

Improved safety and wellbeing of learners

Information brief

Assessing Learners' Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices around School-Related Violence and Sexual and Reproductive Health



Photo: Leh Wi Lan

Introduction

Strengthening safety and wellbeing at school is key to ensuring that learners can concentrate on their studies and improve their learning outcomes. Creating these conditions must mean addressing School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) and building understanding of Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), so that teachers and learners understand their rights and are protected in school.

Leh Wi Lan is working in partnership with the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education on number of activities and trainings with school communities that focus on these issues. To measure the effectiveness of these interventions, an annual Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) survey is carried out with learners and teachers in schools across Sierra Leone. The first of these was carried out in February 2024 to provide a baseline of data that will be used to measure progress every year throughout the programme.

This Information Brief highlights the approach and methodology of the survey, key findings from the learner participants and an overview of our conclusions for future work in the area.



Another information brief on findings from the teacher participants is available.

About the survey

4,478 learners

7.7% self-reported having a disability

Equal gender representation.

All grades represented in JSS and SSS.

Five districts sampled: Bombali, Kambia, Kenema, Moyamba and Western Area Rural.

Summary of findings

Improvements are needed for learners equally across Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices. Only 3.7% of learners achieved the desirable threshold in all three areas (i.e. selecting eight or more of the desirable responses).

Learners in higher grades had better knowledge scores, suggesting the existing environment (in and out of school) does improve Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices as learners progress and age. It is important to accelerate the rate of this improvement, so learners achieve stronger scores on completion of secondary education.

Female students were slightly more likely than males to achieve the overall desired threshold (4.4% of females vs 3% of males), but there were specific gender difference on topics like treatment of pregnant learners.

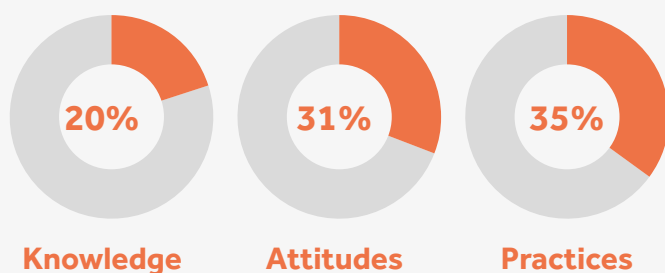
Learners with disabilities have lower scores than learners without disability – particularly in the Knowledge domain – strongly suggesting the need for inclusive interventions.

Geographical differences were not significant enough to demand location-based interventions but are important to recognise and monitor in future surveys.

Methodology

The study consisted of a student assessment and a teacher assessment, which was divided into three areas (or domains): Knowledge, Attitude and Practices. The domains were explored via questions that had a desired response (i.e. an answer that would demonstrate good understanding and customs towards violence and sexual health). The actual answers from participants were compared with these desired responses and the number of correct matches determined a score. A higher score reflects a greater alignment with the expected answers.

% of learners who met threshold (selected 8 or more desirable responses)



Violence and safety at school

A significant portion of students were aware that violence is not permitted in school with more than half the learners (62%) acknowledging it is forbidden for school staff to harm or threaten students. However, reported practices show that different kinds of violence are still widespread and somehow accepted:

54% still think it is normal for a teacher to cane students sometimes

49% have witnessed violence in their school

51% said sometimes they don't feel safe at school.

We also found that there is a lot of work to be done to improve understanding of how learners can report violence beyond going to teachers or principals: only 18% of learners knew alternative reporting methods.

Teacher-student relationships

While learners generally understand appropriate behaviour between students and school staff, there is still some misalignment with official policies. A little more than half of the learners (57%) know the Teachers' Code of Conduct forbids all forms of sexual or romantic relationship with learners, yet 56% believe it is acceptable for teachers to offer good grades in exchange for a sexual favour. Meanwhile 20% of girls and 24% of boys think that sexual relationships between teachers and learners should be tolerated if learners give consent.

