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# It takes a village to raise a teacher

The Learning Assistant  
programme in Sierra Leone

A report on research  
carried out in March 2017



# Acknowledgements

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# Executive summary

The Learning Assistant (LA) component of Girls Education Challenge Sierra Leone has enabled nearly 500 young women to train as teachers in remote rural areas where schools are understaffed and there are few female teachers. The LA programme provides a pathway to teaching through guided distance study and in-school work experience. This research examines empowering and constraining factors of the LA programme.

The research draws on interviews in two rural locations with 18 participants: Learning Assistants themselves, and those who work alongside and support them: headteachers, class teachers, subject tutors, community leaders, family members and programme staff.

The impact of becoming educationally active is profoundly transformational, according to Learning Assistants and those who support them. Personal change encompasses self-esteem and self-organisation, increased confidence to speak, teach and study, and to encounter new people and experiences. These personal transformations have changed how Learning Assistants are perceived in their villages. Behaviour and relationships in communities have improved in response to Learning Assistants; they are now a group of highly-regarded local women who promote learning and aspiration.

Furthermore, the data identify a set of approaches that promote ownership and sustainability of the LA programme in Sierra Leone, where infrastructure is underdeveloped and material resources are lacking:

- Community selection, where communities are invited to identify Learning Assistants and become part of their support network;
- The concept of ‘total engagement’, where programme staff are continually visible and accessible to Learning Assistants and their communities;
- Ongoing exposure of Learning Assistants to new places and people such as revision camps, teacher colleges, registrars, lecturers and principals;
- Voluntary support from formal, informal and traditional sources such as teachers, headteachers, neighbours, family members and village leaders.

The data illustrate how some of the difficulties of training female teachers in isolated rural areas can be mitigated by the involvement and capacities of local individuals, in particular men who can lend status and support.

The data indicate how the impact of the LA component extends beyond individual Learning Assistants to create a culture of learning and aspiration in homes, schools and communities. The Learning Assistant ‘Village Teacher’ model mobilises a variety of human and social capital, simultaneously involving a range participants in roles which are new and traditional, formal and informal, paid and voluntary, to enable micro-system change at community level. There is much in this research that points to the Learning Assistant ‘Village Teacher’ pathway as a scalable, transferable model across cultures and countries.

# Introduction and aims of the research

The Learning Assistant component of Girls Education Challenge Sierra Leone was developed with the aim of increasing the numbers of female teachers in primary schools in rural areas of the nation. Recruiting more women into teaching is critical in terms of improving gender equity in education, and women teachers are considered important role models for improving and sustaining girls' participation in and completion of primary schooling, particularly in rural areas. The programme aims to do this by enabling young women who did not complete or continue their school education to follow a work/study pathway to teacher training: they work as Learning Assistants in primary schools in their own communities four days each week, alongside studying modules in English and maths in preparation for taking the Teacher Training College entrance exam. Learning Assistants who pass the exam become Student Teachers (see Appendix 1 'The Learning Assistant pathway to Teaching'). As Student Teachers, they continue to work in their schools and continue to study, following the Teacher Training College distance programme, which includes regular residential schools, to become fully qualified teachers.

The LA component was designed by The Open University (OU) and is delivered in partnership with the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) as part of the UKaid funded GEC programme led by Plan International. The approach, structure and open educational resources draw on the successful model co-created by The OU in Malawi with FAWEMA. In Sierra Leone, The OU led the development of distance learning materials for English, Maths and School Experience, Tutor Guidance, and the Monitoring and Evaluation framework and tools. The OU worked with FAWE in Sierra Leone to implement all key activities such as Learning Assistant recruitment and induction, Maths and English Tutor training and support, and ministry-level Steering Committee and Teacher Colleges meetings. The OU also worked with PEN Sierra Leone to create informational posters for schools and colleges about Learning Assistants.

The LA component started in 2013 but was interrupted by the Ebola outbreak in 2014-15. 550 young women had registered for the programme in five districts (Kailahun, Kenema, Kono, Moyamba and Port Loko) and by December 2016, 483 Learning Assistants passed the Teacher Training College entrance exam to become Student Teachers.

These numbers are impressive and indicative of the programme's success. But numbers convey little about the impact of the LA component on the lives of the beneficiaries, their families, schools and their wider communities, and what has contributed to this impact. This research therefore set out to gain insight into the impact of the LA component on its beneficiaries and those who support them in their work and study, and to identify how the programme might be developed further to strengthen provision for the young women and the people who facilitate and support their progress. The research explored four questions:

- In what ways has participation in the LA component changed Learning Assistants and their communities?

- What are the key factors contributing to or hindering the success of the LA component?
- What lessons can be learned to inform the continuing support of Learning Assistants who are now Student Teachers?
- What is the potential for replication and up-scaling of the LA model?

This report is informed by The OU's and FAWE's collaboration and leadership of the Learning Assistant component of GEC Sierra Leone since its inception in 2013, before and after the Ebola crisis. In October 2016 The OU research team visited 8 villages and 15 schools in 3 districts, and observed 85 Learning Assistants, to gain a broad understanding of the current state of the programme; at the same time, The OU and FAWE held meetings with the three Teacher Training Colleges to plan support structures for the first cohort of Student Teachers.

# Data collection and methodology

*Maria: Everyone says my life has changed ... we have a space in the community now ... They call us teachers, they encourage us to be part of it.*

*Research team: What do you think has motivated you to keep going, because it's not easy to study and work and look after family. What keeps you going, do you think?*

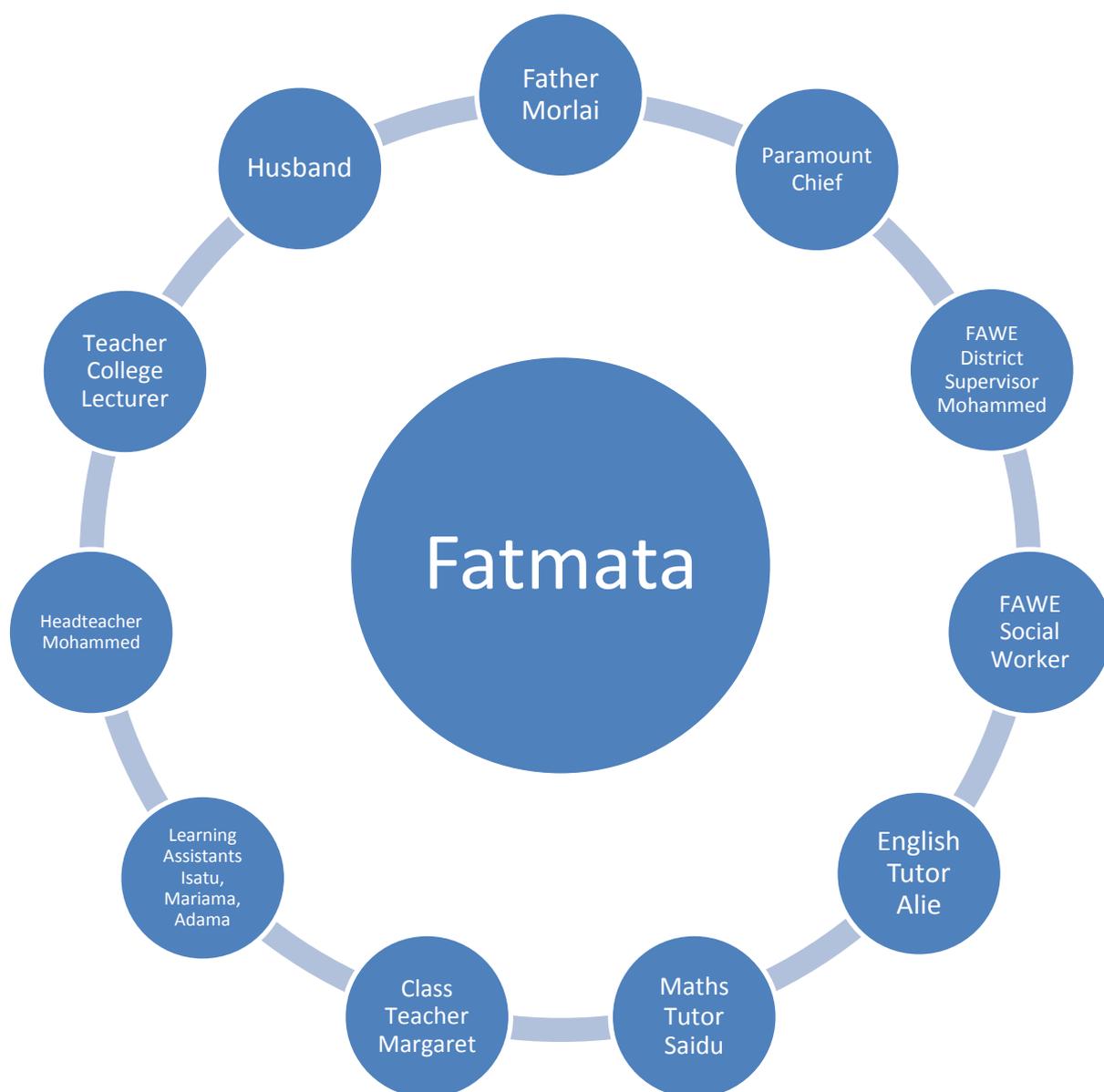
*Maria: Well, because of the encouragements ... I have people to help me. There are a lot of encouragements.*

