

# Sierra Leone 2023 Human Rights Report

## Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Sierra Leone during the year.

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

The government took some steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses, 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 credible reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. On June 25 (the day after the June 24 elections), at the opposition All People's Congress (APC) party headquarters in Freetown, police reportedly killed a party volunteer. On June 26, police killed four other APC supporters in the town of Masiaka. During protests on September 11, police reportedly killed two more individuals. The Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL) called on the Independent Police Complaint Board, a civilian oversight mechanism, to investigate these security force killings and make recommendations on prosecutions to the Sierra Leone Police (SLP).

On April 13, the government's Special Investigation Committee (SIC) released its report on violent demonstrations in August 2022, during which the SLP shot and killed 30 protesters, primarily unarmed youth, and protesters killed six police officers. The SIC recommended further investigation to determine the precise number of civilian casualties during the demonstrations. The SIC further stated there was no evidence to support allegations security forces committed extrajudicial killings on the night of the violent demonstrations. Critics of the report noted strong ties

to the government and security services among a large percentage of the members of the committee.

## **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 prohibited such practices, and unlike in 2022, there were no credible reports government officials employed them.

Impunity was a significant problem in the security forces, notably the SLP.

## **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

Prison and detention center conditions were harsh and sometimes life threatening due to gross overcrowding, lack of sufficient correctional facilities and personnel, inadequate sanitary conditions, and a lack of proper medical care in the Port Loko, Kambia, and Bo prison facilities.

**Abusive Physical Conditions:** As of August, the country's 21 prisons, designed for 2,495 inmates, held 5,561 individuals. 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 Sierra Leone Correctional Services (SLCS) reported 10 prisons and detention centers were moderately overcrowded, due to delays in trials and sentencing.

The HRCSL and Prison Watch Sierra Leone (PWSL) reported overcrowding, unhygienic conditions, and insufficient medical services in SLCS detention centers. The SLP's District Human Rights Monitoring Groups (DHRMGs) reported conditions in police station holding cells were poor, especially in small stations outside Freetown such as in Port Loko, Magburuka, Kambia, and Bo districts. 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.

The PWSL and 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.

The SLCS reported a shortage of prison staff generally across the country, which resulted in a lack of security that endangered inmates' safety.

**Administration:** Senior prison officials responded to complaints. The HRCSL reported SLCS authorities generally investigated credible allegations of mistreatment of inmates.

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

**Improvements:** On August 28, the judiciary launched its third “Access to Justice through Judicial Week.” As assigned by the chief justice, a team of 23 judges undertook expedited processing of 802 cases in two weeks, addressing sexual offenses, larceny, burglary, and murder, to reduce sentences and decongest prison and detention centers.

#### **d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention**

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

## **Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees**

The law required warrants for searches and arrests of persons taken into custody on criminal grounds, but arrests without warrants were common. The HRCSL reported the SLP made some arrests without warrants and held suspects under custody beyond the legally mandated period.

The law required 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. According to Amnesty International and HRCSL, detainees were not always informed promptly of the charges brought against them.

Detainees had the right to access family members and to consult with an attorney in a timely manner. According to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), lawyers typically were allowed unrestricted access to detainees, and the SLP or detention officers largely respected this policy.

**Arbitrary Arrest:** The EU Election Monitoring group reported authorities arrested and detained APC supporters for periods in excess of constitutional limits during the June elections and later protests.

**Pretrial Detention:** Lengthy pretrial detention was a significant problem. Several NGOs, including the Campaign for Human Rights and Development International (CHREDI) and the PWSL, reported pretrial and remand detainees spent an average of two to three 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 provided for an independent judiciary. NGOs, including the CHRDI and the Center for Accountability and Rule of Law, assessed the judiciary maintained relative independence. The limited number of judicial magistrates and lawyers, cumbersome judicial procedures, and high court fees restricted access to justice for most citizens.

In addition to the formal court system, the HRCSL and the DHRMGs reported local chieftaincy courts administered customary law with lay judges, primarily in rural areas. Appeals from these lower courts were 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 and NGOs in Bo, Kenema, and Port Loko, 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 DHRMGs further reported traditional authorities charged offenses not within their jurisdictional powers and violated the rights of persons when prescribing punishment.

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

## **Trial Procedures**

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

The limited number of state attorneys resulted in long trial delays. Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, PWSL, and CHRDI, stated 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.

According to DHRMGs, laws on gender equality were inconsistently enforced, and many traditional courts ignored the rights of women regarding family law and inheritance. Juveniles were afforded few rights in the traditional justice system.



## **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

In mid-June, authorities arrested 35 APC supporters participating in a protest against the Electoral Commission. Authorities released them on June 23, the eve of the June 24 elections, without charge.

