnancy reinforces norms about the acceptability of men having sex with young girls and of teenage pregnancy and marriage.

The other traditional actors that were reported as having relevance to the problem of teenage pregnancy are *Soweis*,[5] who shape community attitudes about when girls are mature enough for sex and marriage, including through initiation, although little detail emerged on how this happens. The Concern programme is seeking to engage with *Soweis*, with the aim of having an open discussion about the role of this institution in girls' transition to womanhood. Concern programme staff reported that even though the participating *Soweis* disagree with the messages of the adaptive research programme, they continue to participate in the discussion sessions.

4.4 Beliefs about different kinds of sexual relationships

From the initial research that each of the partners undertook to inform their programming, and from the observations of staff working on these three programmes, it appears that **'transactional' sex is the main driver of teenage pregnancy in their communities.** Indeed, some partner staff stressed that the levels of transactional sex and widespread community acceptance of it was far higher than expected. One Save the Children staff member commented that 'girls expect to do this and communities expect them to do so, making it harder to chip away at'.[6] However, it is important to break down this concept of transactional sex to understand the different types of relationships and transactions that adolescent girls are involved in.

The root cause analysis undertaken by Concern (Newbury, 2020) found that all **romantic or sexual relationships that adolescent girls are involved in are described as boyfriend/girlfriend or love relationships** and are assumed to involve sex. Within these boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, it is expected that the man will give the girl money and gifts, which is seen as a sign of the seriousness of the relationship, and that the characteristic that girls most look for in a partner is the ability and commitment to provide them with ongoing support. So, within such relationships, there is both an element of romantic commitment and of economic transaction that are highly interlinked and are considered normal and acceptable. Indeed, this transactional nature of boyfriend–girlfriend relationships mirrors, to some extent, the transactional exchange within concepts of marriage itself in Sierra Leone (Denney *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, understanding how these relationships operate and how they are perceived is important for developing interventions that can meaningfully support girls to make choices about relationships, sex and contraception.

In addition to these transactional romantic relationships, all the programmes reported that girls also engage in more **overt transactional sex in order to meet basic needs.**[7] For example, Save the Children reported that girls who are sent to fetch water may be forced to exchange sex for water with the man who controls the local water source; IRC reported that girls who face a very long walk to school each day may exchange sex for transport with *Okada* (motorbike taxi) riders; and Concern reported girls from poor households may exchange sex for a fish from local fisherman. It seems that this more overtly transactional sex is generally disapproved of and viewed as quite different from a transactional boyfriend–girlfriend relationship. However, while the girls engaging in such transactions face a high level of stigma, the men do not. Indeed, the youth-led research that was part of the Save the Children project found that only overt sexual violence is recognised as abuse by the communities in which Save the Children is working, while any other type of sexual exploitation or coercion by adult men towards girls is largely seen as normal and acceptable (BDO, 2020).

---

5   *Soweis* are powerful women who hold a traditional role within women's secret societies (*Bondo*) and who are responsible for girls' initiation into these societies, including through performing FGM.

6   Interview with Save the Children staff member, 1 December 2020.

7   There is a significant body of literature that details the varied nature of transactional sex. See, for example, Formson and Hilhorst (2016).

5 Learning about how norm change happens

Evidence suggests that social norms can change slowly or relatively rapidly, and that this change is often messy with old norms existing alongside new ones for some time (Heise and Manji, 2016). It also suggests that norm change can be both top-down (e.g. driven by economic development, new laws and policies, new ideas from the media, etc.) or bottom-up (e.g., when groups and individuals see some norms as problematic and act to change them). It is this bottom-up process of norm change that the three partners' projects are mainly seeking to support. Such bottom-up norm change requires fostering new beliefs about what is typical and appropriate behaviour – for example, creating a belief that adult men having sex with adolescent girls is not normal, but instead it is inappropriate and a source of social disapproval and shame.

Norms shift when enough people can be persuaded to try out new behaviours and this, in turn, affects others' beliefs about what is typical and appropriate (Alexander-Scott *et al.,* 2016; Marcus and Harper, 2014). Hence, key elements of successful programming for norm change include identifying the reference groups whose opinions matter most on a particular issue, finding early adopters of new norms and making their behaviour visible to others, providing opportunities for people to practice new behaviour and creating new rewards and sanctions, facilitating public debate on what people do or should do, working with role models and leaders who play an important role in shaping norms, and using change agents to reach out to others beyond the programme (Care International, n.d.). The three programmes are seeking to employ a number of these strategies to support norm change in their communities, and have provided some interesting learning about how norm change can be supported and the challenges faced in trying to do this.