Individual determination and tenacity are attributes of successful Learning Assistants, many of whom overcame considerable hardships to participate in the programme. But individuals do not succeed in isolation. Based on the positive outcomes of the LA programme, evidenced by post-Ebola retention and progression of Learning Assistants to Teacher Training Colleges and Student Teacher status, the research took an ecological approach, looking beyond the impact on individual beneficiaries to identify and explore their support community: the roles and actions of people who, in different ways, enable individuals to persevere and achieve. The research also aimed to learn whether and how participation in the programme has impacted on Learning Assistants' communities.

The research was carried out in March 2017 in two districts of Sierra Leone, in two locations: a remote agricultural community and a rural township. Eighteen people were interviewed (see Appendix 2 'People and communities in the research'). Locations and participants are anonymised. Learning Assistants represented a range of ages, backgrounds and family statuses, and we interviewed two Learning Assistants in depth. We sought to interview people who help the Learning Assistants, in order to gain a holistic understanding of the roles, relationships and activities that collectively contribute to the success of the programme (see Diagrams 1 and 2). Interviews took place in schools and communities, using a semi structured schedule, and five interviews were done with translators for Mende, Temne and Krio.

## Diagram 1 Learning Assistant Fatmata and her support community

Fatmata is 25 years old with one child, a 5 year old boy who attends the school where she teaches in a remote rural Muslim school. She has 15 siblings, and she also looks after her two 6 year old sisters. She sat the WASCE in 2010 but did not continue her education because her parents could not afford it, and this prompted her to get married at the age of 20. Her husband became disabled in an accident and is no longer able to work. She says her husband 'fought' for her have the chance to join the LA programme: 'He wants me to push for my education'. She says 'I love learning. If I have any chance to learn I will accept it.' After teaching every day in a classroom of over 200 Class 1 and 2 pupils with Teacher Margaret, Fatmata cooks, looks after her son, and studies from 8pm to 10pm.



## Diagram 2 Learning Assistant Maria and her support community

Maria is 29 years old and has 2 children, a 7 year old girl and a 4 year old boy who attend the school and the pre-school where she teaches. At the time of interview was pregnant. She passed the WACSE in 2008 but did not continue her education, and she had health problems that prevented her from working. She did not work or study until she became a Learning Assistant. She had not been outside of her village until she attended Revision Camp. She is very quietly spoken and has overcome opposition from her husband to join the LA programme, with the support of FAWE Social Worker Martha. Maria works alongside Class Teacher Pascal in Class 5. She says teaching is 'exciting' and she enjoys helping her children and her younger siblings with their school work.



We were not able to meet every supporter that Learning Assistants referred to in interviews. For instance, Fatmata (Diagram 1) spoke about her husband, and she described how a specific Teacher College Lecturer gave her one-to-one tutorials during a residential school. Maria (Diagram 2) told us her sister-in-law takes on more housework now that she is teaching, and her sister-in-law and husband looked after the children when she attends Teacher Training College. Hawa (a fellow Learning Assistant with Maria in Diagram 2) spoke of her mother's encouragement to leave selling in the market, and about a neighbour who helps her to study. We did not have the opportunity to meet these people. Some supporters mentioned by Learning Assistants, such as English and Maths Tutors and FAWE Social Workers, are no longer contracted by the programme and have moved on to other employment, and we were not able to locate them.

What emerges from this research is a clear picture of how Learning Assistants are supported by a constellation of people in roles that are formal and informal, paid and voluntary, new and traditional. A network of people and practices sustains their motivation, their academic studies and their teaching in schools. Furthermore, the encouragement and involvement of such people is generating a culture of collective learning and community development.

# Findings

In analysing the interview data from Learning Assistants and members of their support community, we identified 5 themes which characterise the process and the impact the programme has had on beneficiaries, their families, schools and communities. These themes are:

- I. Community selection
- II. Total engagement
- III. Exposure
- IV. The role of men in women's empowerment
- V. Changing attitudes, recognition and respect

## I. Community Selection

*Because it was owned by the community, the community gave it a lot of support. (FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

An innovative element of the LA programme, and one of its founding principles, is the community selection process. FAWE sought out, consulted and assembled a committee of high status people in each village to identify and recruit suitable candidates to become Learning Assistants. This process had the effect of informing and sensitising communities about the nature and purposes of the programme, and inducted a range of people in professional and traditional roles to support its implementation and provide ongoing support to the Learning Assistants. People on selection committees worked within programme guidelines which were collectively developed to ensure consistency across districts, with flexibility to meet local needs. Selection committee members are well known in villages, and they promote a collective awareness and appreciation of Learning Assistants. Selection committees typically have up to eight local people including the Chief, the women's leader, the youth leader, senior management committee members from the schools, headteachers, social workers, and highly educated women who live locally.

*The selection process is owned by the community. I don't know these girls. It was taken to the community. They were well informed ... if it's not owned by the community, I could just choose my sisters ... I could just give the community a list and say "Here are the beneficiaries". Well the community would rise up and say "These are not our children". (FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

FAWE Social Worker Martha went from home to home, talking about the LA programme and searching for potential Learning Assistants. She focused on how the programme could raise the aspirations of women who had left education, and improve the perceptions of these women in the community.

*I look round the community ... they will say “That girl, her parents have died” ... from there I will call the girl and interview ... I encourage them. I say “Learning is very important. You learn, tomorrow you will reap ...you were sitting there doing nothing in the community. So, people give you names... ‘Prostitutes’, many names ...If you put seriousness [into it], this programme will take you from zero to hero and make you very important in this community”. (FAWE Social Worker Martha)*

Other people in selection committees were on the lookout for potential Learning Assistants. Women’s Leader Massah identified one candidate at an adult literacy workshop. Massah did not know how to write her name, but had to sign the workshop register.

*This young lady wrote my name for me ...So I thought: If I push her she will try, she will be educated. (Massah)*

Headteachers were also involved in the selection process. They looked for qualities such as willingness, ambition and enthusiasm in young women who wanted to become teachers in their communities.

*I was born here and my husband is from this community. I know people, and these ladies are from this community ... first of all I was looking for willingness ... You really see the eagerness in them to come to the school ... [We] really enlisted them to be teachers. So there was that enthusiasm there. (Headteacher Agnes)*

*I interviewed them, [to] know which one is capable of doing something, or which one is willing ... [I looked for] the ambition. (Headteacher Mohammed)*

Being selected and enlisted by the community conferred status on Learning Assistants, and had the effect of increasing their motivation and determination. The selection process created a network of people to monitor the Learning Assistants inside and outside school, to provide encouragement and sometimes financial help.

*Sometimes if [a Learning Assistant] has to travel I would give that person money as transport ... Sometimes if I see them lonesome I will give support ... If I don’t see the person in school one, two days I will go out to know why that person is not in the school, and I will really reassure the person that “You are here for a purpose and you should accomplish that purpose”. (Headteacher Agnes)*

Learning Assistants are likely to encounter people from the selection committee as they go to and from school and go around their communities. FAWE Social Worker Martha and Mamie Queen Women’s Leader Massah regularly meet Learning Assistants in and outside school. Martha is a familiar figure in the community and is involved in a project to keep children in school. Women’s Leader Massah made time to drop into Maths and English tutorials to informally check Learning Assistants’ attendance and to learn what happens in these sessions. The Paramount Chief makes routine impromptu visits to schools, to see Learning Assistants teaching and offer on-the-spot guidance to them. These community leaders know the Learning

Assistants well. They express pride and affection for Learning Assistants. Their interactions with Learning Assistants are different to the more professional relationships the young women have with Headteachers and Class Teachers:

*They can meet me as a group, maybe when I am going to market, maybe when they are coming from school ... as soon as they see me, they run to come and hug me with happiness, "Auntie Massah, Auntie Massah" [laughing]. (Women's Leader Massah)*

*Every day [Learning Assistants] see me, they know "This woman is really paying attention to us"... I know them by names, the headteacher, the children also know me, "Auntie Martha, Auntie Martha", they wave to me. (FAWE Social Worker Martha)*

*They are very brilliant ... I'm here to [offer help] for her, because she's very focused on what she is doing. So, I'm very, very glad. I'm sure she's going to deliver. Because I've seen her performance. (Paramount Chief)*

People on selection committees felt a responsibility to recruit the best candidates for the benefit of their schools, their communities, and for the future of the candidates themselves. Selection committees are also, in effect, implementing government education policies and solving teacher shortages.

