COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient

Sierra Leone

INTERNATIONAL
RESCUE
COMMITTEE

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EAGER Project Overview

Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER) is a 4-year (2019-2023) girls' education and empowerment project that was implemented in 10 districts of Sierra Leone with funding from FCDO[1] through the Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) initiative of the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC). Through a consortium led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in partnership with Concern Worldwide, Restless Development, and BBC Media Action, EAGER created new learning opportunities for 27,322 of the most marginalised out-of-school (OOS) adolescent girls ages 13-19[2] who lacked basic literacy and numeracy skills – including girls who were pregnant or already mothers, married girls, girls with disabilities, and girls who were heading their own households. The project aimed to equip these girls with significantly improved learning outcomes and enable their transition into further learning and/or earning opportunities within in a context of increased support from their families and community.

EAGER's Theory of Change guided the programme design around three core outcome areas: learning, transition, and sustainability. This design includes an 8-month integrated Learning Programme encompassing Literacy, Numeracy, Financial Literacy, and Life Skills, followed by an 8-month Transition period during which girls are encouraged to use their new knowledge and skills in different areas of their life. This is guided by an Empowerment Plan in which each girl sets her own learning, household, community, and financial goals.

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1   The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the United Kingdom.
2   EAGER worked with girls ages 13-17 in the first cohort. For the second cohort, the age range was expanded to 13-19 to allow girls who were 17 during the pandemic to still participate in the programme

Trained Mentors and Facilitators recruited from the girls' communities guide them through their Learning, Transition, and beyond – serving as role models not only for the girls, but also for the community. To foster sustainability, the project engaged key members of girls' households and the wider community through structured dialogues and action planning, and broadcast weekly girl-centred radio programmes highlighting the barriers girls face whilst showcasing their agency and positive gender norms.

This programme was delivered through two cycles: the first cycle engaged 7,481 girls in a first cohort (Cohort 1), and the second cycle engaged 19,841 girls in subsequent cohort (Cohort 2).

EAGER's programme model is built on the foundation of girls' rights, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child – both of which are ratified by the Government of Sierra Leone. These include every girl's right:

- To life, freedom, and safety
- To an education and to learn new skills
- To be protected from harmful practices and to live free from all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation
- To delay marriage and pregnancy until after 18 and to make her own choices about marriage, pregnancy, and using modern contraception
- To be as healthy as possible and to access the best possible health services
- To privacy and confidentiality
- To take part in important life decisions
- To speak up and be heard

Whilst these are individual rights, protecting them requires understanding, respect, and support from those closest to girls, as well as the community and the wider society. This includes those who hold the most power in girls' households, and those with power and influence in the community. The project design therefore draws on the socio-ecological model, recognising this complex interplay between girls and those with whom they live in relationship and community, as well as the policies, structures, and opportunities that impact them at the societal level.

To build support for girls' rights both during and beyond project implementation, it was essential to strengthen this sense of responsibility and accountability towards girls. One of EAGER's 10 Core Principles for Working with Adolescent Girls[3] states that: The community is responsible for girls' safety and must work together to keep girls safe from violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation. Safety is foundational, enabling greater freedom and access to opportunities. The following strategy outlines the approaches and actions that EAGER took to engage with and influence those within girls' households and communities to increase awareness and understanding of girls' rights and encourage action with girls for girls.

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3   Based on Girl Shine's 10 Core Principles for Working with Adolescent Girls, the principles include key attitudes and beliefs that are fundamental for creating an empowering environment for girls to learn and thrive

❯ Project Context

EAGER's programme design was based on a comprehensive situational analysis, and then further tailored in response to the findings of its own Baseline Evaluation to best meet the needs and interests of the adolescent girls enrolled. The following contextual factors informed the project's understanding of the overlapping barriers impacting girls, and shaped its approach to Learning, Transition, and community engagement that would foster a more enabling environment for girls and support the sustainability of project outcomes. This highlights the need for engagement with girls' households and communities, as well as the need for working to ensure that girls' safety and empowerment remained at the centre of this work.

Understanding the Country Context

In 2018, Sierra Leone's poverty rate was ranked amongst the highest in the world with real annual income per capita estimated at USD 469.80, and more than half the population living on less than USD 1.90 per day.[4] This financial vulnerability is more pronounced in rural areas, where 74% of the population live below the national poverty line, as compared with 35% in urban areas.[5] According to the 2020 Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, 4.9 million people (nearly 60% of the population) were food insecure and the number of people facing severe hunger tripled between 2010 and 2020.[6]

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4   Sierra Leone Economic Diversification Study – (P162720) documents1.worldbank.org/curated/pt/354291578288053592/pdf/Sierra-Leone-Economic-Diversification-Study.pdf
5   Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey (SLIHS) 2018.
6   World Food Program and Government of Sierra Leone, "State of Food Security in Sierra Leone: Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis," May 2021, docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000129312/download

Poverty is a known barrier to education and in Sierra Leone, more than half (57%) of the population 15 years and above is illiterate.[7] Gender differences are significant, and data from September 2021 places adult literacy rates at 52% for men and 35% for women; amongst youth, literacy rates are 71% for boys and 63% for girls.[8] Much of the gender disparity in education begins in adolescence, when more value begins to be placed on girls' domestic roles, rather than their education. This is evident in the widening gender inequality later in the education system, with more girls than boys dropping out as they move through Junior Secondary and Senior Secondary School.[9] Adolescent pregnancy and child marriage rates in Sierra Leone are amongst the highest globally, resulting in an estimated 20% of girls dropping out of the classroom.[10] At the school level, gender-based violence is evident, with violence occurring both on the way to school and in school – by perpetrators including male teachers, peers and older students.[11] On a national level, approximately 45.5% of all women in Sierra Leone have suffered some form of violence.[12]

Despite making up just over half of the country's population, girls and women remain marginalised across all sectors, and gender inequality and discrimination remain high. Sierra Leone regularly ranks at the bottom of global indices of gender inequality, such as the Gender Inequality Index (182 out of 189 in 2019)[13] and the Global Gender Gap Index (121 out of 156 in 2020).[14] These indices are based on measures of health and survival, women's empowerment, economic participation, and educational attainment.

