

Girls Mental and Physical Health Grant Progress Report

In the second quarter of the Embassy Girls Mental and Physical Health Grant, we have concentrated more of our focus on eliminating the practice of FGM/C in rural villages of Sierra Leone. In addition to addressing FGM/C, we have also focused on menstruation kit and reproductive health education distribution and finalizing all the components needed to begin sewing menstruation kits in Sierra Leone.

FGM/C education progress:

Our team has begun implementing our FGM/C intervention plan to complement our Uman Talks in each community. We have been initially targeting communities in Tonkolili District and in Bo District.

Last quarter, our team carried out site inspections with each community's local women's groups. Since then, we have identified Soweis and influential female leaders in these communities with whom we are partnering to address FGM/C practices.

In early February, our team met with 95 Soweis in Maforeka and Yele. The Soweis explained to our team that they are ready and willing to stop the practice but they need help with their livelihoods. They expressed that it is hard for them to stop despite laws against FGM/C because they need the income to survive. Out of this meeting, three opinion groups emerged:

1. Teenage Soweis: these Soweis want to go to school and are willing to refrain from FGM/C. They are asking for educational support. If these girls would need to sign a legal document in front of their senior Soweis and the chiefs, then their parents and the senior Soweis will no longer be able to use them for FGM/C.



2. Stop the practice: These Soweis are ready to stop FGM/C totally. Some are asking for help with shelters or farming equipment. Many in this group have small amounts of money for trading and to support their families. Others in this group asked for capital to start a business.
3. Reduced practice: These Soweis are willing to sign a legal document indicating they will not conduct FGM/C on any girl under 18 years old. The Soweis in this group indicated that in order to sign, they would need to be set up with alternate livelihoods. Most of the Soweis in this group are on the fence and waiting to see what benefits will be given to those who abandon the practice.

Our team also met with parents of girls in Maforeka. The parents said if their daughters will receive educational support, they are ready to sign any legal document ensuring the children in the sponsorship program will not undergo FGM/C and will not be given in early marriage.

Another essential piece of this effort is educating children about FGM/C and the health risks associated with the practice. We presented this information to 433 girls in February. After receiving this information, 85% of girls who initially wanted to join Bondo society, which requires FGM/C, said they were no longer interested. Although these girls no longer want to undergo FGM/C, they do not have the sole power to make that decision, and may be forced by their parents to participate in FGM/C and marry.

We have taken this feedback from the local stakeholders and are in the process of evaluating the best approach to addressing stakeholder concerns while sustainably eliminating FGM/C in these communities.

Impact Spotlight:

Many of the Soweis with whom we met came up with ideas for how they would provide for themselves to replace income from FGM/C, given the appropriate start-up support:

Farmer Soweis would like to get a tractor to cultivate their farms and to rent to other farmers to generate additional income. At the end of the season they plan to combine their proceeds, store seedlings for the next harvest, and share the remaining proceeds among themselves to support their homes.

Business Soweis would like capital to start businesses. They plan to organize themselves into groups and apply a scheme that will bring them together at a particular time to monitor every individual in the group to ensure each member is able to generate a sustainable income.

Health education and kit distribution progress:

From January through March, our team has given reproductive health education to 230 girls in the North and Western Area and 203 girls in the South. During these visits, we distributed 133 kits to girls who had begun menstruating since our last visit. We have now distributed a total of 566 kits. During these sessions with the female students, our team asked a series of questions to gain a better understanding of the impact of reproductive health education and access to menstrual hygiene management:

Question	Responses
Did you know what menstruation was before you had your first period?	93% - No 7% - Yes, have seen women washing in the stream
What did you use for menstruation before you received your kit?	81% - Cloth 14% - Double panty 4% - One panty 1% - Washed frequently with water
Have you ever felt ashamed or embarrassed because of menstruation?	100% - Yes, before learning about it
Have you ever missed school because you didn't have menstrual hygiene supplies?	20% - Yes

Impact Spotlight:

All the class 6 students who received kits from us while they were attending primary school at Makali last year successfully graduated to Junior Secondary School.

Our team started the reproductive health lessons by reviewing the use and care of the kits, then had the girls practice. We then listed and discussed some myths about menstruation. Some of these include: if you discuss your period you will bring drought, you cannot go in public when menstruating, and menstruating women are unclean. Our team explained that all of these statements are myths. Our team also taught girls about the functions of the female reproductive system and emphasized the consequences of FGM/C.





Our team also met with the boys, and taught them about reproductive health and respecting girls.

These sessions elicited great participation among the students, who were so enthusiastic to learn, especially about FGM/C. Many of the girls were not pleased about what their parents had done to them. Those that have not gone through the procedure were so appreciative of our team for teaching them.

The number of students present at each school presentation is as follows:

School	Girls in Attendance	Boys in Attendance
South		
Sahn Negbuema	27	20
Gbumbeh	6	10
Sembehun	15	24
Kandor	39	25
Kalia	23	15
Niagorehun	17	31
Lungi	17	16
Kpakuma	19	20
Buma	27	14
Bendu	13	20
North		
Maforeka	45	22
Masanga	37	19
Robis	23	12
Makali Primary	33	19
Makali Secondary	47	0
Western Area		
Children in Crisis	38	30
Education for All	7	12
TOTAL	433	309

Impact Spotlight:

One girl from Maforeka used a single panty when menstruating. The day she started seeing her period she pretended to be sick and cried secretly for three days and stayed home from school. She never told anyone what she was experiencing. The second time her period came, she was forced to go to school. She stayed in the back of the classroom, lifting her uniform to sit. At the end of the day, she would make sure to be the last to leave, wipe her seat with paper from her notebook, and go home. She had been in this situation for a year, and her performance in class was poor. She told us that the day she got the menstruation education was the happiest day in her life. She said she was excited to see her period that month and felt very comfortable using her kit.

Kit-making enterprise progress:

We have been continuously gathering the materials for kits and building up our infrastructure to begin kit production. The serger machines arrived from the UK in early February. Our team purchased thread and secured a high-quality flannel distributor in Freetown, which will save us future costs in shipping flannel to Sierra Leone. Our team has also purchased panties, washcloths, and soap bars to go into the kits. The barrel from the US was severely delayed, and has only just arrived in Freetown. Once our team receives the barrel and completes set up of the sewing center, we will begin kit production. We have purchased an additional 60 complete kits and 10 menstrual cups to enable us to continue kit distribution and education until we can begin sewing the kits in Sierra Leone. We have received requests for menstrual cups from our team and will be piloting the menstrual cups when they arrive. One of our board members will be carrying the kits and cups to Sierra Leone in early April.

