

SHAMED AND BLAMED: PREGNANT GIRLS' RIGHTS AT RISK IN SIERRA LEONE

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



AI Index Number: AFR 51/2778/2015
November 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Visibly pregnant girls in Sierra Leone are banned from attending mainstream school and taking exams. This prohibition was declared as official government policy by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in April 2015, just before schools re-opened following the Ebola crisis. The exclusion of pregnant girls from mainstream education and from sitting exams pre-dates the outbreak of Ebola; however, the official declaration of the ban when schools re-opened has sparked renewed debate and concern about this issue in Sierra Leone. The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone described the ban as discriminatory, stigmatising and likely to worsen the marginalization of pregnant girls and women.

It is not clear how many girls are affected the ban. Official figures suggest three thousand, but experts mapping the situation indicate that the true figure is far higher.

In June 2015 Amnesty International visited the country and interviewed 52 girls, of whom 13 were either pregnant or had recently given birth. Amnesty International also interviewed teachers, officials, civil society organizations and donors about the issue. This report presents the findings of that research and sets out a number of recommendations to the government of Sierra Leone and its international partners.

The ban on pregnant girls attending mainstream schools is being enforced, in some cases, through humiliating and degrading treatment of girls. Amnesty International interviewed girls who had experienced or witnessed others being subjected to degrading procedures by teachers and others in positions of authority, such as nurses. For example, girls have, publically, had their breasts and stomachs felt by adults on school premises to see if they are pregnant. Some girls have been compelled, by their schools, to take urine tests. Girls described acute embarrassment and fear at being subjected to this treatment when they tried to attend school or sit exams. Fear of being "tested" for pregnancy and or turned away from school has meant some girls who are pregnant, stay away. The extent of this problem is difficult to assess. Such "testing" of girls is a serious violation of their right to physical integrity.

The way girls are "tested" for pregnancy is not part of government policy, but the way some schools treat girls believed to be pregnant is widely known. Despite this, no government directive has been issued or other pro-active step taken to prevent such discriminatory and degrading treatment of girls by teachers or others in positions of authority.

The prohibition on visibly pregnant girls attending mainstream school has long-term implications in a country where just 52% of girls aged 15-24 are literate. Pregnant girls have missed a significant

portion of their education including key exams necessary to go onto further education or secure employment. Once the baby is born many girls cannot afford child care or cannot count on the support of their families to be able to go back to school.

The ban on sitting examinations also has long-term implications for pregnant girls. There are at least two crucial exams that they are currently excluded from: the Basic Education Certificate Examination, which is necessary to guarantee admission into senior secondary school or other higher level education centres; and the West African Senior School Certificate Examinations, which are necessary to get into university or college, and are also important for potential employers. Given that the next BECE exams are to be held at the end of November 2015, the need to lift the ban is all the more urgent.

Many girls want to sit exams and not miss out on their chance to gain a qualification that they have studied for. The desire to sit exams and fear of being turned away has led some girls to taking risks with their health in order to sit the exam, such as girls strapping their stomach down in order to pass for non-pregnant girls. One girl described to Amnesty International how her friend had tied her stomach so she could sit her exam [the BECE exam in March 2015].

In May 2015, following national and international pressure, the President announced the establishment of an alternative “bridging “ education system that would allow pregnant girls to continue going to school, but in different premises or times to their peers. The alternative system has just launched and is being supported by some donor countries, such as Ireland and the UK. While some of the girls to whom Amnesty International spoke welcomed the idea, others wanted to attend regular classes with their peers and said they would do so if given the chance. Some experts expressed concern at the lack of choice, and that the persistent presence of the ban was stigmatising.

The ban on visibly pregnant girls attending mainstream school and sitting exams violates their right to education. Education is being treated as a privilege that can be taken away as punishment, rather than as a right of all children, regardless of their pregnancy status.

The policy is also blatantly discriminatory. It is founded in, and reinforces, negative stereotypes about girls. In addition it fails to take into account the high levels of sexual violence in Sierra Leone. During the Ebola outbreak, acts of sexual violence, including abusive and exploitative relationships, rose in Sierra Leone. Girls’ access to sexual and reproductive health services, information and goods, including post rape health care, has been a persistent problem predating the Ebola crisis. However during the height of the epidemic the pre-existing difficulties for girls wishing to access such services were acutely exacerbated.

The exclusion of pregnant girls from education has been recognised as a problem for several years. Over ten years ago the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2004 called the exclusion of pregnant girls from school “discriminatory and archaic.” The Commission said that changing this situation was “imperative”. In what appeared to be a positive development in 2013, the President committed the government to putting a *“particular emphasis in ensuring that pregnant girls are allowed to and supported in taking their exams, so they will be able to create a life for themselves and for their children.”* However, implementation of the programme was hampered by the onset of the Ebola outbreak, and has now been further impeded by the confirmation that visibly pregnant girls are banned from mainstream school and exams.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL’S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF SIERRA LEONE:

Amnesty International is calling on the government of Sierra Leone to guarantee girls’ human rights to non-discrimination and education by immediately lifting the ban on pregnant girls attending mainstream school and sitting exams, if they wish to do so. This is urgent and must be immediately addressed in relation to the forthcoming exams in late November 2015.

The government must also, as matter of urgency, protect girls' rights to privacy, physical and mental integrity, as well as their right to be free from inhuman and degrading treatment by issuing a directive to all schools prohibiting the checking or testing of girls for pregnancy.

The government should develop and implement a programme of Comprehensive Sexuality Education as part of the curricula delivered in all schools to enable people, boys and girls alike, to take informed decisions about their sexuality and health. The curriculum should include information to help prevent sexually transmitted diseases and early or unwanted pregnancy.

The report makes a number of recommendations for action by the government to guarantee girls' right to health, including access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, and in particular post rape services. It also calls for further action to eradicate violence against girls, to protect girls at risk, and enforce laws against perpetrators of sexual violence.

Amnesty International urges that attending the alternative system be optional for those girls who do not wish to continue at mainstream school and also that the government makes sure that the girls who go to the alternative system can count on equal quality and content of education.

In addition, Amnesty International is calling on Sierra Leone's international partners to continue efforts to support the Sierra Leonean government to fully comply with its international legal obligations to ensure the protection of pregnant girls' human rights. In particular, to take the steps necessary to ensure all programmes are in line with human rights standards and do not reinforce stigma or undermine pregnant girls' right to equality and non-discrimination.
