

Table of Contents

I. Executive Summary of the 4th Cycle of the State Under Review.....	3
II. Background of the Reviewed State’s Political and Social Situation.....	4
III. Background and Critical Perspective on the Subsisting Issues Across the second, third, and fourth UPR Cycles	5
IV. Exhaustive Summary of Sierra Leone’s Fourth UPR Cycle	7
V. Recommendations	8
VI. Remarks by the Representative of Sierra Leone.....	10
VII. Looking Forward: New Priorities of the International Community and Commitments of Sierra Leone.....	10
VIII. Critical Analysis.....	11
IX. GICJ Position.....	12
SOURCES	13

I. Executive Summary of the 4th Cycle of Sierra Leone

During the 52nd session of the Universal Periodic Review held on 12 May 2026 in Geneva, Sierra Leone presented its fourth-cycle national human rights report before the United Nations Human Rights Council. The delegation was led by government officials, including Ms. Fracess P. Alghali, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, alongside the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Alpha Sesay. The review consisted of an extensive interactive dialogue between Sierra Leone and several Member States before the Human Rights Council.

The review focused on Sierra Leone's progress in democratic governance, constitutional reform, criminal justice reform, gender equality, healthcare, education, child protection, and environmental sustainability. The government emphasized achievements such as the abolition of the death penalty, the enactment of the Child Rights Act (2025), the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2024), and reforms introduced through the Criminal Procedure Act (2024).

Throughout the review, Sierra Leone portrayed itself as a State committed to the "rule of law," "human rights protection," "victim-centered justice," "gender equality," and "inclusive governance." The delegation actively responded to recommendations and criticisms, presenting the review as evidence of the government's willingness to engage transparently with the international community.

Several Member States, including the United Kingdom, Mexico, Australia, Mongolia, Morocco, Namibia, Uganda, Tunisia, and Togo, raised critical concerns and recommendations. Major issues discussed included prison overcrowding, female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, freedom of expression, access to healthcare, electoral transparency, discrimination against women, and climate resilience.

States also urged Sierra Leone to ratify additional international instruments, including the International Convention for the Protection of Workers, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, and the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which aims at the abolition of the death penalty.

The review highlighted the contrast between Sierra Leone's significant legal reforms and the persistent implementation gaps that continue to affect vulnerable populations. Despite visible institutional progress, serious concerns remain regarding corruption, prison conditions, gender-based violence, maternal mortality, harmful traditional practices, weak healthcare infrastructure, and political tensions following the 2023 elections.

II. Background of the Reviewed State’s Political and Social Situation



Sierra Leone is a post-conflict West African country whose political and institutional structures continue to be shaped by the legacy of the civil war that ended in 2002. The conflict, which lasted from 1991 to 2002, resulted in widespread human rights violations, including killings, sexual violence, forced displacement, and the recruitment of child soldiers. Although the war formally ended more than two decades ago, its legacy continues to influence contemporary governance challenges, weak institutions, socioeconomic inequalities, and public distrust in state authorities. Since then, the State has pursued democratic reconstruction, transitional justice, and institutional reform while attempting to consolidate political stability and economic development.

Indeed, the political environment of Sierra Leone remains fragile. The June 2023 elections generated disputes and post-electoral tensions between the government and opposition parties. These tensions contributed to the establishment of the Agreement for National Unity signed on 18 October 2023 and the Tripartite Committee tasked with reviewing electoral reforms and

governance processes. The Tripartite Committee, composed of representatives from the government, opposition, and international partners, was established to assess the electoral process and propose reforms aimed at strengthening public confidence in democratic institutions. Sierra Leone also experienced violent protests in August 2022 and an attempted unconstitutional change of government in November 2023. Those events intensified concerns regarding democratic governance and political accountability.

Socially, Sierra Leone continues to face serious structural challenges including poverty, unemployment, corruption, weak infrastructure, and limited access to public services. Despite economic progress in some sectors, a significant proportion of the population continues to experience multidimensional poverty, particularly in rural areas where access to healthcare, education, clean water, sanitation, and employment opportunities remains limited. These socioeconomic challenges contribute directly to the persistence of many human rights concerns identified across successive UPR cycles. Weak public institutions and resource constraints often limit the government's ability to effectively deliver essential services and implement reforms.

