



NGO: EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR LAW AND JUSTICE (ECLJ)

**UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW
52ND SESSION**

**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE
FOR THE 52ND SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

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Introduction

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Republic of Sierra Leone (Sierra Leone) for the 52nd session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

Background

2. Sierra Leone is a country located in western Africa and has a population of approximately 7.8 million people.¹ The majority of the population is Muslim, with approximately 78.6% of the population identifying as Muslim, 20.8% as Christian, and 0.6% as belonging to other religions.²

3. Sierra Leone's last review was held on May 12, 2021.³ As a result of the review, Sierra Leone received 274 recommendations, 216 of which it accepted.⁴ In our last report on Sierra Leone, we expressed concern over the prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the country. Since then, we have become further concerned about religious persecution, FGM, child trafficking, and child marriage.

4. As part of Sierra Leone's last UPR, it was recommended by Timor-Leste, but only noted by Sierra Leone, that the government “[s]trengthen the efforts to eradicate the practice of female genital mutilation.”⁵ It was also recommended by Brazil, and supported by Sierra Leone, that the government “[r]edouble the efforts to combat trafficking in persons, particularly children, ensuring that relevant laws reflect international standards, duly prosecuting the offenders and protecting the victims.”⁶ Additionally, it was recommended by Belgium, and supported by Sierra Leone, that the government “[h]armonize laws to prevent and eliminate child marriage and undertake comprehensive awareness-raising campaigns on the negative consequences of child marriage on girls.”⁷

¹ *Sierra Leone*, BRITANNICA, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sierra-Leone> (last visited July 18, 2025).

² *Id.*

³ *Universal Periodic Review – Sierra Leone*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/sl-index> (last visited July 18, 2025).

⁴ *Infographic – Sierra Leone*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/UPR38-Sierra-Leone-Infographic.pdf> (last visited July 18, 2025).

⁵ OHCHR, UPR of Sierra Leone: Thematic List of Recommendations 53, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/UPR38-Sierra-Leone-Thematic-List-of-Recommendations.docx> (last visited July 18, 2025).

⁶ *Id.* at 15.

⁷ *Id.* at 30.

Legal Framework

Religious Persecution

5. Article 24 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone guarantees the freedom for individuals to “either alone or in community with others and both in public and in private to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”⁸

6. Sierra Leone is also a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁹ Under Article 18 of the ICCPR:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.¹⁰

Female Genital Mutilation

7. In Sierra Leone, FGM is currently legal. However, under Section 21 of the newly adopted Child Rights Act:

(1) A child shall not be subjected to physical violence including torture, other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and cultural practices which dehumanises or is injurious to the physical and mental welfare of a child.¹¹

8. Sierra Leone is a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).¹² Under Article 19 of the CRC:

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

2. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of

⁸ CONSTITUTION OF SIERRA LEONE 1991, art. 24, <https://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/constitution1991.pdf>.

⁹ *Status of Ratification Interactive Dashboard*, OHCHR, <https://indicators.ohchr.org> (last visited July 18, 2025).

¹⁰ G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 18 (Dec. 16, 1966), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> [hereinafter ICCPR].

¹¹ THE CHILD RIGHTS ACT 2024, § 21 (Sierra Leone),

https://www.parliament.gov.sl/uploads/bill_files/The%20Child%20Right%20Act,%202024.pdf.

¹² OHCHR, *supra* note 9.

prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.¹³

9. Further, Article 7 of the ICCPR states that “[n]o one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In particular, no one shall be subjected without his free consent to medical or scientific experimentation.”¹⁴

Child Trafficking

10. Under Article 19 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone, “[n]o person shall be held in slavery or servitude or be required to perform forced labour or traffic or deal in human beings.”¹⁵

11. Under section 13 of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act of 2022, a person “shall not knowingly transport another person across an international border for the purpose of sexual exploitation including prostitution or for the purpose of labour exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude, slavery or practices similar to slavery.”¹⁶

12. When the victim is a child, the trafficker shall be sentenced to no less than fifteen years in prison.¹⁷

13. Additionally, section 15 criminalizes fraudulent adoptions.¹⁸ Those convicted of using deceit or fraud to carry out an adoption shall be sentenced to no less than ten years in prison.¹⁹

14. Further, under section 22, “[a] person convicted of the offence of trafficking shall be liable to a fine not exceeding fifty million leones or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding ten years or to both such fine and imprisonment.”²⁰

15. Additionally, Article 8 of the ICCPR states “[n]o one shall be held in slavery; slavery and the slave-trade in all their forms shall be prohibited. No one shall be held in servitude.”²¹

16. Sierra Leone is also a party to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.²² Under Article 9, section 1 of this Protocol:

¹³ G.A. Res. 44/25, Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 19 (Nov. 20, 1989), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/crc.pdf>.

