



Sierra Leone National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools

SUMMARY 2021



 **Irish Aid**
Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Introduction

This National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools seeks to ensure that schools in Sierra Leone are accessible to all children, in particular those children who have typically been excluded or pushed to the margins. The policy is driven by a vision of justice and equity for Sierra Leone and the imperative that education is critical to reducing cycles of poverty and breaking down all stigma including around disability, pregnancy, or parental status.

Poverty, as one of the greatest barriers to education in Sierra Leone, has often left girls the most affected, involving issues of transactional sex, early marriage, and the burden on them as care givers with the heavy load of supporting their families. When Sierra Leone's schools closed for nine months in 2014-15 to stop the devastating spread of Ebola, girls experienced even higher school dropout rates as a result of teenage pregnancy, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. Adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in Sierra Leone are among the highest globally, and UNICEF cites that over the next decade, as many as 13 million more girls could be forced into early marriage by economically struggling parents.

Historically in Sierra Leone, pregnant girls were not allowed to attend school or sit for examinations. This was challenged in the Economic Community of West African State's (ECOWaS) Court of Justice, by a consortium led by Equality Now, Waves and Amnesty International, and supported by the Coalition 4 Girls Education, led by Purposeful. In March 2020, following years of advocacy against the ban and constructive engagement with key stakeholders, the Government overturned the policy with immediate effect. This overturn plays a crucial role in now establishing systems that help pregnant girls and young mothers to return to school and take exams.

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Despite an increase in school attendance among pregnant girls, the stigma, discrimination, and a lack of integration for pregnant and parent learners still remain as a barrier to their full participation in school. This policy sets out to support access to sexual and reproductive health services, including the provision of sex education at school and in the community and engage communities in ways schools can support all learners.

Unfortunately, children with disabilities in Sierra Leone are often denied their right to education. They are not only less likely to be in school but also, when they are in school, they are less likely to complete their primary education. This policy supports the Government's commitment towards improving the learning environment for children with disabilities and for all children to learn side-by-side, helping to break the cycle of stigma and discrimination.

This is the first radical inclusion policy by any Government of Sierra Leone, and it leads the way in guaranteeing the education rights of *all* children across the country with a focus on; **pregnant girls and parent learners, children with disabilities, children from rural and underserved areas, and children from low-income families.**

The policy is the result of an extensive and inclusive country-wide consultation and engagement with key stakeholders including adolescent girls, teachers, school and traditional authorities, parents and crucially, civil society and non-governmental actors including Purposeful, who all played a key role in pushing against the ban and working closely with government to draft this new signature blueprint for radical inclusive access to education in Sierra Leone.

To compensate for the chronic neglect of female education, this policy encourages positive discrimination in favour of girls and provides measures that aim for greater equality by supporting them so they also can have access to the same opportunities as others in the community.

What is Radical Inclusion?

Radical inclusion is the intentional inclusion of those excluded from education due to the actions of individuals, institutions, or society. It lifts the obstacles that limit learning for a child to create an inclusive environment free of harassment, stigma, intolerance, or exclusion of any kind.

Radical inclusion is a process and a way of increasing justice and equity in people's lives. It means that anything that has excluded, be it policies, moral positions, regulations, or national laws should be removed with urgency in order to achieve inclusion.

The Policy

The focus of this policy is on girls, especially pregnant girls and parent learners; children with disabilities; children in the rural remote areas; and children from low-income backgrounds. Over the next five years it will implement the areas below.

1 – Creating Inclusive Learning Environments

Schools will provide safe, inclusive, and accessible learning environments which meet the needs of all children and where diversity is valued and supported. This includes:

- Making physical adaptations to bring all school buildings up to a national standard; such as ramps and hygiene facilities.
- Making toilets more easily usable by pupils with disabilities and making teachers more aware of student needs.
- Providing learners with the specialised learning materials they need.
- Aim to have classroom assistants throughout the school, particularly in classes that include a child with a disability.
- Introducing inclusion champions and support groups for marginalised groups in schools.
- Staffing, training, and supporting teachers to promote inclusive approaches to education.
- Provide transportation where possible for pupils – for example the provision of buses in district head quarter towns as currently done by the Local Councils under the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development

MBSSE will:

- Increase the number of classrooms and schools in rural remote areas of the country to increase access for children living in those areas. These classrooms and schools must be safe and have adequate learning facilities.