Furthermore, women and children remain among the most vulnerable groups due to gender inequality, child marriage, female genital mutilation, limited educational access, and weak healthcare systems. Women continue to face barriers to economic participation, political representation, and access to justice despite recent legislative reforms. Gender-based violence remains widespread, while harmful traditional practices continue to affect the rights and wellbeing of women and girls. Children are particularly vulnerable to poverty, child labour, exploitation, and educational exclusion. In many rural communities, customary practices, limited state presence, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms weaken child protection efforts. Educational inequalities and limited opportunities for social mobility further contribute to cycles of poverty and vulnerability, demonstrating that legal reforms alone are insufficient without broader social and economic development.

III. Background and Critical Perspective on the Subsisting Issues Across the Second, Third, and Fourth UPR Cycles

Several human rights issues have remained persistent throughout Sierra Leone's second, third, and fourth UPR cycles.

1. Gender Inequality and Violence Against Women

Women's rights remain one of the most recurring concerns across all review cycles. Although Sierra Leone adopted progressive legislation such as the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (2022), women and girls continue to experience discrimination, sexual violence, harmful traditional practices, and unequal access to opportunities.

Female genital mutilation remains one of the most controversial unresolved issues. During the fourth cycle, the government acknowledged that the executive initially attempted to include an explicit prohibition of FGM in the Child Rights Act (2007). However, the Parliament modified the provision, adopting broader language condemning harmful practices without specifically criminalizing FGM. This outcome demonstrated the continued political sensitivity surrounding traditional practices.

Issues like FGM persist because deep-rooted cultural norms and patriarchal social structures continue to shape attitudes and practices at the community level, often limiting the impact of formal legal reforms. In addition, political considerations make it difficult for governments to fully criminalise or strictly enforce measures against practices such as FGM, as they may face resistance from influential traditional and community actors. As a result, there remains a significant gap between progressive legislation and effective implementation.

2. Child Protection and Child Marriage

Child protection has consistently been a major issue throughout previous cycles. Sierra Leone adopted the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2024) and strengthened child protection systems through legislative reforms. Nevertheless, enforcement remains weak, especially in rural areas where poverty and customary practices continue to drive child marriage and exploitation.

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2024) represents one of the most significant child rights reforms in Sierra Leone's recent history. The Act criminalises child marriage and imposes penalties on individuals who facilitate, permit, or participate in the marriage of persons under the age of 18. The legislation was widely welcomed by international organizations and human rights advocates because it addressed a longstanding gap in the protection of children, particularly girls, who remain disproportionately affected by early and forced marriage.

Despite this legislative progress, the persistence of child marriage highlights the limitations of legal reforms when underlying socioeconomic conditions remain unchanged. Poverty continues to encourage families to view marriage as a means of reducing financial burdens, while limited access to education increases the vulnerability of girls to early marriage. In many communities, customary and religious practices continue to influence family decisions, creating tensions between statutory law and local social norms.

Furthermore, implementation challenges remain significant. Effective enforcement requires public awareness campaigns, accessible reporting mechanisms, trained law enforcement officials, and adequate child protection services. Without these supporting measures, there is a risk that the Act will have limited practical impact, particularly in remote areas where state institutions have a weaker presence. The continued prominence of child marriage across successive UPR cycles demonstrates that child protection is not only a legal issue but also a broader development challenge linked to poverty, education, and gender inequality.

3. Rule of Law and Prison Overcrowding

Justice sector reforms have remained a central recommendation throughout successive cycles, with persistent issues including prolonged pretrial detention, prison overcrowding, weak legal aid systems, judicial delays, and poor detention conditions.

The fourth cycle highlighted new efforts through the Criminal Procedure Act (2024), including non-custodial sentencing, mediation, legal aid expansion, and decriminalization of petty offences. However, implementation challenges remain substantial.

Prison overcrowding has been one of the most persistent concerns raised throughout Sierra Leone's UPR history. Many detention facilities continue to operate beyond their intended capacity, creating poor living conditions and placing significant pressure on already limited resources. Overcrowding is closely linked to prolonged pretrial detention, with many detainees spending extended periods in custody before their cases are heard. This raises concerns regarding the right to a fair trial and the presumption of innocence.

The persistence of these problems reflects deeper structural weaknesses within the justice system. Limited numbers of judges, prosecutors, and legal aid providers contribute to case backlogs and judicial delays. Resource constraints also affect prison administration, rehabilitation services, and monitoring mechanisms. Although the Criminal Procedure Act (2024) represents an important effort to modernise the justice system, legal reforms alone are unlikely to resolve longstanding institutional deficiencies without sustained financial investment and administrative capacity-building.