¹⁴ ICCPR art. 7, *supra* note 10.

¹⁵ CONST. OF SIERRA LEONE 1991, art. 19, *supra* note 8.

¹⁶ ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND MIGRANT SMUGGLING ACT 2022, § 13(1) (Sierra Leone), <https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/117003/AntiHuman%20Trafficking%20and%20Migrant%20Smuggling%20Act%202022.pdf>.

¹⁷ *Id.* at § 13(3).

¹⁸ *Id.* at § 15(1).

¹⁹ *Id.* at § 15(2).

²⁰ *Id.* at § 22(2).

²¹ ICCPR art. 8, *supra* note 10.

²² *Status of Treaties: 12. A Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime*, UNITED

1. States Parties shall establish comprehensive policies, programmes and other measures:

(a) To prevent and combat trafficking in persons; and

(b) To protect victims of trafficking in persons, especially women and children, from revictimization.²³

Child Marriage

17. On July 2, 2024, President Julius Madda signed into law the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2024.²⁴ Under this law, marriages under the age of eighteen are strictly prohibited.²⁵

18. Child marriages are also prohibited under international treaties such as the CRC and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to which Sierra Leone is a party.²⁶ Article 1 of the CRC defines a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years,”²⁷ and Article 16 of the CEDAW prohibits child marriages.²⁸

Religious Persecution

19. A 2022 Pew Research study noted an increase in religious persecution in Sierra Leone, largely due to an increase in religiously motivated attacks by hostile groups.²⁹ In Sierra Leone, religious violence is primarily associated with tribal violence and increases in radical Islam.³⁰ Additionally, an estimated ninety percent of the population identify with secret societies.³¹ These secret societies engage in demonic and occultic rituals and anyone who leaves these groups, like Christian converts, are persecuted.³²

NATIONS TREATY COLLECTION, https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?src=ind&mtdsg_no=xviii-12-a&chapter=18.

²³ G.A. Res. 55/25, The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children art. 9 § 1 (Nov. 15, 2000), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>.

²⁴ AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *Sierra Leone: Historic Bill to End Child Marriage Passed-Sustained Efforts to Raise Community Awareness Must Now Follow* (July 3, 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/sierra-leone-historic-bill-to-end-child-marriage-passed-sustained-efforts-to-raise-community-awareness-must-now-follow/>.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Status of Ratification Interactive Dashboard*, *supra* note 12.

²⁷ G.A. Res. 44/25, art. 1, *supra* note 13.

²⁸ G.A. Res. 34/180, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women art. 16 (Dec. 18, 1979), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>.

²⁹ Samirah Majumdar, *I. Number of Countries With “Very High” Government Restrictions Increases in 2022*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Dec. 18, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/12/18/number-of-countries-with-very-high-government-restrictions-increases-in-2022>.

³⁰ *Sierra Leone*, VOICE OF THE MARTYRS, <https://www.persecution.com/globalprayerguide/sierra-leone/> (last visited Oct. 7, 2025).

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

20. For example, a Christian woman was abused by her parents because she refused to participate in her family's occultic rituals.³³ Later, when her father became sick, her family threatened to bring her back to sacrifice her in hopes that it would heal her father.³⁴ In trying to escape, she was attacked by her mother.³⁵ Thankfully, she managed to escape to a safe location.³⁶

21. Another Christian woman fled from her family when they threatened to kill her after she became a Christian and refused to be initiated into a secret society.³⁷ She now is living and working with forty-five other Christian women who also had to flee from their homes in search of safety.³⁸

22. Additionally, in 2024, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Sierra Leone (PFSL) expressed concern over the increase in attacks being perpetrated against Pentecostal Churches across Sierra Leone.³⁹ President of PFSL, Bishop Akintayo Sam-Jolly, stated:

Sacrilege, desecration, destruction, and violence go on against Churches, land matters are being overturned, all of these happening in increasing numbers in clear view of the authorities and yet very little or no conclusive justice is being meted out. These acts have great propensity to result in people taking things into their own hands, as they feel marginalized.⁴⁰

23. For example, in 2023, a church in Freetown was vandalized and a Bible was destroyed.⁴¹ Unfortunately, despite the increase in attacks over the past three years, these cases are held up in magistrate courts, without any final outcomes.⁴²

