



Sierra Leone Deep Dive Report

Getting to parity: Sierra Leone's Journey
Towards Closing the Gender Gap

May 2022

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ACRONYMS

APC	All-People's Congress
BECE	Basic Education Certificate
BIAWE	Business Incubator for African Women Entrepreneurship
CAGR	Compound Annual Growth Rate
CSO	Civil Society Organization
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FHC	Free Health Care
FINESL	Fambul Initiative Network for Equality Sierra Leone
FQEP	Free Quality Education Program
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEWE	Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
GII	Gender Inequality Index
GPS	Gender Parity Scores
HCD	Human Capital Development
MDAs	Ministries, Departments and Agencies
MMR	Maternal mortality ratio
MOGCA	Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs
MPs	Members of Parliament
NaC-GBV	National Committee on Gender Based Violence
NCTVA	National Council for Technical Vocational and Other Academic Awards
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NHSSP	National Health Sector Strategic Plan
NPSE	National Primary School Education
RMNCAH	Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health Strategy
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SLIHS	Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
SSA	Sub-Saharan African
STEAM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Agriculture, and Mathematics
TFP	Technical and Financial Partners
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
WASSCE	West Africa Secondary School Certificate of Education
WELD	Women Empowered for Leadership and Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sierra Leone has significantly improved women and girls' access to health and education by introducing inclusive policies. While still one of the highest in the ECOWAS region, the country has been able to reduce its maternal mortality rate from 1,120 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2016 to 916.25 in 2020, through the implementation of ambitious initiatives over the past decade. Indeed, the government of Sierra Leone, with the support of its technical and financial partners, deployed the Free Health Care (FHC) program in 2010 as well as the National Ambulance Service in the country's 14 districts to improve access to health services, especially maternal healthcare. The country has also taken drastic legal measures to prevent and combat harmful practices against women, particularly sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), which is prevalent as it affects nearly 2 out of 3 adult women (61%); in this context, the president of Sierra Leone officially declared a national emergency on rape and sexual violence in 2019. Improvements in access to basic health services were achieved in parallel with improving girls access to basic education. Sierra Leone has rapidly achieved gender parity in primary school enrollment (gender parity score of 1.03), tertiary enrollment (1.01) and is close to bridging the gap in secondary school enrollment (0.98) through the introduction of the Free Quality Education Program (FQEP) in 2018, allowing thousands of students, especially girls, to continue or resume their education.

Despite this, Sierra Leonean women have limited access to the productive resources needed to capitalize on their newly acquired human capital and power to weigh into the political discourse. Only 12.87% of women have an account with a financial institution or mobile money service provider in Sierra Leone, compared to 19.50% of their male counterparts (i.e., a gender parity score of 0.66, below the regional average of 0.68), which makes them more financially excluded. In addition, women's lower access to property ownership (19% of men are the sole owners of a house vs 5% of women), makes it more difficult for them to collateralize their loans with banks. These factors result in gender inequalities in business ownership and income; Sierra Leonean women earn on average three-quarters of the estimated income of men, resulting in a parity score of 0.74. Women's limited economic empowerment also translates into the political sphere. They often have little knowledge of their political rights and processes, which is a significant barrier to higher female representation in senior political office. As a result, women hold 12.32% of the seats in Parliament and 13.79% of the ministerial positions in the President's cabinet, well below the regional averages of 16.19% and 19.39% respectively.

While Sierra Leone is on track to fully close the gender parity gap in health and education by 2030, additional efforts will be needed to empower women economically and politically. Sierra Leone's experience in its journey towards gender parity has generated insightful lessons to be considered in future initiatives across ECOWAS member states. In addition, recommendations emerge to address remaining barriers to full gender parity such as (i) intensifying awareness messages to deconstruct gender stereotypes; (ii) building and equipping more facilities to improve basic service delivery; (iii) developing incentive mechanisms to encourage women's access to basic services and economic opportunities; and (iv) building local capacity to improve the implementation of gender parity initiatives.

This report is positioned as one of six country reports within the overall study assessing ECOWAS member states gender parity performance, through their gender parity scores (GPS) on key indicators across education, health, economic participation and political empowerment dimensions. The report is primarily based on data analysis used to complete a modeling exercise to quantify the economic impact of closing the parity gap in West Africa. Detailed results from the modeling scenarios will be outlined in the final regional report. This country report includes current GPS performance

comparison at the country, cluster and regional levels based on indicators projections through 2020. Additionally, the report is complemented by stakeholder interviews conducted in Sierra Leone to understand persistent barriers to greater gender parity, identify lessons learned and formulate recommendations to close the parity gap.

A. CONTEXT

A1. Landscape analysis

Sierra Leone has a young, ethnically diverse, and mostly rural population. In 2020, the country's total population was estimated at 7.98 million people, with a balanced gender distribution (50.10% female). Sierra Leoneans are relatively young, with 40% under the age of 15 and only 3% 65 and older, and are predominantly rural (57%).¹ Sierra Leone's population is ethnically diverse; however, four ethnic groups make up about 80% of the population, namely the Temne (35.4%), the Mende (30.8%), the Limba (8.8%) and the Kono (4.3%). More than three out of four Sierra Leonean is Muslim (77.1%) while the rest of the population is Christian (22.9%).²

The country has made great strides over the past two decades in terms of post-conflict recovery and is now firmly on the path of peacebuilding, democracy, and development. Sierra Leone has been relatively stable since the end of the civil war, which was officially proclaimed in 2002, and its political system is based on the 1996 constitution, revised in 2008. The country's political scene is dominated by two major parties, the All-People's Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), which have alternated in power since the end of the civil war in 2002. After President Ernest Bai Koroma's (APC) second term, Sierra Leoneans elected opposition candidate Julius Maada Bio (SLPP) in 2018. He has made education the spearhead of his program, with a commitment to provide free schooling for all from primary to tertiary education.³ In 2020 education accounts for more than a third (34.3%) of public expenditure⁴ and primary and secondary schooling have been free since September 2018.

Outside of the short recessions caused by the two epidemiological shocks (Ebola and COVID-19) that Sierra Leone experienced over the past 10 years, the country's economy has been growing steadily. The economy was severely impacted by the effects of the Ebola epidemic and the strict measures implemented to contain it (from 2014 to 2016), which led to a drastic drop in GDP of -20.6% in 2015,⁵ before returning to positive growth the following year (+4.78% per year on average between 2016 and 2019), thanks in particular to the implementation of the post-Ebola Recovery Strategy and the resumption of iron ore extraction.⁶ Subsequently, the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdown measures slowed economic activity in all sectors and caused GDP to shrink by -2% in 2020. This less severe impact of COVID-19 on the economy reflects the resilience that Sierra Leone has built from its recent experience with Ebola. The World Bank expects GDP to rebound by +4.2% in 2021, due to the easing of COVID-related restrictions as well as the implementation of the government's budgetary response to the pandemic.

¹ World Bank, Database, 2020

² CIA world factbook, 2022

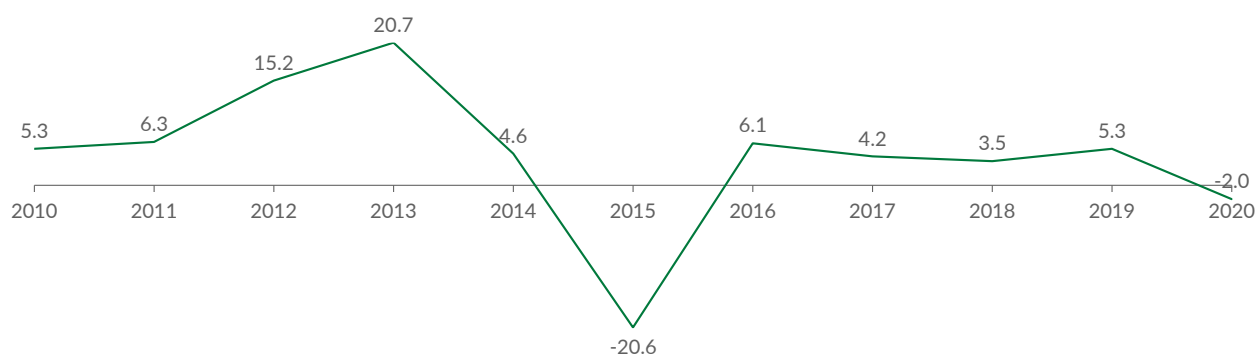
³ France Diplomatie, Presentation of Sierra Leone

⁴ World Bank data

⁵ World Bank data

⁶ France Diplomatie, Presentation of Sierra Leone

Figure 1 : Sierra Leone's GDP growth 2010-2020 (annual %) ⁷



While Sierra Leone has taken numerous gender equality initiatives in recent years, gender inequalities are still prevalent. The recent establishment of the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs in 2019, the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) bill, and even the production of gender-disaggregated statistical data by Statistics Sierra Leone, the national statistical agency, demonstrate Sierra Leone's institutional commitment to advancing gender equality. Nevertheless, the country's gender inequality index (GII)⁸ of 0.644 remains among the highest in the world. Sierra Leone ranks 155 out of 162 countries in 2019,⁹ reflecting significant gender-based inequalities in reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity, and a significant loss to human development. Thus, Sierra Leone has a long way to go to achieve full gender parity.

⁷ World Bank data

⁸ The GII can be interpreted as corresponding to the loss of human development due to inequalities in outcomes for women and men in the 3 dimensions of reproductive health, empowerment and economic activity.

⁹ UNDP

A2. Objectives of the country deep dive

This deep dive analysis aims to provide an overview of Sierra Leone's gender parity performance, identify key interventions to close the gap, and ultimately drive economic growth. The study will seek to identify underlying drivers of gender inequalities and binding constraints preventing further progress in Sierra Leone. While not an exhaustive list, this report is based on a set of selected gender indicators to consistently track the country's gender parity performance over time. Additionally, gender-focused recommendations to address remaining constraints to closing the parity gap will then be formulated.

The ECOWAS region could generate up to \$105B by fully closing the gender gap by 2030

One of the study's key objectives is to assess the impact of achieving gender parity on the ECOWAS region's economy. A scenario analysis tested the hypothesis that the region is incurring an economic and societal loss by not reaching full gender parity. This best-case scenario measures the economic impact of reaching full parity in the ECOWAS region. Using the region's 2020 GDP as a baseline, the projected regional GDP value was estimated under the assumption that all Member States gender parity scores for the indicators selected for this study reach full parity (increase to 1).

Reaching full gender parity in education and workforce participation was determined to have the most significant impact on ECOWAS' GDP growth. Reaching full gender parity in the following indicators can result in an increase in GDP growth: Literacy rate (+1.53%), primary school enrollment rate (+1.54%), secondary school enrollment rate (+1.44%), tertiary school enrollment rate (+1.09%), and labor force participation (+1.62%). This finding implies that in order to optimize the economic impact of gender parity interventions, priority should be given to girls' education, from primary to tertiary levels, and to helping women enter the labor force. These gender-related interventions will most likely have the highest return on investment.

While health and political empowerment indicators were not found to have a direct impact on the region's GDP growth, they contribute to women's ability to thrive both at school and in the workplace. Greater gender parity in health service provision and political positions were not found to have a direct impact on ECOWAS GDP growth. However, these indicators nonetheless showed a correlation with the five significant indicators mentioned above. For instance, increasing young women tertiary school enrollment results in the higher likelihood of more women holding ministerial positions across the region, while improvements in literacy rates can significantly improve women's maternal mortality ratio.

Sierra Leone is on track to reap the economic benefits of greater gender parity. The country has already closed the gender parity gap in primary and tertiary education, and in labor force participation. At the current pace of progress Sierra Leone is also expected to close the gender gap in secondary enrollment by 2022 and reach gender parity in literacy rate by 2029.

B. THE CURRENT STATE

B1. Gender Parity Performance Overview

While Sierra Leone has made great strides overall in recent years on its journey to gender parity, it is struggling to empower women economically and politically. The country has shown a particularly strong commitment of its civil society, government, and technical and financial partners to improve the conditions of women and girls. The country has made significant progress in women's and girls' access to health and education but has stagnated in terms of economic empowerment and women's political participation, where women are still highly disadvantaged in comparison to their male counterparts.

In the area of health, although Sierra Leone has one of the poorest records in ECOWAS and the world, the country has been able to improve its performance on reproductive health and nutrition indicators over the past few years, thanks in particular to the implementation of the Free Health Care (FHC) program since 2010. The country has also taken drastic legal measures to prevent and address harmful practices against women, especially sexual gender-based violence (SGBV); the president of Sierra Leone has officially declared a national emergency on rape and sexual violence in 2019.

Sierra Leone's best performance has been on girls' and women's access to education and the labor force. The country has achieved gender parity in primary school enrollment, tertiary enrollment, and labor force participation, and is close to closing the gap in secondary school enrollment where girls are still underrepresented in senior secondary education. The adoption of the Free and Quality Education Program (FQEP) in 2018 by government has particularly benefited girls' school enrollment.

In contrast, Sierra Leone shows little progress in terms of women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship. Women entrepreneurs remain at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts due to low financial inclusion and inadequate provision of financial services for their businesses on the one hand, and gender norms and stereotypes that discourage them from starting or expanding their businesses on the other hand.

In terms of women's political representation, despite numerous initiatives and advocacy by local and international organizations, the country has made little progress over the past decade. Its performance has stagnated and remains poor, with less than 14% of women in government and parliament. Sierra Leone is also struggling to mainstream gender in public sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken by the government of Sierra Leone to contain it have undermined further progress on gender parity. Restrictions on movement and lockdowns induced by the pandemic have made it more difficult for women to access maternal health services, increased their exposure to gender-based violence (GBV), threatened progress in girls' education, and reduced women's economic opportunities.

