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Left Behind

The Unfolding Crisis in Girls' Education in Sierra Leone



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Abstract

Education is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which promotes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. This article critically examines the current state of education in Sierra Leone, focusing on literacy disparities and the gendered dimensions of school retention. Despite commendable government interventions such as the *Free Quality School Education (FQSE)* initiative launched in 2018 and the enactment of the *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act* in 2022, structural barriers continue to hinder the educational advancement of girls. Persistent challenges include high dropout rates linked to poverty, early marriage, and adolescent pregnancy, all of which are exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure and policy enforcement gaps.

The recent exclusion of thousands of students from the *West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE)* has further illuminated systemic vulnerabilities within the education system, disproportionately impacting female students from marginalized communities. Drawing on the lived experiences of beneficiaries of the *Thimzy Empowerment Initiative*, this article underscores the urgency of integrated policy reforms, including gender-responsive budgeting, expanded digital literacy and capacity-building for educators, and strengthened accountability mechanisms involving government, civil society, and community stakeholders.

Ultimately, ensuring equitable access to education for girls in Sierra Leone is not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for sustainable national development and the fulfillment of the country's Education Sector Plan (2022–2026). Without inclusive education reforms, the nation risks undermining its broader social and economic development goals.

Introduction

Education is not merely a human right, it is the foundation upon which all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) rest, influencing health, economic growth, gender equality, and social cohesion. SDG 4 specifically aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” with Target 4.6 emphasizing the need for all youth and a substantial proportion of adults to achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030 (UNESCO, n.d.).

In Sierra Leone, recent estimates place the adult literacy rate (ages 15 and above) at approximately **48.64%** (World Bank, 2022). However, this national average masks deep disparities. When disaggregated by gender, male literacy stands at **56.03%**, compared to **41.31%** for females, underscoring persistent gender inequality in access to quality education (World Bank, 2022; Country Economy, 2024). These figures are significantly below the **global adult literacy rate of 86.7%** and the **sub-Saharan African average of 68.3%** (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2023), reflecting the structural barriers Sierra Leone continues to face.

Nevertheless, youth literacy in Sierra Leone shows promise, with **67% of individuals aged 12–24** reported as literate (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2022). This upward trend aligns with broader national efforts, notably the **Free Quality School Education (FQSE)** initiative launched in 2018, which has expanded access and reduced financial barriers to basic education (Government of Sierra Leone, 2018). Furthermore, legislative milestones such as the **Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) Act of 2022**, which mandates at least 30% female representation in political and public life signal a national commitment to transforming the educational and socio-economic landscape for women and girls (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022).

Despite these efforts, systemic challenges persist, particularly in school retention and transition to tertiary education, disproportionately affecting girls in rural and low-income communities. The recent controversies surrounding the **West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE)** have further exposed vulnerabilities in the educational system, with implications for equity, quality, and long-term human capital development (Education Commission of Sierra Leone, 2024).

Addressing these gaps requires sustained policy reform, targeted investments, and robust community engagement to ensure that no one, especially young women and girls is left behind in the pursuit of lifelong learning and development.

The Persistent Gap: School Retention for Girls in Sierra Leone

Despite significant strides in promoting gender equality in education, school retention for girls in Sierra Leone remains critically low, especially beyond primary school. Recent data from the **2023 National Primary School Examination (NPSE)** shows promising progress: **girls made up 51.1%** of the total candidates (83,731 girls vs. 80,129 boys), and the pass rate for girls stood at **81.1%**, nearly equal to boys’ 81.6% (Sierraloadead, 2023). This signals an encouraging trend in primary-level participation and performance.

However, this momentum is not sustained through higher education levels. According to **UNICEF (2023)**, only **52%** of girls complete lower secondary education, and this figure drops steeply to **28%** by the end of upper secondary school. Similarly, **UNESCO (2022)** reported that for every 100 boys in

secondary school, only 84 girls are enrolled. The situation worsens at the end of senior secondary school, where only **66 girls complete school for every 100 boys**, according to **2023 BECE analysis** (Sierra Leone Monitor, 2023).

These gaps are fueled by a range of deeply entrenched barriers. **The Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS, 2017)** revealed that **34% of girls aged 15–19 were either pregnant or already mothers**, significantly contributing to early school dropout. Additional challenges include **poverty, early and forced marriage, teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence**, and **inadequate school infrastructure**, especially in rural areas. Cultural norms often prioritize boys' education and reinforce gender roles that confine girls to domestic responsibilities.

Sierra Leone's government has taken bold steps to address these issues. The **Free Quality School Education (FQSE)** initiative, launched in 2018, eliminated school and examination fees to reduce financial barriers. More notably, the **National Policy on Radical Inclusion (2021)** guarantees that pregnant girls and adolescent mothers have the legal right to stay in school, a major shift from previous exclusionary policies (HRW, 2023).

Despite these efforts, retention challenges persist. In parts of the **Northern Province**, child marriage rates exceed **40%**, directly contributing to high female dropout rates (HRW, 2023). There remains a critical need for gender-responsive infrastructure such as safe spaces, trained female teachers, and separate sanitation facilities, as well as community engagement to shift harmful gender norms.

The situation in Sierra Leone reflects a broader regional challenge. Across **sub-Saharan Africa**, over **10 million secondary school-aged girls** may never return to school due to poverty, gender norms, and childbearing responsibilities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (**World Bank, 2021**). Globally, **UNESCO (2022)** estimates that **129 million girls** are out of school.

Closing this gap is not only a matter of justice but also of socio-economic advancement. Studies from the **Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2022)** highlight that every additional year of schooling can increase a girl's earnings by **up to 20%** and reduce the likelihood of early marriage and child mortality.