5.1 Building on norms in flux and positive deviance

As mentioned earlier, it appears that norms related to gender and sex are in flux in Sierra Leone, with traditional norms existing alongside newer attitudes (Branksy *et al.*, 2017). For example, traditional ideas about the value of early marriage sit alongside newer ideas about the importance of girls remaining in education. Learning from these projects supports this evidence, as all partners found more progressive attitudes and behaviours about these issues alongside more traditional ones.

Staff from all three partners reported that a notable change is the extent to which **communities recognise teenage pregnancy as a problem and will discuss it with an openness that would have been impossible some years ago**. For example, the root cause analysis undertaken by Concern found that parents are willing to talk about the issue of teenage sex, although they will generally not admit that their own teenagers are having sex (Newbury, 2020), while Save programme staff reported that their communities widely accept the need for an intervention on teenage pregnancy. This appears to be partly due to a history of NGO activity in some communities, as well as an increasingly supportive policy environment and awareness-raising at national level.[8] While many of the norms and behaviours that drive teenage pregnancy are still very much in place, programme staff reported that this increased recognition of the problem and willingness to talk about it have made it easier for their programmes to engage communities, as there is less effort needed in making the case for change. They hope that it will make their interventions more sustainable too, because the community is already convinced of the seriousness of the problem.

There also seems to be a limited **shift underway in some of these communities regarding the value placed on girls**. IRC staff reported that parents are more aware of the value of education for their daughters than was previously the case and that more girls are going to school. During the dialogue sessions that IRC facilitated with men and women about household dynamics, some men reported that they see the value in supporting their daughters, although it is unclear whether such statements are linked to actual behaviour change. IRC staff were also surprised to find that some boys are much more concerned about the problem of teenage pregnancy than they had expected and want to support girls to address this problem, although the solutions that boys proposed were themselves problematic as they involved boys 'policing' girls' behaviour. In order to build on this unexpected engagement from boys, IRC has added a component for boys to their programming.

Some of the programmes have identified examples of **positive deviance, where certain people are behaving in positive ways that are outside the 'normal' behaviours of the community.** Such positive deviance can be built

upon to foster norm change, including by making this behaviour and the positive impacts of it visible to the rest of the community, by identifying the factors that enable such positive behaviour and seeking to foster these more widely, and by encouraging and supporting others to adopt such behaviour.

For example, IRC staff reported that some mothers' behaviour is not in line with mainstream norms and attitudes about teenage girls. These mothers have kept their pregnant daughters living with them rather than sending them to live with the baby's father and have looked after their daughter's baby so she can return to school. These women are breaking with existing norms by recognising that pregnant teenage girls are still children and enabling them to continue living as a child, rather than pushing them into the role of an adult wife because they have become pregnant. IRC staff reported that these mothers are acting in this way because they believe that girls' life chances will be better if they are able to finish school, which indicates that perceptions about the value of girls and about opportunities and life paths for girls may be shifting. More information is needed about what has made it possible for these mothers to act in this way, so that the enabling conditions can be spread to others in the community.

Meanwhile, CDHR staff reported that some individuals are increasingly speaking out about the problem of gender-based violence (GBV), including reporting cases and supporting survivors, and that this is a new behaviour in these communities, where GBV is widely viewed as a private issue and is not spoken about publicly. They also reported finding some religious leaders who are sympathetic to the problem of teenage pregnancy and want to help solve it, as well some men within the community who are vocal in support of women's rights. CDHR staff recognised that, where positive deviants are powerful men within the community, they can have significant influence in shifting norms and attitudes of others, and want to work with these people to help achieve the programme's goals.

Save programme staff reported that their youth groups have had some success in getting religious leaders to adopt their message and set a more positive example. They reported that an Imam who they have been working with in their Murray town site, and who had initially

---

8   Over the last two years the policy environment has evolved significantly, including a State of Emergency on Sexual violence pronounced by the President; the review and amendment of the Sexual Offences Act; the lifting of a ban on pregnant girls' access to education; the launch of a toll-free number, six new sexual assault referral centres and a sexual offences court; and the 'Hands off our girls' initiative championed by the First Lady.

been resistant to their programme, is now encouraging parents to talk to children about issues related to teenage pregnancy. Likewise, religious leaders at their Waterloo site have requested a training session just for themselves, in order to include some content about these issues in their sermons.

