

# Creative Strategies and Spaces of Protection and Empowerment for Young Women in Sierra Leone

By

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Photo credit: Femme Collective

## Abstract

Sierra Leone has some of the highest rates of female genital mutilation/cutting, sexual and gender-based violence, child marriages, and teenage pregnancies in the world (Save the Children, 2020). While there are many academic articles and policy reports describing these issues, few exclusively center the perspectives and experiences of young Sierra Leonean women around topics on sexual and reproductive health. This study highlights creative strategies young women in Sierra Leone are adopting to navigate and address physical, mental, and cultural obstacles they encounter during their transitions to adulthood.

# Background

- Sierra Leone has the 19th highest child marriage rate globally, with 13% of girls married by the age of 15 and 39% by the age of 18. One out of every three girls between the age of 15-19 is either pregnant or has had a child (Save the Children, 2020)
- Across Sierra Leone, girls have less access to learning opportunities, and they are more likely to drop out of school.
- According to Save The Children, persistent gender gaps exist at all levels of education; 68% of boys complete primary school versus 55% of girls, and 47% of boys complete lower secondary level versus only 29% of girls. Five out every ten girls 15-24 years old are illiterate, compared to three out of ten boys.



Source: UNICEF Sierra Leone

# Methodology

- This study draws from scholarly articles, reports, formal and informal conversations, and popular works by intergenerational, interdisciplinary Sierra Leonean female scholars and practitioners in the fields of education, public health, politics, grassroots activism, and digital media and communications to capture the diverse range of challenges and opportunities facing young women in urban and rural communities across Sierra Leone.
- I conduct a content analysis of the following radio interviews, podcasts, videos, and social media posts:
  - Radio interview on sexual and reproductive health with Dr. Aisha Fofana Ibrahim on 91.8 FM on October 2, 2020
  - Podcast on women's political participation in Sierra Leone by Dr. Aisha Fofana Ibrahim
  - *The Vickie Remoe Show* episode on teen mothers at the Peaggie Woobay Scholarship Fund in Moyamba
  - Facebook and Twitter posts by *Femme Collective*, an NGO in Sierra Leone that seeks to promote women's voices, rights and activities.

**JACK AND THE Feminist**  
by *Femme* COLLECTIVE  
ON AIR 98.1  
TOPIC: "Let's talk about sex <sup>and</sup> baby"  
GUEST: Dr. Aisha Fofana Ibrahim  
HOST: Ebinoluwa, Femme Collective  
GUEST: Tania Fraser  
2<sup>nd</sup> October, 2020  
5:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m. **girls+**  
Also join us on Facebook live: Radio Democracy 98.1



# Results

- Preliminary findings suggest that young women as well as young men in Sierra Leone are increasingly engaging in public conversations around sexual and reproductive health and sexual and gender-based violence and that digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Zoom are important spaces of protection, community, and empowerment for young people across the country.
- Some key issues that are discussed on these platforms include: birth control and contraceptives, gender and sexual-based violence, education, and employment



Host, Vickie Remoe, interviewing three teen mothers who are beneficiaries of the Peaggie Woobay Scholarship Fund in Moyamba. Visit <https://www.facebook.com/TheVickieShow> for the full interview.

# Discussion

- Digital platforms are important spaces for young people in Sierra Leone to engage in issues of sexual and reproductive health and gender empowerment.
- Yet, only about 13% of Sierra Leone's population, mostly urban, has access to broadband and mobile internet (SALCAB, 2018).
- These insights call for greater investments in electricity, broadband, and mobile internet services to help more youth connect with these digital communities.
- In addition, there needs to be increased funding to support local youth-led programs addressing issues of gender equality.



Photo credit: Femme Collective

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## References

Femme Collective Facebook page: [https://www.facebook.com/femmecollectiveSL/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/femmecollectiveSL/?ref=page_internal)

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Remoe, V. (2020). No Innocence, No Childhood – New Pathways to Safeguard Girl Moms in Sierra Leone. Save the Children: Freetown.

The Vickie Remoe Show Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/TheVickieShow>