

SIERRA LEONE 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sierra Leone is a constitutional republic with a directly elected president and a unicameral legislature. In 2018, the Sierra Leone People's Party candidate, Julius Maada Bio, won the presidential elections. Observers found the elections to be largely free and fair. Following the 2018 general elections, the Sierra Leone People's Party and the All People's Congress each held 58 seats in parliament; however, subsequent by-elections in June gave the All People's Congress a one-seat advantage with 59 members. These by-elections were considered free and fair.

The Sierra Leone Police, which reports to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, is responsible for law enforcement and maintains security within the country. The Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces have some domestic security responsibilities to assist police upon request in extraordinary circumstances. The armed forces report to the Ministry of Defence and National Security. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. There were reports members of the security forces committed some abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by government or on behalf of government; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly; serious government corruption; lack of investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child, early, and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation/cutting; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults, although the laws were not enforced.

The government took some steps to investigate, prosecute, and punish officials who committed abuses or engaged in corruption, but impunity persisted.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were several credible reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. The Independent Police Complaint Board (IPCB), an independent civilian oversight mechanism, investigates security force killings and makes recommendations on prosecutions to the Sierra Leone Police (SLP).

On August 10, during demonstrations that turned violent, the SLP shot and killed 30 protesters, mostly unarmed youth, in the capital city of Freetown and in the towns of Makeni and Kamakwie. Protesters killed six police officers.

On August 24, authorities announced the formation of a special investigation committee regarding the August demonstrations composed of members of the Sierra Leone Bar Association, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, civil society organizations, veteran and retired police associations, and others. Critics noted a large percentage of committee members had strong ties to the government, and some committee members had already publicly condemned protesters before being appointed.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses

The law prohibits such practices, but there were reports police committed cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment of prisoners or detainees. In one reported instance, on June 12, the SLP arrested, detained, and shaved the dreadlocked hair of a controversial rapper, Alhaji Amadu Bah (more commonly known by his stage name LAJ), for an alleged offense. Following media reports of inhuman treatment of LAJ, the IPCB launched an investigation into the alleged police mistreatment. The IPCB had not published its report as of September 6.

Impunity remained a significant problem in the security forces, notably in the SLP. While Amnesty International noted improvements in police leadership's enforcement of disciplinary measures, other observers reported continuing lack of crowd control and human rights training. The IPCB investigates police misconduct, with a mandate within the security sector to receive and investigate complaints from the public and advise the leadership of the SLP.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions were harsh and sometimes life threatening due to gross overcrowding, an inefficient justice system, lack of sufficient correctional facilities and personnel, inadequate sanitary conditions, and a lack of proper medical care in prison facilities.

Abusive Physical Conditions: As of August, the country's 21 prisons, designed for 2,495 inmates, held 4,801, including 2,173 convicted prisoners. The most severe example of overcrowding was in the Freetown Male Correctional Center, designed to hold 324 inmates, which held 1,820 individuals. Some prison cells measuring six feet by nine feet held nine or more inmates. The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL), the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Prison Watch Sierra Leone (PWSL), and the Sierra Leone Correctional Services (SLCS) reported 13 prisons and detention centers were moderately overcrowded, due to delays in trials and sentencing.

In most correctional centers, such as in Moyamba, Kenema, and Bo, pretrial detainees were held with convicted prisoners. As of August, the HRCSL and SLCS reported no prison or detention center facility held male and female inmates together.

According to the SLCS and the PWSL, 24 juveniles were detained in Freetown following the August 10 demonstrations that ended in violence. Officials initially struggled to confirm the ages of inmates due to the lack of documentation, which resulted in some juveniles being treated as adults and detained in adult correctional facilities. By August 24, all 24 juveniles had been transferred to care homes by the NGO Don Bosco Fambul, which had facilities for vulnerable youths in Freetown.

Other than those arrested following the August 10 demonstrations, authorities sent

most offenders younger than 18 to “approved schools” or reformatory institutions. According to the SLP’s District Human Rights Monitoring Groups (DHRMGs) and Family Support Unit (FSU), to avoid detaining juveniles with adults immediately after arrest, police frequently detained children (mostly teenagers) in the FSU offices while waiting to transfer the youths to one of three juvenile facilities. Authorities acknowledged these juvenile facilities lacked resources to function properly.

The HRCSL and the DHRMGs in Moyamba, Bo, and Kenema reported overcrowding, unhygienic conditions, and insufficient medical services in SLCS holding centers. The DHRMGs reported conditions in police station holding cells were poor, especially in small stations outside Freetown such as Moyamba and Pujehun. Lack of adequate physical facilities created life-threatening conditions for detainees. Holding cells in some facilities were often dark with little ventilation, and inmates slept on mattresses on bare floors. The HRCSL reported poor toilet facilities in most police holding centers. Conditions in detention centers, including lighting, space, and ventilation, were generally better for female inmates than for male inmates.

