



**Defence for
Children International**
the worldwide movement for children's rights

Girls' Right to Education - A West African Perspective

Side Event to the 29th Session of the Human Rights Council (16 June 2015)



Brief Report

Organiser: Defence for Children International (DCI)

Sponsor: Permanent Mission of Sierra Leone



Event Flyer



Girls' Right to Education

Tuesday 16 June 2015, 10:00-12:00, Palais des Nations, Room XXVII

Across West Africa, girls continue to face discrimination in accessing and realising their human right to a quality education. While progressive policies have been developed at national level, significant barriers to the right to education persist, including early marriage and pregnancy, gender based-violence, child labor, etc. At this side-event, expert panellists will share best practices in terms of influencing decision makers and direct engagement with vulnerable girls and their communities.

Speakers

H.E. Madam Yvette Stevens, Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the UN

Ms. Barbara Robinson, Human Rights Centre of the University of Essex

Ms. Hawanatu Mansaray, youth involved in the DCI Girl Power Project, Sierra Leone

Mr. Akwasi Amankwaah, Ghana NGOs Coalition on Rights of the Child (GNCRC)

Mr. Abdul Manaff Kemokai, DCI Regional Representative for Africa, Executive Director DCI – Sierra Leone

Moderator

Ms. Joyce Brummelman, DCI – The Netherlands (Moderator)





Table of Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	04
2. Background	04
2.1 Defence for Children International –International Secretariat (DCI-IS)	04
2.2 Defence for Children International – Sierra Leone (DCI-SL)	05
3. Overview	05
4. Timeline	
4.1 H.E. Madam Yvette Stevens , Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the UN	06
4.2 Ms. Barbara Robinson , Human Rights Centre of the University of Essex	06
4.3 Ms. Hawanatu Mansaray , youth involved in the DCI Girl Power Project, Sierra Leone	07
4.4 Mr. Akwasi Amankwaah , Ghana NGOs Coalition on Rights of the Child (GNCRC)	08
4.5 Mr. Abdul Manaff Kemokai , DCI Regional Representative for Africa, Executive Director DCI – Sierra Leone	09
5. More information	10

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 29th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), a side event was held on “Girls’ Right to Education – A West African perspective”. The event was organized by Defence for Children International (DCI). Key panel speakers participating in the event included: H.E. Madam Yvette Stevens, Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the UN; Ms. Barbara Robinson from the Human Rights Centre of the University of Essex; Ms. Hawanatu Mansaray, a youth involved in the DCI Girl Power Project in Sierra Leone, and current Program Manager for the Girl Power Program in DCI –Sierra Leone; Mr. Akwasi Amankwaah, National Coordinator for Ghana NGOs Coalition on Rights of the Child (GNCRC); and Mr. Abdul Manaff, DCI Regional Representative for Africa and Executive Director of DCI – Sierra Leone. The event was moderated by Ms. Joyce Brummelman, the Program Officer Defence for Girls, DCI – The Netherlands.

The main objective of the event was to discuss the social, cultural and financial barriers that exist to girls’ schooling, drawing upon issues raised in a new DCI report, “A Mountain to Climb”, on gender-based violence and girls’ right to education in Sierra Leone. The presenters set out the issues in a West African context, and discussed effective strategies and ‘what works’ in overcoming these obstacles at national and local level. The event was an opportunity for participants to share good practices both in terms of influencing decision makers and direct engagement with vulnerable girls and their respective communities, with special reference to DCI’s Girl Power programme that is currently being implemented in a number of West African countries.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Defence for Children International – International Secretariat (DCI-IS)

Defence for Children International (DCI) is an independent non-governmental organisation that promotes and protects children’s human rights on a global, regional, national and local level.

DCI is represented in over forty (40) countries worldwide through its national sections and associated members across Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and Europe.



At the global level, the DCI Movement is united in its commitment to working on justice for children, protecting, defending and advocating for the human rights of children and young people involved in the criminal justice system. DCI national sections develop and implement programmes in response to the specific needs of children at the national level, working on a range of issues such as child labour, sexual exploitation and access to education.

Located in Geneva, DCI's International Secretariat is the focal point of the Movement at the international level, implementing programmes that promote children's human rights globally and supporting the activities and the growth of its members.

