

**Universal Periodic Review of Sierra Leone**  
**Submitted by Child Rights Coalition – Sierra Leone (CRC-SL)**  
**October 2020**

**A. Introduction**

This submission, which covers the period from 2016 to October 2020, is a child-focussed report. Fifteen civil society organizations working on child rights issues and representing the Child Rights Coalition - Sierra Leone (CRC-SL), participated in the preparation of the report: Children’s Forum Network, Grassroots Community Development Advocates –Sierra Leone, Advocacy Movement Network, Defence for Children International, Youth and Child Advocacy Network, Youth and Children’s Advocacy Panel, Network Movement for Youth and Children’s Welfare, Foundation for Rural and Urban Transformation, Youth Arise for Rural Development, Empowerment and Peace Building, Plan International Sierra Leone, Youth Welfare and Development Organization, Centre For Social Economic Empowerment And Development Sierra Leone, Ngopee Foundation, SOS Children’s Villages Sierra Leone, and Campaign for Good Governance.

Consultative meetings were held to collect relevant data and information on progress in implementing the UPR thematic recommendations. Staff of the Human Rights Commission Sierra Leone and the National Children’s Commission participated in the meetings. The report writing process entailed desk review, consultative meetings, and the validation of the report.

Donors and organizations that supported the preparation of the report are Equality Now, Fund for Global Human Rights, Defence for Children International, SOS Children’s Villages Sierra Leone, AMNet, and Foundation for Rural and Urban Transformation.

**B. Country Context**

Sierra Leone has an estimated population of 7 million,<sup>1</sup> of which more than 50% are aged 18 or under and 18.4% of the population is less than 5 years old. The majority of the population live on less than \$2 a day and 70% of the population lives below the poverty line. The country’s Human Development Index value for 2018 is 0.438, which put the country in the low human development category (181

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Sierra Leone (2015) Population and Housing Census

out of 189) countries and territories<sup>2</sup>. The 2018 Sierra Leone Integrated Household Survey estimated overall poverty incidence at 56.8 percent and extreme poverty at 12.9 percent.

Sierra Leone signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991 to which it is now legally bound and has enacted into law through the national Child Rights Act 2007. Sierra Leone has also ratified the following international and regional human rights instruments relating to the protection of children: the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography; the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

### **C. Priority Child Rights Issues**

Feedback from engagement with children’s agencies and relevant stakeholders during the consultative process identified five priority areas used as parameters to assess the Government of Sierra Leone human rights situation in relation to children’s issues from 2016 to 2020. The five thematic areas are as follows:

1. Right to Health - Inadequate support to children affected by the corona virus pandemic (COVID-19)
2. Discrimination against girls accessing education, particularly pregnant girls
3. Sexual abuse and violence
4. Child trafficking and child labor
5. Harmful traditional practices (Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child forced marriage)

#### **1. Right to Health – Inadequate support to children affected by the Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic**

Sierra Leone reported its first corona virus case in March 2020 and this prompted the Government to establish the National COVID Emergency Response Centre (NACOVERC) to manage the pandemic. At NACOVERC, the Psychosocial Pillar was also created with Standard Operating Procedures to address the welfare,

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<sup>2</sup> Human Development Report 2019

mental health and emotional needs of vulnerable populations including children. NACOVERC data shows that over 311 children have tested positive for COVID-19 (13% to 14%) of the total reported positive cases in the country<sup>3</sup>. The increasing rate of infected children is alarming and this was brought to the attention of the Government by CRC-SL and other child led organization as this does not augur well for children's health and well-being.

CRC-SL reports suggest that children are among the most vulnerable groups affected by COVID-19 and evidence from NACOVERC further indicate that over 400 children have gone through quarantine, Treatment Centers and Community Care Centers.<sup>4</sup>

In Sierra Leone, children aged 0 – 18 are identified as positive contacts and efficient transmitters of COVID-19 but have not benefitted much from psychological first aid, counselling and other forms of psychosocial support services to help them cope with stigmatization, discrimination, mental health and emotional problems associated with COVID-19.

The NACOVERC Psychosocial Daily Reports 2020 have further identified that children have witnessed domestic abuse and other forms of abuse in quarantine homes, treatment and community care centers. Evidence suggest that children affected by the corona virus pandemic in Sierra Leone have experienced separation from their parents, mental health problems, stigmatization and a good number are now orphans as a result of losing their parents due to Covid 19<sup>5</sup>. As at period under review, 72 persons have died in Sierra Leone as a result of the corona virus and this has disintegrated families and the livelihood of children<sup>6</sup>.