The DHRMGs reported cells often lacked proper lighting, space, bedding, ventilation, and protection from infectious diseases and mosquitoes. For security reasons, SLCS authorities refused to allow inmates to sleep under mosquito nets, requiring inmates to use chemical repellents instead. Most prisons had piped water, but some inmates lacked sufficient access to potable water.

SLCS Officials in Moyamba and Bo referred inmates to government hospitals for special care, which largely accepted the inmates as patients. SLCS authorities, the DHRMGs in Moyamba, Kenema, and Bo, and the HRCSL reported there was no discrimination against inmates with disabilities. The HRCSL further reported it had no information regarding abuse of inmates with disabilities.

As of August, the SLCS reported 18 deaths in prisons and detention facilities due to malaria, respiratory and skin infections, and typhoid fever. The PWSL reported the causes of death were related to prison conditions, such as overcrowding and poor hygienic conditions.

The HRCSL and SLCS reported a shortage of prison staff, which resulted in a lack of security that endangered inmates' safety.

Administration: There was no prison ombudsperson, but senior prison officials were available to respond to complaints. The HRCSL and DHRMGs reported SLCS authorities generally investigated credible allegations of mistreatment of inmates.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring by independent nongovernmental observers. The HRCSL reported international monitors had unrestricted access to detention centers and police holding cells. The HRCSL, Amnesty International, and PWSL monitored prisons frequently.

Improvements: During Judicial Week in February, to decongest detention centers across the country, the Legal Aid Board Sierra Leone secured the discharge of 234 accused persons from various High Courts around the country, using methods such as habeas corpus petitions and summary reviews of cases.

Prison authorities issued new bedding and pillows to several correctional centers in Moyamba and Kenema.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention and provide for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of arrest or detention in court. The government generally did not observe these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires warrants for searches and arrests of persons taken into custody on criminal grounds, but arrests without warrants were common. The DHRMGs in Moyamba and the HRCSL reported authorities made some arrests without warrants and the SLP did not follow proper arrest procedures in some instances.

The law requires authorities to inform detainees of the reason for their arrest within 24 hours and charge them in court within 72 hours for suspected misdemeanors or within 10 days for suspected felonies. Detainees, however, were not always informed promptly of the charges brought against them.

According to Amnesty International, the judiciary and the SLP applied the bail system inconsistently and sometimes demanded excessive bond fees.

Detainees have the right to access family members and to consult with an attorney in a timely manner. Lawyers typically were allowed unrestricted access to detainees; however, there were numerous credible reports those detained in connection to the August 10 unrest were denied access to lawyers and their families. Although there were 50 active state counsels (public defenders), the majority worked in the capital and were often overburdened, poorly paid, and available only for more serious criminal cases.

Arbitrary Arrest: According to the HRCSL, there were reports of individuals held for questioning without being promptly informed of the reason for the arrest. The SLP and the chiefdom police held suspects in detention cells without explanation for up to three days for suspected misdemeanors and more than 10 days for suspected felonies. Chiefs sometimes subjected both adults and children to arbitrary detention and imprisoned them unlawfully in their homes or “chiefdom jails.” The DHRMGs and the HRCSL reported cases of illegal detentions at several police stations and the Freetown Male Correctional Center. The DHRMG in Moyamba and the HRCSL reported the SLP and chiefdom police occasionally arrested and detained persons arbitrarily, including members of opposition parties.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention remained a significant problem. The Campaign for Human Rights and Development International and the DHRMGs reported pretrial and remand detainees spent an average of three to five years in pretrial detention before courts examined their cases or filed formal charges, frequently exceeding the maximum sentence for the alleged crime.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary. Observers, including Amnesty International and the civil society organization Center for Accountability and Rule of Law (CARL), assessed that the judiciary maintained relative independence.

In addition to the formal court system, the DHRMGs and the HRCSL reported local chieftaincy courts administered customary law with lay judges, primarily in

rural areas. Appeals from these lower courts are heard by the magistrate courts. Paramount chiefs in villages maintained their own police and courts to enforce customary local law. Chieftaincy police and courts exercised authority to arrest, try, and incarcerate individuals. According to the HRCSL, traditional trials were generally fair, but there was credible evidence corruption influenced many cases, as paramount chiefs acting as judges routinely accepted bribes and favored wealthier defendants. The HRCSL and the DHRMGs further reported that traditional authorities charged offenses not within their jurisdictional powers and violated the rights of persons when prescribing punishment.

