

Integrating inclusion and equality into all areas of programming

Girls walk home from Gaylali Public School, Gayakpala, Margibi District. Photo credit. RTI



Inclusion and Equality

In its programs, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) attempts to address inclusion and equality issues that are not limited to education but that relate to all sectors—such as health care, politics, and economic growth—to more systematically resolve those issues in the most effective ways possible.¹ One such cross-cutting issue that Read Liberia explicitly addressed is the need to foster greater inclusion and equality for everyone, including women, girls, and individuals who are historically marginalized, such as individuals with disabilities and individuals from minority social or religious populations.

The Liberian Context

In Liberia, women, girls, and other individuals who are historically marginalized face substantial physical, educational, and economic risks. Gender-based violence against women and girls is widespread. Female circumcision is prevalent. According to the 2019–2020 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey, 9% of participants reported personal experiences of sexual violence, and tragically, sexual violence is common in schools, where girls can encounter pressure to exchange sex for grades. The survey concluded that less than half (42%) of the victims of physical or sexual violence have sought help.² Also, gender disparities in land rights, financial autonomy, political participation, and access to education show women to be on the margins of social and economic empowerment.

Liberian citizens living with disabilities often experience extreme poverty, and costs associated with medical care make it difficult to escape financial hardship.³ Initiatives to strengthen disability inclusion have struggled to build the momentum needed to effect meaningful, sustainable change.⁴

The importance of Equality

USAID believes that when all members of society are included and empowered, a country can build democracy, resilience, and self-reliance. Equality is the foundation that enables communities to thrive and meet their governance, economic growth, and human capital goals.⁵



Suah is kind. He shares and helps others.
He runs fast. Soon, Suah has many friends.

Page from Grade 1 Supplementary Reading Book *New at School*.

From inception, Read Liberia has prioritized cross-cutting issues of inclusion and equity.

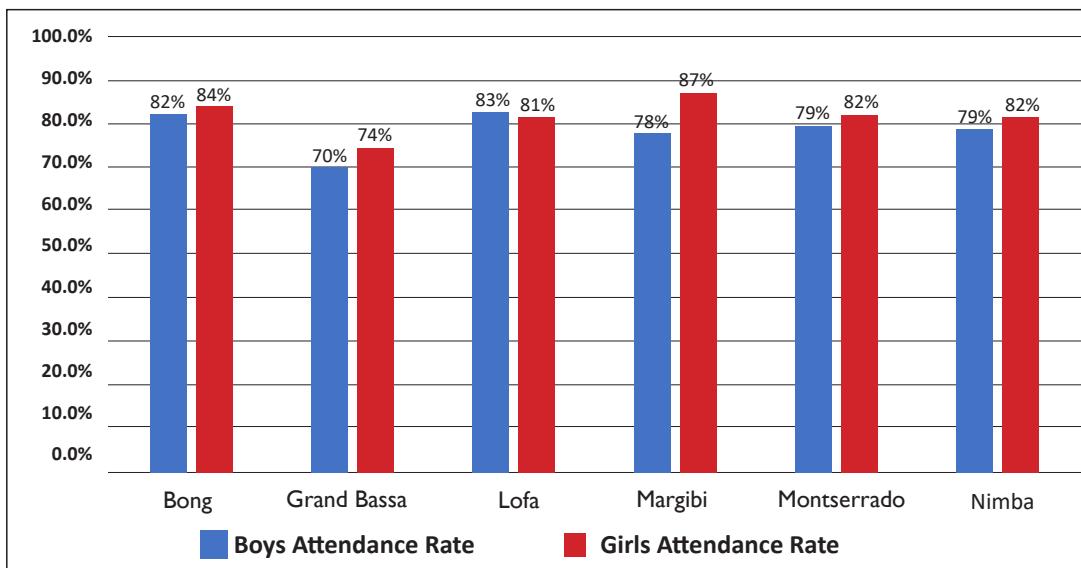
Data Collection

Read Liberia's work is underpinned by consistent, focused data collection. Read Liberia tracked the participation of children, teachers, and education officers in all activities to fully understand the complexity of and seek to improve representation of women and girls. These statistics depict the current situation in classrooms and across the Ministry of Education (MOE), and the MOE can use the data to guide future project interventions and government strategy.

The data were also used to identify potential barriers to learning and to highlight areas of progress. For example, Read Liberia showed that the average attendance for girls was 82% but only 79% for boys (**Table 1**),⁶ which suggests an opportunity for the MOE to tailor outreach to school-aged boys and their families to encourage more steady attendance.



Table 1: Gender Comparison Of Students' Attendance In MOE Read Liberia Supported Schools



Teaching and Learning Materials

This consistent attention to cross-cutting issues of inclusion and equity guided Read Liberia's development, in partnership with the MOE, of teaching and learning materials.

Representing all children in teaching and learning materials is a tangible way to promote inclusive messages and diverse role models,⁷ and the development team aligned all materials with USAID's Guide for Strengthening Gender Equality and Inclusiveness in Teaching and Learning Materials.⁸ Read Liberia's books and materials proactively model equitable, non-stereotypical, and positive representations of girls and women, people with disabilities, and people from religious minorities (**Table 2**). The team thoughtfully determined the best size and placement of illustrations to ensure that all groups represented in the illustrations were of equal size and prominence. The language used in materials was carefully considered; for example, Read Liberia used person-first language, such as "a girl who is blind" instead of "a blind girl" to avoid focusing on a person's limitations. Read

