

# Policy Brief: Disability and school related gender-based violence (SRGBV)

## About Sightsavers

**Sightsavers** works in more than 30 countries, across Africa and South Asia, to prevent avoidable blindness and fight for the rights of people with disabilities. Our vision is a world where people with disabilities participate equally in society. In **Sierra Leone**, we have been working with the government and partners since 1962, to help improve health services, promote inclusive education and broader inclusion for people with disabilities. Our focus includes Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs), eye health (cataract surgery, glaucoma, and other health conditions) refractive error services, social inclusion and inclusive education.

## Summary

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) in Sierra Leone presents significant challenges for children with disabilities, who face increased vulnerability to the risk of violence. Despite this heightened risk, there is limited data on their experiences, leaving gaps in policy responses and safeguarding measures.

This policy brief draws on participatory research conducted by Sightsavers to highlight the realities faced by children with disabilities and their exposure to SRGBV in schools, communities, and homes. It underscores the urgent need for community-based disability-inclusive approaches to SRGBV and calls for safeguarding and child protection policy reforms to integrate a disability perspective.

A set of recommendations is presented at the end of the document, but key recommendations for the Government of Sierra Leone, including the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MoGCA), Teaching Service Commission Sierra Leone and the Sierra Leone Parliament are as follows:

**Ensure the specific needs and perspectives of children and youth with disabilities are considered in the development, review and implementation of education and child protection policies**, including the implementation of the new Child Rights Act (2024), the Sexual Offences Act (2019) and the upcoming National Child Safeguarding Policy.

**Champion inclusion and advocate for the rights of the most marginalised children in regional and global spaces**, including by raising the need to address the increased risk of SRGBV faced by children with disabilities through the Ministerial Task Force to End Violence in and Around Schools.

**Promote inclusive education and raise awareness of disability rights and SRGBV issues, tackling gender and disability discrimination**, which are root causes of violence against children with disabilities. This should be done through inclusive teacher training, curricula, practices and engagement with learners with disabilities and communities.

**Strengthen institutional capacity and reporting mechanisms** to enable victims/survivors of SRGBV to report and to ensure duty bearers provide the necessary services, as well as hold perpetrators to account for their actions.

By implementing these measures, Sierra Leone can ensure that children with disabilities are protected from violence and supported in realising their right to education.

## **School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) and disability**

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is any act or threat of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics.<sup>1</sup> **SRGBV affects 246 million children and adolescents** around the world every year.<sup>2</sup> It includes any violence related to educational participation, such as bullying or physical or sexual violence, including on the way to and from school.

In Sierra Leone, high levels of SRGBV are a profound challenge, driven by gender roles and cultural norms, which exacerbate socio-economic inequalities. Although this challenge is now being treated as a priority, data on prevalence remains limited. A 2010 survey revealed that over 40 per cent of girls had experienced sexual violence and 18 per cent had been raped – one third of these at or around schools.<sup>3</sup> Whilst **qualitative research** provides **extensive evidence** of widespread sexual harassment, bullying and sexual violence in and around schools in Sierra Leone, little is known about how this violence affects children with disabilities.

Globally, there is limited comparable data on SRGBV prevalence in low- and middle-income countries. However, as people with disabilities already experience multiple barriers to inclusion, they often face increased vulnerability to the risk of violence. Alongside other marginalised groups, children with disabilities tend to bear the brunt and face increased exposure to violence worldwide.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the studies that do exist have indicated that **children with disabilities in Africa are two to five times more likely to be sexually abused** than their non-disabled peers, with rates even higher for those with intellectual disabilities<sup>5</sup>. **Girls with disabilities are at**

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO and UN Women (2016) *Global guidance on addressing school-related gender-based violence*

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO (2017) *School Violence and Bullying Global Status Report*.