B2. Health & Nutrition

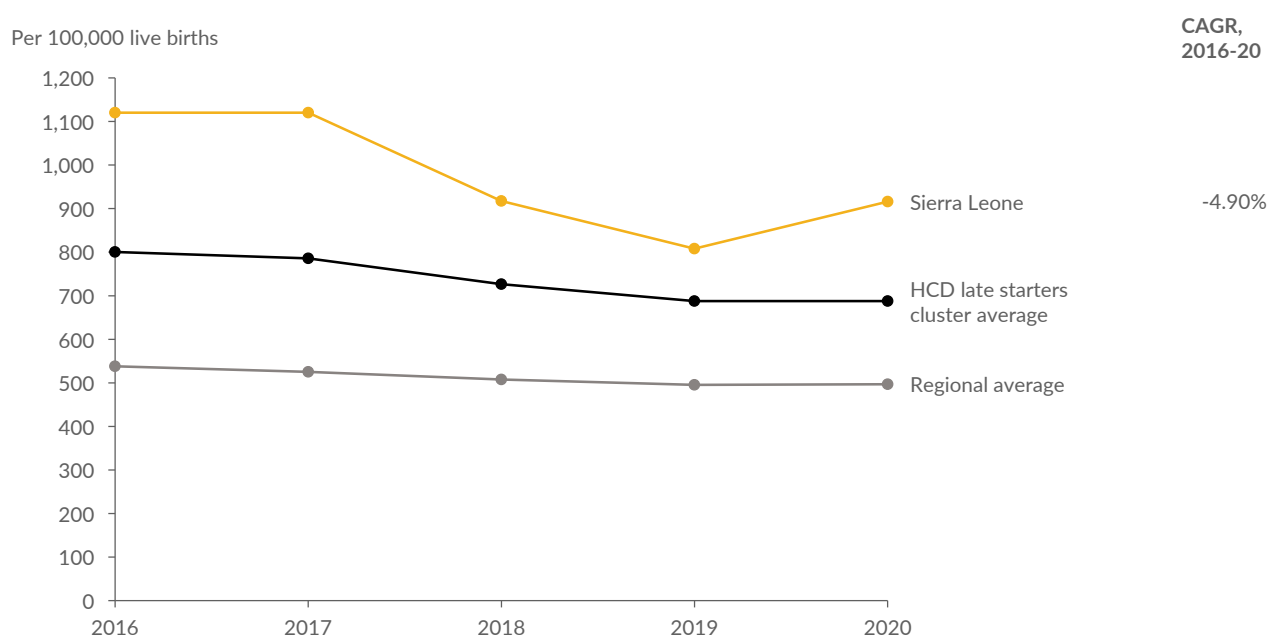
Sierra Leone has made significant progress in improving women's health in recent years. Thanks to a strong commitment from civil society, government, and technical and financial partners, the country has been able to (i) improve women's reproductive health through increased access to maternal health services and modern family planning methods, which has enabled the country to experience a steady reduction in its maternal mortality and fertility rates; (ii) reduce children and mothers'

malnutrition through nutrition programs; and (iii) make substantial progress in the fight against harmful practices to women, such as child marriage and GBV.

Sexual, reproductive, and maternal health

Improved access to maternal health services has enabled Sierra Leone to reduce its maternal mortality over the last 5 years. Sierra Leone has the highest maternal mortality ratio in the ECOWAS region with 916.25 deaths per 100,000 live births, which is almost twice the regional average of 496.78. However, the country is showing improvements with a reduction in mortality averaging 4.90% per year over the past 5 years (the maternal mortality ratio was 1,120 deaths in 2016). This improvement is due to ambitious initiatives introduced by the government over the past decade, with the support of technical and financial partners, to provide better access to maternal health services, including (i) the FHC program launched in 2010, which aims to provide universal access to quality free health care for vulnerable groups, in particular pregnant women, lactating mothers and children under five; (ii) and the National Ambulance Service deployed in all 14 districts of the country to allow rapid access of populations to health centers and thus reduce deaths due to delayed medical intervention (80 ambulances already deployed in 2019 out of 163 targeted¹⁰). As a result, more women have been able to access antenatal and post-pregnancy health services: between 2008 and 2019 the proportion of women receiving antenatal care from a skilled provider has increased from 87% to 97%, with deliveries taking place in a health facility having more than tripled from 25% to 83% and the proportion of births assisted by skilled attendants, more than doubled from 42% to 87% in the same period.¹¹

Figure 2: Maternal mortality ratio (MMR)– Sierra Leone regional and cluster average comparison (2016-2020)¹² - per 100,000 live births



Sierra Leone has also made considerable progress in expanding access to modern family planning methods. Through its general health sector policies and numerous strategies aimed at improving maternal health outcomes and reducing teenage pregnancy, including the National Health Sector

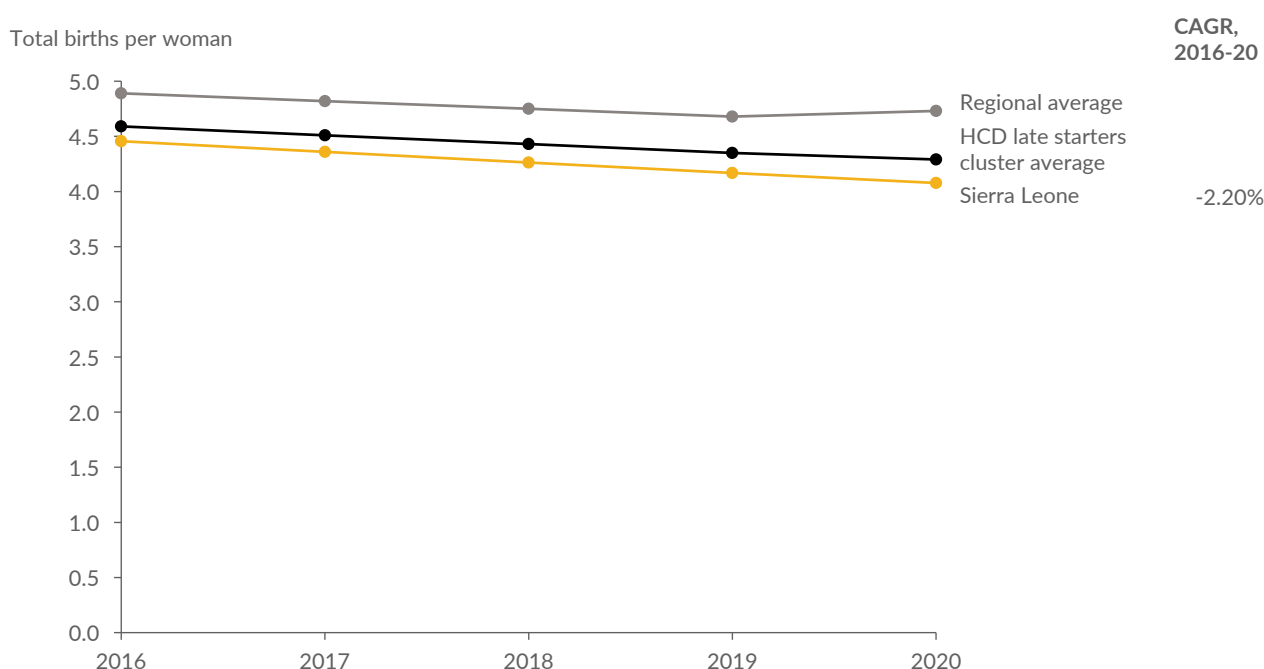
¹⁰ Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action - Sierra Leone Country Report 2019

¹¹ Demographic and Health Survey 2019

¹² Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau

Strategic Plan (NHSSP) 2010-2015, the revised National Community Health Worker Policy 2016-2020, and the Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health Strategy (RMNCAH), 2017-2021), Sierra Leone has created a conducive and supportive environment for family planning. The Ministry of Health and Sanitation, which is the country's main healthcare provider, raises awareness through its health education unit by regularly disseminating preventive health messages, including family planning, to influence behavior change. Knowledge about family planning methods and services in Sierra Leone has significantly increased over the past years as 98% of currently married women and 99% of men know at least one modern method in 2019, an increase from 2013 when 95% of women and 96% of men knew at least one family planning method.¹³ As a result, modern contraceptive use among married women has tripled from 7% in 2008 to 21% in 2019, and the public facilities, covering 80% of users, are by far the main providers of modern contraceptive methods. Thus, the country's fertility rate has declined steadily over the past five years, with a CAGR of -2.20%. In 2020 Sierra Leone had a fertility rate below the regional average (4.08 live births per woman compared to 4.73) and fell below the average of its HCD cluster of Late Starters (4.29).¹⁴

Figure 3: Fertility rate – Sierra Leone regional and cluster average comparison (2016-2020)¹⁵ - total births per woman



Despite the progress made in reproductive health, disparities in access to care persist and need to be addressed. Gaps of varying significance are observed (i) according to women's location, as urban women are six times more likely to have a prenatal visit with a doctor than rural women (12% compared to 2%), and the proportion of births in a health facility varies from 61% in Port Loko district to 97% in Kenema and Pujehun; (ii) according to the educational level of women, considering that the proportion of women who had access to prenatal care from a doctor is 4% among those with no education or only primary education against 26% among those with more than secondary education, or that the proportion of births in a health facility is 80% among women without education against 95% among those with more than secondary education; and finally (iii) according to the level of wealth of the women, as the proportion of women in the lowest wealth quintile who received

¹³ Sierra Leone Family Planning Costed Implementation Plan 2018-2022

¹⁴ Demographic and Health Survey 2019

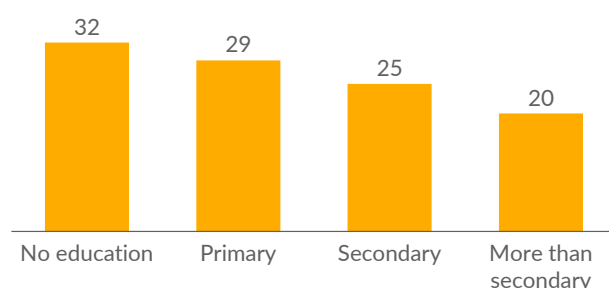
¹⁵ Due to missing data, regional average is excluding Guinea Bissau

prenatal care from a doctor is 2% versus 17% of women in the highest quintile.¹⁶ Sierra Leone will be able to sustainably improve its reproductive health outcomes by addressing these disparities.

Women and food security

While food insecurity affects both genders, women are more vulnerable to malnutrition which also directly impacts their children's health. Nearly one-third (30%) of children under 5 are stunted (too short for their age) due to malnutrition and 11% are severely stunted in Sierra Leone.¹⁷ This developmental anomaly affects both boys (32.02%) and girls (25.21%) at rates higher than the regional average (26.92% for boys and 22.20% for girls). The high prevalence of stunting in the country is related to the food insecurity that affects the majority of households (57%), i.e., they consume insufficient food to maintain a healthy and active life.¹⁸ Moreover, it is observed that the symptoms and conditions of food insecurity are more visible in female-headed households: 13% of them are affected by severe food insecurity compared to 11% of male-headed households.¹⁹ Maternal education is found to play a major role in the prevalence of stunting in children; the 2020 Demographic Health Survey revealed that the prevalence of stunting declines with increasing mother's education, from 32% among children whose mothers have no education to 20% among those whose mothers have more than a secondary education. Pending the long-term effects of girls' education initiatives, the government, and many organizations, including Action Against Hunger, WFP and UNICEF, are addressing stunting and malnutrition in Sierra Leone through nutritional food distribution programs for young children and mothers. For instance, in 2020, Action Against Hunger assisted more than 7,500 people²⁰ with food security programs and WFP assisted over 17,000 people with more than 47 tons of food aid.²¹ These food programs have reduced malnutrition among mothers and children and increased their dietary diversity. The prevalence of stunting in Sierra Leone has thus decreased from 36% in 2008 to 30% in 2019.²²

Figure 4: Stunting in children categorized by mother's education level - Children under age 5 who are stunted (%)



Harmful practices against women

While not fully eradicated, Sierra Leone has made substantial progress on reducing incidences of child marriage over the past decade. Sierra Leone has a high prevalence of child marriage, particularly among girls, with 29.6% of young Sierra Leonean women aged 20 to 24 having been married before their 18th birthday. The country remains below the regional average of 34.88% and the late starters' HCD cluster average of 37.34%. The phenomenon is particularly prevalent among rural women in Sierra Leone, with the median age at first marriage among rural women aged 25-49 years being 18.9

¹⁶ Demographic and Health Survey 2019

¹⁷ Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action - Sierra Leone Country Report 2019

¹⁸ Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, WFP, 2021

¹⁹ Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, WFP, 2021

²⁰ Action Against Hunger

²¹ WFP Sierra Leone Country Brief, May 2020

²² Demographic and Health Survey 2019

years, compared to 20.6 years among urban women; and among women with low levels of education, with the median age at first marriage increasing from 18.7 years among women with no education to 21.9 years among women with secondary education. To address the problem, the government of Sierra Leone strengthened the child protection legal framework with the Child Rights Act of 2017, which prohibits marriage for anyone under the age of 18. However, there is a contradiction to be resolved with the Customary Marriage Act of 2008, which allows for marriage at 16 with the consent of the parents, guardian, or a local government magistrate or chief administrator.²³ Sierra Leone's First Lady, Mrs. Fatima Bio, is also involved in the protection of girls from early marriage and other harmful practices against them through the "Hands off our girls" project.²⁴ Thus, the situation in Sierra Leone has improved over the past decade as the median age at first marriage for women aged 20-49 has steadily increased from 17.2 years in 2008 (i.e., the majority of women were married before age 18) to 19.8 years in 2019.²⁵

Figure 5: Child marriage - Child marriage – Sierra Leone regional average and cluster comparison²⁶ - Percentage of women (aged 20-24 years) married before age 18



Gender-based violence remains prevalent in Sierra Leone despite a strong political commitment to address it. According to the 2019 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey, nearly two out of three women (61%) between the ages of 15 and 49 have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, up from 56% in 2013. Most often the perpetrator of violence against women is none other than their intimate partners, in fact, among married women who have experienced physical violence, they are the perpetrators in 72% of cases. Furthermore, 7% of women have suffered sexual violence in 2019, a decrease since 2013 when 11% of women faced similar violence. As with physical violence, individuals with whom women have an intimate relationship are the main perpetrators of sexual violence against them; the current husband/partner is the perpetrator in 78% of cases while the former husband/partner is responsible in 19% of cases. To eradicate this harmful practice against women, civil society organizations (CSO) such as FNESL and Rainbo Initiative, non-governmental

²³ Child Marriage in Sierra Leone, Save the Children

²⁴ Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action - Sierra Leone Country Report 2019

²⁵ Demographic and Health Survey 2019

²⁶ Child marriage data are sourced from the UNICEF Data warehouse which contains data gaps across years: calculated average are based on the most recent data by country between 2012 and 2019, Senegal data is from 2019. Cabo Verde and Niger data are unavailable.

organizations (NGO) such as USAID, UNWomen and the Human Rights Commission (HRC), and the government are actively engaged in the fight. The President of Sierra Leone officially declared a national emergency on rape and sexual violence in 2019, with directives such as free medical treatment and certificate to every victim of rape and sexual abuse in all government hospitals, a national emergency telephone number dedicated to reporting rape and sexual violence available to the public, and the creation by the Sierra Leone police of a special division for rape and sexual penetration of minors to speedily handle all cases of rape and sexual penetration of minors. This was a major step in the fight against rape and all forms of sexual violence in the country. The President then promulgated the Sexual Offences Amendment Act in 2019, allowing the government to enact drastic measures without parliamentary approval, including the introduction of maximum life sentences for those found guilty of sexually abusing minors.²⁷ Prior to this, Sierra Leone passed "Gender Justice Laws" including the Domestic Violence Act (2007) and the Sexual Offences Act (2012), as well as other national policies, which are among the strongest in the region.²⁸ For effective coordination and better service delivery, the National Committee on Gender Based Violence (NaC-GBV) has been established. It is a multi-sectoral body composed of government institutions, UN agencies, CSOs and international NGOs working on the prevention and response to GBV. The objective of this body is to harmonize resources, including expertise, and to avoid duplication of efforts in GBV program interventions. However, barriers remain to the response to GBV despite these initiatives, such as (i) the lack of laboratory equipment in the country to investigate rape cases; (ii) the remoteness of care services for many communities across the country; (iii) the tendency of some families to want to protect the rapist because of family ties, and (iv) the lack of awareness in some communities about the laws in place protecting women's and girls' rights. These challenges will need to be addressed in order to eradicate GBV in Sierra Leone.