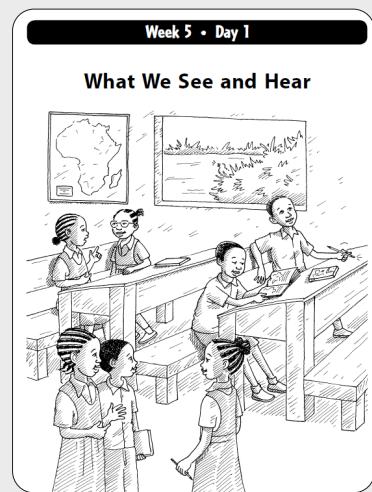
Table 2: Read Liberia Materials Depicting Inclusiveness

	Page	Depiction
Student Activity Booklet - Kindergarten	44	Female student in wheel chair
	101	Customer in market wearing Muslim hijab (headscarf)
	111	Male student with crutches
Grade 1 Supplementary Reader New at School	2	Male student with crutches
	8-12	Male character with albinism
Grade 1 Supplementary Reader Dogs Can Help	10	Male character who is blind
	12	Boy in wheelchair
Grade 2 Supplementary Reader Finding Friends	6	Boy and Girl in Islamic dress
	7	Muslim child who says "assalamu" (Koranic Arabic)

Liberia also used gender-neutral forms (e.g., chairperson, council member) to further help normalize inclusivity and equality.⁹



Images shown here (in black and white) are examples taken from the Read Liberia Kindergarten Student Activity Book. The color illustration is from the Grade 1 Supplementary Reading book *New at School*.



Teacher Practice

Read Liberia recognizes the pivotal role that teachers have in reinforcing positive messages. Cluster-based teacher training routinely included a dedicated session on differentiating instruction for children with different learning needs. With appropriate preparation, teachers can be catalysts for providing inclusive education.¹⁰



Teacher in class. Photo credit. RTI.

Coach Support

Read Liberia works to empower marginalized groups in all areas of instruction delivery. During school support visits, Read Liberia coaches ensured that all students were included in lesson activities, with a particular focus on girls, older students, and students with specific learning needs.



Coach Steven Lloyd (R) working with Grade 2 teacher and students
Photo credit. RTI.

Community Engagement

As part of community engagement activities, Read Liberia advocated for gender equality and female empowerment by encouraging both women and men to participate in meetings, scheduling meetings and events where and when women can most easily attend, and making space for women to be heard. In 2019, of the 2,986 people from 217 school communities who participated in meetings with Community Mobilization

“ I am the PTA chairperson of Wolala Public School in Margibi county. I hold regular meetings with my parents in the community to encourage them to send their children to school...these children are going to be our future leaders. ”



Parent and child reading. Photo credit. RTI.

Officers, 60% (1,783) were women.¹¹

The data show how Read Liberia has engaged with and empowered women, both within and beyond formal educational structures.

Looking Ahead

As Read Liberia transitions activities to the MOE, the Activity will continue to monitor inclusion and equity and collaborate with the MOE to scale best practices and mitigate challenges that may be found. Read Liberia's strategy reflects this landscape, from its focus on community engagement to its insistence that representation starts on the pages of books that children hold in their hands.

Endnotes

1. New Guide for Including Women with Disabilities in Liberia's Elections | IFES <https://www.ifes.org/news/new-guide-including-women-disabilities-liberias-elections>
2. Gender and Social Inclusion | Fact Sheet | Liberia | U.S. Agency for International Development (usaid.gov) <https://www.usaid.gov/liberia/fact-sheets/gender>
3. Disability and Poverty in Liberia - The Borgen Project <https://borgenproject.org/disability-and-poverty-in-liberia/>
4. Handicap International, Liberia <https://www.hi.org/en/country/liberia>
5. Gender Equality, Female Empowerment, and Social Inclusion (usaid.gov) https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1861/FINAL_GESI_Factsheet.pdf
6. USAID Read Liberia, Year 3 Annual Report—Analysis of school census data for Y3 (Quarter 1 and 2).
7. Brief Gender and Inclusiveness Guide https://ierc-publicfiles.s3.amazonaws.com/public/resources/Brief%20Gender%20and%20Inclusiveness%20Guide_FINAL%20updated%20COR.pdf
8. A Guide for Strengthening Gender Equality and Inclusiveness in Teaching and Learning Materials | SharEd (rti.org) <https://shared.rti.org/content/guide-promoting-gender-equality-and-inclusiveness-teaching-and-learning-materials-2>
9. Brief Gender and Inclusiveness Guide https://ierc-publicfiles.s3.amazonaws.com/public/resources/Brief%20Gender%20and%20Inclusiveness%20Guide_FINAL%20updated%20COR.pdf
10. USAID CIES PowerPoint Presentation https://ierc-publicfiles.s3.amazonaws.com/public/resources/1%20Gender%20Equality%20and%20Inclusion%20Guide_Overview%20Presentation%20CIES%202015%20March%206.pdf
11. USAID Read Liberia, Year 2 Quarter 2 Report January – March 2019.



Child reading Read Liberia Let's Read book. Photo credit. RTI.



Girls from Gaylali Public School. Photo credit. RTI.

More Information:

The USAID Read Liberia Activity is a five-year (September 2017–September 2022) program that aims at improving early grade reading skills for Liberian students in 640 public schools in grades 1 and 2. Read Liberia also pilot tested a program to develop emergent literacy skills for Liberian students in 60 public kindergarten schools. The Activity is implemented in six targeted counties—Lofa, Bong, Grand Bassa, Nimba, Margibi, and Montserrado. Read Liberia is funded by USAID and implemented by RTI International with subcontractors Another Option, Brattle Publishing Group, and Diversified Educators Empowerment Program (DEEP) through direct partnership with the Liberian MOE.

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Read Liberia Activity
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This report is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the Read Liberia Activity. The contents are the responsibility of RTI International and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.