“If you go into the Bondo Society, they will honour and respect you”

Research on Female Genital Mutilation in Freetown, Sierra Leone

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# Table of Contents

**Project Partners** .......................................................................................................................... 5  
FORWARD (Foundation for Women’s Health, Research and Development) ........................................ 5  
Girl 2 Girl Empowerment Movement (G2G) .................................................................................. 5  

**Acknowledgements** ..................................................................................................................... 6  

**Acronyms** ..................................................................................................................................... 7  

**Glossary** ......................................................................................................................................... 7  

**Executive summary** ....................................................................................................................... 7  
  
  Key findings ...................................................................................................................................... 8  
  Summary of recommendations .......................................................................................................... 9  

1. **Introduction** ................................................................................................................................. 12  
   1.1 Female Genital Mutilation ....................................................................................................... 12  
   1.2 Context: Sierra Leone ............................................................................................................. 13  
   1.3 FGM in Sierra Leone .............................................................................................................. 14  
   1.4 Role of traditional leaders in Bondo ..................................................................................... 14  
   1.5 Policy context ......................................................................................................................... 14  
   1.6 FGM and the Ebola crisis ....................................................................................................... 15  

2. **Methodology** ............................................................................................................................... 16  
   2.1 Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research (PEER), .............................................. 16  
   2.2 Recruitment ........................................................................................................................... 16  
   2.3 Training .................................................................................................................................... 16  
   2.4 Data collection and analysis ................................................................................................... 16  

3. **Research findings: Through Girls’ Eyes** .................................................................................... 17  
   3.1 Lived experiences of girls and women .................................................................................. 17  
   3.1.1 Poverty, hardship and gender inequality ............................................................................. 17  
   3.1.2 Education .......................................................................................................................... 17  
   3.1.3 Boyfriends, prostitution and sexual abuse ......................................................................... 19  
   3.1.4 Sexual health, access to information and guidance ............................................................. 21  
   3.1.5 Teenage pregnancy outside of marriage ............................................................................ 21  
   3.2 Bondo Society and FGM .......................................................................................................... 23  
   3.2.1 Explaining initiation into the Bondo Society ...................................................................... 23  
   3.2.2 Social pressure and Bondo ............................................................................................... 25
# Table of Contents

3.2.3 The male perspective on Bondo ................................................................. 27
3.2.4 Bondo Society, secrecy and taboo ............................................................... 28
3.2.5 Harmful Physical Impact of FGM ............................................................... 29
3.2.6 Bondo, child marriage, child pregnancy and girls’ education ..................... 30
3.2.7 Pikin (child) Bondo ................................................................................ 31
3.2.8 The changing influence of the Bondo Society ........................................... 34

4 Using PEER to build women and girl’s initiatives ........................................ 36

5 Concluding recommendations ...................................................................... 37
  5.1 Supporting girls and women ...................................................................... 37
  5.2 Creating an enabling policy environment .................................................. 38
  5.3 Establishing new positive norms ................................................................ 38
FORWARD (Foundation for Women’s Health, Research and Development)

FORWARD is the leading African women led organisation working on female genital mutilation, child marriage and maternal health in the UK and Africa. For over 30 years we have been committed to safeguarding the rights and dignity of African girls and women. We do this through community engagement, grassroots partnerships, international advocacy, training and research.

FORWARD’s vision is a world where African girls and women live in dignity, are healthy, have choices and enjoy equal rights.

Girl 2 Girl Empowerment Movement (G2G)

G2G was founded in September 2013 following Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation Research on fistula in Sierra Leone. G2G aims to improve women’s knowledge of, and access to sexual and reproductive health; promote the sexual health, empowerment and rights of girls in Sierra Leone; and end the stigma associated with obstetric fistula. Through girls’ clubs, and women’s networks, they provide leadership training and capacity building for young women.

Club and network members are also provided with entrepreneurship training, and accompanying capacity building, such as computer skills training. They reinforce this work with networking and advocacy to secure policies to enable their work.

A very young organisation, G2G’s focus has been on improving their organisational capacity. They are in the process of setting up a resource centre, where women, girls and communities can access relevant information. They have also set up a number of classes, for example mother and baby classes and computer classes.
Acknowledgements

FORWARD would like to thank the PEER Researchers and PEER supervisors, without whose determination and commitment it would have been impossible to conduct this study.

We would also like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the PEER participants who shared their intimate stories and experiences, making this report both unique and rich in information.

We acknowledge the key role played by all the staff of Girl 2 Girl Empowerment Movement in particular Mary Stevens and Zahra Mahdi who have been instrumental throughout the training, research and stakeholder consultations.

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Acronyms

CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women Committee
FGM: Female Genital Mutilation
FORWARD: Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development
G2G: Girl 2 Girl Empowerment Movement
PEER: Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research
PS: PEER Supervisors
PR: PEER Researchers

Glossary

Bondo Society: Women's secret society in Sierra Leone
Gboreka: Incomplete or uninitiated (Temne language)
Kantha: Circumcision
Konko: Clitoris
Kpowa: Incomplete or uninitiated (Mende language)
Pikin: Child under the age of 18
Samper: Traditional Sierra Leonean dance done at the completion of the Bondo initiation
Sowei: A powerful traditional leader who effectively leads the Bondo Society. Always a woman, a sowei may own or rent the Bondo bush, carry out the FGM and lead all the teachings as part of the Bondo initiation
Female genital mutilation (FGM) in Sierra Leone is almost universal, with a national average of 89.6% of women having undergone FGM, reaching 96% in the northern region. FGM forms part of an initiation and a rite of passage for girls, signifying their readiness for marriage and womanhood. It is part of girls’ entry into the Bondo Society, a powerful women-run secret society central to culture and identity in Sierra Leone. Membership to the society provides girls with comradeship, support and power in an otherwise male-dominated society.

Sierra Leone represents one of the countries in Africa where talking about FGM remains a strong taboo. This report documents the results of participatory research, carried out with young women at risk of or affected by FGM in Freetown, Sierra Leone. It provides invaluable insights into why girls undergo FGM, the changing nature of the practice, its impact on the lives of women and recommendations based on their voices.

FGM is defined as “all procedures involving partial or total removal of female external genitalia or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons.” FGM is a grave human rights violation in that it prevents girls and women from fully realising their right to health and bodily integrity, and has long term implications on girls’ physical and psychological health. The short term implications include severe pain, shock, excessive bleeding or death. FGM often takes place due to deeply engrained social norms about the perceived need to ensure girls’ “sexual morality” and “decent behaviour” and to prepare her for marriage.

Recent developments provide an unprecedented opportunity for anti-FGM campaigners aiming to prohibit the practice in Sierra Leone. In July 2015 Sierra Leone ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. This symbolises a commitment to bringing an end to harmful practices including FGM through the creation of domestic legislation. In their most recent poverty reduction strategy paper, Sierra Leone also named the enactment of a law against the underage initiation rites of passage for girls as a key priority.

FORWARD carried out this Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation Research (PEER) in Freetown, Sierra Leone. This involved supporting young women to design and carry out interviews with their PEERs. Using this unique methodology has produced rich and insightful information, based solely on the words of women at risk of, or who have undergone FGM. It has shed light on the challenges they face and their support needs. The findings from the research are summarised below.

Key findings

The PEER Researchers (PRs), who were recruited from the community, carried out a number of interviews with girls like themselves. To start with the PRs asked girls about their daily lives, and the lived experience of young girls in Sierra Leone more generally. Extreme poverty was a recurring theme and rigid gender norms meant women are viewed with low regard. Women shoulder a disproportionate amount of domestic responsibilities causing them to feel held back and deeply frustrated. Likewise, girls’ education is undervalued, and many parents prevent their daughters from attending school in the fear that it will increase the likelihood of their daughters ‘going wayward’.

1 Statistics Sierra Leone, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, ICF International (2014), Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2013, Freetown
2 WHO, Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: An interagency statement, p.4
Transactional sex was also common among the PEER Participants. In some cases this was due to pressure to provide for their families, and others were responding to pressure from men. Many had experienced sexual abuse through transactional sex but also from other members of their communities, including their school teachers. Sexually transmitted infections were a recurring theme throughout the interviews, but information and guidance surrounding sexual and reproductive health appears to be limited. Another interesting finding is that teenage pregnancy is described as rampant in the communities in which the study was conducted. Girls who become pregnant out of marriage are stigmatised and rejected by their families.

Having developed a good rapport and trust with the participants, the PEER Researchers moved on to ask their participants about FGM. They highlighted the importance of initiation into Bondo Society, which represents an essential precursor to marriage, the commitment to culture and morals of a girl and therefore her family, and to secure social status. Consequently, there is significant pressure for girls to enter the Bondo Society. Often girls are forced or coerced into undergoing the initiation process by their families and friends. The interviews highlighted how Bondo initiation is shrouded in secrecy, and people believe they will be cursed or fined if they speak about the society and initiation into it. As a result, girls often agree to undergo initiation without fully understanding what it entails.

The participants were asked about the changing influence of the Bondo Society. Some felt that it was becoming less important in society because of the growing uptake of other religious beliefs, and increased exposure to technology and information. However, others felt that it was becoming more influential in response to this perceived threat to culture and tradition.

The issue of ‘Pikin Bondo’, or child Bondo, which refers to FGM and initiation for very young girls and babies, was also explored during the interviews. The participants felt that Pikin Bondo was more damaging for young girls, compared to when FGM is carried out on older girls. They also highlighted that in Pikin Bondo the girls are too young to benefit from the learning opportunities that accompany the cutting ceremony. In addition, when FGM is carried out on very young girls, they have very little say in the decision for them to undergo the procedure. As a consequence the PEER Participants felt that Pikin Bondo should be prohibited.

The PEER Participants were also asked about male perspectives on Bondo. It was explained that girls’ fathers have a big influence over the decision of whether they undergo FGM, as they may want their daughters to get married. In some cases, it seems like other men in the community influence the decision for girls to undergo FGM, teasing uninitiated girls as “incomplete”. However, in other cases girls said that men have expressed their desire to marry girls that have not undergone FGM.
Due to the complex nature of the issue, tackling FGM will require a concerted and holistic effort. The recommendations based on the PEER findings and FORWARD’s experience to date, are organised into three main groups: supporting girls and women, creating an enabling policy environment; and establishing new positive social norms.