Global evidence[15] tells us that by the onset of puberty, many girls experience the following risks:

- Increased social isolation
- Limited knowledge about sexual health, needs, maturation, and menstruation
- Rigid, confining expectations of roles and opportunities because of sex and age
- Disproportionate burden of household work and caregiving
- Withdrawal from, and lack of safety in, public spaces
- School dropout and limited life and/or vocational skills
- Gender-based violence including sexual violence
- Harmful traditional practices such as early/forced marriage
- Limited opportunities to earn and save income, migration for work

With these factors in mind, EAGER embarked on an approach to harmonise targeted programming with OOS girls alongside a comprehensive community engagement strategy in order to ensure support for girls in the programme and encourage sustainability beyond the project timeline.

7   UNDP (2020) Human Development Report: Sierra Leone.
8   data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.MA.ZS?locations=SL UNESCO Institute for Statistics
9   MBSSE 2019 Annual School Census Report.
10 Statistics Sierra Leone and ICF, 2019. Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2019: Key Indicators, Freetown, Sierra Leone and Rockville, Maryland.
11 UNICEF 2012 Sierra Leone Statistics
12 Ministry of Education Science and Technology, UNICEF 2016. A National Assessment of Out-of-School Children in Sierra Leone
13 hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII
14 World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2021: Insight Report"
15 Factors Specific to Girls by Age 12 (Bruce, J. 2010).

This approach was also designed to contribute towards the Government of Sierra Leone's priorities for gender equality in education and other sectors as outlined in the Education Sector Plan (2022-2026), the Radical Inclusion Policy (2021-2026), and Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy (2021).

Learnings from the EAGER Baseline Evaluation

The EAGER Baseline Evaluation[16] was conducted in 2019 in order to investigate how a targeted approach to supporting OOS girls across the 10 districts of Sierra Leone could be conceptualised and best rolled out through EAGER. This evaluation further outlined and confirmed the need for strategic engagement with the people around girls, and further informed the project's multiple approaches to community engagement. Following are some of these learnings and risk factors:

Learnings

Girls had little decision-making power over their education:

66% stated that they could not choose their own educational path and were subject to the decisions of others.

Girls experienced multiple barriers to education:

72% of girls reported that they were previously unable to attend school because their families lacked the money to pay fees.

23% because they needed to work at home

19% because they had a child or became pregnant

Such barriers would likely continue to impact their opportunities.

Girls lacked key resources for daily living [key drivers of early marriage and transactional sex]:

46% were food insecure

43% were impoverished

Girls lacked financial independence:

56% had no earnings

30% either worked for themselves

5% were employed informally or formally by others

Many girls experienced social marginalisation, stigma, isolation from their peers, and heavy chore burdens due to life circumstances:

44% were married

56% were mothers

7% were pregnant at the time

9% were their own head of household

Many girls were living with invisible disabilities:

15% self-reported to be living with a disability

60% of these were in whole or in part due to daily experiences of anxiety or depression

Girls were unaware of the gender norms that underpin their lives:

4% demonstrated awareness of gender norms

Suggesting that these norms are largely internalised through socialisation and the absence of female role models.

0%   50%   100%

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16 The EAGER Baseline Evaluation was conducted in March 2020 by IMC Worldwide and Dalan Associates as the data collection partner. The Baseline Research Policy Brief summarises the key findings

Men, especially male partners, supported education as a means to generate household income:
Nonetheless qualitative data presented the nuance that many did not approve of changes that would alter traditional gender norms.

There was a general lack of community support for key components required to support girls in the community:
Qualitative data demonstrated this with regard to girls' participation, education, safety, and/or empowerment.

Risks identified at the household level

- Caregivers or husbands/partners may not support girls' participation and consistent attendance in sessions, or allow girls to make decisions or increase their education.

- Economic or household priorities and/or childcare responsibilities may keep girls from attending and lead to dropout or lower learning outcomes.

- Families may not support childcare, or children may be at risk left with other caregivers.

- Topics relating to girls' empowerment and rights may lead to backlash and increased violence against girls in the household.

- Girls' husbands or partners may block them from attending or force their dropout due to household responsibilities or anger about the programme content.

- Intimate partner violence is a risk, as nearly half of the girls were married or living with a partner.

- Complications and injury in pregnancy and/or childbirth are a risk. According to the World Health Organisation, this is the leading cause of death for girls ages 15-19 globally.[17]

Risks identified at the community level:

- Community acceptance of girls' autonomy and decision-making power may not keep up with girls' increasing levels of confidence in their own capacity and rights.

- Staff and volunteers may reinforce discriminatory norms, not respect their right to learn, and deliver poor quality instruction that fails to meet their needs.

17 See WHO Sept 2022 Factsheet: www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy

1. Community Consultation and Ongoing Communications

The EAGER project strategically engaged with communities from initial entry in the communities through to close-out and exit with the aim of ensuring community support for girls' safety, wellbeing, and success. Several factors were considered when deciding whether or not to implement EAGER in a particular community. As a first step, the project engaged with community leaders to explain the project model, key activities, and objectives. Whilst not every leader initially embraced the idea of an education and empowerment project focused on girls – with primary critiques arguing why boys could not be targeted – the project required their commitment and support before moving forward to launch the programme in their community. This was critical to ensure the girls' engagement and safety, as well as the sustainability of project outcomes. This section highlights different ways that EAGER teams engaged and communicated with community members throughout project implementation.

Identifying Safe Spaces

Communities that agreed to implement the EAGER project through an initial mapping process[18] were requested to identify Safe Spaces within the community that could be used for the duration of the programme cycle as outlined in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). These spaces were required to be structurally sound, lockable, located in a safe and relatively quiet area where girls would not be disturbed, and large enough for groups of up to 25 girls.[19] Community leaders understood that these were to be female-only Safe Spaces so that girls would feel safe and at ease during their sessions, and that they as community leaders were responsible to ensure that the community understood this and that the girls remained safe there throughout the Learning Programme. This included making sure the spaces were not disturbed during sessions, and that girls were not stopped or harassed whilst coming or leaving. If anyone harassed, bullied, or disturbed girls in or on their way to the Safe Space, volunteers could appeal to these leaders to intervene with the individuals and the wider community. They were also in charge of general upkeep around the spaces, such as clearing the surrounding brush to keep the area safe from snakes or other risks.