5.2 Strategies to support the development of alternative norms

All three programmes seek to support the development of more positive norms related to gender roles and sexual relationships that can to help address the problem of teenage pregnancy. Changes in social norms tend to be relatively slow, non-linear and are driven by multiple factors, and it would therefore be impossible to identify any evidence of norm change as a result of these specific programmes, particularly as they are all at early stages. However, the programmes do offer some tentative evidence on what strategies may be useful in encouraging people to discuss the norms that drive teenage pregnancy, to examine how these norms influence their own behaviours, and to reflect on ways in which they might challenge or change these behaviours.

IRC staff reported that some of their interventions have **prompted community members to discuss the impact that certain behaviours have on women and girls and how these behaviours might be changed.** Among the strategies that IRC staff identified as most promising is bringing together women from the Women's Action Group (WAG) with their spouses to discuss how to manage their households. This includes talking about concrete ways in which men can change their behaviour to be more supportive of women and girls, for example helping them to carry loads back from the farm or allocating resources more equally at harvest time. IRC staff also reported that the organisation's Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (EMAP) programmes are encouraging men and boys to think differently about girls and pregnancy, with some boys demonstrating more awareness of the problem of teenage pregnancy and more interest in supporting girlfriends to use contraception. They reportedly talk to their peers about these issues too. For IRC's EMAP sessions with men, key issues that emerged within women's discussion groups were fed into these, giving men an insight into the concerns of women and encouraging them to discuss how to address these within this men-only space.

However, it is important to note that while IRC staff reported these changes, they also recognised that it will be difficult to assess whether such changes are contributing to their overall goal of enhancing girls' decision-making. In particular, some IRC staff suggested they need to further develop their ToC to map out potential pathways of change and understand how they might monitor the contribution of their programme to any such change. One IRC staff member commented, 'we are doing all different things to empower girls, but have not focused enough on how we will know if this is helping girls to make informed choices and decisions'.[9]

Save the Children staff observed that, while actual programme activities were only just beginning, the process of working with the youth champions and supporting them to conduct research in their communities has already had an impact on some individuals involved. Girls within the youth champion groups were reported to be gaining confidence and speaking out more. In some cases, they are also being perceived differently by family members because of their 'public' role as a youth champion. For example, staff reported the case of one female youth champion who was responsible for taking notes during a meeting with community members at which her father was a participant. Her father reported being both surprised and proud to see his daughter in this public and responsible role. However, this impact was not consistent, as there were some girls involved in Save the Children's programming at the start that themselves became pregnant and ceased participating.

5.3 Managing resistance

Endeavours to change norms will often face resistance or backlash, as these can be viewed as an attack on values, traditions and interests. Efforts to challenge and change gender norms – as the partners are seeking to do – are particularly sensitive, as they can be seen as a confrontation with religious beliefs and cultural values about roles of men and women, and a threat to the power and status of men (Marcus and Harper, 2015). Evidence suggests that **reducing backlash requires focusing more on promoting new positive norms and behaviours rather than criticising old harmful norms, emphasising what can be gained from the new norms, and engaging with all sections of a community, including resisters.** All three partner programmes are largely using these strategies.

---

9   Interview with IRC staff member, 30 November 2020.

Interestingly, none of the programmes faced much overt resistance regarding the need to work on teenage pregnancy in these communities. Although CDHR did report that some religious leaders feel it is immoral to discuss these issues, while a few individuals in the community were vocal about their opposition to gender equality principles.

What did emerge, for both IRC and Concern, was resistance to the programme from more powerful community members because it did not benefit them personally, and particularly because the programmes are intended to benefit girls. IRC staff reported some local leaders saying that the programme is just meant for girls and is of no value to the community as a whole, as well as asking IRC to pay *per diems* for workshop attendance rather than just provide refreshments. Likewise, both men and boys within IRC's programme communities expressed frustration that so much attention was being given to girls and complained that there were less activities for them. IRC developed an activity for boys partly in response to this demand.

Save the Children staff reported that communities are not overtly resistant to their teenage pregnancy programme, in large part because of the benefits and resources that they believe could come from having Save the Children present in their community. However, these staff recognised that meaningful engagement may well be limited, with individuals 'going along' with activities to gain the benefits of participation (refreshments, status, stipends, etc.), but not really intending to change their behaviour. Save the Children staff did report that there is very clear community resistance to discussing *Bondo*, however, and that conversations on this topic were difficult and reveal a clear gap between the approach of

the programme and attitudes of community members (although it is important to note that by its very nature, this secret society is not to be spoken about in public or with those who have not been initiated).

