

## RESEARCHED AND COMPILED BY THE REFUGEE DOCUMENTATION CENTRE OF IRELAND ON THE 19 MAY 2025

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### COI QUERY RESPONSE

#### SIERRA LEONE - INFORMATION ON SUCCESSION IN THE POROS SECRET SOCIETY; IF THE ELDEST SON REFUSES TO TAKE OVER WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR SUCH REFUSAL; ANY OTHER GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE POROS / BONDO SECRET SOCIETY IN SIERRA LEONE. ARE THERE CONSEQUENCES FOR REFUSAL TO FGM FOR A CHILD BY BONDO FAMILY? WHAT AGE DOES THE BONDO SOCIETY STOPS TO FORCE A CHILD TO GO THROUGH FMG?

The *Orchid Project* in April 2025 mentioned that: “In Sierra Leone, FGM/C is associated with entry into the Bondo or Sande society. As part of the preparation for adulthood and marriage, girls are taken to the bush and taught about local customs and trained in domestic and caretaking skills, such as housekeeping and childrearing (10). In this process, girls undergo FGM/C and following completion of the initiation, they are considered members of the Bondo or Sande society. (10) In most contexts, girls are cut before the age of 15 years, but in Sierra Leone, at least 21% (2) of women are cut after age 15, raising important concerns for programme and policy design. Among those who were 15-19 at the time of the 2019 survey, 21.7% (2) had been cut after 15 years of age and among those who were 45-49 years at the time of the 2019 survey, 29.5% (2) had been cut after 15 years of age. 49.5% of girls 15-19 reported being cut between the ages of 10-14 years (2). This suggests that the majority of FGM/C is conducted after the age of 10.”<sup>1</sup>

This document further states that: “Sierra Leone does not have a law that prohibits FGM/C and in February 2024 (3), the nation came under international pressure to introduce a law following the death of three young girls who had undergone the practice. Adamsay Sesay, 12; Salamatu Jalloh, 13; and Kadiatu Bangura, 17, died in January 2024 after undergoing FGM/C as part of the Bondo initiation (3). The Bondo society is a secretive society in which girls undergo a 2–3-week initiation ritual in the bush which includes FGM/C (3). After participating in the initiation, girls and young women are considered part of the Bondo society. Unfortunately, instances of women dying after experiencing FGM/C is not a new occurrence in Sierra Leone. Three years prior, Maseray Sei, 21 (17), died from complications related to FGM/C after being abducted from her home. An arrest was made

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<sup>1</sup> Orchid Project (2 April 2025) Data Update: FGM/C in Sierra Leone (March 2025)

following Maseray's death, but the charges were dropped, and no conviction was made (17). This indicates a gap in judicial accountability for perpetrators of FGM/C.”<sup>2</sup>

The *Inter Press Service (Johannesburg)* in March 2025 reported that: “In Sierra Leone, 83 percent of women aged 15-49 have been subjected to FGM. The practice is deeply tied to the Bondo Society - a female secret society that is integral to the cultural identity of Sierra Leonean women; where girls are prepared for womanhood. The Society is defended as a powerful space for sisterhood and solidarity.”<sup>3</sup>

The *United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)* in June 2024 notes that: “FGM/C is particularly widespread in Sierra Leone. It forms part of the initiation rites into the Bondo secret societies for women, to which a majority of women in Sierra Leone belong. Girls are taken into the bush where they are taught local customs, sex education, feminine hygiene, housekeeping and childcare skills. As part of this rite of passage, girls are subjected to genital cutting, which generally includes removing all or part of the clitoris.”<sup>4</sup>

*Equality Now* in May 2024 reported that: “In January 2024, three girls (aged 12, 13, and 17) died...after being subjected to FGM as part of their initiation into the women-only secretive society, the Bondo. Their deaths came after multiple other similar deaths caused by FGM...”<sup>5</sup> This document further states that: “FGM in Sierra Leone, in most cases, takes place as part of initiation rituals of the Bondo society, which are regarded as a rite of passage for young girls and, therefore, considered to be an important traditional practice by the community.”<sup>6</sup>

In April 2024 *Amnesty International* commented that: “In March, a two-year-old died after being subjected to the practice during an initiation process into the “Bondo” secret society.”<sup>7</sup>

The *Bertelsmann Stiftung (Germany)* in March 2024 mentioned that: “...deeply embedded secret societies (Poro for males and Sande for females) have considerable influence and constitute parallel decisionmaking bodies. Most boys and girls undergo initiation rites, and it can be assumed that a significant number of political representatives are also members of the secret societies.”<sup>8</sup>