**Supporting girls and women**

**Establish clubs and networks to empower and support girls and women** – Clubs and networks provide members with information, skills, services and support from their PEERs and relevant professionals. Members can also share concerns, ideas and experiences among themselves to mutually overcome group and personal challenges. Girls club and network members can speak out about FGM as an abuse of their rights, to influence decision makers at all levels.

**Engage with communities and influential people within them** – Substantial time and resources must be invested in building trust and relationships with communities to facilitate critical reflection and behaviour change. Actors aiming to tackle FGM must have a comprehensive understanding of the beliefs that underpin and surround the practice, so that they can be approached with relevance and sensitivity.

**Working with women** – Elder women in a girl’s family are frequently responsible for making the decision for a girl to undergo FGM, as part of their implicit responsibility for the continuation of tradition and culture. As the holders of tradition, these women hold the answers for the abandonment of the practice. Particular efforts are needed to engage soweis, to ensure they do not feel a threat to their power and influence.

**Working with men** – Despite being labelled “women’s business”, gender inequality can explain the cause and continuation of FGM. Men must be engaged to understand the negative implications of FGM for girls, women and also for themselves. They must be supported to find ways to sensitively break the taboo around FGM and renounce it in the process.

**Provide appropriate support alongside prevention initiatives** – Girls and women who have undergone FGM must not be overlooked. Special measures must be taken to ensure that efforts to highlight the benefits of discontinuing FGM do not stigmatise girls who have undergone FGM. Girls who have undergone the practice may have specific health needs. Medical professionals, law enforcers and educational professionals must be equipped to meet their requirements, and be able to signpost girls towards information, resources and services when required.

**Creating an enabling policy environment**

**Pass comprehensive legislation prohibiting FGM** – It is crucial that Sierra Leone passes robust and holistic legislation to effectively prohibit FGM irrespective of age. To facilitate this process, it will be critical to create avenues through which girls are able to raise their concerns to decision makers at the highest levels.

**Secure structures and resources to ensure legislation is fully implemented** – Legislation prohibiting FGM must be complimented with a national action plan and the resources to ensure it can be implemented. Safeguarding structures must be introduced and adhered to by educational institutions, health facilities and law enforcers. Relevant professionals must be confident to identify, refer or manage cases of FGM. Government structures at the local level must be made aware of the new legislation and must have the necessary funding and political will to ensure its implementation is prioritised in local action plans.

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Establishing new positive social norms

Economic / educational empowerment - Empowerment through employment and education is central to FORWARD’s approach because of its transformational potential. Women with access to, and control over, economic assets are less likely to undergo FGM in order to get married before the age of 18. Positive examples from the community, or from other communities or countries, should be used to highlight new aspirations for women, which do not require a breach of their rights. This will increase girls’ access to resources, and their influence in decisions within their families and the wider community. Girls who have spent substantial amounts of time out of school due to child marriage, child motherhood or FGM must receive special support to return to education. Girls who do not want to return to mainstream school education must have access to skills training and lifelong learning.

Alternative rites of passage – The positive aspects of the Bondo Society should be celebrated and promoted by actors aiming to tackle FGM. It is possible that sexual and relationship education could replace the FGM ceremony. This will be crucial to the success of initiatives aiming to tackle FGM, which are sometimes seen as attacking Bondo more broadly due to the ambiguities and secrecy in the language used when talking about Bondo.
1. Introduction

1.1 Female Genital Mutilation

FGM refers to “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons.”

FGM describes a broad range of practices, performed on girls and women, normally before they turn 15. Most FGM happens in infancy and early childhood. It is estimated that at least 200 million girls and women worldwide have undergone FGM, and that three million girls are at risk annually. FGM continues to be practiced in 29 African countries, as well as in parts of Asia and the Middle East. The four main types, agreed by the World Health Organisation in 2007 are outlined below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type I</td>
<td>Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce (clitoridectomy).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type II</td>
<td>Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (excision).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type III</td>
<td>Narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris (infibulation).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type IV</td>
<td>All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reasons for FGM vary from country to country. It is frequently attributed to religious obligation, despite no written requirement for FGM in any of the holy books. In many communities, undergoing FGM is a precursor to social acceptance and coming of age. The rewards associated with undergoing FGM and the stigma associated with rejecting the practice help to understand its continuation.

Commonly, FGM is perceived as guaranteeing a girl’s sexual morality and decent behaviour, curbing her sexual desire and preparing her for marriage. FGM is also seen as making female genitals clean and beautiful, or as enhancing men’s sexual pleasure.

FGM is known to have short term implications including severe pain, excessive bleeding, difficulty passing urine and infections. FGM can also cause immediate death from haemorrhage, infections, tetanus and circulatory shock. The long term consequences include dermoid cysts, abscesses, difficulty passing urine and/or menstruating, chronic pelvic infections and infertility. There can also be severe implications for women’s maternal health, including death in childbirth, increased risk of birth complications, and infertility. FGM is associated with a host of psychological implications such as emotional distress, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexual phobia and a decrease in sexual pleasure.

5 WHO, Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: An interagency statement, p.4
6 UNICEF, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Global Concern, 2016
7 OHCHR, UNAIDS, UNDP et al (2008), Female genital mutilation: An Interagency Statement
10 WHO, Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: An interagency statement, p.4
11 OHCHR, UNAIDS, UNDP et al (2008), Female genital mutilation: An Interagency Statement
FGM has been classified as a human rights violation under international law. The practice violates the right to health and bodily integrity outlined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is also considered a form of violence against women under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW). The practice also falls under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. FGM tends to be performed on minors, to the detriment of their health and wellbeing therefore FGM can also violate the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). Regional treaties specifically address FGM, including the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, known as the Maputo Protocol, which came into effect in 2005.

1.2 Context of Sierra Leone

According to Sierra Leone’s most recent demographic and health survey, one in six women between 20 and 49 were married by the age of 15, and 48% were married before they reached the age of 18. The total fertility rate in the country is 4.9 births per woman, 5.7 in rural areas and 3.5 in urban areas. 28% of adolescents between 15 and 19 have begun childbearing, of these 22% have a live birth and 6% are pregnant with their first child. Teenage pregnancy in rural areas is 34%, compared to 19% in urban areas. At the most recent estimate, infant mortality in Sierra Leone is 92 deaths per 1,000 live births. Six in ten births in Sierra Leone are attended by a skilled provider, such as a nurse or midwife, or a medical aide. Only 2% of cases are attended by a doctor, while more than one third of births are attended by a traditional birth attendant or relatives. 11

One in five women in Sierra Leone use a modern method of contraception. The most common are injectable contraception, followed by pills and implants. More than two thirds of women access their contraceptives from government health centres, but some rely on the private sector, for example pharmacies, to access contraception. 12

In Sierra Leone, men’s share of income earned is far greater than that of their female peers, despite there being many more women active in the labour force. Women tend to be concentrated in informal forms of employment including agriculture. They are the ones who do the vast majority of domestic tasks, and much of their work remains unrecognised and undervalued. Women’s representation and participation in decision-making positions in public and private sectors is below 30%. 13

48% of all school-going children are girls, but their enrolment decreases dramatically as the education level increases. Girls in Sierra Leone face serious barriers to education, including child marriage, teenage pregnancy, child initiation rites (Bondo initiation), poverty, sexual exploitation and harassment.

Only 17% of girls are thought to complete secondary school, compared to 35% of boys.

Violence against women and girls is endemic, with one in six women reporting having experienced rape or sexual assault in their lifetime. Nearly 70% of these girls are attacked by someone they know. These figures are likely to be a vast underestimate, as girls rarely report cases of abuse to the police, or other professional bodies. Consequently, very few women are able to gain justice after experiences of abuse. 15

Teenage pregnancy accounted for approximately 47% of girls dropping out of school before reaching 18 years of age. 14

11 Statistics Sierra Leone, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, ICF International (2014), Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2013, Freetown
12 Ibid
14 Ibid
15 Ibid
1.3 FGM in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is one of seven countries in the world where national FGM prevalence is almost universal.

In 2013, it was estimated that 89.6% of women had undergone FGM of which 75.2% underwent type I, II or III FGM. FGM is more prevalent in rural areas (94%) than in urban areas (81%), with the highest prevalence (96%), in the Northern region. FGM is also more prevalent among the older generation, with 95% of women aged 30 or older having undergone FGM, compared with 74% of girls between 15 and 19. The majority of women (40%) underwent FGM between the ages of 10 and 14, while 13% underwent FGM between five and nine, and 17% of women reported undergoing the procedure between one and four. These figures are an estimate as many women are unsure exactly what age they underwent FGM.

In Sierra Leone, FGM forms a key aspect of an initiation ceremony that is a rite of passage for girls, which signals that they have reached womanhood and are ready for marriage. FGM takes place within the Bondo Society, a powerful women led and run secret society. The societies are run by older women known as soweis, a role which is inherited or passed down female family lines. Soweis carry out the FGM ceremony and are said to have supernatural powers allowing them to punish those who reveal the secrets of the society with curses and serious and incurable health conditions.

Bondo initiation typically takes place over several weeks, and can last as long as a year. During initiation girls and women are secluded in a clearing known as the Bondo bush, several kilometres away from the nearest settlement. The initiates go through FGM as soon as they enter the Bondo bush and, as their wounds heal, they take part in activities said to prepare them to serve their marital homes and the wider community. On completing the initiation, the initiates are celebrated as women. They dance back to their village where they are welcomed with gifts and festivities. Girls are then life members of the Bondo Society, providing a sense of comradeship and support, and even a form of resistance from male dominace.

1.4 Role of traditional leaders in Bondo

The Bondo Society has historically enjoyed open and unchallenged support from parliamentarians who commonly financially sponsor girls’ initiation, with the understanding that girls and their families will then support them in future elections. This has had notable implications on the government’s commitment to abandonment of the practice. If the government that has traditionally supported the Bondo Society does not take immediate steps to address this, the government’s commitment to abandon the practice will be in jeopardy.

