



COI QUERY

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COI QUERY RESPONSE – Sierra Leone

Situation of women without a support network; access to housing, healthcare, and employment, including in Freetown

1. Situation of women without a support network

According to the Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (SLDHS) published by Statistics Sierra Leone on behalf of the Sierra Leone Ministry of Health and Sanitation in October 2020, 27.4 % of households were headed by women, with a prevalence of 32.4 % in urban areas and 23.8 % in rural settings.¹ Female headed households in Sierra Leone faced a higher dependency ratio than male headed households, with the source highlighting that ‘Households with a high dependency ratio are significantly more prone to food insecurity.’² They were also ‘more reliant on external support such as remittances’ than male counterparts, 3 % compared to 1 %, and ‘female headed households are poorer than male headed and are linked to the lower asset ownership that women have’.³ United States Department of State (USDOS) reported that women faced widespread discrimination in society.⁴

Specific information on women without a support network in Sierra Leone was scarce among the sources consulted within the time constraints of this query.

2. Access to housing and property

In the district of Western Area Urban, where Freetown is located, the percentage of women who owned alone a house was 2.5 % according to the SLDHS published in October 2020.⁵

On the implementation of property and land rights, Freedom House noted that in 2022 ‘the laws do not effectively protect those rights’.⁶ The Customary Land Right Act improved land rights for women but the land titling system outside Freetown followed customary law and was influenced by community chiefs.⁷ USDOS mentioned in the 2022 Human Rights Report that matters concerning property and inheritance ‘were largely contingent on customary law in all areas except Freetown’. The source added that formal law was applicable in both customary and formal courts.⁸ Women’s rights under customary law changed significantly according to

¹ Sierra Leone, MHS and Stats SL, Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (2019 SLDHS), October 2020, 2020, [url](#), p. 66

² WFP, State Of Food Security In Sierra Leone 2020 - Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, 21 June 2021, [url](#), p. 26

³ WFP, State Of Food Security In Sierra Leone 2020 - Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, 21 June 2021, [url](#), pp. 31-32

⁴ USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 17

⁵ Sierra Leone, MHS and Stats SL, Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (2019 SLDHS), October 2020, 2020, [url](#), p. 320

⁶ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 - Sierra Leone, March 2023, [url](#)

⁷ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 - Sierra Leone, March 2023, [url](#)

⁸ USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 17



the ethnic group they belonged. However, their 'rights and status were routinely inferior to those of men'.⁹ In 2020, the World Bank noted that 'in many cases' women whose husbands had passed away were denied their right to own or inherit a land while considering 'whether she bore children with the husband or willingness to remarry the male relations of her deceased husband'.¹⁰

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in Sierra Leone women faced challenges in achieving equality due to 'discriminatory property and inheritance laws, mainly increasing their vulnerability to poverty and consequently sexual violence since they are denied access to their land or property due to their status as single women'.¹¹

In Freetown, 36 % of all settlements were informal, where resident women and girls especially faced the health risks driven by 'lack of access to adequate service'.¹² African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC)¹³ published a discussion among researchers on 28 November 2022 titled 'Understanding housing challenges in Cockle Bay, Freetown' where they explained that due to the increase in the price of housing after the Covid-19 pandemic women have 'decided to come together, maybe three, four of them going for one room'.¹⁴

The academic paper 'Exploring gender, health, and intersectionality in informal settlements in Freetown'¹⁵ published on 23 March 2021 explained that many women lost their home upon their husbands' death or job loss.¹⁶ Women who arrived new to a community and did not possess land had 'limited say in community affairs' hence 'being alone—and without support—was also a major factor in hardship'.¹⁷

⁹ USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁰ World Bank (The), Sierra Leone - Country Partnership Framework for the Period FY21 - FY26, 19 April 2020, [url](#), p. 100

¹¹ UNDP, Capturing the Socioeconomic and Cultural Drivers of Sexual Violence and Gender-based violence in Sierra Leone, 12 October 2022, [url](#), p. 38

¹² ACRC, Freetown: City Scoping Study, 27 July 2021, [url](#), pp. 5-6

¹³ The African Cities Research Consortium is led by the University of Manchester and comprises research institutions, policy think tanks, civil society organisations and community-based researchers. It follows a holistic approach to research 'to foster the development of prosperous, inclusive cities with enhanced services and more equitable local governance'. ACRC, About us, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁴ ACRC, Understanding housing challenges in Cockle Bay, Freetown, 28 November 2022, [url](#)

¹⁵ Abu Conteh a Senior Researcher at the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) and head of the Urban Health Cluster; Annie Wilkinson is anthropologist, health systems researcher and a Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex and Joseph Macarthy is a lecturer in the Institute of Geography and Development Studies at Njala University in Sierra Leone and the Executive Director of the SLURC. The paper studies how social characteristics including gender, age, wealth, occupation, and tenant status have an impact on health and well-being in informal urban settlements in Freetown.

