



HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF SIERRA LEONE

ALTERNATIVE REPORT

SUBMISSION TO THE

AFRICAN COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE RIGHTS AND WELFARE OF THE CHILD

REPORTING PERIOD: 2021–2025

I. Introduction

The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL) was established under the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone Act (No. 9) of 2004, with the mandate to protect and promote human rights in Sierra Leone. The Commission monitors, investigates and reports on human rights concerns, including the rights and welfare of children.

In November 2022, the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone obtained Affiliate Status with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC). This report represents the Commission's first complementary submission to the Committee following the granting of this status.

This report is submitted pursuant to Article 43 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and provides an overview of progress made and challenges observed during the reporting period, 2021–2025. The report draws on monitoring conducted by the Commission, engagement with relevant institutions responsible for child protection, and information obtained from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and service providers.

While Sierra Leone has undertaken several legislative reforms relating to children's rights, challenges remain in the effective implementation of laws and protection systems.

II. Methodology

This report draws on monitoring activities conducted by HRCSL between 2021 and 2025, including monitoring visits to detention facilities, interim care centres and community-based child protection structures. The report also relies on information gathered through engagement with government institutions, CSOs and service providers, and data from organisations

providing support to survivors of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV). In addition, the Commission reviewed national legislation, policy documents and publicly available statistical reports relating to children's rights in Sierra Leone.

A. General Measures of Implementation

During the reporting period, Sierra Leone undertook significant legislative reforms affecting children's rights.

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024 established 18 years as the minimum age of marriage without exception, thereby harmonising statutory and customary law. This historic law criminalises marriage for anyone under the age of 18. It is designed to protect young girls from a harmful practice that has long violated their rights and impeded their development. It addresses six key recommendations from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) received in May 2021, notably the recommendation from Togo, which called on Sierra Leone to “adopt legislation and other measures to prevent and end the practice of child marriage.

The Child Rights Act, 2025, repealed and replaced the Child Rights Act, 2007, introducing significant reforms to enhance the protection and promotion of children's rights in Sierra Leone. This new legislation expands the legal framework for child protection by implementing more robust safeguards against abuse, violence, exploitation, and neglect. It further clarifies provisions regarding alternative care arrangements, including foster care, adoption, and the regulation of residential care facilities for children. Additionally, the Act strengthens the child justice system by outlining detailed procedures related to diversion, juvenile courts, detention, rehabilitation, and reintegration for children in conflict with the law. Collectively, these reforms establish a more comprehensive framework for addressing the evolving protection needs of children and improving the overall implementation of children's rights in Sierra Leone.

The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act, 2023 strengthened protections in the education sector and introduced reforms aimed at improving access, inclusion and accountability within the education system. The Act explicitly prohibits corporal punishment in schools and promotes positive disciplinary measures. It also reinforces the right to free and compulsory basic education and supports the inclusion of vulnerable groups, including pregnant girls and other marginalized children, to ensure they are able to access and remain in school without discrimination.

In addition, the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act 2022 strengthened the legal framework for addressing trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling. The Act includes victim-centred protection measures and provides specific safeguards for vulnerable groups, particularly women and children, including identification, protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration support for victims, consistent with Articles 29 and 30 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

While these reforms represent important legislative/policy progress, implementation challenges remain. Limited awareness of newly adopted laws, institutional capacity constraints and resource limitations continue to affect the effective enforcement of child protection legislation.

Recommendation

Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) through the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs should strengthen public awareness and enforcement of child protection legislation, including the Child Rights Act 2025 and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, through nationwide sensitisation and institutional training.

B. Definition of the Child

The Child Rights Act 2025 defines a child as any person below the age of 18 years, consistent with Article 2 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024 further reinforces this standard by establishing 18 years as the minimum age of marriage and prohibiting child marriage in all circumstances.

Prior to these reforms, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act allowed marriage below the age of 18 with parental or guardian consent under customary law, creating inconsistencies within the legal framework. The recent legislative reforms have addressed this gap by criminalising child marriage and ensuring that the minimum age of marriage is uniformly set at 18 across all legal systems, including customary and religious marriages.