1.5 Policy context

FGM is not illegal in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone’s child rights bill, passed in 2007, does not include a clause on FGM as the issue was regarded as too sensitive to be addressed through legislation. The CEDAW Committee has specifically urged the government of Sierra Leone to enact a complete abandonment of the practice for girls and women. They criticised the rejection of the criminalisation of child FGM during the adoption of the Child Rights Act. The CEDAW urged the government to take immediate steps to incorporate the Convention into its domestic legal system to ensure the provisions are directly applicable in the local context.

16 Statistics Sierra Leone, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, ICF International (2014), Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2013, Freetown
17 Statistics Sierra Leone, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, ICF International (2014), Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2013, Freetown
18 Ibid
19 Bjälkander, O. (2013), Female Genital Mutilation in Sierra Leone, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm
20 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2014), Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Sierra Leone, United Nations
Sierra Leone’s *The Agenda for Prosperity*\textsuperscript{21} poverty reduction strategy paper for 2013-2018, acknowledges the lack of national legislation to prohibit FGM, but highlights the governments on-going sensitisation and awareness raising engagements with traditional leaders to discourage the practice. It states that some chiefdoms have legislated against FGM, and Memorandums of Understanding have been signed between paramount chiefs and soweis in some areas. This paper also identifies enacting a law against underage initiation rites of passage for girls as a priority area.

On 2nd July 2015, Sierra Leone became one of the last countries in West Africa to ratify the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, or the Maputo Protocol. Article 5 explicitly calls for states to prohibit and condemn harmful practices that prevent women from claiming their rights. States are required to introduce the necessary domestic legislative measures to protect women. There is a particular mention of the need to support survivors of FGM through the provision of basic services, such as health and legal support, alongside vocational training to make them self-sufficient.

### 1.6 FGM and the Ebola crisis

During the 2014-2015 Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, FGM was temporarily banned as part of the governments prohibition of the meeting of more than three people to prevent spreading the disease. According to the World Health Organisation there were over 14,000 cases of Ebola in Sierra Leone and around 4,000 deaths (WHO 2016). This had an impact on people’s movements and their daily life. Schools were closed between June 2014 and April 2015. This ban helped to temporarily stop FGM and is seen as having the potential to break the entrenched practice should the government commit to making this a permanent ban and creating relevant laws banning FGM in the country.

\textsuperscript{21} The Government of Sierra Leone (2013), *The Agenda for Prosperity, Road to Middle Income Status, Sierra Leone’s Third Generation Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2013-2018)*, Freetown
2. Methodology

2.1 Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research (PEER)

PEER, a qualitative participatory research methodology, was chosen for this research because it is especially effective when working with marginalised groups. Using the PEER methodology is also beneficial because it allows researchers to gain insights into sensitive topics that are typically difficult to research such as sexual behaviour, gender relations and power dynamics within households and communities. It can also help identify issues that could either block, or motivate the abandonment of harmful practices.

In all PEER studies, PEER Participants are empowered through their involvement in the study. Over the course of the research, they increase their confidence to break the taboos around speaking about FGM and gain experience in designing research questions, carrying out interviews and collating the data.

By working with marginalised people in a supportive group environment, PEER raises the confidence of the participants to speak out about their experiences and concerns.

As a result of the recent project, women who were once isolated and marginalised by their communities formed networks during the PEER process and are now empowered, confident, and inspired to create change.

The PEER methodology received ethical approval from the University of Wales Swansea Research Ethics Board in 2007 and has been trialled and refined extensively by Options, the consultancy arm of Marie Stopes International. Over the past decade, PEER has been implemented in over 15 countries and has a strong track record in health and social research.

2.2 Recruitment

In PEER, members of the target community are trained to carry out in-depth conversational interviews with trusted individuals who they select from their own social networks. To start the process FORWARD and Girl 2 Girl Empowerment Movement recruited three PEER Supervisors from the existing girls clubs in Waterloo, Brookfield and Grey Bush, Freetown. The supervisors, aged between 18 and 21, then recruited a further nine G2G run girls’ club members aged between 15 and 18 years to be PEER Researchers (PRs).

Lead researchers from FORWARD and G2G facilitated a two-part training program for the PRs, with support from the three PEER Supervisors. The training was participatory, with an emphasis on interview skills development and enabling the PRs to engage as ‘experts’ on the issues being researched. During the training, the facilitators, supervisors and PRs used role play, group work and developed prompts to guide in-depth conversational interviews around two key themes: daily life, and then Bondo Society and FGM within it.

2.4 Data collection and analysis

Following the training, each of the PRs conducted a series of two in-depth interviews with three different members of their social networks, making a total of 54 interviews. The PEER Supervisors met with the PRs between interviews, to discuss and record the findings and to help the PRs address challenges or concerns that may have arisen. During the data collection and analysis phases, the PEER Supervisors also worked with the PRs to fill any gaps in the data, or to make clarifications where necessary.
This section provides insights into the data collected by the PEER Researchers. The PEER data shares general information about the lived experiences of girls and women in Sierra Leone, their experiences of FGM and their knowledge of the Bondo Society, as well as the changing nature of the practice.

3.1 Lived experiences of girls and women

In the first interview, the PEER Researchers (PRs) talked to their PEERs about their experiences of daily life, their relationships with their families, and their experience of education and access to key services. As well as providing context to the research findings, this also allowed the PRs to build a relationship of trust with the participants, in anticipation of the second interview where they raised more difficult and personal issues related to the Bondo Society.

3.1.1 Poverty, hardship and gender inequality

Many of the girls’ responses were dominated by stories of extreme poverty, hardship and gender inequality. They also reported having the primary responsibility for domestic work in their households.

*The people in this community need girls and young women only to cook, sweep and take care of the home for their parents.*

*There is a girl in our community that lived with her parents and her brother, she did all the domestic work. If she would say she is tired her mother would beat her up. And even if her brother ate in a pan and did not wash the pan, when her mother sees the pan is very dirty she would call her out and say wash the pan quickly. She makes the girl feel so unhappy that later she left the house for the streets.*

*Girls do all the domestic work at home, the boys are not doing anything. They say housework is not for boys but for girls.*

They described how the community generally holds women and girls in low regard, subsequently limiting their goals and aspirations.

*This community doesn’t want anything good for girls and young women. They don’t want girls and young women to be educated, travel abroad, to have big business. All they want to hear is that girls and women are getting pregnant, idle, marry early or drop out of school. This community is full of negative activities for young women and girls.*

*If you want to be educated you won’t have the chance. This community is very noisy, every blessed day there is a party, fighting, shouting, so this won’t give somebody a chance to read.*

As a consequence, the participants spoke about many girls feeling held back and deeply frustrated by their daily existence.

*Girls lose their self-confidence always thinking that they should be behind, not in front of, men.*

3.1.2 Education

The limited education of girls and young women was a recurring theme throughout the PEER. Many girls are prevented from going to school because of social norms and values, which devalue girls’ education. This situation is further compounded by gender roles within the household with girls carrying out domestic chores.

*People say that girls and young women are not allowed to go to school because of customs and tradition. In the provinces parents think that girls are supposed to stay at home and take care of the home and children and if married they should also take care of their husbands.*

*The adults said that they do not have the time to send girl children to school because it is a long-term process and also a waste of time and resources. So they only give chance to boys to go to school. Girls help their mother to do house work.*

*Girls are not allowed to go to school because of traditional customs and religious beliefs. For example, her father says that girls should not go to school because they will learn bad things in school because they do not teach Islam in the school. Also girls are not able to go to school because their parents want them to go into early marriage.*

*The adult people always have the thinking that school is not for girls but for boys. If you spend all your resources on a girl child at the end it will be a waste.*

Many parents also forbid their daughters from attending school due to fears it will increase their risk of getting pregnant before they are married.
Some PEER participants highlighted that parents are afraid that if their daughter is educated they will refuse to get married, or not respect their husbands once they are married.

If a girl goes to school she will later be pregnant.

Some PEER participants highlighted that parents are afraid that if their daughter is educated they will refuse to get married, or not respect their husbands once they are married.

Girls who are taken from their parents to live with their aunts or other family members are most at risk of being kept out of school. This is a common practice in many rural communities, which was described in the interviews.

Because of poverty some girls don’t live with their parents, they live with people who call themselves their guardians. [The guardians] go to the provinces and ask their relatives to give them their children so they can bring them to the city to take care of them. Out of joy the parents will give out their children willingly to be taken to the city. But when [the guardians] come back to the city with the children, instead of sending them to school as they have promised their parents they prefer sending them to go out and sell for them. Some children hawk the street selling things like cold water, fried cake, boiled eggs and other things and they are threatened that if they don’t finish off selling the amount of goods given to them they will be punished. Even though the girls are the people who bring in money for the home by selling, they are still deprived of going to school. Some don’t even have good clothes to put on, let alone sending them to school.

Someone will adopt a [girl], the person will not allow the girl to go to school because she is not her biological child.

There was a girl who lives with her aunty. She was a very hardworking girl but she did not go to school because she was not at the house to attend school but to sell and do domestic work at home. Whenever she saw her friends going to school she got annoyed and started to cry. Even when her aunt see her like that she will not encourage her, she only told her that she did not take her to go to school but to assist her to do the domestic work at home.

The PEER Participants themselves all strongly felt that girls’ education is vital for empowering girls and helping them, their families, and indeed the nation, to break out of the shackles of poverty. Many talked about the benefits of girls’ education and job opportunities.

When you are educated, you will be proud of yourself and also your family will be proud of you. You will have respect anywhere you go.

It is important for girls and young women to be educated because it will build self-respect for the girls or young women.

When you are educated, you will be outspoken in public and you will have the confidence to talk anywhere.

When you are educated, in the future you will have better job and the girl will help her parent and she will also know how to run her home.

In this community people normally say that if a girl does not go to school the nation will always be backward. If you educate a girl child you educate the whole nation but if you educate a boy you educate a single person.

Education can help girls to know their rights and can give them the confidence to fight for them.

If a girl is educated she will know her rights as a girl child so no man can say rubbish to her. She can stand where men stand and talk, men will be afraid of her because she is educated.

It is important for girls to go to school because if a girl is educated she will be independent. She will know her rights, she will stand wherever men stand and she will able to compete with men in elections or any other kind of job.

