

ALIGN REPORT

Gender-based violence in West Africa: how women's and feminist movements are driving norm change



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About the author

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Key findings

- Activism by women's and feminist movements has an impact on the gender norms that enable gender-based violence (GBV) in Senegal and Sierra Leone by generating shifts in attitudes among political actors and citizens, opening spaces for debate, and advocating for progressive laws and policies.
- The greatest normative shift relates to the harmful practice of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), which is no longer a taboo subject and seems to be becoming less prevalent. Survivors of other forms of GBV, along with their families, are more willing to speak out and report it.
- Activism has, however, encountered resistance, which includes anti-gender and anti-feminist backlash in both countries. This resistance is fuelled, in part, by a public perception that delegitimises feminists and a discourse that frames their claims as culturally inauthentic, or as a global imposition.
- Feminist movements need support in five key areas to continue their advocacy and activism: reliable data on GBV; flexible and core funding; safe spaces to learn and build their movement; increased political will and state capacity to implement progressive policies; and men's engagement in the ending of GBV.

Acronyms

ALIGN	Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil society organisation
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
FGC	Female genital cutting
FGM	Female genital mutilation
GBV	Gender-based violence
GEWE	Gender equality and women's empowerment
MoGCA	Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (Sierra Leone)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RP	Research participant
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
UN	United Nations
VAW	Violence against women
VAWG	Violence against women and girls

Executive summary

Introduction

Changing harmful gender norms and power relations is one of the most effective ways to tackle gender-based violence (GBV) (World Bank, 2019). Yet the nexus between GBV and harmful gender norms is rarely foregrounded in existing knowledge or by feminist and women's anti-GBV activists and movements (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2020; Horn, 2013; Hassim, 2005; Tamale, 1999). Using critical reviews of evidence and semi-structured field interviews, this report on women's and feminist movements and norm change explores the interplay between gender norms and GBV in Senegal and Sierra Leone. It examines how their anti-GBV activism has affected harmful gender norms and the factors that have either enabled or prevented this impact.

The interplay between gender norms and GBV

Gender norms

Both countries are deeply patriarchal and impose widespread restrictions on women and girls. Gender norms prescribe women's domestic duties, expectations of acceptable behaviour and adherence to cultural rites that weigh heavily on women, in particular. Gender norms are enforced through multiple layers of social control, such as reprimand and social exclusion. These controls discourage women from violating gender norms and punish those that do. Divorced women, for example, are often ostracised and may suffer neglect and emotional violence.

Tools of social control

Religious beliefs and practices are tools of control that perpetuate the sanctity of women's subordination, with dire consequences for those who disobey. GBV is also used to police the appearance of women and girls in keeping with gender norms, with penalties for those who are seen as wearing 'provocative' clothing or dressing 'indecently'. Cultures of silence prevent survivors of GBV from speaking out, particularly about violence in the home, while pressure to conform with cultural practices such as female genital cutting (FGC) and bride price¹ shapes women's social power in communities.

The impact of women's and feminist activism on the gender norms that enable GBV

Norm change has been seen in three areas, in particular. First, in attitudinal shifts among political actors and citizens. Second, in the spaces that have been opened by activism for debate about once taboo subjects, such as FGC. And third, in tangible outcomes, including progressive laws and policies. Feminist anti-GBV activism has been found to have had both positive and negative impacts on these three areas that must be viewed through the lens of progressive change within the deeply patriarchal contexts of both countries.

1 Bride price is money, property, or wealth 'paid' to the parents of a woman for the right to marry their daughter.

Progressive legal and policy change

Through consistent advocacy against everyday violence and intensified activism against extreme violence, women's and feminist movements in both countries have contributed to the creation and revision of legal and policy frameworks on GBV. They have helped to push for legal reform to enhance gender equality and women's political representation (including through the uptake of global norms) that could lower women's vulnerability to GBV. These impacts have been made possible by significant shifts in national cultural and policy spaces, as reflected in a growing openness to change both norms and narratives by actors who were once very anti-feminist and anti-gender.

Broader attitudinal and behavioural change

By combining awareness raising, civic disobedience and norm questioning in public and private spaces, feminist activism has helped to drive gradual and normative shifts in state, societal and personal attitudes and behaviours towards the gender norms that enable GBV and towards women's political leadership. These changes can be seen, for example, in relation to engrained cultural practices such as FGC, which is no longer a taboo subject and is being practised less (and discouraged). In addition, cultures of silence are eroding as survivors and their families become more willing to speak out about – and report – GBV.

Levels of gender-based violence

There are variations in the quality and reliability of and access to GBV data, and participants in this research had differing opinions about trends in GBV in recent years and whether and how it has been affected by feminist activism. Both rising and declining levels of GBV could be the outcome of effective activism that has led to either higher reporting or fewer incidence, or of ineffective activism that is reflected in higher incidence or lower reporting rates.

Anti-gender backlash

Activists in Senegal and Sierra Leone face multi-layered resistance and backlash for countering accepted gender norms and threatening established social structures. Feminists, in particular, are viewed as socially deviant and are regularly denounced and delegitimised. This backlash is compounded by a growing anti-gender movement that dehumanises women and seeks to undo progress on women's rights. In Senegal, for example, this can be seen in misogynistic social media posts and a growing trend among young men for misogynistic music and girlfriend beating. Female journalists have also been harassed online and have faced divorce and GBV for supporting anti-GBV activism.

Silencing of victims of gender-based violence

Activists face the dilemma of the need for stiffer penalties for certain types of GBV and the unintended impact this might have on survivors who seek justice. This may include the greater incentive to agree to out-of-court settlements and a heightened risk that perpetrators may kill survivors to avoid accountability.

Downplaying 'everyday' forms of gender-based violence

Although sexual gender-based violence (SGBV) is a dominant form of GBV (and one that causes high moral outrage), the strong focus on this form of GBV among activists has inadvertently diverted attention away from other forms of 'everyday violence', such as domestic, workplace and online violence. The focus on GBV against children has helped to galvanise major changes in law and policy, but has made violence against women less visible.

Factors that contribute to changes in norms that enable GBV

Strong (women's and) feminist movements

The centrality of women's and feminist movements in driving changes in gender norms is enabled by a dedicated and intergenerational core of activists, shared networks and relationships of trust and common values. Feminist activists also recognise and have invested in movement building by: training young feminist leaders, including men, who are growing in number; using new tools like social media; and integrating the need to tackle the broader patriarchal violence that enables GBV into their activism.

High-level political support

Senegal's former President, Macky Sall, and his wife were relatively quiet about GBV. In contrast, the President of Sierra Leone's declaration of a state of emergency (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019) and his wife's campaign to address GBV against girls are seen as decisive and influential. Both cases reinforce the importance of executive leadership for countering GBV and its underlying norms.

Male engagement

The logic of engaging men as anti-GBV allies is supported by state and non-state actors but this engagement is being implemented in gender conservative ways that do not lead men to question GBV-enabling social norms and power structures, or male privilege in deeply patriarchal societies. This is reflected in disparities between some men's public and private identities and practices regarding GBV and the status of women.

Challenges and barriers to norm change on GBV

Tensions between global and traditional norms

Considerable resistance to GBV-enabling norm change is based on a perception of the imposition of global norms as a threat to cultural authenticity. Pathways to change have involved negotiating this tension in ways that reduce harm while preserving cultural benefits and protecting women's agency and power.

Unseen linkages between cultural practices and GBV

Cultural practices, such as bride price, are known to enable GBV, yet they are overlooked by activists, ostensibly because of their cultural significance. This indicates a conflict between bride price as a cultural marker of identity for married women that simultaneously exposes them to GBV because of the gender norms that underpin its practice.

Intergenerational dynamics in feminist movements

Intergenerational tensions within and between the women's and feminist movements in both countries are fuelled by differences in ideology, approach and worldviews on feminism.

Resourcing feminist activism

Many activists who participated in this research cited insufficient and dwindling resources as a challenge to anti-GBV work, while some noted the pressing need for more feminist resourcing that could enable flexible responses to the threats to women's safety. There were also calls for more flexible, non-traditional structures within non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Conclusion

Feminist activism in the patriarchal landscapes of Senegal and Sierra Leone has made inroads into GBV-enabling gender norms and attitudes by enhancing gender norm awareness, changing attitudes and behaviours around GBV, and by building feminist movements. However, it has encountered unintentional and negative resistance, such as anti-gender and anti-feminist backlash, that strengthen the case for continued anti-GBV activism. Other actors in the anti-GBV ecosystems in both countries could support feminist movements with:

- reliable quantitative data and focused sociological research to provide deeper and more nuanced insights into the dynamics of GBV that transcend the limited anecdotal evidence offered by selected NGO or donor project reports
- flexible and core funding that adapts to movements' needs, based on holistic views of GBV-enabling factors, with harmful norm change positioned as a key goal
- the facilitation of safe spaces for lessons learned and sharing of good practices from other countries and contexts to deepen ongoing efforts to bridge generational and ideological gaps and support collaboration
- the strengthening of the capacities of both states to follow through on their GBV commitments in partnership with feminist activists and movements – including through increased and sustained women's political leadership, the creation and efficient management of implementing structures, and the continued sensitisation of all state actors across different regimes.

Introduction

'The militant movement is one, and on the move! There are new players, there are new faces... There's new blood in the fight. There's a new way of doing things.'

Interview with research participant, Dakar, Senegal

Evidence indicates that changing harmful gender norms and power relations is one of the most effective ways to tackle violence against women. It also suggests that efforts to tackle gender based violence (GBV) (laws, policies, advocacy, activism) that do not take into account or target changes in harmful norms cannot be effective (World Bank, 2019). A vast amount of existing knowledge on GBV addresses interventions by multiple actors at different policy levels, but it does not always foreground the nexus between GBV and gender norms as an approach to positive change (Harper et al., 2020; Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021).

The same applies to some feminist and women('s) activists and movements that recognise the need for gender norm change around GBV and address it using approaches to tackle harmful norms, but that do not explicitly frame their activism in these terms (Horn, 2013; Hassim, 2005; Tamale, 1999). Some organisations, for example, focus directly on tackling the gender norms and power structures that enable GBV through the building of feminist movements, while others are more invested in tangible outcomes, such as reduced rates of GBV, better support for GBV survivors and enhanced awareness.

In the contexts of Senegal and Sierra Leone, two countries with high levels of GBV and active anti-GBV movements, this study:

- examines the interplay between gender norms and GBV
- explores women's and feminists' perspectives on the role of their activism in changing harmful GBV-enabling gender norms, and
- interrogates the factors that contribute to norm changes associated with a reduction in GBV.

The study forms part of the ongoing efforts of Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) to better understand how social movements drive gender norm change and how actors, including donors, can best support feminist movements to promote this change.

Using qualitative field data and deep readings of existing literature, the study finds that feminist movements have had positive and negative impacts on GBV-enabling gender norms in both countries. They have helped to raise awareness and contributed to shifts in attitudes and practices surrounding GBV and gender norms. However, persistent resistance to change that is perceived as imposed by external players and as opposed to traditional cultures and values is fuelling misogynistic countercultures that threaten the gains made by feminist movements in addressing GBV. In addition to a more explicit focus on norm change, feminist movements need more sustainable resourcing, reinforced technical capacities and greater intergenerational and cross-ideological solidarity to mount an effective resistance to backlash and to consolidate the changes they have facilitated.

This report has six parts: this introduction is followed by an overview of the methodology, definitions of concepts, a background section and the presentation of the study's findings, before concluding with a discussion of the findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Methodology

This study focuses on two West African countries with high levels of GBV that offer some insights into the vast political and sociocultural diversity of the wider region: Senegal (a francophone, Muslim-majority country and a relatively stable and mature democracy) and Sierra Leone (an anglophone post-conflict country). The study set out to identify and research how women's and feminist social movements influence change in GBV-enabling gender norms.