Inevitably, harmful social norms, such as those that fuel teenage pregnancy, are likely to be shared by staff working on these programmes and will shape the way that these staff engage with communities on these issues. Addressing staff beliefs and attitudes should be part of any social norm intervention, although this was not specifically included within the three partner programmes.

Some senior managers within the partner organisations recognised that programme staff may share discriminatory gender norms, that this impacts the delivery of programmes, and that this is not something that can simply be overcome with training. For example, a number of programme staff from across all the programmes expressed beliefs that girls 'run after men for money', use any unsupervised time to engage in sexual relationships, and need to be better 'controlled' by their parents. This is unsurprising given that such beliefs are commonly held and are reinforced by the dominant social and gender norms within Sierra Leone. However, it also shows the complexity of seeking to support meaningful norm change, and particularly the need to go beyond training, information provision or discussion, in which people may agree with the information they receive but without this producing any shift in their attitudes or behaviour. Indeed, the prevalence of discriminatory attitudes among some staff, many of whom will have participated in various gender trainings, demonstrates the challenge of really shifting norms and the fact that this is a long-term project that involves supporting and encouraging people to try out and model new behaviours.

6 Conclusion

While these three programmes are still in relatively early stages of implementation, they have already thrown up interesting learning about the way in which social norms drive teenage pregnancy within the communities in which they work. This learning largely reflects the existing evidence base on teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone, for example around negative attitudes towards girls, limits to girls' decision-making power, the importance of other actors and the transactional nature of many sexual relationships. However, learning from the programmes also adds important context-specific details and nuances to this evidence base – for example, regarding the extent to which families and communities expect girls to engage in transactional sex, the potential influence of less directly involved actors such as grandparents or the differences in decision-making power between girls living with parents or partners.

The programmes have also offered interesting learning about the types of changes that are currently taking place within communities and which can be entry points for programming. This includes the ways in which norms related to gender roles and teenage girls are already shifting and how some people are acting as positive deviants. Likewise, they have provided insights about the types of resistance that can be faced in programming for gender norm change. As these programmes develop – and as they trial different strategies and learn from these – there is potential for them to develop valuable evidence about 'what works' in building on these entry points to support norm change, as well as 'what works' in addressing and overcoming resistance. Ensuring that such learning continues to be captured from the programmes will be critical to building this evidence base.

References

Alexander-Scott, M., Bell, E. and Holden, J. (2016) *Shifting social norms to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG)*. DFID Guidance Note. London: UK Department for International Development (https://assets. publishing.service.gov.uk/ government/uploads/system/ uploads/attachment_data/ file/507845/Shifting-Social-Norms-tackle-Violence-against-Women-Girls3.pdf).

BDO (2020) Research on the gender and social norms that influence teenage pregnancy and sexual reproductive health rights. Freetown: BDO.

Bransky, R., Enoch, J. and Long, C. (2017) *Child Marriage in Sierra Leone and Guinea: cultural roots and girl centred solutions*. Freetown: Purposeful Productions.

Buell, S., Bash-Taqi, R., Castillejo, C., Denney, L., Fraser, T., Kamara, M. and Koroma, H. (2021) 'Bridging evidence and practice: learning from an SLRC action research project in Sierra Leone'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (https://securelivelihoods.org/ publication/bridging-evidence-and-practice-learning-from-an-slrc-action-research-project/).

Buell, S. and Castillejo, C. (2020) 'Adapting through Covid-19: lessons from teenage pregnancy programmes in Sierra Leone'. Briefing Paper 34. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/SLRC-Covid19-BP-Sep20-Proof07.pdf).

Care International (n.d.) 'Promising practices: social norm change'. Gender in Practice Series. London: Care International (https://genderinpractice.care.org/ promising-practices/social-norms-change).

Castillejo C. (2018) 'Teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone: priorities for a future research agenda'. SLRC Briefing Paper 28. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (https://securelivelihoods.org/ wp-content/uploads/Teenage-pregnancy-in-Sierra-Leone-briefing-website.pdf).

De Koning, K., Jalloh-Vos, H., Kok, M., Jalloh, A.M. and Herschderfer, K. (2013) *Realities of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers (https://www.kit.nl/wp-content/ uploads/2018/08/2086_sierra-leone_web.pdf).