Recommendation

- 1. It is recommended that GoSL should ensure effective implementation of the legal definition of a child as any person below 18 years, including continued monitoring of the enforcement of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024 across all regions.*

C. Harmful Practices and Child Marriage

The 2019 Demographic and Health Survey indicates that approximately 30 per cent of girls are married before the age of eighteen¹. According to a 2023 UNICEF report, approximately 30% of girls and 4% of boys in Sierra Leone are married before reaching 18, with even higher rates in rural areas. Currently, around 800,000 girls are married in Sierra Leone, with half of these marriages occurring before they turn 15. This trend significantly contributes to the country's high adolescent pregnancy rate, with pregnancy complications being the leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19².

However, given the recent enactment of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, continued monitoring will be necessary to assess the extent to which the prohibition of child marriage is effectively implemented across the country.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) remains widely practised in Sierra Leone. According to the Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2019, which refers to the practice as Female Genital Cutting (FGC), prevalence is estimated at 83 per cent among women aged 15–49 and 61 per cent among girls aged 15–19³. Although the Child Rights Act 2025 strengthened aspects of child protection, Section 19 does not explicitly criminalise FGM against children, leaving a gap in the legal framework.

During the review of the Child Rights Act 2007, the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone submitted a position paper on the proposed Child Rights Bill, highlighting the need for the law to explicitly prohibit FGM against children. During parliamentary deliberations, provisions relating to FGM were removed from the Bill. Prior to presidential assent, the Commission issued a public statement expressing concern about the removal of these provisions and called for explicit legal protection of girls below 18 from FGM. Despite all these interventions, the Bill was enacted into law.

In 2024, the Commission investigated the deaths of two girls, aged 13 and 17, in Kambia District, linked to FGM. Following preliminary investigations before the Kambia Magistrate Court, the cases were committed to the High Court for trial in August 2024 after the Magistrate

¹ <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR365/FR365.pdf>

² <https://www.unicef.org/sierraleone/reports/unicef-sierra-leone-2023-annual-report>

³ <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR365/FR365.pdf>

found that sufficient evidence had been presented by the prosecution. The matters are currently pending before the High Court, which the Commission continues to monitor.

Recommendation

- 1. GoSL should explicitly criminalise Female Genital Mutilation against children under the age of 18 through legislative reform to close existing protection gaps and ensure compliance with Article 21 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and Article 5(b) of the Maputo Protocol.*

D. Violence, Abuse and Exploitation of Children

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Article 27 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child requires States Parties to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. This includes the inducement, coercion, or use of a child to engage in sexual activity, the use of children in prostitution or other sexual practices, and the use of children in pornographic activities, performances, or materials.

In Sierra Leone, several laws provide for the protection against sexual exploitation and abuse of children, including the Child Rights Act 2025, which strengthens child protection measures, and the Sexual Offences Act 2012, as amended in 2019, which criminalises sexual offences against children and provides penalties for perpetrators. In addition, the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act 2022 addresses trafficking and exploitation, including offences involving the sexual exploitation of children.

HRCSL remains concerned that, sexual exploitation and abuse of children continue to occur despite existing legal protections.

Institutional mechanisms have been strengthened to improve the response to gender-based violence. According to the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, Government One-Stop Centres have been established progressively across the country since 2020, bringing the total to seven centres. These centres provide integrated services to survivors, including psychosocial support, medical care, safety and legal assistance. HRCSL notes that the centres have provided case management and comprehensive support services to over 2,530 survivors since their establishment.

Monitoring conducted by HRCSL on the implementation of the Sexual Offences Act between 2020 and 2024 identified several systemic gaps affecting the protection of child survivors. While the establishment of the Sexual Offences Model Court and the One-Stop Centres have strengthened the national response, challenges remain. These include: limited logistical and human resources for the Family Support Units responsible for investigations, delays in legal advice from the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, and an inadequate number of State Counsel handling cases across the regions.

HRCSL notes with concern that access to survivor support services remains uneven across the country. Safe homes and interim care centres for child victims are limited and are largely operated by non-governmental organisations rather than the State. The limited number of state-supported shelters restricts timely access to safe accommodation, psychosocial support, and rehabilitation services for child survivors, particularly in rural areas. It also places the protection and recovery of child victims at risk where NGO resources are constrained or where services are not consistently available.