As part of the Agreement on National Unity signed on October 18 by the government and the APC, the APC provided a list of persons arrested or detained for alleged elections-related or other protest offenses to be released by the government.

### **f. Transnational Repression**

Not applicable.

### **g. Property Seizure and Restitution**

Not applicable.

### **h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence**

The constitution and law prohibited such actions, and the government largely respected these prohibitions.

## Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

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

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

**Nongovernmental Impact:** According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, on March 28, supporters of the ruling Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) assaulted Radio Fountain of Peace journalist Alie Melvin Towaka while he covered an event in Moyamba-Southern Province.

Reporters Without Borders stated APC supporters harassed and intimidated their staff during its coverage of a June 14 APC campaign event.

On August 16, a major independent national radio station, Radio Democracy, ceased transmitting shortly before the scheduled broadcast of a prerecorded interview with a resident diplomat concerning the June general election. The interview leaked on social media and was broadcast in full the following day, with the minister of information and civic education present to provide a rebuttal and deny the government caused the station to cease broadcasting. Journalist Musa Kamara, who conducted the interview, received several anonymous death threats after the broadcast.

## **Internet Freedom**

The government did not routinely restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content.

The law granted the government the power to designate certain computer systems as “critical” infrastructure and outlined 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**

There were reports the government restricted the right to peaceful assembly. The constitution and law provided for the freedom of association.

### **Freedom of Peaceful Assembly**

The constitution and law provided for freedom of assembly. The law, however, required 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 police stated the inspector general of police had to approve protests. Opposition leaders and civil society organizations complained police routinely denied permits for protests that would be critical of the president.

While the October report of the EU election observation mission stated the fundamental right of freedom of assembly was largely respected during campaigning, and observers found political rallies largely went well in major areas, alleged ruling SLPP supporters in rural areas in the Southern and Eastern Provinces attempted to disrupt APC party rallies in ruling party strongholds. Unknown assailants committed an arson attack on the APC party headquarters in Bo.

### **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 provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

### **e. Protection of Refugees**

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees 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 provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had established a system for protecting refugees.

## **Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process**

The constitution and law provided 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**

**Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections:** National elections in June were widely reported by domestic and international observers to have logistical problems and delays on election day and a lack transparency during the tabulation process. There were reports of attempted intimidation by alleged supporters of the ruling party at some opposition APC rallies. There were also reports of threats against and intimidation of domestic observers by government and government supporters.

**Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable Groups:** Despite a large increase in representation for women in parliament, cultural practices, traditional gender roles, and intimidation inhibited women's full political participation, and limited the number of

women who successfully contested for the office of paramount chief (a parallel system of tribal government operated in each of the 190 chiefdoms).

All citizens had the right to vote, but citizenship at birth was 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 could apply to be naturalized. If naturalized they were eligible to vote in all national and local elections, but no naturalized citizen could run for public office.

## Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials; however, the government did not implement or enforce the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption.

**Corruption:** The government made some progress in fighting corruption in recent years. The Anti-Corruption Commission investigated and prosecuted corruption cases. Some observers accused the commission of targeting opposition politicians while failing to investigate credible allegations of corruption against the ruling SLPP, including those close to the president.

In May, a court granted Samura Kamara, opposition presidential candidate, an adjournment of his pending corruption trial, to enable him to campaign

in the June elections. He faced allegations of misappropriation in 2021 of funds at the country's UN mission chancery in New York. Kamara denied the allegations, claiming the case was politically motivated. The case resumed in July.

For additional information concerning corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

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

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restrictions to monitor or investigate human rights conditions or cases and publish their findings. Government officials often were cooperative and responsive to the views of these groups and generally acknowledged the problems presented. The government, including security forces, generally responded to human rights concerns raised by civil society organizations but was at times slow to implement their recommendations.

**Government Human Rights Bodies:** The HRCSL was the government's primary institution dedicated to monitoring and investigating human rights abuses. The HRCSL operated without government or party interference, and observers considered it relatively effective.

## Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

### Women

**Rape and Domestic Violence:** The law criminalized rape of both women and men, with a statutory minimum of 15 years' imprisonment for offenders. The law specifically prohibited spousal rape. The law also criminalized 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, indictments were rare, especially in rural areas, due to medical reporting requirements, high court fees, corruption, 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. Compared with 2022, the Family Support Unit (FSU) of the SLP reported a decrease in rape cases.

**Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C):** The law did not prohibit FGM/C for women or girls. A May 1 BBC report estimated approximately 83



percent of women and girls ages 15 to 49 had experienced FGM/C, a decrease from a 2013 report of 90 percent. The percentage of women who had undergone FGM/C was higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

**Discrimination:** The law provided for the same legal status and rights for men and women under family, labor, property, and inheritance law. The government did not enforce the law effectively.

