



World Vision

Hope, Joy and Justice for ALL Children



**CP ADAPT
ASSESSMENT
REPORT
2024**

WORLD VISION INTERNATIONAL SIERRA LEONE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence Against Children (VAC) remains a critical issue affecting the well-being and development of children globally. Understanding the root causes of VAC is essential for creating effective interventions and policies. This research employs a qualitative approach to explore the underlying factors contributing to VAC in the Falaba District, where World Vision International Sierra Leone (WVSL) operates.

Using the WV CP-ADAPT, the study systematically identifies, prioritizes, and analyzes the root causes of child protection challenges. Data collection employed purposive and availability sampling techniques, involving children aged 10 to 17 (both genders), adult men and women, and key community figures such as local leaders and social workers. Primary data were gathered through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), with content analysis applied to the qualitative data.

The findings revealed various factors contributing to VAC. Adolescent pregnancies are significantly influenced by peer pressure and weak enforcement of local laws. Child marriages result from inadequate parental supervision, limited educational access, and insufficient housing and services. Incidents of sexual penetration correlate with a weakened national system, ineffective local regulations, substance abuse among youth, inappropriate attire, and a lack of opportunities. Substance abuse is intensified by easy access to drugs, school dropouts, peer influence, poor parental care, unemployment, and single-parent households. Child neglect and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) are linked to single-parent families, parental loss, domestic conflict, lack of family planning, family breakdowns, unemployment, and polygamous relationships.

To address these challenges, several strategies are proposed, including strengthening legal systems and enforcement, enhancing family support and parental care, increasing access to education and essential services, developing comprehensive substance abuse prevention programs, and promoting community involvement in child protection efforts. Additionally, the importance of raising public awareness of child protection initiatives is underscored.

BACKGROUND

Violence against children is a critical issue that has garnered global attention due to its widespread prevalence and severe impact on children's lives. This violence can manifest in various forms, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect. The consequences of such violence are far-reaching, affecting not only the immediate well-being of children but also their long-term physical, psychological, and social development.

Globally, violence against children is a pervasive problem. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in the past year. This alarming statistic underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to prevent and address violence against children. International organizations like UNICEF and WHO are at the forefront of these efforts, advocating for legal reforms, raising awareness, and providing support services for victims. These organizations emphasize the importance of creating safe environments for children, both at home and in the community, to ensure their healthy development and well-being [1, 4].

In Africa, the issue of violence against children is compounded by cultural, economic, and social factors. Traditional practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) are prevalent in many communities, contributing significantly to the violence experienced by children [2]. Economic hardships and lack of access to education further exacerbate the problem, making children more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse². Poverty forces many children into labor or early marriages, depriving them of their childhood and exposing them to various forms of violence [2]. The African Union and other regional bodies are actively working to combat these issues through legal reforms, public awareness campaigns, and community-based interventions [2]. These initiatives aim to change harmful cultural practices and provide better protection and support for children across the continent [3].

Sierra Leone faces significant challenges in addressing violence against children. The country has high rates of physical abuse, sexual violence, and exploitation. According to UNICEF, 86.5% of children aged 1 to 14 years in Sierra Leone experience some form of violent discipline in their households [3]. Factors such as poverty, lack of education, and weak law enforcement contribute to the prevalence of violence³. Cultural practices like child marriage and FGM are also widespread, further endangering the lives and well-being of children [3]. The government, along with various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), is working to tackle these issues through a range of initiatives [4]. Programs by UNICEF and local NGOs focus on empowering children, improving reporting mechanisms, and providing support services for victims [4]. Efforts are also being made to strengthen legal frameworks and enhance the capacity of law

enforcement agencies to protect children and prosecute offenders [4]. Despite these efforts, much work remains to be done to ensure the safety and well-being of all children in Sierra Leone.

This study aims to analyze the complexities and implications of VAC in Sierra Leone. By leveraging empirical evidence, community insights, and scholarly research, it seeks to identify knowledge gaps and provide data-driven recommendations to enhance policy creation, program implementation, and advocacy initiatives aimed at reducing VAC and improving children's well-being in Sierra Leone.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This research utilized a qualitative design to investigate the root causes of Violence Against Children (VAC) in Sierra Leone. A qualitative approach was selected to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex and context-specific factors contributing to VAC, which may not be fully captured by quantitative methods.