The recurring nature of these recommendations across multiple UPR cycles suggests that the challenge is not the absence of legal reforms but rather the State's limited capacity to fully implement them. Future progress will therefore depend on strengthening judicial institutions, increasing access to legal representation, and ensuring that alternatives to detention are effectively applied in practice.

5. Democratic Governance and Freedom of Expression

Questions regarding democratic governance, political tensions, and freedom of expression have become increasingly important. While Sierra Leone highlighted the repeal of criminal libel laws, concerns remain regarding the implementation of the Cybersecurity and Crime Act (2021) and the broader protection of civic space and media freedoms.

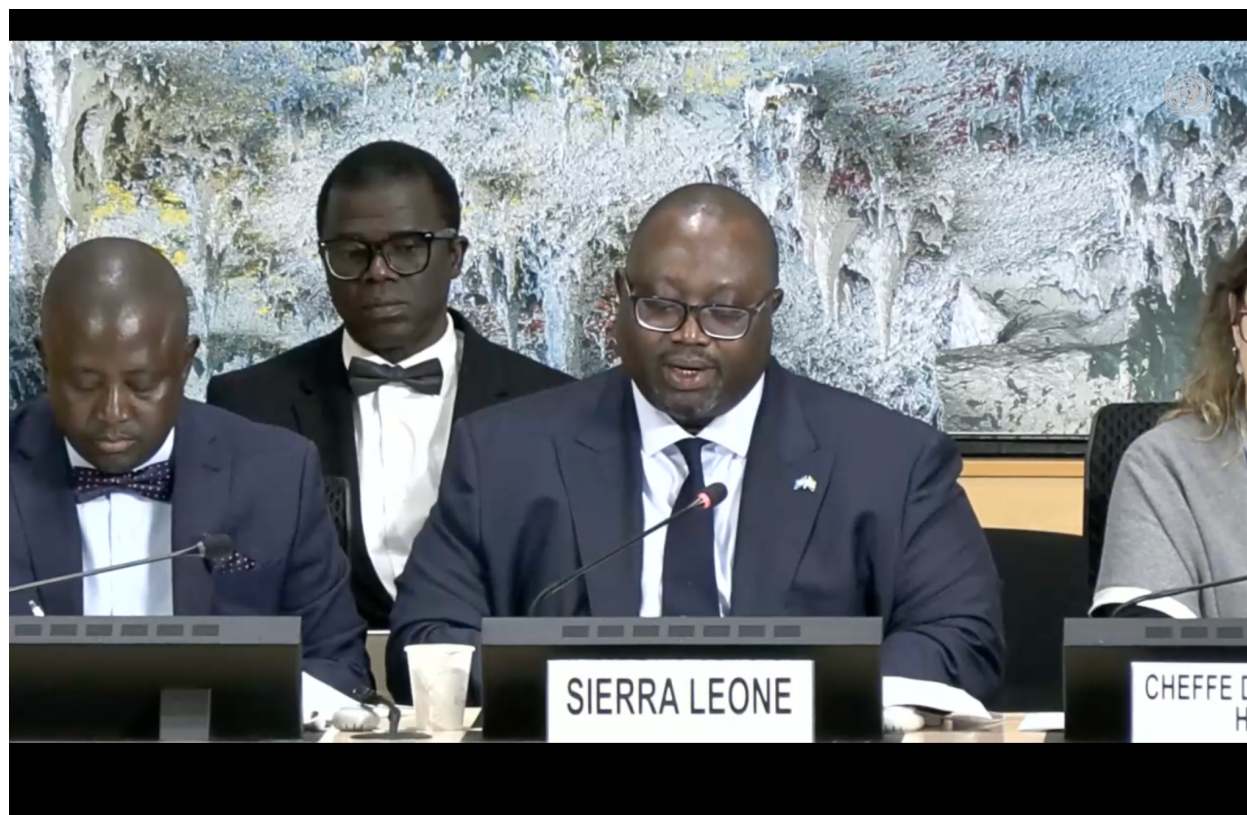
These concerns gained greater prominence following the political tensions surrounding the 2023 elections and earlier protests in 2022. While Sierra Leone continues to present itself as a democratic state committed to constitutional governance, allegations relating to excessive use of force, political intimidation, and restrictions on civic space have generated concern among

stakeholders. These developments demonstrate that democratic consolidation remains an ongoing process rather than a completed achievement.