Identifying Community-based Volunteers

Project teams engaged with community leaders to explain the purpose and role of Mentors and Facilitators in the programme, alongside their expected profiles, behaviours, and safeguarding responsibilities. To mitigate the risks of individuals being recommended due to their personal ties to community leaders rather than their qualifications and positive character traits that would be well-suited to working with girls, the project required all interested individuals to apply in the same way using the application and interview process so they could be properly tested and vetted.

18 EAGER mapped over 400 communities across 10 districts of Sierra Leone before the beginning of both the first and second cohort to assess which communities were eligible for the programme. This was determined both by the number of OOS girls present in the community that matched the criteria for enrolment, as well as the availability of a safe space with the support of the community.
19 To ensure a manageable group size for Mentors and Facilitators, and enable them to use more inclusive and individually supportive facilitation practices.

Before being hired, every volunteer was validated by the girls to ensure that they felt comfortable and safe engaging with the volunteer. This final sign-off from girls was vital for creating a learning environment in which they felt at ease and had a sense of ownership in its shaping.

All Mentors had to be female to support building relationships of trust with the girls, ensure that girls felt comfortable having conversations on sensitive topics during Life Skills sessions, and mitigate safeguarding risks. As there were fewer qualified female community members than males based on education level, these recommendations supported teams to identify females who otherwise may not have applied based on limited experience and confidence in their skills. Whilst basic literacy skills were required and experience was preferred, in many cases the only option was to engage women who had never held a formal job or leadership role before. Their known positive character traits were the foundation for building up their skill set for leading Life Skills sessions and working with the girls.

The significant growth in facilitation skills and confidence seen amongst the Mentors over time, as documented through ongoing project monitoring, led the project to consider Mentors not only as volunteers but also as direct beneficiaries themselves. Investing in their ongoing capacity-building enabled the project to roll out quality Life Skills sessions for the girls, whilst also enabling Mentors to see themselves as role models and play a more active role in the community as advocates and allies for girls.

Engaging with Girls' Households

The majority of girls enrolled in EAGER lived with others family members, whether parents or caregivers (51% of girls in Cohort 1, and 74% of girls in Cohort 2), or a husband or partner (31% of girls in Cohort 1, and 27% of girls in Cohort 2). Girls' engagement in the project therefore required positive communications with these key household members. This began at the point of initial mapping, when EAGER staff and volunteers went house to house to identify and map girls who met the selection criteria of age, out-of-school status, and limited literacy skills. As this was the first programme of its kind in many of these rural communities, this required explaining to household members the intentions of the project and its goal of focusing on girls' education. It was pre-empted before this mapping process that many households may not be enthusiastic to present some girls to the team conducting the mapping – for example, girls with disabilities. Project teams were trained on positive methods of sensitisation to mitigate the likelihood that all adolescent girls in the household were not presented to the team at the point of mapping.

Following the mapping exercise and confirmation of a sufficient number of girls to run the programme in the community, project teams led an enrolment exercise by again going house to house to engage with the girls and key household members. Girls were administered a test to gauge the level of pre-existing education, if any. Further details about the programme, such as time commitments and length, were explained, so that parents/caregivers or husbands/partners understood how many days and hours a week a girl would need to attend and that there was an attendance policy with dropout rules. These expectations were made clear during the enrolment process so that all girls and their households were aware of what participation in the programme would entail. Girls were then enrolled in the programme with their own intention and the understanding and commitment of these key household members. This was essential because most girls of this age already carry a heavy chore burden within their households, and the fact that they are out of school points toward less value being placed on their education than on their physical and/or economic contributions to the household.

Throughout the programme cycle, volunteers visited these households to communicate key messages and updates about the programme, and inform them about specific activities. When specific messages needed to be conveyed, key talking points were prepared, printed, and distributed to volunteers to ensure consistency in communications across the project. Whenever girls were absent from sessions, Mentors were assigned to follow up directly with the girl and her household to understand the reasons and try to help resolve any barriers to her continued attendance and full participation.

Communicating Safeguarding Messages

All EAGER consortium partners were required to have in place organisational policies, procedures, codes of conduct, and a Complaints Response Mechanism (CRM) with toll-free phoneline, alongside a specific Safeguarding SOP for EAGER. Staff, volunteers, and associated personnel were required to review and sign off on these materials during on-boarding and prior to working with girls or engaging with the communities.

The project worked to ensure that community members were aware of these reporting procedures and the CRM phone line. Project teams led community discussions to explain their right to report any concerns or complaints about staff, volunteers, or the project, and presented the options for reporting through the CRM phoneline, a staff member, or complaints boxes.

These messages were repeated during community meetings and included in key talking points to households to ensure that community members understood their rights and felt comfortable to report any concerns or incidents. EAGER also created and distributed an image-based poster (for the low-literacy context) that shows a girl borrowing a Mentor's phone to call the CRM line to make a confidential report.[20]

This poster includes the specific CRM number of the organisation working in that community alongside their logo, and was strategically placed in central locations within the community as well as inside the Safe Space. EAGER girls were regularly reminded about the CRM phoneline and how it works, and encouraged to call the number if they had any concern, worry, or complaint about anyone or anything related to the EAGER project. During focus group discussions conducted as part of the Girls and Mentors Survey led by the project in July 2022, all participating girls demonstrated a strong understanding of how to report abuse, including calling the CRM number. All knew where to get the number, and many knew it by heart.

Engaging with Caregivers

In response to the high number of girls with children and the challenges they may face securing childcare support from family members, the project started informal Mother/Female Caregiver Groups that met on a periodic and as-needed basis during the Cohort 1 learning phase. Through these groups, the project communicated vital information about the programme and held these female caregivers more accountable to the commitments made during enrolment to reduce girls' household chores on session days and support with childcare as needed. These female caregivers played a key role in ensuring attendance and mitigating the risk of girls dropping out. During Cohort 2, EAGER engaged both male and female caregivers in Community Dialogues (further explained below) and used these monthly dialogues to discuss any other concerns. This replaced the Mother/Female Caregiver Groups as an intervention strategy. However, in communities where these had proven especially effective and the women wished to continue holding meetings, these continued as well. The project sees the value in both structures, with the main limitations being staff and volunteer time.