²⁷ Sierra Leone Education Sector Analysis, UNESCO, 2020

²⁸ Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action - Sierra Leone Country Report 2019

Fambul Initiative Network for Equality Sierra Leone (FINE-SL): Combat harmful practices against women in Sierra Leone by engaging men:

FINE-SL works to gradually change harmful social norms women and girls face in Sierra Leone by engaging men and boys as part of the solution. Fambul Initiative Network for Equality Sierra Leone (FINE-SL) is a Non-governmental Organization established in 2010, which aims to engage men and boys to address issues of gender equality and violence against women and girls in society. With support from development partners such as UNFPA, FINE-SL is (i) implementing male-led approach programs to end Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV) at household and community-institution levels; (ii) promoting sexual reproductive health rights including maternal and child health, and breaking STI/HIV infection and transmission; and (iii) sensitizing the communities on policy reforms in Sierra Leone (e.g., the Domestic Violence Act 2007, Sexual Offenses Act 2012, Gender Empowerment Act 2021, etc.) so these policies are implemented.

The “husband schools” project is the most emblematic initiative of FINE-SL; about 10,000 men have enrolled at 22 “husband schools” across the country, where they attend monthly classes to learn about gender equality, reproductive health and protection of women and girls.¹ The training lasts 6 months and issues certificates. The NGO also trains trainers through the Male Advocacy Peer Educators (MAPEs) network, engaging male community pillars to promote the end of child marriage in their communities. In 2021, FINE-SL was able to (i) open 6 new husband schools; (ii) reach 320 women and 1,300 husbands through its programs; and (iii) prevent 6 child marriages in the city of Moyamba.

A session at a husband school in Sierra Leone



Although Sierra Leone has made significant improvements in women's health by reducing maternal mortality, fertility rates, stunting prevalence, and violence against women, additional efforts are needed to (i) accelerate the reduction of maternal mortality, which remains the highest in ECOWAS, (ii) expand the implementation of GBV prevention policies, which is still too prevalent in Sierra Leone; (iii) resolve the contradiction between the Child Rights Act of 2017 and the Customary Marriage Act

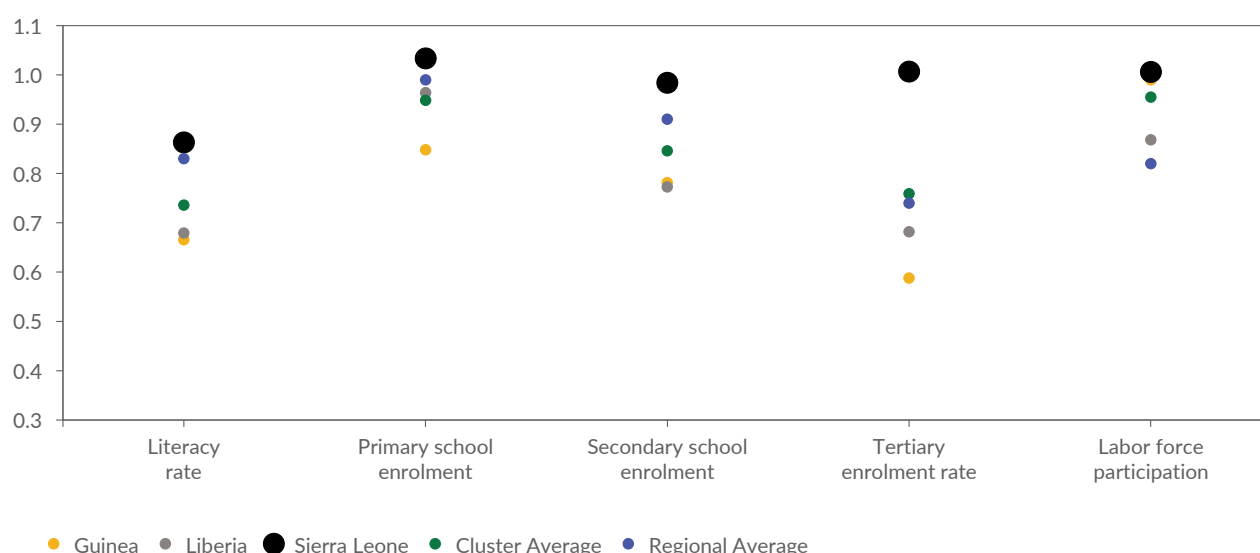
²⁹ Credit photo: VSO

of 2008 to fight more efficiently against child marriage; (iii) and address disparities in basic health services provision.

B3. Education, skills, and labor participation

Sierra Leone has made tremendous progress in recent years in terms of access to education and labor force participation for women and girls. Through strong commitment from the state, civil society, and support from technical and financial partners, Sierra Leone has successfully closed the gender gap in primary school enrollment, tertiary school enrollment, and labor force participation, and is close to closing it in secondary school enrollment. However, gender disparities persist as women remain underrepresented in senior secondary, higher education programs and all too rare in high-skilled jobs in the labor market.

Figure 6 : Education, Skills and Labor Participation, Sierra Leone regional average and cluster comparison (2020) - Gender parity scores (0-1)

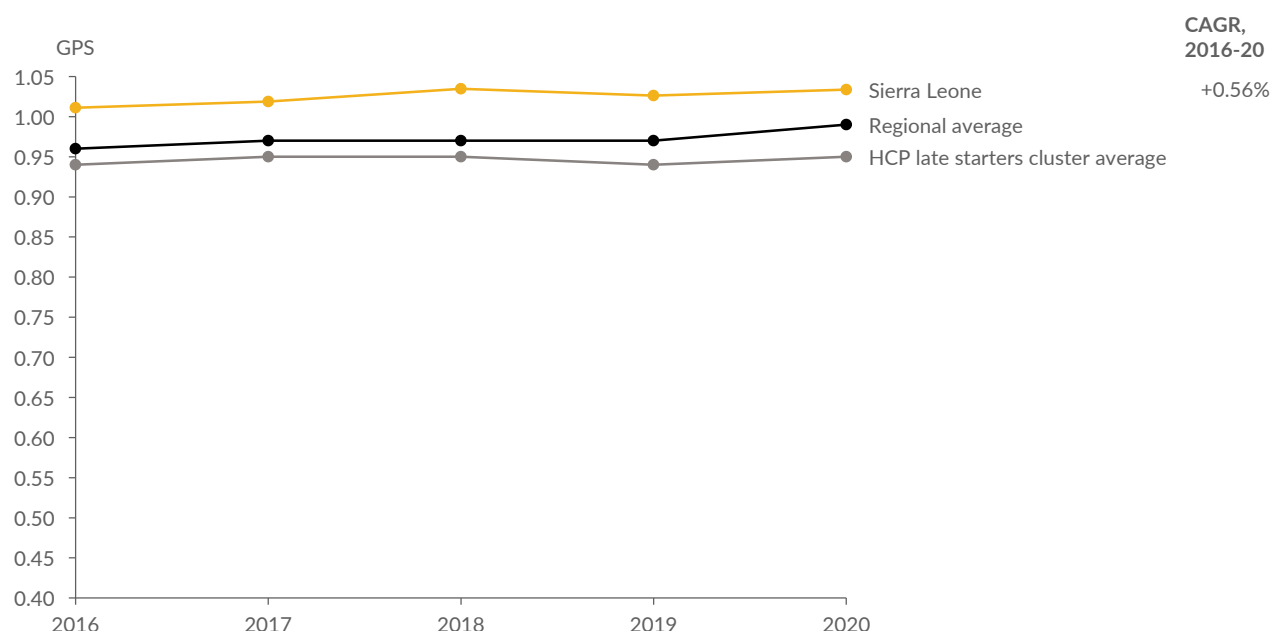


Girls' primary and secondary education

Sierra Leone has successfully bridged the gender parity gap in primary school. The country achieved gender parity in primary school enrollment with a score of 1.03 in 2020, which means that girls outnumber boys in primary schools by 3%. In the region, 5 other member states achieved gender parity in primary school: Burkina Faso (1.01), the Gambia (1.12), Ghana (1.02), Nigeria (1.02) and Senegal (1.15). Sierra Leone's government made early commitments to removing barriers to girls' education. The Education Act was passed in 2004, prior to closing the gender gap in primary education (0.78). The Act criminalized the refusal of parents or guardians to send their children (both girls and boys) to school, contributing to a rise in girls and achieving full parity by 2013. The Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) 2018, confirmed that boys are now more likely to be out of school than girls at primary school levels (23.1% of boys out of school compared to 18.8% of girls). In most cases, out of school children at that level face financial difficulties (53% of cases for girls and 67% for boys). In 2018, the government launched the Free and Quality Education Program (FQEP), which includes free grants for pre-primary, primary, junior and senior secondary schools, for students taking private exams, and covers fees for key national examinations (i.e., the Basic Education

Certificate (BECE) and National Primary School Education (NPSE) for primary school students).³⁰ These programs have enabled thousands of out-of-school children to re-enroll and stay in school the following year. As a result, school enrollment has indeed increased significantly by +30% for boys and +29% for girls in 2019 compared to 2018.³¹

Figure 7 : Primary school enrollment rate – Sierra Leone regional and cluster average comparison (2016-2020) - Gender parity scores (0-1)

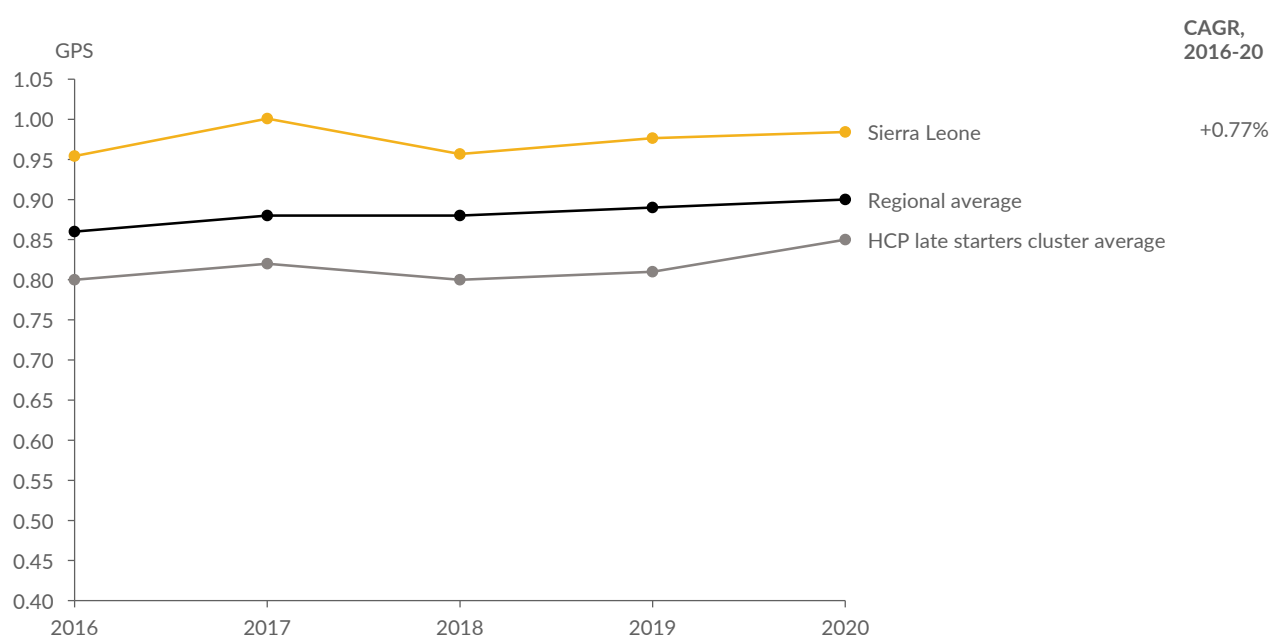


However, as students' progress through secondary school, girls' enrollment rates fall below that of boys. In 2020, with a gender parity score of 0.98 in secondary school enrollment, Sierra Leone has almost closed the gender parity gap. The country has the highest score in its HCD cluster (0.78 for Guinea and 0.77 for Liberia) and is above the regional average of 0.91. While more girls enroll in primary school, their retention, completion, and transition rates from primary to secondary school remain lower than boys; as they progress through the education system, they are more likely to drop out than boys. According to the 2018 SLIHS, more girls drop out of school in senior secondary school (32.1%) than boys (28.7%), and the main reasons are pregnancy (31% of cases) and financial difficulties (53%). The adoption of the FQEP by the government in 2018 and the lifting of the ban on pregnant girls from attending school and taking exams in 2020 are all efforts to remove barriers to girls' enrollment in secondary school. The FQEP includes free grants for students taking private exams and covers fees for key national examinations such as the West Africa Secondary School Certificate of Education (WASSCE), and National Council for Technical Vocational and Other Academic Awards (NCTVA) examinations. As a result of adopting the FQEP in 2018, secondary school enrollment has increased significantly by +46% for boys in senior secondary school in 2019 compared to 2018, and even more so for girls by +55%, further narrowing the gender parity gap. Given latest efforts and its current pace of progress over the past 5 years (CAGR of +0.77%) Sierra Leone should be able to achieve gender parity in secondary school enrollment by 2022.