The limited number of judicial magistrates and lawyers, cumbersome judicial procedures, and high court fees, restricted access to justice for most citizens.

According to CARL, corruption within the military justice system was less prevalent than within civilian criminal justice system.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair trial for all defendants, but this right was not always enforced.

The lack of judicial officers and facilities regularly resulted in long trial delays. The HRCSL and the DHRMGs stated some defendants at magistrate court were not always afforded access to counsel. Attorneys provided at public expense were overburdened with cases, and often defendants who could not afford to pay for an attorney had no access to legal aid prior to trial.

Defendants were not always informed promptly or in detail of the charges against them, and they did not always have access to free assistance from an interpreter. Defendants generally did not have adequate facilities to prepare their defense. Delays in the appeals process were excessive, sometimes lasting more than two years.

HRCSL and DHRMGs reported local chieftains at times exceeded their mandates and administered harsh punishments.

Laws on gender equality were inconsistently enforced, and many traditional courts

continued to ignore the rights of women regarding family law and inheritance. Juveniles were afforded few rights in the traditional justice system.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

On July 3, police arrested and detained Femi Claudius Cole, leader of the 13-party Coalition of Progressive Political Parties (CoPPP), and Dennis Bright, Chairman and Leader of the National Grand Coalition (NGC) party and CoPPP member, for allegedly contravening a police notice banning a planned protest (see section 2.b.). On July 6, authorities released Cole and Bright without charges.

In the days following violent protests on August 10, authorities conducted raids throughout Freetown, Makeni, and other provincial towns. Authorities claimed to use video evidence to confirm the identities of suspects; however, several reports suggested some police targeted opposition All People's Congress (APC) party supporters as "persons of interest," irrespective of their connection to specific events on August 10. Members of the APC reported their arrested members were denied access to counsel. Some were subsequently released while others remained in custody pending trial at year's end.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Individuals and organizations may seek civil remedies for human rights abuses through regular access to domestic courts or through the Legal Aid Board Sierra Leone and the HRCSL. Individuals may also seek redress from regional bodies, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and law prohibit such actions, but there were reports the government failed to respect these prohibitions. Most notably, for several hours during and after the August 10 protests and violence, the government shut down the country's internet access and mobile phone networks and instituted monitoring of social media (see section 2.a, Internet Freedom). After the demonstrations, the SLP reportedly arrested hundreds of persons at their homes in Freetown and other

towns without warrants.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution and law provide for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right, but there were exceptions.

Internet Freedom

The government did not routinely restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. Following the August 10 protests, however, the government twice shut down internet and cell phone services nationwide. The government also shut down television broadcasts and news radio stations. Telecommunications and media networks came back online two hours later after the first shutdown, just before Vice President Juldeh Jalloh announced a nationwide curfew. Authorities again cut the internet that evening when President Bio returned to Freetown from abroad; service was restored shortly thereafter. On August 11, the National Cybersecurity Coordination Centre declared it had “put mechanisms in place” to monitor social media platforms accessible by citizens and threatened prosecution on charges of “cyber terrorism” for the spreading of “incendiary” information to “destabilize” the State.

The law grants the government the power to designate certain computer systems as “critical” infrastructure and outlines the process for the search and seizure of electronic devices by law enforcement personnel or “other authorized persons.” Critics of the law raised concerns the law could be used to target opponents of the government by characterizing online criticism as “cybercrimes.”

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution and law provide for the freedoms of assembly and association,

however, there were several reports the government restricted the right to peaceful assembly.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The law requires prior coordination of demonstrations with the SLP. Civil society groups believed the law only required groups to notify police of their intent to demonstrate, but the government stated protests must be approved by the inspector general of police. Opposition leaders and civil society organizations complained police routinely denied permits for protests that would be critical of the president.

On July 2, police issued a public notice banning protests concerning rising fuel and other costs of living. On July 3, police arrested CoPPP leader Femi Claudius Cole on “incitement” charges for allegedly organizing protests, after a video circulated on social media in which she urged women to take to the streets. Police also arrested NGC Chair Dennis Bright, also a CoPPP member, after he attempted to visit Cole in jail. Cole said she and a women’s group had applied for a permit to protest but authorities had denied the request. On July 4, the SLP arrested dozens of market women attempting to protest.

When August 10 demonstrations turned violent, with protesters burning police stations and government buses, the government declared a nationwide state of emergency, with a curfew from 3:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. the following day. A 7:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. curfew remained in force until August 13. The state of emergency granted the president broad powers to maintain peace and order, including mandating restrictions on movement and assembly as needed. The state of emergency affected religious services for Muslims, restricted social gatherings and spectator sports, and closed nightclubs and cinemas.