Communicating about Distributions

The EAGER project included a number of in-kind distributions during the project as a support and incentive for girls to continue engaging. This included the distribution of a reusable Menstrual Hygiene Kit to every girl during the first half of the Learning Programme, and an Empowerment Package including a portable solar light, water bucket with lid and tap, wooden lock-box with lock and keys for storing cash and small valuables, and a *lappa* (length of traditional fabric). The Empowerment Package was distributed towards the end of the Learning Programme to support girls during their Transition period. In addition, every girl who graduated from the programme received a conditional cash transfer that would support her to work toward a financial goal that she had identified for herself and outlined in her Empowerment Plan. More details on these activities can be found in EAGER's Transition Strategy (find out more about this Strategy at the link under Resources at the end of this chapter).

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20 Whilst many Mentors had mobile phones, not all did – the aim was to encourage girls to seek out a trusted person in the community who was willing to make their phone available. During Covid-19, Mentors were provided with phones and airtime to ensure ongoing communication when staff were not able to reach communities.

Before each of these distributions, EAGER volunteers engaged with community leaders and with the girls' parents/caregivers or husbands/partners to ensure that they were aware of the distributions and the purpose of the items ahead of time. Key talking points were written and distributed so that volunteers were able to share consistent messages. These communications reinforced the project's accountability in maintaining open communications with girls' key household members, whilst reinforcing the messages that these items and cash were for the girls, how they would be helpful to the girls, and that nobody had the right to take these from the girls. These communications were also pre-emptive and designed to mitigate risks and any backlash against girls by members of their household or community.

During the actual distributions in the Safe Spaces, a representative community leader (in many cases, a female leader such as the Mami Queen was preferred) and 1-2 representative female caregivers were invited to witness the distribution process. This ensured transparency and accountability at the community level for reassurance that the distribution was safe, fair, and equal for all girls. Signatures from these witnessing community members are reflected on the distribution documentation.

Community Celebrations

At the end of the Learning Programme, EAGER staff and volunteers organised a graduation event for the girls to mark their achievements. For many girls, this was their first certificate or marked achievement of any kind, and it was important to honour and celebrate this. The girls' parents/caregivers and husbands/partners were invited to attend this event so they could witness and honour their achievements and participate in this moment of celebration. Community leaders were also invited to attend to add importance to the event and show that the community was also proud of the girls and supporting them as they looked towards their Transition and future.

99% of girls reported feeling safe at their Safe/Learning Space.
- Midline Evaluation, 2021

99% of girls reported that they felt comfortable speaking to Mentors.
- Project monitoring

98% of girls believed they could reach the goals they set for themselves in EAGER.
- Endline Evaluation, 2022

95% of girls reported feeling safe and supported to make decisions about their life.
- Project monitoring

274 communities in Cohort 1 and **381** in Cohort 2 provided and facilitated the use of Safe Space for girls in the community.
- Project monitoring

600 Mentors and **345** Facilitators were identified and trained across **274** communities in Cohort 1, and **800** respectively across **381** communities in Cohort 2.
- Project monitoring

26,793 girls received an Empowerment Package (**6,995** in Cohort 1 and **19,781** in Cohort 2) and **26,775** received cash (**6,994** in Cohort 1 and **19,781** in Cohort 2).
- Project monitoring

Resources

- EAGER Community-based Volunteer Model
- EAGER IRC Safeguarding Poster
- EAGER Cash and Empowerment Package Distribution Guidelines
- EAGER Transition Strategy
- EAGER Protection Strategy

2. Community Dialogues

The socio-ecological model of social and behaviour change makes it clear that any work designed to empower adolescent girls cannot stop with the girls themselves, but must also consider those with whom she interacts. This includes those who hold power to make decisions and influence others in the community, as well as those who hold more power within the girls' households.[21]

To strengthen the collective sense of responsibility for and accountability towards adolescent girls, the project designed a series of 7 Community Dialogues that invited participants to reflect on their assumptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards girls. These dialogues brought girls into greater focus by putting a spotlight on the inequalities holding them back. The aim was that as participants better understood the challenges girls face, they would be motivated to identify and lead meaningful actions to better protect and support girls in the community.

The approach aimed to inspire transformational change, which the project defined as a big shift in how a person thinks, feels, and acts. This can only happen when a person recognises that there is a problem, feels the need to do something about it, and is motivated to take steps to create change. It can also happen collectively in a group, where there is more power with others to lead change. More specifically, the dialogues aimed to spark transformational change in relation to gender norms and how girls in the community were being seen, heard, valued, protected, and supported.

21 For further reading, see: www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Technical_Note_on_Gender-Transformative_Approaches_in_the_GPECM_Phase_II_A_Summary_for_Practitioners-January-2020.pdf

A shift towards gender equality in the balance of power within households and the wider community is unlikely without looking honestly and seeing how the inequalities harm girls and lead to many consequences for the girl as well as the entire community. This gender-transformative approach aimed to shine a spotlight on existing unequal gender roles and harmful gender norms, and reinforce positive gender norms to promote gender equality.

The Community Dialogues approach draws on the understanding from Social Cognitive Theory[22] that learning occurs in a social context through interactions with others and the environment, and that we can learn faster by observing the actions of others and seeing the results. As we learn both desirable and undesirable behaviours from those around us, we copy them to benefit ourselves – therefore, our role models and others' social influences have a great impact on our learning and actions.

Most people in a given community are especially unlikely to make individual changes outside of the accepted gender norms [which often act as rigid Gender Boxes for men and women that we judge each other's behaviours by] because this can lead to mocking, rejection, or even punishment from those around us. Recognising that such shifts are most likely to come by building consensus as a group to make changes, the project's strategy was to create this space for respectful discussions and collective learning about the key issues impacting adolescent girls. The role and voices of women and girls in these conversations was vital. This work builds on the IRC's evidence-based Engaging Men through Accountable Practice (EMAP)[23] approach to gender norms transformation as well as the work of Raising Voices[24] in Uganda and other countries through their SASA! model for engaging communities in conversations about gender, power, and GBV.