In addition, the absence of a functional forensic laboratory continues to affect evidence collection and the effective prosecution of cases. Although Section 39 of the Sexual Offences Act 2012 (as amended in 2019) entitles victims to free medical treatment and medical reports from accredited health facilities, the lack of forensic laboratory services limits the ability to conduct scientific analysis of evidence needed to support prosecutions. The absence of a functional forensic laboratory affects the proper collection and analysis of evidence needed to support investigations and prosecutions. This weakens cases before the courts and increases the likelihood that perpetrators may not be held accountable. It also creates a risk of evidence being lost, contaminated, or tampered with, which undermines the right of survivors to access justice and effective remedies

Other barriers affecting accountability include stigma surrounding sexual violence, community pressure on families to settle cases outside the formal justice system and delays in the justice process. These factors contribute to underreporting and subsequently weakens the protection of children from exploitation and abuse.

Available service-provider data from the Rainbo Initiative, which provides medical and psychosocial support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, further illustrates the continued prevalence of sexual abuse in Sierra Leone. Records from Rainbo Centres show that

sexual assault consistently constitutes the overwhelming majority of reported cases between 2021 and 2025 for children between the ages of 0- 20 years.

According to Rainbo Initiative GBV data (2021–2025), a total of 14,817 sexual and physical assault cases were recorded across the reporting period⁴. Analysis by educational level indicates that adolescents are the most affected group, with students in Junior Secondary School accounting for the highest number of cases, followed by Senior Secondary School students. Cases were also reported among primary school children and kindergarten-aged children, highlighting that sexual violence affects children across all stages of development.

Educational Level	Total Cases (2021–2025)	Percentage (%)
Kindergarten	564	3.8%
Primary School	2,848	19.2%
Junior Secondary School	5,913	39.9%
Senior Secondary School	3,795	25.6%

Key insight:

Adolescents in Junior and Senior Secondary School account for approximately 65.5% of all reported cases, demonstrating that early and late adolescence represent the period of highest vulnerability to sexual violence.

Recommendations

- 1. GoSL should strengthen prevention and response mechanisms for sexual violence against children, including improved coordination among law enforcement, health services and social welfare institutions.*
- 2. GoSL should establish and operationalise a national forensic laboratory to strengthen evidence collection and support the effective prosecution of sexual offences.*
- 3. GoSL should increase logistical and human resource capacity of the Family Support Units responsible for investigating sexual offences involving children.*
- 4. GoSL should establish and adequately support State-run survivor services, including safe homes and regulated interim care facilities for child victims of abuse.*

E. Administration of Child Justice

⁴ <https://rainboinitiative.org/>

The Child Rights Act 2025 establishes 14 years as the minimum age of criminal responsibility for all offences. The Act further provides that a child below this age cannot be held criminally responsible and should instead be subjected to restorative processes.

However, inconsistencies remain within the legal framework. The Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2019, through its sentencing guidelines relating to sexual penetration offences, refers to 12 years in relation to criminal responsibility. The Child Rights Act 2025 does not expressly repeal or replace this provision, leaving a discrepancy within the legal framework and highlighting the need for harmonisation of relevant legislation.

During the reporting period, the Judiciary expanded the Sexual Offences Model Court system beyond Freetown, establishing specialised courts in Bo City, Bo District in the Southern Region, and Makeni City, Bombali District in the Northern Region of Sierra Leone in 2025. This expansion would improve access to justice for survivors in the rural areas and helps facilitate more timely handling of cases, thereby contributing to faster trials and reducing delays in the prosecution of sexual offences.

However, challenges remain, including limited geographic coverage of specialised courts, case backlogs, and inadequate child-friendly facilities within some police stations.

Recommendation

- 1. GoSL should harmonise legislation relating to the minimum age of criminal responsibility, particularly provisions under the Sexual Offences Act and the Child Rights Act 2025.*
- 2. GoSL should expand the Sexual Offences Model Courts to other districts to improve access to justice, promote speedy trials, and reduce delays in the handling of sexual offences cases.*

F. Family Environment and Alternative Care

Monitoring conducted by HRCSL in 2024 across eighteen (18) Interim Care Centres identified several structural challenges. Access to education was generally available, with most centres reporting that children were enrolled in nearby schools or supported through educational programmes. Vaccination services were also accessible in several facilities, mainly through government immunisation programmes or referrals to nearby health facilities.

However, HRCSL monitoring revealed serious structural concerns in a number of centres, including sanitation challenges, limited access to clean water and overcrowded sleeping arrangements. In addition, mental health services were available in only a few facilities, and structured reintegration programmes for children leaving institutional care were often absent.