One woman in this community, she is married for ten years but she is well educated and she has a great job. A year ago, her husband died and her husband’s family wanted to claim the man’s property. But the married woman stood for her rights because she was educated and knew her rights so she saw them in court. She had the self-confidence.
The girls spoke a lot about the importance of female role models in their communities and at the national level that are helping to inspire the next generation of girls to be the future leaders. A good education for girls is seen to be at the heart of this.

We know it is important for a girl child to go to school for her to be socialized and courageous, bold and strong for her to take up her own responsibility and to be able to help her family and community. For example, there is one woman who is well educated and she fights for the voice of girls to be heard in her community, she is the first woman counsellor in the community where she lives.

In this community they need quality education for the girls and prominent personalities to set examples so they will become a lawyer, doctor, bank manager or an accountant.

She said [education] is important because she wants to be a role model in the society. If she goes to school she will be a doctor, lawyer, police. Like for example, the first lady Mrs. Sia Koroma because she is educated she is well known all over the world, also Kadie Sesay are people we are copying from.

There is a girl in our community that is educated and later she got a good job and during the month of Ramadan she bought a lot of items and gave them to people. She helps her family and other relatives in their education. She is now a role model in this community.

In this community when girls and young women go to school they will be very important in the sight of everybody, especially boys and men. The lady next door is well educated and she is a nurse, if any child is sick, bitten by dog or get cut by any object, the child’s mother will run to her for help. This lady makes everybody happy for the help she gives them. Children, men, mothers in this community respect her so much. It is important for girls and young women to go to school because when you educate a girl you have educated the whole nation.

3.1.3 Boyfriends, prostitution and sexual abuse

PEER Participants shared stories about the consequences of growing up in such a challenging environment with so little money, support or opportunity resulting in many girls going "wayward". In many cases this means girls enter into transactional sexual relationships, labelled as prostitution by some, and "man business" by others.

Some of them say that, though things are hard for them, they can still cope with it and they will find a way to survive. While the others say that they cannot go through hardship and the only way for them to survive is for them to have a wayward life.

In this community the bad things are more than the good, especially for girls and young women. Girls do prostitution in the community. That is very bad because they are in poverty and are influenced by their fellow friend.

Some say the girls and young women in the community do not have respect for elders and they dress half-naked in the community, and some also run after the men in the community and harass them for money.

The bad things in our community is that girls like to gossip, they don't have self-esteem, then some of the girls like to dress like outlaws to attract men and young boys, they like going to night clubs.

Some of them go into prostitution because of poverty and they think that is the only way for them to survive, some of them don't want to be controlled by their parents and they choose to live in the street and do prostitution. Some of them are orphans who don't have anyone taking care of them so they do it the hard way by becoming a prostitute as a means of survival.
In some cases, the PEER participants mentioned that they were forced into transactional relationships due to pressure exerted upon them from their families.

Many of the girls are bread winners for their family and the only way they have to hand over money is having sex with men. There is a girl whose parents force her in to it and if she did not have enough money at night when she came home it will be a tug of war for her. The whole area will know that she is not a useful child to her family, but if she brings a lot of money she will be accepted and well praised and seen as a good child for the family.

Although it is often the girls that seek out men to help meet their needs and ease the burden of poverty in the family, men also put significant pressure on the girls to have sex with them. Stories of sexual harassment and abuse were common among the issues girls raised.

There is this girl, her parents loved her so much and she was growing up and good looking. When she was off from school, on her way home she was caught by some men they tied her up and blind folded her and raped her. They even broke one of her legs and now the girl is in the hospital.

There is also evidence of girls facing abuse by men in authority. Many of the PEER participants talked about experiences of abuse at the hands of their male teachers.

This sexual harassment doesn’t even end in the community, it is also happens in school settings and this is really very painful because people are expecting teachers in the schools to be trustworthy but some of them don’t actually keep up to what is expected of them.

Some girls are harassed by their teachers and that makes them loose concentration in school and decide to leave school.

There is a girl who is sexually harassed by a man. The man is a teacher, he asks the girl to visit him at his house, when the girl visited him he asked her to have sex with him so that he can pass her exam paper. She agreed to have sex with the teacher and later she noticed that she was pregnant, she told the teacher about it but the teacher denied it. She was sexually harassed and also her future was destroyed.
3.1.4 Sexual health, access to information and guidance on sex education

Sexually transmitted infections were a recurring theme throughout the PEER interviews. HIV/AIDS are mentioned particularly regularly.

Girls may contract sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS and we all know what this disease does.

The bad things they say in this community are prostitution will destroy their future and later they will be affected by sexual transmitted diseases like HIV and AIDS.

There is a girl in our community, the girl is very beautiful. She join prostitution and later have a disease she suffer and died.

There was a girl who decided to sleep with different men in exchange of either money or gifts that they can offer her. She did that with several men so she contracted sexually transmitted diseases one after the other and she was treating herself. After, she decided to have children, she went to see a medical doctor, she was told that according to her medical history she will not be able to give birth because she has had history of sexually transmitted infections which had interfered with her uterus and that the uterus is ruptured.

Many of the PEER participants mentioned lack of information about sex and lack of guidance, particularly from parents, as a critical issue that puts girls at risk.

Girls get pregnant because of lack of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and lack of advice from their parents and from people who are older than them. So they listen and take advice from their friends who lead them astray and get them to do things that are wrong, ending up destroying their future.

In this community people say teenage pregnancy is caused by lack of information between mother and child. Parents should have enough time to explain to her girl child about sex and how it affects her future.

Poor parenthood leads to teenage pregnancy because if the parents are not strict over their children and they do not give good advice for their children to do things that are right, or to tell them to abstain from early sexual activities, they will be influenced by their friends.

Due to lack of education about early sex life and pregnancy some can only know after they get pregnant.

None of the respondents mentioned contraception use or information. While the PRs did not ask them about it directly, the fact that it wasn’t mentioned at all while talking about sex with multiple partners, pregnancy and STIs is likely to be indicative of very low levels of use in their communities.

3.1.5 Teenage pregnancy outside of marriage

Teenage pregnancy is said to be “rampant” in the girls’ communities, and is most often used to describe girls becoming pregnant outside of marriage, as opposed to those teenage girls who get pregnant within marriage. Teenage pregnancy is often linked to transactional sex.

Some girls are the bread winner in their home at a very young age, so this will cause teenage pregnancy. For example if the girl’s father is dead, her mother is jobless and she has younger ones, she is the eldest. She will involve herself with a man to provide for her family. As time goes on she will become pregnant in her teenage years.

My friend’s parents were very poor but the girl wanted to live a very good and luxurious life so she started going out with other friends - bad gangs - in her community. They seduced her into having sex with a man old enough to be her grandfather, so she gave in to their advice and started having sex with the man. Unfortunately for her she became pregnant. Her parents soon found out about what had happened and they asked her who was responsible for the pregnancy. When she went with her parents to the man’s house, the man denied knowing her. Her parents then said to her that she must give birth to the child. All of the friends who were giving her the advice now abandoned her and she eventually became a dropout after giving birth to a baby boy.
The interviews exposed the catastrophic implications of becoming pregnant outside of marriage, on girls' and women's life path as well as the stigma they face at the hands of their community.

In this community young women and girls said that when a little girl becomes pregnant at an early age, it cannot be easy for her. All her plans and dreams that she had for herself may have to change. The girl will have to face her family. Some parents cannot accept the pregnancy and make their daughter leave the house. This is a problem. This can be difficult for a young girl to live alone with many responsibilities. If she decides to have abortion it will be risk for her life. But if she wants the baby it will change her condition. Because she may have to give up the plans she had for her education. If she did not complete her education the girl will not qualify for anything more than local job like sweeper or cleaner.

Girls who get pregnant at an early age can face so many problems like they will be sent away by their parents. They will be looked down upon by people in their community. They will struggle for their own survival and also for their babies.

She said that in her community people say all the time discouraging words to [young mothers] like ‘you are not useful in the society’, they totally discourage you so that you can’t even concentrate in making something of your life or to correct your mistakes.

Some say teenage pregnancy is rampant in this community. People in this community say that maybe it’s a curse in the community, another people say maybe it’s the end of the world.
3.2 Bondo Society and FGM

In the second interviews the PEER Participants were specifically asked about the Bondo Society, a secret society which initiates young girls into womanhood. While girls noted that they could not speak directly about what happens in the Bondo bush, they provided useful insights and prevailing views in the practice.

3.2.1 Explaining initiation into the Bondo Society

Initiation into the Bondo Society is regarded as a necessary precursor for marriage and the ceremony is understood to prepare girls for married life.

Once a young girl completes her initiation she is considered ready for marriage.

It is our culture and traditional practice for a girl child born in our community to go to the Bondo Society because that is the time they will find their husband.

Anybody who comes out of the Bondo Society will get married early.

Girls learn how to cook, how to run the household and take care of their future husbands. Paradoxically about 17% of girls were known to join Bondo between one and four years old. This defeats the avowed purpose of preparing girls to cook and care for their future husbands.

The good things about Bondo for the young women and girls is that once you joined the Bondo you are one step secured from teenage pregnancy.

Some of the people are saying they send their girls and young women to the Bondo Society to reduce sexual feeling.

The elders say Bondo helps to reduce sexual feeling, and minimize prostitution and teenage pregnancy.

The cutting of the clitoris is said to help release a woman's sexual desire. Left intact, people fear that once sexually mature, girls will have an insatiable desire for sex and thus not only be promiscuous before marriage, but unable to remain faithful to their husband even during marriage.

Initiation into the Bondo Society, and the FGM it entails, is said to help protect girls’ virginity and prevent them from becoming sexually “wayward” before they get married. A girl’s virginity is of paramount importance to her and her whole family’s honour and sending a daughter to be initiated is felt to be essential if a girl is to be “protected from her own sexual desires”. However teenage pregnancy still remains high in Sierra Leone, making this justification very contentious.

The good thing about Bondo is that the girl child will have patience and be able to rule her marriage home and she will be well trained in how to calm her husband down when he gets mad or angry.

People in her community say that Bondo is good for any girl child because in that period they will learn so many things about how to take care of their home and children.