*It was a privilege for me ... It was not more work for me because these people are in my community ... it was an opportunity for them to elevate themselves. (Headteacher Agnes)*

*The government of this country is saying that everybody should send children to school and if we have Learning Assistants, more especially for the girl child, the girl child stays in the school, she sees a menstrual, the male teacher cannot step in, but the female teacher can step in... That is very major. ... [Learning Assistants] will continue growing because it is very important and it is in my heart that the women of this community succeed. (Mamie Queen Massah)*

*Had it not been for [the Learning Assistants] this school would be understaffed ... a school like this accommodating over five hundred pupils, having only four paid-up teachers ... There is no way we can cope with this kind of situation. (Headteacher Mohammed)*

The selection process inducted Learning Assistants into a network of people who are respected in the community. Learning Assistants are now part of this network. The daily presence of high status people who helped to select Learning Assistants and who have an ongoing interest in their progress is a sustaining aspect of the programme. Community selection created high expectations of these young women, and put some pressure on them to succeed. Learning Assistants know these people are paying attention to them and have a reputational stake in their success. By involving, consulting and informing stakeholders from the beginning, community selection was a significant factor in the successful re-start of the LA programme after Ebola.

## II. 'Total engagement'

*Just after Ebola ... I moved to all the communities with my team, in fact we slept there with all of them ... those days created a big change in [communities'] mindsets: 'We were thinking that you'd gone, but thank God you are back'. (FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

The willingness and commitment of local community members are key to the success of the Learning Assistant programme in Sierra Leone, a country where material infrastructure is underdeveloped and resources are lacking. Taking Fatmata (Diagram 1) and Maria (Diagram 2) as examples of Learning Assistants who are now Student Teachers, it is of note that the majority of the people in each young woman's support community are not paid by Plan/GEC Sierra Leone; only FAWE staff and subject tutors are paid by the programme. The others support Learning Assistants as part of their normal roles. Some of these roles are professional and formal, such as the school headteacher, class teacher and teacher college lecturer. Other roles are traditional and more informal, such as the Mamie Queen Women's Leader and the Paramount Chief. The support of husbands, parents, siblings and in-laws is also important.

Characterising this ongoing and in-the-moment support is a high level of commitment to ensuring the success of Learning Assistants as teachers and as students. English and maths tutors, for instance, often provided additional weekly tutorials.

*Some communities added the time for tutorials because they looked at it as an example of "Our girls want to change their lives, so because it [a tutorial] was one hour, let us increase it to two hours thirty minutes". And from once to twice to even three times a week in some communities. (FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

Subject tutors sometimes paid Learning Assistants' transport costs to enable them to attend tutorials, and tutors also sometimes provided food at tutorials. Learning Assistants reported how tutors would organise tutorials beyond the additional hours they were contracted to teach.

*The tutors taught us, encouraging me ... pamper me, make me to be speaking, construct more English. Especially the maths teacher ... he takes us Saturday and Friday ... he told us "Fatmata, Maria too, I want you to come at five, let us revise the area that you are not having much understanding" We come back. We don't give him nothing... he did it just to help. (Fatmata)*

Hawa also confirms the dedication and professionalism the subject tutors applied to their role,

*I did not know mathematics since I was a child going to school ... they teach us very carefully. They explain to us, they try hard for us to understand ... For now, I thank God I am able to solve some of the [maths] problems. (Hawa)*

Because of this academic and pastoral commitment, Learning Assistants were able to pass the Teacher College entrance exam. They also became better able to teach English and maths to children. Hawa provides a glimpse of how her supervising class teacher Pascal had high

expectations of her and felt she was ready to be pushed her beyond her comfort zone in the classroom.

*[When I came to teach children in school] I find it difficult to teach them. ... I said I don't do maths. So, the teacher used to force me to teach it! [laughing] ... I have confidence now to do the work. (Hawa)*

Headteachers have responded to emerging needs, for example, allowing Learning Assistants to bring their small children into school and to continue to teach and study if they became pregnant. Headteachers have taken action when they recognise that Learning Assistants cannot carry out their work properly, for instance if they have not eaten. Headteacher Agnes would sometimes give Learning Assistants money for food and transportation. Fatmata's headteacher, Mohammed, also did more than provide guidance.

*He not only gives us advice. Like for example ...one day we don't have nothing to eat, I come, I said "I'm hungry" ... He remove from his pockets, give me money to buy rice so we eat ... [Because] the empty bag cannot stand. (Fatmata)*

Learning Assistants said they are able to call regularly on family and friends to look after their children while they are away from the house. Some domestic chores have been redistributed to mothers, sisters-in-law, siblings and older children. Hawa explained how in the early stages of her study she had enlisted the regular help of a neighbour who was formerly a teacher; he was not part of the programme but he supported her English and Maths studies. She also highlighted the importance of the peer support she receives from the other Learning Assistants.

*I will sit by my friends. I ask them question. They explain to me so I'll recall when I go home... So, I will decide to go to them and ask them if I am lost, any question. (Hawa)*

FAWE District Supervisor Thomas describes the nature of his work supporting the LA programme as 'total engagement'. This term encapsulates how Learning Assistants have been sustained by the awareness and engagement of their communities and by certain individuals in particular. Support for Learning Assistants was, of course, planned - for example, in regular visits from the FAWE social worker and district supervisor, and weekly tutorials taught by the English and maths tutors. But much more was done beyond what was planned. In addition to scheduled support, there has been readily available and spontaneous support as needs have arisen. FAWE staff, it seems, are never truly off duty, answering calls from Learning Assistants on a myriad of issues from distribution of stipends to dealing with suspicious husbands.

*One hundred and four LAs have my number! At times, they occupy most of the calls that I receive on my phone. (District Supervisor Mohamed)*

*They will say "Martha, go to my husband, talk to him, he will not believe me". So I will go there, explain to them, so they relax and allow them to go [to the revision camp] ... I will see that they return back home safely". (FAWE social worker Martha)*

*At times they call my phone at ten or eleven at night ... I have never rejected an LA call.  
(FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

‘Total engagement’ is characterised by a focus on project beneficiaries, responding to them at any hour, taking their needs and concerns seriously, and attending to their well-being. It is also a focus on informing and motivating people around the beneficiary, whether they are paid or voluntary, and who often give time beyond what is expected or required. Thomas often used the phrase ‘Believe me, it’s happening!’ when talking about how he responded to Learning Assistants’ anxieties about aspects of the programme. The programme team’s consistent visibility and accessibility were important in convincing communities and Learning Assistants that the LA programme absolutely was real, and not a short-term internationally funded intervention which would fail to bring long-term benefits. Alongside this commitment, the voluntary participation of professionals, traditional leaders and families sustained the viability of the programme.

### **III. Exposure**

Few Learning Assistants had travelled out of their local area before they joined the programme, and most had not been outside of their small villages. Being in new places and situations, and meeting a range of professional people such as registrars, lecturers, hotel staff and FAWE officials, has raised their aspirations.

*Some ladies, it was their first time in a town, for three days. It was significant learning for them. Being in a hotel, using a flush toilet, using a shower. You see it written on their faces: We are enjoying this, we feel fresh! They meet other LAs, from other areas, and they teach each other. Some will say, use the tap this way, use the shower like this. They go to the dining table, sit down with their food, eating and talking, in a big dining room, with a ceiling fan. They take rice, fruit. They know this is something different, they are in a different community. Everyone had their own room, light bulbs for reading, a bed. Their eyes have been opened to plenty of things, and it helps to keep them going. (FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

Such experiences and encounters have made Learning Assistants more confident to try new things, and to talk to people whom they might have previously been too shy to speak to. Exposure to wider communities and people of higher status has created new relationships with other professionals and para-professionals. They feel part of a network of teachers and students.