Data were collected in two phases, using primarily qualitative methods. This phasing was purposeful and aimed to ascertain the feasibility of the study, given the relative novelty of gender norms as a targeted approach towards ending GBV. Findings from Phase One informed the study samples and supported the refinement of the preliminary research questions.

Phase One consisted of background research involving informal conversations with key feminist and other anti-GBV actors in Senegal and Sierra Leone. They were identified through scopings of the feminist and human and women's rights anti-GBV spaces in each country, and included individual activists, civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), CSO and NGO networks, and social movements. Phase One also involved reviews of existing literature (academic, policy and grey) and analysis of traditional and social media reports.

Phase Two of the primary research involved semi-structured interviews in Dakar (in French and English) and Freetown (in English) from May to August 2023 with 27 individuals and organisations identified in Phase One. In all, 6 men and 21 women participated, ranging in age from 20 to 60 years. All participants were working in the anti-GBV space: 2 media practitioners; 12 women's rights and feminist NGOs and networks; four technocrats; four independent GBV experts; and five activists (including students and lawyers). All were members of, or affiliated with, non-state or/and multisectoral anti-GBV coalitions or movements. Most had at least a university degree and all were located in the capital cities of Dakar and Freetown, where most interviews were held.

With the exception of one interview held on Gorée Island in Senegal and two held virtually, interviews were not held outside capital cities as a result of budgetary constraints. Further limitations included the unavailability of many participants during a period of political unrest in Senegal and electoral activity in Sierra Leone during data collection.

Given that the results discussed in this study were obtained from interactions with small groups of participants in capital cities, they should not be read as applicable across either country. Similarly, the views of feminist research participants represent diverse positionalities in each country and are not intended to represent the broader views of feminists in Senegal or Sierra Leone.

Key concepts

This study acknowledges but does not delve into the intricacies of long-running debates over the exactness of the different terms used to describe what happens when violence intersects with gender (Read-Hamilton, 2014; United Nations General Assembly, 1993; UN Women Africa, n.d.). This report conceptualises GBV as violence inflicted because of a victim's gender, with the understanding that women and girls are the main but not the only victims in the study's two focal countries. In the same vein, while recognising epistemic debates over appropriate terminology for female genital cutting (FGC) (see below, and also Gillespie, 2015), this paper uses the term FGC in keeping with the terminology used by many activists interviewed during field research.

Defining gendered violence

GBV and violence against women (and girls) (VAW(G)) are often used interchangeably but they embody distinctions that are important for policy purposes. Defined as 'harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender' (UN Women Africa, n.d.), GBV is seen as more inclusive to the extent that it includes violence against men and boys that centres on their gender identity or presentation. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) highlights the often sexual nature of such violence. VAW(G) is defined as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women and girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life' (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). It applies to people who identify as women and who comprise the majority of GBV survivors. VAW(G) holds greater currency among those who recognise that gendered power disparities make women disproportionately vulnerable to GBV.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) comprises all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons (WHO, n.d.). In recent years, associated practices have come to be called female circumcision and female genital cutting (FGC). This change has been informed by the efforts of some development actors to shift the narratives surrounding underlying cultural norms, including those related to societal acceptability for women and girls who are cut. The use of different terms also reflects the diverse forms of cutting and the ways in which judgemental and accusatory terms like mutilation that are imposed by outsiders can alienate affected communities and affect the agency of women and girls who are cut (interview, RP7, Freetown, June 2023).

Gender norms

Social norms are variously defined as the unwritten 'rules' that govern behaviour and that are shared by members of a given group or society (ALIGN Platform, 2021), standards of 'appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity' (Finnemore, 1996) and 'contextually and socially derived collective expectations of appropriate behaviour' (Perrin et al., 2019). While scholars identify different types of norms, from regulative to prescriptive, and descriptive, injunctive or proscriptive, all of these norms have the shared effect of constituting what behaviour is allowed (or not) by members of given groups or societies. Norms are enforced through socialisation within different societal institutions (e.g., family, school, religious bodies) as well as by systems of reward for compliance and punishment for deviation (ALIGN Platform, 2021; Bicchieri and Funcke, 2018). Norms are prevalent because they are embedded in social systems and practices that are inculcated into children from a young age, as several participants mentioned during fieldwork for this study in Senegal and Sierra Leone.

Gender norms are types of social norms that encapsulate ideas about appropriate roles and behaviours for women and men, and girls and boys based on their gender. As stated, harmful gender norms both enable and are upheld by GBV through structures of power that reinforce gender inequality (USAID, 2021).

Norm change

Despite their embeddedness in social fabrics, norms can and do change. Norm change describes the processes by which social norms adjust to changing realities. Evidence shows that social movements play key roles in changing norms (Harper, 2021; Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021; Medie, 2020). Evidence also indicates that changing harmful gender norms and power relations is one of the most effective ways to tackle VAW, and that efforts to tackle GBV (through laws, policies, advocacy, activism) that do not take into account or target transformations in norms cannot succeed (World Bank, 2019). As an emerging field, the measurement of norm change is very challenging (see Hughes and Desai, 2019). While this study does not attempt to measure norm change, it offers insights into the factors that enable such change in certain contexts, drawing on participants' perceptions.

Feminist versus women's movements

Historically, feminist and women's movements have been constituted predominantly by women, yet gender scholarship has sought to distinguish them by defining the former as 'movements that align themselves with feminism as a political ideology and seek to challenge inequalities and injustices between women and men, framing these as a challenge to patriarchy and patriarchal power relations' (Horn, 2013:14, 15; also Ahikire et al., 2015; Viterna and Fallon, 2008). In contrast, women's movements are seen as 'movements of women' that challenge gender inequalities and injustice with the aim of transforming gender power relations using approaches that 'vary from conservative to radical' (Horn, 2013). Such movements may not identify as feminist (Hassim, 2005; Tamale, 1999).

As this study demonstrates, this difference is not as clearly binary on the ground among activists, and both women's and feminist movements have made significant contributions towards changing harmful gender norms (Horn, 2013; Htun and Weldon, 2012). This study refers to women's and feminist movements and activism, guided by how participants identify.

Background

As reflected in Senegal and Sierra Leone, the focal countries for this study, women and girls face high risks of GBV across West Africa (Ouedraogo et al., 2022), as they do elsewhere in the world. Available data suggest that over 40% of West African women suffer violence at least once in their lifetimes (REFELA and la Commission de CGLU, 2018). This section considers the dynamics of GBV in both countries and the norms that enable them, an overview of women's and feminist anti-GBV activism, and the factors that contribute to norm change.

Forms, dynamics and enablers of GBV in Senegal and Sierra Leone

According to media and community anecdotes, the dynamics of GBV in both countries are similar: high levels of sexual, physical, communal, economic, structural, verbal and psychological violence. In both countries GBV data quality and access challenges mean that the available statistics are unreliable indicators of the scale and scope (UN CEDAW, 2019). However, the latest statistics (see Tables 1 and 2) indicate high levels in Sierra Leone where an average of 60.7% of women and adolescent girls aged 15–49 have experienced physical violence,² and an average of 7.3% have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15 (Stats SL and ICF, 2020). Data suggest that GBV levels have reduced annually since 2019 (3,897 reported cases), to 3,292 in 2021 and to 2,941 in 2022 (Rainbo Initiative, 2023:3, 6). In 2019, approximately 90% of all cases involved sexual assault,³ with a majority involving children under 18 (Rainbo Initiative, 2021, 2022, 2023; Mitchell, 2020) – an increase from some 70% in 2019 (Kardas-Nelson and Inveen, 2019).⁴

For Senegal, described as having 'a deep-rooted culture of rape and gendered violence' (Gueye, 2021), figures are comparably lower, although they seem to be increasing. At least 27% of women aged 15–49 had experienced physical violence in 2022, up from 17% of women in 2019 (WHO, 2022). A total of 826 GBV cases were reported from January through October 2023 (Agence de Presse Sénégalaise, 2023). A 2016 GBV situation analysis revealed high GBV prevalence: conjugal space was found to be the main site of violence (accounting for 65% of cases), and sexual violence was estimated to account for more than 58% of cases (GESTE and CRDI, 2015). The comparably lower figures for Senegal should be read in the light of war-induced spikes in Sierra Leone – particularly among older women – low reporting rates (Rainbo Initiative, 2021; Stats SL and ICF, 2020; ANSD and ICF, 2020) and an entrenched culture of silence (Packer and Friend, 2021).

GBV in both countries is considered to be one of the most pervasive forms of human rights abuse (UNDP, 2022; Gueye, 2021). In both countries, levels of GBV deteriorated significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic (UNFPA, 2020) and, for Sierra Leone, during the Ebola epidemic – notably against schoolgirls (Korkoyah, Jr. and Wreh, 2015).

² As defined by the Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 2019, physical violence includes pushing, shaking, and throwing objects; slapping, twisting the arm or pulling the hair; punching with the fist or with something that could hurt; kicking, dragging or beating up; trying to choke or burn on purpose; threatening or attacking with a knife, gun or other weapons.

³ Consultant computation from Rainbo Initiative (2022) SGBV data; Rainbo Initiative (2023); Rainbo Centre GBV Data (2022; 2023:12) (<https://rainboinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Rainbo-SGBV-Data-2022-Landscape-1.pdf>).

⁴ Figures are for the total numbers of survivors of physical, sexual and psychological abuse supported across the six Rainbo Centres in the country. These do not represent the total incidences across the country (Rainbo Initiative, 2023:12).

Table 1: Percentage of women in both countries who have experienced physical violence by age, 2019

Age	Percentage who have experienced physical violence since age 15*		Percentage who have experienced sexual violence since age 15*	
	Senegal (n = 1869)	Sierra Leone (n = 5248)	Senegal (n = 1869)	Sierra Leone (n = 5248)
15-19	19.8	54.2	2.1	3.4
20-24	15.7	61.2	3.5	7.0
25-29	14.5	67.0	3.6	8.7
30-39	17.7	62.9	4.1	9.7
40-49	15.4	58.3	3.7	7.8

Sources: ANSD and ICF (2020); Stats SL and ICF (2020).

Table 2: Levels of female-genital cutting by age in Senegal and Sierra Leone, 2019

Age	Percentage who have experienced genital cutting*	
	Senegal (n = 2181)	Sierra Leone (n = 12,932)
15-19	23.7	61
20-24	24.2	81
25-29	27.5	88.1
30-34	25.4	90.7
35-39	25.9	93.1
40-44	27.9	93.5
45-49	23.0	94.9

Sources: ANSD and ICF (2020); Stats SL and ICF (2020).

Access to justice remains below par and is affected by issues like low reporting and the incapacity of justice mechanisms, which results in even lower levels of successful prosecution and, notably in cases of sexual and physical violence, survivors having to pay for medical assistance despite the legal provision of free services (M'Cormack, 2018:5-6). Access to justice is also hampered by a common practice of 'compromise' between perpetrators and the families of survivors. These practices are enabled by social norms that discourage reporting and taking legal action against known perpetrators (interviews, various activists, Dakar and Freetown, 2023).

In both countries, high-profile cases of extreme violence involving sexual assaults of children and young women, gang rapes and allegations against public figures attract attention and outrage. Examples in Senegal include the koranic teacher accused of raping up to 27 of his young female students in 2023 (Africanews, 2023), the rapes and murders of young women, Bineta Camara and Coumba Yade in 2019 (Africanews and Fisayo-Bambi, 2021), and the 2020 rape of a schoolgirl recorded and shared on social media (Martínez, 2021). In Sierra Leone, a teenage victim of commercial sexual exploitation was gang-raped and killed on a beach in 2015 (Kandeh, 2015), and two five-year-old girls were allegedly raped by family members in 2018 and 2020 (Remoe, 2022), among many others.