Similar concerns were observed in some schools, where poor sanitation conditions, including inadequate toilet facilities and lack of clean water, pose risks to the health, dignity, and well-being of children.

Recommendation

- 1. GoSL should strengthen oversight and standards in alternative care facilities, including ensuring access to clean water, sanitation, mental health services and structured reintegration programmes for children leaving institutional care.*

G. Basic Health and Welfare

Government allocation to the health sector remains below the 15% benchmark set under the Abuja Declaration. The construction of a 152-bed Tertiary Children's Hospital in Freetown represents progress toward strengthening specialised paediatric care.

However, recurring shortages of drugs under the Free Health Care Initiative for pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children under five, as well as sanitation challenges in health facilities, limited ambulance services and referral constraints, continue to affect child survival and development outcomes.

Recommendation

- 1. The State Party should increase investment in the health sector, particularly to improve the availability of drugs under the Free Health Care Initiative, strengthen referral systems and expand child-focused health services.*

H. Education, Leisure and Cultural Activities

The Government continues to implement the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme launched in 2018, which provides free tuition and public examination fees for pupils in government and government-assisted schools. The Government has also maintained approximately 21% annual budget allocation to the education sector, contributing to increased

school enrolment. Between 2018 and 2021, enrolment increased by 37%, from 1,982,475 to 3,131,440 pupils, and further rose to 3,461,876 pupils in the 2023/24 school year, with slightly more girls than boys enrolled. In addition, the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools promotes access to education for marginalised groups, including pregnant girls, parent learners and children with disabilities.

Despite these efforts, several challenges continue to affect the effective implementation of the right to education. These include the inadequate supply of core textbooks in schools, limited infrastructure to support learners with disabilities, including the absence of ramps and accessible sanitation facilities, and insufficient assistive devices for children with disabilities. In addition, delays in the disbursement of school subsidies have affected the effective administration of schools.

Recommendation

- 1. The State Party should strengthen implementation of the Free Quality School Education programme, including improving access to textbooks, expanding infrastructure for learners with disabilities and ensuring timely disbursement of school subsidies.*

I. Special Protection Measures

Children in Street Situations and Child Labour

Monitoring conducted by HRCSL in 2024 and 2025 in some parts of the Western Area identified children engaged in street trading and begging, including during evening hours, often to contribute to household income. Children observed were generally between 6 and 17 years of age, with some indicating that economic hardship and single-parent household situations compelled them to engage in such activities while attending school.

Although these activities differ from hazardous forms of child labour such as those reported in mining areas, the monitoring indicates that children engaged in street trading remain exposed to significant protection risks, including harassment by older youths and others in street environments, unsafe environments, prolonged working hours and possible economic exploitation, particularly where money collected appeared to be controlled by adults.

These conditions raise concerns regarding economic exploitation and children in street situations, contrary to the protections provided under Article 15 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Recommendation

- 1. The State Party should strengthen social protection programmes and targeted interventions to address the root causes of child labour and the increasing presence of children in street situations.*

III. Priority Areas for Urgent Action

Based on its monitoring and analysis, the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone highlights the following priority areas requiring urgent attention:

- Explicit criminalisation of Female Genital Mutilation against children to close the current protection gap in national legislation.
- Strengthening the response to sexual violence against children, including improving investigative capacity, prosecution, and survivor support services.
- Establishment of a functional national forensic laboratory to support evidence collection and improve prosecution of sexual offences.
- Expansion of specialised Sexual Offences Model Courts to additional districts to improve access to justice and reduce delays in cases.
- Improvement of conditions in interim care centres and schools, including access to clean water, sanitation, and adequate living conditions for children.

IV. Conclusion

Sierra Leone has undertaken significant legislative and institutional reforms during the reporting period, including the enactment of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, the Child Rights Act 2025, and the expansion of Sexual Offences Model Courts.

Conspicuously, explicit criminalisation of Female Genital Mutilation remains absent in our laws. Sexual violence against children continues at significant levels. Service delivery coverage remains uneven, case backlogs persist, and structural weaknesses in alternative care and child justice systems continue to affect effective protection.

Strengthened enforcement, adequate funding, geographic expansion of services and clear statutory safeguards remain essential to ensure full compliance with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