The repeal of criminal libel laws was widely regarded as a positive step for press freedom and was welcomed by both domestic and international observers. However, concerns have emerged that provisions of the Cybersecurity and Crime Act (2021) may be used in ways that restrict freedom of expression or create uncertainty for journalists, activists, and opposition voices. This reflects a broader challenge faced by many states in balancing legitimate security concerns with the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms.

The persistence of governance-related concerns across successive UPR cycles suggests that strengthening democratic institutions requires more than legal reform. Effective accountability mechanisms, judicial independence, political inclusiveness, and public trust in State institutions are equally important. The establishment of the Agreement for National Unity and the Tripartite Committee (The Committee handed in its final report in 2024) following the 2023 elections demonstrates recognition of these challenges, but their long-term effectiveness will depend on whether proposed reforms are fully implemented and broadly accepted by political stakeholders.

IV. Exhaustive Summary of Sierra Leone’s Fourth UPR Cycle



The fourth cycle review of Sierra Leone was characterized by extensive participation from the State delegation and sustained engagement from Member States. The delegation appeared highly prepared, active, and responsive throughout the session.

Ms. Franced P. Alghali, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, opened the presentation by explaining the preparation of the National Report and stressing the consultative nature of the process. Throughout the review, the delegation emphasized the importance of transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, and national ownership.

Then, Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Alpha Sesay, presented reforms relating to the constitution, criminal justice system, prison overcrowding, electoral processes, gender equality, and climate change. The delegation strongly highlighted the abolition of the death penalty as a major achievement and pledged to continue pursuing ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the ICCPR. The government also described the Criminal Procedure Act of 2024 as an important modernization reform aimed at reducing prison overcrowding, improving legal aid, expanding alternative sentencing, strengthening victims' rights, and streamlining criminal procedures.

Overall, the focus points of the working group were gender-based violence, female genital mutilation, child marriage, prison overcrowding, access to healthcare, judicial independence, and environmental protection. The issue of female genital mutilation became one of the most sensitive topics during the review. Sierra Leone acknowledged international concerns while attempting to balance them against domestic political and cultural realities. States like Tunisia and Mozambique also emphasized climate resilience and environmental rights, while Togo encouraged Sierra Leone to ratify international conventions on migrant workers and enforced disappearances.

All in all, the representatives of Sierra Leone were neither passive nor evasive. On the contrary, they actively defended reforms, acknowledged shortcomings, and attempted to contextualize challenges within broader social and economic realities. The delegation consistently responded to criticisms and highlighted future reform commitments.

At the same time, Member States clearly attempted to hold Sierra Leone accountable. Several recommendations specifically demanded stronger enforcement mechanisms, explicit criminalization of harmful practices, improved detention conditions, and stronger institutional independence.

The repeated use of international law terminology such as: “rule of law,” “victim-centred justice,” “gender-based violence,” “climate resilience,” “human dignity,” “inclusive governance,” and “accountability” illustrated the priorities currently dominating international human rights discourse and the emerging expectations of the international community.

These terms reflect a shift in how human rights are framed, with increasing emphasis on how effectively states implement obligations rather than only whether they have adopted them. In particular, concepts such as “accountability” and “rule of law” signal concern with institutional performance, transparency, and enforcement mechanisms, while “victim-centred justice” and “human dignity” highlight a stronger focus on the lived experiences of affected populations.

Similarly, the inclusion of “gender-based violence” shows the continued prioritisation of women’s rights as a core human rights issue, while “climate resilience” reflects the expanding scope of human rights discourse to include environmental protection and the impact of climate change on vulnerable communities. “Inclusive governance” further underscores the importance placed on participation, representation, and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

Taken together, this terminology demonstrates that the international community is increasingly framing human rights as an interconnected system that links governance, social protection, environmental sustainability, and institutional accountability, rather than treating them as isolated legal obligations.

V. Recommendations Section

Recommendations on the rule of law and possible justice reforms focused on reducing prison overcrowding through legal reform and non-custodial sentencing, improving access to legal aid for vulnerable groups, addressing prolonged pretrial detention and judicial delays, and strengthening judicial independence and accountability. These recommendations reflected persistent structural weaknesses in the justice system, particularly limited judicial capacity, inadequate legal infrastructure, and socioeconomic barriers that prevent equal access to justice.