³⁰ Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action - Sierra Leone Country Report 2019

³¹ Sierra Leone Education Sector Analysis, UNESCO, 2020

Figure 8: Secondary school enrollment rate - Sierra Leone regional and cluster average comparison (2016-2020) - Gender parity scores (0-1)



Women's higher education and vocational training

Although Sierra Leone has achieved gender parity in tertiary education, women outnumber men only in vocational programs. With a GPS of 1.01 in 2020 Sierra Leone bridged the gender parity gap in tertiary education and largely exceeds ECOWAS' average, which is 0.74; the country is only surpassed in the region by Cabo Verde (1.47) and the Gambia (1.14). In recent years, tertiary enrollment has been growing significantly in Sierra Leone, and the increase in female enrollment between 2017 and 2020 (CAGR of +27%) is almost twice that of males (CAGR of +15%), resulting in a strong growth in the GPS. This increase is a result of (i) the growing share of girls in secondary school; and (ii) the government's efforts to promote female enrollment in tertiary education over the past few years, including awareness-raising campaigns among communities, and (iii) the provision of automatic scholarships to young women enrolling in Science, Technology, Engineering, Agriculture, and Mathematics (STEAM) programs. Indeed, women account for only 22% of enrollments in STEAM programs; but they are steadily increasing (up from 17% in 2017). However, the growing trend of women's enrollment in tertiary education slows down as the degree level pursued rises. Female students make up the majority in vocational programs (52% in 2019), but they are in the minority in bachelor's degrees or equivalent (45%), and the gap widens with professional degrees, where female students make up 39% of master's students and 21% of doctoral students. Female students are particularly attracted to TVET tracks, where they represent 54% of enrollments, because (i) TVET centers are present in all districts of the country, making them more accessible to women who do not want to travel for family, financial or security reasons; (ii) they require a short-term commitment, which is more suitable for young women with family obligations; and (iii) they offer courses that are traditionally considered female friendly careers (e.g., catering, tailoring, tourism, etc.).

Figure 9: Tertiary school enrollment rate – Sierra Leone regional and cluster average comparison (2016-2020) - Gender parity scores (0-1)

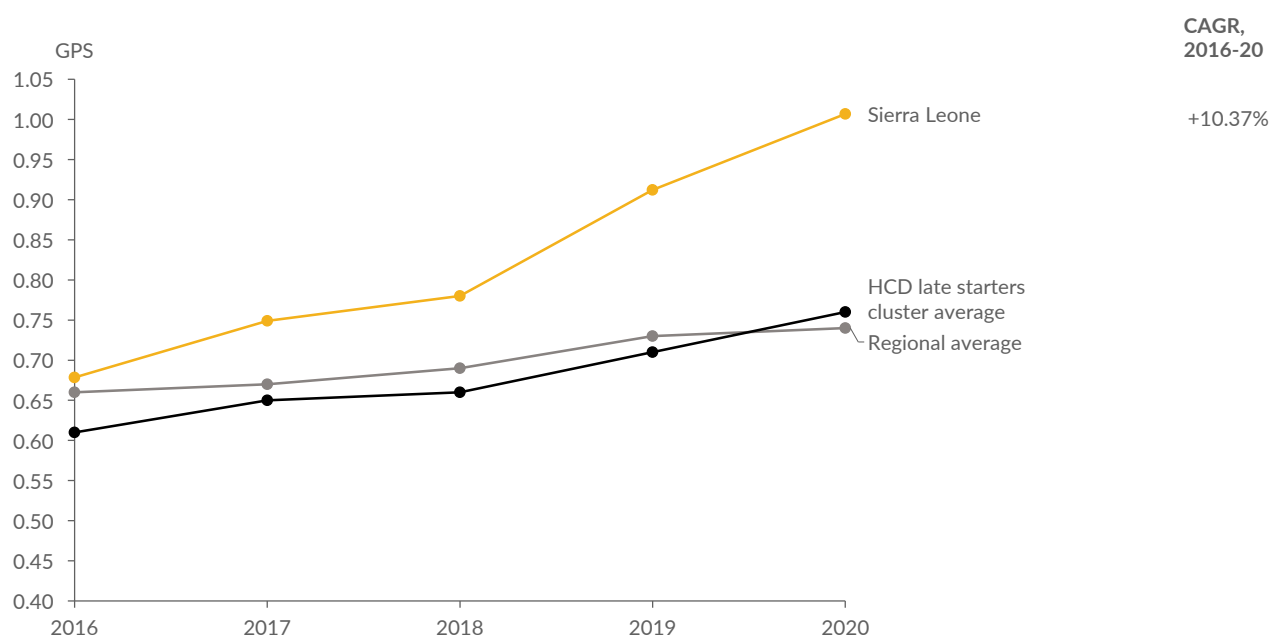
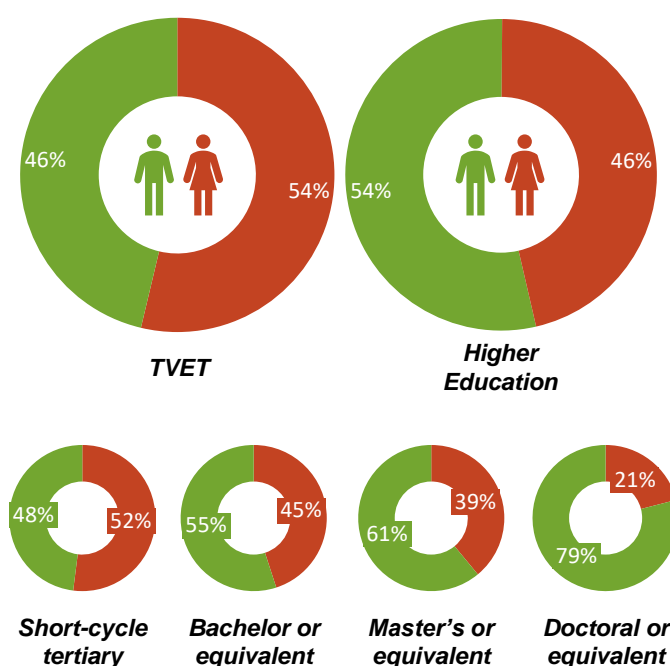


Figure 10: Distribution of students by gender in tertiary education in Sierra Leone (2019)



Women in the labor force

In line with the pattern of tertiary education enrolment, although Sierra Leonean women are fully engaged in the labor force, they outnumber men only in low-skilled jobs. Sierra Leone has just reached gender parity in labor force participation with a GPS of 1.01 (in 2020) and holds the highest score of the ECOWAS region which averages at 0.82. This means that women slightly outnumber men in the formal labor market in Sierra Leone (101 women for every 100 men), which is a unique case in the region. However, women earn less from paid employment than men, with a GPS of 0.74 for estimated earned income (i.e., women earn on average only 74% of men's earnings) in 2020, which is still above the regional average of 0.63. Young women are, to some extent, less likely to

occupy high-skilled jobs and more prone to engage in unskilled basic occupations than young men. This is a direct consequence of the previously mentioned trend in Sierra Leone's tertiary education, where women tend to pursue short, low-skilled studies, leading to a concentration in relatively low skill jobs that generate meagre incomes. The share of young women holding low-skilled non-manual jobs (32% in 2018), which includes clerical support workers, as well as services and sales workers, largely outnumbers young men's (12%); while the share of young men in high-skilled nonmanual jobs (8%) is nearly three times that of young women (3%).³²

Figure 11: Labor force participation – Sierra Leone regional and cluster average comparison (2016-2020) - Gender parity scores (0-1)

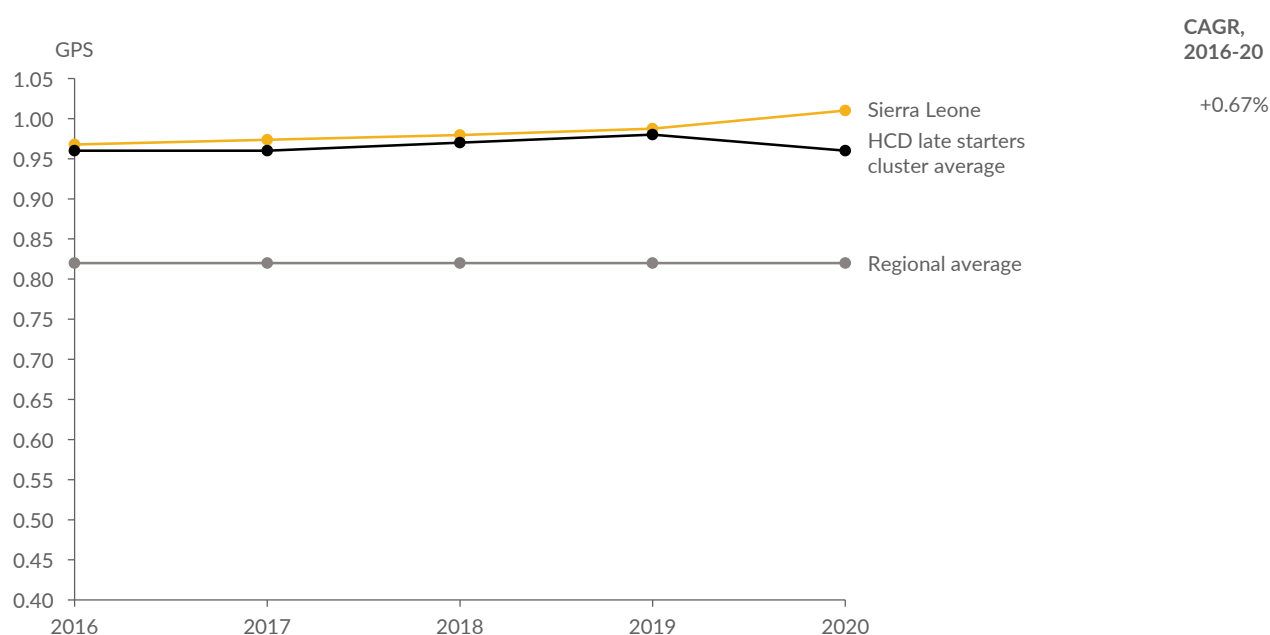
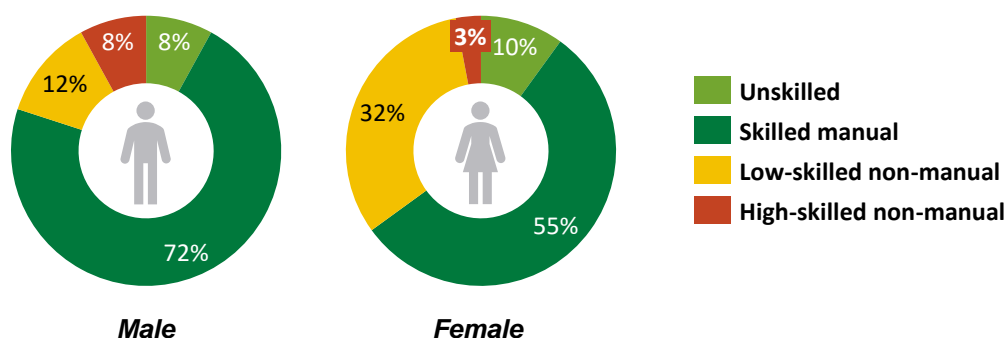


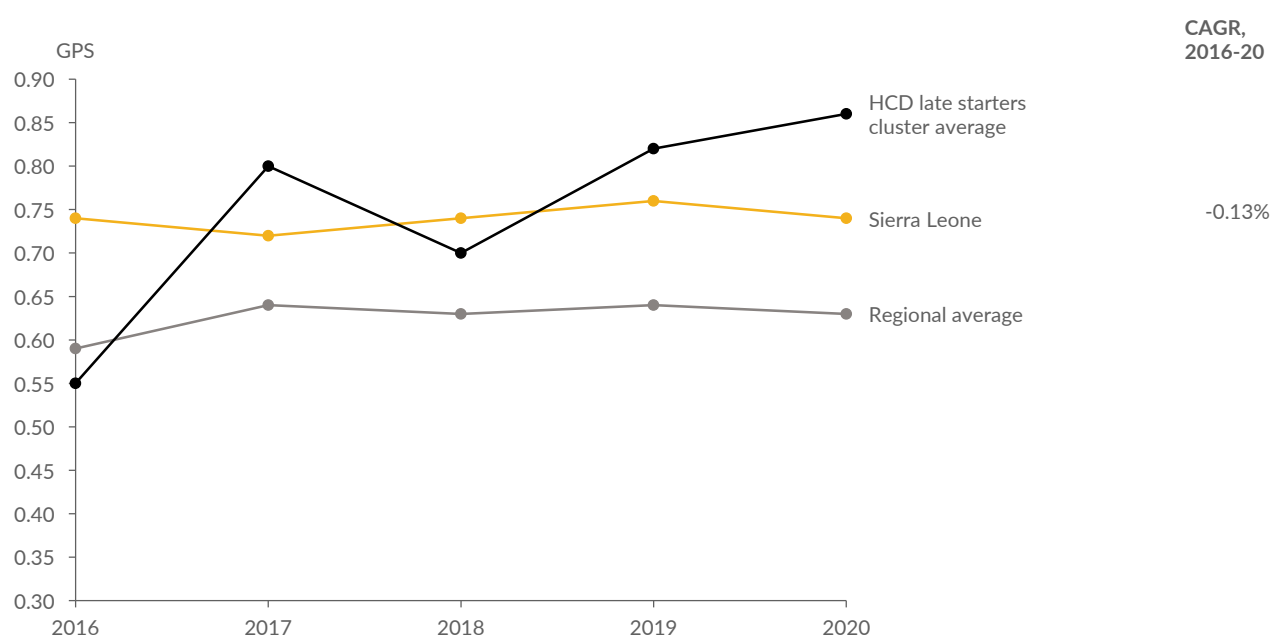
Figure 12: Distribution of young workers by occupational skill level (2018)³³



³² Education Sector Analysis: Assessing the enabling environment for gender equality, UNESCO, 2020

³³ Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) 2018

Figure 13: Estimated earned income – Sierra Leone regional and cluster average comparison (2016 – 2020) - Gender parity scores (0-1)

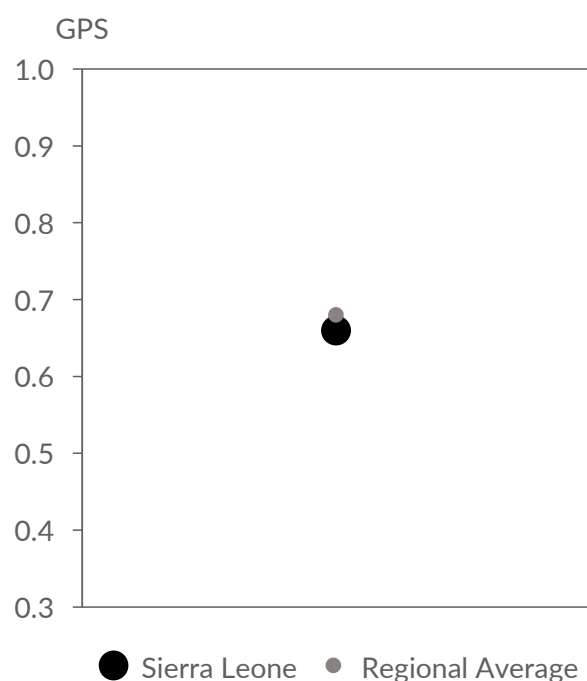


Although Sierra Leone has successfully achieved gender parity in primary and tertiary education and in labor force participation, more efforts are required to improve girls' secondary school completion rates and women access to high-skilled jobs with higher incomes.