2 – Targeting Support for Vulnerable Learners

All children will be provided with support, quality learning and the ability to stay in school. Supporting girls who are or have been pregnant, and parent learners, to stay in school is critical if the education system is to be gender inclusive. This includes:

- Getting the Government to pursue a national commitment to girls' education (e.g., passing laws against child marriage, and child labour that interferes with children's education).
- Ensure that girls experiencing their menstrual cycle are provided with sanitary towels on a quarterly basis.
- Allowing pregnant girls to stay in school during their pregnancy, to return to school after giving birth, and supporting them to stay in school.
- Providing programmes that prepare pregnant girls, breastfeeding mothers, and out of school children to re-enter formal schooling.
- Creating leadership programmes to boost girls' confidence.
- Recruiting and training women teachers who will serve as role models for girls.
- Ensuring that girls have a right to attend medical appointments during pregnancy.
- Ensuring that girls have a right of protected absence from school for one year after giving birth or miscarrying.
- Ensuring that girls who are or have been pregnant, and learner mothers, have the right to sit all examinations, including public examinations and are supported to make up for lost lessons.
- Appointing two teachers with at least one female teacher as a Girls' Champion to offer advice on issues affecting them, including sexual harassment and abuse. They will receive counselling training and will also advocate for gender inclusivity.
- Imposing a zero-tolerance policy against bullying of a pregnant student by staff or students.
- Prioritising pregnant and lactating learners in any school-feeding programmes.
- Making all efforts to provide a desk and chair fit for use through the final trimester of the pregnancy.



3 – Engaging Families and Communities

In order for schools to be accessible to, and inclusive of all children, there is a need to engage families and communities to help implement this policy. This includes:

- Drawing on parent volunteers as community champions to identify marginalised children and helping them enrol in school.
- Seeking out community engagement opportunities.
- Providing guidance and community dialogues around pregnant and parent learners in a *Toolkit for Supporting Pregnant and Parent Learners*.



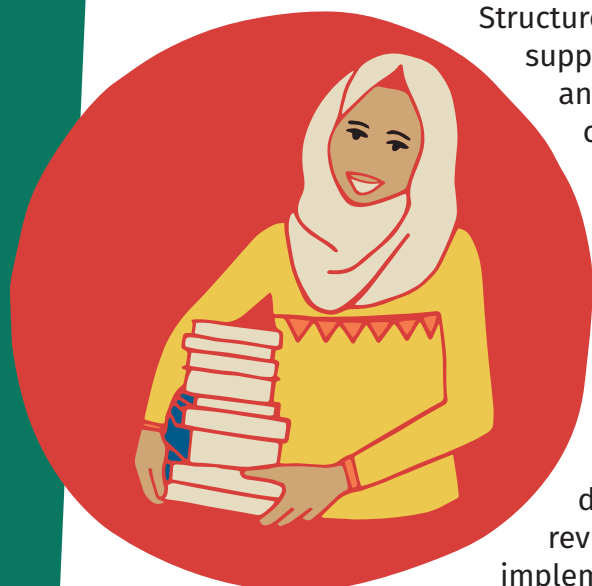
4 – Enabling this Policy

Strong national leadership will guide and ensure this Policy on Radical Inclusion is enacted and that its effectiveness is measured.

Structures, plans and schemes will be put in place to support radical inclusion in schools, among teachers and other education professionals, and within communities. As part of the Free Quality School Education programme, government and civil society will continue to ensure local ownership and act as champions of the policy.

After five years, there will be a policy review to assess the sustainability and success of the policy.

Evaluation will run through each year of development and a final evaluation will reflect and review what needs to be changed so that implementation can be improved and enhanced.



Purposeful is a feminist hub for girls' activism, rooted in Africa and working all around the world. We believe that another world is not only possible, it is already being built right here and now, in the ways that girls are organising with each other, imagining with each other and pushing us all a little further towards liberation.

In Sierra Leone, we work with tens of thousands of girls across the country to build intergenerational solidarity and access spaces of political knowledge building, modelling new beliefs, cultural conversations and shifting policy.





REMAKING the WORLD WITH AND FOR GIRLS

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