Sexual and reproductive health (SRH)

Awareness of SRH is limited amongst learners, though there is a general openness to more information with 66% supporting the provision of family planning services in schools, which reflects a generally favourable attitude towards SRH education. However, there is a need for better teaching and support in this area:

39% knew they can access SRH services without permission from an adult

47% of girls would be willing to use a contraceptive (54% of boys)

24% reported having felt pressure to have sex

58% acknowledged health risks associated with early pregnancy

36% of learners are aware of the potential health risks of Bondo (female genital mutilation).

Pregnancy

Although more than half of the learners (59%) learned how to prevent pregnancy at school, stigmatisation and misconceptions around pregnancy persist. The majority (61%) still believe pregnant girls are forbidden to attend class, despite the law being changed in 2020. In addition, 55% think that pregnant girls are a distraction, 48% believed that pregnant students can't concentrate in class like their peers, 50% think that teachers mock pregnant girls and 54% believe that pregnancy is solely the girl's responsibility.

Even more teachers were found to hold discriminatory attitudes towards pregnant learners with 83% thinking they cause distraction in school.

Key differences between male and female learners

Consent and sexual violence

While most learners held progressive views on consent and sexual violence, gender differences were noticed in certain areas. Overall, 62% agreed that a girl has the right to refuse sex, 69% believed that girls should decide when to marry, and 65% condemned teacher-student sexual relationships, even with consent.

However, boys were more likely to acknowledge that males can also be victims of sexual violence with 59% of boys recognising they can suffer from violence, compared to 49% of girls. Meanwhile girls were generally better at recognising what constitutes sexual violence against females: 80% of girls knew that touching a breast is an act of sexual violence compared to 73% of male learners.

Understanding menstruation

Female learners are generally better informed about menstruation than males, which is a reflection of the fact that more girls (64%) reported having learned about menstruation at school compared to boys (57%). Misconceptions still persist across both genders, but especially amongst boys: for example, 46% of boys believed that girls should refrain from attending school or participating in sports during menstruation, while only 40% of female students shared this view.

Stigmatisation of pregnant girls. Attitudes toward pregnancy varied significantly between male and female students. Girls tended to be more accepting of pregnant learners with 60% supporting the idea that pregnant students should stay in school, compared to 55% of boys. Male learners were more likely to view pregnancy negatively, with 44% thinking it could influence others to become pregnant, compared to 37% of girls.

Conclusions

- Given that a small fraction of learners (3.7%) met threshold scores across Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices, there is considerable scope for improvements in both Junior and Senior Secondary Schools with regards to both SRGBV and SRH. This underscores the importance of planned interventions to address these critical areas through the Leh Wi Lan programme.

A slightly higher, but still small, proportion of teachers met the threshold - just 15.7%. This indicates interventions are needed for both audiences.

- As female learners slightly outperformed their male counterparts and learners in higher grades performed better than younger learners, programme interventions need to be targeted to reach these groups. It could be possible to involve older learners to roll-out new ideas amongst their younger peers.
- Learners with disabilities consistently scored lower than learners without disabilities, particularly in the Knowledge domain, highlighting a need for inclusive support that is tailored to the needs of these learners.
- There is good recognition of the importance of consent and gender rights amongst learners, with most understanding the dangers of teenage pregnancy, the need for family planning services and the importance of consent in sexual relationships.
- Overall the survey highlights critical areas where future interventions should be prioritised to ensure a safer and more supportive environment for all learners. For example:
 - better awareness of available channels for reporting violence
 - reduced discrimination and stigma towards pregnant learners and children with disabilities
 - improved understanding of the rights of access to SRH services
 - less tolerance of corporal punishment and relationships between school staff and learners
 - shift in gender stereotypes.

Despite good knowledge of the Teacher Code of Conduct, similar concerning attitudes were found amongst teachers indicating a need for further training across schools, not only in terms of laws and policies but also in terms of behavioural and attitudinal change.



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The second phase of the Leh Wi Lan programme is part of the Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme II (SSEIP II), which is funded by UK International Development. This five-year programme supports Sierra Leone's Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) to deliver improved education outcomes at secondary level, with a focus on schoolgirls and learners with disabilities. Leh Wi Lan is implemented by a consortium of national and international organisations led by Cambridge Education.