2.2 Defence for Children International – Sierra Leone (DCI-SL)

Defence for Children - Sierra Leone (DCI-Sierra Leone) was founded in 1998 during the country's civil war, a time when the human rights of many child citizens were gravely violated. It was initially established to monitor and document violations of children's rights and to provide legal assistance to child victims of violence and children in conflict with the law, including those who were detained and accused of being rebels. Although DCI-Sierra Leone is a local and independent chapter, it develops its programs based on the core principles and values of the DCI Movement. DCI-SL has its head office in Freetown, with branch offices in five different districts with forty-five staff spread over the four regions of Sierra Leone. The main goal of DCI-Sierra Leone's work is to provide legal assistance, psychosocial and socio-economic empowerment for child victims of abuse/violence, children in conflict with the law and children in very vulnerable situations.

3. OVERVIEW

Under international law, children are entitled to free compulsory primary education and States have an obligation to develop secondary education and make it accessible for all. However, across the world children continue to face discrimination in accessing and realising their human right to a quality education. This is especially the case for girls in the developing world, who are more likely to be illiterate and to drop out of school at an earlier age than their male peers. While poverty is normally the main underlying reason for disengagement from education, for



girls these financial obstacles are often compounded by discriminatory attitudes, practices and laws.

In Sierra Leone and across West Africa, girls face a conflict between traditional female roles and modern influences promoting gender equality in education and employment. While progressive policies have been developed at national level to improve enrolment rates, significant barriers to the basic right to education persist, including early marriage and pregnancy, child sexual exploitation, the heavy burden of domestic work, female genital mutilation (FGM) and other forms of gender-based violence.

4. TIMELINE

4.1 H.E. Madam Yvette Stevens, Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the UN underlined the fact that poverty is one of the major barriers to girls' education. Poor families believe that it is a better idea and more worthwhile to educate the male child because they see the girl as the one who will leave and get married. Additionally, the female role is seen to be confined to the household. As a result, this has led to some resistance in educating girls. During the 11 year war in Sierra Leone, the education of children also suffered. Free education is now a policy, but turning this into practice remains a challenge. Some other barriers include girls leaving school when they start getting their menstrual cycle because they do not have the sanitary materials to protect themselves. Early pregnancies also result in drop outs. Education therefore needs to focus on reproductive health, and aim for education to continue for girls even after they give birth. Some initiatives include nutrition in schools as incentives to poor households. A key finding is that families want their girl children to succeed, especially once they see what is possible for a girl child.

4.2 Ms. Barbara Robinson, Human Rights Centre of the University of Essex presented a report: "A Mountain to Climb – Gender-based violence and girls' right to education in Sierra Leone." During consultation in Freetown, the report found that girls had good access and enrolment in education at a primary school level. But once adolescence was reached (ages 12-13), girls started to drop out and disengage. The report found that this was due to several key factors: poverty, early marriage, pregnancy, sexual exploitation (i.e. with older men in exchange for food), female genital mutilation (which marks the end of childhood and thus children's right

to education), prostitution, and child labour. In addition, teenage pregnancy had the largest negative impact, as girls with babies were no longer regarded as children and were seen as giving up the right of being a child and having the right to education. Since the Ebola crisis, many schools closed and girls turned to men for support. Nevertheless, through the consultations held with girls and community groups, the message to campaign for girls' education comes across strong. Significantly, girls are generally aware of the importance of education.

4.3 Ms. Hawanatu Mansaray, DCI Girl Power Project, Sierra Leone reported that the goal of the DCI Girl Power Project in Sierra Leone is to provide equal opportunities for girls and young women through civil society strengthening. The project works in four thematic areas: 1) protection, 2) education, 3) socio-economic empowerment, and 4) participation. The objective of the Project is to provide girls with the skills and the technique on how to access opportunities and protect themselves from sexual-based violence. Furthermore the Project aims to increase access to justice, break cultural and social barriers, empower girls, and strengthen government institutions and community based mechanisms.

The five year project takes a four-pronged approach: 1) investment in girls and young women, 2) involvement of boys and young men, 3) child protection system strengthening, and 4) gender friendly recruitment of female staff and volunteers. The following are some of the strategies that the project has used:

- Socio-legal support to girls and young women who are victims of violence;
- Legal advocacy and child justice strategy;
- Mobilization and establishment of girls' groups;
- Empowerment through education (with an asset building programme);
- Supporting girls and women with campaigns in their communities;
- Organizing events at community level to give girls the opportunity to showcase what they have learned from the Project;
- Capacity building of local civil society organizations to become gender aware and to build community-based mechanisms.

Ms. Mansaray also reported the impressive achievements so far: in the past four years, the Project has already reached over 2,500 girls and young women directly with sensitization messages, life skills, and socio-legal support. Over 10,000 girls and young women have been



indirectly reached through the Project. For example, many groups have been established at the community level. These groups carry out advocacy, self-empowerment, awareness raising, advice, peer education, and assistance of other girls. The groups have also initiated sustainability strategies, such as dancing groups to assist in fund raising. Furthermore, girls are empowered by the information they receive on the services accessible to them, and community child protection mechanisms work together and refer cases to each other. Girls now have better chances to survive forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and domestic servitude.