Following the protests, President Bio claimed peaceful demonstrations would still be authorized, but many officials within the government opposed political demonstrations, seeing them as a vehicle for opposition-led political violence.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

In-country Movement: When protests turned violent on August 10, the government declared nationwide curfews in force until August 13.

e. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for protecting refugees. UNHCR worked with the government's National Commission for Social Action to develop standard operating procedures for refugee status determination.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and law provide citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: The 2018 presidential election, in which Julius Maada Bio of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) prevailed, and the 2018 parliamentary elections, including an election rerun and by-elections, were regarded by most observers as free and fair. Following June 25 parliamentary by-elections in Tonkolili District, the opposition APC increased their representation to 59 parliamentary seats, while the incumbent SLPP retained 58. The Tonkolili by-elections were considered free, fair, and mostly peaceful. By-elections in Koinadugu and Kono Districts in October and November 2021, respectively, were marred by violence, intimidation, and allegations of vote tampering.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit the participation of women and members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. Women have the right to vote, and they cast votes at rates similar to men. Women, however, frequently cited fear of violence, cultural norms, and lack of support from political parties as reasons they avoided a more active role in politics. Cultural and traditional practices in the northern areas of the country prevented women from holding office as paramount chiefs (a parallel system of tribal government operated in each of the 190 chiefdoms).

All citizens have the right to vote, but citizenship at birth is granted only to persons of “Negro-African” descent, thus disenfranchising the significant number of Lebanese and other “non-Negro-African” persons who were born in and resided in the country (see section 6, Children, Birth Registration). Persons of non-Negro-African groups may apply to be naturalized. If naturalized they are eligible to vote in all national and local elections, but no naturalized citizen may run for public office.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, and the government generally implemented the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption.

Corruption: The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) recovered 187 million leones (\$14,400) in a case against Mayor of Freetown Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, for alleged inappropriate use of Freetown City Council funds (a third party reimbursed the government). Some observers accused the ACC of targeting opposition politicians, such as Mayor Aki-Sawyerr, while failing to investigate credible allegations of corruption against the ruling SLPP party, including those close to the president.

In May 2021, the ACC announced an investigation into the country’s permanent mission to the United Nations for the alleged misappropriation of \$4 million earmarked for the renovation of the chancery in New York. The ACC charged five persons, including two former heads of chancery, two financial attaches, and a

contractor. In November 2021, the ACC invited the 2018 presidential candidate of the opposition APC, Samura Kamara, to answer questions regarding these renovations, which occurred during his tenure as foreign minister from 2012 to 2017. According to reports, Kamara was investigated, arrested, and then released on bail. The trial continued at the High Court as of year's end.

In November 2021, President Bio announced the convening of a tribunal to investigate widely respected Auditor General Lara Taylor-Pearce and her deputy, Tamba Momoh, officially triggering their suspension due to allegations of misconduct. On March 17, the tribunal commenced. Several civil society organizations condemned the suspensions, stating the move was intended to forestall the impending release of an auditor general report allegedly accusing the administration of corruption and the president and his wife of fraudulent spending during international trips.

According to a Transparency International survey in 2021, 52 percent of public service users reported having to pay a bribe. Police frequently exacted bribes at checkpoints, falsely charged motorists with violations, impounded vehicles to extort money, and accepted bribes from suspects to drop charges or to arrest their rivals and charge them with crimes. The DHRMG in Moyamba stated police, in exchange for kickbacks, arrested persons for civil disputes, such as alleged breach of contract or failure to satisfy a debt.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restrictions, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials often were cooperative and responsive to the views of local and international NGOs and generally acknowledged the problems presented. The government, including security forces, generally responded to human rights concerns raised by the HRCSL and civil society organizations but was at times slow to support the HRCSL or implement its recommendations.

On February 1, the HRCSL announced it would conduct a public inquiry into the conduct of the country's security forces between 2015 and 2021, including the SLP and the military, in response to reports of abuse of power, unnecessary and disproportionate use of force, illegal detention, harassment, sexual misconduct, and violence against civilians. The HRCSL held public consultations and inquiries in provincial and district headquarters towns.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The HRCSL is the government's primary institution dedicated to monitoring and investigating human rights abuses. The HRCSL operated without government or party interference and was relatively effective. As an example of its work, in July 2021, parliament abolished the death penalty after initial drafting of the parliamentary bill by the HRCSL.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape of both men and women, with a statutory minimum of 15 years' imprisonment for offenders. The law specifically prohibits spousal rape. The law also criminalizes domestic violence, punishable by a substantial fine and two years' imprisonment. Although awareness of rape and domestic violence increased over the years, according to the HRCSL and the DHRMGs, indictments were rare, especially in rural areas, due to medical reporting requirements, high court fees, and an inefficient judicial system. Rape was common, and survivors of sexual offenses, often at the encouragement of their families, tended to settle out of court with offenders. As a result, a culture of impunity persisted, which perpetuated gender-based violence. The FSU within the SLP reported increased cases of rape and sexual assault, while arrests and convictions of perpetrators were negligible.