Many other types of GBV do not attract the same interest, including workplace and street sexual harassment and violence, structural violence and forced marriages between victims and their abusers to protect families from shame. In Sierra Leone, the sexual exploitation of girls in the form of ‘transactional sex’ exchanged for food, money, school fees, mobility and other needs is widespread (Bransky et al., 2021).

Factors that enable GBV in Senegal and Sierra Leone

Cultures of violence

In Sierra Leone, some view GBV today as a continuation of the pre-war marginalisation of women, which fuelled ‘established patterns of gender violence’ and catalysed extensive wartime violence (Ojukutu-Macauley, 2013; IRIN News, 2013; Barnes et al., 2007; Nowrojee, 2005). Others, however, attribute the current situation to the country’s prolonged and brutal civil war in which SGBV was widespread (215,000 to 257,000 women and girls experienced some form of SGBV) (Mills et al. 2015; Denney and Ibrahim, 2012; PHR, 2002 in M’Cormack-Hale, 2022a). The conflict ‘has played a specific role in shaping the way VAW manifests and conditions attitudes and practices that contribute to its incidence’ (Denney and Ibrahim, 2012:5). Such attitudes include the trivialisation of GBV, enabled by the government’s failure to sufficiently prosecute GBV violations (Abdullah et al., 2010; Barnes et al., 2007).

Women and girls were used as sex slaves... They were tortured, they were abused. The social structures broke down during the civil war - the respect for human life, the respect for rule of law... We thought that the end of the war was going to arrest some of those negative social vices, but actually it’s continuing...

IRIN News, 2013

This quote shows how GBV escalated as a result of extreme uncontrolled violence and toxic masculinities that were strengthened during the conflict and became normalised in its aftermath in a country described today as ‘deeply patriarchal’ (M’Cormack, 2018:9).

Cultures of silence

Cultures of silence driven by stigma and shame are common to Senegal and Sierra Leone. In Senegal, deeply rooted cultural practices like *sutura* (meaning discretion or modesty in the Wolof language), encapsulate social compacts among community members that discourage the airing of personal matters to outsiders (Packer and Friend, 2021).

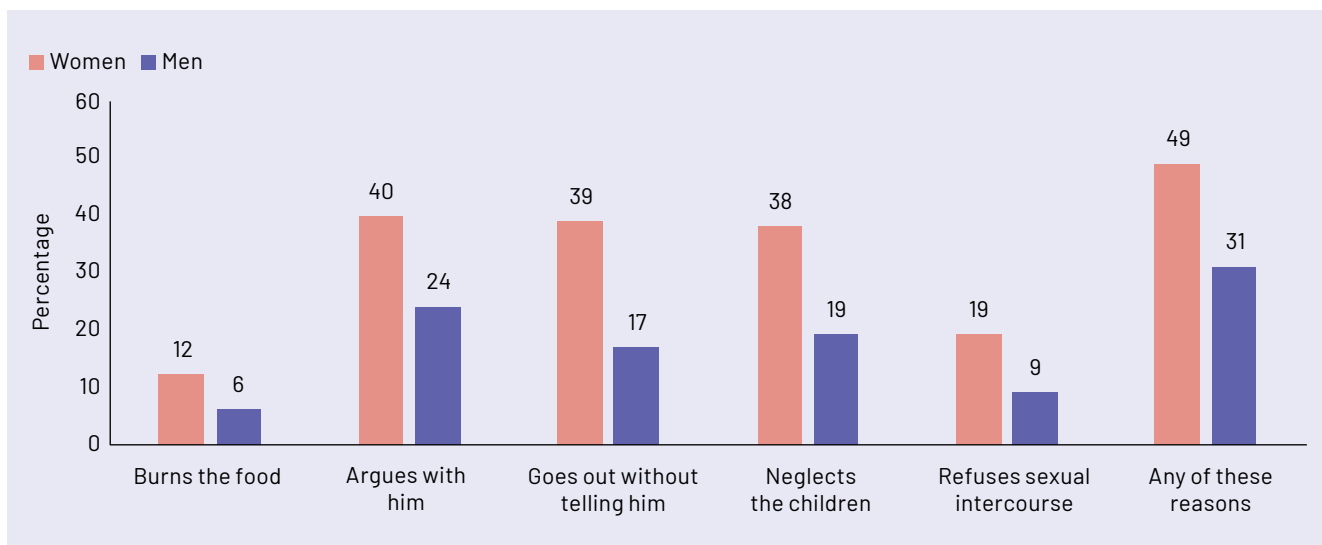
This was the norm and ‘collective consciousness’ that Adjé Sarr, a Senegalese massage parlour worker, was seen as having violated when she publicly accused opposition leader, Ousmane Sonko, of rape and threats to kill her in 2021 (Kane, 2023). She was also seen as contravening norms around acceptable female composure, sexuality, and whether and how women should talk publicly about sexual matters (Kane, 2023). These contributed to her harsh stigmatisation by Sonko’s supporters, her portrayal by Senegalese media as morally ‘loose’ and ‘a masseuse with a dubious past’ (Sambe, 2021), and her lack of support from sections of the women’s movement (Dieng, 2023; Kane, 2023; Réseau Siggil Jigeen, 2021). Sonko played into this popular indignation and embodied the cultural trivialisation of GBV in Senegal when he said that if he wanted to rape a woman, he would not choose ‘a brain-damaged monkey’ – implying that Sarr was unintelligent and not attractive enough to be raped (Popoviciu, 2023).

Gender norms that enable GBV

In both Senegal and Sierra Leone, GBV is enabled, normalised and sustained by patriarchal traditions upheld by discriminatory social norms and cultural practices that place greater value on male than female lives and that view women as properties of men (M'Cormack, 2018; Denney and Ibrahim, 2012; Sow, 2003). Such norms include women's inferiority, submissiveness and obedience to men (Ashman et al., 2017; Sow, 2003:71). They also perpetuate the normalisation of certain types of GBV, such as rape or sexual assault when a young woman wears clothing considered provocative, FGC, and the 'correctional' beating of a wife that is validated by religious teachings (Stats SL and ICF, 2020; Sow, 2003). Wife beating is accepted in both countries, with some believing that a husband is sometimes 'justified' in beating his wife. There is an overall higher acceptability for husbands beating their wives among women in Sierra Leone (49% versus 39% in Senegal). (See Figures 1 and 2 below.)

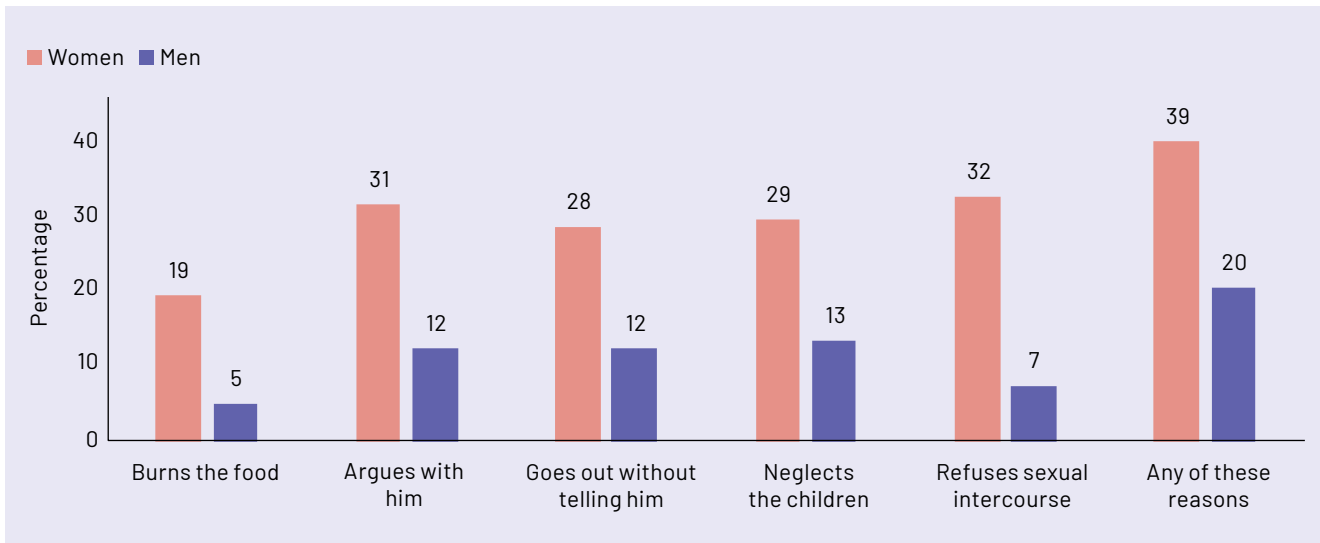
Other social norms that underpin GBV are those that disempower women economically and politically, making them dependent on men and, therefore, more vulnerable to violence. Examples include traditional and religious norms against women owning land in Senegal because it is considered shameful to male relatives who are seen as being incapable of meeting the needs of their families (Pereira and Bop, 2019). Further norms include social expectations around male dominance, even from a young age, in decision-making and economic power; male power over and entitlement to female sexuality; the sexual objectification of women; and female purity (virginity and marital fidelity) (Sow, 2003).

Figure 1: Percentage of women and men who believe a husband is justified in beating his wife for specific reasons (Sierra Leone)



Source: Stats SL and ICF (2020) Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2019:123.

Figure 2: Percentage of women and men who believe a husband is justified in beating his wife for specific reasons (Senegal)



Source: ANSD and ICF (2020: 200-201).

While predominantly male religious and traditional leaders in both Senegal and Sierra Leone use Islamic and Christian teaching and doctrine to justify the oppression and subjugation of women, Dieng (2020) critiques the contradictions between contemporary subjective and restrictive interpretations and the historically empowered roles of women in Islam. She points to traditional Senegalese values, codified in sexist proverbs that debase women, as sources of this discrimination. Such expressions include, *'jigeen day mugn ngir am njabott bu baax'* (a woman must accept hardships to have successful children), or, when the child misbehaves, *'doom ja, ndey ja'* (the child is a reflection of the mother) (Dieng, 2020).

Female subordination and women's obedience to men are taught from childhood by men and women and create power imbalances that enable GBV (Alie, 2008). In Sierra Leone, secret societies 'teach initiates that a good wife obeys her husband and looks after his needs, putting her interests secondary', and families often teach girls to 'be obedient to authority and...passive and quiet' (Denney and Ibrahim, 2012). These teachings compel women to be submissive to men and make them believe that they have fewer rights, causing them to accept poor treatment as normal. Similar values pertain in Senegal (Sow, 2003).

The root of this inequality is traced to European colonial gender concepts and policies that overturned pre-existing norms, traditions, and values of powerful women leaders actively involved in politics and warfare (Alie, 2008).⁵ Colonialism suppressed women's agency, removing them from formal and customary decision-making and forcing them into domestic roles that enabled a male dominance that has since become entrenched through masculine control of the means of production and violence (Steegstra, 2009 in M'Cormack-Hale, 2022a). Such values continue to define normative framings of what constitutes a 'good woman' in both Senegal and Sierra Leone today.

The study now turns to women's and feminist anti-GBV organising in the two countries.

⁵ In Sierra Leone, these included figures like Queen Masarico who led the Mende in the mid-16th century, various women leaders who helped protect their territories during pre-colonial inter-tribal wars and 'bush disputes', and Paramount Chiefs Madam Yoko and Madam Humornya.

Contextualising women's activism on GBV in Senegal and Sierra Leone

Against the background of a long history of women's mobilisations around multiple women's issues, the activism of women's and feminist movements on GBV in both Senegal and Sierra Leone has been critical to the contesting of harmful norms and practices and bringing about change (Dieng, 2023; M'Cormack-Hale, 2022a).