22 Statistics Sierra Leone, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, ICF International (2014), Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2013, Freetown
Bondo is seen by many families as a critical turning point as it is a precursor to marriage, when parents will be able to hand over financial responsibility of their daughter to her future husband. Parents incur huge costs to send their daughters to the Bondo bush which can cost around $250 for one girl.

If you are with that thing that you are born with [the clitoris] you will have feelings for so many men. That girl will want to get sex everyday with different men and it will lead to teenage pregnancy and that is the reason why they join them into Bondo Society.

They said that the most important thing about Bondo is that when you are initiated you will not be involved in sexual intercourse with different men, because your clitoris has been circumcised.

If they don't circumcise their daughter they will only let their children go wayward and be the most useless thing in their community especially in terms of sex. They will not be satisfied with one man. Mostly, they will end up into prostitution.

Bondo is seen by many families as a critical turning point as it is a precursor to marriage, when parents will be able to hand over financial responsibility of their daughter to her future husband. Parents incur huge costs to send their daughters to the Bondo bush which can cost around $250 for one girl.

Enter into the Bondo Society is also an important rite of passage. Once girls have gone through the initiation, they are thought to be a “complete and respectable woman”. A critical part of the process is teaching girls respect; respect for themselves and respect for others. They learn how to conduct themselves and behave as respectable and respectful women of the community.

Young girls learn the value of being a woman.

People in my friend’s community say that going to Bondo is a good thing because girls who are initiated into the Bondo Society do not lose their self-esteem and pride easily.

The good thing about Bondo is that you will have a husband after the Bondo and people in the community will respect you. They will see you as a very important person because you will have the skills to mingle with people with high respect in the community.

Being initiated into the Bondo Society is said to be a must for any women who wants to take on a position of responsibility in the community as Bondo not only gives a woman status but approval as fit to take on official roles.

Women go through it so that they can be able to get high position in society.

If you go into the Bondo Society they will honor you and respect you and they will say you are now a full grown woman.

The participants explained how even after the initiation period, the Bondo Society structure defines the traditional female hierarchy in a community. The women who lead the Bondo, known as soweis, are given utmost respect and power as women leaders.

I know of one woman who is willing to be the head of the Bondo Society, she gave a big part of her land to build the Bondo bush. She was given five children to initiate them into the Bondo and she was very happy about that because she has the power and fame in her community and beyond.

Even if a woman does not take on one of these traditional positions, being a member of the Bondo Society is still felt by many to be key for a woman to get ahead in any kind of work, and is particularly important for networking and securing positions of influence.

Girls and young women want to go through Bondo Society because they want to be associated with others who are part of it, they don't want to be discriminated against by others. For some women they go through Bondo because they want to contest in elections and if the people in that area notice that she is not an initiate they will not vote for her. So, because she wants to win the election with their votes, she will go through it.

People say Bondo is a matter of must because many families need to get money from the bride price.

The good thing about Bondo Society is the girl will have good home training and they will have men that will pay for their Bondo experience and after that she will get marriage to that man and the parents will have nothing to worry about.

When they are faced with financial constraints, they will have to give their child to an old man to marry her since that man is able to take care of them and the girl.

The general idea about Bondo in our community is good because they say that the Bondo Society is a place where girls’ minds and attitudes can be moulded, they will be well groomed and they will know how to behave themselves when they are in the community.

You will have respect for yourself and for others in your community, you will also be able to maintain your pride.
The cycle of influence is sustained by wealthier women members and other wealthy community members supporting the Bondo Society financially.

*They have so many sponsors who are giving them money to build another Bondo hut.*

*The good thing about Bondo is that it creates employment for adults; it raises money for the community.*

In stark contrast to the positive trajectory for girls who are initiated, a number of participants explained how those who are not initiated are ridiculed and ostracised.

*In some provinces, [if you have not been initiated] you are not allowed to be talking and sitting among those who have attended. You will not even be allowed to go some certain places in the provinces or villages.*

*If you are a girl or young woman and you have not been into Bondo Society you will became a laughing stock in the community. If you go into the Bondo Society they will honour you and respect you and they will say you are now a full grown woman.*

*Women go through Bondo for them to be respected in the society, for them to handle an honourable position or title in their community, for them to participate in any gathering or meeting or social function rather than being banned from activities that initiated women are free to participate in.*

In a poor society where girls in particular face such hardship, Bondo is one of the few times in their lives when girls are celebrated and are the center of attention. Girls are given gifts, clothes and jewelry following their initiation.

*They say Bondo is the sweetest time that ever happened to them.*

*All girls and young women want the attention, love and to be noticed in the community. That reason will make them to go to the Bondo Society.*

Far from describing Bondo as a negative experience, many of the girls spoke of all the good things that come from time in the bush and initiation into the Society.

*People are still going to Bondo in our community. People find it very much comfortable and are happy about it and people said that they have fun, love, respect, fame and a lot of good things happen during this Bondo period.*

The custom of initiating girls into Bondo Society dates back to the early ancestors and is therefore seen as a critical part of local culture and tradition. Almost all of the girls mentioned upholding tradition as a key reason for why girls are initiated into Bondo. Joining the Bondo Society demonstrates the girl’s and her family’s commitment to and respect for their culture.

*The general idea of people in my community about Bondo is that they think that it is a part and parcel of their tradition so they will uphold it.*

*Bondo Society is still common in our community because they think that it is part of their tradition and they say they will uphold it so that it will be transferred from one generation to the other, they think that if they don’t practice it they will not be able to hand it over to the next generation.*

*They like and value their culture and they are willing to continue it till the end of their generation because that is what their forefathers and mothers did so they will not end it now.*

As a consequence, for many it is simply assumed that girls will go through the initiation, and that there are no other options.

*People in my community say that as Bondo is part of our tradition, whether you like it or not you must go through it as long as you are an African and especially a Sierra Leonean.*

*Tradition and custom demand that all girl children in this community must go to the Bondo Society.*

### 3.2.2 Social pressure and Bondo

Pressure for girls to go through initiation into the Bondo Society comes from all directions. Commonly, it is girls’ parents that ultimately make the decision. Parents want to do what is considered best for their daughters and they feel proud to play their part in upholding traditions. Parents hope that by sending their daughter to be initiated and securing her an early marriage, they will have done what they can to protect her from the scandal of prostitution or teenage pregnancy out of marriage.
Parents are still proud of sending their daughters to the Bondo Society.

Parents give traditional leaders power to initiate their girl child into the Bondo Society because they think that any girl who goes into the Bondo will come out to be a powerful woman.

As a parent, in order to send your daughter to Bondo you make sure you do everything you can, including spending everything you have.

The Bondo Society is still valued in our community because we see that parents make their children go through the Bondo and even when the time of their harvest comes they will keep a good portion of that harvest so that their daughter can go through the rites. They will buy a lot of dresses for them so that they will look good on the day that the process will end.

Every season parents get their children initiated into the Bondo Society and some parents keep a good part of their harvest to sell so that they can initiate their daughters. Some don’t even mind if they starve as long as they get their daughters initiated and some even end up paying debts.

Often it is the mothers who decide, as they too have experienced the Bondo initiation. They want to make sure their daughters continue the tradition.

It is normally the mother’s idea to send her daughters to the Bondo Society because the mothers believe that it is their tradition and since they were part of it they want their daughters to be part of it so that they can be able to learn what they have learnt. They say that as Africans they have to uphold their culture and tradition.

In the family, it is often the mother who has the idea of sending her girl child to Bondo, the main motive why the mothers are so eager for their girl child to go through the Bondo Society is for them to become real women in the society, so that they will be fit to handle honourable positions in the community. So that they will speak where other women are speaking, so that they will be involved in suggestion making or law making in the community, so that they will be trained how to look after their husband and their children. They were even trained how to bear hardship, how to cure diseases.

Sometimes it is the mothers’ idea because the women are the ones that fund the Bondo Society.

Other female family members and respected community members also play a role.

It is the idea of the parent or even the extended family members like the aunts because they will take it that since it is a tradition and they have gone through it, it is a must for their daughters to go through it also.

The pressure comes from their grandmothers because they use the advantage to say this my grandchild and I have the right to her too, you cannot stop me to initiate her. For what my mother do to me and I did the same to you, her mother, so you must give me this chance to prove to my grandchild that I love her so much and am ready to do whatever it takes for her to be called a complete traditional woman. Do not deny me of this right to be called a proud woman of her community. So they put pressure and confuse her at all cost to be initiated into the Bondo Society.

People say the pressure sometimes comes from some elders in the community, especially from women leaders of the Bondo Society.

Some of the participants told stories of girls being forced into going to Bondo against their will, and parents threatening to disown them if they do not go.

Parents force them into it and if they refuse to go to the Bondo Society they will treat them badly, and say we will disown you as our child and forbid you in anything regarding our tradition.

There is this girl whose parents are forcing her to go into the Bondo Society. At first the girl refused to go into the Bondo Society. Her parents said to her ‘if you deny us of going into the society bush then we will refuse for you to be our daughter this world till next world’ and the girl said to her parents ‘is it because of the Bondo Society you people want to disown me?’ Then her parents said to her again, ‘yes it is because of that, do you have anything to say towards that?’ and the girl says to them ‘what must I say? I have no choice.’

Some girls are even tricked by their parents.

There was a certain parent in our community who has three children and all of them happen to be girls and when the time came when girls are to be initiated, there was one of the girls who adamantly refused to be a part of it. Her parents insisted that she must join but the girl still refused so the parents now thought of a way to get the girl initiated and they tricked her. The mother gave her food to go and give to her grandmother who they said was sick. The girl innocently went with the food but to her greatest shock she found that the place she was in was a place where girls are being initiated and there was no way for her to go back, so that is how the girl was initiated into the Bondo Society.
Participants spoke of the regret felt by girls who do not choose it for themselves.

In our community we have one girl who her mother forced to go into the Bondo Society. Later the girl regretted it her whole life because it was not her wish to go to the Bondo Society but her mother forced her.

It should not be by force for girls and young women to go into the Bondo Society. People should wait for the girl child to know what is good and bad for her so that she should know whether she should go into the Bondo or not.

However there are many girls who are not forced, who are choosing to join the Bondo Society for themselves.