Authorities at the Ministry of Social Welfare Affairs reported women faced widespread societal discrimination. Their rights were largely guided by customary law, particularly in matters of marriage, divorce, property, and inheritance in all areas except Freetown. Formal law applied 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 in many parts of the country, women's status in society was 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. NGOs and HRCSL reported women experienced discrimination in rural areas.

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. Women experienced discrimination in hiring, and

employers commonly dismissed women who became pregnant during their first year on the job. The law did not prohibit dismissal of pregnant workers. The law prohibited women from working in mines or any underground work site.

The Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs had a mandate to protect the rights of women, but most international and domestic NGOs asserted the ministry did not address its assigned tasks effectively.

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

Vulnerable populations were often not provided the opportunity to grant informed consent. According to the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, teenage pregnancies, restrictive abortion laws, and gender-based violence contributed to the health-related problems in the country. According to health authorities, FGM/C increased the risk of childbirth complications, maternal death, and infertility, in addition to posing health risks associated with the procedure itself.

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 prohibited 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 across the country.

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.

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.

The government had “one-stop centers” for survivors of gender-based violence in government referral hospitals in six districts across the country, in Kabala, Kailahun, Moyamba, Port Loko, Pujehun, 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. According to the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, women and girls represented more than 99 percent of gender-based violence survivors. Emergency contraception was not always available as part of the clinical management of rape cases.

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 First Lady Fatima Bio, together with the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education in the primary and secondary school curriculum, sought to improve access on a range of activities.

## **Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination**

There were laws to protect racial or ethnic minorities from violence or discrimination, while other laws institutionalized some forms of discrimination based on race and ethnicity. Authorities made some efforts to enforce 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. Some non-Mende populations alleged discrimination in government employment, as the ruling SLPP was predominantly Mende.

Residents of non-African descent faced some institutionalized discrimination, particularly in the areas of citizenship and nationality. Citizens of non-African descent were barred from holding public office.

The government made some efforts to address discrimination, such as equal access to education, medical care, employment, and credit. The government made limited efforts to address discrimination and bias against albinos and members of Rastafarian religious groups.

## Children

**Birth Registration:** Birth registration was provided on a discriminatory basis. The constitution restricted citizenship derived by birth to children with at least one citizen parent or grandparent of Negro-African descent. Non-Africans who lived in the country for at least five years (two years for foreigners married to citizens) could apply for naturalization, subject to presidential approval. Children not meeting the criteria had to be registered in their parents' countries of origin.

**Child Abuse:** The law prohibited child abuse, including sexual abuse of children. The government effectively enforced the law, and authorities generally took cases of child sexual abuse more seriously than adult rape

cases. A pattern of violence against and abuse of children existed, and according to FSU regional offices in Bo, Kambia, Kenema, Makeni, and Port Loko, it increased when schools were closed during the summer months. The FSU and the DHRMGs stated in many cases of child sexual assault parents accepted payment instead of taking perpetrators to court due to difficulties dealing with the justice system, fear of public shame, and economic hardship. The FSU reported an increase from 2022 in cases of sexual assault of children.

**Child, Early, and Forced Marriage:** Under the Child Rights Act of 2007, the legal minimum age for marriage was 18; however, the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act of 2009 allowed children to be married with parental consent and did not stipulate a minimum age of marriage. Due to this conflict in the law, the government faced difficulties in effectively enforcing the legal minimum age in the Child Rights Act. The government continued efforts to prevent teenage pregnancy with implementation of a years-long national strategy.

The NGO Girls Not Brides stated child marriage was most prevalent in Kambia, Koinadugu, Port Loko, and Tonkolili. Thirty percent of girls reportedly married before they turned 18, and 9 percent married before age 15. Additionally, 7 percent of boys married before age 18. The Hands Off Our Girls Initiative addressed child marriage and reduction of teenage pregnancy.

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 criminalized the sexual exploitation and sale, grooming, offering, or use of children for exploitation, child sex trafficking, and child pornography, although enforcement was problematic and conviction numbers were low. The minimum age of consensual sex was 18.

## Antisemitism

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

## 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 criminalized same-sex sexual activity between men, but the law was not enforced. There was no legal prohibition against sexual activity between women.

**Violence and Harassment:** Police generally did not incite, perpetrate, or condone violence or harassment against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals. LGBTQI+ advocates reported violence and blackmail against LGBTQI+ persons. Police did not generally abuse or harass those reporting such abuse, but they were reluctant to act on the basis of such reports. There were no reports of action by government authorities to investigate or punish state or nonstate actors complicit in violence or abuses of LGBTQI+ persons.