In February 2024 the *Guardian* points out that: “FGM involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, and is considered a violation of women’s and girls’ human rights. In 2012 the UN passed a resolution to ban it, but it is still practised in about 30 countries. Unicef will publish new figures on its global prevalence next month, but current estimates show at least 200 million women and girls have been subjected to FGM. Despite calls from activists and human rights advocates for the practice to be criminalised – including from the UN special rapporteur on violence against women and girls – it remains legal in Sierra Leone. A national survey in 2019 found that 83% of women had undergone FGM, a slight drop from 90% in 2013. The procedure is part of a

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *Inter Press Service (Johannesburg)* (March 2025) *Our Silence On Female Genital Mutilation in Sierra Leone Will Not Protect Us*

<sup>4</sup> *United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)* (4 June 2024) *Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Sierra Leone* [7.2.2 Female genital mutilation/cutting]

<sup>5</sup> *Equality Now* (6 May 2024) *Information on Sierra Leone for consideration of the list of issues prior to reporting by the Human Rights Committee at its 141st session (Female Genital Mutilation; Violence against women)*, p.2

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.4

<sup>7</sup> *Amnesty International* (23 April 2024) *The State of the World's Human Rights - Amnesty International Report 2023/24: Sierra Leone*

<sup>8</sup> *Bertelsmann Stiftung (Germany)* (19 March 2024) *Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2024 Country Report - Sierra Leone*

traditional initiation ritual that marks a girl's entry into womanhood. It is carried out by soweis, senior members of the all-women Bondo secret societies"<sup>9</sup>

The *International Human Rights Center (Loyola Law School)* in January 2024 reported that: "In Sierra Leone, FGM is usually practiced in an all-female society called the Bondo society (also known in West Africa as the Sande). The purpose of the Bondo society is to help young women earn the rites of passage into adulthood. In order to receive these rites of passage, a girl must undergo their cultural rituals including FGM. The society is called Bondo because initiation occurs in the Bondo bush, which is a private enclosure constructed near their village. Once a woman becomes a member of the Bondo, she is able to go to the Bondo without her husband's permission. The Bondo leader, a woman called Sowe, typically performs the cutting."<sup>10</sup>

This document further notes that: "Generally, there is a "collective sense of social obligation and expectation" that adds to the preservation of the practice. It is sustained through pressure on younger women or families to continue the practice; refusals result in ostracism, being shunned, and stigmatization. Community leaders and supporters of the practice claim FGM is required to protect a woman's honor. Because the Bondo is the only place women are allowed to go to without permission from their husband, women who are a part of the Bondo have an increased freedom of movement. Also, members of the Bondo are regarded as having a higher standing than other women."<sup>11</sup>

The *European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)* in November 2023 points out that: "A 2023 BBC news article, described that Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of FGM in Africa and one of the main reasons for FGM is to 'tame a women's sexual desire'. The organization 28 Too Many, illustrated that FGM has been closely linked with the 'Bondo' secret society, in which FGM is part of an 'initiation ritual for women and girls into the society'. The 2021 USDOS report also stated that FGM was performed in initiations into 'traditional secret societies' and was considered a 'rite of passage into womanhood' by these societies. Moreover, the Borgen Project described that FGM was viewed as a 'symbol of status and honor to families, making it a social norm that girls have no choice but to abide by'."<sup>12</sup>

Under the heading "Possibility to refuse FGM and consequences for refusal" the report notes that: "According to a 2022 news article by the Irish Times, refusing 'Bondo', an initiation for young women involving FGM, 'comes at great social cost'. Furthermore, the same source indicated that women who have not received the initiation are 'not permitted to marry; to represent their communities in religious or cultural events; to participate in celebrations or funerals; or to serve as chief or in parliament'. The article described a specific woman who was abandoned by her family at the age of 18 and cut off financially, due to refusing the initiation, leaving her unable to further her education or marry. The article also illustrated that a 'growing numbers of girls and young women' are 'refusing to participate in initiation, telling their mothers and grandmothers, they will not join Bondo'. A 2021 news article by Deutsche Welle (DW) portrayed that a woman from Sierra Leone who refused the 'Bondo' initiation, due to the involvement of FGM, faced 'enormous teasing' from her school peers and community."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Guardian (2 February 2024) Three girls die after FGM rituals in Sierra Leone