B4. Entrepreneurship and financial inclusion

Women entrepreneurs in Sierra Leone are at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts as they have less access to affordable financing products and suffer from gender bias in their business. Sierra Leonean women face low levels of financial inclusion and an inadequate supply of financial services for women-owned businesses, which hampers their economic empowerment. In response, the Sierra Leonean government and its development partners have launched several initiatives to stimulate women's entrepreneurship in recent years. However, despite these efforts to improve women entrepreneurs' access to finance, the gender bias they face in the workplace continues to hinder their success.

Figure 14: Adult with account ownership at a financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider, Sierra Leone and regional average comparison (2020) - Gender parity scores (0-1)³⁴



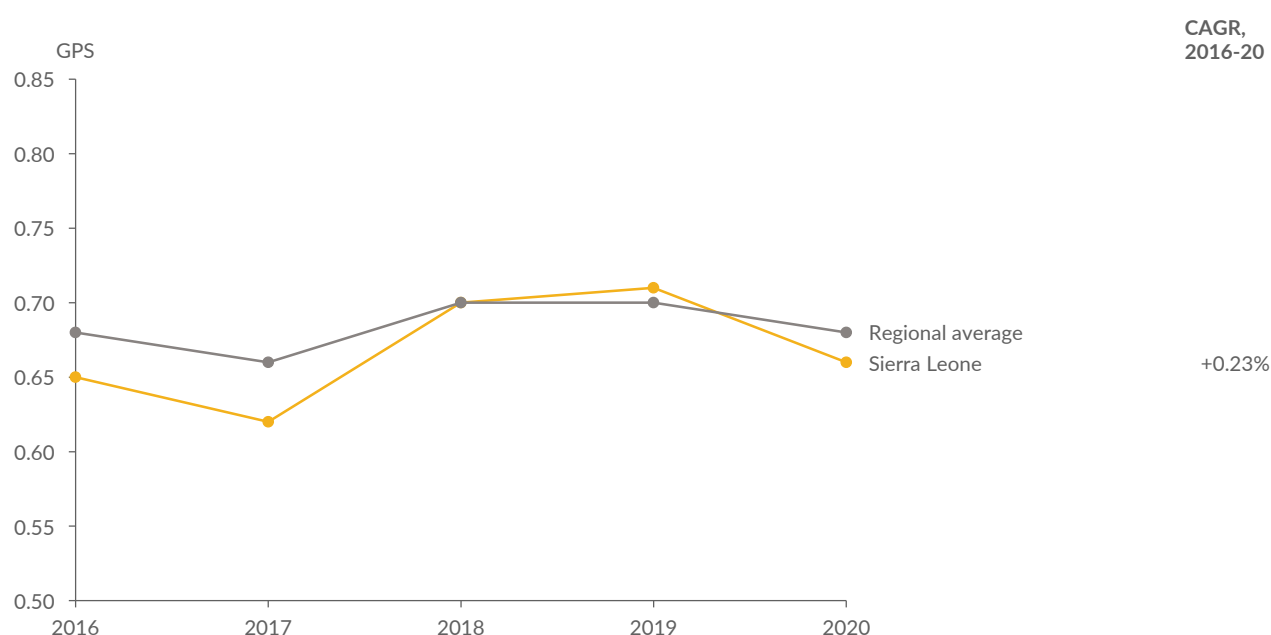
Women's financial inclusion

The lower financial inclusion of Sierra Leonean women significantly hampers their economic empowerment. The share of adult women with an account at a financial institution or mobile money service provider is 12.87%, which places women's financial inclusion in Sierra Leone well below the regional average of 30.08%. However there is limited financial inclusion in the country overall, as the share of adult men with an account at a financial institution or mobile money service provider is 19.50%, resulting in a gender parity score of 0.66 for Sierra Leone which is slightly below the regional average of 0.68. Women are less likely than men to be financially included, mainly because they are generally less involved in household financial and budgeting decisions. Indeed, (i) men are most often the main source of household income as two-thirds of currently married men (67.68%) are employed and earn money (cash only or cash and in-kind) compared to 38.25% of currently married women; while women rarely earn more than their husbands (in 9% of cases); (ii) and decision making regarding the use of income is often made by the husband alone, whether it is his income - 62% of the cases - , or the wife's income - 32% of the cases (in comparison, the wife makes decisions alone in 8% and 37% of cases respectively).³⁵ Lower levels of financial inclusion disadvantages Sierra Leonean women in economic production and access to credit compared to men. Having a bank account provides access to financial services such as savings, credit, and insurance that are important for starting or expanding a business and property ownership.

³⁴ Due to missing data, regional average is not including Cabo Verde, the Gambia and Liberia

³⁵ Demographic and Health Survey 2019

Figure 15: Adult with account ownership at a financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider – Sierra Leone and regional average comparison (2016 – 2020) - Gender parity scores (0-1)



In addition to limited financial inclusion, Sierra Leonean women's low access to property ownership hinders their eligibility for bank credit. Constraints related to collateral requirements prevent women, who often do not have land titles or personal assets, from securing loans. In Sierra Leone, men are nearly 4 times more likely than women to be the sole owner of a house ([m] 19% vs [f] 5%), and they are also more likely to hold title to land, as 25% of men who own a house have a title or deed with their name on it compared to 19% of women.³⁶ As a result of these low rates of title ownership, 53.36% of loans taken out by women are mainly solicited informally from relatives, friends or neighbors in Sierra Leone, while formal organizations, i.e. moneylenders, microfinance institutions, cooperatives and commercial banks have low proportions of women borrowing at 6.56%, 5.37%, 4.47% and 0.5% respectively.³⁷ This reduces the potential for expansion of businesses, especially those owned by women. As a result, women's participation remains largely informal and low: about 84% of rural women and 63% of urban women engaged in commercial work operate in the informal sector of the economy (micro-enterprises mainly in agriculture and trade).³⁸

Women and entrepreneurship

A dynamic for the development of women's entrepreneurship has recently been created in Sierra Leone with the launch of several initiatives to provide women with access to financing and training. To facilitate access to credit and strengthen women's entrepreneurship in Sierra Leone, the government and its development partners have launched a number of initiatives over the past few years, including (i) the government-led Women's Development Fund, disbursed USD 200,000 (SLL 2 billion) in 2019, which aims to provide seed capital to female traders and entrepreneurs to start small businesses;³⁹ (ii) the Business Incubator for African Women Entrepreneurship (BIAWE) in 2018, in partnership with ECOWAS and NEPAD which focuses on supporting the most vulnerable women, particularly those in agribusiness, to develop SMEs⁴⁰; and (iii) the USAID-funded Women Empowered

³⁶ Demographic and Health Survey 2019

³⁷ Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) 2018

³⁸ Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action - Sierra Leone Country Report 2019

³⁹ Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action - Sierra Leone Country Report 2019

⁴⁰ Implementation of UN sustainable development goals in Sierra Leone, Ministry of Finance, 2017

for Leadership and Development (WELD) from 2014 to 2019, which provided 361 Savings Groups with 87% of female members (an estimated 8,323 women)⁴¹ with grants and improved agricultural technologies to enable them to expand their farming activities. In addition, women entrepreneurs often lack financial and managerial knowledge, and may even be illiterate, which contributes to their difficulties in growing their businesses. The WELD program has addressed these gaps with the savings groups by providing training in entrepreneurship and basic numeracy to enable the beneficiaries to effectively manage increasingly complex business transactions. Other international organizations such as UNDP, and local organizations such as the Chamber for Agribusiness Development are involved in building the capacity of women entrepreneurs, thereby creating a more favorable environment for women's entrepreneurship development in Sierra Leone.

However, the gender bias that women entrepreneurs face in their income-generating activities hinders their success. Due to gender biased norms and stereotypes in Sierra Leonean society that require women to be under the authority of a man or to work only in activities considered female friendly, women entrepreneurs face obstacles both during the establishment of their businesses and during their day-to-day operations. In the pre-business phase, the obstacles begin at home, with many women having to make it without the support of their husbands or partners, who are apprehensive about their financial independence from them; then, in the establishment of various business partnerships, they are often subject to unsolicited advances from inappropriate men during negotiations. In the operational phase of the business, obstacles appear in the interactions of women entrepreneurs with their male peers, particularly in sectors described as "masculine" such as automotive, technical, manufacturing or logistics, where they can be confronted to sexual harassment from their male colleagues; and in interactions with their own male staff, who are often not used to taking orders from a woman and may resist. These additional barriers that women entrepreneurs face are disincentives to female entrepreneurship.

"Many of the challenges for women led business are the same around the world, but they are more obvious in Africa. I have been struggling with my male staff sometimes because they are not used to take instructions from a woman, and a strong one. Especially in the beginning, they wouldn't listen to me and would go talk to my husband instead."

A Sierra Leonean female entrepreneur

Although Sierra Leone has implemented several initiatives to promote women entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurs remain at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts, particularly because of gender stereotypes that are unfavorable to them. Further efforts need to be made to remove financing barriers and change mindsets of both men and women in order to eliminate discrimination against women in the business world and enable them to succeed in entrepreneurship.

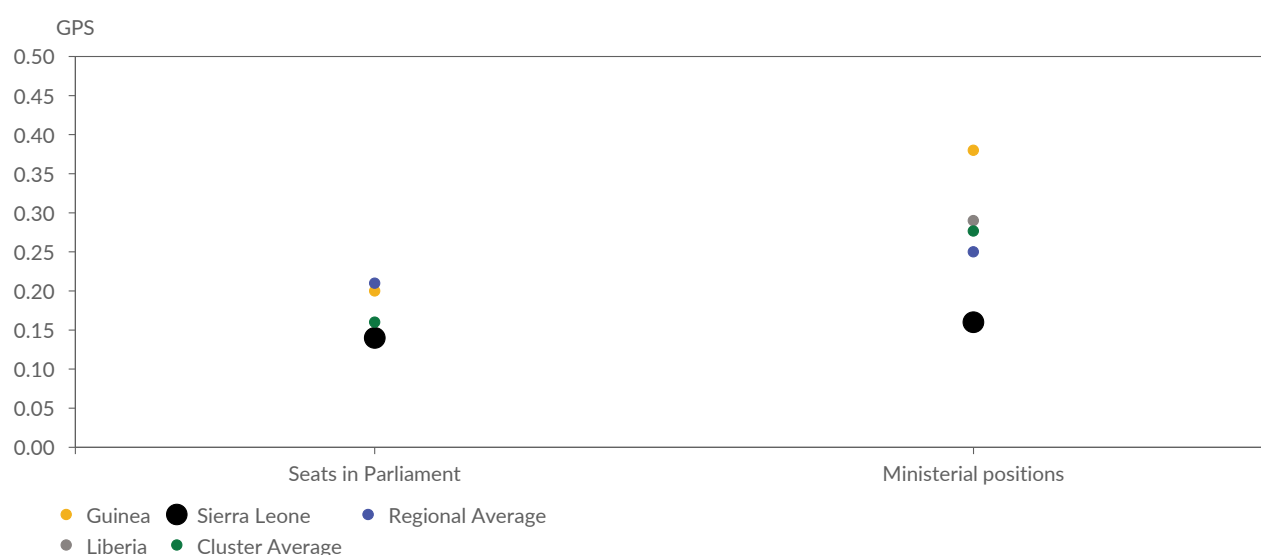
B5. Political empowerment

Sierra Leone is still far from achieving gender parity in political representation. While the country has made some improvements in women's political representation over the past decade, its

⁴¹ Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action - Sierra Leone Country Report 2019

performance remains poor, with only 13.79% women in the Government and 12.32% in the Parliament in 2020, which is below the ECOWAS averages, which are 19.39% and 16.19% respectively. Despite its good will, as evidenced by the recent creation of a Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, Sierra Leone is struggling to mainstream gender into public sector. However, the recent revival of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) bill, which would guarantee a minimum of 30% of the elective and nominative political functions to women, raises hopes for better political representation of women in the country.