*Some of these young girls have never gone to the big towns. In fact, they have never mixed together in a larger group ... it is really helping them. It exposes them to meet other people, other places. Like when they go for the seminars, even when they go for their tutorials ... Wider communities. Meet people of other, higher status. (Headteacher Agnes)*

In school, Headteacher Agnes develops Learning Assistants' exposure to new and interesting situations by including them in staff meetings, putting them on duty rosters, and providing the same in-service workshops and training that staff teachers routinely receive. She treats them as developing professionals, and sees them responding well to her expectations.

*When they have their tutorials, we ask them "What did you learn?" ...they are no more observers, they are now teachers in the making .... They have class control, they give tests, they value the children. (Headteacher Agnes)*

Class Teacher Margaret, the only female teacher in the school in the remote rural community of the research, takes on a mentoring role and acts as a role model to the young women that extends beyond their responsibilities as Learning Assistants to include how they should present and conduct themselves outside of school.

*Whether in school or outside, it is bad, you should not quarrel because you are a role model ... I told them how to behave. If you are a teacher you do not behave like a farmer again. (Class Teacher Margaret)*

Learning Assistants want to be close to other professionals who can help and advise them. They seek out others who, by example and direct instruction, can 'show them the ropes', such as such as FAWE Social Worker Martha who has overcome many family and life challenges which are similar to theirs.

*[Learning Assistants] will call me ... "Auntie Martha, I want to see you... we just want you to be around us. We want to learn from you, from your experience" So, I will give them their own experience about my life. (FAWE Social Worker Martha)*

Martha, who is a trained teacher, will observe Learning Assistants teaching in school and give them feedback on teaching skills and child friendly teaching practices, encouraging them to listen to children and care for them.

*I explain to them my own knowledge of teaching because I have been to college ... I said "When you are teaching children you don't have to concentrate on the board only. Where they are writing, you pass round ... as a teacher, you have to behave as a parent. You listen to them ... the children have to copy from you". (FAWE Social Worker Martha)*

For Learning Assistants, the realisation that professional people are willing to help them can be a life-changing experience. When Fatmata entered the Teacher College, she found it 'difficult and strange' because she had been out of formal education for so many years. A lecturer took Fatmata under her wing.

*Miss J said "Fatmata, call to me at night" ... She started showing me the area that I have to study ... I went there every night. ... She cajoled me, she encouraged me, teach me every day. She made me to be capable of being in [the Teacher Training College]. (Fatmata)*

This kind of social, professional and academic exposure is increasing Learning Assistants' capabilities when they work in their primary schools, and is helping to develop reciprocal relationships with Class Teachers. Learning Assistants feel confident to ask for advice and act on it. Teachers feel they have something to offer Learning Assistants. Fatmata recalls when she first entered the classroom she felt overwhelmed, and was supported by the class teacher so that now she feels competent.

*I said "Miss Margaret [the class teacher] ....I don't know where to start". She started counselling me, show me when I enter in the classroom, what and where I have to wear, what I have to say to the children... Making timetables, setting, marking the register, closing register ... So now I am using the system. (Fatmata)*

As we interviewed Class Teacher Margaret, she let us know that Fatmata was teaching and managing the class and that she had confidence in Fatmata's ability to do this. Margaret indicated that she takes a team-teaching approach whilst supervising Fatmata.

*We will go and stand and teach. Where there is a mistake I will go in and ... help, make correction. But I will not do it for the pupils to know. [Pupils] do not even know if they are Learning Assistants ... We say they are teachers. (Class Teacher Margaret)*

This kind of sensitive support puts Teachers and Learning Assistants on the same side, as co-workers. This means LAs can make mistakes without feeling punished or humiliated, as Maria, who works alongside teacher Pascal in the classroom, emphasised in her interview.

*Our class teacher he explains everything, how do it, how to teach ... If we find anything difficult he will come out to help us. (Maria)*

Exposure to teachers and to teaching is giving Learning Assistants confidence to ask questions and see themselves as learners. Class Teachers such as Pascal see themselves as important role models of adults as learners.

*You [must] have the courage to ask others. It's not bad when you ask, it does not mean you are stupid when you ask ... you'll not be debating 'Am I doing the right thing?' (Teacher Pascal)*

Pascal, who has had mentoring experience in adult literacy projects, volunteered to take a Learning Assistant in his classroom. He said he can see Maria developing her own teaching style, and he appreciates having another adult in the classroom.

*She's going to relieve me more from standing there alone. And also, it's going to give the children, you know, like a mixture in the sense they are not just hearing one voice. (Class Teacher Pascal)*

'Exposure' has social, academic and professional facets. Learning Assistants are encountering new places: tutorial centres, teacher colleges, lecture theatres, residential halls, hotels, workshop venues, and, of course, the primary school classroom. Within these environments

they socialise, work alongside and learn from new people, and develop formal and informal relationships. The relationships arising from exposure enable Learning Assistants and those who support them to take on new or enhanced responsibilities, as students, mentors, para-professionals and experts. Exposure requires Learning Assistants to take on new social, academic and professional roles which are aligned to the new people and places in their lives. Exposure promotes mobility and raises aspirations. In interviews, Learning Assistants often said they are now 'bold', expressing their willingness and lack of fear to try something new and ask for help.

Exposure can also cause problems, according to one District Supervisor. When Learning Assistants started going to teacher colleges and other meetings, teaching in schools and interacting with a range of other people, there was discord in some homes.

*Interactions with husbands became distanced. Some women think they are no longer at the same level as their husbands. One LA has taken her husband to the police. It all started when she started Teacher College. (FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

Therefore the participation of men, in voluntary and paid roles, in sustaining the LA programme must be acknowledged: the husbands, fathers, tutors, headteachers, class teachers and FAWE staff who support women to study and teach.

#### **IV. The role of men in supporting female empowerment**

*Our hopes are onto them because they are women... this is putting them on a higher level now... nowadays you have these footballers, you have Ronaldo, you have Messi, and all the young boys want to be like any of them ... And these women as well, they are [like] footballers. (Paramount Chief)*

Men such as FAWE District Supervisors, chiefs, headteachers and tutors have lent their status and leadership to the LA programme. From interviews, it is evident that some of the influential men within Learning Assistants' communities hold a deeply-felt belief in the value of girls' and women's education and a commitment to actively supporting female empowerment. For Fatmata, one of 16 children, these supporters include her farmer father who, although by his own admission very poor, has made considerable personal sacrifices to send all of his children to school because of his belief in the importance of education. He expressed great pride in his daughter's achievements on the LA programme.

*[I] can see changes in her in terms of her physical appearance, she knows how to dress. [As farmers] we were not able to dress her. That makes me happy ... Also the attitude changed. ... She is now able to meet with people and greet in a gentle mood ... She talks in low tones and she does not get annoyed easily and I am sensing a lot of respect in her for humanity. ... she is learning patience. (Morlai, Fatmata's father)*

Although some husbands have tried to oppose their wives' participation in the programme, it is important to note that many partners have been supportive from the outset, and have been happy to offer practical assistance, for example looking after young children while their mothers are in tutorials or residential schools.

*My husband takes care of my son. So, I went [to the revision camp]. (Fatmata)*

*My husband encouraged me to be a teacher [because] teachers are able to take care of their children. (Maria)*

It is fair to say, however, that convincing some of the Learning Assistants' husbands of the worth and, indeed, the authenticity of the programme remains a work in progress. Men such as chiefs, headteachers, tutors and FAWE staff are therefore important 'levers' in persuading husbands and partners who may be reluctant for women to be involved. In the rural township community of this research, FAWE District Supervisor Thomas has had to validate the whereabouts of Learning Assistants and what they are doing when they are away from home.

*I am the first port of call for most of the LAs, and the husbands too as their point of confirmation. For example about when the colleges are going to reopen. The husbands are going to ask plenty of questions: "Mr Thomas, when are they really going, which days are they going to be in [the town], when are they coming back?"*

Sometimes, however, the need has arisen for reassurance to be given to husbands in a more tangible way, even after the Learning Assistants have started at Teacher Training College.

*I had a case when the husband came. I told him "I'll go and show you the class ... let me take my bike". He said "No, Mr Thomas, let us use mine". I sat on top of his bike and went to the college. I took him straight down into the class. I said "look at your wife sitting down!" He was ashamed. I said "I want you to ascertain that I am not bringing them here for un-seriousness, they are here to take something back to you guys, so feel free to trust them ... when they are here 8 to 5, it is purely education". (FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

The English and maths tutors in the remote rural community of the research, are respected men of status in the local area. English tutor Alie is the principal of a secondary school and is also a local politician. Maths Tutor Saidu was vice principal of the school where Alie is principal. He now teaches maths at a secondary school in a township. Both men were prepared to considerably exceed their paid duties as tutors to support the Learning Assistants. For example, they met with husbands opposed to their wives' participation in the programme, urging them to let their wives be educated so that 'two frogs can croak together', as Tutor Saidu put it. Saidu said that he always had a vision of supporting women's education and the programme enabled him to achieve this.