<sup>10</sup> International Human Rights Center (Loyola Law School) (7 January 2024) NGO Joint Parallel Report on Sierra Leone's First Report on the Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Female genital mutilation (FGM))

<sup>11</sup> ibid

<sup>12</sup> European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) (10 November 2023) EUAA COI Query - Sierra Leone: Information on female genital mutilation (FGM) for married women

<sup>13</sup> ibid

*The Calabash News Paper* in August 2023 mentioned that: “20 years old Mohame Fofanah has been reported missing after he was declared wanted by certain members of the Poro Society. According to investigations conducted by this medium, Fofanah was declared wanted because he declined to take his ‘rightful’ position as head of society the secret society. Poro is one of the major male secret societies in Sierra Leone that has members in all walks of life in the country. The leadership of the Poro Society is, however based on inheritance within specific families in the country. Those families command significant respect and feared in the areas where the society operates, especially in the rural areas. At old age, each head of the society is expected to present to the general membership the son that will inherit his position after his demise. Mohame Fofanah’s father was the head of the Poro Society at Kayiama Village in Kono District, a mantle the family has held for generations. Speaking to the media, Kumba Kamara younger sister to Fofanah’s late mother narrated that her nephew was living with his grandmother in Freetown but on a certain date in July 2023, he called and told her that the elders of the poro society had informed him that he has been chosen by his father to inherit his position as leader of the society. She said Fofanah told her the elders had asked him to travel to the village for short initiation ceremony that will allow him to begin to sit by the sides of his old father and learn the process. “The boy confides in me that he was not interested in being a member of the Poro Society not to talk of taking a position as head. I drew his attention to how dangerous declining the elders request could be and the consequences that could follow. But the boy had already made up his mind,” Kumba explained.”<sup>14</sup>

This document further states that “Kumba said she decided to contact the media and call for government attention because she is of the view that members of the poro society had kidnapped the boy and forced him to become a member of the society against his will. “We have had cases wherein many boys have been kidnapped, taken into the initiation bush and be initiated against their will, and many have lost their lives through the process. This is the third week we have not seen him or know his whereabouts,” she said.”<sup>15</sup>

The *Migrant-Rights.org* in September 2023 reported that: “The Poro and Bondo/Sande secret societies for men and women respectively are centres of power in Sierra Leone, and those aspiring for any kind of political or socio-economic influence must be initiated into these societies. The members wield political power, and are responsible for decisions that affect the country as a whole. The Poro society is the more powerful of the two and plays a part in enforcing social norms, socialising the young through initiation schools.”<sup>16</sup>

The *International Journal of Women's Health* in December 2022 reported that: “FGM in Sierra Leone takes place as part of an initiation ceremony, which identifies a woman as belonging to a particular ethnic group and through which the community recognizes when a girl becomes a woman. This initiation ceremony also gives membership to a women-only led and run secret society called Bondo. The initiation ceremony takes place over several weeks where the girls and women are secluded in a clearing several kilometers away from the nearest village, and consists of various activities. This clearing, surrounded by palm leaves, is referred to as the Bondo Bush. The women who are the heads of the society are also the traditional excisors. Their local names depend on the ethnic group, as Table 2 shows, but are generally referred to as Soweis. Soweis are usually older women who are feared and respected as women with supernatural powers. The role of a Sowe is hereditary.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The Calabash News Paper (30 August 2023) Man went missing after ‘poro society’ elders declare him wanted

<sup>15</sup> ibid

<sup>16</sup> Migrant-Rights.org (3 September 2023) Risking life and limb: Trafficking is the only form of recruitment for Sierra Leoneans headed to the GCC

<sup>17</sup> International Journal of Women's Health Health (December 2022) Health complications of female genital mutilation in Sierra Leone

This document further states that: “The first activity in the initiation ceremony is FGM. While the girls heal they are taught what their roles are in the family, in the community, and to other women who belong to the Bondo society. After the period of seclusion, the girls, now Bondo members, and recognized women in their communities, are led back in procession and dance to the village to be welcomed by their families with gifts and festivities.”<sup>18</sup> This document further mentioned that: “One of the reasons given for Bondo initiation is that it prepares a girl for marriage, and therefore sexual activity.”<sup>19</sup>

The *Green Scenery Sierra Leone* in June 2021 noted that: “Women intending to compete for local level leadership in the other hand are expected to be member of the *Poro* male secret society, a process largely undocumented, but implying high pressure on women and many shying away from the idea (Rogers, 2011).”<sup>20</sup>