Bondo is still common because the girls like to join the Society.

Some of them want to taste the Bondo.

It is not by force or pressure, they go willingly.

There is a girl I know and she is the one that forced her parent to put her into the Bondo Society.

For most of them it is not by force or pressure but it is by their own wish and willingness because they like, love, respect their tradition and they obey it because it was started a long time before they were born, so now they can't end it they must continue it, it is their origin. The girl herself thinks about the beautiful dresses and shoes and loud party her mother will make for her after her Bondo Society ceremony. She will keep on pestering and asking when she is going to be initiated too, she can't even wait for that day to come.

They want to go into society because of the new dresses; some are even saying that when she was out of the Bondo Society she will like to be like those women who are dancing the samper because she likes the way they dance and dress.

Some girls see their peers joining the Bondo Society, and, hearing their stories and seeing the attention they receive, want to be a part of it too.

Some of them join the Bondo Society because of what their friends says about it.

Girls want to join the Bondo because most of them in their community, their friends, have joined the Bondo. So they will join too because they want to be like their friends and any other woman in the community.

Girls see their friends who have been in Bondo treated differently. The thing that makes girls join the Bondo Society is the moment they see their friends are out of that place and the encouragement their parents give to them to join the Bondo Society. For example, seeing the type of dress they put on and that they start to mingle with their elders in their discussions and also their parents start to discuss about marriage to them.

While some are inspired by their peers to join, other girls face significant pressure from other girls and women.

Most of them get the pressure from their friends or PEER group because whenever they come together they will talk and influence and convince them to go to the Bondo Society.

People in the community say going to the Bondo Society is by force. Because if you don't join the Bondo Society people will mock you, especially the woman will say a lot of bad things about you, like you are dirty or stinky and useless.

3.2.3 The male perspective on Bondo

Although for the most part men are kept very separate from anything to do with this female secret society, a father, as the head of the family, is responsible for securing a husband for his daughter. He often decides to send his daughter for Bondo initiation as it marks her transition from being a child that he is responsible for, to a woman ready for marriage.

In our community we see the fathers are the ones who send their girl child into the Bondo Society, because they want their girl child to grow up so they can give them to a man for marriage.

It is said that in the family the idea comes from the father because he is the head of the family and has the final say in whatever he wants to be done. He supports and gives money for the festival to take place because he knows if his children join the Bondo Society they will eventually have a man that will ask for her hand in marriage and all money which he has been spending on her will not go [to waste]. The man will help the father on the farm. So the idea will come from the father first before anyone supports it.

The father will say maybe because I have not yet initiated my girl child to be a complete woman that is why men are afraid to come to ask her hand in marriage.
As well as pressure from their fathers to join the Bondo Society, girls can also feel pressure from other boys and men in the community who tease them as being “incomplete” if they are uninitiated. This is particularly relevant when it relates to and influences the type of girl a man wants to marry.

Men and boys sometimes take it that the [uninitiated] girls do not know anything and most of the time they insult the girls calling them names such as gborek or kpowa (meaning uninitiated or incomplete) and this will make the girls feel intimidated.

When men marry women or girls who have not been in the Bondo they will feel like they have not married a complete woman so some of them, after marrying such women, they will insist that the women must be initiated if they want to keep the marriage.

In contrast, many of the PEER participants described how men wanted to marry girls who had not been initiated.

The boys and men say they feel good marrying a girl who has not entered into the Bondo because they are so sweet during sexual intercourse and they are willing to have fun whenever you need them and they will not deny you whenever you need them.

If they marry girls who did not go into the Bondo Society they enjoy with them when they are making love.

Some men feel good marrying girls who have not been into the Bondo Society because they have got konko (clitoris), which those who have been into the Bondo Society do not have.

All men and boys feel so good marrying girls who have not gone into the Bondo Society because they say having sex with them is so enjoyable. It is easy to make love with them because the girls have something on them called clitoris which stimulates their sexual ability.

Some men say that it is a lie that when women go through the Bondo Society they will be satisfied with one man, they said that they cannot be satisfied because what should have made them satisfied has been cut off from their bodies.

I know of one man who married a girl who had not joined the Bondo Society. The girl asked her husband for more sex throughout the night and anytime she need the man she will tell him and she will not be ashamed because it is nature. So that causes the man to grow love for his wife so much. A girl who has joined the Bondo Society would not do that because of what they have told them through the initiation ceremony.

One of the Participants explained how this sexual passion within marriage is so much harder to achieve if the women has been initiated into the Bondo Society and has undergone FGM.

If the man is asking the woman to have sex with him, she won’t render the service to her husband and she will be saying she is not in the mood to have sex with her own husband. If the woman continues like that then automatically the marriage is over.

The participants responses reveal how, for many men, women’s sexual pleasure is a double edged sword. On the one hand men want to be with a woman who enjoys sex, but it also threatens their male ego.

Some men feel fine because when they marry a girl who did not belong to the Bondo Society such girls will have good sexual feeling and good taste in bed when making love. But on the other hand some men say that if girls and young women are not part of the Bondo Society they will not be able to be satisfied with only one man.

Some men [who marry uninitiated girls] will feel worthless because they will take it that the girl has passed through many men. But if it is a girl who has attended the Bondo they will feel safe and think that they are the only man for that particular girl.

3.2.4 Bondo Society, secrecy and taboo

The Bondo Society is a secret society and the details of what takes place in the bush is protected by a pact of secrecy. Repercussions for people who break this pact are extreme. Some of the participants told stories of the soweis using their powers of sorcery to put curses on people, especially men, who speak out about Bondo. Other men have been made to pay a fine after speaking out about Bondo.

Anyone they find talking about Bondo, they will give the individual sickness for the rest of his life. They will give them sickness in their stomach, stop their manhood functioning and will give them everlasting bad luck. So this has made them stop talking about Bondo Society.

There is one guy who is a drunkard, whenever he got drunk he would start to abuse the community. One day he got drunk and said that he will join all the women into the Bondo Society because women are not serious. While he was saying this the sowei was passing by and she heard him. When she approached the guy one side of his mouth become infected with sickness.

It is not men’s business to talk about the Bondo Society; it does not belong to them. It’s about women, not about men, so they do not have the right to talk about it, it is a secret.
The women who have been through the initiation themselves are sworn to secrecy. This secrecy protects the society and contributes to its appeal and intrigue. It also prevents girls who are yet to be initiated from understanding what happens in the bush. The circumcision ceremony is shrouded in the highest secrecy.

When men talk about the Bondo Society people feel that they have committed an abomination. When men are caught talking about Bondo Society they will be charged or fined with items like sheep, goats, palm oil, wine and huge amount of money.

The participants explained that if girls do talk about the Bondo initiation they only tend to talk about the good parts, further strengthening the allure of the society.

People always tell girls the good things about Bondo and leave out the negative ones.

Most initiated girls tell lies to their non-initiated friends. They say that everything is good in the Bondo. They will never tell you that if you do not respect the elders they will beat you in the bush or they will remove that part (clitoris) from you. So those girls will want to join the Bondo because of the stories about good food, new clothes, dancing and singing and so on.

Importantly, the girls’ responses show how it is not Bondo itself that is the problem, but rather the harmful side effects.

The whole idea seems worthy but for the cutting of the clitoris.

People think that this law [against Pikin Bondo] is very good because it will help to reduce the rate at which girls are been initiated into the Bondo Society. The girls and young women feel good about this because this will help to reduce the rate at which infections are being spread and reduce the rate of early marriage.

3.2.5 Harmful Physical Impact of FGM

Girls involved in this PEER study had a safe space to break the taboo surrounding the Bondo Society. They spoke of the pain and suffering that girls go through during and after their initiation. Some of the girls mentioned stories of girls who were infected or had died as a result of FGM.

Some people feel bad because they say it includes the removal of womanhood or some part of the inner labia. It will lead to a severe pain and closure of the vagina. Some girls have chronic pain, cysts and even infections from the initiation.

The bad things about Bondo Society process is that it can easily transfer disease from one person to another because most of the time the instruments that they use to carry out the initiation ceremony are not enough for the number of girls they are initiating.

After they circumcised the girl, the girl started to bleed. She bled and bled, they took her to a native doctor but the native doctor tried but couldn’t help her. After some time the girl died of bleeding, her mother regretted doing that to her daughter and up till now she is blaming herself for the death of her daughter.

After Bondo one girl’s parents did not wait for her wound to be healed, they took her straight to a man’s house to get married. The man did not wait for her wound to heal and instead he had sex with her by force and the girl started bleeding and bleeding. They took her to the doctor who tried all he could but he could not help the girl and after several days of bleeding the girl died.

When her clitoris was removed, she was fighting the women and the woman who was doing the cutting mistakenly cut her badly. She started bleeding and at first they thought it was just a minor bleeding that it was the blood from cutting the clitoris. But the bleeding continued for several weeks and even one month.
3.2.6 Bondo, child marriage, child pregnancy and girls’ education

As previously mentioned, initiation into the Bondo Society and child marriage are closely associated. Parents try to secure marriage immediately after the initiation to help avoid the shame associated with pregnancy before marriage, or inability to get married.

Parents will say that they want their daughters to marry as a virgin and so the best thing they will do is to initiate them early and let them marry early.

Most people think that the best thing to do is to let the girls marry at an early age after they have been initiated. They don’t want their daughters to remain in their house and get pregnant out of wedlock. So they don’t have to be faced with such a shame, they will get the girls to go through the Bondo Society and after that they give them out to men.

Initiation is a necessary precursor to marriage, and is commonly funded and supported by the girl’s future husband.

Bondo has a very big impact on early marriage because it acts as the platform from which early marriage comes. If a girl has been initiated into the Bondo the next thing the parents will think of is how to get their daughter to marry the man who was responsible for [paying for] the initiation ceremony. They think that if they allow the girls to grow bigger they will end up rejecting the man as their husband. They fight the shame of their daughter not getting married to the man who had been betrothed to her by forcing the girl to marry at an age when they know that the girl won’t have power to disobey them.
As the last quote suggests, for many of the participants, initiation into the Bondo Society, and subsequent marriage, prevents their chances of a brighter future.

