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HRW – Human Rights Watch (Author)

Sierra Leone Acts to Ban Child Marriage

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New Law Essential to Protecting Girls from Abuse

Last week, Sierra Leone's parliament enacted landmark legislation to ban child marriage. The [Prohibition of Child Marriage Bill 2024](#), which makes marriage for anyone under 18 a criminal offense, seeks to protect girls from a harmful practice that has long violated their rights and hindered their development.

Child marriage is a serious problem in Sierra Leone, [where 30 percent of girls and 4 percent of boys are married before age 18](#), with even higher rates in rural areas. Around 800,000 girls are currently married in Sierra Leone, half before turning 15.

Child marriages fuel the high adolescent pregnancy rate in Sierra Leone where, tragically, pregnancy complications are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19.

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Parliament enacts legislation to ban child marriage

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Sierra Leone

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The new law prohibits all forms of child marriage and cohabitation with a child, including aiding and abetting, protects the best interests of children, and ensures affected girls have access to counseling and safeguarding. The law amends existing legislation, including the Child Rights and Registration of Customary Marriage Acts, to harmonize the legal framework on marriage and break the cycle of early marriage and its devastating consequences.

The law also builds on Sierra Leone's [efforts to protect young girls from marriage and tackle barriers to girls' education](#). A new education law, adopted in 2023, guarantees children 13 years of free education, including one year of preprimary education as well as secondary education.

The First Lady's "[Hands Off Our Girls](#)" campaign has been instrumental in advocating against child marriage.

The legislation is a milestone in Sierra Leone's journey towards gender equality and child protection. It also sets a pathway forward for other African nations, such as [Tanzania and Zambia](#), to revoke laws that permit child marriage, and ensure girls can complete primary and secondary education.

Now, Sierra Leone's government should raise awareness, particularly in rural areas, about the new law and the harmful effects of child marriage. The government should also address other prevalent harmful practices [linked to child marriage](#), such as female genital mutilation. It should collaborate with local communities, nongovernmental groups, and international organizations to publicly campaign about the harms associated with child marriage, while also providing support services for married children and children at risk of child marriage.

The government will also need to continue focusing on keeping girls in school, while it develops sustainable economic opportunities and social programs that empower girls and their families.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/28/sierra-leone-acts-ban-child-marriage>

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