Study Setting

The study was carried out in six Area Programs (APs) managed by World Vision International Sierra Leone. These APs represent a diverse cross-section of the country's population, reflecting its varied geographical and cultural landscapes. The selected APs, encompassing both urban and rural environments, differ in terms of socioeconomic conditions, cultural practices, and infrastructure. The APs involved are:

- Sorogbema Area Program
- Kalini Area Program
- Mandokama Area Program
- Fiama Area Program
- Delmanyedu Area Program
- Bum Area Program

Each AP provided a unique context, enriching the study with diverse insights into child protection and developmental challenges in Sierra Leone.

Research Participants

Participants were strategically selected to encompass a wide range of perspectives on the causes of VAC. The sample included children who had directly experienced or witnessed VAC, along with their parents and guardians to gather firsthand accounts. To provide a broader social and educational context,

community leaders, educators, and school staff were also involved. Additionally, professionals such as healthcare providers, social workers, and law enforcement officials contributed their expertise in child welfare, protection, and legal enforcement. Representatives from local NGOs and community-based groups were included to offer a comprehensive view of grassroots efforts to combat VAC.

Data Collection Methods and Process

The data collection process incorporated multiple qualitative methods to gather extensive information from various sources.

In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including community leaders, social workers, law enforcement officials, and NGO representatives. The interview guide aimed to explore participants' perceptions and experiences related to VAC, as well as the social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors influencing the issue.

Local-level Analysis: The analysis unfolded in four steps. First, separate sessions for boys and girls were held to gather their experiences and perspectives on child protection issues, promoting open participation among vulnerable children. Second, the team engaged with community adults to address the concerns raised by children and to map the local child protection system, organizing separate meetings for men and women, especially targeting marginalized groups. Third, stakeholder insights were employed to identify major child protection issues and assess local system strengths and gaps, thereby contributing to the mapping of the child protection system.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs were conducted with distinct groups, including children, parents, caregivers, and teachers, ensuring a comfortable environment that encouraged candid discussions. These discussions aimed to capture collective views, experiences, and community norms related to VAC.

Observations: Observations were conducted in various community settings, including schools, healthcare facilities, and community events. These observations provided contextual insights into the social dynamics that may contribute to VAC.

Document Review: Relevant documents, such as local reports, policy papers, and records from community organizations, were reviewed to supplement and triangulate the data obtained through interviews, FGDs, and observations.

Data Analysis Plan

The analysis employed thematic analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the findings.

Transcription: All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to accurately capture participants' words.

Familiarization: Researchers thoroughly read and re-read transcripts and observation notes to become familiar with the content and identify potential patterns in responses.

Coding: Initial codes were generated using both deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive coding was based on predefined research questions, while inductive coding allowed new insights to emerge directly from the data.

Theme Development: The codes were grouped into broader themes and subthemes, refining each theme to represent the essence of the data accurately.

Analysis: The themes were systematically analyzed to interpret the causes of VAC, identifying patterns and relationships across the different APs and shedding light on the complexities of VAC in various contexts.

Triangulation: Data from multiple sources and methods were triangulated to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, cross-checking information from interviews, FGDs, observations, and document reviews to ensure consistency.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical protocols were followed in this study. Adult participants provided written informed consent, while children provided assent alongside parental or guardian consent. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, all data were anonymized and securely stored. Participation was voluntary, and individuals had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. Researchers prioritized the comfort and safety of participating children, addressing any signs of distress and providing appropriate support when needed. Through these thorough and careful approaches, the study aimed to deliver a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to VAC in Sierra Leone, ultimately providing valuable insights into effective strategies and policies to address the issue.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Peer Pressure and Socioeconomic Factors Driving Teenage Pregnancy

This study identified teenage pregnancy as a significant issue primarily driven by societal pressures, cultural norms, and inadequate social and legal protections. Data from the six APs revealed that this issue persists in both urban and rural contexts, influenced by the unique socioeconomic and cultural landscapes

of each region. The repercussions of adolescent pregnancy extend beyond disrupting young girls' lives, perpetuating cycles of economic hardship, and limiting educational opportunities.