On July 13, the ECOWAS Court of Justice awarded a rape survivor \$10,000 for the failure of the government to adequately prosecute a perpetrator in 2021, noting the government failed its duty to provide a remedy for abuse, or to protect the survivor from cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law does not prohibit

FGM/C for women or girls. According to the 2019 *Demographic Health Survey*, 83 percent of women and girls ages 15 to 49 had undergone FGM/C, a decrease from 90 percent in 2013. The procedure was most common between ages 10 and 14. Approximately 71 percent of women and girls ages 15 to 49 had undergone FGM/C before age 15. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 61 percent of women and girls ages 15 to 19 had undergone FGM/C compared with 95 percent of women ages 45 to 49. The percentage of women who had undergone FGM/C was higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

Sexual Harassment: The law criminalizes sexual harassment. It is unlawful to make unwanted sexual advances, repeatedly follow or pursue others against their will, initiate unwanted communications with others, or engage in any other menacing behavior. Offenders faced substantial fines or imprisonment not exceeding three years, but authorities did not always effectively enforce the law. No reliable data were available on the prevalence of sexual harassment.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Vulnerable populations lacked the ability to provide informed consent to medical procedures affecting reproductive health.

According to the Ministry of Health, FGM/C increased the risk of childbirth complications, maternal death, and infertility, in addition to posing health risks associated with the procedure itself (see the Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) subsection for additional information).

Social and cultural barriers sometimes limited access to sexual and reproductive health services. Religious, social, and cultural barriers adversely limited access to contraception. The law prohibits access to contraception for individuals younger than age 18 without parental consent. The availability of contraception at health facilities varied, and individuals did not have consistent access to their specific method of choice. Emergency contraception was not always available as part of family planning method mix.

The inaccessibility of contraceptives for adolescents contributed to the adolescent birth rate of 101 births per 1,000 girls ages 15 to 19. According to the 2019

Demographic and Health Survey, the proportion of teenagers who began childbearing rose rapidly with age, from 4 percent at age 15 to 45 percent at age 19. Adolescent mothers were also more likely to experience adverse pregnancy outcomes and to face challenges in pursuing educational opportunities. The proportion of women of reproductive age who had their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods was 57 percent. Modern contraceptive prevalence rates for women and girls ages 15 to 49 was 21 percent.

The government established “one-stop centers” for survivors of gender-based violence in six districts across the country in government referral hospitals in Moyamba, Kailahun, Pujehun, Kabala, Port Loko, and the King Harman Road Government Referral Hospital. These centers provided comprehensive care including psychosocial, legal, medical, and shelter assistance to survivors of sexual violence, including access to sexual and reproductive health services. Emergency contraception was not always available as part of the clinical management of rape cases.

According to the 2019 *Demographic and Health Survey*, the maternal mortality rate was 717 per 100,000 live births, and 87 percent of births were attended by a skilled health attendant. Major factors in the high maternal death rate included poverty; distance to medical facilities; lack of access to sufficient information regarding availability of health-care services; inadequate and poor-quality services, especially in remote settings; cultural beliefs and practices; early marriages and childbearing; delay in decision making to seek health-care services; and malnutrition.

Lack of access to adequate menstrual hygiene management facilities and supplies impacted women and girls’ participation in educational, social, and economic opportunities. According to the *2017 Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey*, approximately 20 percent of women reported not being able to participate in social activities, school, or work due to menstruation difficulties in the previous 12 months. The Hands Off Our Girls Initiative promoted by the president’s wife, along with the recent inclusion of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the primary and secondary school curriculum, sought to improve access on a range of activities.

Discrimination: The law provides for the same legal status and rights for men and women under family, labor, property, and inheritance law. The law provides for both fathers and mothers to confer nationality to children born abroad. The law provides for equal remuneration for equal work without discrimination based on gender. Both spouses may acquire property, and women may obtain divorces without being forced to relinquish dowries.

Authorities at the Ministry of Social Welfare Affairs reported women faced widespread societal discrimination. Their rights were largely contingent on customary law, particularly in matters of marriage, divorce, property, and inheritance, which were guided by customary law in all areas except Freetown. Formal law applies in customary as well as formal courts, but customary judges had limited or no legal training and often were unaware of formal law or chose to ignore it. Women's rights and status under customary law varied significantly depending upon the ethnic group to which they belonged, but such rights and status were routinely inferior to those of men. Under customary law, women's status in society is equal to that of a child. Women were frequently perceived to be the property of their husbands and to be inherited on his death with his other property.