*The experience [of being a tutor] was great. I felt part of the success of my Learning Assistants. (Maths Tutor Saidu)*

Class Teacher Pascal likewise believes that the time he spends guiding, training and supporting Learning Assistants is intrinsic to, in his words, ‘nation building’ and his own professional development.

*If they fail I fail. If they pass I pass.... I’m doing the right thing, and not for any other person or not for the money. (Class Teacher Pascal)*

In the remote rural school where Fatmata, Isatu and Mariama work, their headteacher, Mohammed provides valuable extra support by meeting with them three times a week after school to discuss their subject studies and teaching skills. He also has a pastoral role and provides practical support for their well-being by providing them with food and sometimes money to sustain them.

Going to Teacher Training College has given status to Learning Assistants, where they meet and interact with educated men and women. In meetings<sup>1</sup>, college principals have told us that whilst Learning Assistants may be weak in some subject knowledge, they know a lot about what happens in the primary school classroom, and in this area they have an advantage over other students. Teacher College lecturers have been impressed by the ‘pre service training’ aspect of the LA programme. According to FAWE District Supervisor Thomas, the colleges ‘nurture’ the LAs and give them special status, which other students sometimes resent.

*Other students in the college mock them: ‘Oh, the village teachers are here’. So I come in and call out ‘Village teachers, where are you?’ (FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

Thomas, a well-know personality in the area (he often talks on the radio about local issues) took what other students meant to be an insult and gave the term ‘Village Teachers’ new meaning, value and status.

## **V. Changing attitudes, recognition and respect**

*Before they were “Just look at this, she is just giving birth to a lot of children without doing anything”. But now I’m part of this programme, they call us “Teacher”... We have respect now in the community. (Maria)*

The personal impact on individual Learning Assistants is significant, as described by them and confirmed by people who know them. The two focus Learning Assistants, and the other Learning Assistants interviewed, talked about their increased confidence, feelings of competence, efficacy and ambition. Participation in the programme has moved them out of educational inactivity, from insecure petty trading and street selling, subsistence farming, and in

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<sup>1</sup> Source: minuted notes of meetings with TTCs in October 2016 after Cohort 1 Learning Assistants had been to interview and exam.

some cases literally ‘doing nothing’, to being active high status members of their communities. These changes are evidenced in a range of external and internal attributes: pride in personal appearance, punctuality, confidence to speak, work ethic, teaching skills, planning, re-organisation of domestic responsibilities, devoting time to study, language development, subject knowledge, understanding children, and overall comportment:

*Before, we are in the markets, we dish out [sell]... We don't even care about dressing... But from now in the morning I will take my bags and wash, and dress for school and come for class, for teaching ... now they call me Auntie Teacher. (Hawa)*

*For me [being] a Learning Assistant makes me to be able to construct small little bit English, able to stand in front of many, two or five hundred pupils to talk ... to be dressed neatly, to be learning ... to be bold [confident], nice to people's children, familiar with children ... The first time that I enter in classroom I found it difficult ... now I am able to lead assembly, able to close and mark the register, able to make the lesson notes. (Fatmata)*

Supporters of Learning Assistants confirm these developments. The pride and delight of Fatmata's father was evident as he talked about her changed appearance and behaviour (see page 17). The changes that Fatmata's father sees in her community interactions - increased patience, self-esteem, respect for others, and the ability to communicate well – are reflected in comments by Headteachers in schools. Headteachers noted that Learning Assistants feel more secure, respected, happier, noticed and cared-for. There is a sense of Learning Assistants now being ‘inside’ the professional context of the school and the learning context of the Teacher Training College. This new belonging has enabled them to act as role models inside and outside schools.

*I ask [Learning Assistants] what impact has the [programme] really done to them ... they tell me that “We have not been secure. Now we are respected in this community. Where people who used to abandon us, [they] now look at us as respectable people, so we are really happy”. I say “You see the difference between you and the others outside?” (Headteacher Agnes)*

*I don't know how to describe it, the [Learning Assistants] can be close with children ... You see pupils coming close to them, talking to them like sisters or mothers ... some pupils cannot explain to us, the Headteacher or the men [teachers], but they will go close to the women and speak to them. That's another very great impact. (Headteacher Mohammed)*

The personal transformation of Learning Assistants is having a wider positive impact. In Hawa's village, ‘Mamie Queen’ Women's Leader Massah said the Learning Assistants are ‘special people’ in the community. She does not hesitate to send them to represent the village in meetings because ‘they can address people comfortably’. Massah also said the LA programme has caused a decrease in domestic and community violence, because Learning Assistants have a greater sense of self-worth and are respected more by others.

*Because she [a Learning Assistant] cannot be quarrelling with her husband ... the kids will say "Teacher is being abused" ... they will come and report it to me... I am no longer getting those complaints. And some [Learning Assistants] were always going to dance at night. That is minimised, because you cannot go to dance as a teacher. ... Waywardness is changed. Now ... she's [the Learning Assistant] going for meetings, she's going for workshops, she can now know "I need to maintain myself in the community. ... no fighting [between men] takes place for me any longer" ... that is one major thing that I'm happy about. (Mamie Queen Massah)*

Learning Assistants are now Student Teachers. They teach in the day and study at night, following the Teacher Training College distance programme, working through a series of subject modules to prepare for exams and become fully qualified primary school teachers. Hawa told us that her mother agreed that she no longer has to sell in the market, but domestic chores still need to be done. For Hawa, as for all Learning Assistants, time management skills are important.

*I just have to sweep the compound, take the children to school [in the morning]. ...at two-o'clock when I go home, I will prepare food for my younger sisters and brother because my mother is in the market ... [At night] I prepare one subject and study, every day one. ... [at Teacher College they] explained to me that every day you will take one of the modules and read. Make a timetable. ...I start it at eight o'clock and end it ten in the evening. I use those Chinese lights to study. (Hawa)*

In addition to managing her own studies, Hawa helps her sisters with their homework. In return, her sisters have taken on more of the housework now that Hawa is teaching.

*...my younger sisters do the [domestic] work. After school I will continually balance work.... In the evening I will take my own books to study... and I assist my younger sisters...they will come with assignments from school, and I will solve it for them. (Hawa)*

LAs with children and younger siblings see this homework help as a further opportunity to teach. Like Hawa, Maria helps her children and also her siblings with their school work. She finds the experience 'exciting' and appreciates the time she has to influence her children and siblings in a positive way.

*Teaching is quite exciting... It makes you even to have time to study [with] your own children. ...I look at my children, their books.... I say, come and sit by me, then you're teaching.... even my own sister, I [take] such a look. (Maria)*

In interviews, Learning Assistants spoke of their ambitions to become financially responsible, to contribute to the home and family, share financial burdens with husbands, and thereby gain respect from husbands and others.

*If you have your own job ... no [one] can say "This woman is doing nothing" ... when your husband provides everything you are just sitting there. ...But if he brings two thousand [Leones] and you bring one thousand, you're able to manage a home. He will have respect*

*for you. ... I am able to support my children too.... if we inform ourselves now to be educated, we will be side by side working. (Maria)*

For Learning Assistants, becoming educationally active has been profoundly transformational, starting with personal appearance. Dressing neatly and smartly, signifying a sense of self-worth, was the first important change mentioned by Learning Assistants and their supporters. This outward manifestation of self-esteem is accompanied by increased confidence to speak to others, to teach, to study, to be organised, to encounter new people and experiences, and to know how to ask for guidance. These personal transformations have changed how Learning Assistants are seen in their communities, as they travel to and from school, and to and from Teacher College. They have a sense of importance, as representatives of the school and the community. Behaviour and relationships in communities have improved in response to the role of the Learning Assistant/Student Teacher: there is now a new group of high status women in communities who promote a culture of learning and personal aspiration.

# The challenges of teaching training and support in rural communities

The schools and communities where Learning Assistants work vary greatly. School 1 in Community 1 is an all-girls Christian primary school in the rural township where Maria and Hawa teach. It has spacious classrooms, small class sizes, an enclosed yard for play, and some pupils receive bursaries from the church. School 2 in Community 2 is a Muslim primary school in the remote agricultural community where Fatmata, Isatu and Mariama teach. It is acutely overcrowded and under-resourced: 500 pupils occupy three small classrooms without chairs, and Classes 1 and 2 all sit on the floor in one room. For art lessons, pupils draw outside in the dirt with sticks. These differences impact on the work experiences of Learning Assistants, and also on their visibility and community recognition.

