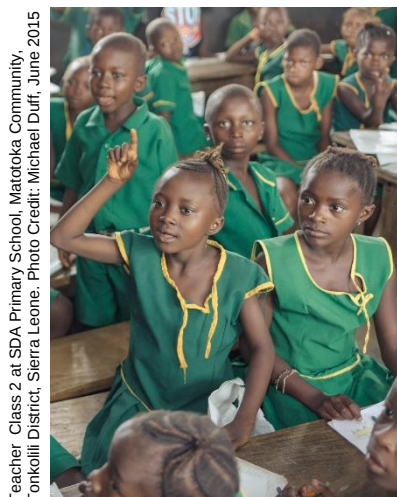


Gender, Wellbeing and Experiences of Violence¹

CONCERN
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ENDING
EXTREME POVERTY
WHATEVER
IT TAKES

The Safe Learning Model



Teacher, Class 2 at SDA Primary School, Matorka Community, Tonkolili District, Sierra Leone. Photo Credit: Michael Duff, June 2015

Significant Gender and Wellbeing Findings

- The Safe Learning Model has positive impacts on basic Literacy skills and wellbeing, especially for girls in intervention group one.
- There is a clear link between Literacy progress and Wellbeing, particularly for girls.
- Teachers, principals and caregivers have high aspirations for the education of girls and believe it is necessary, however also have lower expectations for their success in school with the majority believing boys are more brilliant than girls.
- Children's psychological wellbeing, specifically 'feeling good' declined during COVID-19, however girls in intervention group one show significant increases in 'feeling good' at the end of the intervention.
- Children that feel safer with a teacher are more likely to report having been whipped or caned by a teacher.



Context of the Research

Developed by Concern Worldwide, the 'Safe Learning Model' adopts a holistic approach to the education of children in extreme poverty, to realise sustainable improvements in children's literacy, wellbeing and gender equality (including gender-based violence) in schools and communities. The model combines a comprehensive educational programme with interventions that support teaching practices, as well as gender-based violence prevention and response.

“children's educational progress will be enhanced when they live in communities that are underpinned by support for gender equality and children's wellbeing.”

To evaluate the effectiveness of this integrated model, University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education conducted a three-year longitudinal study with approximately 3,000 children, their teachers and caregivers from 100 primary schools in Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. The randomised control trial utilised a mixed methods design that included 376 semi-structured interviews and group discussions along with participatory approaches such as photo voice. In addition, 42 hours of classroom observational data, analysis of school records, annual Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) and the Child and Adolescent Personal and Social Assessment of Wellbeing (CAPSAW). The study examined wellbeing, gender equality and literacy development of a cohort of pupils and their everyday experiences in school and at home and ultimately how this may be affected by the programme. This brief presents specific interpretation of the findings related to Gender, Well Being and Violence from the study (2018-2021), providing detailed information on the impact of the intervention and how Literacy achievement, Wellbeing and Gender are connected. Additional thematic briefs including a more general overview as well as detailed information and interpretation of other key findings and the intervention and research design are available².

¹ This briefing is based on original research undertaken by Devine, D; Sugrue, C; Symonds, J; Sloan, S; Kearns, M; Bolotta, G; Samonova, E; Capistrano, D Smith, A and Gibbons, R; University College Dublin, School of Education.

² More information on the Safe Learning Model and study is available at <https://www.concern.net/knowledge-hub/education-safe-learning-model-research> or contact: Amy Folan, Senior Education Advisor, Concern Worldwide amy.folan@concern.net