Regarding women’s rights and gender equality, States recommended the explicit criminalization of female genital mutilation, stronger protection against gender-based violence, full implementation of the Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Act (2022) , and greater political and economic opportunities for women. These recommendations highlighted the gap between progressive legal frameworks and social realities, where cultural norms, patriarchal structures, and limited enforcement continue to undermine women’s rights in practice.

On children’s rights, recommendations called for stronger implementation of the Child Rights Act (2025) and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2024), improved child protection systems in rural areas, and stronger action against child labour and exploitation. This reflects ongoing concerns that poverty, lack of education, and reliance on customary practices continue to drive child marriage and exploitation, particularly outside urban centres where state enforcement is weaker.

In the area of healthcare and social rights, States urged Sierra Leone to increase investment in healthcare infrastructure, improve maternal healthcare services, and expand access to reproductive

healthcare. These recommendations are driven by persistent structural inequalities in service delivery, including underfunding, shortages of medical personnel, corruption, and unequal access between urban and rural populations.

Concerning freedom of expression and democratic governance, recommendations emphasised ensuring that cybersecurity laws comply with international human rights standards, protecting media freedom and civic space, and improving electoral transparency and inclusive political dialogue. These concerns persist due to tensions between State security interests and civil liberties, as well as ongoing challenges in strengthening democratic institutions and ensuring full protection of civic spaces.

Several recommendations also encouraged Sierra Leone to ratify important international treaties, including the Convention against Enforced Disappearance, the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, the Convention on Migrant Workers, and the Second Optional Protocol to the ICCPR. These recommendations reflect the need to align national law more closely with international human rights standards and to strengthen accountability mechanisms.

On environment and climate change, States called for stronger climate resilience policies, expanded access to water and sanitation, and improved environmental governance and disaster preparedness.

VI. Remarks by the Representative of Sierra Leone



Sierra Leone's representatives presented the State as committed to democracy, reforms, and human rights despite economic and structural challenges. They highlighted key achievements such as abolishing the death penalty, constitutional and justice reforms, improved healthcare and education, and greater women's political participation.

They also identified major challenges, including prison overcrowding, poverty and inequality, climate risks, harmful traditional practices, and weak institutional capacity. The delegation stressed cooperation with the UN and international bodies, including engagement with UN Special Procedures and international legal processes.

A key discussion point was FGM. The Attorney General noted that while the executive branch supported banning it for minors, the Parliament changed the content of the bill when voting on it, showing tensions between human rights goals and domestic politics. They also defended ongoing electoral and constitutional reforms after the 2023 elections, describing them as inclusive and nationally driven.

The representatives also responded actively to concerns regarding electoral transparency and constitutional reform. They insisted that the constitutional review process would strengthen protections against discrimination, improve governance, and constitutionalize the rights to health and education.

Overall, the delegation sought to maintain a balance between acknowledging ongoing challenges and promoting an image of progressive reform and constructive international cooperation.

VII. Looking Forward: New Priorities of the International Community and Commitments of Sierra Leone

The fourth UPR cycle revealed several evolving priorities for both Sierra Leone and the international community. The government committed itself to continuing constitutional reform, improving prison conditions, expanding access to healthcare and education, strengthening gender equality, enhancing climate resilience, and reviewing discriminatory legal provisions.

Sierra Leone also pledged to continue considering the ratification of major international human rights treaties, particularly those related to torture, enforced disappearances, and the abolition of the death penalty.

The International Community placed greater emphasis on implementation and accountability rather than only adopting laws. Member States repeatedly called for stronger enforcement, greater institutional independence, measurable progress, and better protection of vulnerable groups.

Looking ahead to the fifth cycle, several unresolved issues are expected to remain central, including FGM, prison overcrowding, healthcare inequality, political tensions, corruption, freedom of expression, and climate vulnerability.

The effectiveness of Sierra Leone's future reforms will largely depend on political will, financial investment, institutional capacity, and genuine collaboration with civil society and international partners. Political will is central because many of the most persistent human rights challenges require politically sensitive decisions, such as criminalising harmful traditional practices, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and ensuring full enforcement of existing laws. Without sustained commitment from both the executive and legislature, reforms risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

Financial investment is equally critical, as many of the identified issues, particularly in healthcare, education, and the justice system, are heavily constrained by limited state resources. Underfunding leads to inadequate infrastructure, shortages of trained personnel, and weak service delivery, especially in rural areas where inequalities are most severe.