Women's activism in Senegal

Following their active participation in national liberation struggles, women's associations and protest movements in Senegal focused on multiple facets of women's empowerment (Dieng and Sall, 2023). In the 1960s and 70s, forums like AWA women's magazine and the Fédération des Associations Féminines du Sénégal (Federation of Women's Associations in Senegal) helped women to connect locally and internationally, to mobilise against gender inequality and to 'transform patriarchal systems from within' (Dieng and Sall, 2023: para 1; AWA, n.d.). However, they did this using 'very conservative' approaches, in that they 'almost never questioned' – theoretically or practically – the policies affecting women that were attributed to the colonial socialisation of their leaders (Kane and Kane, 2018:20).

In the mid-1980s, a 'more radical discourse on the status of women' emerged from the women's sections of leftist political parties. It was in this context that Yewwu Yewwi Pour la Libération de la Femme (loosely translated from Wolof as 'raise consciousness for liberation'), emerged in 1984. Tagged as a 'major feminist movement', alongside other groups that identified explicitly as feminist, Yewwu Yewwi called out patriarchy as 'an ideological system justifying and legitimising the subordination of women' (Kane and Kane, 2018). A wave of anti-GBV activism emerged in the early 1990s, triggered by incidents like the murder of Doki Niass by her husband for failing to cook dinner during Ramadan and a series of assaults on children (Bop, 2010).

The activism of conservative women and radical feminists has since co-existed in an uneasy peace. Women's groups are seen as 'mobilising without troubling the status quo'.⁶ This comes amid a return in contemporary Senegal to radical feminist organising and the use of innovative protest strategies that have helped overcome 'generational and ideological divides between feminist and women's rights organisations, as well as within feminist movements, and to resist strategic alliances between patriarchal and political powers' (Dieng, 2023:1). Both groups address women's issues and have had positive outcomes, including the passage of the 2010 Parity Law (Pereira and Bop, 2019; Tøraasen, 2017), but feminist activists have made more use of intersectional politics, focusing on marginalised groups, and have taken direct aim at patriarchy (Dieng, 2023).

Backlash and authoritarianism (police brutality, arrest, detention) against feminist activists helped to build the momentum for mass protests in 2021 against Ousmane Sonko over Adjil Sarr's rape accusation, part of broader resistance to 'the ongoing assault on women's bodies' (Gueye, 2021). While feminists in Senegal and its diaspora mobilised transnationally, using social media to share messages of support for Sarr (Dieng, 2021), some clashed over the veracity of her claims and protest approaches. The distancing of older women's groups from statements of support for Sarr (Dieng, 2023; Kane, 2023; Réseau Siggil Jigen, 2021) demonstrated the generational and ideological divisions within the anti-GBV movement.

⁶ Dieng (2023:3) suggests that this stems from social norms around what it means to be a 'good' woman'.

Women's activism in Sierra Leone

Women in Sierra Leone mobilised actively during the civil war to bring an end to the conflict, driven significantly by the atrocities inflicted on women and girls by warring factions (interviews, various activists, Freetown 2023; M'Cormack-Hale, 2022a; Smythe, 2022; Abdullah et al., 2010; Abdullah, 2010; Steady, 2006; Jusu-Sheriff, 2000). The Young Women's Christian Association, one of the oldest women's organisations in Sierra Leone, was instrumental in this regard.

Coupled with this experience, the participation of Sierra Leonean women in international women's rights processes, such as the 1995 World Conference on Women, bolstered their power, agency and momentum for post-war collective action that continues to sustain the women's movement today (Smythe, 2022). Sierra Leonean women have joined constellations of African women activists who have worked together to bring the challenges facing African women to the attention of international policy makers and spaces (Badri and Tripp, 2017).

Today's women's and anti-GBV movement in Sierra Leone includes various actors, individuals and organisations, most working together in constituted groupings. Key players include collectives like the 50/50 Group and the Black Tuesday Movement co-created as a protest movement by broadcast journalist and activist Asmaa James. There are also several feminist organisations, including Purposeful and Feminists United Sierra Leone and Allies, and coalitions such as the Irish Working Group on Gender Based Violence in Sierra Leone and the recently revived National Committee Against Gender-based Violence.

Individual professionals also lead advocacy through their personal platforms, such as Asmaa James and Rugiatu Turay, the anti-FGM campaigner and founder of the Amazonian Initiative Movement, a grassroots anti-FGM group. Multi-actor taskforces on GBV comprising varying combinations of these actors provide coordination, as do respected NGOs and civil society networks like Fambul Tok and the Rainbo Initiative. These have been in place for many years but have been galvanised into renewed action in recent years in the form of mass online and offline campaigns against extreme cases of GBV.

Senegal and Sierra Leone are signatories to several global normative frameworks that seek to tackle GBV by countering negative gender norms and advancing positive gender norms through targeted frameworks that address multiple aspects of women's and girls' human rights. These include the UN Charter, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform of Action, the Maputo Protocol, the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, the constitutive frameworks of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and various child protection protocols. Many such global norms have been integrated into national laws and policies designed to improve women's and girls' human rights and address GBV (see Annex).

Findings

The study findings are presented in this section in response to the three research objectives, namely to: examine the interplay between gender norms and GBV; explore women's and feminists' perspectives on the role of their activism in changing harmful gender norms that enable GBV; and interrogate the different factors that contribute to the norm changes associated with a reduction in specific forms of GBV.

The interplay between gender norms and GBV

Gendered social norms

Women in both countries are subject to multiple layers of gender norms consisting of duties to their husbands and families, expectations of acceptable behaviour and adherence to cultural rites. Participants described both countries as 'deeply patriarchal' with 'everything revolving around men', where 'women are at the bottom of the hierarchy and men are...treated like kings', and 'women's voices don't count as they should' and are 'often relegated to the background' (various activists, Dakar and Freetown, June and August 2023).

A woman is expected 'to be...submissive, look after her family, ...not speak loudly' and 'ask permission every time she goes out...even...to travel and to get a passport for your child' (interviews, various activists, Dakar, August 2023). One Sierra Leonean activist described the country as 'extremely patriarchal, extremely sexist, extremely misogynistic actually, in many ways' and 'very conservative' (interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023). Male and female Senegalese feminist activists described their country in similar terms, with one likening the social norms 'constructed by society' concerning women to a 'straitjacket': 'There are so many prohibitions against women. Women must not do this; women must not do that...' (interviews, various activists, Dakar, August 2023).

Several participants described these gender norms as 'weighing heavily' on women. Cultural rites such as FGC are so engrained within families and communities that efforts to change the underlying norms that shape this practice, especially by outsiders, are fiercely resisted on the grounds of cultural contamination and erosion of identity. A young Senegalese activist said:

Genital mutilation is still practised on women, even with the conventions that have been signed... And the authorities have no control over it because it's such a cultural practice that when you touch it, the whole community rises up against you...

Interview, RP3, Dakar, August 2023

Several participants in Senegal reported that socialisation into these intersecting gender norms begins in childhood with the gender-differentiated raising of children according to their sex through instruction and behavioural modelling (interviews, various activists, Dakar, August 2023):

When you're born a boy, how you're treated is totally different from a girl. You have no responsibilities in the house - nothing to do... So it's normal then that when they get married, they treat their wives as slaves because this is how they were brought up. And this is totally accepted... The norm is men don't do anything in the house; women are in charge of all that.

Interview, RP1, Dakar, August 2023

...it's all linked to education, the education that girls are given from an early age. The girl has to behave in this way, the girl has to do that. So the girl grows up with these ideas in her head...

Interview, RP8, Dakar, August 2023

Infrastructures of social control

The study finds that community and society enforce gender norms using diverse social control mechanisms to chastise girls and women who are seen as going against culturally accepted behaviour. This can take the form of verbal correction (as noted by a research participant in Dakar, August 2023):

There are always people there to remind her of her origins, to tell her that her mother behaved like her, her mother was exemplary, so she has to follow in her mother's footsteps.

or condemnation of norm disobedience:

So even if we rebel, we say... she's influenced by men, by perhaps the French activists, the feminist activists. They now adopt imported behaviour.

Chastisement can also be performative, taking the form of social exclusion. In Senegal, for example, divorce is heavily discouraged and many families insist that their daughters cannot return home once married. Those who disobey become ostracised and may suffer neglect and emotional violence:

My niece, she divorced with her husband who is a quite successful man. Now she went back to her mother's house and she was not welcome. They gave her a little tiny room, no electricity in the room and always, every morning she calls me, 'I haven't had breakfast yet'. So sometimes, I talk to her mom. Her mum is my cousin, but they don't accept her there in the house. She's like... 'We don't want you here...'. She's not part of the house anymore.

Interview, RP1, Dakar, August 2023

In Senegal, the cultural subordination of women that enables GBV is seen as compounded by misogynistic interpretations of the Quran that reinforce women's subordination to men through gendered religious prescriptions. Many women accept GBV because they are led to believe that obedience to husbands is sacred and inextricable from their own well-being and that of their children. It is believed that the children of women who are not submissive to their husbands 'will not be successful in their life' and 'there's no way' the women 'can access to paradise' when they die (interview, RP1, Dakar, August 2023).

The dominance of Islam in Senegal and the prevalence of male leadership in religious practice help to perpetuate what feminist activists see as chauvinistic interpretations of the Quran and other sacred texts that enforce the subordination of women (interviews, various activists, Dakar, August 2023). This subordination is further reinforced by historically low (although improving), levels of religious literacy among women, who tend to be dependent on male religious leaders for scriptural interpretations (interview, RP1, Dakar, August 2023).

In both countries, some people justify sexual assault, including the assault of children, because of the way someone looks or dresses. GBV is, therefore, a way to police the appearance of women and girls who are considered to be wearing 'provocative' clothing or dressing 'indecently' in keeping with gender norms (interviews, Dakar and Freetown, June and August 2023).

Some men also seek to control women's reactions to sexual harassment, objectification and assault by body shaming them and questioning their self-value. This is a form of psychological violence that stems from the gender norm that women cannot refuse sexual advances because their bodies are for male pleasure:

They just feel like if they see someone's body, it's an invitation for them to devour that person... And when you tell them [no], they say, 'what do you feel of yourself? Do you think that you're special?'

Interview, RP11, Freetown, June 2023

Silence is another tool of social control in both countries, particularly in Senegal where reporting is discouraged to protect the dignity of survivors' families, and where those who do report are shamed and labelled as bad women for violating a cultural norm against making private matters public. This is especially true in relation to the widespread sexual abuse of young girls within some homes, of which only a fraction of cases are made public.

You'll be surprised how many young women are raped within their houses. They don't talk about it and people are starting talking about 'tonton sai-sai' [local slang for paedophile], which is a new term meaning that the uncle or the brother in the house is... sexually abusing the young girls in the house...

Interview, RP1, Dakar, August 2023

Social control also takes the form of expectations of conformity with cultural practices like FGC and bride price: one determines whether a woman is qualified to marry, among other things, and the other determines whether she is properly married according to local custom. For those who support it, FGC offers women and girls social acceptance, is seen as 'part of their cultural identity, benefits cleanliness and hygiene, aids marriage prospects, preserves virginity and is a religious requirement' (28 Too Many, 2021; Ameyaw et al., 2020; Girls Not Brides, n.d.). Payment of bride price offers married women legitimacy but does not protect them from GBV (interview, RP8, Freetown, June 2023).

Impacts of women's and feminist activism on norms that enable GBV

Drawing on the field interviews conducted for this study, women's and feminist anti-GBV activism was found to have had both positive and negative impacts on harmful gender norms and attitudes, measured as direct changes in norms as well as the actions and outcomes that these changes have produced. As this section will describe, the positive outcomes include: greater awareness; new and revised laws; behavioural change (whether wilful or compelled); changes in what state authorities are willing to publicly endorse compared to a few years ago; and increased executive political will and action to end GBV. The negative impacts are identified as diverse manifestations of backlash among different actors.