In the rural township, School 1 sits just off the main road. Maria and Hawa are seen daily by many people as they travel to and from her school. They might walk along the road and encourage children not to be late. They might greet parents along the road as they go to work or to the market. They are likely to encounter Massah, the Mamie Queen women's leader, in the marketplace, or the Social Worker Martha. Massah and Martha are likely to drop in to the school from time to time. As Maria and Hawa go to and from school, they see billboards and other 'environmental print' e.g. advertising hoardings, traffic signs, billboards for shops, products and institutions, exposing them to many examples of written English which they can use for their own and for pupils' language learning.

The remote agricultural area of Community 2 is a forty minute drive (in a substantial vehicle) along an unmade track from the main road. Homes are scattered and families are working on large plantations. Fatmata, Mariama, Isatu and Adama are not seen by many people as they travel to and from the school. Getting to schools, tutorials and Teacher Training College can be difficult and time consuming as there is no bus service. Adama, who is disabled and for whom walking is difficult, daily faces a three hour walk from home to school. She sometimes has to wait for up to an hour at a river, hoping for someone to appear who can ferry her across. The lack of environmental print, even in the community's meeting place, is striking. This lack of environmental print may impact on Learning Assistants' endeavours to learn English to a considerable extent, and it was evident that the spoken English of two of the four Learning Assistants interviewed in the remote rural school was very poor. There are few people with whom they can practise English.

The over-crowding of School 2 may not necessarily be related to the school's location. Muslim schools visited by the research team in October 2016 were considerably over-subscribed. But in interviews overcrowding arose as an issue that might impact negatively on the sustainability of the LA programme in terms of increasing the number of women in schools in some rural communities. Isatu and Mariama, for example, were explicit that they did not enjoy teaching and were planning to go elsewhere when they were qualified.

*The class is crowded, so I cannot enjoy the teaching ... after college I'll find another school. (Isatu)*

In both communities, the commitment of Learning Assistants to the programme is notable not only because of the dramatic disruption of Ebola. They have also endured persistent cynicism from some parts of their communities about reality of the programme. Fatmata was emphatic in stating that, as a whole, the community had 'done nothing' for Learning Assistants in terms of encouragement or material support. All the Learning Assistants interviewed described widespread scepticism and doubt about their progress to teacher colleges.

*When they heard that we are going to [Teacher College] they were surprised. They were surprised, they were very surprised. ... Now they respect us...Yes, we are proud. (Maria)*

Learning Assistants therefore see themselves as living proof that perseverance pays dividends. They hold themselves up as examples to children, families and the community.

*[Some] community people always think bad about us ... [but] this programme makes me to be smart in my school ... I said, "Your children, I take care of him or her [in school] ... I take care of your children ... Because I want to learn. (Fatmata)*

The messages that Learning Assistants hear from their supporters provide more than motivation. By aligning themselves with education and high status people in their communities, Learning Assistants learn words and phrases to verbally combat those who might try to undermine them.

There are specific challenges of training and supporting teachers in rural areas. These include: community cynicism, lack of visibility and recognition, isolation, few sources of support and a lack of resources for subject knowledge. Teacher Training Colleges may not make supervision visits to remote schools, or only visit them occasionally, further depriving Learning Assistants in these areas of recognition and mentoring. In spite of their challenging circumstances, Learning Assistants in rural communities have persevered to complete the programme and enter Teacher's College. A contributing factor to this success is the involvement of influential members of the community who believe in the value of girls' education. People such as class teacher Margaret, English tutor Alie and Headteacher Mohammed are important in advising and motivating Learning Assistants and are, in effect, human resources for subject knowledge.

## Impact: community development

*When LAs left their schools for the first residential at teacher college, their absence was a big blow to the schools. They cover all the gaps. Headteachers said, “Ah, it was heavy for us”. Initially schools didn’t want them. Now they can’t operate without them. It was true confession time. (FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

The outcomes of the LA component of GEC Sierra Leone extend much further than sending nearly 500 young women to Teacher Training Colleges. The project has acted as a catalyst to a more deep-rooted transformation of their communities.

The development of these young women as respected professionals is acting to change the balance (between young and old, male and female) and strengthen the leadership of their communities. The LA programme is developing younger, high status individuals who are recognised and intrinsic – not extrinsic – to their villages. Martha, the FAWE social worker, explained how she frequently stresses to the Learning Assistants that they ‘are now responsible in the community’.

This growing responsibility on the part of the Learning Assistants is already reaping benefits. Headteacher Agnes, like many school leaders in rural areas, must rely on unqualified ‘community’ teachers who are not on government payroll and are not always dependable .

*We don’t have a hold on them. They go when they want. They come to school when they want ... [the Learning Assistants] stay in the school, they are more reliable. (Headteacher Agnes)*

In Learning Assistants, school leaders have found a local supply of teachers who will not be leaving the area. The leadership potential offered to the communities by Learning Assistants is recognised by the Paramount Chief, who sees them spreading a culture of learning and aspiration.

*... if a man educates, that education doesn’t spread to the family because sometimes he only thinks about his wife and children. But for a woman in the family she thinks about everyone, about the mother, the brothers, the cousins, the uncles, you know ... And, [the Learning Assistants] should also serve as role models for the younger ones, the younger ones see them and be able to aspire to be like them. (Paramount Chief)*

Headteacher Mohammed has noticed this pastoral aspect of leadership already becoming visible through the Learning Assistants’ work in his school, when he referred to the ‘very great impact’ of pupils ‘coming close’ to LAs and talking to them ‘like sisters or mothers’. Mohammed as a headteacher can see changes in pupil behaviour that they can speak to LAs about things they cannot explain to male staff.

The theme of raising aspirations, and leading by example to pave the way for future generations, appeared as a common thread through much of this research, for example forming

part of the advice offered to one group of Learning Assistants by their community women's leader:

*Now you are young, remember you are going to get old, and when you are going to get old you need to leave legacies. You need to leave examples that will show to your children and the people around your children that your mother left this particular something, what you did in the community as a very good hard work. (Mamie Queen Massah)*

The comments of Hawa illustrate how the programme has shifted young women's thinking, perhaps for the first time for many, towards widening their ambitions beyond what they might have traditionally accepted as their lot in life.

*Being a teacher is very nice ... You will go there [to school] and take your children and your family. ...You will have respect in the community ...I never dreamed that. I was thinking that my life was in the market every day selling, selling, I was not thinking about any teaching or going to school. (Hawa)*

An important attribute of the Learning Assistants as new leaders is that, through exposure, they are becoming more socially mobile. They are already developing valuable links to the world beyond their existing experience through their attendance at revision camp, college residential weeks, workshops and meetings. This kind of exposure will extend further as they proceed with their studies. Their learning from new environments and people, the increased confidence and widening of horizons that this engenders, together with the networks that the Learning Assistants, now Student Teachers, become a part of, have the potential to make a significant positive contribution to future community development.

Importantly, however, existing community leaders and other high status members of communities (e.g. headteachers and teachers) do not see the Learning Assistants as rivals, but as younger members of their communities advancing to maturity and participation. The involvement of established community members in the selection process has helped to ensure that they accept the beneficiaries, and are committed to supporting them to do well. This endorsement of the beneficiaries was exemplified by the Paramount Chief assigning one of the Learning Assistants to help set up our interview with him, and to lead us into his compound to be introduced.

The programme has also resulted in the professional and personal development of key people who support the Learning Assistants. For example, by regularly visiting the beneficiaries in their schools, the Chief and Women's Leader have been prompted to reflect on their own roles and how they can support girls and young women in their communities to make the most of opportunities to improve their life prospects and those of their wider communities.

In terms of professional development, Headteacher Mohamed told us that having Learning Assistants in his school was his first experience of supporting student teachers, and class

teacher Pascal reflected on his own learning from mentoring and supporting Learning Assistants like Maria:

*Number one, she has made me to work extra. And two ... giving her the chance [means] that I too have to listen to others. That's another change. At the same time... when I give her a chance to teach I'm also gaining extra time to rest ... I'm not the Mr Know All, you know, so, like, if she steps in for me, it gives me more space and help me to work, to prepare and gain energy more for another lesson. (Class Teacher Pascal)*

There was a strong sense from the range of interviewees of a developing culture within communities of reciprocal respect and readiness to learn:

*[Maria is] willing to learn and willing to improve herself in knowing that, OK, I'm limited so I want to improve myself. So, that is the changes I am seeing. She's willing to learn and improve on her own capabilities. (Teacher Pascal)*

This culture was also evident in the comments of other LA programme participants, who describe their learning and growth in terms of respect, patience, good listening, facilitation, problem-solving, how to interact with people, and enabling others to speak and act.