In contrast to some PEER Participants who said that joining Bondo gave girls the status they needed to succeed in life, others spoke of Bondo limiting girls to becoming traditional women, something they see as outdated, and hindering their lives.

3.2.7 Pikin Bondo

The issue of Pikin or child Bondo was raised by many of the PEER Participants. A Pikin is defined as any child under the age of 18, but most participants used the term to refer to very young girls and babies. Many of the participants feel strongly that Pikin Bondo is wrong, and that the impact on young girls is markedly more damaging than that on older girls.
People think Pikin Bondo is very bad because it will destroy the girl’s vagina area - especially the clitoris - very badly before she is grown up.

People think Pikin Bondo is very bad because it involves the removal of the clitoris. If the child is very young it will affect them greatly. The children will still be growing up and it might hinder the process of their growth.

The people’s thoughts about Pikin Bondo is not good because they say that the child will not have an idea about what is being done to her except the pain they will put her through. People say that it is violation of the right of the child and they see it as an inhumane act.

The respondents highlighted how young girls are also too young to benefit from the learning opportunities the Bondo initiation presents to older girls.

Pikin Bondo is not encouraged in my community because the child will not know the value of the Bondo Society because she is not yet fit to make a decision. She will have no respect for culture and tradition. The Pikin Bondo in our community is not good at all because it cannot help girls to know anything in the Bondo Society. They are too small to learn everything in the Bondo Society.

In our community Pikin Bondo Society is very bad. Girls will not enjoy Bondo Society because the girl is too small and won’t be able to understand everything from the Bondo Society, for example when they train them how to take care of themselves. It will make girls more likely to be given in early marriage which can damage the girl’s future.

When girls who go through Pikin Bondo enter into their teenage years and young adulthood, they will not feel able to sit down among their friends to talk about the Bondo Society. They will not visit the Bondo Society place because they do not know what to do there. They will feel ashamed of themselves because the Bondo people will shun them saying that you do not know anything.

Girls who are initiated at a very young age often regret it and resent their parents for forcing them into it.

People’s thoughts about Pikin Bondo are very negative because the child will not be ready and will not know anything about that, it is like taking advantage over the girl. When she grows up she will not like the idea about going to the Bondo but her parents had already joined her into it and will make her regret it for the rest of her life because she is against it.

Those types of children would be the one that say they regret joining Bondo because they don’t remember anything and they don’t benefit anything from joining Bondo.
In contrast, some people see Pinkin Bondo as a positive thing. Some parents believe it is best to initiate girls before they are old enough to know what to expect and then potentially refuse to undergo Bondo.

People think that Pikin Bondo is the best thing to do because they say if girls are left to grow old they will refuse to go through the Bondo Society rites because of all the movies and technology. If they are initiated at an early age they will not be able to refuse.

People think Pikin Bondo is good because if they let the child start going to school she will refuse her parents’ decision. Their teachers and friends will tell them about the Bondo Society and advise them not to go to Bondo because it is all about wickedness and traditional practices and beliefs. Also the pastor will preach and teach them that it is against the bible and God’s commandments and wishes.

There was a recent Pikin Bondo which took place in our community where the girl was about six to seven years old. Her mother convinced her to join the Bondo Society by saying ‘don’t be scared about Bondo. It is fun and you will eat plenty of food with plenty of drinks, lots of palm wine and after that you will get outside and have plenty of fine dresses and good shoes and you will be seen as a big woman and be respected with your PEERS, so my dear, Pikin Bondo is good’.

There is one girl whose family let her grow into a big girl before telling her to go to the Bondo Society. The girl refused to listen to her parents and she started preaching the gospel to her parents, telling them that the Lord is great and Bondo is against the bible. She also said that her friends said to her that the Bondo Society is all about wickedness and that you should not let her parents deceive you.

Better to do Bondo when girls are young, because if they wait until girls are fully grown, girls have already become too ‘wayward’. If they leave their girl child until they are full grown she will be very stubborn to go to the Bondo Society and even run away from family and home.

Some of the participants gave examples of girls who had joined the Bondo as a Pikin and had “grown up well” and found good jobs.

The people in the community think it is good for Pikin Bondo to take place because it helps the Pikin to grow well and have good home training. There is this girl child whose parents joined her into the Bondo Society when she was a little girl. She has respect for elders and she is now a fully trained doctor.

There is this girl child whom her parents joined into Bondo Society as a Pikin and she is now grown up to be well trained nurse.

The girls spoke a lot about the by-laws instigated in some chiefdoms to prevent Pikin Bondo.

Some people in my community know that there is a law banning Pikin Bondo and that if anyone puts their children into Bondo before the age of 18 they will be prosecuted by the law. They say that girls should be allowed to reach the age of consent and they can decide if they would like to go or not.

In some chiefdoms they have laws which place a ban on child Bondo and if anyone is found in the act of initiating girls who are not yet mature, they will be charged in court. So this law allows girls to make decisions on their own without influence from their parents, elders or anyone else.

In the Kono district they have made a law that anyone who put their daughters into the Bondo Society at an early age, the chief will take them to the police station. People in my community say that they don’t know much about the laws banning Bondo, they only hear it, but they don’t actually know the chiefdoms that have placed a ban on Bondo Society.

In this girl whose parents wanted to force their daughter to enter into the Bondo Society when she was not at the right age to go to the Bondo. She went quietly to her uncle who is working on human rights and the girl’s uncle came to both parents and said to them ‘if you try anything stupid to force the girl to enter the Bondo Society when she is not at the right age to go there, I will sue that person in court’, and the girl’s parent asked him, ‘are you the one that gave birth to her or is she your child?’ and both the parents went and joined the girl into the Bondo Society and now they went in the court with the girl’s uncle and they sentenced both parents to six months imprisonment.
Some of the PEER Participants felt very positively about the emerging by-laws banning child Bondo. Girls and young women will feel happy about this law because they will know that somewhere there are people who are against Pikin Bondo and somehow they will know where they can go for help. Some people think that the law is good because they will know that when they want to put their child into Bondo they should not put a baby. The well matured girls rather than children should go and if you get caught the law is there. Girls and young women like this law. Before, some go through this society because there is no way out, they can’t fight it or talk for themselves, and the law will end this.

Many of the PEER Participants highlighted how they felt the law banning child Bondo increased their ability to make an informed decision as to whether they wanted to go through the initiation. Girls and young women think that the law is good because some of them say that if they had known they would not have been a part of such tradition. Since the law has been made girls will be given the chance to decide if they want to go or not. The girls and young women think that the law is necessary because they think they have been given the right to express themselves. So the law will help them make a wise decision for themselves. Young women and girls think the law should continue because they now know their right to make a decision. They have fundamental human rights.

These people think that this law may bring peace among young women and girls because now they will not be forced or pressured by their parents.

However, others see the law as preventing girls from learning about their culture and traditions. People think that this law is not good because if they say girls should not be initiated then this will mean the end of the Bondo Society. That should not happen because they are African so they should uphold their culture and tradition. People think that because this law will not allow girls to go through the Bondo Society, they will not know about their tradition.

The soweis in particular are against any laws against Bondo, as their livelihood and position in society depends on Bondo continuing. A couple of the participants referred to the soweis demonstrating against the law. Now in her chiefdom they have banned the Pikin Bondo. But this make the soweis want to demonstrate. Let the soweis be peaceful and accept the law.

3.2.8 The changing influence of the Bondo Society

The interviews unearthed a range of differing attitudes towards the practice of FGM and the Bondo Society. Likewise, different respondents had different perspectives as to whether the influence of Bondo on communities is changing. Some of the respondents felt that the influence of Bondo had increased, and that initiation into Bondo was becoming more extreme and more important in their communities, because of perceived threats to its continuation. Bondo is still common in our community because people believe that it is their tradition and their culture. That is why they join their daughters into it so that they can learn about their culture and tradition. Some parents even leave their children in the bush for almost a year so that they can learn more.

The Bondo Society is not changing in my community because people, especially the mothers, send their children to be initiated into the Bondo Society and now they even allow them to stay much longer in the place so that they can learn more about their culture.

In my community, it seems the influence of Bondo has increased because they have built another hut for the Bondo Society. Also the number of girl children they have this season has increased from 10 children to 30 and above.

Others thought that the Bondo Society was so integrated into culture and identity, that even concerted efforts to stop the harmful aspects of the practice were unsuccessful. In our community we want to change the Bondo Society tradition but there is no way to change it. People say that it is their own traditional beliefs and culture so there is no way to change it in our community.
In contrast, some PEER participants felt that Bondo was becoming less prevalent for a number of reasons. This is because people in the community are starting to recognise that not only does it not bring all the positive impacts promised, but that it can also have detrimental impacts.

Others explained how the influence of Christianity is reducing the grip of the Bondo Society as it is seen by many as being against God's will.

Bondo doesn’t bring all the positive effects that are promised to girls in their lives. Bondo is less because they have stopped building Bondo bush places and they have stopped talking so much about Bondo Society as before. They have seen the problems which they face during and after the Bondo Society. They have learnt from their past experience that Bondo Society has taken them nowhere and it did not build them an office or make them live a better or happy life in their marriage home like their parents promised them.

Things are changing in the community because they have seen some of the problems they face after joining the Bondo Society. They have learnt lessons from their mistakes and have stopped believing in and depending on their traditional practices. They have seen the negative impact of Bondo that follows the girls throughout their life. They have become tired of this life that is why they are willing to change their attitudes towards Bondo Society.

Some of the participants lived in communities that do not even consider Bondo. Either because they have moved beyond it or because it has never been a part of their tradition.

She thinks Bondo is not common in her community. Because there is no place for that in her community and people don’t even talk about Bondo.

Bondo is not common in my community because as the times are changing so are the people also changing.

In my community they say that Bondo is outdated and should not be considered.

A number of the girls mentioned other priorities being far more important than Bondo, like work and education.

Bondo is less in her community because all they think of is their work and other things.

In our community nobody is thinking about Bondo Society because you can see that majority of the parents in the community are thinking of taking their children to school to educate them. In my own community people do not force their children to Bondo Society, they only force their children to go to school and be educated.

Another reason girls mentioned that Bondo is becoming less prevalent in their communities is that the soweis that lead the initiation are dying out.