Norm change for most research participants is assessed in terms of: attitudinal changes among political actors and citizens (notably in rural areas); the spaces that activism has opened up for debate about previously taboo subjects like FGC; and tangible outcomes like laws and policies that are becoming increasingly progressive (interviews, various activists, Dakar and Freetown, June and August 2023). It should be noted that these observations were informed largely by participants' varying approaches to assessing norm change, which included personal observation and technical assessments as part of monitoring and evaluation within NGO-led projects. As pointed out during the fieldwork, quantitative approaches may not convey accurate impact assessments if communities say what they think NGOs want to hear (interview, RP12, Freetown, June 2023).

Participants pointed out that the measure of norm change depends on the analytical lens used. For example, the narrow assessment of change in terms of lower GBV levels could obscure recognition of women's improved political leadership that could translate in the medium to long term into more transformative GBV policies and implementation. Participants also highlighted the need to celebrate progressive change, given the deeply patriarchal contexts of the societies in which their activism takes place (interviews, various activists, Freetown, June 2023).

Positive impacts

Progressive legal and policy change

Interview respondents said that the most tangible achievements of the women's and feminist movements in both countries include the progress they have catalysed in the creation and revision of anti-GBV legal and policy frameworks. This has occurred through consistent advocacy against everyday violence and intensified activism following extreme acts of violence that cause moral outrage, including fatal sexual assaults of children and young women (interviews, various activists, Dakar and Freetown, May/June and August 2024).

In Sierra Leone, this impact is attributed to significant shifts in national cultural and policy spaces as reflected in changing narratives and attitudes towards GBV which have evolved 'from a very anti-feminist, anti-gender lens to pretty much everybody now trying to own that space', and the presence of an elite male ally in President Julius Maada Bio 'who even declared himself a feminist', among other factors (interview, RP4, Freetown, June 2023).

One state actor in Sierra Leone expressed the view that the activism of women's and feminist movements are an important accountability mechanism that 'bring[s] duty bearers to see what are the realities on the ground', without which 'it's like we are all complacent again' (interview, RP10, Freetown, June 2023).

Broader attitudinal and behavioural change

Respondents believe that feminist activism is largely responsible for effecting gradual normative shifts in state, societal and personal attitudes towards GBV-enabling gender norms through a combination of awareness raising, confrontations and questioning in public and private spaces (interviews, various activists, Dakar and Freetown, June and August 2023). These changes are seen in behaviour related to specific practices like FGC, as well as other forms of GBV where gender inequalities are pronounced and visible. For example, survivors and their families, notably those with limited formal education who have been considered more susceptible to harmful gender norms, are seen as being more willing to speak out about and report GBV because of awareness raising by activists and the growing availability of support structures (interviews, various activists, Dakar and Freetown, June and August 2023; Pereira and Bop, 2019, 221).

Erstwhile cultures of silence that normalised the shaming and victimisation of GBV survivors, forcing them to keep their abuse 'as a secret not to be exposed, because people would talk', are eroding because 'people are more aware and they are more willing and open to talk about it without carrying that shame' (interview, RP11, Freetown, June 2023). Significant change has also occurred regarding the acceptability of activism and public discourses against GBV, which was hampered for a long time by cultures of silence and sexual propriety.

There have also been changes in the broader landscape of gender disparities that have an impact on GBV, such as women's access to political power. In northern Sierra Leone, women have, historically, been excluded from traditional and Westphalian state governance structures⁷ and the few who have sought political power have sometimes been violently subdued (interview, RP7, Freetown, June 2023; see also Choat, 2023). As a result of civil society interventions, an 'increased number of women are [now] allowed in certain decision-making spaces at community level, at chiefdom level and at district level' (interview, RP3, Freetown, June 2023).

Participants reported that while they have observed changes in behaviour, Sierra Leone remains a deeply patriarchal country where trajectories of norm change require more in-depth research spanning broader cross-sections of citizens across the country than this study was able to provide. Drawing on some participants' responses, there seems to be a cognitive dissonance between some men's habitual GBV practices and the restraint imposed by an awareness that they can now be held accountable:

If they're in the public eye, most men will say, 'Oh, let me don't touch you, because I don't want problems', but they still do it. But now, I think most of them are realising.

Interview, RP7, Freetown, June 2023

Female genital cutting

It could be argued that FGC is one issue where norm change has been most combative yet visible in this study's focal countries. Its practice is a significant issue for, and marker of, norm change in both countries, particularly for Sierra Leone, which is reported to have one of the highest rates in Africa (iAHO and WHO, 2023). This has been an emotive and politically sensitive issue because of the cultural values attached to FGC around womanhood, sexual purity, marriageability and social acceptance (Hairsine, 2021; Sow, 2003). From a feminist standpoint, these practices form part of the machinery of women's and girls' continued subordination. In Sierra Leone where activists previously 'couldn't even get the word FGM written in any policies':

If you take the numbers on both of those things [on FGC and child marriage], they have gone down, not nearly as you want, but FGM we're starting from over 90 percent plus some years ago to now... Among the older population, it's still in the 80s, but among younger people, it's coming down towards 60/70 percent. It's massive in terms of like the number of people who believe in it, who want to do it, who says it's right, who aspire to it. So, if you're tracking norms along those lines, you'll see some pretty big changes.

Interview, RP4, Freetown, June 2023

A further example of norm change around FGC is that it is no longer considered acceptable to support it publicly. This is a marked change from about seven years ago when politicians would 'proudly say they support it because it was an important marker, identifier with the community women' and show solidarity by paying for 'hundreds of underage girls to get initiated' and attending the ceremonies. Today, any public figure who supports it does so privately, and those who have been vocal in their support for the practice in the past have retracted their statements.

⁷ 'Westphalian' is a term used in international relations that is generally held to mean a system of states or international society comprising sovereign state entities that possess the monopoly of force within their mutually recognised territories.

There's like a brigade of people who will make a fuss about it. And politicians are...now we're at the stage where support for it is no longer vocalised. Doesn't mean they're not supporting it, but it's not something that you beat your chest about. We started from our First Lady herself, giving some interviews that people thought, you know, she was very open, in terms of saying, 'I'm not gonna interfere with it' to saying 'actually, I don't think children should be cut. I think if an adult chooses to...'. So there's almost like a new consensus that children should not be cut.

Interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023

In a context where conversations about FGC were a taboo that would trigger aggressive protests, it is significant that some now see it as a subject that can be discussed publicly.

The women, they have a way of revolting when you want to talk about the [Bondo] society, they will start singing and dancing around you and threatening you. But now, it's not happening... People are now free to hold meetings and talk to the women; they will understand. The only thing, they are still resistant, but like they will not fight you again. Because they have known that no matter how they try to fight us [activists], we are still talking about it. And now you hear about cases going to court on FGM; it never happened before.

Interview, RP7, Freetown, June 2023

After years of national and global activism, FGC is evolving into what is being called 'bloodless Bondo'⁸ which encompasses the same initiation into womanhood but without the pain and risk of cutting (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May/June 2023). This 'reimagining' (Purposeful, 2021) is being promoted as a way to empower women and girls while retaining cultural identities and upholding the values inculcated in those who go through this to become good wives and mothers and maintain social acceptance and respectability (M'Cormack, 2018). This shift from FGC as mandatory for all females to an optional rite that requires adult consent and agency represents another significant form of behavioural change.

This change has been the result of a staggered approach that has used underage cutting as an advocacy entry point into 'an ingrained traditional practice that is very difficult to break' (interview, RP8, Freetown, June 2023). It should be noted, however, that pending revisions to the Child Rights Act have stalled over disagreements on the mention of FGC (interviews, various activists, Freetown, June 2023).

Levels of GBV

Participants in both countries stated that prevailing GBV levels had either fallen, increased or that they were unsure. The study finds that the current state of statistics on GBV in Senegal and Sierra Leone makes them unreliable indicators of the state of GBV and the impact of feminist activism upon it. In both countries, data are collected by different bodies with varied resources using different metrics, and are not harmonised or sufficiently disaggregated (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May and June 2023).

⁸ Bondo is a women's secret society in Sierra Leone to which almost all women belong. These societies play key roles in all aspects of social life, including initiating girls into womanhood – for which FGC is an important rite of passage – to make them acceptable for marriage, and educating them in cultural and historical traditions (M'Cormack 2018:7-8). They also curate women's political access; women must be members to be elected to public office.

There is also no consistent monitoring of data collection on GBV (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May and June 2023). In Sierra Leone, many participants referenced data provided by The Rainbo Initiative – a key civil society actor, GBV response centre and member of national multi-stakeholder taskforces – and, to a lesser extent, state data on GBV, suggesting that they find the former more trustworthy (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May and June 2023). Even the state is reported to rely on the GBV data provided by civil society. Because GBV is an evolving challenge in Sierra Leone (and the country has not yet reached a stage where changes in levels can be computed definitively as negative or positive), data can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the speaker's positionality in the GBV movement ecosystem. One participant interpreted rising numbers following an anti-rape campaign to mean higher reporting, indicating a positive impact of activism:

In three years of this campaign, reporting went over the roof. People thought rape was going up, but what was happening was cases that were not coming forward, were coming forward.

Interview, RP4, Freetown, June 2023

Another participant viewed declining GBV levels as evidence of effective activism (interview, RP10, Freetown, June 2023). As stated earlier in this report, high and increasing incidence of GBV could be the result of rising levels and/or increased reporting because of changes in practice brought about by changes in norms. In the same way, a decline in GBV could either be the result of positive norm change or reduced reporting as a consequence of stiffer laws and survivors' reluctance to get close acquaintances in trouble with the law. More grounded research is needed to interrogate in greater depth the underlying reasons for changing incidence of GBV in different subnational spaces across country contexts.

Negative impacts of feminist activism on GBV

Anti-gender backlash and resistance to feminism

Negative perceptions of, and attitudes towards, feminism are common to Senegal and Sierra Leone. In both countries, multilayered resistance to feminism and anti-GBV activism is occurring in public and private spaces, with potentially negative outcomes for activists, survivors and those at greatest risk of GBV.

This resistance seems to be directed as much towards the idea of a movement for better rights for women as it is to the normative and behavioural changes that feminists seek. Respondents said that backlash against feminists stems, in part, from the equating of feminism with growing demands for LGBTQI+ rights and the perception that feminist activists seek to impose ways of life that are seen as abhorrent and fundamentally opposed to traditional and religious culture (interviews, various activists, Dakar and Freetown, June and August 2023).

This explains the denunciation and delegitimation of female feminist activists by anti-gender opponents who label them as women who are not 'good', sexually queer or socially deviant, and who defy submission to male authority and who are, therefore, threats to accepted gender norms and social structures (interviews, various activists, Dakar and Freetown, June and August 2023). In comparison, men who identify as feminist or support feminist causes are seen as being 'against themselves' and as culturally aberrant (interviews, various activists, Dakar and Freetown, June and August 2023; 'they'll just be wondering why you consider yourself as feminist' (interview, RP3, Freetown, June 2023).

The performance of feminist activism seems to have harsher implications for female than for male feminist activists. This compels feminist activists to not:

...outrightly say, I'm a feminist or saying it from the point of a feminist because the moment when you mention those things, it kind of like puts some kind of amount of resistance [from people who see feminism as] you are trying to induct me into something that I'm not really, or my culture or that my religion does not fully permit.

Interview, RP3, Freetown, June 2023

In Senegal, in particular, there is still considerable resistance to changes in values that are seen as feminist and therefore 'Western' and intrinsically opposed to Senegalese culture and to Islam. One feminist activist describes Senegalese reaction to Western influences as 'allergic', especially concerning women's rights and the impacts of modernisation on women's domestic roles (Dieng, 2020).