In the largely rural Sorogbema region, where educational and healthcare resources are limited, social influence emerges as a key driver of teenage pregnancy. Adolescent females often feel compelled to emulate their peers, leading to unsafe sexual behaviors. A resident from Sorogbema, identified as Participant A, noted, *"Many girls here get pregnant because their friends are already having babies. It feels like the normal thing to do."* This highlights the significant impact of societal expectations and peer pressure on young women in the area.

Limited access to comprehensive sex education exacerbates this issue. A teacher in Sorogbema, Participant B, expressed concern: *"We don't have the resources to teach them about these things, so they rely on what their friends tell them, which is often wrong."*

In the urban environment of Kalini, teenage pregnancy is influenced not only by peer pressure but also by the pervasive effects of media and urban culture. Social media platforms significantly shape the behaviors and aspirations of young females. Participant C from Kalini stated, *"Urban girls are exposed to content on their smartphones, which makes them want to emulate the individuals they see online. It's about conforming and appearing mature."* This desire to adopt an urban lifestyle often leads to premature sexual activity and unplanned pregnancies.

Community members in Kalini have observed ineffective law enforcement, particularly regarding the exploitation of young girls by older men. A community leader, Participant D, noted, *"Laws exist, but they're not being enforced. These men exploit the girls without facing consequences."* The lack of legal accountability normalizes these exploitative relationships within the community.

In the Mandokama Area Program, economic hardships are closely linked to adolescent pregnancy. Many households struggle to meet basic needs, prompting young females to engage in transactional relationships with older men, often referred to as "sugar daddies." Participant E, a caregiver in Mandokama, explained, *"Some girls do not have enough money for food or school, so they end up with older men who give them money. It's a sad reality."* The lack of open discussion about these relationships within the community worsens the problem. A social worker in Mandokama, Participant F, observed, *"People are aware of what's going on, but they're reluctant to discuss it. It's considered acceptable for a young girl to be involved with an older man if she's receiving some form of benefit."*

In Fiama, societal expectations regarding gender roles and inadequate parental support are significant factors contributing to adolescent pregnancy. Many young females face familial pressure to marry early

or engage in relationships for economic security. A female participant from Fama, Participant G, stated, *"My parents did not care if I got pregnant. They just wanted me to find someone who could take care of me."* This societal expectation, coupled with limited access to sexual and reproductive health education, results in high rates of teenage pregnancies. Participant H, a local law enforcement official, acknowledged, *"We don't have the resources or manpower to enforce the laws properly. Many cases of teenage pregnancy go unreported, and the perpetrators aren't held accountable."*

In Delmanyedu, a region with strong cultural traditions, teenage pregnancy is heavily influenced by local customs. Early marriage is still common, with many adolescent girls expected to start families young. A community elder, Participant I, explained, *"Our cultural norms accept early marriages for girls. It's considered a means of ensuring their welfare."* This widespread acceptance contributes to elevated rates of adolescent pregnancy, often before girls can complete their education. A healthcare professional in Delmanyedu, Participant J, noted, *"There is a shortage of resources to teach girls about birth control. Many are unaware of pregnancy prevention methods."*

In the Bum Area Program, where infrastructure is more developed, teenage pregnancy is associated with both social pressures and financial struggles. Many young females in Bum face societal pressure to engage in sexual activities, while others are driven by economic necessities. A teenage resident, Participant K, explained, *"My friends were all having boyfriends, and I felt left out. I didn't want to be the only one without a boyfriend, so I gave in."* This social pressure, combined with inadequate parental supervision, leads many girls into relationships that result in early pregnancy. A local NGO employee in Bum, Participant L, noted, *"Despite the existence of laws, their implementation is often lacking. Girls frequently have to face the repercussions by themselves."*

Theme 2: Sexual Penetration

Report on Vulnerability Factors Affecting Children in Sierra Leone

The issue of sexual penetration in the context of violence against children in Sierra Leone reveals a range of interconnected factors that increase the vulnerability of young people across various Area Programs (APs).