*What I gained as a tutor...You treat them with respect ... we don't shout at them, we treat them with respect ... And my lesson gain as a teacher, we acted more like facilitators ... they had their handouts, they read them, so when you come to class you .... discuss so whenever you come across difficulties ... you may ask them to tell you areas where they encounter difficulties, then you help them. (English tutor Alie)*

*I have learnt a lot, you see. The management skills, the way you interact with people in community, I am getting a lot telling me, every now and then they will call me for their problems, I know how to address them, talk to them. (FAWE District Supervisor Mohammed)*

*I learned patience. They (Learning Assistants) bring babies to meetings, to the teacher colleges. Sometimes they are disrespectful. I don't allow it to stress me. Good listening, listening to problems. (FAWE District Supervisor Thomas)*

In terms of communities as a whole, the LA programme can be seen as an innovation in sustainable authentic community and human resources development that has transformed communities, strengthening and expanding a professional class in a sustainable way. Networks of new and traditional roles have been harnessed to support individual beneficiaries, transforming young women viewed previously as failures into successes. The LA component has involved, and developed, key high status people: chief, women's leader, head teacher, teacher, social worker, and Learning Assistants are expanding the professional class in villages. Learning

Assistants are future teachers, headteachers, and even political leaders – like English Tutor Alie, the secondary school teacher who became a head teacher and a local councillor.

The LA component has made an impact beyond beneficiaries to influence the thinking and practices of professionals such as teachers, headteachers and tutors. There has been an impact at community level, in terms of perceptions of girls' and women's capacities, competences and potential. The commitment of men for change is evident in those who support Learning Assistants. Many of these people participate as a personal commitment, not for money. They each bring different attributes, skills and knowledge to the Learning Assistants. When FAWE implemented the LA component, there was an implicit understanding that the community would look after some aspects of it, and that it would become part of the fabric of communities. It has taken time for this to happen, and for communities to overcome cynicism about the programme as one of many international aid projects which come and go. But raising 'Village Teachers' will leave a lasting legacy.

# Village Teachers: a model to scale up

The LA component of GEC Sierra Leone has innovated in authentic community and human resources development. It offers an identifiable and sustainable model of professional development which enables young people to move into education, employment, higher status and potential future leadership. There is much in this research that points to the LA programme as a scalable, transferable model across cultures and countries.

The Learning Assistant component demonstrates the concept and reality of how to raise 'Village Teachers'. Its success is rooted in existing systems and roles which accept and are committed to the success of the beneficiaries as 'Village Teachers'. It is a model which is manageable because in villages everywhere, everyone knows each other and their roles and responsibilities. As evidenced by the research data, the Learning Assistant model can harness a variety of human and social capital, involving a range of participants simultaneously, for micro system change at community level.

This report has identified key elements of the LA programme which interact and contribute to its effectiveness and to its widespread recognition in the communities where it operates. The term and the concept of the 'Learning Assistant' are understood in the Teacher Training Colleges and in the Ministry of Education. There is considerable interest in the LA pathway to teaching in other districts of Sierra Leone. Based on knowledge and experience of this model, Plan could support the expansion of a 'Village Teacher' training programme, based on the existing Open Educational Resources and structures, taking into account:

- Community selection of beneficiaries, drawing on local knowledge and expertise
- Community sensitisation, including families and high status men
- Project staff who promote 'total engagement' with beneficiaries and their support community
- Recognition of participation at all levels, explicitly valuing supporters in professional, traditional, family and informal roles
- Activities, people and places to enable 'exposure'
- Flexibility to make changes in response to events and feedback
- Additional support and resources for remote rural communities

A key element contributing to the sustainability of the Learning Assistant model is the shift in the perception that it is possible for mothers to work and study without being held back by the demands of childcare. There are many examples within the programme of family and other community members taking care of children while Learning Assistants are away or studying at home; women can continue the programme whilst pregnant or with infants, and Learning Assistants with young children and younger siblings can attend the schools where they work.

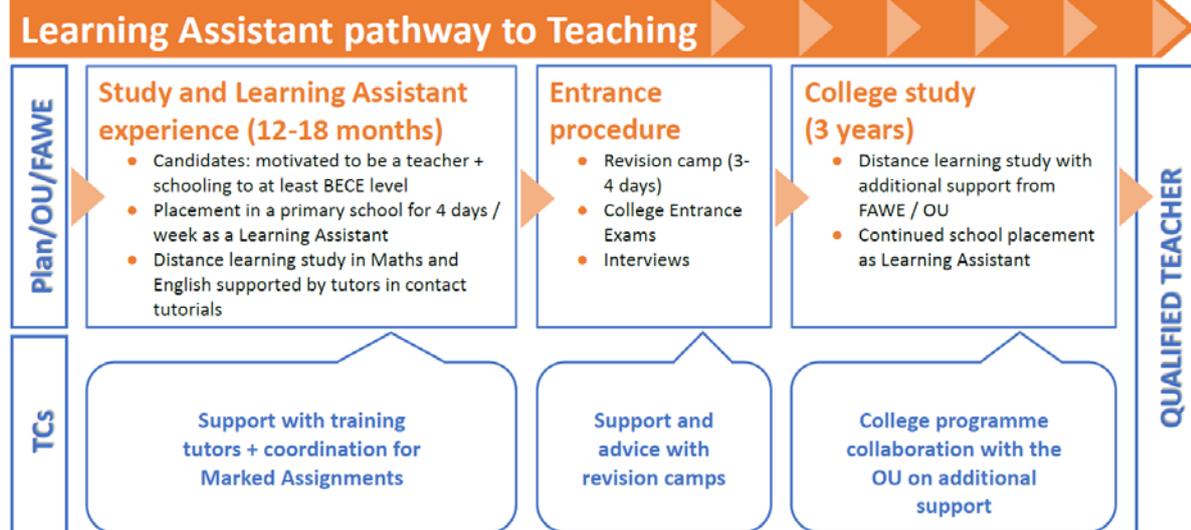
The OU with Plan have funding (GEC-Transition) for ongoing support of Learning Assistants who are now Student Teachers, and for longitudinal research tracking their educational and vocational progress. There are other potential areas for development, research and evaluation

of the LA model: Learning Assistants play a critical role in understaffed village schools, and the value of additional staff could be examined in terms of pupil participation and outcomes. The Ministry of Education could be further engaged to design and validate school-based routes to teacher education and training, and to provide additional resources necessary to ensure genuine sustainable development in rural areas. Teacher Training Colleges have indicated their willingness, with support, to provide 'Village Teacher' CPD for subject tutors, class teachers and headteachers, and the impact of such community capacity-building could be the focus of research.

# Appendix 1

## The Learning Assistant pathway to teaching

Helping young women become teachers: collaboration with Teachers' Colleges in Sierra Leone



# Appendix 2

## People and communities in the research

Community 1 and School 1 are in a rural township where we met Student Teachers Hawa and Maria, Headteacher Agnes and Class Teacher Pascal. The school is an all-girls Catholic school where some pupils receive bursaries. The school has 12 teachers (7 female) and 430 pupils. The school receives additional training, support and funding from the church and from FAWE. Class sizes are small. Classrooms are spacious the school has an enclosed courtyard where pupils can play. The school is near the main road where the print environment is stimulating, with government and commercial billboards and signs, shops, busses, markets, and much coming and going of people.

Community 2 and School 2 are in a remote rural area where we met Fatmata, Isatu and Mariama, Headteacher Mohammed and Class Teacher Margaret. The school is a Muslim school and is acutely overcrowded: 500 pupils occupy three small rooms in a single block. There are no chairs or desks. Classes 1 and 2, over 200 pupils, sit on the floor in one room. There is no enclosed yard. There is a weekly local market nearby, but no other regular gathering place for the community. Dwellings are scattered, and families are often working away on plantations. There is no environmental print in the area, and no bus service.

Adama is a Student Teacher in School 3, a mixed Catholic school which is also in the remote rural community. We did not visit that school, and met Adama in School 2.

## Focus Student Teachers

Maria is 29 years old and has 2 children, a 7 year old girl and a 4 year old boy who attend the school and the pre-school where she teaches. At the time of interview was pregnant. She passed the WACSE in 2008 but did not continue her education, and she had health problems that prevented her from working. She did not work or study until she became a Learning Assistant. She had not been outside of her village until she attended Revision Camp. She is very quietly spoken and has overcome opposition from her husband to join the LA programme, with the support of FAWE Social Worker Martha. Maria works alongside Class Teacher Pascal in Class 5. She says teaching is 'exciting' and she enjoys helping her children and her younger siblings with their school work.