Organised religion is seen as playing a major role in this backlash and pushback against feminist values (interview, various activists, Freetown, June 2023). Sierra Leone has a long history of religious tolerance but newer formations pose a threat to gains achieved in women's rights and gender norm change, such as Pentecostal churches and a growing Muslim movement influenced by the conservative gender values of jihadist groups in other countries (interview, RP2, Freetown, June 2023).

Sow (2003: 75) commented on this trend in Senegal 20 years ago, noting the efforts of fundamentalist Islamist groups to 'impose a totally retrograde and alienating rhetoric on women' via local radio, invoking religion with a particular focus on women's rights, in ways that were eroding 'civilised cultural values' preserved by Senegalese over the years. Sow goes on to say:

'Their stipulations include the wearing of the veil by girls in schools, in city streets and in villages; a taboo against touching women's hands; revival of religious vigils; a return to the Islamic practice of patriarchal control over women, women's seclusion in domestic spaces, and rule of a male household head; and condemnation of social changes which are rooted in secular law.... Women and children's rights are heavily contested and subject to fights between 'modernists' and 'Islamists'. Others even question the legitimacy of laws voted on in Parliament. Obedience to the patriarchal order is looked upon as a sign of commitment to God and religious faith'.

(Sow, 2003:75)

Further research is needed to ascertain the position of organised religion towards women's rights and gender equality in both countries today.

One of the vehicles of feminist backlash is a growing anti-gender movement that dehumanises women and seeks to undo the progress made on women's human rights over many decades. Anti-gender sentiment has particular expressions in each country context, but it is part of a global movement that has gathered momentum over the last two decades (Awondo et al., 2022). It now poses a major threat to the women's rights movement, the rights of women and girls, and the gains made in these areas over many years. In Senegal, this can be seen in the leaked misogynistic posts from Senegalese Facebook group 'homme choc' ('shocking men' in English) and a growing trend in misogynistic music and girlfriend beating among young men (interview, RP1, Dakar, August 2023; Gueye and Sylla, 2022).

In the political space, several participants noted how legislators resist activists' efforts to strengthen GBV legal frameworks (which they see as interference), by altering laws that they object to. Examples include the provisions on underage sex in the Sexual Offences Bill (now Act) that essentially

'undermine it almost in its entirety' (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May and June 2023). Parliamentarians raised the age of consent for girls and boys to 18, 'clearly in response to backlash', effectively criminalising underage sex (interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023). As things stand:

if a 16-year-old boy sleeps with a 15-year-old girl, he's a rapist too and should go to jail for six years. That's backlash. That's saying, it's not just us, boys are also doing it. It's equating...

Interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023

Individual activists have also suffered personal backlash online (MFWA, 2024; Reporters Without Borders, 2021) and in real life for supporting feminist anti-GBV activism in the form of domestic violence, divorce and family friction caused by differences in gender values (interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023). The credibility of feminist organisations has also been questioned by those who resent their activism against historic gender norms, in some cases labelling it as donor-driven and informed by foreign values.

Such resistance has also influenced justice sector actors to disrupt access to justice for survivors by helping perpetrators escape or face lesser charges.

There was a particular case in Koinadugu. This girl was sexually penetrated by an older man, the guy is very prominent in the community... I was called to attention. I spoke to my team there, and we were trying to get justice, but the guy who did it was in police custody. And then when they released him, they advised him to run away. We're still looking for him... And there were other cases where you'd see... a young boy who is above 18. And then they are trying to take him to court to swear an affidavit that he's a minor so that [the] case should be dealt with out of court at the justice of the peace.

Interview, RP11, Freetown, June 2023

The cumulative effect of all this resistance is the narrowing of space for feminist engagement against entrenched social norms. This, in turn, puts at risk the gains that have been made over many years of anti-GBV and gender equality activism.

Resistance to feminist activism on GBV and particularly strong opposition to the use of the term FGM (seen as derogatory) and other provisions on child marriage are also seen as responsible for stalling the passage of the Sierra Leone's Child Rights Act of 2022.

There was something that was said about FGM, the abolition of FGM for children. But when it reached parliament now, they were able to remove that. So if you see, where you're talking about harmful practice, they just talk about harmful practice generally, they talk about bodily integrity, but when it comes to the word FGM, they removed it. So that is the reason why...we have been finding it difficult to prosecute FGM. So with this present one now, we made it very explicit and all, but the parliamentarians are against the word FGM.

Interview, RP7, Freetown, June 2023

Silencing of victims of gender-based violence

There is anecdotal indication that the new, stiffer penalties for certain types of GBV could have the unintended effect of not only discouraging survivors from seeking justice in order to protect known

perpetrators, social capital and relationships, but also of making it more likely that families will seek to settle outside court:

Even though it might encourage people to report that, now, you can have justice, there are stronger laws, but some people will be hesitant to report some of these cases understanding that if this case goes to court and the person is convicted, they will have certain sentences. And as you know, most of these cases of SGBV especially in the Sierra Leone context, are perpetrated by persons that are very close to the survivor. So family members, neighbours, you know, school teachers, close community members, friends... They will try to manage it, for it not to even be reported in the first place.

Interview, RP3, Freetown, June 2023

Participants also speculated that survivors may now face increased danger from perpetrators who want to avoid accountability for their actions. One research participant commented on a CSO documentary, which revealed that:

Some people will probably try to kill the survivor now, because they know if it comes out, they will have probably a maximum of life imprisonment or a minimum of 15 years or things like that. So, at some level, it puts the life of some survivors at further risk...

Interview, RP3, Freetown, May 2023

One activist pointed out the tension between the shared understanding among feminists of the need for both stronger penalties as disincentives for SGBV, and of the fact that these could have adverse impacts on how GBV is perceived. The activist explained:

...we all still have this problem of a mismatch. That, yes, you need to give them tough sentences but when you end up, when people realise how serious the sentences are, everybody's sorry for this rapist, instead of being sorry for the girls.

Interview, RP2, Freetown, May 2023

Downplaying 'everyday manifestations of gender-based violence'

During fieldwork, many participants seemed to equate GBV with sexual violence. Evidence suggests this is the more pervasive form, however the prevalent focus on it by media and women and feminist activists has delegitimised other forms of violence, such as domestic, workplace and online violence. One feminist activist spoke to the sensationalisation of extreme violence against children in Sierra Leone and its impact on what he termed the 'everyday manifestation of violence':

...the [outrage] machine that takes you away from the everyday manifestation of violence and that says that it's violence you should only care about if it happens in its extremist form and only to children... If it's young women who suffer and experience everyday violence... nobody wanted to hear about that; they only want to hear about extreme cases of children.

Interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023.

The existence of this 'outrage machine' in the contexts of Sierra Leone and Senegal appears to have been one of the key factors responsible for the convergence of anti-GBV actors in multi-actor mobilisations that other participants credit for the passage of key laws and policies (interviews, Dakar

and Freetown, 2023). The politics of outrage has had the effect of drawing policy attention to selected cases in selected issue areas and making violence against children more politically visible than violence against women (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May/June 2023).

GBV norm change: enabling factors

This section discusses some of the factors identified by respondents as facilitating positive changes to the gender norms that enable GBV. These are: strong women's and feminist movements, high-level political support and male engagement.

Strong women's and feminist movements

The strength and resilience of such movements have been essential in the anti-GBV ecosystem (interviews, various activists, Dakar and Freetown, June and August 2023). This strength can be conceptualised as an amalgam of several elements, notably: a dedicated intergenerational core of activists; shared networks and relationships of trust built over the years that enable fast and effective mobilisations; survivor leadership and participation; reliable and flexible funding; and a shared awareness of and alignment with feminist and gender transformative values. Other important factors include a shared consciousness of the importance of feminist movement building and intentional investments in raising and equipping young feminist leaders, such as Purposeful's feminist night school, as well as knowledge- and skills-building programmes like those offered by the Salone Adolescents Network (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May/June 2023).

Movement building in Senegal includes the Université d'été féministe (feminist summer school) organised by J-GEN and Collectif des Féministes du Sénégal (Senegal Feminist Collective) in August 2023, bringing together francophone activists and academics to share knowledge and experiences to inform more effective mobilisations (J-GEN Sénégal, 2023). This was organised in response to the need identified by feminist movement structures, activists and advocacy organisations for knowledge and technical capacity on a range of women's rights themes, including SGBV (interviews, various activists, Dakar, August 2023). Adaptability to the use of new tools also emerged as important, with specific reference to growing digital violence against women and girls and the effective use of social media by feminists to mobilise and rally support nationally and internationally (interviews, various activists, Freetown, August 2023; M'Cormack-Hale, 2022a).

In both countries, feminist movement building has led to a proliferation of new feminist anti-GBV activists, CSOs and networks and a growing willingness to identify as feminist in an otherwise 'deeply misogynistic, anti-feminist space' (interview, RP4, Freetown, June 2023). Growing numbers of young people, in particular – including young men – are joining feminist movements, creating new spaces of engagement that differ from 'the other traditional organisations we used to see', and altering traditional repertoires, chiefly through the creative use of social media.

...the militant movement is one, and on the move! There are new players, there are new faces. We now see different people to those we used to see. There's new blood in the fight. There's a new way of doing things. Today, there are feminist movements, feminist networks, a collective of feminists and artists who also have their own associations where they meet to talk about their concerns as women.

Interview, RP8, Dakar, August 2023

More and more young people identify as feminists. There's been more and more organisations now, young people who... set up feminist organisations, feminist young men, you know, who are calling themselves feminists, starting organisations, they want real allyship, they're coming to us for help.

Interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023

Feminist movement building has also led to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the structures that enable GBV, in that emerging activists are increasingly better able to understand and integrate into their activism the ways in which multilayered facets of gender inequality enable GBV and the need for collective approaches. Contrary to 'the NGO response [which] treats it as an isolation', emerging activists 'will understand not just the conditions of their situation, but the history of it and its other manifestations....that GBV is a manifestation of a broader patriarchal violence and inequality' and it is not enough just 'to save you from being beaten or from being raped' (interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023).

High-level political support

Several participants remarked on an important imperative for norm change in Sierra Leone: the public apology from the country's President Julius Maada Bio to women for their past ill treatment, his declared support for reform, his declaration that he is a feminist, and his passing of key laws. The 'Hands Off Our Girls' Campaign led by his wife, Fatima Maado Bio, is also credited with consolidating pre-existing anti-rape mobilisations and prioritising action to end the genital cutting of children (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May 2023).

The conversation about sexual violence... the first lady's Hands Off Our Girls campaign... brought attention to this issue and simplified it for communities where those conversations were not being had in the past. I think it's probably the biggest brand in the country... And that, you know, changed some of the conversation.

Interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023

The Campaign highlights the potential, albeit controversial, roles of first ladies in African politics (Mama, 1995). Fatima Bio has been very active and vocal on child sexual violence nationally and globally. She often leads national conversations around these issues, including, for example, the recent prayer she led for survivors of SGBV in Sierra Leone, even though she has made controversial statements around FGC in the past (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May/June 2023). In comparison, former Senegalese first lady Marieme Sall played a more conservative domestic role and headed the Serve Senegal Foundation worked to address the humanitarian needs of broad communities, raising questions about what leadership opportunities were missed during her husband's tenure as a result of her lack of engagement on GBV at this level.

Male engagement

Many of the participants, including men interviewed during this study, support the idea and logic of male engagement as an anti-GBV strategy (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May/June 2023). In Sierra Leone, CSOs like the Men's Association for Gender Equality Sierra Leone and MenEngage Alliance are active members of the anti-GBV movement, as are 'HeforShes' – 'a few men' who are 'conscious that these things [GBV] are not good' (interview, RP11, Freetown, June 2023).