CRC-SL is very concerned that most children affected by the corona virus in Sierra Leone have not received adequate welfare and psychological support services and this has exposed children to neglect, emotional abuse and psychological harm associated with the pandemic.

To promote the health of children, the Government has adopted a National Strategy on Teenage pregnancy (2018–2022), which partners are now working with to reduce the occurrence of teenage pregnancy. However, government is heavily reliant on donor funds to curtail the menace and this is making it difficult to effectively implement the strategy.

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<sup>3</sup> National Covid Emergency Response Center (NACOVERC) 2020, Ministry of Health DHISS2 2020

<sup>4</sup> National Covid Emergency Response Center (NACOVERC) 2020, Ministry of Health DHISS2 2020

<sup>5</sup> National Covid Emergency Response Center (NACOVERC) 2020, Ministry of Health DHISS2 2020

<sup>6</sup> National Covid Emergency Response Center (NACOVERC) 2020, Ministry of Health DHISS2 2020

As a country, there is limited access to adolescent sexual and reproductive health services, but there is increased awareness by Government and civil society organizations on lessening teenage pregnancy.

## **Recommendations**

It is evident that children in Sierra Leone have experienced trauma and other social vices as a result of the pandemic and if not addressed would impact on their emotional health and developmental needs. In response to this, CRC-SL urges the Government to take the following actions:

- I. To continue improving the health infrastructure and put effective public health management systems in place to combat the corona virus thereby minimizing the devastating impact on the welfare of vulnerable children and those living with special needs including orphans;
- II. To create fair access to health facilities in the remote areas of the country to ensure that underprivileged children and their families in rural areas have equal access to quality health care;
- III. To put in place an emergency child protection response plan that is child focused to address the needs of children affected by COVID-19 and any future disease out breaks;
- IV. To increase budgetary allocation to the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs to enhance their capacities for monitoring and reporting on the care and protection of children affected by the corona virus;
- V. National Commission for Children and other partners including United Nations agencies to support meaningful participation of children in decisions that affect their lives;
- VI. To allocate more resources to the full implementation of the National Strategy on Teenage pregnancy (2018 – 2022)
- VII. Free health care services to continue and extended to children up to the age of 12 years;

## **2. Discrimination against girls accessing education, particularly girls who are pregnant**

Since the last reporting period in 2016, it is observed that the Government of Sierra Leone has made significant strides in reducing barriers for girls, especially pregnant girls to have equal access to education.

Following the ECOWAS court ruling in December 2019, which found that the policy barring girls from attending school amounted to discrimination and human rights violation, awareness raising from Government officials and civil society organizations on the ECOWAS judgement have commenced. However, much still needs to be done to disseminate and implement the ECOWAS court recommendations.

Moreover, removing social barriers and cultural bottlenecks for girls to access education continues to be a menace in society and this is institutionally entrenched in the schools. On the positive side, following the last reporting period, the Government has adopted two complementary policies namely; *Radical Inclusion Policy* and the *Comprehensive Safety Policy* in favour of equal access to education for girls.

As part of the Government's Human Capital Development expansion, total budgetary allocation to the education sector was 1.4 trillion Leones representing 22 percent of total primary expenditures as indicated in the Government Budget and Statement of Economic and Financial Policies (Financial Year, 2020).

Another progress noted from Government in the best interest of the girl child is the integration of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) into the National Basic Education Curriculum. This would now mean that teachers and pupils would have an opportunity to talk about sexual and reproductive health issues openly with girls and this may raise more awareness compared to when such discussions were shrouded in secrecy. Comprehensive Sexuality Education has the potential to expose the girl child to preventative and safe reproductive health thereby increasing their chances to make choices and reach their fullest educational potential.

Notwithstanding the progress made by the Government of Sierra Leone to reduce discrimination against girls in accessing education, deep seated challenges still remain. It is noted for instance that the Radical Inclusion Policy and

Comprehensive Safety policy are too vague and need to be disseminated for them to be effective. The ECOWAS judgement has been passed but there are gaps in the implementation of post court ruling recommendations.

The Comprehensive Sexuality Education is yet to be fully reflected in the school curriculum. Above all, cultural, traditional and religious views are perceived to debunk the importance of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education as open discussions of sexual intercourse with adults are frowned at in schools and in the community.

