

UPR Pre-session Sierra Leone Statement

YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL - PLAN INTERNATIONAL SIERRA LEONE

This statement is delivered on behalf of the Youth advisory panel (YAP) of Plan International Sierra Leone. A body of young people from different youth advisory, networking and advocacy groups in Sierra Leone Striving to vocalize the needs of youths by serving as advisors and ambassadors to Plan International. The panel is geared towards creating and nurturing a network between youth-child partners and decision makers at Plan International Sierra Leone. In order to reinforce, voice out and monitor Plan's mission of empowering children across the world.

My statement addresses the following issues: child marriage, gender-based violence and how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted these issues.

❖ CHILD MARRIAGE

Follow up on the first review

Amongst the many recommendations put forward to the government of Sierra Leone, we note that two that referred to harmful practices were not accepted by the government of Sierra Leone¹. Yet, the issue of child marriage remains one of the greatest challenges faced by girls especially in the rural areas. Enforcement of the existing Laws has been challenging. The Family support unit (FSU) is a Unit that operates on the aforementioned issue, FSU is part of Sierra Leone police of all regions in Sierra Leone. However, complaints against child marriage have been low because these marriages are done secretly and informally. Very few of these matters are reported, as in most cases these issues die a natural death. The issue of conflicting laws in Sierra Leone between the Child Rights Act, and the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act has made prosecution very difficult for law providers and activist.

Improvement after first review

Despite the slow pace at which child marriage is tackled, the government of Sierra Leone has made progress towards this issue. Namely: open dialogue between the Government and CSOs, and community sensitization of laws protecting children against early marriage. There is the political will to tackle child marriage; the "hands off our girls" campaign has influenced Government policies to promote child protection, and we have seen great media involvement in helping to raise awareness.

Recommendations

We therefore recommend that child marriage is made prominent among other issues in the upcoming UPR, with a priority on the two conflicting laws on age of marriage and referral

¹ 111.109 - Explicitly prohibit all harmful practices against women of all ages, including female genital mutilation, child, early and forced marriage and practices inflicted on elderly women in relation to allegations of witchcraft, and take all necessary measures to enforce the prohibition (Slovenia); 111.115 - Adopt pertinent measures for economic empowerment of women, and intensify actions against female genital mutilation and early marriage (Cabo Verde).

pathways as one of the solutions to solve many of the challenges above. We hereby recommend the following:

- ✓ Government to speedily draft and enact a new law that prohibits child marriage and swiftly amend the conflicting laws in other documents especially the laws dealing with age of marriage, which are found in the Child Rights Act, and the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act respectively.
- ✓ Government and partners should source more funds and structures to provide psychological and counselling facilities for victims of early marriage. They also should promote more outreach, monitoring and sensitization of laws on child marriage.

❖ GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Follow up on the first review

Although a lot has been done to tackle gender-based violence (GBV) little has been done on harmful traditional practices, according to United Nations data 90% of females in Sierra Leone aged 15-49 have been victims of female genital mutilation (FGM) during their life time; and no criminal penalties or laws have been made by the Government of Sierra Leone against FGM. Although gains have been made on issues of GBV there are still improvements needed. According to local institutions there have been several reported cases of sexual violence against girls including months old babies in a space of three years. GBV remain to be an overarching challenge hindering gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Improvement after first review

The Government of Sierra Leone has made immense progress to tackle gender-based violence in the space of three years' time. Namely: the establishment of the "One stop centre" to respond to victims of abuse in six districts out of the sixteen districts in Sierra Leone, a toll free line to report issues of SGBV, amendment of the sexual offences act of 2019, setting up of a special court for speedy trial and the development strategy on SGBV prevention. The Government declared a national emergency on rape and established a separate ministry to promote gender equality and children's rights. There is the political will to tackle GBV issues and protect women and girls. Several laws and policies have been instituted by the government to ensure compliance on the protection of women and girls rights.

Recommendations

In order to further address the issues around gender-based violence we make the following recommendations to the Government of Sierra Leone:

- ✓ The Government of Sierra Leone to have a clear position or policies in ending FGM and enforce these policies through community engagement and designing of monitoring systems to minimize the risk.
- ✓ The Government to speedily and urgently establish a forensic laboratory to respond to SGBV matters and create sexual offender registers in Sierra Leone.

❖ COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In relation to the above statement, we also note that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the issue of child marriage and gender-based violence in the following ways:

- ✓ The Covid-19 pandemic has made monitoring difficult for CSOs, and the Government because of limited movements.
- ✓ More girls especially in rural communities are at risk of child marriage during Covid-19
- ✓ There is reduced rate of prosecutions because of irregular court hearings especially in the rural areas.