<sup>3</sup> Concern Worldwide (2010) *School-related gender-based violence in Sierra Leone - 2010 research report*

<sup>4</sup> UN (2024) *Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children*

<sup>5</sup> ACPF (2019). *Sexual Exploitation of Children in Africa: A Silent Emergency*. African Child Policy Forum

**higher risk of sexual violence perpetrated by their peers than girls without disabilities.<sup>6</sup>**

Sexual violence in and around schools can be perpetrated by teachers, school staff, learners – or even community members. Gender-based violence (GBV) impacts the immediate physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of survivors and creates deep lasting connections to violence and trauma throughout their lives, perpetuating cycles of harm and further violence that can echo across generations.<sup>7</sup> Children with disabilities face further exclusion from safeguarding and protection systems due to inaccessible reporting mechanisms and a lack of disability-sensitive education.<sup>8</sup>

**Strategies to prevent and respond to violence, abuse and exploitation must include the needs of children with disabilities.** This extends to the education system, which must be able to understand and respond to the vulnerabilities experienced by children with diverse needs.<sup>9</sup>

## **Sightsavers research on risks of SRGBV for children with disabilities in Sierra Leone**

**Sightsavers has conducted innovative research** in **Sierra Leone** to articulate the experiences, concerns and needs of children with disabilities in relation to SRGBV.

The Sightsavers study focused on four junior secondary schools in the Karene district in northwestern Sierra Leone. From this, the study supported the creation of disability-inclusive SRGBV response action plans centred around the voices and perspectives of children with disabilities. In partnership with two organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), young researchers with disabilities led focus group discussions with 33 girls with disabilities and 37 boys with disabilities. They also engaged 120 community members in varied ways to understand experiences of GBV and school safety.

### **Key research findings:**

- 1. For children with disabilities, stigma and discrimination are deeply connected to SRGBV.** Children experienced more frequent SRGBV, as well as other types of violence and psychological abuse due to their disabilities, or because they were isolated by peers and community members. Boys with disabilities were particularly likely to experience corporal punishment, while girls were more likely to experience sexual harassment and abuse, which made them more likely to drop out of school as a result.
- 2. Children with disabilities encounter multiple forms of SRGBV, in schools, on the way to school, but also in communities and at home.** Children with disabilities may be particularly vulnerable to harmful cultural beliefs or practices, such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and other practices which some believe might ‘cure’ or ‘heal’ their disabilities.

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<sup>6</sup> UNESCO (2021) *Violence and bullying in educational settings: the experience of children and young people with disabilities*.

<sup>7</sup> UNGEI (2024) *Prevention of Sexual Violence in Education Settings. A White Paper by Sexual Violence Research Initiative and UNGEI*

<sup>8</sup> Miller, Hannah L., et al. (2017) ‘An Exploratory Study on the Knowledge of Personal Safety Skills among Children with Developmental Disabilities and their Parents’, *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 290-300, as cited in UNICEF (2021) *Seen, Counted, Included. Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities*

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF (2021) *Seen, Counted, Included. Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities*

### **3. SRGBV reporting and redress mechanisms must be strengthened in Sierra Leone.**

**Leone.** Current systems are weak, ineffective and often inaccessible to learners with disabilities, offering little to no support to those experiencing SRGBV. Perpetrators are not held accountable and are at times protected by these reporting systems.

### **4. Building awareness of SRGBV, and its impact on children with disabilities, can generate commitment and change in communities.**

Initially, children with disabilities showed little awareness of the concept of SRGBV and needed support to understand and engage with this sensitive topic to then be able to share their experiences and perspectives. The Community SRGBV response plans developed during the study showcase ways in which existing resources and capacity can respond to the needs of children with disabilities.

Through engaging with the community and local youth with disabilities in the research, this project created safe spaces in which children with disabilities felt comfortable and empowered to discuss the sensitive topic of SRGBV. The project also generated a commitment among the community to implement disability-inclusive responses to SRGBV.