In the face of strong traditional gender norms, any outside criticism, judgment, or telling people what they should do differently may generate defensiveness and be counterproductive. Instead, this model takes the approach of opening up conversations, asking targeted and open-ended questions to invite different perspectives whilst ensuring female voices are heard, sharing factual information, and showing different possibilities to spark new insights and 'aha' moments. The dialogues use image-based posters, interactive activities, storytelling, and role plays to highlight the challenges girls face, and targeted open-ended questions to generate discussion.

Project staff were trained by technical specialists on topics covering gender, power, social norms, GBV, and common resistance responses, on inclusive facilitation practices, and on the specific content and activities in the Community Dialogues Guide. Whilst Life Skills Officers (all female) and Basic Literacy and Numeracy Officers (majority male) led the dialogues in teams of two, EAGER Mentors and Facilitators from the community actively supported throughout the process and were encouraged to speak out as advocates and allies for girls. Mentors also reviewed the content of the dialogues during one of their monthly Learning Cluster meetings so that they were prepared and confident to be strong female voices in the group for girls' rights and opportunities. By bringing community members together for these structured dialogues, the project created a learning environment in which role models and positive social deviants could speak up to influence others and individuals could be supported to adopt new practices through positive reinforcement from those around them.

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22 Developed by psychologist Albert Bandura: albertbandura.com/albert-bandura-social-cognitive-theory.html
23 Please see: gbvresponders.org/prevention/emap-approach/ and https://airbel.rescue.org/studies/impact-evaluation-of-engaging-men-in-accountable-practices-in-the-drc
24 Please see: raisingvoices.org

The idea was to build a sense of accountability between group members, and strengthen consensus on actions that could be taken to protect and support girls in the community. These action points were intended to be small and achievable, to be established through behavioural contracting, and to be monitored and reinforced through record keeping. A separate Community Dialogues Guide is printed for every community to serve as a living document so that these specific action points can be recorded in the moment and referred back to in the following session.

The dialogues are built around 7 themes, each ending with a call to action:

1. Girls' Opportunities ◐ What changes can we make now so girls have equal opportunities?

2. Girls' Barriers ◐ What changes can we make now to remove the barriers girls are facing?

3. Girls' Education ◐ What changes can we make now so girls can access education?

4. Early Marriage ◐ What changes can we make now to stop early and forced marriage?

5. Early Pregnancy ◐ What changes can we make now to protect girls from early pregnancy?

6. Violence Against Girls at Home ◐ What changes can we make now to stop violence against girls inside the home?

7. Violence Against Girls in the Community ◐ What changes can we make now to stop violence against girls in the community?

To ensure a sense of cohesion across the series, each dialogue is built on the previous ones, with ties back to earlier discussions and reminders to follow through on actions previously committed to.

Listening Sessions

Ahead of each Community Dialogue, all EAGER girls were invited to participate in a listening session with their female Mentors and Life Skills Officer. Each listening session was based on the theme of the dialogue, and girls were asked open-ended questions related to that theme. This created an opportunity for girls to talk about their challenges, specific barriers they were facing, what they needed and wanted, and their vision for change – all within a safe and supported space with adults who were actively listening. The Life Skills Officer took notes about the key points raised during the discussion.

Before the end of the listening session, the Officer read back each point and asked the girls if they wanted her to share this point with the community leaders. If the girls said no (for example, if it was too sensitive or they did not feel safe raising the issue), she marked it to ensure that it would not be shared with the leaders. However, the Officer and Mentors could discuss amongst themselves what could be done from their side to address the concern. If the girls said they wanted the point to be shared, the Officer marked it with a checkmark to indicate that it should be raised during the next Community Dialogue. These points were then built into the dialogues so that participants would directly hear the needs and concerns of girls in their community. This encouraged accountability to the girls in their action planning.

Listening sessions create a unique space for adolescent girls to share their concerns and ideas for how to make the community a better place for all girls. Being listened to affirms that their concerns are valid, and that their voices and opinions matter. During each subsequent listening session, the Life Skills Officer and Mentors updated the girls on the community's latest action plans and progress. This created an accountability loop, and confirmed to girls that they were being heard.

The approach to listening sessions was reshaped from Cohort 1 to Cohort 2. In the first pilot cycle, one longer listening session was held with girls covering all the topics. The points raised in response to each topic were then brought into that specific dialogue. However, as the project saw the value of these listening sessions, this was expanded to enable time for richer discussion around each topic and to create more opportunities for girls to gather together and strengthen their collective voice. Each targeted listening session took place just before the related Community Dialogue was rolled out.

Engaging the Community in the Dialogues

For the pilot round of Community Dialogues during Cohort 1, EAGER staff and volunteers worked together to identify and invite approximately 25 recognised leaders in each community who were already regularly involved in meetings and decision-making. This included the Chief, Mami Queen (the highest-ranking female leader), Youth Leader, religious leaders, etc. The aim was to engage those with power at the highest levels of the community so they could positively influence others and lead on actions.

Seeing the value of directly engaging with Mothers/Female Caregivers during Cohort 1 to support girls' attendance in sessions, the project decided to hold a second separate Community Dialogue with girls' female and male caregivers during Cohort 2. This allowed the project to more regularly engage caregivers in these vital conversations for more immediate impact in the households and lives of EAGER girls. In addition to motivating support for their girl's consistent attendance in sessions, the aim was to increase their respect for her autonomy during Transition. This also allowed the

project to double the number of people reached through the Community Dialogue series, increasing the potential for these conversations to continue outside the dialogues, and ultimately lead to more meaningful changes for girls.

In communities where one round of dialogues had already been conducted during Cohort 1, additional influential community members were invited to join the second round during Cohort 2 – including girls' husbands/partners and older adolescent boys with potential to positively influence other boys.