Key Findings

Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Everyday Life

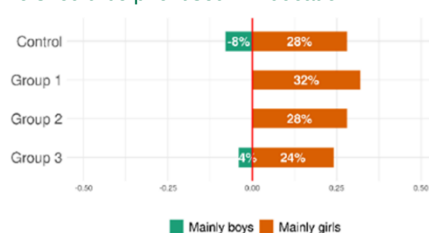
Children in Tonkolili are immersed in a rich cultural and multi-lingual world, characterised by distinct gendered and spiritual norms that frame their experiences of living and learning. High levels of structural poverty predominate, exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet despite these challenges, the research highlighted the high value placed by families on education, in addition to the importance of children's early literacy experiences in the family and community. These included informal learning that occurs through children's daily contributions to family practices and livelihoods, in addition to wider community and social activities. Trading, farming, cooking and cleaning are important frames of reference for children as culturally valued activities and a core part of the family economy. Through these activities, children engaged and interacted with adults and older siblings, learning key skills for survival and adaptation. As children aged, gender differences became apparent with girls significantly more likely than boys to state they were involved in domestic chores including washing clothes, cleaning the house and caring for younger siblings. Girls along with boys were also involved with chores outside the home (mining, farming, trading and hunting), but it was only boys in the control group who were significantly more likely than girls to be engaged in these activities. Findings highlighted the strong social networks and solidarities across kin, and the important role of elders and wider community members as a key and rich source of oral language for children through traditions of storytelling and singing. Multilingualism was evident, with fluency in local languages central to children's evolving language skills. While English was taught in schools, children rarely spoke it out of school. Older siblings were especially important in supporting more formal learning (reading, writing, and counting) including helping with homework and during the pandemic school closures.

Gender Attitudes to Success in Education

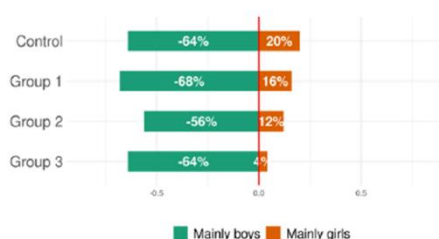


Gender norms and perceptions of what it means to be a boy, or a girl are incorporated in the everyday life of children in Sierra Leone and underpin their experience of childhood, including work, play and classroom life. These perceptions of fundamental differences between men and women became clearly visible in attitudes and practices related to education and in expectations for girls' success. The study identified that teachers' attitudes were deeply gendered with some contradictions evident in their views on the learning of boys and girls. Across the study, teachers and principals highlighted their high aspirations for the education of girls and their belief in the necessity of education for girls. Observations in case study intervention schools highlighted teachers' emphasis on the active involvement of girls in lessons. However, interviews with teachers also confirmed their lower expectations for the success of girls in school and across both intervention and Control schools, most principals and teachers believed that boys were more brilliant than girls and that girls usually needed more help in class.

Teachers' Attitudes Towards:
Who should be prioritised in Education



'Brilliance'



Similar gendered views were evident among case study families. In general, parents (and elders) aspired to educate girls and believed that girls more than boys will use their education to help their family out of poverty. The study also showed that most of the children's extended family believe that "mainly girls" are going to use their education to get a better job in the future. However, parents and elders also have lower expectations for girls' success connecting this to sexuality, pregnancy, and girls' "poor" moral character. Further the study showed a progression in these gender stereotypical views over time and its negative impact on girls themselves. It was found that children's views on gender differences deepened over time, with increasingly negative views of girls' capacities evident, especially among boys as they got older.

Wellbeing



To assess children's wellbeing, the CAPSAW instrument, developed by the Safe Learning Study team, was used. Throughout the evaluation, the measurement of wellbeing was approached through understanding children's psychological wellbeing (feeling good and doing well), and physical wellbeing (social wellbeing, food sufficiency and sickness).