In Sierra Leone, the Government has started to engage men methodically as allies in the fight against GBV as a key strategic priority, formalised through the National Male Involvement Strategy for the

Prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone (Government of Sierra Leone, 2020). Launched at around the time the Sexual Offences Act was revised to include stiffer penalties for rape and sexual penetration, the Strategy comes across as a softer approach to tackling GBV. As Ibrahim and Shepler (2022) observed, male engagement has caught on in recent years as a way to spotlight men as key allies and to leverage their agency to transform GBV norms among fellow men (see also Kedia and Verma, 2019). Sierra Leone's Strategy aspires to:

a socially transformative approach that seeks to accelerate implementation by encouraging the participation of men and boys as change agents and champions of women's and girls' rights, in their families, communities, schools and work places.

Government of Sierra Leone, 2020

Yet a feminist analysis of the Strategy by Ibrahim and Shepler (2022) finds that contrary to global notions of male engagement as gender transformative, the two male-led NGOs leading the process in Sierra Leone engage men in gender-conservative ways that might produce better outcomes for women, but not in ways that question or transform gender norms.

This corroborates the study's findings that current approaches to engaging men in anti-GBV activism appeal to men's duty to protect women and girls, based on their interpersonal relationships with mothers, wives, daughters and sisters, rather than on women's human rights (observations from interviews, various activists, Freetown, June 2023; also Ibrahim and Shepler, 2022). Men are framed as 'secondary recipients' of GBV who have a personal stake in preventing the abuse of their female relatives:

When women are raped or are beaten, the issue comes back to the family. The only male elder or leader or brother or uncle or father who is working will take up the case. So, you say you are not part of it, but you are part because you'll be spending the money, you'll be leaving your job to attend the court. So, you have a share. Physically, she felt it, but economically and otherwise, it's costing you too! It's costing you time, energy, effort and resources.

Interview, RP5, Freetown, June 2023

While this personalises the effects of GBV, it does not lead men to question the social norms and power structures that enable and sustain it, nor their privilege as males in a deeply patriarchal society. This gap has led some men to identify as anti-GBV allies without understanding that this requires them to confront the factors that drive gender inequality and give up some of their social power as men. This is evident in the disparities between some men's public identities as male allies or as 'women's empowerment supporters' and the fact that:

If you go to their houses, you see their women are not educated and they love that their women are so subservient – they're just performing their domestic work. So we're used to seeing men who talk about equality issues like they're passionate about it, but they don't practice the ideals.

Interview, RP9, Freetown, June 2023

This discrepancy is also observed in public spaces. Some male parliamentarians in Sierra Leone, for example, supported the reservation of 30% per cent of seats for women under the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act, 2022 (GEWE) (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022) until they realised it could affect their own access to political power:

...during the passing of the bill, the GEWE, ...there were men that are willing to support – male parliamentarians. But of course, as politicians... they also have their own underlying interest that they want to promote. So if those interests are not met, then they are not fully willing to support.

Interview, RP3, Freetown, June 2023

In sum, participants acknowledge the support of male anti-GBV allies, but ‘don’t think we have like a strong or unified force that is moving to push the interests of women’ (interview, RP3, Freetown, June 2023).

Senegal anti-GBV activists have targeted mostly male religious leaders who hold vast political and social influence as entry points for conversations about norm change (interview, RP6, Dakar, August 2023). They also engage young men in conversations about GBV, aiming to change their views of harmful gender norms (interview, RP1, Dakar, August 2023). Older feminists pursue an ‘African positivist feminism’ based on ‘shared African values and positive masculinity’, aiming to create collaboration to counter negative gender norms (interview, RP7, Dakar, August 2023).

GBV norm change: challenges and barriers

The study finds that the positive impacts of women’s and feminist activism on gender norm change around GBV are tempered by some barriers to greater progress. This section discusses these barriers, and the negative impacts of feminist activism on anti-GBV norm change.

Tensions between global and traditional norms

This study finds that one of the challenges to anti-GBV work has been resistance by some local actors who believe that foreign norms contradict local values and are imposed by ‘Westernised’ local actors, many of whom form the vanguard of NGO-ised⁹ – and notably feminist – GBV advocacy. In this regard, the key roles played by women and feminist activists in negotiating and adapting harmful norms and cultural practices are significant.

This is notable in Sierra Leone in the transition from an outright ban on FGC to the criminalisation of its practice on children and efforts to centre its perceived benefits, as described earlier in this report (interviews, various activists, Freetown, May and June 2023). This negotiation is important to nuance demands for change that cut to the core of aspects of cultural identity and, in some cases, women’s agency and power. Reflecting on the interface between global norms that frame FGC as bad and local gender norms that recognise the cultural significance for women of the space in which FGC occurs, one participant said:

I struggle with that with FGM. On one hand, because of the health factors. But then the other time when I went there to the bush, I thought, wow, this is like such a huge space that women have that they have nowhere else. But how do you marry that, the fact that it’s got some negative connotations, because it can impact negatively on the health of a young girl who has not made that choice. But then you see how you hear the drums beating and the women come and like this is where we can talk our own talk; no man can come here. And I just say, wow, that power, how do we harness it? But you can’t harness it without also going through those other customs and rituals.

Interview, RP8, Freetown, June 2023

⁹ The term NGO-isation refers to the process by which loosely structured social movements transform into more structured and professionalised institutions.

Several participants noted that there have been shifts in mindsets that point to some level of compliance with global gender norms. However, it can be hard to tell whether this is informed by a fear of violating laws with stiff penalties or substantive normative change.

One indicator of this uncertainty is the prevalence in Senegal and Sierra Leone of cultural sayings that denigrate women and perpetuate harmful gender norms. The objectification of women, for example, is grounded in sayings like:

'Cow big tey na for soup' ['no matter how big a cow is, it is meant for soup'] meaning a woman, no matter how educated you are, you're meant for a man. Which means you're meant to be handled, to be subdued in every way, sexually... in every way.

Interview, RP9, Freetown, June 2023

Unseen linkages between cultural practices and GBV

Despite considerable advocacy and public education around harmful gender norms, the persistence of harmful cultural attitudes grounded in patriarchy undermines the effectiveness of global norms when they clash with these attitudes. In addition to unpacking some of the nuances around FGC from local perspectives, the fieldwork for this study also revealed the gender blindness inherent in other historical cultural practices, like bride price, and the perceived damage to cultural habitus¹⁰ of their alteration.

In the two study countries, for example, bride price is a customary rite without which women are not considered to be properly married. Its payment has become socially constructed as wife buying, which is traditionally seen as conferring ownership rights over wives on husbands who feel entitled to use violence as a means of subordination and control (see Ibrahim et al., 2021).

When you want to marry a woman, for the acceptability, you still have to go to her parents, which is a good tradition... But the fact that now they go and pay that bride price creates... especially like even in my tribe, it's like you've paid so that you can have unlimited sex. So, you cannot be saying, why? Why now should she say no, I don't feel like it. I mean, you have paid for it... So why now can she renege? That's the contract. That's why you're paying bride price.

Interview, RP8, Freetown, June 2023

Despite the association of bride price with GBV – one that is widely recognised in literature – the study's findings suggest there is little cognitive identification in Sierra Leone of the ways in which it enables GBV. As one participant said:

When I bring it up, you don't see people thinking, is this an issue? It's like, if you remove it, how do you get respectability, you know?

Interview, RP8, Freetown, June 2023

It is unclear whether this gap is informed by attitudes to what is seen as correctional wife beating (see Figure 1), resistance to foreign cultural norms or men's reluctance to give up the power they gain through bride price. The full depth of the linkages between bride price and GBV are complex and beyond the scope of this study, but its findings indicate a conflict between bride price as a cultural marker of identity for married women and the way in which it simultaneously exposes them to GBV because of the norms that underlie its practice.

¹⁰ The ingrained habits, skills and dispositions that individuals develop through their life experiences and that shape their perceptions, feelings and actions within their social world.

Intergenerational dynamics in feminist movements

Intergenerational tensions exist in, within and between the women's and feminist movements in both countries that are informed by differences in ideologies, approaches and worldviews on feminism. For example, mutual perceptions of opportunism and grandstanding among older and younger activists are seen to inform what is perceived to be selective outrage over extreme acts of GBV that leave 'everyday forms of violence' unattended (interviews, various activists, Dakar and Freetown, June and August 2023).

Some younger activists in Senegal perceive older women as being 'not feminist enough', which is interpreted as holding positions that are too moderate and not being vocal enough on issues of concern. They also view older activists as being too closely aligned to the political institutions they regard with scepticism over what they see as slow progress on the implementation of laws that govern women's rights (interviews, various activists, Dakar, August 2023). These range from laws on rape and sexual violence to paternity laws that prevent mothers from travelling with their biological children without paternal consent (interviews, various activists, Dakar, August 2023).

Younger activists also view older ones as not having done enough to disrupt gender norms and the manifestations of gender inequality in society and politics. One aspect of this is what younger activists see as older activists being too willing to negotiate around and kowtow to culture – a perspective reminiscent of Nnaemeka's (2004) nego-feminism and what some have termed African Islamic womanism (Latha, 2010) – which they regard as restrictive and counterproductive.

On their part, older feminists, some with long histories of student and Pan-Africanist struggle, see their own activism as more grounded, inclusive and holistic than that of young feminists who 'copy everything from the West', focus only on women and are disconnected from societal values in ways that make their activism contextually redundant and alienating (interviews, Dakar, August 2023). They view young activists as not being strategic enough or willing to build on the legacies of older movements.

One older activist in Senegal described her activism as based on 'African positivist feminism' because it 'takes on these shared African values, positive masculinity that is the opposite of Western feminism, which puts men and women back to back, which pits men and women against each other in the conquest of rights and power...' (interview, RP7, Dakar, August 2023). Older feminists in Senegal also view younger ones as politically naïve and at risk of being marginalised if they do not work with the government to address their grievances collaboratively.

Now the new generation, everything that is politics is dirty for them. That's why they rejected the old generation's organisations and for them, they have got to shy away from the political parties, which is too bad. They can't understand that this is a tool that they can use...

Interview, RP1, Dakar, August 2023 (see also Pereira and Bop, 2019:222)

In Sierra Leone, younger feminists have publicly disagreed with older activists for not taking action that is radical enough on gender matters (interview, RP9, Freetown, June 2023). In addition, some previous gender ministers have been seen as too closely aligned with the patriarchal political system to serve women's interests (interview, RP9, Freetown, June 2023).

Resourcing feminist activism

There were recurring concerns about resourcing for anti-GBV activism among many participants, who described funding that was insufficient and dwindling. Others spoke of the need for more feminist resourcing that could offer greater flexibility than traditional funding to enable quick responses to threats to women's safety. Access to funding was noted as a particular challenge for more remote women's organisations located outside urban areas.

You know, because of the crisis that we're having in the world currently, the space to have funding from donors has become even tighter. So you find a lot of organisations that have very good plans, that have very good strategies, that are doing very good work, they are really struggling to have funds to implement some of the ideas that they have. So that's another very big challenge for civil societies working in Sierra Leone.

Interview, RP3, Freetown, June 2023

One participant suggested that funding alone is insufficient if anti-GBV structures are not equipped to use it effectively. In his view, 'the reason why Black Tuesday and other movements worked is... because there was a dedicated, organised movement that was funded' by a feminist funder that had money to use for emergencies, mobilised in a non-traditional way that enabled it to 'give money out swiftly through the door' without having to 'wait for projects and proposals' (interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023).

In this light, NGO-isation has affected the momentum of anti-GBV activism to the extent that most NGOs are not set up to respond quickly to urgent problems, hence the need for 'a dedicated, responsive movement' that has the resources needed to engage in a sustained manner (interview, RP4, Freetown, June 2023). In Sierra Leone, the presence of such a movement made a difference in the passage of the Revised Sex Offences Act and helped to galvanise the passage of the GEWE and other supporting legislation (interview, RP4, Freetown, June 2023).