Collective Action Planning

Following the core activities and discussions in each dialogue, participants were asked to listen to the concerns and needs voiced by girls in the Listening Sessions. Then they were guided by the Facilitator through a problem-solving framework with specific questions:

1. **Identify the problem(s)** ◐ Why is this happening?

2. **Connect with it** ◐ How is it affecting girls and the community?

3. **See new possibilities** ◐ What would it be like if things were different?

4. **Take responsibility** ◐ What can we do to create change?

5. **Make a plan** ◐ How can we do this?

After going through this process, the group is encouraged to think of concrete actions they can take to solve the problems they have discussed. This is about encouraging collective responsibility, creativity, and action, rather than hopeful thinking. The dialogue facilitators are encouraged to guide them toward achievable goals that they can act on – rather than waiting for outside support or funds. In the design, each group is encouraged to define at least two specific actions they will take. Once these are agreed, they discuss what their goal will be, what steps they will take to reach it, who is responsible for taking the lead, and when they expect to complete the action.

The Community Dialogues Guide is designed to be printed for every community and written in a workbook. This allows the dialogue facilitators to document the action points every month in the table provided so that they can bring these points up during the next dialogue and see what progress has been made. This documentation enables follow-up across the months and supports accountability. These action plan points are then also shared with the girls during the next listening session.

In each of the 7 monthly dialogues, both groups are guided through this action planning process. The intent is that they will continue to reflect on different ways they can support, protect, and enable the girls in their community. By the end of the series, many practical actions should have been taken. The group of community leaders may have a different set of action points than the group of caregivers, opening up possibilities for different areas of action. However, there is space for these groups to work together to amplify the impact of their actions.

Towards the end of the series of dialogues, representatives from both groups and from the girls are invited to come together to discuss a Community Action Plan.

Community Action Plan

At the end of the Community Dialogues, the project facilitated a process for community action planning. As the dialogues are intended to start around the same time that girls begin the 8-month Learning Programme, the 7 monthly dialogues wrap up around the same time. At this point, project staff and volunteers worked to bring the girls and community leaders together to look at the actions taken so far for the girls.

After looking at progress made up that point, the girls and community leaders had an opportunity to discuss together how they could best use a small fund provided by EAGER to take one specific action that would bring a positive change for girls. Once they had agreed on a specific action that was feasible within the amount provided, the Community Action Plan template could be used to record details explaining the problem that required action, the action that would be taken, the steps that would be taken, how they would know they reached the goal, the start and end dates of the plan, and the person ultimately responsible for it. Then the plan would be signed by a representative girl, representative community leader, and an EAGER staff as witness.

Following these steps, the cash transfer was delivered to the responsible community leader and EAGER project staff followed up to document progress on the plan through a Community Action Plan Matrix.

Girls' Empowerment Ambassador Committees

To keep up the momentum built during the girls' listening sessions and dialogues, the project encouraged the creation of Girls' Empowerment Ambassador Committees. Where a similar standing committee did not exist, the project team proposed to community leaders to form one. If a similar group was already in place and met regularly, the project approached that committee and asked them if they would be willing to take on the same responsibilities with additional support from the project volunteers and EAGER girls.

The aim of these committees was to ensure there would be a continued focus on the needs of adolescent girls and ongoing work towards positive and lasting changes for girls. They could continue to follow up on any outstanding action points from the dialogues and follow up on the Community Action Plan to ensure that it was completed. Such a committee could also ensure that girls knew who to go to if they had concerns requiring action from community leadership, and when they had ideas they wanted to propose to the community. In addition to continuing to support their girls, these communities could also become positive role models for neighbouring communities, and even influence positive change for girls up to the Chiefdom level.

The project recommended that this committee include 2 community leaders (at least 1 female), 3 adolescent girls (EAGER graduates), 2 caregivers (at least 1 female), 1-2 EAGER Mentors, and 1-2 EAGER Facilitators.

97% of girls feel that they are listened to in their home.
- Endline Evaluation, 2022

86% of girls feel that they are listened to within their community.
- Endline Evaluation, 2022

90% of girls feel that they are able to play an active role in their community.
- Endline Evaluation, 2022

94% of girls reported feeling safe and supported to access opportunities in their community.
- Project monitoring

100% of communities (**274** communities in Cohort 1 and **381** in Cohort 2) engaged in **100%** (7/7) of Community Dialogues across both cohorts.
- Project monitoring

100% of communities (**274** communities in Cohort 1 and **381** in Cohort 2) developed and implemented a Community Action Plan.
- Project monitoring

Resources

- EAGER Guide to Community Dialogues (with Community Action Plan template)
- EAGER Community Dialogues Training Guide
- EAGER Girls' Empowerment Ambassador Committee Guidelines
- EAGER Protection Strategy

3. Social and Behaviour Change Communication

The Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) component of the EAGER project targeted the harmful socio-cultural norms and practices that impact adolescent girls in order foster a more supportive and enabling environment for girls. This approach requires engaging with the communities and networks around girls, particularly those who hold power in girls' lives, and draws on the socio-ecological model of social and behaviour change, which recognises the complex interplay between individual-level, relationship-level, community-level, and society-level factors.

This SBCC work was led by EAGER consortium partner, BBC Media Action, whose team created and produced two types of radio programmes for the project in collaboration with EAGER technical specialists and implementation teams, and with regular contributions from girls and community members engaged in the EAGER project. Radio is the most widely consumed form of media in Sierra Leone, and these programmes enabled the project to engage with communities and individuals beyond the reach of direct implementation to cover all districts of Sierra Leone. Programmes were broadcast nationally in Krio, with additional local segments produced in regional languages to increase resonance and further engage communities in these conversations.

While these radio programmes aimed to inspire and empower girls as they listened to the experiences of girls like themselves, the primary audience was the community around them – their parents, caregivers, and guardians, their husbands and partners, boys and young men in the community, community leaders, and others in the community who interact with girls. These are generally the controllers of radio sets in a household, and the ones likely to make or influence decisions impacting girls. The aim was bringing households and communities together to discuss and find solutions together with girls for the greater protection, wellbeing, and opportunities of all girls.