Discrimination occurred in access to credit, equal pay for similar work, and the ownership and management of a business. Authorities and local NGOs stated women had equal access to education and health facilities, but they did not have equal economic opportunities or social freedoms.

The government did not effectively enforce the law. The Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs has a mandate to protect the rights of women, but most international and domestic NGOs asserted the ministry did not have the infrastructure or support of other ministries to handle its assigned projects effectively.

On August 8, parliament passed the Customary Land Right Act 2022, which eliminated discriminatory clauses under customary law that prevented women from inheriting land in their name.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

There were laws to protect racial or ethnic minorities from violence or

discrimination. Authorities enforced these laws.

Strong ethnic loyalties, biases, and stereotypes existed among all ethnic groups. Ethnic loyalty was an important factor in the government, armed forces, and business. Complaints of ethnic discrimination in government appointments and contract assignments were common.

Residents of non-African descent faced some institutionalized discrimination, particularly in the areas of citizenship and nationality.

The government made some efforts to address discrimination, such as equal access to education, medical care, employment, and credit. Some non-Mende populations alleged discrimination from government employment, as the ruling SLPP party was predominantly Mende. The government made limited efforts to address discrimination and bias against albinos and members of the Rastafarian religious sects.

The Customary Land Right Act 2022 eliminated discriminatory clauses that restricted ethnic Creoles to land ownership in the Western Area only.

Children

Birth Registration: The constitution restricts citizenship derived by birth to children with at least one citizen parent or grandparent of Negro-African descent. Non-Africans who have lived in the country for at least five years (two years for foreigners married to citizens) may apply for naturalization, subject to presidential approval. Children not meeting the criteria must be registered in their parents' countries of origin.

The National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) is responsible for the recording of vital events including births, deaths, marriages, divorces, annulments, adoptions, legitimization, and recognition of citizens and noncitizens. The NCRA is mandated to maintain an Integrated National Civil Register. In May 2021, the NCRA conducted a nationwide exercise to electronically confirm the personal details of registrants and to register any unregistered citizens and noncitizens resident in the country. Citizens largely complied with the registration process.

Child Abuse: The law prohibits child abuse, including sexual abuse of children. A pattern of violence against and abuse of children existed, and according to FSU regional offices, it increased when schools were closed during the summer months. Cases of child sexual abuse generally were taken more seriously than adult rape cases. The FSU and the DHRMGs stated in many cases of sexual assault of children parents accepted payment instead of taking perpetrators to court due to difficulties dealing with the justice system, fear of public shame, and economic hardship.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: Under the Child Rights Act of 2007, the legal minimum age of marriage is 18; however, the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2009 allows underage children to be married with parental consent and does not stipulate a minimum age of marriage. Child marriage was most common in Koinadugu, Tonkolili, Kambia, and Port Loko. The government, in collaboration with UNICEF and UNFPA, continued its *National Strategy on the Prevention of Teenage Pregnancy and Ending Child Marriage in Sierra Leone (2018-2022)*.

The NGO Save the Children reported girls most vulnerable to early marriage included those from certain ethnic groups living in poor rural areas in the Eastern, Southern, and Northern Provinces, where child marriage rates were more than 40 percent, compared with 20 percent in the Western Province.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law criminalizes the sexual exploitation and sale, grooming, offering or use of children for exploitation, child trafficking, and child pornography, although enforcement remained a challenge and conviction numbers remained low. The minimum age of consensual sex is 18. On April 26, Parliament passed the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act 2022; President Bio signed the bill into law July 18. The law provides a secretariat and task force to prosecute human trafficking and migrant smuggling and provide economic alternatives to those involved in such practices.

Displaced Children: In 2019 the NGO Help a Needy Child International reported approximately 50,000 children worked and lived on the street, with 45,000 of them engaged in artisanal gravel production in the Western Province. The NGO Develop Africa reported in 2020 that chronically neglected, traumatized, and

homeless children and adolescents lived on the streets of Freetown and other urban centers, in bus stations, outside cinemas and nightclubs, in abandoned buildings, under bridges, or in the open air.

Antisemitism

There was a very small Jewish community. There were no reports of antisemitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: The law criminalizes same-sex sexual activity between men. There is no legal prohibition against sexual activity between women. The law was not enforced.

Violence against LGBTQI+ Persons: As in 2021, there was no information regarding any action by government authorities to investigate or punish public entities or private persons complicit in abuses against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons. No hate crime law covers bias-motivated violence against LGBTQI+ persons. LGBTQI+ advocates reported violence and blackmail against LGBTQI+ persons. Advocates estimated 17 cases of violence occurred between January and September.