Some of the soweis are dead in our community, some are afraid of being a sowe and so that is how it is beginning to lessen in our community.

Rapid development and increased access to technology and therefore information about health and human rights are also exposing the harmful impacts of Bondo, and causing a decline in its influence.

The reason why this system of tradition is changing now is because people know their human rights, so now every child has the right to make a decision on her own.

There is a great change in our community, due to the rapid development of technology and civilization in the world. Because of this most girls do not go to the Bondo because they fear the transmission of infections and other diseases, and some fear the punishment they will go through during the kantha (circumcision) ceremony.
4. Using PEER to build women and girl’s initiatives

FORWARD has been working with Girl 2 Girl Empowerment Movement since its very early days, before it was an established organisation. It is through our first PEER study in Sierra Leone that the women who eventually founded G2G first came together.

FORWARD has learned to value the role of insider knowledge in our programmes. Access to community perspectives has helped to inform our campaign and support work.

The data collection methodology used in both this and our first study with G2G, *In Their Own Words: Girls from Sierra Leone on Sexuality, Pregnancy and Services*, was based on the peer ethnographic method.

In this method, members of the target community are selected as peer researchers who are trained to carry out in-depth conversational interviews with individuals they know from their own social networks, ‘based on the premise that what people say about social life and behaviour changes according to the level of familiarity and trust established between the researcher and the researched’ (Price and Hawkins 2002: 1328). The method aims to tap into the existing established relationship of trust with the individuals who peers interview.

Given the projects’ aim of empowering young women to speak out about their needs, this method was also chosen as it has been documented as having a transformational effect on PEER Researchers (PRs). This was perceived as important, given the programmatic aim of establishing a platform for young women’s action, and establishing social support networks among them.

The transformation and confidence that the PRs developed over the course of the PEER study and the transition into a new girls’ intervention was remarkable. It clearly showed the added value of listening to young women’s voices and supporting their participation in shaping and designing programmes for girls in similar difficult situations to themselves.

Following the first piece of research, three of the PEER Supervisors and two PRs who had shown an interest in taking action in their community were included in four days of training in confidence building and working with girls. This resulted in the five representatives developing an action plan to work with girls from their community.

With FORWARD’s support, each of the five representatives established a girls’ club in their local area, and recruited girls to join these clubs. Efforts were made to continue to build the capacity of these five individuals, which included funding a study visit to Ghana to meet a young women’s organisation that was implementing a girls’ network. During this visit, the five young women decided to set up what is now the Girl 2 Girl Empowerment Movement. Funding was secured to recruit a part-time coordinator in 2013. It has since been registered as a community-based organisation with the Government of Sierra Leone.

When FORWARD decided to carry out research about the Bondo Society in Sierra Leone, we knew it would be vital to build on these foundations and relationships. This study was managed by the members of G2G. It maximises the close connection the organisation has built with women and girls in the local community. It continues to transform the lives and capacities of girls and women, while discovering rich and valuable evidence for the development of further initiatives.

Ongoing programmes run by G2G, and supported by FORWARD, are tackling the practice of FGM in communities and empowering girls to make decisions that affected their bodies, rights and wellbeing.
5. Concluding recommendations

5.1 Supporting girls and women

Establish clubs and networks to empower and support girls and women – FORWARD has achieved great success in establishing clubs and networks for girls at risk of, or affected by FGM. Clubs and networks provide members with information, skills, services and support from their PEERs and relevant professionals. Members can share their concerns, ideas and experiences to mutually overcome both group and personal challenges. Using their improved knowledge and confidence, girls club and network members can raise their voices to speak out about FGM as an abuse of their rights, thus influencing decision makers at all levels.

Engage with communities and influential people within them – Girls are rarely, if ever, the sole decision-makers in the choice for them to undergo FGM. More commonly the decision is made by their family members, with significant pressure from their communities. Initiation into the Bondo Society is regarded as a crucial aspect of maintaining culture, tradition and identity. Consequently, substantial time and resources must be invested in building trust and relationships with communities (and the power brokers within them) to facilitate critical reflection and behaviour change. In order for this to be successful, it is crucial for actors to have a comprehensive understanding of the beliefs that underpin and surround the practice, so that communities can be approached with both relevance and sensitivity.

It is important that myths about the benefits of FGM are replaced by awareness of the negative and long-lasting implications of FGM on survivors’ health and ability to claim their rights. These arguments should be reinforced with positive examples of individuals or families that have benefitted from choosing not to subject their daughters to FGM.

Successful interventions must reach a range of actors both at the local level and in rural areas. Expecting one family or individual to abandon the practice is unrealistic due to the pressure exerted by the community for all to conform, which is compounded by the stigma experienced by those who choose to reject FGM. That said, working with particularly influential community members will help speed up the process, and create a critical mass for the abandonment of the practice.

Working with women – The Bondo Society is viewed as “women's business” and men are prohibited from talking about or interfering in the society's work. Elder women in the girl's family are frequently responsible for making the decision for their daughter to undergo FGM, as part of their implicit responsibility for the continuation of tradition and culture. As the holders of tradition, these women hold the answers for the abandonment of the practice. Particular efforts are needed to engage soweis, to ensure they do not feel a threat to their power and influence. Alienating these women could result in the further entrenchment of FGM and associated harmful practices.

Working with men – Despite being labelled “women's business”, gender inequality explains the cause and continuation of FGM. This PEER has shown that fathers are one of the key drivers behind child marriage, of which Bondo initiation and FGM are a necessary precursor. Community members perceive men as preferring to marry girls who have undergone FGM, although according to the PEER participants this may not be the reality. Men must be engaged to understand the negative implications of FGM for girls, women and also for themselves. They must be supported to find ways to sensitively break the taboo around FGM and renounce it in the process.

Provide appropriate support alongside prevention initiatives – Girls and women who have already undergone FGM must not be overlooked in efforts to prevent the practice. Special measures must be taken to ensure that efforts to highlight the benefits of discontinuing FGM do not simultaneously stigmatise girls who have undergone the procedure. Girls who have undergone FGM have very specific and acute needs. Medical professionals, law enforcers and educational professionals must be equipped to meet their requirements, and be able to signpost girls towards information, resources and services when required.
5.2 Creating an enabling policy environment

Pass comprehensive legislation prohibiting FGM – It is crucial that Sierra Leone passes robust and holistic legislation to effectively prohibit FGM. Local and global actors must apply pressure on the Sierra Leonean Government to fulfil the commitments associated with ratifying the Maputo Protocol. The government must create domestic legislation that prohibits FGM in all forms, including medicalised and para-medicalised forms. These measures must be reinforced with sanctions where appropriate. As the government itself has committed to prohibiting “underage initiation of rites of passage for girls” banning FGM for girls under the age of 18 would be a good initial advocacy goal with further efforts for full abandonment. 

Secure structures and resources to ensure legislation is fully implemented – Legislation prohibiting FGM must be complimented with a national action plan and the resources to ensure it can be implemented. The Maputo Protocol also requires that necessary support is provided to survivors of FGM through health services, legal and judicial support and emotional and psychological counselling alongside vocational training. Safeguarding structures must be introduced and be adhered to by educational institutions, health facilities and law enforcers. Relevant professionals must be confident to identify, refer or manage cases of FGM.

Government structures at the local level must be made aware of the new legislation and must have the necessary funding and political will to ensure its implementation is prioritised in local action plans. Special efforts must be made to ensure the most marginalised girls are safeguarded. For example, girls fostered by extended family or community members. Work on FGM must be integrated into other initiatives working with girls and women, including sexual and reproductive health rights and education work.

5.3 Establishing new positive norms

Economic / educational empowerment – Economic dependence makes girls and women less able to take part in decisions concerning their lives. As explained in the PEER findings, many girls are forced to undergo FGM to prepare them for marriage. In contrast, women with access to, and control over, economic assets are less likely to undergo FGM or get married before the age of 18. Positive examples from the community or other communities or countries should be used to highlight new aspirations for young women. It will be necessary to explain and demonstrate the benefits of letting girls complete their education, and enter employment. Any intervention should highlight the benefits for girls themselves, as well as benefits for their families and wider communities. Increased access to higher education will increase girls’ access to resources, and consequently their influence in decisions within their families and the wider community.

Empowerment through employment and education is central to FORWARD’s approach because of its transformational potential. Both have the potential to make young women economically independent which impacts positively on their decision making. Girls who have spent substantial amounts of time out of school due to child marriage, child motherhood or FGM, must receive special support to return to education. This might require bursaries to help them with child care costs. It will also require educational professionals to be flexible and non-judgemental to help girls balance their multiple responsibilities.

FORWARD recognises that for some young women the formal education system is out of their reach or is not their desire. For such young women it is important to support them with vocational skills training and life-long learning or other income generating activities. In order to be successful, such income generating activities must provide them with decent wages and working conditions and should not be limited to so-called ‘women’s work’ such as caring roles, which would serve to reinforce damaging stereotypes. Interventions must be relevant to the local community and the specific needs of the most vulnerable girls and women.

Alternative rites of passage – Although the language surrounding Bondo is ambiguous, the PEER has shown that FGM is a distinct part of the Bondo initiation ceremony separate from the teaching on culture and managing a household. Creative ways must be found to differentiate between FGM and the other aspects of the Bondo initiation in communications with local communities. The positive aspects of the Bondo Society should be celebrated and promoted by actors aiming to tackle FGM. It is possible that sexual health, rights and relationship education could replace the FGM aspect of the initiation. This could be crucial to the success of initiatives aiming to tackle FGM, which are sometimes seen as attacking Bondo more broadly due to the ambiguities and secrecy in the language used when talking about Bondo.

23 The Government of Sierra Leone (2013), The Agenda for Prosperity, Road to Middle Income Status, Sierra Leone’s Third Generation Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2013-2018), Freetown
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FORWARD is an African diaspora women's campaign and support charity. As well as working with local partners in Africa, FORWARD works in the UK delivering training to professionals to raise awareness of FGM and working in schools to support girls at risk and affected by FGM. FORWARD works closely with communities and youth groups as well as advising other organisations and policy makers on the issues of FGM, child marriage and maternal health. You can find out more about the work FORWARD does by visiting our website: www.forwarduk.org.uk

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