Denney, L., Bash-Taqi, R., Buell, S. Castillejo, C., Fraser, T., Kamara, M. and Koroma, H. (2021) 'What it takes to work adaptively: learning from an SLRC action research project in Sierra Leone'. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (https://securelivelihoods.org/ publication/what-it-takes-to-work-adaptively-learning-from-an-slrc-action-research-project/).

Denney, L., Gordon, R. and Ibrahim, A. (2015) *Teenage pregnancy after Ebola in Sierra Leone: mapping responses, gaps and ongoing challenges*. Working Paper 39. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (https://securelivelihoods.org/ wp-content/uploads/Teenage-Pregnancies-after-Ebola-in-SierraLeone_-Mapping-responses-gaps-and-ongoing-challenges.pdf).

Denney, L., Gordon, R., Kamara, A. and Lebby, P. (2016) *Change the context not the girls: improving efforts to reduce teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone*. Report 11. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (https://securelivelihoods.org/ wp-content/uploads/RR11_Change-the-context-not-the-girls_Improving-efforts-to-reduce-teenage-pregnancy-in-Sierra-Leone.pdf).

Formson, C. and Hilhorst, D. (2016) *The many faces of transactional sex: women's agency, livelihoods and risk factors in humanitarian contexts: a literature review*. Working Paper 41. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (https://securelivelihoods. org/wp-content/uploads/The-many-faces-of-transactional-sex_Women%E2%80%99s-agency-livelihoods-and-risk-factors-in-humanitarian-contexts_A-Literature-Review.pdf).

Government of Sierra Leone (2018) *National strategy for the reduction of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage 2018–2022*. Freetown: UNFPA Sierra Leone (https://sierraleone.unfpa.org/sites/ default/files/pub-pdf/National%20 Strategy%20for%20the%20 reduction%20of%20Adolescent%20 Pregnancy_final_Oct%202.pdf).

Heise, L. and Manji, K. (2016) 'Social norms'. GSDRC Professional Development Reading Pack no. 31. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham (https://assets. publishing.service.gov.uk/ media/597f335640f0b61e 48000023/Social-Norms_RP.pdf).

IRC – International Rescue Committee- (2020) *Report on phase 1 research for the Adolescent Girls Empowerment and Protection Project adaptive programming component*. Freetown: International Rescue Committee.

Marcus, R. and Harper, C. (2014) *Gender justice and social norms – processes of change for adolescent girls*. London: Overseas Development Institute (https://odi.org/en/publications/ gender-justice-and-social-norms-processes-of-change-for-adolescent-girls/).

Marcus, R. and Harper, C. (2015) 'How do gender norms change?'. Research and Practice Note. London: Overseas Development Institute (https://cdn.odi.org/media/ documents/9817.pdf).

Newbury. E, (2020) *Beyond the girls: a root cause analysis of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone*. Freetown, Sierra Leone: Concern Worldwide.

Presler-Marshall, E. and Jones, N. (2012) *Charting the future: Empowering girls to prevent early pregnancy*. London: Overseas Development Institute and Save the Children (https://cdn.odi.org/media/ documents/7724.pdf).

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund (2015) Child marriage, Adolescent pregnancy and Family formation in West and Central Africa. Dakar, Senegal: UNICEF West and Central Africa Regional Office (https://www.unicef.org/wca/ media/1171/file/English%20PDF. pdf).

Annex:
Interview list

Regina Bash-Taqi, Senior Action Researcher, London, United Kingdom, 10 December 2020

Sarah Cundy, Concern Worldwide, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 25 November 2020

Sarata Daramy, Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, Port Loko, Sierra Leone, 1 December 2020

De Evans, Save the Children, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1 December 2020

Tania Fraser, Senior Action Researcher, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 8 December 2020

Janette Garber, International Rescue Committee, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 30 November 2020

Jenny Hutain, formerly Concern Worldwide, USA, 9 December 2020

Nafisatu Jalloh, Irish Aid, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 8 December 2020

Moses Kamara, Save the Children, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 2 December 2020

Muallem Kamara, Junior Action Researcher, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 2 December 2020

Henrietta Koroma, Junior Action Researcher, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 30 November 2020

Anni Lehto, Concern Worldwide, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 26 November 2020

Samuel Mokuwa, International Rescue Committee, Bo, Sierra Leone, 25 November 2020

Mary O'Neill, Irish Aid, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 8 December 2020

Jeremiah Sawyer, Save the Children, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 10 December 2020

Elizabeth Tucker, International Rescue Committee, Bo, Sierra Leone, 11 December 2020

Rosa Vandi, International Rescue Committee, Bo, Sierra Leone, 30 November 2020