



SIERRA LEONE: GENDER EQUALITY A FOCAL POINT AS THE COUNTRY SEEKS TO STRENGTHEN EDUCATION SERVICE DELIVERY AND RELEVANCE TO THE LABOUR MARKET



An Education Sector Analysis conducted jointly by the Government of Sierra Leone and IIEP-UNESCO Dakar, offering a comprehensive picture of the sector, aims to inform discussions between all stakeholders on policy and operational interventions to improve education service delivery and relevance to the labour market.

Some of the findings are disturbing. Only 5% of the poorest rural girls finish secondary school in comparison to 68% of the richest urban boys. The probability of a girl completing senior secondary is estimated at 29% and only some 5% of them go on to achieve tertiary education.

This notwithstanding, the good news is that the country has not only made huge progress, but there is also strong political will to make education even more inclusive, and not only for girls.

Despite many challenges, both economic and social, the government has made a strong commitment to education, supporting programmes that have seen a growth in enrolment, especially at the basic and senior secondary levels.

The introduction of the flagship Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme in 2018, and the sector's prominent role in the Medium-term National Development Plan 2019-2023, highlights the importance the government places on human capital development.

A new direction

The education system in Sierra Leone has registered considerable progress in recent years. In the same period, it has faced and continues to face many challenges. The system had barely recovered from a decade-long civil war, which ended in 2002, when the country was gripped by an Ebola virus epidemic from 2014 to 2016, both of which had a serious impact on education.

One of the first steps taken in 2018 by the "New Direction" administration upon election was to introduce the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme that provides free education in government-approved basic and senior secondary schools. Although this has been a positive step, the increased enrolment brings new challenges, and much remains to be done to ensure learning is taking place, with gender equity being one of the top priorities.

The triple whammy of poverty, location and gender

While the area a child lives in and their family's socio-economic status have a huge impact on access to education, this effect is amplified for girls. The parity index shows that for every 100 rich urban boys, 81 poor rural girls access primary education. But only eight of the girls reach the end of senior secondary level.

Adolescent pregnancies and child, early and forced marriages (CEFM) are two of the biggest reasons why girls drop out of school at secondary level. Moreover, most at risk are girls who come from poor households or rural areas. However, the recent abolition of a policy that barred pregnant girls from attending school is a positive step. Efforts are also being made to increase access to toilets for menstruating girls, a factor that also reduces attendance, and to combat gender-based violence at schools.

Efforts towards retention in school, in particular of adolescent girls, has to be one of the top priorities in Sierra Leone. However, addressing gender inequalities, which are the result of deeply entrenched traditional norms, values and attitudes, is part of a long-term struggle, and changes in the education sector alone will not be enough.

Financial burden for households

Despite the introduction of the FQSE, household spending on education remains significant and is unlikely to change, as it does not cover items such as uniforms, shoes and learning materials. In fact, families spend more on their children's education than government at all levels, except for higher education.

While universal primary school education is not yet achieved, focus seems to be moving to higher levels of education. Government spending on a university student is 4 times higher than the average spent on a TVET trainee, and 18 times higher than on a primary learner.

Although 20% of its discretionary spending in 2019 went towards education, most of this was spent on salaries and school grants. The low level of capital investment on items such as new classrooms and desks, for example, raises questions about the impact this will have on the effective implementation of the FQSE, which is presently dealing with a surge in enrolments.

Qualified teacher deficit

Another area of concern is the need to improve the quality of education. National exams pass rates are very low, with less than half of candidates passing the Basic Education Certificate at the end of junior secondary levels, and only 6% of students taking the West African Senior School Certificate Examination meeting the minimum requirements for access to university.

This very poor learning achievement is probably related to the combination of a low effective teaching time, the fact that many teachers are unqualified, with this number reaching 60% at senior secondary level, the uneven distribution of qualified teachers across schools, and the failure to use textbooks in the classroom.

Skills deficit impacted by curriculum relevance

Going forward, a major challenge facing the government is to improve the quality of education at both school and tertiary level and to make it more relevant to the needs of society and the skills requirements of the modern world.

In 2019, less than one out of ten students passed the WASSCE exam taken at the end of senior secondary, raising important questions about the skills and knowledge they acquired at school.

However, the number of students enrolling in higher education is increasing, but there is a need to modify curricula to meet labour market demands. A 2020 survey found that only 40% of TVET institutions offer programmes that are relevant to economic demands, despite the fact that this is central to youth employability and labour market integration.

And although there have been many positive changes in recent years, much remains to be done in terms of increasing geographical, financial and gender equality in access to quality education. Improving education remains crucial for Sierra Leone as it moves to strengthen its economy and build a better and more equitable future for its entire people.

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