In the Sorogbema Area Program, deep-rooted societal issues undermine protective measures for children, heightening their risk of abuse. As noted by a resident, *"Our country has many problems that leave children unprotected,"* highlighting how economic instability and weak social support systems contribute to an environment ripe for mistreatment.

Participants in the Kalini Area Program pointed out significant deficiencies in the legal framework intended to protect children. One participant remarked, *"The laws are weak and don't protect children"*

from abuse," revealing a troubling gap between legislation and its enforcement. This lack of effective legal protection leaves minors vulnerable without proper means to seek justice.

Drug use emerged as a critical concern in the Mandokama Area Program. A participant stated, *"Drugs make young people do things they wouldn't normally do, including sexual acts,"* indicating how substance abuse can impair decision-making and increase susceptibility to sexual pressure among youths.

In the Fiama Area Program, societal attitudes toward clothing standards also exacerbate vulnerability. A participant observed, *"People blame girls for what they wear instead of protecting them from abuse,"* illustrating how victim-blaming perpetuates a culture of violence rather than fostering a safe environment. This mindset obstructs efforts to address the root causes of violence and protect vulnerable individuals.

The Delmanyedu Area Program highlights the impact of limited educational and socioeconomic opportunities on children's safety. One participant stated, *"Children become vulnerable to abuse when opportunities are absent,"* emphasizing that a lack of resources can lead to desperate situations, exposing children to exploitation.

Theme 3: Drug Abuse

The prevalence of drug abuse among children and youth across different Area Programs in Sierra Leone reveals multiple contributing factors.

In the Sororgbema Area Program, participants raised concerns about the easy availability of drugs within communities. One participant remarked, *"Drugs are easily accessible, even for children,"* underscoring alarming usage rates. Another participant echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the urgent need for community-driven initiatives to curb children's access to drugs. The link between school dropout rates and substance abuse was also highlighted. One participant observed, *"Students who leave school early often resort to drug use due to a lack of alternative activities."* This underscores the need for educational support to prevent children from turning to drugs when they abandon their studies.

In the Mandokama Area Program, peer influence emerged as a significant factor in children's drug use. Participants noted that many children start using drugs to fit in with their friends, indicating the powerful role of social circles in shaping their choices.

The Bum Area Program identified a lack of parental guidance as a critical issue. One participant stated, *"When parents are absent or indifferent, children often turn to drugs as a coping mechanism."* This highlights the vital role of parental involvement in protecting children from substance abuse.

In the Delmanyedu Area Program, youth unemployment was identified as a major factor leading to frustration and drug use. Participants noted that joblessness often drives young people to seek escape through substances, emphasizing the need for economic opportunities to combat these issues.

The Kalini Area Program identified a gap in programs educating children about their rights. Participants stressed the importance of empowering children through rights-based education to prevent drug abuse.

In the Fiama Area Program, children from single-parent households face increased risks of substance abuse due to insufficient supervision. Participants highlighted the necessity of community support for single parents to better protect their children from engaging in drug use.

Theme 4: Child Neglect and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

The interconnected issues of child neglect and FGM are prominent across various Area Programs.

Participants in the Bum Area Program highlighted the challenges faced by single parents in providing adequate care, often leading to neglect and exposure to harmful practices like FGM. They emphasized the need for targeted support for single-parent households.

In the Sorogbema Area Program, the death of a parent can leave children vulnerable to neglect and dangerous practices. Participants noted the importance of community support systems to assist families in coping with such losses. The Kalini Area Program revealed how domestic disputes negatively affect children's well-being, often resulting in neglect and increased risks of harmful practices like FGM. Programs focused on conflict resolution were deemed essential for protecting children.

In the Mandokama Area Program, inadequate family planning was noted as a contributing factor to child suffering. Participants stressed the need for effective family planning education to ensure better care for children. The Fiama Area Program highlighted the impact of family breakdown on child neglect. Participants noted that children from separated families often lack the necessary support, increasing their vulnerability to harmful practices. In the Delmanyedu Area Program, parental unemployment exacerbates neglect. Participants emphasized the need for economic assistance programs to support families struggling to provide adequate care.

Theme 5: Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment remains prevalent in many communities, often stemming from a lack of understanding regarding child protection laws and the belief that physical discipline is effective. Participants from various Area Programs shared their perspectives on this issue.