Discrimination: The law does not offer protection from discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. The government made limited efforts to address discrimination and bias against LGBTQI+ persons.

A few organizations, including Dignity Association and the HRCSL, supported LGBTQI+ persons and engaged with activists; however, they maintained low profiles to protect their safety and identities. Although LGBTQI+ advocacy

groups noted police continued to discriminate against LGBTQI+ individuals, they reported police were increasingly treating LGBTQI+ persons with understanding.

LGBTQI+ advocates reported the community faced challenges ranging from stigma and discrimination to denial of public services such as health care and justice. Advocates reported LGBTQI+ persons faced no discrimination in schools, although pupil-on-pupil discrimination was reportedly prevalent.

Dignity Association reported it was difficult for LGBTQI+ individuals to receive health services; many chose not to seek medical testing or treatment due to the risk their right to confidentiality would be ignored and their sexual orientation would be revealed. Obtaining secure housing was also a problem for LGBTQI+ persons. Families frequently shunned and expelled their LGBTQI+ children from their homes, leading some to turn to commercial sex to survive. Adults risked having their leases terminated if their LGBTQI+ status became public. Women in the LGBTQI+ community reported social discrimination from male LGBTQI+ persons and the general population.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: There was no legal gender recognition process available under local law.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices Specifically Targeting LGBTQI+ Individuals: So-called conversion therapy was not reported by activists. Rape was common, however, and activists have found “corrective” rape to be one of the prevalent abuses suffered by LGBTQI+ women.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: LGBTQI+ civil society organizations contended that because the law prohibits sexual activity between men, it limited LGBTQI+ persons from exercising their freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly. The law, however, does not restrict the rights of persons to speak out on LGBTQI+ human rights. The government reportedly registered a transgender rights organization in 2018.

Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities could access education, health services, and transportation on an equal basis with others. The law mandates access to these services, and

prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment and provision of state services, including judicial services. The government-funded National Commission for Persons with Disabilities-Sierra Leone (CPWD-SL) is charged with protecting the rights and promoting the welfare of persons with disabilities. The CPWD-SL stated the government did not effectively enforce the law or implement programs to make buildings, information, and communications accessible. In view of the high rate of general unemployment, work opportunities for persons with disabilities were even more limited, and begging was commonplace. Children with disabilities were also less likely to attend school than other children.

The CPWD-SL reported considerable discrimination against persons with mental disabilities. Most persons with mental disabilities received no treatment or public services. At the Sierra Leone Psychiatric Hospital in Kissy, the only inpatient psychiatric institution that served persons with mental disabilities, authorities reported only one consulting psychiatrist was available, patients were not provided sufficient food or sanitation facilities, and restraints were primitive and dehumanizing.

The HRCSL and local NGOs documented discrimination against persons with albinism in Freetown, Kabala, Kono, Port Loko, and Tonkolili. The Albinism Royal Foundation Sierra Leone reported persons with albinism had the highest number of dropouts from schools and other learning institutions due to bullying, inattention, poverty, illness, and rejection.

The Ministry of Health and Sanitation is responsible for providing free primary health-care services to persons with polio and diabetic retinopathy as well as to blind or deaf persons. The ministry did not provide these services consistently, and organizations reported many persons with disabilities had limited access to medical and rehabilitative care. The Ministry of Social Welfare has a mandate to provide policy oversight for problems affecting persons with disabilities but had limited capacity to do so.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

The law prohibits discrimination based on actual, perceived, or suspected HIV

status, but society continued to stigmatize persons with HIV and AIDS. According to the *People Living with HIV Stigma Index* report for 2020, approximately 47 percent of respondents disagreed that disclosure of their HIV status had become easier over time, and 48 percent reported disclosure of their HIV status to friends, family, or partners was not a positive experience. The report also noted a small increase in unemployment among those living with HIV, from 38 percent in 2013 to 40 percent in 2019.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of workers in both the public and private sectors to join independent unions of their choice without prior authorization, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law does not prohibit discrimination against union members or prohibit employer interference in the establishment of unions. The government may require workers provide written notice to police of an intent to strike at least 21 days before the planned strike.

The government generally protected the right to bargain collectively. Collective bargaining was widespread in the formal sector, and most enterprises were covered by collective bargaining agreements on wages and working conditions. Although the law protects collective bargaining activity, the law required it take place in trade group negotiating councils, each of which must have an equal number of employer and worker representatives. There were no other limits on the scope of collective bargaining or legal exclusions of other groups of workers.