## **Protecting children with disabilities from SRGBV in Sierra Leone**

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### **Policy frameworks on child protection in Sierra Leone**

The Government of Sierra Leone is mandated to protect children with disabilities from all forms of violence and abuse, including sexual violence, punishment and bullying, in accordance to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, both the CRPD and the CRC encourage schools to involve students with disabilities in creating policies that promote safety and accessible protection mechanisms.<sup>11</sup>

Progressive efforts have been made at the national level to prevent and respond to SRGBV and gender-based violence more broadly. The **Child Rights Act (2024)** reinforces Sierra Leone's commitment to protecting children from discrimination, abuse, violence or practices that compromise their physical and psychological well-being, whilst the current revision of the Sexual Offences Act (2019) will go further to punish perpetrators and prevent their re-engagement in the social sectors. This is bolstered by the recently revised **National Referral Protocol on Gender-Based Violence (NRP)** (2022) which outlines steps the Government will take to ensure response and reporting mechanisms are child-friendly, gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive.

Specifically in schools, the **National Policy on Radical Inclusion in School (2021)** prioritises the inclusion and safety of children with disabilities in schools, setting out objectives for robust reporting mechanisms and focus on teachers. The National Policy on Radical Inclusion is up for review in 2026. It is also welcome that the present **Education Sector Plan: Transforming Learning for All** (2022 – 2026) sets out clear objectives to reduce gender and disability disparities in children with disabilities accessing education

<sup>10</sup> UN (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

<sup>11</sup> UN (1989) Convention on the Rights of a Child

through a safe learning environment in and around school. Plans are also being finalized to review the Education Sector Plan in 2026.

The **SRGBV Social and Behavioural Change Communication Strategy** (2025) aims to promote positive practices and norms in school system, strengthening policies, institutional frameworks and community capacities based on the whole school approach.

However, despite a strong policy framework for GBV prevention and response, the implementation of these initiatives has been weak in practice, both at the school and community levels. Overlapping policies and fragmentation of approaches, coupled with poor coordination between responsible agencies results in several challenges in resourcing and delivery plans. Whilst there have been some shifts to embed inclusion within these frameworks, there is still a significant lack of data, evidence and expertise on disability mainstreaming across the GBV and education landscape, leaving children with disabilities more at risk of falling through the gaps. Additionally, cultural norms and discrimination create further barriers to ensuring response and referral mechanisms effectively identify perpetrators and protect children from harm.

## Recent developments and ways forward

The Government of Sierra Leone is aware of the challenges around SRGBV and has been a leader on this topic in the world stage. It played an active role in the 2024 **Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children**, has been supported by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) to combat SRGBV through **the Safe Learning initiative** and recently founded a **Ministerial Taskforce to tackle violence in and around schools**. Through the Taskforce, the Government of Sierra Leone joined others in committing, among other things, to integrate violence prevention and response within education sector policies, budgets and plans, as well as to improve data and monitoring of all forms of violence against all children and young people in schools.

These global forums provide key opportunities for the **Government of Sierra Leone to be vocal on the importance of ensuring schools are safe for all learners, highlighting the increased risk of violence faced by learners with disabilities and championing the need to incorporate disability perspectives amongst wider regional and global actions.**

## Key recommendations

To make schools safer for all children, the Government of Sierra Leone and other education stakeholders should **incorporate a disability perspective into child safeguarding and education policies to prevent SRGBV**, as well as other initiatives to promote child safety and wellbeing at school.

**The Government must strengthen investments in integrated systems to end violence against all children, ensuring collaboration across ministries responsive for child protection, wellbeing, education and health.**

Sightsavers calls on the Ministry of Basic and Secondary School Education (MBSSE), Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MoGCA), Ministry of Social Welfare (MOSW), the National Commission for Children, the Joining Forces Coalition and the School Related

Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) technical working group to take the below recommendations forward.

