

The State of the World's Human Rights; Sierra Leone 2025

Freedom of expression was threatened, particularly through libel provisions in cybersecurity legislation, and a proposed law that could curtail press freedom. While new legislation provided greater protection of women's and girls' rights, it failed to criminalize female genital mutilation, and a bill to protect maternal health and reproductive rights remained pending. The government made efforts to reduce food insecurity. US cuts to foreign aid undermined the right to health. Meanwhile, more than half of Africa's Mpox cases were concentrated in Sierra Leone, while hundreds of people died in the capital as a result of using kush, a harmful synthetic drug. Authorities took steps to respond to the effects of climate change.

Background

In June, President Bio was the first Sierra Leonean head of state to become chairman of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS. He outlined four key strategic priorities: restoring constitutional order and deepening democracy; revitalizing regional security cooperation; unlocking economic integration; and building institutional credibility.

Freedom of expression

In March, parliament passed a new anti-terrorism bill that granted broad powers to authorities. The bill, which was awaiting the president's assent, threatened to severely restrict press freedom and criminalize journalists for doing their job, under the guise of national security. In May, Reporters Without Borders warned that the bill's imprecise definition of a "terrorist act" could allow authorities to interpret legitimate journalism as a threat to national security. If enacted, journalists could face up to 30 years in prison for reporting information that the authorities deem prejudicial or false.

In March, Hawa Hunt, an artist and reality television personality, was released after more than two months in detention, during which she was repeatedly refused bail. She was arrested on live television and charged with insulting the president and the First Lady in a video she posted on social media. She was charged under the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021, which criminalizes libel and defamation, among other offences.

Women's and girls' rights

On 8 July, the ECOWAS Court of Justice ordered Sierra Leone to criminalize female genital mutilation (FGM) after hearing the case of a woman forced to undergo the procedure.

On 14 October, President Bio signed the 2024 Child Rights Act into law after it was passed in July by parliament. The law banned early and forced child marriage, reinforcing children's rights to autonomy and protection from harmful traditional practices. However, its failure to criminalize FGM sparked criticism from civil society.

The Safe Motherhood Bill, which aimed to improve maternal healthcare and reproductive rights, and to legalize abortion in certain cases, remained pending at the end of the year. Meanwhile, childbirth continued to pose significant risks for women, with persistently high maternal and newborn mortality rates, largely due to obstetric violence in public health facilities.

LGBTI people

While consensual sexual relations between women was not explicitly outlawed, lesbian women continued to face significant social, cultural and economic challenges making it difficult for them to live freely and in safety. They continued to experience stigma, harassment, and limited acceptance from their families and communities.

Right to health

According to development and humanitarian organizations, drastic cuts in USAID funding in March resulted in the closure of clinics, staff retrenchments and the suspension of essential services such as HIV testing, treatment and care, and threatened to seriously affect maternal health services. Maternal mortality rates in Sierra Leone were among the highest in the world, although government initiatives in recent years led to a decline in 2025 compared to previous years.

By May, more than half of Africa's confirmed Mpox cases were in Sierra Leone. Over 61,000 doses of the Mpox vaccine were distributed and more than 24,000 people vaccinated, with healthcare workers and high-risk groups prioritized.

Also in May, the Ministry of Health, supported by the WHO, convened a high-level policy dialogue on a draft bill to establish the Sierra Leone Agency for Universal Health Coverage.

In July, President Bio launched the Water Security and Hygiene Program. It aimed to reach 4 million people by 2035 to improve access to clean water and promote hygiene in schools and health facilities, among other things.

According to Freetown City Council, between January and October it collected the bodies of 220 people who had died on the capital's streets as a result of kush consumption (a cheap synthetic drug). Measures were taken to fight substance abuse, particularly kush, in response to the national emergency declared by President Bio in April 2024. Strategies included treatment and support for addicts, and strengthening law enforcement measures to dismantle drug trafficking networks and hold traffickers accountable.

Right to food

In January, the minister of agriculture renewed a commitment to increase rice production to improve food security. According to the UN Food and Agricultural Organization, about 1.2 million people were estimated to be facing acute food insecurity during the June-August lean season period.

Right to a healthy environment

The country remained at risk of coastal erosion. According to the World Bank in its June Country Climate and Development Report, climate change, together with unregulated urban growth, threatened to hinder agricultural growth and aggravate poverty. In August the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change engaged with parliament to accelerate climate action progress. The ministry, with the Environment Protection Agency, also engaged in a nationwide consultation for the review of Sierra Leone's NDC.