## **Recommendations**

CRC-SL urges the Government of Sierra Leone to:

- i. Continue to promote retention of pregnant girls in schools by fully complying with the recommendations of the ECOWAS ruling of December 2019. This is in compliance with the National Education Act of 2004 which states the principle of non-discrimination in accessing education (article 4 section 1);
- ii. Provide services and supportive interventions for pregnant girls in school to ensure that they are not bullied or discriminated against as this may impact on their school attendance, progress and retention in school;
- i. Demonstrate their commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), especially article 28(1) which calls on State parties to recognize the right of every child to education;
- ii. Effectively implement the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1981 Part 3 Article 10, that requires “State parties to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in the field of education”;
- iii. Promote and disseminate the Comprehensive Sexuality Education which is yet to be fully reflected in the school curriculum to ensure open discussions of sexual matters with adults in schools;
- iv. Must work with partners and service providers to mobilize resources to strengthen the educational services to address the special needs of adolescent and pregnant girls;

- v. Enforce the 2019 Sexual Offences Act ( as amended) to hold perpetrators accountable for sexual violence against children especially the girl child;
- vi. Take all necessary measures to ensure that girls are protected against any violence in schools, and that pregnant teenagers enjoy equal access to education;
- vii. Strengthen all policies to bolster basic education, including education for girls, adult literacy and education for persons with disabilities;

### 3. Sexual Abuse and Violence

The Government of Sierra Leone has recently made noteworthy efforts to curb the growing rate of sexual violence particularly against minors. In September 2019, the government amended the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 including punitive measures and increasing penalties such as life imprisonment for perpetrators. The Government has also established a special unit within the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police, which is now charged with the responsibility of investigating all reports of sexual violence.

In 2020, the Government of Sierra Leone established a free toll line (Help Line 116) managed by the newly established Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs to ease reporting of rape cases and established a model court in Freetown for adjudication of cases of sexual violence.

From April 2020 to October 2020, 39,000 calls have been recorded on the 116 line. However, 329 of these calls were sexual offences calls of which 212 were related to sexual penetration, 17 for rape and 97 calls related to domestic abuse.<sup>7</sup>

A progressive step made by the Government in curbing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is the establishment of One-Stop-Shop Centres in seven districts: Pujehun, Bonthe, Moyamba, Kailahun, Portloko, Koinadugu, and Western Area. These centers provide opportunities for survivors of sexual violence to access legal, medical, psychological and other support services from a centralized location.

The Government has shown political will in addressing SGBV issues as demonstrated in the nationwide sensitization campaign in 2018 by the Office of the First Lady of the Republic of Sierra Leone. The First Lady launched the “Hands off

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<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs (2020)

Our Girls” Project to raise national wide awareness and high-level advocacy and lobby on ending sexual and gender-based violence.

In spite of the above, there are still significant issues that need to be addressed across the country and civil society organizations are concerned with the growing reports of sexual violence against minors. On average, the Family Support Unit of Sierra Leone Police receive and investigate about 4000<sup>8</sup> cases annually and the lack of a forensic lab in the country compromises and weakens evidence at the detriment of victims/survivors.

Between January and May 2020, the Family Support Unit recorded a total of 1,272 sexual assault cases in just five districts and only 93 were prosecuted<sup>9</sup>. This shows that much remains to be done to bring perpetrators to justice.

Defence for Children International (DCI) in Bo District alone reported that 59 cases of sexual violence against children were recorded between June and September 2020<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, convictions of the cases have not been effected. Defence for Children International reports 2020 suggest that outside the capital of Freetown, most of the sexual offence cases are still held up within the justice system either at the Family Support Unit (FSU), the State Counsel’s Office, in transition between Magistrate Court and High Court awaiting indictment or are at the High Court.

It is observed that over half of the rape cases are still held up at the State Counsel’s office awaiting legal advice before prosecution and with only one State Counsel covering Bo, Pujehun and Moyamba districts and overwhelmed with work. Delay in access to justice for victims of sexual and gender based violence is very worrying and this is tantamount to injustice and a gross human rights violation<sup>11</sup>.

There are growing reports of commercial child sexual exploitation such as internet related sexual harassment including cyber bully against girls in Sierra Leone. Sexual violence puts parents and children at risk of harm and this serves as an impediment to active participation of girls in public spheres.