To do so, this work sought to build listeners' knowledge and understanding of girls' rights and shift attitudes through positive role modelling. Particular emphasis was placed on valuing girls equally to boys, supporting girls' learning, education and skills development opportunities, and protecting girls from harmful practices such as early/forced marriage and other forms of gender-based violence. The project adopted a gender transformative approach to content creation, challenging the root causes of gender discrimination by addressing stereotypes and unequal power distribution. By showcasing the benefits of positive gender norms, this work aimed to shift these power dynamics and enable girls to exercise their power to act with the support of those around them.

The SBCC approach used a range of channels, formats, voices and treatments – for example, using interviews to deepen understanding and build empathy, real-life role models to showcase supportive behaviour, debates to spark discussion, and drama to tackle sensitive issues. The use of social media further enabled the project to reach a younger and urban-based audience. To ensure that local media could continue to produce gender-sensitive programming with potential for positive impacts for adolescent girls beyond the timeline of the EAGER project, the project team used a mentor model to build the capacity of local radio stations.

This work supported the overall efforts of the EAGER project to increase access to learning and opportunities for adolescent girls within a framework of increased support from their families and communities. By engaging households in these vital topics centred around girls, the radio shows reinforced the work being carried out by project teams in EAGER communities, whilst enabling these messages to also reach a far broader audience at the national level. EAGER girls and Mentors were regularly featured and invited to share what they had learned, and EAGER communities engaged in discussion shows that were then broadcast at the national level. In this way, the radio shows directly complemented, reinforced, and amplified the work being carried out at the community level. The following sections describe these approaches in more detail.

Factual Radio Show: *Wae Gyal Pikin Tinap*

Wae Gyal Pikin Tinap (When the Girl Child Stands) is a factual magazine-style radio show that was broadcast nationally on a weekly basis throughout the two cohort cycles of the EAGER project. This package contains 104 episodes which approach harmful attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about girls by inviting listeners to see the world through the stories and experiences of girls and demonstrating what girls are capable of achieving when their community is supportive. Such support includes creating a safer environment for girls, engaging girls in decision-making, taking action to remove barriers that girls face in their daily lives, and expanding opportunities for girls. Each 30-minute episode explores one theme or issue through different perspectives, including inspiring stories from girls, role model stories from people supporting girls, and a range of interviews with national and local stakeholders and subject matter experts. Themes range from the foundational (emphasising girls' inherent value and rights) to the fun and inspirational (such as girls' participation in sports, and girls' hopes for the future) to more sensitive and challenging areas (including relationships and consent, and violence against women and girls). Many of the themes correspond to sessions and objectives in the EAGER Life Skills curriculum, and topics discussed in the Community Dialogues.

Some episodes take an issue that might be of national significance, such as Ramadan or impacts of climate change or the rising cost of living or an industry, such as mining or agriculture. These shows explore that issue or industry "through the eyes of girls," looking at the unique ways in which girls experience and view it, and encouraging audiences to engage and listen to girls when considering these issues. To ensure inclusivity and a wide representation of experiences, girls are interviewed from different parts of the country, different walks of life, and with different life experiences. Many episodes include interviews with girls who became pregnant at an early age, are living with disabilities, are heading their own households, and/or who are out of school.

Whatever the topic may be, the show aims to be positive and solutions-focused and to show what girls can achieve when they are valued, listened to, supported, believed in, and given opportunities. It aims to showcase girls' agency by featuring girls who have overcome challenges and who are making positive changes in their lives and communities. To keep the series engaging, every episode features a unique combination of short segments that may include on-the-ground reports; interviews; discussions (including between girls and adults); strong personal stories; expert information; and info-tainment such as music, poetry, and short drama sketches. BBC Media Action journalists drew on the consortium's wide network to connect with experts and contributors, and travelled across the country to interview girls and community members.

In addition to being girl-centred, girls are also at the heart of the production process. Many episodes feature a girl as a co-presenter who sits in the studio with the main presenter and helps to introduce and respond to items, as well as conducting some of the interviews herself. In the process, she helps to role model the importance of listening to girls and including them in discussion and decision making. Placing girls in this visible role and enabling them to do the asking demonstrates their agency and gives them a greater voice for shaping the conversation.

Wae Gyal Pikin Tinap was broadcast on 64 partner stations around the country.

Drama-discussion Radio Show: *Kotoku Baray*

Kotoku Baray (Open Secret) is a short format drama-discussion radio show created to explore some of the most sensitive issues faced by adolescent girls, role model supportive behaviours, and open up constructive conversation. This 24-episode series was created to complement the factual radio show by enabling more extensive conversations on topics including violence against women and girls and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The drama series follows the lives of its characters as they navigate questions and decision-making around sexual health, relationships, consent, early/forced marriage, contraception, and unplanned pregnancy, and draws out intersecting issues of power, gender, and agency. Listeners follow the choices these girls make, and see the consequences. As with the factual show, adolescent girls are at the heart of the drama. The central characters are girls ages 13-17, and listeners follow them and explore the issues through their eyes and experiences. They also hear the perspective of secondary characters – parents/caregivers/guardians, husbands/partners, and others who influence the girls' lives.

Drama is a particularly useful format for addressing such sensitive and personal issues, as interviews would carry great risks relating to disclosures, retraumatisation, and stigmatisation. With drama, the challenges can be played out through fictional characters, and the stories and change journeys can be carefully crafted to demonstrate the harmful impacts of non-supportive behaviours, role model supportive behaviours, and communicate key advocacy messages.

The drama is designed to be listened to sequentially from start to finish, in order, as a complete series. This enables listeners to follow the characters and storylines as they develop, especially as a number of story lines run over multiple episodes. This is how the drama series was first broadcast at the national level, and how the project recommends other audiences and groups to engage with it.

The recurring characters – including girls, parents, partners, and community leaders – demonstrate and highlight specific issues through a stand-alone vignette approach. The use of these recurring well-liked and love-to-hate characters builds the audience's emotional engagement over time and increases potential for learning and behaviour change. To ensure that they would have the desired impact, the dramas were field-tested with girls and other audiences before being broadcast.