**Discrimination:** The law did not prohibit discrimination by state or nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. LGBTQI+ persons faced widespread discrimination in health care, housing, education, employment, family life, and policing, although men did not fear arrest, and police acceptance of LGBTQI+ activities increased. The government made limited efforts to address discrimination and bias against LGBTQI+ persons.



NGO Dignity Association reported LGBTQI+ persons faced discrimination in accessing health services; many LGBTQI+ persons chose not to seek medical care due to the risk their right to confidentiality would be violated and their sexual orientation would be revealed. LGBTQI+ persons also faced discrimination in housing, as families frequently shunned and expelled LGBTQI+ children from their homes. Adults risked lease termination if their LGBTQI+ status became public. According to the Dignity Association, patriarchal attitudes resulted in social discrimination both in the general population and within the LGBTQI+ community.

**Availability of Legal Gender Recognition:** The law provided no legal gender recognition process.

**Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices:** Rape of LGBTQI+ women was common, and activists found “corrective” rape to be one of the prevalent abuses committed against lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. There were no reports of medically unnecessary and irreversible “normalization” surgeries performed on children or nonconsenting adult intersex persons.

**Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:** The law did not restrict the rights of persons to speak out on LGBTQI+ human rights. LGBTQI+ civil society organizations contended, however, that because the law prohibited sexual activity between men, it limited LGBTQI+

persons from exercising their freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly.

## **Persons with Disabilities**

Persons with disabilities could access education and transportation on an equal basis with others. The law mandated access to these services and prohibited discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment and provision of state services, including judicial services. They could not access employment, health care, or public buildings on an equal basis.

NGOs stated the government did not effectively enforce the law or implement programs to make these services accessible; information was not available in accessible formats. Children with disabilities were also less likely to attend school than other children.

Persons with disabilities frequently experienced discrimination and unfair treatment in schooling, employment, housing, and daily life. In view of the high rate of general unemployment, work opportunities for persons with disabilities were even more limited, and begging was commonplace. Almost two-thirds of persons with disabilities had no job or income; many became victims of crime, were homeless, and lived with emotional trauma, particularly those mutilated or dismembered by rebel forces during the civil war of 1991-2002. Relevant disability laws were not well implemented, and the government did not enforce its protections against discrimination in hiring.

The National Commission for Persons with Disabilities-Sierra Leone and NGOs reported considerable discrimination against persons with mental disabilities. Most persons with mental disabilities received no treatment or public services.

## **Other Societal Violence or Discrimination**

The HRCSL and local NGOs documented discrimination against persons with albinism. 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 law prohibited discrimination based on actual, perceived, or suspected HIV status, but society stigmatized 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 provided 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 did not prohibit discrimination against union members or prohibit employer interference in the establishment of unions. The government could 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 and the right to strike. 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 protected collective bargaining activity, the law required it take place in trade group negotiating councils, each of which had to 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.

The government generally respected freedom of association and effectively enforced governing laws. All unions were independent of political parties and the government. Some trade unions had close relationships with the government, such as the Teachers' Union and the Doctors Association.

There were no reports of labor union members being arrested for participating in industrial actions or other union activities.

Penalties for violations of association, bargaining, and the right to strike were less than with those for analogous violations such as civil rights violations. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

## **b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor**

See the Department of State's annual *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 (see section 6)**

## **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 was no statutory definition of overtime wages to be paid if an employee's work hours exceed 40. Alleged violations of wage, hour and overtime were common in informal artisanal diamond mining, domestic work, and agriculture.

**Occupational Safety and Health:** There were no occupational safety and health (OSH) standards generally appropriate for the main industries in the country. The government did not proactively identify unsafe conditions, but only responded to worker complaints, if at all. Workers could not remove themselves from situations endangering health or safety without jeopardy to their employment.

A union could make a formal complaint regarding a hazardous working condition; if the complaint was rejected, the union could issue a 21-day strike notice. The law also required employers to provide protective clothing and safety devices to employees whose work involves "risk of personal safety or potential health hazard." The law protected both foreign

and domestic workers. According to NGOs, alleged violations of OSH standards were common in the health, medical, and mining sectors.

**Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement:** The government did not effectively enforce minimum wage, hour, and OSH standards, particularly in informal sectors, and the penalties for noncompliance were not commensurate with those for similar violations such as fraud or negligence. Penalties were rarely applied against violators. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security was responsible for enforcing labor law, including wage, hour, and OSH regulations, but the number of labor inspectors was insufficient to enforce compliance. Approximately 90 percent of laborers worked in the informal sector, predominantly in subsistence or small-scale agriculture.