Figure 16: Political empowerment – Sierra Leone regional average and cluster comparison (2020) – Gender parity scores (0-1)



Women's political representation

In Sierra Leone, persistent barriers due to gender traditions and women's limited political skills prevent them from participating in politics on an equal footing with men. Currently, only 4 women are in President Maada Bio's 29-member cabinet (i.e., 13.79% of the cabinet or a GPS of 0.16 compared to a regional average of 0.25). These 4 ministers hold the portfolios of gender, social welfare, tourism, and marine resources.⁴² Of the 146 Members of Parliament (MPs) elected in the last general election in 2018, only 18 are women (i.e., 12.32% of the seats or a GPS of 0.14 compared to a regional average of 0.21), including 2 of the 14 Paramount Chief MPs. Women's participation in governance is also limited to a handful of positions at the local level with 73 women elected out of 489 local councilors (14.93%).⁴³ According to the findings of the 2018 EU Election Observation Mission report women were disadvantaged given that, (i) none of the major parties had a woman as a presidential candidate or running mate, (ii) the 2 women presidential candidates only received 0.5% and 0.2% of the vote in the first round, (iii) there were only 4 women running mates out of a total of 16 candidates, and (iv) the number of women running for parliament was 100 out of 795 (12.6%). It turns out that women in Sierra Leone face both internal and external barriers to their political participation: (i) there is still a strong patriarchal structure, especially in rural communities where women cannot participate in local governance due to tradition; (ii) for politically engaged women it is difficult to navigate political parties that are disproportionately male dominated as they have to work harder to build their political networks, find allies, secure campaign funding, and gain respect, especially since the scarcity of women leaders in the parties makes it difficult for them to access

⁴² Songhai Advisory, 2021

⁴³ SEND Sierra Leone

mentorship; (iii) women's low literacy levels (69.02% of adult women above the age of 15 are illiterate against 52.89% of men in 2020)⁴⁴ and insufficient knowledge of their political rights and processes limit their ability to participate on an equal footing with men and successfully advocate for other women.⁴⁵ All these barriers discourage women from aspiring to political a career.

Figure 17: Number of seats in parliament – Sierra Leone regional and cluster average comparison (2016-2020) - Gender parity scores (0-1)

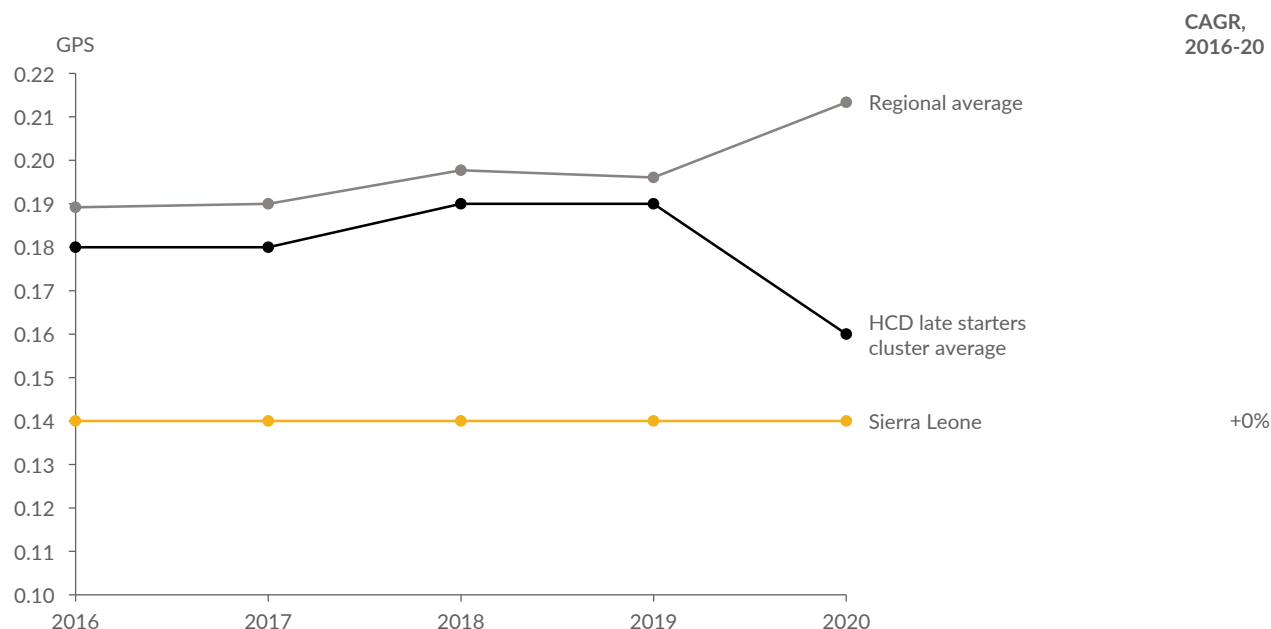
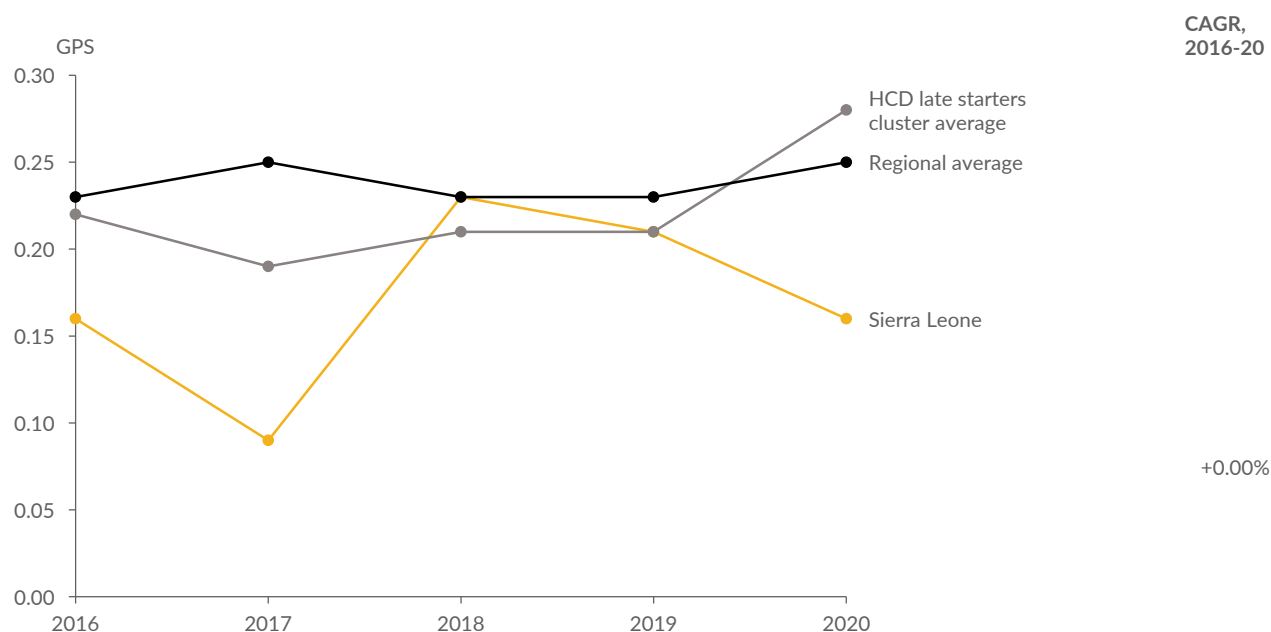


Figure 18: Ministerial positions – Sierra Leone regional and cluster average comparison (2016-2020) - Gender parity scores (0-1)



⁴⁴ World Bank data

⁴⁵ The Borgen Project, The Challenges of Women in Sierra Leone, 2022

However, thanks to the advocacy of international organizations and civil society for women's political representation, slight improvements have been observed between the 2012 and 2018 general elections. International and civil society organizations such as UN Women, USAID, the 50/50 Group, etc. are mobilizing in Sierra Leone to increase the number of women in decision-making positions and boost their leadership skills. They have organized leadership trainings and awareness raising sessions with communities on women's human rights across the country during the last general elections in 2018. For example, the 50/50 Group has implemented numerous mentoring programs, leadership, decision-making, public speaking and political campaign trainings. As a result, the number of women candidates increased in various elected positions in the 2018 general election compared to 2012. For example, while there were only 2 female candidates out of the 16 for president in 2018 as mentioned earlier, there were none in the 2012 elections. In addition, the government has established the Situation Room, a platform composed of women from all political parties, which observed the pre-election, election, and post-election processes in order to report any election-related violence or intimidation against women to the election management bodies.⁴⁶

The recent revival of GEWE bill raises hopes for better political representation of women in Sierra Leone. After advocacy from international and civil society organizations to improve women's political representation, Sierra Leone's cabinet passed a bill in 2021 to reserve 30% of elected and public office for women. A version of the GEWE bill was first proposed in 2012 under the previous APC government of Ernest Koroma but had little political support to pass then. Passage of such a law by Parliament will require a lot of goodwill on the part of MPs who are predominantly men.

Figure 19: Female representation in elected positions of the executive and legislative branches, 2018

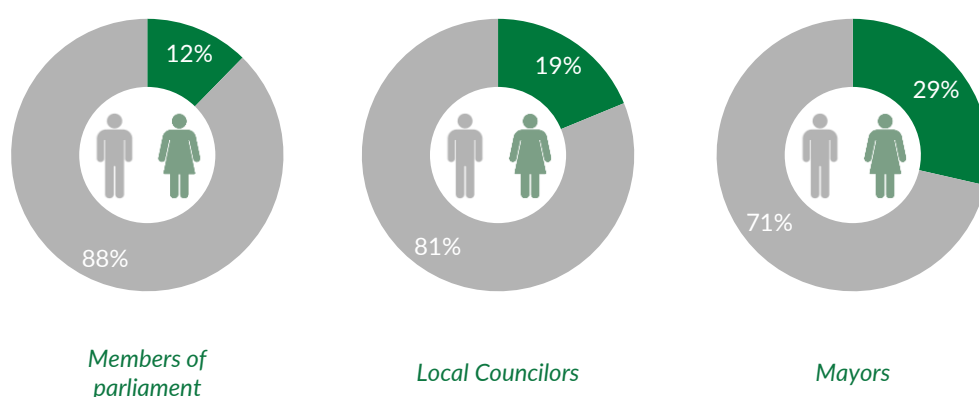
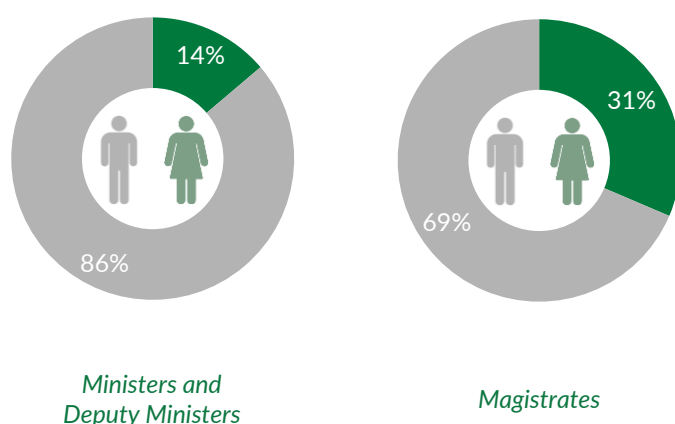


Figure 20: Female representation in appointed positions of the executive and judicial branches, 2018



⁴⁶ Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action - Sierra Leone Country Report 2019

Gender mainstreaming

Despite its efforts, Sierra Leone struggles with gender mainstreaming in the public sector. The willingness to mainstream gender across government in Sierra Leone is demonstrated by (i) the recent establishment of the Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs (MOGCA) in 2019 following the split of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, which is in charge of policies for the protection of women's and children's rights and the empowerment of women; (ii) the development of the GEWE policy for elimination of gender inequalities by all stakeholders at national and community levels and family units throughout the country, which is the guiding principle of the MOGCA; (iii) the appointment of gender focal points in Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) to facilitate gender mainstreaming activities in their respective MDA; and (iv) the production of gender disaggregated statistical data by the national statistical agency Statistics Sierra Leone (Stat SL).⁴⁷ However, gender mainstreaming in government has been slow to take root because (i) MOGCA's budget is insufficient for its needs in terms of policy implementation; (ii) focal points in the MDAs lack effectiveness as they are often administrative staff with little or no decision-making power, and limited knowledge of tools and resources needed to carry out their mission; and (iii) some MDAs are not sufficiently engaged and see gender equality as the sole responsibility of MOGCA rather than an integral part of their mission. Furthermore, despite progress in providing gender-specific data in health and education, there are still gaps in the provision of comprehensive gender disaggregated data across all sectors of the economy. Technical and financial partners, such as UNDP and UN Women, are working with the Sierra Leonean government to build the capacity of MDAs in these aspects.

Sierra Leone is facing difficulties in increasing women's political representation and mainstreaming gender in the public sector. Sierra Leonean women face barriers to entering the political arena on an equal footing with men, both at the level of political parties that are largely dominated by men and at the level of the women themselves who lack preparedness and motivation for a political career. In terms of gender mainstreaming in government, the process is taking time due to lack of financial means and technical capacities, as well as resistance to change among some stakeholders. In such a context, women's political representation in Sierra Leone could significantly benefit from reform.

B6. Impact of COVID-19

Measures taken by the government of Sierra Leone to contain the spread of COVID-19 have negatively impacted the condition of women and girls. The first case of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone was recorded on March 30, 2020, followed by an increase in cases to a peak in June 2020⁴⁸ and a steady decline. To reduce the spread of the coronavirus, containment measures have been put in place, including (i) widespread dissemination of guidance on social distancing, mask wearing, and hand washing; (ii) closure of schools and universities; (iii) prohibition of public gatherings; (iv) border closures and prohibition of inter-district travel; (v) a nationwide partial lockdown and nighttime curfew; (vi) as well as a one-year national state of emergency. Through these measures, the pandemic

⁴⁷ Stat SL has facilitated the collection of gender-disaggregated data through (i) the establishment of an inter-agency coordination mechanism on gender statistics (e.g., technical working group, inter-agency committee), (ii) the reprocessing of existing data (e.g., censuses and surveys) to produce more disaggregated and/or new gender statistics, and (iii) the enhancement of administrative or alternative data sources to fill in gender data gaps.

⁴⁸ Sierra Leone Education Sector Analysis, UNESCO, 2020

has particularly affected the living conditions of women and girls by making it more difficult for them to access maternal health care services, increasing their exposure to harmful practices, and threatening advances in women and girls' educational outcomes and economic opportunities.

Impact on health and nutrition

COVID-19 restrictions have made it more difficult for women to access maternal health services. Experience with past Ebola epidemics (2014-2016) and initial reports of the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that the greatest threat in Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, including Sierra Leone, may be its indirect effects on access to and delivery of essential health services.⁴⁹ Women are the primary victims given the significant reduction in the use of maternal care services.⁵⁰ The maternal mortality ratio rebounded in 2020 to 916 deaths per 100,000 live births: while Sierra Leone had reached its lowest rate the previous year (up from 808 in 2019), the country regressed to its 2018 level (which was 917) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, COVID-19 has exacerbated the already high prevalence of women dying from complications during childbirth. The epidemic has also disrupted the treatment of chronic diseases such as child malnutrition, as not only have limited government resources been diverted to address the pandemic, but also restrictions on inter-district travel have prevented NGOs from providing services to populations in need outside larger cities.