Female Genital Mutilation

24. In Sierra Leone, FGM remains prevalent due to societal traditions and the fact that it has yet to be explicitly banned. In Sierra Leone, sixty-one percent of girls between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine and ninety percent of women between the ages of forty-five and forty-nine have undergone FGM.⁴³ FGM is performed mainly as a rite of passage in an initiation ritual known as Bondi.⁴⁴ Bondi rituals are often performed in secret in remote forests.⁴⁵ FGM is practiced because of ingrained cultural beliefs and the notion that FGM helps control sexual desire and helps women remain faithful to their husbands. However, the World Health

³³ *Sierra Leone: Christian Woman Attacked by Family*, THE VOICE OF THE MARTYRS (Oct. 1, 2024), <https://www.persecutionsa.org/post/sierra-leone-christian-woman-attacked-by-family>.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Sierra Leone: Christian Girl Escapes Secret Society*, THE VOICE OF THE MARTYRS (Jun. 17, 2025), <https://www.persecutionsa.org/post/sierra-leone-christian-girl-escapes-secret-society>.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Pentecostal Concern Over Increased Attacks on Churches*, AYV NEWS (Mar. 19, 2024), <https://ayvnews.com/pentecostal-concern-over-increased-attacks-on-churches>.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *In Sierra Leone; Churches Under Attack, Inter-Religious Council Executive Urges Government to Act Urgently*, FAITH AND JUSTICE NETWORK (Aug. 24, 2024), <https://fjnetwork.org/index/in-sierra-leone-churches-under-attack-inter-religious-council-executive-urges-government-to-act-urgently>.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Isaac Kaldedzi, *FGM in Sierra Leone: What Can Be Done to End It?*, DW (Feb. 6, 2024).

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

Organization (WHO) notes that FGM offers zero benefits and instead can result in numerous health complications, ranging from severe bleeding to problems menstruating and complications in childbirth.⁴⁶ In extreme situations, complications relating to heavy bleeding can result in death.⁴⁷

25. For example, in January 2024, three girls below the age of eighteen died because of complications that were believed to have been caused by FGM.⁴⁸ Additionally, in 2022, a twenty-one-year-old girl died who had undergone FGM.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the lack of legislation in Sierra Leone has made it difficult to investigate deaths related to FGM. As noted by UN human rights experts, “[t]he lack of a dedicated and enforceable legislation that expressly criminalises and punishes female genital mutilation is hindering judicial or other investigation into, and persecution of, these harmful practices and unlawful killings.”⁵⁰

26. On July 3, 2025, the Child Rights Act was passed to strengthen Sierra Leone’s protections for children.⁵¹ Notably, Section 21 of this law prohibits physical violence against children, including torture, inhumane treatment, and acts that cause physical or mental harm to the children.⁵² However, the law stops short of expressly banning FGM. In fact, shortly after the passing of this new law, Parliament issued an official disclaimer clarifying the law.⁵³ The disclaimer stated “[t]he Parliament of Sierra Leone wishes to categorically state that the Child Rights Act, 2025, recently enacted by this Honourable House, does not contain any provision imposing a fine, penalty, or punishment specifically addressing **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)**.”⁵⁴

27. It is sad that despite claiming to want to protect children from physical abuse, the government remains not just unwilling to criminalize FGM, but the above statement shows that the government does not consider FGM as a form of physical abuse. As stated above, FGM has been proven to result in numerous health complications, even death. Sierra Leone has an obligation under its laws and international agreements to protect children from physical abuse. However, not only does Sierra Leone fail to criminalize this practice but it also refuses to support recommendations calling for the practice to be outlawed.

Child Trafficking

28. Child trafficking for labor is a pervasive issue in Sierra Leone.⁵⁵ This is particularly true in Sierra Leone’s eastern province, where “an estimated thirty-three percent of children

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ Press Release, OHCHR, Sierra Leone: End Impunity for Female Genital Mutilation, Says UN Human Rights Experts, U.N. Press Release (Aug. 24, 2022), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/08/sierra-leone-end-impunity-female-genital-mutilation-say-un-human-rights>.

⁵¹ Aminata Sesay, *Parliament Passes Child Rights Act Into Law*, A-Z NEWSPAPER (Jul. 4, 2025), <https://a-zsl.com/parliament-passes-child-rights-act-into-law/>.

⁵² THE CHILD RIGHTS ACT 2024, § 21, *supra* note 11.