## Recommendations

CRC-SL recommends to the Government to:

- i. Implement the Sexual Offences Act 2019 (as amended) to ensure that perpetrators of sexual violence are brought to justice;

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<sup>8</sup> Family Support Unit Reports ( 2020)

<sup>9</sup> Rainbo Initiative Reports (2020)

<sup>10</sup> Defence for Children International Reports (2020)

<sup>11</sup> Press release of Defence for Children International, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2020.



- ii. Address underlying issues including gender discrimination and poor parenting at national and community level;
- iii. Replicate the Sexual Violence Model Court at regional, district and community levels;
- iv. Recruit more State Counsels and High Court Judges and deploy them across all districts to facilitate resolution of rape cases;
- v. Speedily establish a forensic lab, strengthen the capacity of the Family Support Unit (FSU) with more logistics and training of personnel;
- vi. Strengthen child safeguarding measures in schools to ensure that safeguarding focal persons are allocated to each schools;
- vii. Work with partners to intensify awareness raising campaigns at community level;
- viii. Recruit more social workers and deploy them at chiefdom level to be facilitating prevention initiatives;
- ix. Scale up and enhance life skills programmes for both boys and girls to meet their full potential;
- x. Child safeguarding policy increased among partners and government

## **4. Child Labour and Child trafficking**

### ***a. Child Labour***

Notwithstanding the fact that Sierra Leone has ratified various International Labour Organization Conventions and criminalized child labour in the Child Rights Act 2007, the country remains among the Sub Saharan African countries with the highest rates of child labour.<sup>12</sup> Though in 2019 the government launched the Free Quality Education programme that has significantly increased school enrolment among boys and girls across the country, many children are still out of school and used by their parents or care givers for different purposes of economic exploitation.

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<sup>12</sup> Press release of Defence for Children International, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2020.

In the cities including Freetown, Bo, Kenema, Makeni and Koidu, large number of children are often engaged in street hawking during and after school hours. In the rural areas, children are engaged in hazardous work including fishing at the high seas, mining and quarrying for their parents and caregivers. Data available from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS, 2019) suggest that Koinadugu (65%), Pujehun (46%) and Kambia (41%) districts have the highest rate of child labour.

Children are involved in exploitative labour as clearly shown below:

<b>Category</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
All children aged 5-17 years engaged in various forms of work	25.1	27.0	26.1
Children 5-11 years engaged in 1 hour of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work per week	24.1	25.5	24.8
Children aged 12-14 years engaged in 14 hours of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work	15.0	17.8	16.4
Children aged 15-17 years engaged in 43 hours of economic or domestic work or even hazardous work	40.7	41.7	41.2

Source: **Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS, 2019)**

The data above demonstrates that more girls are engaged in domestic and economic work than boys. Girls even rate highest in hazardous work as indicated and this disadvantages the girl child further.

## **Recommendations**

CRC-SL recommends to the Government of Sierra Leone to:

- i. Be compliant with International Labour Organization Domestic Workers Convention and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security to implement local Labour laws in the best interest of the child;
- ii. Review the Child Rights Act 2007 to include more punitive provisions that address child labour which is on the increase;
- iii. Implement the Education Act 2005 that makes Primary/Basic education compulsory and levy fines on parents that do not enroll their children at school going age;

- iv. Regulate involvement of children in apprenticeship and informal skills training programmes;
- v. Collaborate with partners to put stringent measures in place to monitor and address child labour across hot spot areas in the country;
- vi. Work with the Local Councils to prohibit street trading and other forms of hazardous work for children to help them reach their full potential;
- vii. Scale up access to school programmes in districts such as Koinadugu, Pujehun and Kambia with the highest rate of child labour.

### ***b. Child Trafficking***

Sierra Leone has taken some significant steps to address human trafficking in general and child trafficking in particular. The country adopted its Trafficking in Persons Act in 2005, which is now under review and has also set up the Trafficking in Persons Taskforce that is actively coordinating policy reforms and programmes that address trafficking. In September 2020, the government through the Taskforce adopted a new National Plan of Action on Human Trafficking.

In 2017, Defence for Children International, facilitated signing of the Standard Operating Procedures between Sierra Leone and Guinea on the one hand, and between Sierra Leone and Liberia on the other hand to enhance practical actions for cross border collaboration in ending cross border child trafficking.