¹⁶ Conteh, A. et al., Exploring gender, health, and intersectionality in informal settlements in Freetown, 23 March 2021, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁷ Conteh, A. et al., Exploring gender, health, and intersectionality in informal settlements in Freetown, 23 March 2021, [url](#), p. 16



3. Access to employment

The World Bank, based on data obtained from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNDP, reflected that for the year 2022 female workforce in Sierra Leone stood at 48.2 %.¹⁸ In Sierra Leone, traditionally women have been involved in low-income activities like ‘petty trading’ and small-scale livestock and farming.¹⁹

In 2022, USDOS reported that women did not have equal access to economic opportunities and ‘discrimination occurred in access to credit, equal pay for similar work, and the ownership and management of a business’.²⁰ Similarly, Freedom House reported that women encountered discrimination in employment and access to credit.²¹ Furthermore, according to UNDP, the lack of stable jobs and means of income generation contributed to what is known as ‘unequal transactional sex out of material need’, making women more vulnerable to sexual violence’.²²

In Sierra Leone, women doing paid work are ‘disproportionately employed in the informal sector’, with fewer regulations and leaving them vulnerable to lower wages and job losses. In the formal sector, women earned less than their male counterparts and spent less time in the paid labour market. As a result, their pensions were generally lower and have higher risks of poverty in retirement age.²³ According to ACRC, in Freetown ‘women form the core of informal trade’ in addition to unpaid tasks involving food production which ‘hinder their participation in other economic and societal opportunities’.²⁴ The National Social Protection Strategy for Sierra Leone noted that general and societal norms driving women to work on care and domestic responsibilities could hamper their entrance in the job market or led to their exit.²⁵

The World Food Programme (WFP) pointed at the distance to the nearest market as a factor which ‘can have a significant impact on the ability of women and other household members to engage in income generating activities’.²⁶

¹⁸ World Bank (The), Labor force, female (% of total labor force) - Sierra Leone, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁹ Intelicap, Promoting a Resilient and Inclusive Private Sector in Fragile Contexts – Sierra Leone, 17 May 2021, [url](#), p. 25

²⁰ USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 17

²¹ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 - Sierra Leone, March 2023, [url](#)

²² UNDP, Capturing the Socioeconomic and Cultural Drivers of Sexual Violence and Gender-based violence in Sierra Leone, 12 October 2022, [url](#), p. 38

²³ UNDP and MoPED, Barriers and Enablers of Women’s Participation in Revenue Generation in Sierra Leone, 2023, [url](#), p. 19

²⁴ ACRC, How displacement of informal traders is exposing Freetown households to food insecurity, 3 November 2022, [url](#)

²⁵ Sierra Leone, National Social Protection Strategy for Sierra Leone 2022-2026, November 2022, [url](#), p. 43

²⁶ WFP, State Of Food Security In Sierra Leone 2020 - Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, 21 June 2021, [url](#), p. 62



The Global Findex Report published by the World Bank in 2022, which considered account ownership as ‘the fundamental measure of financial inclusion’²⁷, noted that globally 74 %²⁸ of women owned an account whereas 25 % did so as of 2021 in Sierra Leone.²⁹

4. Access to healthcare

In June 2023, the World Bank published that access to primary health care was a major challenge for Sierra Leoneans due to ‘limited health services, lack of quality of care, including lack of trained health staff and essential commodities, excessive centralization and a decline in community confidence’.³⁰ Financial and physical access was specifically limited for women and children in most districts.³¹

The SLDHS published in 2020 showed that 64 % of women who had never married and 78.5 % of women who were divorced, separated or widowed had had ‘at least one problem accessing health care’. 21.8 % of women surveyed referred to ‘not wanting to go alone’ as the problem they faced to access healthcare.³²

Regarding the exercise of reproductive rights in Sierra Leone, USDOS noted that access to sexual and reproductive health services was limited sometimes due to social and cultural barriers.³³ The same source referred to ‘religious, social and cultural barriers’ which restricted access to contraception.³⁴ Women and girls’ involvement in ‘educational, social, and economic opportunities’ was impacted by the ‘lack of access to adequate menstrual hygiene management facilities and supplies’.³⁵

Following in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, an academic article published on 8 November 2019 by the journal Culture, Health and Sexuality stated that ‘the high costs of accessing health care will continue to impact on women’s economic empowerment particularly given, as shown in this study, that health care costs are often covered by women and are often the cause of debt and hardship’.³⁶

²⁷ World Bank (The), The Global Findex Database 2021: Financial Inclusion, Digital Payments, and Resilience in the Age of COVID-19, 2022, [url](#), p. 9