The drama series was designed to provoke discussion and debate as a strategy for motivating attitude and behaviour change. Each episode points to a clear talking point; for example, when and how a caregiver might talk to adolescent girls and boys about relationships and sex. To guide this discussion, a short guide was developed for each episode, to be used with communities, girls, or any other groups who listen to the series together. These discussion guides pick up on major themes in each episode and provide a framework for exploring the issues which come up. To mitigate against backlash, this discussion starts from a point of common values and the target audiences' aspirations, focusing on how greater gender equality could help to achieve these changes in households and communities.

Each broadcast of the 15-minute drama was immediately followed by a 15-minute pre-recorded discussion with community members reflecting on the drama that had just been presented. This included their responses to what happened in the drama, and demonstrated their learning and reflections on the themes. This was designed to work together with the drama to motivate other listeners to internalise and act on the content, therefore supporting behaviour change that protects and supports adolescent girls. The 24 episodes of the drama-discussion series were broadcast on 64 partner radio channels across Sierra Leone during the Cohort 2 programme cycle.

Social Media

Given the increasing use of social media platforms in Sierra Leone, the project aimed to further amplify the themes and content from its factual radio show through the strategic use of social media platforms. This enabled EAGER to engage with community members not likely to be reached through other means, particularly those in urban areas with regular access to these technologies. Social media platforms offer fewer safeguards on content, comment, and repurposing of material, leading to increased risks of misuse and abuse online. These risks were carefully considered by the team, and a risk assessment was carried out with steps put in place to mitigate them. It was agreed that social media would not be used for addressing more sensitive behaviour change objectives or covering sensitive stories that could place an individual at risk of abuse. By focusing instead on positive examples and success stories showcasing support and solutions, the intention was to inspire and motivate social media users to make positive changes in their own lives.

BBC Media Action conducted a detailed analysis of each of its social media platforms to identify which were best suited for SBCC work. The team determined that Facebook and Instagram had the greater potential for reaching young women and young men living in urban areas who have some level of influence in their networks and communities. This also carried potential for reaching influencers at the structural and systems level including other media actors and social influencers at the national level. EAGER's social media content was planned in sync with the content being produced for the factual radio show, ensuring consistency through the various media. Posts on BBC Media Action Sierra Leone's Facebook page and Instagram account both featured stories and content from the factual radio programme.

Content was designed to be sharable and 'likable' and to build visibility and momentum around the key issues and garner support amongst an influencer audience for the value of and support of girls' safe learning and educational opportunities.

Mentoring Local Radio Stations

Whilst engaging in the production of *Wae Gyal Pikin Tinap*, the BBC Media Action team simultaneously invested in training and mentoring presenters and producers based in 18 local radio stations. The vision was to build the knowledge, awareness, and capacity of these local radio stations to be able to produce gender-sensitive content focused on adolescent girls long after the close of the EAGER project. The team worked to build this capacity through a hands-on approach. Mentors trained, supervised, and worked collaboratively with mentees to produce their own local versions of the weekly factual radio show. These local shows linked the issue explored in the national programme with the surrounding community, giving local examples and case studies, pointing to local solutions, and sparking local discussion. These local shows were then broadcast on their stations immediately following the national programme.

This long-term mentoring approach enabled the team to reinforce learning through practice whilst maintaining quality, safeguarding, and alignment with a gender-transformative lens. Looking forward, these radio stations are better positioned to produce content that amplifies girls' voices and continues to support positive social and behaviour change for adolescent girls.

Approximately 1.1 million (**21%** of the 15+ population) has listened to at least every other episode of the EAGER radio programmes, defined as regularly reached.

98% of respondents who were regularly reached by *Wae Gyal Pikin Tinap* agreed that the programme helped them better understand girls' learning, skills development, and education opportunities.

74% of those regularly reached strongly agreed that girls and boys should have the same right to an education.

54% of those regularly reached reported having taken an action in support of girls as a result of listening to the EAGER radio programmes.
Of these, **61%** reported that they had enrolled a daughter/girl in school,
and **48%** that they enrolled a daughter/girl back in school after having a child.

- SBCC Endline Evaluation, 2022

Resources

- *Wae Gyal Pikin Tinap* and Listening Guide
- *Kotoku Baray* and Listening Guide
- EAGER SBCC Strategy
- EAGER SBCC Endline Report and Briefs

Conclusion

The EAGER project aimed to achieve positive outcomes in the areas of girls' learning, transition, and sustainability. The approaches described above aimed to engage those closest to the girls as well as their wider communities in this journey so that they would provide additional protection, encouragement, and support to the girls. This was critical not only during the girls' active participation in the Learning Programme, but also during their Transition as they made decisions for themselves and practised the skills they had learnt – including using their increased confidence to speak up about things that mattered to them. By engaging with the communities directly through dialogues and radio programme, the project fostered a safer and more responsive environment for girls to exercise their right to speak up and take action for themselves during their Transition. This positive interaction between girls and their communities speaks to the sustainability of the positive outcomes seen through the project.

These models and programme approaches were developed, piloted, and adapted based on learnings from external evaluations, ongoing project monitoring, and multiple feedback loops throughout the project. This enabled the project to learn from girls, Mentors, and community members directly along the way and make changes based on their feedback as well as programmatic learning. These adaptations included making revisions to the Community Dialogues Guide between Cohorts 1 and 2, strengthening the action planning process, increasing the number of listening sessions with girls, and even adding an additional dialogue focused on adolescent pregnancy and contraception. Another key adaptation was doubling the number of people participating in the dialogues in each community by adding a second dialogue for caregivers. This was added based on requests from field staff to strengthen engagement with the girl's caregivers, and requests from community leaders to reach more people through the dialogues.

The flexibility to pivot and adapt along the way enabled a more impactful programme and a greater chance of sustainability of project outcomes. Whilst the transformation of harmful gender norms and movement towards gender equality is a slow process that requires strong momentum from within the community itself until it reaches a tipping point, there is evidence of a shift in favour of girls' rights and opportunities.

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IRC Mission

At work in more than 40 countries and over 20 U.S. cities, the International Rescue Committee's mission is to help people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster, including the climate crisis, to survive, recover and gain control of their future.