Fatmata is 25 years old with one child, a 5 year old boy who attends the school where she teaches in a remote rural Muslim school. She has 15 siblings, and she also looks after her two 6 year old sisters. She sat the WASCE in 2010 but did not continue her education because her parents could not afford it, and this prompted her to get married at the age of 20. Her husband became disabled in an accident and is no longer able to work. She says her husband 'fought' for her have the chance to join the LA programme: 'He wants me to push for my education'. She says 'I love learning. If I have any chance to learn I will accept it.' After teaching every day in a

classroom of over 200 Class 1 and 2 pupils with Teacher Margaret, Fatmata cooks, looks after her son, and studies from 8pm to 10pm.

## Other Student Teachers interviewed

Hawa is 23 years old. She lives with her mother, her older sister, younger brother and three younger sisters' ages 5, 7 and 15. Her youngest sisters attend the school where she teaches in an all-girls Catholic school in a rural township. Hawa attended school up to JSS3 but had to stop her education when her father died, to help her mother and older sister sell fish, rice and peppers in the market. She had not attended school for over 7 years when she became a Learning Assistant. She had not been outside of her village until she attended Revision Camp. When she became a Learning Assistant, her mother agreed that she could stop selling in the market in order to study and work. Now Hawa's younger sisters do more domestic chores. In return, she helps them with their school work.

Isatu is 23 years old. She lives with her brother and his wife. Her mother and father died when she was very young. She left education in 2011 after sitting the WASCE. Before she became a Learning Assistant, she was a Community (unpaid) Teacher in a township primary school for 2 years, which she enjoyed, but the school closed due to under-enrolment. She moved to her current location in a rural area to become a Learning Assistant.

Mariama is 21 years old. She is a single mother with a 3 year old daughter, and lives with her parents. She left school at SS2 in 2003, because her sponsor (her brother, who was the principal of the school) died, and there was no one to finance her education. She continued to live and work on the oil palm plantation of her late brother, and also engaged in petty trading to support herself, before she joined the Learning Assistant programme.

Adama is 25 years old. She lives with her mother and four siblings. She sat the WASCE in 2010 but 'according to the family philosophy' there was no reason to continue her education. She worked as a hairdresser in her home, and still does this in between her teaching and studies. Adama is disabled, and finds walking slow and difficult. She walks 3 hours each way, and must wait at a river for someone to ferry her across, to get to the school where she is a Student Teacher. She says she has always wanted to be a teacher. She teaches in a school where there are 3 other STs and one female Community (unpaid) teacher.

The interviews with Isatu, Mariama and Adama were conducted partly in English and partly in Krio with an interpreter.

## School staff

Headteacher Agnes (School 1) is a FAWE mentor in an all-girls FAWE school where some pupils receive bursaries. She has been headteacher since 2014, and has been in the school since 2002 as a teacher, senior teacher and deputy head. She is one of two female headteachers in the District, where there are 9 male headteachers. She is quietly spoken, but firm in her views. She is a grandmother to six year old twins.

Headteacher Mohamed (School 2) has been in his role since 2014. There are 500 pupils in his rural school, which has only 3 classrooms. Many pupils are absent when they help their families in the farming season. Mohamed personally identified local women to become Learning Assistants; he interviewed them to ascertain their willingness and gave them a test to evaluate their academic skills. As Student Teachers, he provides them with extra support in subject studies and teaching skills three times a week after school.

Class 6 Teacher (School 1) Pascal is a Gambian Christian Brother. He has lived in Sierra Leone since 2012. He has taught in adult literacy programmes as well as in the primary school.

Class 1 and 2 Teacher Margaret (School 2) is 35 years old and has been a teacher for 9 years. She takes responsibility for three Student Teachers together in a single classroom where there are 150 boys and 75 girls in Classes 1 and 2. There are 7 teachers in the school, and Margaret is the only female teacher. She is also 1 of the 4 teachers who are qualified. She is dignified, elegantly dressed, and considers herself a role model to children and to the Student Teachers who emulate her in dress and manner.

## Community people

'Mamie Queen' Women's Leader Massah in Community 1 attended school for exactly one day as a child. After that, she was taken to her village to do farm work. She married at 14. Before she turned 17 her husband died, leaving her with two children. She became involved in IRC-led programmes for capacity building in rural areas, and over some years she grew into a leadership role. She was elected Women's Leader in 2008, a position she will hold for life. She represents over 2,000 local women in farming and educational projects. Women can report domestic abuse to her, and she will take their cases to the police. Since recently completing an adult literacy course, she can now write her name. She meets Learning Assistants/Student Teachers in the market and sees them in schools, and she attended some tutorials to check on attendance. The interview was conducted in Mende, with an English translator. The interview took place at the women's community outdoor meeting space, which has a communal kitchen and seating surrounded by mango, banana and cashew trees.

FAWE Social Worker Martha in Community 1 is a qualified primary school teacher. She is 32 years old. Before graduating from secondary school, she separated from her husband and had her child. She now also looks after the four children of her deceased brother, and her own

mother who is blind. She has been with the LA project since 2013, working across 5 chiefdoms in her district. In the village area where she was interviewed, she works with 28 Student Teachers in 6 schools. She is small and powerfully built, and has a wide smile. She is warmly greeted by everyone in the community as she makes her rounds.

FAWE District Supervisor Thomas Community 1 has been a District Supervisor for the LA component of GEC Sierra Leone since 2013. He is 32 years old, married with two young children. He took the FAWE position over a job offer from IRC, because he wanted a leadership role. When Learning Assistants first went into schools some of them were harassed by male headteachers and teachers. His rapid intervention was to remind headteachers they were in the role of LA Advisors and therefore had responsibility for the welfare of Learning Assistants. He threatened to withdraw Learning Assistants from schools where they were harassed and report the headteachers to the Ministry. He held informal gender awareness conversations with teachers and headteachers. He is large and cheerful, and describes his work with Learning Assistants and Student Teachers as 'total engagement'.

Paramount Chief Bai Maro in Community 2 is responsible for the second largest of 11 chiefdoms in the district. He was elected to his role in 2012, and will hold the position for life. He is an integral part of local government, and the LA programme acts with his authority behind it. He pays daily visits to primary schools, to give guidance and promote traditional culture, and he has advised Student Teachers in his chiefdom. He lived for several years in Derbyshire. We met him with a local Student Teacher, in his compound which sits along the main road.

Morlai is the father of Student Teacher Fatmata in Community 2. He is a farmer of rice, palm trees and cassava in a remote rural area. He has 16 children all of whom attended school and sat the WASCE, but he could not afford to provide them with further education. He says 'I was not fortunate for my parents to have sent me to school, but I have the strong belief that education is paramount.' He met us the primary school where Fatmata teaches. His interview was conducted in Temne, with an English translator.

FAWE District Supervisor Mohamed in Community 2 is a former Community (unpaid) Teacher and as a mature student he qualified in mathematics in 2012. He became a District Supervisor in 2013 and supports 104 Student Teachers (former Learning Assistants). During the interview he took several calls from Student Teachers. 'They all have my number – they take up most of the calls on my phone!' he says. Mohammed says as a DS he learned how to interact with communities and manage projects, and to manage expectations of participants, giving encouragement along with facts.

## Tutors

English tutor Alie in Community 2 is the principal of a rural secondary school since 2004 and has the Higher Teaching Certificate (HTC) with a specialism in Linguistics. He has undertaken a series of building improvements and expansions to the secondary school because enrolment is increasing. Alie is also a local councillor and politician with responsibility for the development of his area.

Maths Tutor Saidu in Community 2 has been a secondary school mathematics teacher since 2006, and until 2016 was vice principal of the rural secondary school where Tutor Alie is principal. Saidu now teaches maths at a secondary school in a township. As a Tutor, he and Alie met with husbands of Learning Assistants who were unwilling to let their wives participate in the programme, urging them as educated men to let their wives be educated: 'Let two frogs can croak together'. In one instance, where he travelled to meet a Learning Assistant's husband in a remote village, it was the first time he crossed a river. He sometimes paid for Learning Assistants' transportation to attend tutorials, and also sometimes provided food at tutorials. About being a Tutor, he says 'The experience was great – I felt part of the success of my Learning Assistants'. He takes personal pride in the achievements of the 15 of the 19 women in his group who passed the Teacher Training College entrance exam. He says he always had a vision of supporting women's education and the programme enabled him to achieve this.