

Child Marriage Evidence Profiles

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SIERRA
LEONE

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BACKGROUND

Home to one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, the evidence on child marriage in Sierra Leone is extremely limited and draws mostly from multi-country, regional studies rather than in-depth country analyses. While child marriage has declined in Sierra Leone (2006-2016), little is known about the drivers of this changing prevalence across various populations within the country.

THE ROLE OF STAR INITIATIVE:

Through the Strategic Technical Assistance for Research (STAR) Initiative to end harmful practices, UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti aims to strengthen research in countries supported by the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage and the Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation. The STAR Initiative focuses on evidence generation, synthesis and uptake.

EVIDENCE OVERVIEW

The existing body of research on child marriage in Sierra Leone centres around the following common themes and sources for the gathering of data.

Use of cross-sectional DHS data

Much of what we know about the prevalence and trends of child marriage in Sierra Leone and its associated outcomes, comes from cross-sectional demographic and health survey data from Sierra Leone and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Given the cultural specificity of child marriage, there is a need for more country-specific studies focused on Sierra Leone.

Forced marriage in armed conflict contexts

The recognition of forced marriage as a crime against humanity by the Appeals Chamber of the Special Court for Sierra Leone spurred research attention particularly from legal scholars¹. These studies examine the definitions of forced marriage, its overlap with other practices such as sexual slavery, and the legal implications for child brides.

Insights from regional evidence on adolescent pregnancy

Data on this area offers relevant insight into the context of the lives of girls in Sierra Leone. A report² based on intensive fieldwork conducted by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) examines the available programming in the country that aims to reduce teenage pregnancy including child-friendly spaces, life skills training, peer education, and awareness raising and sensitization to name a few.

This research series, prepared by the UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, in collaboration with the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, presents an overview of the research on child marriage in select countries.





Delprato 2017 found that delaying age of marriage for younger girls aged 10-14 can lead to considerable gains in health care utilization and child health including an increase in maternal vaccinations, in the likelihood of postnatal checks, the number of antenatal visits, and the likelihood of having a skilled birth attendant.



Efevbera et al. 2017 established girl child marriage as a risk factor for early childhood development and stunting.



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GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Health

While the existing evidence offers some insight into health interventions aimed at adolescent girls, greater attention to interventions beyond maternal and reproductive health care are needed particularly around the issues of mental health and violence.

Violence prevention, health and safety

Addressing violence experienced by married girls is another area of research and programmatic neglect. A greater understanding of the needs of married

girls and how best to respond to them, and effective interventions that address these can provide insights into the marital relationship including power dynamics which influence key health and social outcomes such as use of family planning, mental health, safety, etc. Greater attention to response services for married girls including those addressing the issues of mental health and violence prevention is needed.

Gender norms and economic livelihoods

There is currently a dearth of evidence on interventions addressing norms and/or the economic livelihoods of girls and their families. The evidence on the effectiveness of these interventions is well-established in other African countries³ highlighting the opportunity for cross-country learning and adaptation.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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For a detailed description of the Global Programme in Sierra Leone and results, refer to the [Sierra Leone country profile](#).

- 1 Park, A. S. J. (2006) "Other Inhumane Acts": Forced Marriage, Girl Soldiers and the Special Court for Sierra Leone', *Social & Legal Studies*, 15(3), pp. 315-337. doi: [10.1177/0964663906066611](https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663906066611); Jain, N. (2008) "Forced Marriage as a Crime against Humanity: Problems of Definition and Prosecution," *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 6(5), pp. 1013-1032. doi: [10.1093/jicj/mqn064](https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mqn064); Oosterveld, V., 2011. Forced marriage and the special court for Sierra Leone: legal advances and conceptual difficulties. *Journal of International Humanitarian Law Studies*, 2(1), pp.127-158.
- 2 Secure Livelihoods report 2015, <https://securelivelihoods.org/wp-content/uploads/SLRC-SierraLeone-SocialNormsTeenagePregnancy-BN-Apr21-Proof05.pdf>
- 3 For example of the Berhane Hewan, a cash and asset transfer programme in Ethiopia, see <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/ForcedMarriage/NGO/PopulationCouncil8.pdf>