In 2019, Defence for Children International, International Organization for Migration (IOM) and World Hope International conducted trainings for border security officials that are now paying dividend. For example, in 2019, the country achieved a landmark conviction of trafficking cases that were arrested at the border with Liberia. This has contributed in moving Sierra Leone from Tier 2 watch list to Tier 2 list in the 2019 report of the State Department of the United States of America.

However, the rate of internal child trafficking remains high in Sierra Leone due to widespread cultural practices of families giving away children to family relations, friends and even strangers to look after. With increasing rate of child labour and commercial sexual exploitation of children in the country, child trafficking continues to be among the highest forms of child abuse and exploitation and this has exposed children to risk of harm.

Trafficking in Persons Taskforce suggest that the country has many porous borders that allow easy transportation of children out of the country to places that are unsafe for their health and developmental needs.

## **Recommendations**

Child Rights Coalition Sierra Leone (CRC-SL) is encouraging the Government of Sierra Leone and partners to;

- i. Transform mainstream training on child trafficking into regular trainings of personnel of all security sectors at border areas. This would act as deterrent to child trafficking;
- ii. Conduct awareness raising on child trafficking at border communities and set up community based surveillance mechanisms at porous areas;
- iii. Expedite adoption of the revised Trafficking in Persons Bill to make it more child centered;
- iv. Take effective measures to provide adequate legal and other assistance for domestic and international trafficking victims, and intensify efforts to identify and prosecute more trafficking cases;
- v. Collaborate with Districts Councils and Council of Paramount Chiefs to develop local policies on child welfare and regulate transfer of children from one family/person to the other;
- vi. Establish safe homes and trust fund for victims of trafficking;
- vii. Develop more Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for other border crossing points;

## **5. Harmful Traditional Practices – female genital mutilation (FGM) and child forced marriage**

The Government of Sierra Leone continues to face challenges in stepping up efforts to combat female genital mutilation (FGM) because it is rooted in culture and traditional practices. FGM is prevalent and perceived as initiation into the Bondo society which is done by exclusively women and mostly privately.

At local level, in some chiefdoms (including in the districts of Bo, Bonthe, Kambia, Kailahun, Port Loko, Pujehun, Western Area Rural and Western Area Urban), paramount chiefs and local practitioners (soweis) have signed 'Memoranda of Understanding' (MOUs). These agreements ban FGM for girls under the age of 18 and require the consent of women over the age of 18. These MOUs are entirely voluntary, however, and, though a positive step forward in the community dialogue, have no legal standing organs.<sup>13</sup>

FGM is central to the Bondo society and involve the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs<sup>14</sup>. Evidence from research suggest that FGM has many social and health implications for girls.<sup>15</sup> That notwithstanding, FGM is still practiced extensively in Sierra Leone.

The Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs was established in 2019 by the Government to oversee all gender and children's empowerment issues. CRC-SL is collaborating with the Ministry to prohibit all harmful practices against women of all ages including FGM, child early and forced marriage.

It is evident that child early and forced marriage deny children their childhood and it disrupts their education. Early marriage in Sierra Leone deprives girls of their basic human rights. Girls that are forced into marriage have experienced other forms of exploitation including domestic abuse and sexual exploitation.

## **Recommendations**

CRC-SL unequivocally condemns child marriage and female genital mutilation as a violation of human rights and therefore recommends to Government to:

- I. Amend the Child Rights Act of 2007 to unequivocally prohibit FGM and early marriage for anyone under the age of 18;
- II. Step up mechanisms to combat female genital mutilation;

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<sup>13</sup> Thomsons Reuters Foundation: Sierra Leone: the Law and FGM (September 2018)

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.unicef.org/protection/57929\\_40802.html](https://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_40802.html).

<sup>15</sup> Sipsma, Heather L., et al. "Female Genital Cutting: Current Practices and Beliefs in Western Africa." Bulletin of the World Health Organization 90.2 (2012)

- III. Explicitly prohibit all harmful practices against women of all ages, including female genital mutilation, child, early and forced marriage and take all necessary measures to enforce the prohibition;
- IV. Facilitate and create an enabling environment for open dialogue on FGM;
- V. Enforce the Sexual Offences Act 2019 as amended that confirms the age of sexual consent at 16, and holds perpetrators accountable for sexual violence against children;
- VI. Increase universal birth and marriage registration and establish additional registration locations. Make birth records accessible to law enforcement authorities;
- VII. Harmonization of laws pertaining to age of marriage.