To ensure Sierra Leone's girls are not left behind, a multisectoral approach is required, combining education, health, legal reform, and economic empowerment. Only through comprehensive, sustained action can the country unlock the full potential of its young women and truly deliver on the promise of inclusive development.

The WASSCE Crisis: A National Wake-Up Call for Sierra Leone

In 2025, Sierra Leone was rocked by a deeply troubling educational crisis that exposed systemic failures in the administration of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). Hundreds of students across the country, many of them girls, were unjustly excluded from sitting for the examination, despite having met all registration and academic requirements.

Among those affected were participants of the *Thimzy Empowerment Initiative's Safe Train Program*, a flagship educational support platform designed to prepare vulnerable young women and girls for academic success and national certification. These students had diligently completed their coursework, verified their exam entries, and maintained the discipline and academic standards

required to sit the WASSCE. However, just days before the examination, they were abruptly informed that their names were not on the official candidates list. No formal explanation was provided, and there was no immediate remediation process or appeal mechanism available.

This crisis not only undermines the individual futures of these young people but also signals a broader systemic failure. For a country striving to improve educational equity and girls' empowerment, such administrative negligence is a major setback. The exclusion disproportionately affected students from underprivileged backgrounds, especially girls from rural and peri-urban communities who have had to overcome enormous obstacles, poverty, gender-based violence, early marriage, and limited access to quality education just to reach this point in their academic journey.

The incident calls for urgent national introspection and institutional reform. If Sierra Leone is to fulfill its commitment to inclusive and equitable education for all, there must be robust systems of accountability, transparency, and student-centered governance within the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), and affiliated bodies.

The *Thimzy Empowerment Initiative* joins civil society voices in demanding:

- A full, independent investigation into the 2025 WASSCE exclusions;
- Immediate provision of alternative exam opportunities for the affected students;
- Transparent communication channels for students and schools during the exam registration process;
- Stronger safeguarding policies to ensure vulnerable groups, particularly girls, are not disproportionately impacted in times of administrative failure.

The future of Sierra Leone rests on the shoulders of its youth. We cannot afford to allow bureaucratic inefficiencies to rob them of the opportunities they have worked so hard to earn. This is not just an educational mishap, it is a national wake-up call.

The consequences of being denied the opportunity to sit for the WASSCE are both immediate and far-reaching:

- **Loss of Access to Higher Education:** Without the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), students are automatically disqualified from university admission. This abruptly halts their academic journey and shatters aspirations for a better future through higher education.
- **Risk of Permanent Academic Displacement:** As the education system transitions to a new senior secondary school curriculum, students who miss this critical examination may find themselves unable to catch up. The gap created by this missed opportunity could result in permanent exclusion from the formal academic system.
- **Insurmountable Barriers to Success:** For many students, achieving five credits is already a formidable challenge due to academic pressures and financial constraints. When they are

unfairly denied the chance to sit for the exam, this challenge becomes an impossible barrier—robbing them not just of results, but of hope, opportunity, and the possibility of breaking cycles of poverty.

Where the System Failed

Educators and school administrators have identified two critical points of failure:

- 1. Inadequate Training on Digital Registration Systems:**

A hastily organized two-week training program, often limited to just a few hours per day, left many teachers ill-equipped to navigate the digital platforms required for accurate and timely exam data entry.

- 2. Unrealistic Timelines and Resource Disparities:**

While better-funded schools managed to hire ICT specialists and data clerks, under-resourced public schools, frequented by girls from economically disadvantaged backgrounds struggled to comply with the demanding deadlines, often falling short.

In the aftermath, a cycle of blame has emerged: the Ministry points fingers at the schools, and the schools shift the blame back to the Ministry. But one fact remains clear, **it is the students, especially girls, who ultimately suffer the consequences of this systemic failure.**

The Ripple Effect on Girls' Futures

Excluding girls from critical educational milestones such as the WASSCE deepens existing inequalities and sets off a chain reaction with long-term consequences:

- **Rising dropout rates** fuel cycles of child marriage, early pregnancy, and gender-based violence, further entrenching gender disparities.
- **National progress is undermined;** initiatives like the 30% quota for female leadership under the GEWE policy lose impact if future women leaders are denied access to education.
- **Poverty intensifies,** particularly in rural and marginalized communities where education is often the only pathway to opportunity and upward mobility.

Our Call to Action: A National Imperative

At Timzy Empowerment Initiative, we firmly believe that education is the cornerstone of empowerment, economic independence, and bodily autonomy. This crisis transcends a mere examination issue, it strikes at the heart of justice, equity, and national accountability. In response, we urgently recommend the following actions:

- 1. Immediate and Transparent Investigation**

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) must promptly launch a

comprehensive investigation into the WASSCE exclusions, publicly release the findings, and guarantee that all eligible students are allowed to participate in the next examination session without delay.

2. Policy and Operational Reforms

- Extend digital registration training for school personnel to a minimum duration of one month, supplemented by regular refresher courses.
- Implement equity-driven registration support programs to provide targeted logistical assistance and staffing to underserved schools.

3. Collaborative Accountability

Civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and student associations must unite to:

- Facilitate public consultations with affected communities.
- Form advocacy coalitions dedicated to monitoring reform implementation.
- Demand consistent progress updates from both the Ministry and WAEC.

Girls' Futures Are Non-Negotiable

We cannot truly advance women's empowerment while systemic failures push girls out of school. Education is a fundamental right, not a privilege and when it is denied, our entire nation pays the price.

To the students and families caught in uncertainty: We see you, we hear you, and we stand with you. To the authorities: Silence is no longer an option. To civil society: The moment for unified, decisive action is now.

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