Psychological wellbeing (doing well and feeling good) initially increased for all groups at 6 months but decreased during the pandemic. 'Feeling good' increased for all groups at 6 months, more so for intervention groups than control. Scores then declined during COVID-19 school closures for the intervention groups and remained relatively stable for control groups. At 30 months, all intervention groups reported higher levels of 'feeling good', while scores decreased for the control group. Only girls in the intervention group only receiving Literacy support showed a significant increase in 'feeling good' scores at 30 months, with a medium effect size. Significant intervention effects were found for 'feeling good' for girls in this intervention at 6 months and 30 months. There were significant intervention effects for boys in intervention groups receiving Literacy, School and Community Level SRGBV prevention and response support at 6 months. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is also of note. Qualitative data confirmed an increase of hunger and children's work during this period and heightened poverty in case study communities. Reports from interviews on the negative experiences of COVID-19 correspond with the reduction in psychological wellbeing at 23 months reported by children.

Psychological Wellbeing 'Feeling Good'



Relationship between literacy, local understandings of wellbeing and gender

There was a significant positive correlation between EGRA scores and levels of 'feeling good'. Children who performed well in EGRA subtasks appeared to also report higher levels of feeling good about themselves. In other words, there was a clear relationship between children's literacy progress and their feelings of wellbeing. This was especially the case for girls.



Average Score of 'Feeling Good' for Girls



The intervention in Group 1 had a positive and significant effect on the levels of 'feeling good' among girls. Apart from the direct effect of the intervention on 'feeling good', there was also an indirect effect that is explained by their EGRA performance. Consequently, girls in Group 1 had higher EGRA scores and their improvement in literacy also resulted in higher levels of 'feeling good'. These patterns can also be understood in the context of socio-cultural norms related to wellbeing and realising a 'good life'. The study qualitatively explored the understanding of wellbeing and the concept of a 'good life' to understand in what ways families work to ensure that they are living well in a context of extreme poverty. The three most common themes were: have their basic needs

met, being of good character and getting an education. The widespread belief that girls' education might bring more benefits to the family than the education of boys can also be connected to ideas of what is more important for a 'good life' for the whole family. Aspirations for girls reflected local understandings of wellbeing as freedom from poverty (a 'good' life) and girls' education as good for the family (a 'good' life). Doing well in literacy thus heightens the value of, and aspirations for girls, which may positively influence girls' wellbeing. Girls are performing better at school, which increases their feeling of brilliance and feeling good about themselves. Considering the value being placed on education across all communities for the potential future impact on families, girls doing better in school may increase their feeling of 'usefulness' and thus improve their individual sense of wellbeing reflected in their 'feeling good' scores.

Experiences of Violence

Violence impacts not only wellbeing but also children's capacities and dispositions to learning. The Safe Learning study adopted a three-dimensional construct of violence:



- **Direct**- relating to self-reported experiences of physical and psychological violence.
- **Structural**- specifically child reported suffering due to lack of resources such as food, water, access to school
- **Cultural**- reported social norms that legitimise and perpetuate direct and structural violence in society

Case studies revealed that corporal punishment and gender-based violence is highly prevalent in schools and an everyday feature of children's lives. Adults viewed flogging as necessary for a 'good life', however, qualitative case studies highlighted a nuanced understanding of direct violence in communities and a clear differentiation between cases of severe physical violence which was perceived as harmful, and 'light' flogging which was viewed culturally as necessary to discipline children. Intergenerational differences in attitudes towards corporal punishment were evident with older generations being more likely to indicate that flogging children was necessary. In addition, children themselves did not report a direct association between physical forms of discipline and 'being hurt' or violence; however, during photovoice exercises they demonstrated a clear link between physical punishment and feelings of pain, discomfort and feeling unsafe.

Despite the beliefs that certain levels of violence were necessary to show care and protection, there appeared to be a growing awareness among adults of the prohibition of corporal punishment within a wider context of children's rights including an increasing awareness of gender-based violence. Children, especially but not exclusively girls, reported sexual harassment and bad touches happening between children and adults (usually men) in their communities, while at school this was reported as occurring mainly between children themselves. However, most teachers and parents discussed having a lack of knowledge and skills to provide supportive guidance to girls and boys and interviews with parents and elders confirm that local responses to the prevention of sexual harassment and gender based violence in particular relied predominantly on restrictions and control of girls rather than transforming negative norms and practices, having significant impacts on gender inequalities, expectations and community expressions of 'safety' and 'wellbeing' and highlighting the importance of whole school and community-based approaches to holistically transform negative societal and gender norms.