- 1. Strengthen and implement legal and policy frameworks to protect the rights of children with disabilities and address all forms of violence in line with the CRPD.** This should include the prohibition of all forms of violence in and around schools, including through online learning, with recognition of the increased vulnerability of children with disabilities to SRGBV and specific measures to protect them, as well as accessible mechanisms to prosecute sexual violence perpetrators. Relevant Ministries should pay particular attention to the rights and needs of children with disabilities in the review and implementation of the following policies:
  - The **Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs** through the inclusive implementation of the Child Rights Act 2024, the Sexual Offences Act (2019), the National Referral Protocol on SGBV and the development of a National Safeguarding policy .
  - The **Ministry of Social Welfare** to facilitate the enactment of the revised Persons with Disability Act 2021.
  - The **Ministry of Basic and Secondary School Education (MBSSE)** through implementation of the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools ,the Comprehensive School Safety policy (2023), the Guide for Reducing Violence in Schools and the Sierra Leone School Health Policy 2020.
- 2. Ensure national education and school safety strategies promote inclusive and gender and disability-responsive learning environments.** They should support interventions that recognise the intersectional dimensions of gender and disability which increase the likelihood of experiencing violence for girls and boys with disabilities.
  - The **Safe Learning Initiative workplan**, being led by different Ministries in collaboration with the School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) technical working group, should be developed and implemented in consultation with people with disabilities and their representative organisations and should include specific actions to raise awareness to and address the increased risk of violence for children with disabilities.
  - MBSSE and the Teaching Service Commission to adopt **national guidelines** mandating schools to implement zero tolerance approaches to violence and detailing the process by which all schools should respond to child protection concerns. District councils and school management teams should be involved as they are closer to the schools.
  - MGCA to ensure there are **accessible systems for identifying, reporting, and addressing SRGBV**. Children with disabilities must have access to confidential, gender-sensitive mechanisms to report SRGBV.
  - Coordinate across Ministries to ensure schools **provide support or referrals for learners with disabilities affected by SRGBV**.

- 3. Promote inclusive education and take steps to address gender and disability stigma and discrimination**, which are root causes of violence against children with disabilities.
  - MBSSE to incorporate disability inclusive child safeguarding components into teacher training curricula, ensuring teachers can prevent, identify and respond appropriately to violence in schools.
  - Ensure education curricula and materials break negative stereotypes and raise awareness of safeguarding issues, including through inclusive, age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education.
- 4. Raise awareness on disability inclusion and SRGBV issues. Ministries (MBSSE, MoSW and MBSSE) and community leaders to work with schools and communities, including OPDs, to raise awareness of SRGBV, challenge negative attitudes and raise awareness of disability rights.**
  - Ensure children with disabilities have access to information about sexual and reproductive health and their rights, as well as to information about mechanisms to report SRGBV and other types of violence in and around schools.
  - Create safe spaces in the community to incorporate the perspectives of children and youth with disabilities and develop collective responses to SRGBV and harmful traditional practices, such as FGM, which may disproportionately impact children with disabilities.
- 5. Invest in evidence: research, disaggregated data collection and documentation that explore the intersectional experiences of sexual and gender-based violence in and around schools.**
  - Put in place mechanisms for monitoring cases of SRGBV and collecting confidential data to help identify responses and prevalence of SRGBV for different groups of learners. At district level, monitoring of SRGBV reports, from investigation to prosecution can be done by SRGBV focal points. At the national level, the Ministry of Justice should consider making abuse investigation by the police and court procedures more child friendly.

Disaggregated data by type of disability, age and gender is essential to inform effective responses to SRGBV. The MBSSE education management information system (EMIS) can be expanded to include disaggregated data on SRGBV.
- 6. The Government of Sierra Leone should consider reviewing the following policy documents.**
  - The Education Act of 2004 – to make it reflect emerging developments in the education sector.
  - Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act 2023 - should also be considered for amendment to reflect safeguarding for learners, including children with disabilities.

- The 2019 Code of Conduct for Teachers and other Education Personnel in Sierra Leone - to ensure that the needs and concerns of children with disabilities are adequately reflected.

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