While the HRCSL and labor unions reported the government generally protected the right of workers in the private sector to form or join unions, the government did not enforce applicable law through regulatory or judicial action. Penalties were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

The government generally respected freedom of association. All unions were independent of political parties and the government. Some trade unions had close relationships with the government, such as the Sierra Leone Teachers' Union and

the Sierra Leone Doctors Association. There were no reports of labor union members being arrested for participating in industrial actions or other union activities.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The constitution prohibits all forms of forced and compulsory labor, including by children. Penalties include imprisonment, fines, or both. In September 2021, the government ratified the International Labor Organization (ILO) Protocol on Forced Labor. Under traditional law, individual chiefs may impose forced labor (compulsory cultivation) as punishment. The HRCSL reported no penalty for nonparticipation.

The government did not enforce the law against all forms of forced or compulsory labor. Chiefs requiring villagers to labor in common areas. Men, women, and child victims of forced labor originated largely from rural provinces within the country and were recruited to urban areas for artisanal and granite mining, petty trading, rock breaking, fishing and agriculture, domestic servitude, and begging (see section 7.c. and section 6, Sexual Exploitation of Children). The Ministry of Social Welfare and the HRCSL reported they were aware of trafficking, domestic service, mining, or other activities, but they had no specific data on these forms of forced or compulsory labor.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

See the Department of Labor's Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion, national origin or citizenship, social origin, age, language, sex, or HIV status or other communicable diseases. It does not address discrimination based on disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity. NGOs reported evidence of discrimination based on these

categories. Women in particular experienced discrimination in hiring, and employers commonly dismissed women who became pregnant during their first year on the job. The law does not prohibit dismissal of pregnant workers. The law prohibits women from working in mines or any underground work site.

Significant numbers of individuals lived with a significant disability; rebel forces mutilated and amputated limbs from thousands of civilians during the civil war of 1991-2002. Persons with disabilities frequently experienced discrimination and unfair treatment in schooling, employment, housing, and daily life. Almost two thirds of persons with disabilities had no job or income; many became victims of crime, were homeless, and continued to live with emotional trauma. Relevant disability laws were not well implemented, and the government did not enforce its protections against discrimination in hiring.

The government did not enforce laws prohibiting discrimination in the workplace, and gender-based violence and harassment were prevalent in the workplace and schools (see section 6). Complainants seeking redress for discrimination in previous years filed their cases outside the country, in the ECOWAS Court of Justice. Penalties were not commensurate with laws related to civil rights. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: There was a national minimum wage, but it fell below the basic poverty line in the country. Although not stipulated by law, the customary workweek was 40 hours (60 hours for security personnel). There is no statutory definition of overtime wages to be paid if an employee's work hours exceed 40. There is no prohibition on excessive compulsory overtime nor a requirement for paid leave or holidays.

Occupational Safety and Health: The occupational safety and health (OSH) regulations were outdated and remained under review by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. The responsibility for identifying unsafe situations remained with OSH expert and not workers, but this was not enforced. Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions. The ministry stated more inspections were done compared with 2020 (the COVID-19 pandemic

reduced inspections in 2021). The ILO observed in 2021 that very few employees (10.8 percent) were protected by law for work-related accident and injury, because the law covers only larger, formal employers.

A union may make a formal complaint regarding a hazardous working condition; if the complaint is rejected, the union may issue a 21-day strike notice. The law also requires employers to provide protective clothing and safety devices to employees whose work involves “risk of personal safety or potential health hazard.” The law protects both foreign and domestic workers. The law does not provide workers with the right to remove themselves from situations that endanger their health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, and the government took no steps to protect employees who so acted. Alleged violations of OSH standards were common in the health, medical, and mining sectors.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The Ministry of Labour and Social Security is responsible for enforcing labor law, including wage, hour, and OSH regulations, but the number of labor inspectors was insufficient to enforce compliance. The government did not effectively enforce standards in all sectors, particularly informal sectors, and the penalties for noncompliance were not commensurate with those for similar crimes. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

Informal Sector: Approximately 90 percent of laborers worked in the informal sector, predominantly in subsistence or small-scale agriculture. The national minimum wage of 500,000 leones per month (\$38) applies to all workers, including the informal sector and part time workers. The law requires paid leave and overtime wages. There is no prohibition on excessive compulsory overtime. Workers may be dismissed with limited notice and severance. Informal workers are not covered by workers compensation for workplace injuries and there were no government social protections available for informal workers.

Violations of wage, overtime, and OSH standards were most frequent within the informal artisanal diamond-mining sector. Violations were common in the case of street vendors and market-stall workers, rock crushers, and day laborers, many of whom traveled to Freetown and provincial headquarters towns from elsewhere in the country to seek employment and were vulnerable to exploitation. There were

numerous complaints of unpaid wages and lack of attention to injuries sustained on the job, but victims often did not know where to turn for recourse, and as a result their complaints went unresolved.