As such, the study indicated that the intervention did not appear to have any effect in relation to reports of direct, structural and cultural violence. All groups reported experiencing substantial increases in direct violence from 0 to 23 months, immediately after schools reopened following the COVID-19 restrictions and this declined at 30 months. With treatment group 1 (just literacy interventions) having the lowest levels of reported violence.

While boys and girls followed similar trajectories in terms of reporting direct violence over time, the proportion of boys reporting was higher than girls in all groups, at every time point. One interpretation of these findings is that this may signal a higher awareness of violence (and thus reporting of it) among children in intervention schools, following the intervention itself. Qualitative data indicated that the intervention had a significant impact in facilitating children to talk about violence in their lives, increasing their awareness of both physical as well as gender-based violence and reporting mechanisms. Children in intervention groups were engaged in age-appropriate Social Emotional Learning sessions that were designed to develop their SEL competencies as well as embedding positive gender norms, safety and child-friendly SRGBV prevention and reporting mechanisms.



Feeling Safe and Reporting Violence

Further analysis indicated that if a child felt safer with a teacher, they were also more likely to report having been whipped/caned by a teacher. This suggests that children who do not feel safe may not report violence leading to silent victims and distortions of actual prevalence rates. Therefore, while the study did not identify significant differences in children's reported experiences across the intervention groups, increases in children's perception of safety and therefore greater tendency to report because of the intervention must also be considered when interpreting the results.

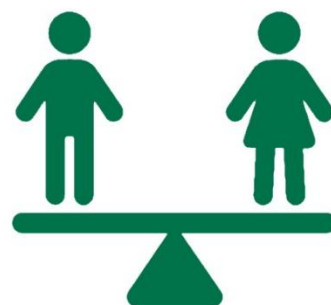


Conclusions and Recommendations

The 'Safe Learning Model' adopts a holistic approach to the education of children in extreme poverty, to realise sustainable improvements in children's literacy, wellbeing and gender equality (including gender-based violence) in schools and communities. Findings have shown even in context of extreme poverty families place a high value on education. Gender norms and perceptions of what it means to be a boy or a girl are incorporated in the everyday life of children in Sierra Leone and underpin their experience of childhood, including work, play and classroom life. These perceptions of fundamental differences between men and women became clearly visible in attitudes and practices related to education and in expectations for girls' success. The study identified that teachers' attitudes were deeply gendered with some contradictions evident in their views on the learning of boys and girls. Across the study, teachers and principals highlighted their high aspirations for the education of girls and their belief in the necessity of education for girls. The study also explored wellbeing and levels of 'feeling good'. The three most common themes were: having their basic need met, having a good character and getting an education. Wellbeing is closely linked to literacy progress, particularly for girls, who showed significant improvements in psychological wellbeing when their literacy skills improved. The study confirms children's awareness of physical, psychological and gender-based violence both in their schools and in their local communities. While the study did not identify any significant differences in the children's reported experiences across intervention groups, the greater tendency to report direct violence because of the intervention itself as well as the increased likelihood that a child would report direct violence when feeling safe with their teacher must be borne in mind.

Key Recommendations

- Prioritise continuous teacher professional development including review of pre- and in-service teacher training to include increased emphasis on gender equality related to expectations of girls' learning.
- Incorporate and validate local concepts of wellbeing into training with teachers, caregivers and children and ensure stakeholders recognise the bi-directional link between academic achievement and wellbeing, particularly for girls.
- Further promote whole school approaches to gender-based violence, including school, community and children in policy response, recognising the importance of children's feelings of safety for encouraging self-reporting of violence.



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