²⁸ World Bank (The), The Global Findex Database 2021: Financial Inclusion, Digital Payments, and Resilience in the Age of COVID-19, 2022, [url](#), p. 21

²⁹ World Bank (The), The Global Findex Database 2021: Financial Inclusion, Digital Payments, and Resilience in the Age of COVID-19, 2022, [url](#), p. 178

³⁰ World Bank (The), Sierra Leone - Health Service Delivery and System Support Project, 27 June 2023, [url](#), p. 10

³¹ World Bank (The), Sierra Leone - Health Service Delivery and System Support Project, 27 June 2023, [url](#), p. 11

³² Sierra Leone, MHS and Stats SL, Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (2019 SLDHS), October 2020, 2020, [url](#), p. 199

³³ USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 27 March 2023, [url](#), p. 15

³⁴ USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 27 March 2023, [url](#), p. 15

³⁵ USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 27 March 2023, [url](#), p. 16

³⁶ Cornish, H. et al., Women’s economic empowerment and health related decision-making in rural Sierra Leone, 8 November 2019, [url](#), p. 14



5. Access to social services

The Social Safety Net (SSN) Project in Sierra Leone contributed to establishing in Sierra Leone a national Social Protection programme 'to respond to the challenges in human capital development' which served to finance the Ep Fet Po cash transfer programme. This programme provided support to poor households who benefited from information sessions on topics such as health and nutrition.³⁷ The World Bank reported that since the SSN project, locally known as Ep Fet Po, was launched in 2014 and until December 2020, 200 000 persons benefited from cash transfers, with 90 % of the recipients being women.³⁸ The programme specifically stated that female household members were to 'receive the transfer on behalf of the household'.³⁹ It targeted poor households rather than individual circumstances and other than this programme, 'the availability of social protection to the working-age poor is very limited'.⁴⁰

The National Social Protection Strategy for Sierra Leone (2022-2026) published in November 2022 noted that there were no specific 'Government-run social protection programmes' addressing pregnant women and preschool children.⁴¹ The Social Safety Net (SSN) provided support to people falling under those categories because they are 'members of poor households' and 'maternity benefit exists for a very limited number of employees in the formal sector'.⁴² The strategy acknowledged that 'As many women might have never entered the labour force or worked primarily in informal jobs and/or on care and domestic responsibilities without remuneration, this will impact how elderly women access social protection programmes and services'.⁴³

As of May 2021, 4.7 million people were affected by food insecurity in Sierra Leone, with households whose head lacked formal education being 'more food insecure than one whose head has vocational training'.⁴⁴ The WFP on the analysis on the state of food security in Sierra Leone based on data collected between November and December 2020 reported that of the 13 % of households benefiting from support to access food, 15 % were female headed and 12 % male headed.⁴⁵ 75 % of assistance was provided by relatives, 8 % by the Government, 4 % by International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and United Nations (UN), 4 % by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and 3 % by religious organisations.⁴⁶

³⁷ World Bank (The), The Plus in the Ep Fet Po Cash-Plus Program and its Role in Building Human Capital for Early Years in Sierra Leone, 1 June 2023, [url](#), pp. 1-2, 18

³⁸ World Bank (The), The Plus in the Ep Fet Po Cash-Plus Program and its Role in Building Human Capital for Early Years in Sierra Leone, 1 June 2023, [url](#), pp. 1-2

³⁹ World Bank (The), Safety nets, health crises and natural disasters: Lessons from Sierra Leone, 1 December 2020, [url](#), p. 43

⁴⁰ Sierra Leone, National Social Protection Strategy for Sierra Leone 2022-2026, November 2022, [url](#), p. 44

⁴¹ Sierra Leone, National Social Protection Strategy for Sierra Leone 2022-2026, November 2022, [url](#), p. 25

⁴² Sierra Leone, National Social Protection Strategy for Sierra Leone 2022-2026, November 2022, [url](#), p. 26

⁴³ Sierra Leone, National Social Protection Strategy for Sierra Leone 2022-2026, November 2022, [url](#), p. 47

⁴⁴ WFP, State Of Food Security In Sierra Leone 2020 - Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, 21 June 2021, [url](#), pp. VI-VIII

⁴⁵ WFP, State Of Food Security In Sierra Leone 2020 - Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, 21 June 2021, [url](#), p. 67

⁴⁶ WFP, State Of Food Security In Sierra Leone 2020 - Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, 21 June 2021, [url](#), p. 67



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ADDITIONAL SOURCES CONSULTED

Amnesty International (AI); Centre for Affordable Housing Finance Africa (CAHF); ECOI.net; European Union – EUAA COI Portal; Human Rights Watch (HRW); New Humanitarian (The); Partners in Health (PIH)