Conclusion and recommendations: what needs to change?

Continuing high rates of gender-based violence in Senegal and Sierra Leone are rooted in and enabled by harmful gender norms – such as the perceived inferiority of women to men in patriarchal contexts – that inform harmful practices, including child marriage, sex trafficking, sexual harassment and abuse, and other forms of GBV. These norms and practices are upheld through social control mechanisms like the gendered socialisation of children, the maltreatment of women who leave abusive relationships, cultures of silence and religious dictates.

Within these complex matrices of power structures, gender inequalities and entrenched beliefs, feminist anti-GBV activism has had some positive impact on GBV-enabling gender norms. This has included shifting attitudes by increasing awareness of both GBV and gender norms, generating momentum towards the passage and implementation of responsive laws and policies, driving changes in GBV attitudes and behaviours, and the growth of feminist movements with stronger capacities for activism, movement building and technical interventions.

It is important to view positive legal and policy impacts in the broader situational contexts of women's rights in each country and of the nexus of advances in women's political representation and their protection from GBV. Therefore, as well as pushing for stiffer penalties for GBV and facilitating the passage of anti-GBV laws, such as the Revised Sexual Offences Act 2019 (Sierra Leone) and Law n° 2020-05 of January 10, 2020 modifying Law n° 65-60 of July 21, 1965 on the Penal Code (Senegal), women and feminist activists have been instrumental in the passage of Senegal's 2020 law on gender parity, among others (Pereira and Bop, 2019). Through national, regional and international advocacy and networking, women's and feminist movements and activists have been instrumental to the national diffusion and uptake of positive global gender norms and frameworks (Medie, 2020).

The impact of feminist activism on gender norms that enable GBV has also been facilitated by persistence, and by collective action that addresses gender norms as an approach to countering GBV. It has also been aided by high-level political support from heads of state and their wives, the support of male allies, and positive global gender norms that have sometimes been adapted to accommodate local realities.

Yet feminist movements have also encountered negative impacts, such as anti-gender and anti-feminist backlash, and the silencing of survivors and sidelining of everyday manifestations of GBV as the result of a dominant focus on extreme cases of violence. In keeping with social movement theorising on the role of affect in activism, women's and feminist movements have mobilised most quickly, effectively and sustainably around what Pereira (2018) terms 'spectacular' acts of violence – such as violence against children – that trigger outrage because they are so unthinkable.

Factors that have hindered greater positive impact include tensions between global and local norms and resistance to cultural contamination, tensions within and between feminist movements and resourcing challenges. These tensions expose ideological differences within and between generations of activists in their conceptualisations of feminism and its values in African contexts that need to be addressed if anti-GBV movements are to find sufficient common ground to work together.

Despite the progress that has been made, GBV prevalence remains high in both Senegal and Sierra Leone and, with anti-gender backlash on the rise, feminist movements must not only sustain their achievements but also counter persistent and emerging threats. In Senegal, for example, faced with

'a battle of concepts' and the struggle to 'make meaning of' their gender and feminist politics in local languages, feminists of all generations find themselves increasingly 'challenged, apostrophised, stigmatised, if not ridiculed, mocked, even abused, always condemned to explain themselves'. Feminism is seen as being at odds with 'Senegalese realities' and values, and, to some extent, with the identities of feminist Muslim women (Sow, 2023: para 9).

This study concludes with recommendations to strengthen feminist anti-GBV movements so that they have greater positive impacts on GBV-enabling norms and accompanying behaviour and cultural practices in Senegal and Sierra Leone. To consolidate their achievements and widen their space for further positive impact, funding partners and other policy actors could undertake several initiatives.

Recommendations for state statistical offices and anti-GBV civil society organisations and networks

1. Activists in both countries noted a lack of consistent, reliable quantitative data and focused sociological research that provide deeper and more nuanced insights into the dynamics of GBV that transcend the limited anecdotal evidence offered by selected NGO or donor project reports. Technical research capacities need to be strengthened across both countries (particularly in rural areas where survivors are less likely to report) to provide comprehensive data on the scale of GBV that can be used to monitor the impact of anti-GBV interventions and inform appropriate responses. In Sierra Leone, for example, the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs could partner with the Rainbo Initiative to strategise the expansion of its longstanding and critical data collection to parts of the country where they do not yet have official representation.

Recommendations for development partners/donors

2. Resourcing was a recurring issue for research participants across both countries. While initiatives like feminist night/summer schools help to fill knowledge gaps that go beyond the surface of women's rights narratives, feminist activists and movements (particularly younger ones with limited experience), need sustained capacities for research and analysis, flexible funding, and technical skills to engage policy actors and respond to rising anti-feminist movements and ideologies. It is critical, for example, that feminist activists are equipped with an understanding of the intersections of social power, gender inequality and GBV in order to design workable interventions that are holistic and, therefore, more likely to have sustainable and transformative outcomes.

Recommendations for anti-GBV women's and feminist activists and movements and their funders

3. There must be greater recognition of the need for more holistic approaches – from GBV prevention to response – that focus on gender norm change. As one participant noted, GBV does not exist in isolation, but is 'a manifestation of a broader patriarchal violence and inequality' perpetrated by particular social processes and institutions (interview, RP4, Freetown, May 2023). Approaches that focus on GBV response without addressing the underlying factors – notably the harmful gender norms that enable and sustain GBV – are not likely to succeed in the long term, even if they bring short-term benefits.

4. There is also a need to deepen ongoing efforts to bridge generational and ideological gaps. This can be achieved through dialogue that brokers consensus across divergent standpoints in ways that enable different feminist groupings to collaborate effectively on the eradication of gender norms that enable GBV. The facilitation of safe spaces for such dialogue is essential, and the gathering of lessons learned and good practices from other countries and contexts would be instructive in this regard.
5. Finally, given the disparities between the existence of GBV-responsive laws and policies and their effective implementation (Pereira and Bop, 2019:217), state capacities need to be strengthened to follow through on their GBV commitments in partnership with feminist activists and movements. This could include increased and sustained women's political leadership, the creation and efficient management of implementing structures, and the continued sensitisation of all state actors across different regimes.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1: Legal, policy and implementation frameworks on gender-based violence in Senegal and Sierra Leone

	National GBV laws and global frameworks	GBV policies and policy actions	Implementing structures
Senegal	<p>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (in 1985), and the Optional Protocol on Violence Against Women (in 2000).</p> <p>Senegal ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa in 2005.</p> <p>The 2001 Constitution guarantees equality between men and women.</p> <p>The penal law in Senegal was amended in 1999 to include provisions addressing domestic violence (including incest), rape, sexual harassment and female genital mutilation.</p> <p>Gender Parity Law, 2010 (Law 2010-11 Act of May 28, 2010)</p> <p>Law n° 2020 - 05 criminalises rape and paedophilia. Rape was previously considered a simple offence punishable by five to ten years in prison. From now on, perpetrators of rape and paedophile acts will be tried by the criminal chamber and face a sentence of up to life imprisonment. The law also deals with violent and indecent assault.</p>	<p>Procédures opérationnelles standards de prévention et de prise en charge des violences basées sur le genre (Standard Operating Procedures on GBV),</p> <p>Plan d'action national multisectoriel (2017-2021) pour l'éradication des VBG et la promotion des Droits Humains, coordonné par le Ministère de la Femme, de la Famille et du Genre (National Action Plan on GBV/Human Rights and the Empowerment of Women)</p> <p>Programme conjoint (2015-2017) pour l'éradication des violences basées sur le genre au niveau national, avec un accent sur les régions de Kolda, Sédhiou, Matam, Ziguinchor, Tambacounda, Saint-Louis et Dakar, qui présentaient une prévalence élevée de violences basées sur le genre</p> <p>Plans d'action régionaux de lutte contre les VBG</p> <p>Stratégie Nationale pour l'Equité et l'Egalité de Genre (SNEEG 1 et SNEEG 2/ 2016-2026)(National Strategy for Gender Equality and Equity)</p> <p>Programme Conjoint (UNICEF/ UNFPA) pour l'accélération de l'abandon des mutilations génitales féminines/Excisions</p> <p>Plan de réponse pour la prévention, l'atténuation des risques, et la prise en charge des Violences Basées sur le Genre, l'Exploitation et les Abus Sexuels et le Harcèlement Sexuel, 2021 (République du Sénégal, 2021)</p>	<p>Ministry of Woman, Family & Childhood</p> <p>CSOs/NGOs</p> <p>Police and gendarmerie</p> <p>Health centres and regional hospitals</p> <p>Bajenu gox (community midwives) and their associations (WHO 2022)</p> <p>Associations of women lawyers</p>

	National GBV laws and global frameworks	GBV policies and policy actions	Implementing structures
Sierra Leone	<p>January 2023, President Julius Maada Bio of Sierra Leone signed into law the country's landmark Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (Government of Sierra Leone 2021).</p> <p>Three 'Gender Acts' were introduced in 2007: Domestic Violence Act 2007, Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, 2007, and Devolution of Estates Act, 2007.</p> <p>Sexual Offences Act, 2012</p> <p>Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act, 2019</p> <p>In 2012, these Gender Acts were complemented by the Sexual Offences Act, which criminalises rape (with marriage explicitly denied as a defence), indecent assault and harassment and imposes a maximum 15-year sentence for cases of rape. It also entitles victims of sexual offences to free medical treatment, as well as a free medical report (necessary for prosecution).</p> <p>The Child Rights Act 2007 sets out the legislative framework to protect persons below the age of 18 years. Section 33(1) states: 'No person shall subject a child to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment including any cultural practice which dehumanises or is injurious to the physical and mental welfare of a child.' Enforcement is impeded by the non-inclusion of FGC in the definition of harmful traditional practices.</p> <p>Gender Empowerment Act 2021 & Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Law 2022</p>	<p>Sierra Leone National Action Plan (SiLNAP) II for the Full Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008) (2019-2023)¹¹</p> <p>Declaration of National Emergency on Rape and Sexual Violence (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019)</p> <p>National Male Involvement Strategy for the Prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone, 2020</p> <p>National SGBV Response Strategy, 2020</p> <p>SGBV Prevention Strategy, Partnership Strategy on SGBV and SGBV Coordination Strategy</p> <p>National Referral Protocol on GBV: Pathways to Service Provision for victims/</p> <p>Survivors of GBV, 2022, to ensure effective response and coordination of services for victims/survivors.</p> <p>Draft National Strategy for the reduction of FGM in Sierra Leone (government announced in 2016; current status unclear)</p>	<p>Family Support Unit, a police body tasked with investigating sexual crimes</p> <p>National Committee on Gender-Based Violence, 2006 (note: dormant till 2023, revived in launch (interview, Freetown, June 2023) Irish Working Group on GBV, 2018)</p> <p>District and national GBV steering committees</p> <p>The MoGCA set up six one-stop centres across the country for SGBV survivors within district referral hospitals that facilitate access to various services and accompany them through legal processes.</p> <p>116 hotline set up by MoGCA to report SGBV and access services</p> <p>Police division, a special magistrate court to try sexual abuse cases</p> <p>Local criminalisation of FGC on children by some chiefdoms in northern Sierra Leone through Memoranda of Understanding between traditional leaders, Bondo society leaders and local councils (UNFPA, n.d.)</p> <p>Gender Based Violence Information Management System launched May 2023 (UNICEF, 2023)</p> <p>GBV monthly pillar meetings to address gender equality issues</p> <p>President launched the Special Sexual Offences Model Courts for rape cases in 2020. The Judiciary will establish one such court in each region and assign a judge to each court to expedite adjudication.</p>

Sources: M'Cormack-Hale (2022b), various internet sources and state portals.

¹¹ There are no laws criminalising FGC. The first National Action Plan was adopted in 2010 for the period 2010-2014.

About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms.

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