The economic crisis and school closures that followed the anti-covid restrictions likely increased the incidence of harmful practices against girls. Research on the Ebola crisis has also shown that measures to contain the spread of the disease tend to increase girls' exposure to harmful practices. On the one hand, girls are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse by both their peers and older men, as they are often home alone and unsupervised. Teenage pregnancies were found to have increased by up to 65% in some communities during the Ebola crisis. On the other hand, many families choose to marry off their daughters to cope with the financial hardships resulting from the cessation of their income-generating activity, rather than keep them in school.⁵¹

Impact on education, skills, and labor participation

Drawing on its experience with the Ebola outbreak, Sierra Leone was able to quickly take steps to mitigate the risks associated with closing schools in response to the spread of COVID-19. Schools across the country closed as early as March 2020 to reduce the spread of the virus, disrupting the education of more than 2.4 million children, and did not reopen until 7 months later, in October 2020. The experience of the Ebola epidemic strengthened Sierra Leone's response to school closures, with infrastructure, pedagogy and a focus on low-tech mechanisms such as radio. As a result, 80,000 radios were distributed in the country during the Ebola crisis, and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education has a dedicated broadcast station ever since. This enabled the rapid launch of a nationwide radio education program within a week after schools were closed. School closures during the Ebola epidemic also led to an increase in school dropouts, child labor, violence against children, teenage pregnancy, and persistent socioeconomic and gender disparities. There is therefore a risk that the situation will be repeated with COVID-19. Progress in terms of children's enrollment has been undermined, as between 2019 and 2020, a decline in enrollment in primary school and secondary school is observed by 2.08% and 5.33% respectively. To mitigate the risk of girls dropping

⁴⁹ BMJ Global Health, 2021

⁵⁰ Fighting COVID-19 in Freetown, Sierra Leone: the critical role of community organisations in a growing pandemic, Open health, 2020

⁵¹ Sierra Leone Education Sector Analysis, UNESCO, 2020

out of school after schools reopen, the government lifted the ban on pregnant girls attending school and taking exams as of March 2020.

Impact on entrepreneurship

With the restrictions on movement and the closure of markets due to COVID-19, women's income-generating activities have been particularly disrupted by the crisis. Containment efforts have resulted in a high economic cost for Sierra Leone: the country's GDP contracted by 2% in 2020,⁵² commodity prices increased, and the majority of Sierra Leoneans, especially women, have lost income. Restrictions on inter-district movement prevented farmers from transporting their marketable surpluses to the capital or other urban centers, severely reducing their incomes; and with the closure of markets, traders were unable to conduct their usual business. Women were once again disproportionately affected by the crisis, as women represent 52.43% of the workforce in agriculture and 62.71% of the workforce in sales and services.⁵³ On average 70% of livelihoods were affected by COVID-19 across the country, and the livelihoods of female-headed households were slightly more affected than those of male-headed households (70% compared to 67%).⁵⁴ Women entrepreneurs, already more vulnerable before the pandemic, have been further weakened by COVID-19.

⁵² World Bank

⁵³ Demographic and Health Survey 2019

⁵⁴ Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, WFP, 2021

C. THE JOURNEY TO ADVANCE GENDER PARITY

C1. Lessons learned from Sierra Leone's gender parity journey

The Sierra Leonean experience with gender parity initiatives across all four dimensions assessed, provides valuable lessons to leverage in future interventions to further close the parity gap in Sierra Leone and across other ECOWAS member states.

Lessons learned in health & nutrition

- **Regional disparities need to be addressed to improve women's access to basic health services.** There is a significant difference in women's ease of access to basic healthcare services across Sierra Leone. The country has a predominantly rural population, yet urban women are six times more likely to have a prenatal visit with a doctor than rural women (12% compared to 2%). For instance, the proportion of births in a health facility varies from 61% in Port Loko district to 97% in Kenema and Pujehun.
- **Women's level of education has a major impact on their health and that of their families.** Women with more than a secondary education attend more prenatal visits, deliver more systematically in a health facility, and have children less prone to stunting due to malnutrition than women with no education.
- **With a wide array of actors involved in the same area of intervention, it is essential to put in place a coordination platform for effective service delivery and improved gender equality initiatives.** The National Committee on Gender-Based Violence (NaC-GBV) was created to harmonize resources, including expertise, and to avoid duplication of efforts in GBV program interventions. It is composed of governmental institutions, UN agencies, CSOs and international NGOs working in the field of GBV prevention and response. It enables to provide a more holistic response to GBV, and particularly sexual exploitation and abuse.
- **Legal sanctions alone are not enough to prevent harmful practices against girls and women in society.** It is essential to secure buy in from men and boys on gender equality and violence against women and girls so they can take ownership of these issues and in turn sensitize their peers. The FINE-SL program is working to help gradually change harmful social norms against women and girls in Sierra Leone through its "Husband's School" initiative, seeing men and boys as part of the solution to gender equality rather than part of the problem.

Lessons learned in education, skills, and labor participation

- **Effective decision-making requires the availability of field survey data.** The government implemented the FQEP following the 2018 Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) findings that most cases of children not enrolling in primary school are due to financial hardship. The FQEP boosted primary school enrollment in the year following its implementation with an additional 30% of students.
- **Lack of financial means is the primary barrier to access to health and education.** By implementing the Free Health Care (FHC) program for vulnerable groups and the Free Quality Education Program (FQEP), Sierra Leone has significantly facilitated access to basic services for vulnerable groups. As a result, the country reduced its maternal mortality rate and increased primary and secondary school enrollment, especially for girls.
- **Women's increased enrollment in tertiary education does not necessarily translate into higher incomes.** While Sierra Leone closed the gender parity gap in tertiary education and in

workforce participation, women still earn on average 74% of men's earnings. Closing this income gap will require young women to pursue higher-skilled fields of study, including STEAMs that will help them access higher-income jobs, as opposed to the vocational training the majority pursue.

Lessons learned in entrepreneurship, financial inclusion

- **Initiatives to stimulate women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship will not be sustainable as long as gender stereotypes remain pervasive in Sierra Leonean society.** Women are expected to marry and take on all domestic tasks while men work outside the home, leaving little time to pursue their professional aspirations. These biased perceptions of women's role in society and within the household are persistent and hinder efforts to empower women economically through entrepreneurship.
- **Financial products available on the market need to be tailored to women's needs to improve their financial inclusion.** Limited access to property ownership is one of the key factors driving women's financial exclusion. Indeed, men are nearly 4 times more likely than women to be the sole owner of a house ([m] 19% vs [f] 5%) in Sierra Leone⁵⁵. This curtails women's ability to use property as collateral, resulting in only 0.5% of women borrowing from commercial banks⁵⁶. Women's financial inclusion will require that financial institutions such as commercial banks and micro-finance institutions rethink collateral

Lessons learned in political empowerment

- **Still too few women aspire to a political career due to a lack of mentoring.** The 50/50 Group has implemented mentoring, leadership training, decision-making training, public speaking training, and political campaign training for women, which encouraged 2 women to run for president in 2018 compared to 0 in 2012. While a good start, women will need more support and training from civil society organizations and the government to overcome the barriers to their political participation that include their limited political skills and knowledge.
- **Gender focal points are not sufficiently heard in their respective MDAs when they are not at a senior level, which is a hindrance to gender mainstreaming in public sector.** Currently, focal points in MDAs lack efficiency because they are often administrative staff with little or no decision-making power, with little knowledge, methods, tools and resources to carry out their mission.

C2. Recommendations

In recent years, Sierra Leone has made considerable progress towards closing the parity gap. The current state analysis identified key areas that Sierra Leone can address to build on the progress made to date. These include addressing gender biased socio-cultural norms, improving the supply of basic services, facilitating women's access to economic resources, and improving women's technical skills' building. The following is an initial set of recommendations for addressing these barriers and challenges.

⁵⁵ Demographic and Health Survey 2019

⁵⁶ Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) 2018

Address persistent gender-biased norms

In Sierra Leone, the prevailing patriarchy, socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes unfavorable to women prevent them from living up to their full potential. It is essential to conduct awareness campaigns to facilitate a gradual change of mindset through (i) gender inclusive school curricula, (ii) leveraging the media and (iii) identifying gender champions in the public sector.

To deconstruct gender stereotypes and break down macho attitudes towards women in society, it is important to raise awareness from an early age by developing inclusive curricula that represent both genders outside of their stereotypical molds; school-based initiatives can go a long way in changing preconceived notions about the role of women and girls in society. Role modeling and mentoring can also be effective ways to show young women and girls what they can aspire to pursue as a professional career.

Another way to foster gender parity in society is to promote women entrepreneurs and leaders through media campaigns such as (i) annual award ceremonies, as a way to give visibility to women who have succeeded in their careers, to tell their stories and to encourage girls and women to pursue their ambitions; and (ii) exhibitions and trade fairs where women entrepreneurs should be invited to participate more often to promote their work and contribute to a gradual change in the mindsets of actors across various industries.

A top-down approach will be needed to change the reluctant mindsets within the public sector that can often be slow to change. To ensure the sustainability of gender mainstreaming in MDAs, it is crucial that all departments take ownership of the topic and that influential gender champions be designated in each MDA to spearhead initiatives.

Improve basic service provision

Sierra Leone has recently implemented ambitious legal provisions for school enrollment and SGBV control that need to be complemented with improved service delivery to address disparities and build infrastructure.

In education, the FQEP increased primary and secondary school enrollment by about 30% in the school year following its implementation. Since the number of classrooms did not increase as quickly, overcrowded schools became more common. To maintain the quality of education, new classrooms will need to be built quickly, especially closer to underserved communities, to address disparities and prevent distance from being a barrier to girls' schooling. In urban areas, the extension of the school bus network would allow girls to go to school safely. Distance is also a barrier to young women's enrollment in tertiary education; it can be addressed by building hostels for female students in universities and/or creating a virtual university to enable distance learning. In terms of career advancement in the labor market, women are disadvantaged by being the primary caretakers of children in the household; by promoting the establishment safe day care centers where they can drop off their infants early in the morning and pick them up in the evening, women will be able to better focus on their professional careers and increase their chances of moving up to management positions.

After the adoption of several policies to prevent SGBV, additional allocation of resource for better service provision is also needed to address cases of violence against women. Sierra Leone could improve its response to SGBV by (i) acquiring laboratory equipment that can test and provide evidence for rape cases; (ii) providing free care and psychosocial support to SGBV survivors; (iii) and

establishing "safe community homes" to keep abused children and women away from abusive situations until they can be reintegrated.⁵⁷

Introduce incentive mechanisms to compensate for women's disadvantaged access to leadership positions as well as economic resources

Financial incentives can be an effective tool to encourage more rapid change in norms and practices.

Despite achieving gender parity in labor force participation in Sierra Leone, women on average earn much less than their male counterparts as they are underrepresented in senior leadership positions; they also find it more difficult to access bank credit to expand their economic activities due to lack of collateral. Fiscal incentives can encourage (i) the promotion of women to leadership positions in the private sector, by providing employers with tax breaks based on women's representation in management positions; and (ii) extending bank credit to women entrepreneurs by expanding guarantee schemes for women entrepreneurs, which could encourage them to borrow at concessional rates, formalize and expand their businesses.

Reinforce capacity of both women and public servants

Capacity building for both women beneficiaries and public servants is necessary to improve the impact of gender parity initiatives. One of the main obstacles observed in all sectors of activity, from women entrepreneurs who lack the business skills to develop their businesses, to women who aspire to leadership positions in the public or private sector, is the lack of technical skills to seize these opportunities. Focus should be put on business training for women entrepreneurs to help them structure their projects and make them investment ready. Training provided to female politicians by local and international organizations, including public speaking and fundraising skills, should also be extended to target more women. These capacity-building efforts will better prepare these women to succeed in fields that are currently disproportionately dominated by men.

Public institutions also need capacity building to successfully carry out their mission for a more gender-equal society. In MDAs, gender mainstreaming is slowed by the lack of knowledge and familiarity of key decision-makers with the tools. They need training to systematically incorporate gender into their policies and interventions. The Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs should be equipped with an effective activity monitoring system that would allow it to track gender initiatives from other MDAs, compile them, and report to sponsors, including the President of the Republic and donors.

⁵⁷ A less costly alternative would be to identify families in the communities that can play this role; this would also allow for greater community involvement in addressing the issue of SGBV.

D. APPENDIX

D1. Methodology used for the case study

Anchoring the Gender Equality and Parity Study in the 2050 ECOWAS HCD Strategy

The ECOWAS Human Capital Development framework evaluates regional performance metrics across three dimensions, which measure social, economic, and educational elements, all critical for societies to thrive. Dimensions selected include:

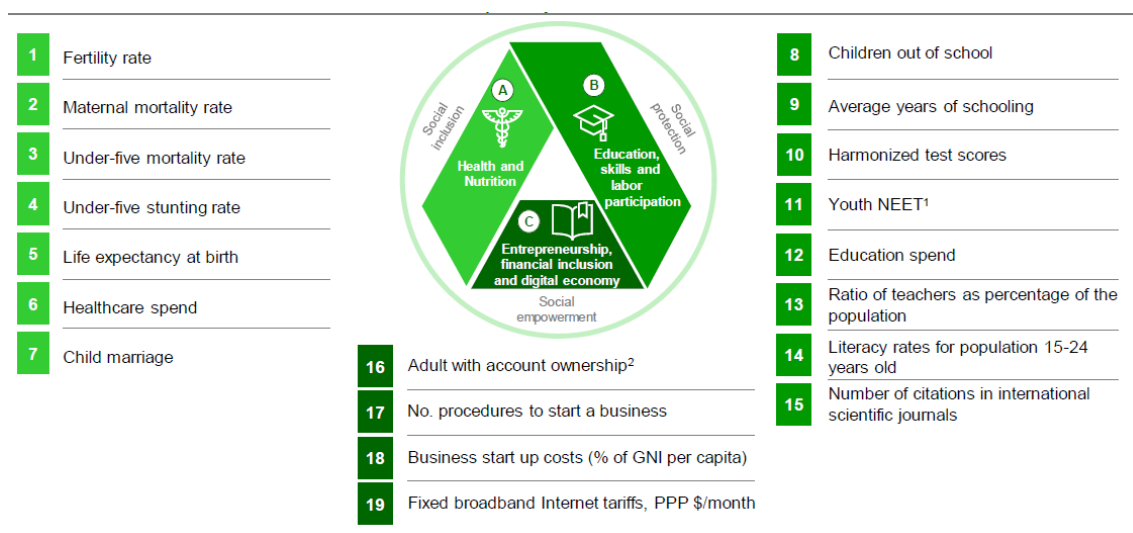
- Health and nutrition
- Education, skills, and labor participation
- Entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, and digital economy

We have also added a political empowerment dimension to assess women's representation in the political arena and capture the challenges they still face.