*The Calabash Newspaper* in April 2021 mentioned that: “Report reaching Calabash newspaper says that Alusine Ibrahim Jah who is the favorite son of late Pa Ibrahim Jah the Kassilolo of the poro society in Bathbana Village, Yonie Chiefdom in the Northern part of Sierra Leone has escaped for refusing to be initiated into the poro society. According to the traditional and cultural laws of Sierra Leone, Alusine Ibrahim Jah being the favorite son of his late Father Pa Ibrahim Jah is destined to succeed the position of his father as the Kassilolo in the Poro society to continue the lineage. Whiles narrating the story of Alusine Ibrahim Jah one of the close family member Pa Abu Bakarr says that Alusine Ibrahim Jah’s father had earlier informed him together with some elderly members of the secret society that Alusine will succeed him as the Kassilolo of the poro society before he died. Pa Abu furthered noted that the thirty-nine years old Alusine has been a strong opposition of the society as he is a fervent Muslim with a strong faith in Allah. He further revealed that the head of the Poro Secret Society gave a statement of threats to kill Alusine Ibrahim Jah for abandoning the tradition for Muslim Religion after knowing all the secrets in the shrine whiles trying to initiate him before he disappeared on the 2nd April 2021.”<sup>21</sup>

In December 2020 the *ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project)* mentioned that: “The most prominent are Sierra Leone’s secret societies like the Bondo, Gbanbani, and the Poro society, which are often responsible for violence against civilians (particularly sexual violence and kidnapping) and tend to operate relatively independently.”<sup>22</sup>

The *US Department of State International Religious Freedom Report* in June 2020 states that: “In January members of a secret group called the Poro Society attacked an Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Kenema in the eastern part of the country to initiate by force the adult males. According to the report, the Ahmadi Muslims rejected membership in the Poro Society and said Poro members kidnapped at least five adult males, severely beat one, and initiated the others by force. Initiation included physical mutilation and cuttings on the back. Following the violent attack, during which the Poro members seized livestock and burned eight houses, approximately 90 members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community fled the village. The Ahmadi leader reported the incident to the highest levels in the government but said police and government officials were reluctant to

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<sup>18</sup> ibid

<sup>19</sup> ibid

<sup>20</sup> *Green Scenery Sierra Leone* (23 June 2021) How Effective is the Promotion of Women’s Customary Land Rights in Improving Women’s Land Tenure Security in Sierra Leone?

<sup>21</sup> *The Calabash Newspaper* (12 April 2021) For choosing Islamic Religion over Primitive Secret Societies, Alusine Ibrahim Jah escaped death

<sup>22</sup> *ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project)* (16 December 2020) When Emerging Democracies Breed Violence: Sierra Leone 20 Years after the Civil War

investigate the Poro Society due to its perceived influence in society. As of year's end, police had made no arrests in the case, although sources stated that authorities knew the identity of the leader of the attacks, and Ahmadi property remained in possession of the attackers.”<sup>23</sup>

In January 2020 the AYV News notes that: “After surviving a whole year of repeated raids upon his family and friends residences across the country and harassments by secret members of the society, Abdulai absconded in 2011 and yet to be seen. However, the escape of Abdulai has not stopped the society members from continuously hunting him day after day. It can be recalled that Abdulai’s father had been one of the Gbanikas of the Poro Secret society for the past 15 years and according to their tradition the position of Gbanika can only be attained through succession, meaning Abdulai who is the eldest son must succeed his father upon his death. After the successful burial of his father, a week later, members of the Poro Secret society visited their residence demanded that he (Abdulai) be prepared to replace his late father as the Gbanika of the society and must undergo robust initiation ceremony. Abdulai’s mother, Ramatu Sesay refused to give up her son due to the fact that her son is no way connected to secret society and she will not allow them to take him. During the process a scuffles erupted between members of the society and relatives of Abdulai, but he managed to escape the scene. According to close family sources, Abdulai managed to flee the country after he secure help from a friend. Also, close sources within the society, revealed that the search for Abdulai is still ongoing as members of the society are still harassing members of his family to the extent that they have been limited from enjoying and attending certain functions in the village. It was revealed that a bounty was place on the head of Abdulai and a handsome reward was placed for any person who will show his way about. Meanwhile, family members have resisted all urge to participate in all traditional activities and rumors have it that they are planning to leave the village soonest.”<sup>24</sup>

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