As with any project, challenges do exist. There is difficulty in combining the different needs of individual girls at the same time. Some girls' self-interest prevail over the group interest, making it harder to achieve a common goal. There are also limited services available, and harmful traditional practices continue to take place as they are usually controlled by secret societies. However, the Project has also seized many opportunities. The government is receptive to the Project, and there is a growing presence of local advocacy groups. The project has long-term technical and financial support from DCI/ECPAT Netherlands, and will move on with strategic support from local, regional, and international advocacy agendas.

4.4 Mr. Akwasi Amankwaah, Ghana NGOs Coalition on Rights of the Child (GNCRC) spoke about the barriers affecting girls' education and strategies to address these barriers. He first introduced GNCRC, a network of over sixty legally registered NGOs that work with and for children in Ghana. So far, the GNCRC's achievements include leading national advocacy in reforms in juvenile justice administration, raising general awareness and sensitization of child rights issues in the country, and moving the establishment of child panels from the law books into practical enforcement. Barriers can be divided into national, regional, and individual levels:

- ✓ At the national level, there is inadequate political and leadership willingness to implement programs and policies, inadequate structures to assist girls during education, and inadequate budget allocation. As a result, there has been a lack of implementation of laws and policies on girls' education.
- ✓ At the regional level, there is an inadequate understanding of policies and programmes, and a lack of training programmes.
- ✓ Significant barriers exist at the individual level: stereotyping against girls, media sensationalism, commercial sexual exploitation of children, sexual violence, child marriages and forced marriages that are tied to teenage pregnancy.



Mr. Amankwaah highlighted the fact that boys and men are also among the major barriers affecting girls' education. So it is necessary to involve and support boys/men to play their roles in the empowerment of girls/young women. In addition, there is inadequate access to relevant information and inadequate learning platforms. GNCRC is working on strategies to combat these barriers. Such strategies include training for duty bearers to understand issues on girls' education, the sharing of best practices for program implementation, the formation of girls clubs and schools within the communities, the establishment of girl panels, and mentoring programs for girls in schools. Further strategies to change societal norms and individual barriers include using the media to highlight issues, instituting sensitization programs on attitudinal change, and supporting boys and men to play their roles in the empowerment of girls and young women.

4.5 Mr Abdul Manaff, DCI Regional Representative for Africa, President DCI – Sierra Leone

presented DCI - Sierra Leone's approach on advocacy for girls' human rights. This approach relies on 1) influencing important mechanisms for policy reforms, 2), forming alliances with strong and influential organizations, and 3) increasing involvement in networks. Actions at different levels were discussed:

- ✓ At the community level, by-laws work better than laws at the higher level of government. Therefore, practices should aim to influence and advise review of by-laws and traditional practices that negatively affect girls (for example, early and forced marriage). There should be a promulgation of by-laws that promote girls' access to education, reporting on violence against girls and young women, and girls' participation.
- ✓ At the district level, there have been improvements. Before the intervention in Moyamba, there was no Magistrate Court. Due to advocacy, there is now a regular Magistrate Court sitting. DCI Sierra Leone is also pushing for the establishment of a High Court as well, and is also lobbying and assisting district and community hospitals to implementing the national Sexual Offences Act. While the Act has been passed, hospitals have not yet put mechanisms in place to help victims notwithstanding these are mandated by the national government.
- ✓ Finally, advocacy opportunities also exist at the national and international levels. At the national level, with the passage of new laws such as the Sexual Offences Act, Child Rights Act and the three Gender Acts, as well as the constitutional review process, advocacy can play a huge role. DCI Sierra Leone is involved in a campaign for access to education for pregnant girls and teenage mothers. Internationally, DCI national sections are fortunate to be able to engage at this level, as most other local organizations are unable to do so.



International participation includes civil society organization's child-centred Universal Periodic Review (UPR) reporting, participation at the Human Rights Council meetings and side events, and alternative reporting at the Committee on the Rights of the Child and other international treaty body and human rights mechanisms.

5. MORE INFORMATION

- Visit the Defence for Children International website: www.defenceforchildren.org - there you will find the report, "A Mountain to Climb", plus more information on DCI - Sierra Leone.

- Visit the Defence for Children the Netherlands website: www.defenceforchildren.nl - there you will find the brochure on the Girl Power project:
<http://www.defenceforchildren.nl/images/125/2485.pdf>