The gender-transformative human capital development (HCD) strategy is anchored into this overall HCD approach and aims to promote gender equity and equality as key to reaching inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Gender inclusion is critical to drive economic growth and increase societal value. All fifteen Member States have untapped opportunities when it comes to gender equality and parity. For these reasons, gender inclusion is a cross-cutting enabler of the HCD Strategy aligned around the previously outlined dimensions.

Each one of these dimensions breaks down into a set of priority indicators as illustrated in the figure below:

Figure 21: The ECOWAS HCD framework

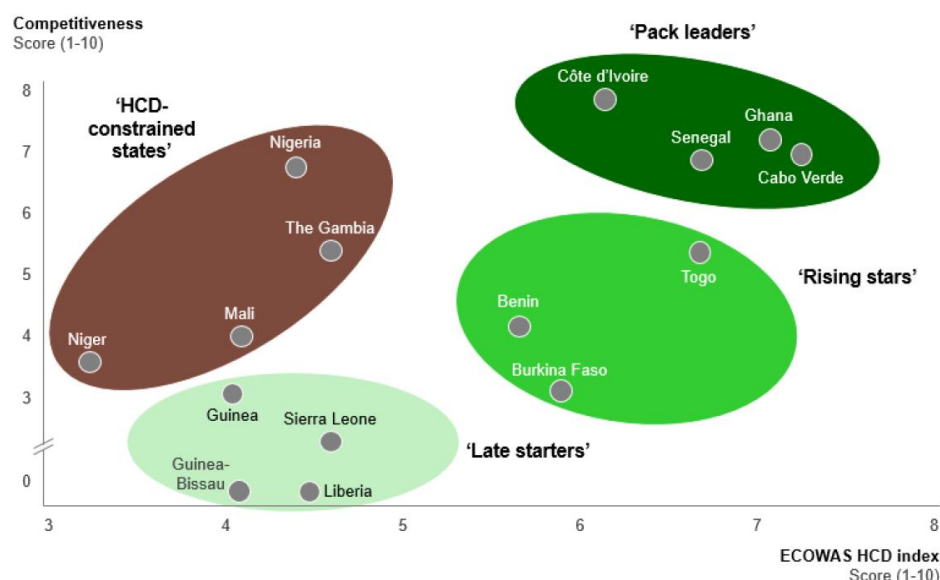


ECOWAS HCD strategy categorizes countries in four clusters based on their HCD performance and economic competitiveness.

- **The Pack Leaders** are the strongest performers on both HCD and competitiveness
- **The Rising Stars** have been registered average performances on both HCD and competitiveness

- **The HCD-constrained States** are lagging behind their peers on HCD indicators despite strong economic competitiveness performances
- **The Late Starters** have experienced a stunt in their progress on HCD indicators resulting in competitiveness under-performance

Figure 22: ECOWAS country clusters based on economic competitiveness and HCD performance⁵⁸



The country performance assessment will be framed around these four archetypes and use the selected indicators across each HCD dimension as guidance to evaluate MS' gender parity performance. This clustered approach will capture the region's diversity and allow a comparison of countries performance facing similar constraints. This study will then review the gender parity performance for each dimension of the HCD framework to understand the drivers and binding constraints to reach total parity (Score of 1 for the index).

Key indicators selected to assess gender parity performance

This study will seek to assess gender equality and parity across a set of key indicators under each dimension (health, education, entrepreneurship, and political empowerment). The figure below is an initial selection of relevant indicators for the gender parity analysis that are used to frame this country assessment. These indicators were chosen because they relate to gender parity and equality. While not an exhaustive list of indicators for lack of gender disaggregated data across all 15 Member States, these indicators capture the state of gender parity consistently across the region.

⁵⁸ ECOWAS 2030 Integrated Regional Strategy for Human Capital Development

Figure 23: Selected indicators across HCD dimensions for regional and country gender parity analysis

Selected indicators			
Dimension	Health and Nutrition	Entrepreneurship, financial inclusion and digital economy	Education, skills and labor participation
HCD Indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fertility rate Maternal mortality ratio Child marriage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adults with account ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average years of schooling Literacy rate
Additional indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life expectancy Prevalence of stunting for height 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Estimated earned income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Labor force participation Primary school enrolment rate Secondary school enrolment rate Tertiary enrolment rate Average years of schooling
Additional dimension	Political Empowerment Seats in parliament Women in ministerial positions		

D2. Methodology used to conduct interviews and type of stakeholders interviewed

A total of 21 stakeholder interviews were conducted to draft the Sierra Leone deep dive report:

- 6 interviews with ministries and government agencies allowed us to identify challenges and potential opportunities in current gender focused interventions implemented by Member State governments.
- 6 interviews with technical partners were conducted to identify successful gender focused interventions to scale up and synergies between their activities and ECOWAS interventions.
- 4 interviews with civil society organizations focused on promoting women and girls' social, political, and economic inclusion. These conversations were critical to identifying successful initiatives implemented by these organizations to advance gender parity objectives.
- 5 interviews with private sector actors were held and conversations with female-led businesses across a wide range of sectors were prioritized to better understand the hurdles women face when pursuing their professional aspirations.

We applied a hypothesis-driven approach to develop tailored interview guides for each interviewees/stakeholder archetypes. The table below outlines the list of stakeholders interviewed for the purpose of this study.

Table 1: List of stakeholders interviewed in Sierra Leone

Type of stakeholder	Institution
Government	Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs – Madam Hon Manty Tarawalli (Minister)
	Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs – Mr. Charles Vandí (Director of Gender Affairs)
	Ministry of Health and Sanitation – Mr. Francis Smart (Director of Policy, Planning and Information)

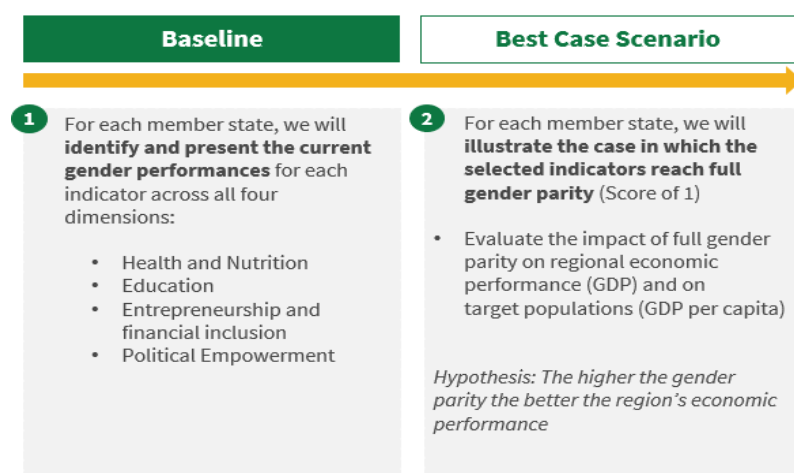
	Ministry of Health and Sanitation – Mrs. Mariam Sow (Special Advisor to the Minister of Health and Sanitation on Gender Mainstreaming and Diaspora Engagement)
	Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education – Mrs. Ann Konneh (Gender Focal Officer)
	Ministry of Technical and Higher Education - Mrs. Christiana Samu (Chief Technical and Higher Education Officer)
Technical Partners	UN Women
	African Development Bank
	UNDP
	USAID
	FAO
	UNIDO
	Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone
Civil Society Organizations	Sierra Leone Adolescent Girls Network / We are Purposeful
	Save the Children
	Rainbo Initiative
	Fambul Initiative Network for Equality Sierra Leone (FINESL)
Private Sector	Gen SL
	Sierra Leone Chamber for Agribusiness Development (SLeCAD)
	Unimax SL
	Narnia Daycare
	Pangea

D3. Methodology used to measure the economic impact of gender parity

The methodology focused on testing the hypothesis that higher gender parity scores lead to a more inclusive society and drive sustainable economic growth. The objective of the modeling exercise was to size the economic potential across each dimension if the region is to achieve gender parity. The purpose is to understand how improvements in gender parity in each dimension can positively impact economic performance.

By using GPS scores for selected indicators and for each country, a baseline and best-case scenario was developed as illustrated below.

Figure 24: Illustration of the scenario modeling methodology



Prior to running the simulations, the pre-selected indicators were presented to ECOWAS to review their relevance to gender. Upon validation of the indicators, a baseline was created for each country using their current gender parity performance scores and determine their current economic performance.

A panel data on the evolution of economic growth was used for each year between 2000 and 2030 in fourteen (14) West African states, namely Benin, Burkina Faso, Capo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo⁵⁹. This model analyzed the impact of these different variables on the economic growth for the fourteen (14) countries.

$$\text{GDPgrowth}_{it} = \alpha + \delta \text{GPS}_{it} + \beta \text{X}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

GDPgrowth_{it} = dependent variable- GDP growth for the country (i) at time (t)

α = the constant

δ = the coefficient of Gender Parity Index for country (i) at time (t)

GPS_{it} = Gender Parity Score is the variable of interest – independent variable for country (i) at time (t)

β = the coefficient of the control variables

X_{it} = control variables for country (i) at time (t)

ϵ_{it} = error term

A baseline and best-case scenarios simulation were conducted to estimate the impact on the economic performance and targeted populations. With GDP growth as the dependent variable and the GPS as the independent variable of interest. World Bank databases on population growth, the share of international trade in GDP, gross savings rate, and the corruption index were used as control variables in the model. Thus, the indicators whose coefficients were found to be more significant on GDP growth were retained. As a result, primary, secondary, tertiary enrollment rates, literacy rate and labor force participation were determined to be the indicators with the most significant impact on GDP growth.

⁵⁹ Guinea Bissau was excluded from the model due to insufficient data availability

D4. Indicators tables across the 4 dimensions

Health & Nutrition

Table 2: Sierra Leone's GPS in Health and Nutrition within its cluster and regional average (2020)

Indicators Countries	Fertility rate (total births per woman)	Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	Prevalence of stunting for height (GPS)	Child marriage (% of girls <18)	Life expectancy at birth (GPS)
Guinea	4.31	495.03	0.83	46.5	1.02
Liberia	4.47	652.414	0.86	35.93	1.05
Sierra Leone	4.32	916.25	0.79	29.6	1.03
Cluster Average	4.37	687.90	0.83	37.34	1.03
Regional Average	4.75	496.78	0.82	34.88	1.04

Table 3: Sierra Leone's GPS evolution in Health and Nutrition between 2016 – 2020

Indicators	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	CAGR (2016-2020)
Fertility rate (total births per woman)	4.46	4.36	4.26	4.17	4.32	-0.76%
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	1120	1120	917.64	808.15	916.25	-4.90%
Prevalence of stunting for height (GPS)	0.80	0.77	0.80	0.83	0.79	-0.42%
Child marriage (% of girls <18)	29.6	29.6	29.6	29.6	29.6	+0.00%
Life expectancy at birth (GPS)	1.03	1.03	1.03	1.03	1.03	+0.03%

Education, Skills and Labor Participation

Table 4: Sierra Leone's GPS in Education, Skills and Labor Participation within its cluster and regional average (2020)

Indicators	Literacy rate (GPS)	Primary school enrolment rate (GPS)	Secondary enrolment rate (GPS)	Tertiary enrolment rate (GPS)	Labor force participation (GPS)
Countries					
Guinea	0.67	0.85	0.78	0.59	1.06
Liberia	0.68	0.96	0.77	0.68	0.88
Sierra Leone	0.86	1.03	0.98	1.00	0.97
Cluster Average	0.74	0.95	0.85	0.76	0.97
Regional Average	0.83	0.99	0.91	0.74	0.84

Table 5: Sierra Leone's GPS evolution in Education, Skills and Labor Participation between 2016 – 2020

Indicators \ Years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	CAGR (2016-2020)
Literacy rate (GPS)	0.81	0.80	0.89	0.90	0.86	+1.61%
Primary school enrolment rate (GPS)	1.01	1.02	1.03	1.03	1.03	+0.56%
Secondary enrolment rate (GPS)	0.95	1.00	0.96	0.98	0.98	+0.77%
Tertiary enrolment rate (GPS)	0.68	0.75	0.78	0.91	1.01	+10.37%
Labor force participation (GPS)	0.97	0.97	0.98	0.99	0.97	+0.12%

Entrepreneurship, Financial Inclusion, and Digital Economy

Table 6: Sierra Leone's GPS in Entrepreneurship, financial inclusion and digital economy within its cluster and regional average (2020)

Indicators \ Countries	Adult with account ownership at financial institution (GPS)	Estimated earned income (GPS)
Guinea	0.69	0.84
Liberia	N/A	1
Sierra Leone	0.66	0.74
Cluster Average	0.68	0.86
Regional Average	0.68	0.64

Table 7: Sierra Leone's GPS evolution in Entrepreneurship, financial inclusion and digital economy between 2016 – 2020

Indicators \ Years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	CAGR (2016-2020)
Adult with account ownership at financial institution (GPS)	0.65	0.62	0.70	0.71	0.66	+0.23%
Estimated earned income (GPS)	0.74	0.72	0.74	0.76	0.74	+0.13%

Political empowerment

Table 8: Sierra Leone's GPS in Political within its cluster and regional average (2020)

Indicators Countries	Seats in parliament	Ministerial positions
	(GPS)	(GPS)
Guinea	0.20	0.38
Liberia	0.14	0.29
Sierra Leone	0.14	0.16
Cluster Average	0.16	0.28
Regional Average	0.21	0.25

Table 9: Sierra Leone's GPS evolution in Political Empowerment between 2016 - 2020

Indicators	Years					CAGR (2016-2020)
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	
Seats in parliament (GPS)	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14	-0.16%
Ministerial positions (GPS)	0.16	0.09	0.23	0.21	0.16	-0.01%