⁵³ *FGM is Still Legal in Sierra Leone – Sierra Leone Parliament*, SIERRA LOADED (July 9, 2025), <https://sierraloaded.sl/news/fgm-legal-sierra-leone-parliament/>.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Combatting Child Trafficking in Sierra Leone*, CENTER ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING RESEARCH & OUTREACH (Apr. 17, 2025), <https://cenhtro.uga.edu/combating-child-trafficking-in-sierra-leone/>.

between the ages of five and seventeen have experienced child trafficking...⁵⁶ Child trafficking in the country is exacerbated by the cultural practice known as *menpikin*.⁵⁷ This practice operates as an informal foster agreement, where kids are sent away to live in other households, in hopes that this will improve the child's life.⁵⁸ However, nefarious individuals use this practice to their advantage and exploit families who are desperate for their children to have better lives.⁵⁹

29. Every year, thousands of struggling families send their children away to live with relatives and strangers, in hopes that they will be cared for and receive education.⁶⁰ While this may work out in some cases, there are also cases where children are subjected to physical and mental abuse by their “foster” parents and forced to work in domestic service instead of receiving the education their parents were promised. As shared by one survivor, “[w]e were poor, and my mother could not cater for my needs, so she saw an opportunity in my trafficker’s request to take me away. [The trafficker] promised [my mother] of giving me a better education.”⁶¹

30. To help combat individuals exploiting children and desperate families, in 2022, the government adopted a law called Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling.⁶² In addition to criminalizing human trafficking, the law also criminalizes fraudulent adoption, taking aim at the practice of *menpikin*. Under this law, any individual who uses fraud or deceit to adopt a child shall be punished with no less than ten years in prison.⁶³

31. Despite laws prohibiting human trafficking and fraudulent adoption, the practice of trafficking and exploiting children persists.⁶⁴ This is because there have been reports of judicial corruption, inadequate resources, and prolonged delays in prosecuting cases. This means that the laws combating child trafficking go unenforced.⁶⁵

32. Further contributing to the problem is a lack of awareness.⁶⁶ Families believe that they are doing what is best for their children and feel that it is better for their children to be entrusted with strangers than live in poverty.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, often these children end up facing lifelong consequences.⁶⁸ For example, one victim, who is now grown up and has her own children, still has visible scars from the years of abuse she suffered as a victim of child trafficking.⁶⁹

⁵⁶ *High Number of Sierra Leone Children Trafficked Before 18th Birthday*, UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL (Feb. 25, 2022).

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ Alimamy Koroma, *The Hidden Scourge of Child Trafficking in Freetown: A Call to Community Action*, SIERRALII (Oct. 8, 2024).

⁶¹ UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL, *supra* note 56.

⁶² ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND MIGRANT SMUGGLING ACT 2022, art. 15, *supra* note 16.

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ Koroma, *supra* note 60.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

Child Marriage

33. In Sierra Leone, approximately thirty percent of girls and four percent of boys are married before they turn eighteen.⁷⁰ Currently, 800,000 girls under the age of eighteen are married, with half of them being married before they turned fifteen.⁷¹ Thankfully, since Sierra Leone's last UPR, the government passed the Prohibition of Child Marriage Bill in 2024.⁷²

34. This new law not only prohibits child marriage, but also criminalizes aiding and abetting child marriages and prohibits cohabitation.⁷³ Further, this law also provides girls who have been affected by child marriage with access to counseling.⁷⁴

Recommendations

35. We urge Sierra Leone to take steps to protect Christians from being targeted and persecuted. Sierra Leone has a responsibility to ensure that everyone is able to freely practice their religion according to the tenets of their faith. No one should be targeted, harassed, and attacked because of their religion.

36. It is imperative that Sierra Leone immediately criminalize FGM. In addition to criminalizing it, efforts must be taken to educate the population about the dangers of FGM to change the public perception of this practice. Further, once FGM is illegal, the government must aggressively enforce the new legislation.

37. To combat child trafficking and the practice of *menpikin*, the government must conduct awareness campaigns to educate the population on the dangers and risks of sending their children away. It is imperative that attitudes and public perception of this practice change for it to be eradicated. Further, we ask that the government commit to enforcing the laws that have already been implemented and vigorously go after individuals who are taking advantage of desperate families and exploiting children.

38. We commend Sierra Leone on the work it has done since its last UPR to criminalize child marriage. Now that child marriage is officially illegal, we urge the government to aggressively enforce this law and implement awareness campaigns to educate the population on the new law.

⁷⁰ *Sierra Leone Acts to Ban Child Marriage*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (June 28, 2024), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/28/sierra-leone-acts-ban-child-marriage>.

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *Id.*