A participant from the Sorogbema Area Program stated, *"Many parents believe that hitting is the only way to discipline their children,"* reflecting a misunderstanding of child protection laws. Another participant noted that corporal punishment can cause lasting emotional harm, indicating a disconnect between parental intentions and the negative psychological effects on children.

The Mandokama Area Program highlighted how fear of punishment can foster resentment and rebellion among children. Participants stressed the need for educating parents about positive discipline techniques and advocating for community workshops to promote nonviolent strategies.

In the Delmanyedu Area Program, a participant remarked, *"When children are punished harshly, they don't learn; they just learn to hide their mistakes,"* underscoring the detrimental impact of corporal punishment on open communication between parents and children.

Theme 6: Child Labor

Child labor is intricately linked to parental neglect, economic pressures, and a lack of educational encouragement. Participants articulated the complexity of this issue.

In the Sorogbema Area Program, one participant noted, *"When parents are busy or neglectful, children are left to fend for themselves and often end up working instead of going to school,"* highlighting the exploitation that can result from neglect. Participants in the Kalini Area Program echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that financial struggles often compel parents to rely on their children for household income, which can hinder their educational opportunities.

The Mandokama Area Program stressed the need for stronger advocacy for educational programs to keep children in school and out of labor. Similarly, participants in the Fiama Area Program emphasized the importance of educational support to prevent school dropouts from turning to drugs. In the Delmanyedu Area Program, a participant remarked on the need to educate parents about the value of education, aiming to change the perception of children as financial assets.

Theme 7: Child Discrimination

Discrimination against children often stems from their backgrounds, including orphanhood, alternative care arrangements, and polygamous family structures. Participants in the Kalini Area Program noted that orphans frequently face social stigma, making it difficult for them to feel accepted. Similarly, children in alternative care arrangements may receive less support and be viewed as less deserving. In polygamous households, participants observed that resources are often spread too thin, leading to feelings of neglect

among children. Participants emphasized the importance of advocating for equal treatment for all children, regardless of their family situation.

Conclusion

The findings from these Area Programs illustrate the multifaceted challenges children face in Sierra Leone. Addressing these interconnected issues requires a comprehensive approach that includes strengthening legal protections, providing educational opportunities, fostering positive parenting practices, and creating supportive community networks.

Recommendations

To address the interconnected issues of adolescent pregnancy, sexual assault, substance misuse, child maltreatment, female genital cutting (FGM), physical punishment, exploitation of minors, and discrimination against children in Sierra Leone, the following strategies are recommended:

Integrated Community Awareness Campaigns

Implement comprehensive community programs that highlight the significance of child protection, educational advancement, and health promotion. These initiatives should raise awareness about the risks of teen pregnancies, substance abuse, and harmful practices like FGM while advocating for children's rights.

Strengthening Legal Framework and Enforcement

Advocate for the development and enforcement of robust legislation aimed at protecting children from all forms of abuse and exploitation. This should include strict regulations against sexual misconduct, child labor, and physical discipline, alongside educational programs for children and their guardians about their legal rights and protections.

Comprehensive Education Programs

Introduce holistic educational initiatives in schools that cover sexual health education, substance abuse prevention, and the importance of education. These programs should also focus on constructive disciplinary methods to replace physical punishment, fostering a supportive learning environment.

Support Systems for Vulnerable Families

Establish community support networks to assist single parents, orphans, and families facing domestic challenges. These networks should provide counseling, financial assistance, and parenting resources to reduce neglect and promote healthier family dynamics.

Youth Empowerment Initiatives

Develop programs that equip young people with essential skills, mentorship, and opportunities for community engagement. These initiatives can offer alternative pathways, reducing the likelihood of youth involvement in substance abuse, child labor, and social isolation.

Collaboration with Local Organizations

Forge partnerships with regional nonprofits, grassroots organizations, and healthcare providers to coordinate child protection efforts. Collaborative efforts can enhance resource sharing, boost public awareness, and establish protective measures across various sectors.

Parental and Community Engagement

Encourage active participation from parents and community members in child protection, education, and health discussions. This engagement fosters a culture of accountability and shared responsibility for children's well-being.

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