Institutional capacity also plays a decisive role, as weak administrative systems, limited coordination between State institutions, and shortages of skilled professionals reduce the State's ability to effectively implement policies and enforce legislation. Even where laws exist, enforcement gaps often undermine their practical impact.

Finally, collaboration with Civil Society and international partners is essential for monitoring, accountability, and technical support. Civil Society Organisations help to identify gaps between law and practice, particularly in areas such as gender-based violence, child protection, and prison conditions, as well as hidden or forgotten issues, like the ones affecting marginalized communities, while international partners contribute through resources, expertise, and external pressure that can encourage compliance with human rights obligations. This is why, where such collaboration is limited or symbolic, accountability mechanisms remain weak and progress slows.

VIII. Critical Analysis

Although Sierra Leone's National Report demonstrates notable legal and institutional progress, several key issues remain insufficiently addressed, particularly in terms of implementation gaps and politically sensitive areas of reform.

First, there is limited and cautious engagement with allegations relating to excessive use of force during protests, political intimidation, and accountability concerns following the 2023 elections. These issues are often framed within the report as administrative or implementation challenges, rather than as deeper governance or rule-of-law concerns. This framing suggests a tendency to

acknowledge problems without fully interrogating the structural or political conditions that allow them to persist.

Second, FGM remains a highly contested and unresolved issue. Although the government has publicly acknowledged its subsistence and the need to address harmful practices, the absence of explicit criminalisation reflects the ongoing tension between formal human rights commitments and the influence of entrenched customary and traditional norms. In practice, this indicates that customary authority structures and social acceptance of the practice continue to limit the State's ability to fully enforce uniform legal standards, despite increasing international pressure and evolving human rights norms. While the executive has at times expressed support for stronger prohibitive measures, legislative outcomes suggest that political negotiation and sensitivity to local social structures have constrained reform.

Third, healthcare challenges are acknowledged in the report but remain framed in relatively general terms. Issues such as corruption, unofficial fees, underfunding, inadequate infrastructure, and unequal rural access continue to significantly undermine the right to healthcare. These challenges are closely linked to broader structural constraints, including limited fiscal space and uneven state capacity, which affect service delivery across multiple sectors.

In addition to these substantive gaps, the UPR process itself has inherent limitations that affect the depth of scrutiny. It relies heavily on State self-reporting and diplomatic peer review, which can encourage selective emphasis on progress while downplaying persistent failures. As a result, critical issues may be reframed in technical or incremental terms rather than being addressed as systemic governance concerns. This makes independent Civil Society reporting and external monitoring essential for providing a more comprehensive and grounded assessment of the human rights situation.

A further emerging issue in the fourth cycle is climate change, which has gained greater attention in official discussions. However, the treatment of this issue often remains general and policy-oriented, with limited exploration of its concrete socioeconomic consequences, such as displacement, food insecurity, and rural poverty. This reflects a broader pattern in the report where structural drivers of vulnerability are acknowledged but not fully analysed in terms of lived realities.

IX. GICJ Position

Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) acknowledges the progress made by Sierra Leone since the second and third UPR cycles, particularly the abolition of the death penalty, increased women's political participation, strengthened child protection laws, and ongoing justice sector reforms. GICJ also welcomes the State's continued engagement with the UPR process and cooperation with UN Human Rights Mechanisms.

However, GICJ remains deeply concerned that serious structural challenges persist, including prolonged pretrial detention, prison overcrowding, high maternal mortality, corruption, weak healthcare systems, gender inequality, and the continued practice of female genital mutilation. These issues reflect a persistent gap between legal reforms and their effective implementation, especially in rural and marginalised communities.

GICJ also notes ongoing concerns related to governance, including limitations on civic space, political tensions, and weaknesses in institutional accountability, which continue to affect public trust in state institutions.

GICJ therefore urges Sierra Leone to prioritise implementation-focused reforms, including strengthening judicial independence, reducing pretrial detention through legal aid and non-custodial measures, and improving prison conditions. It also calls for urgent investment in healthcare infrastructure and maternal health services, particularly in rural areas.

In addition, GICJ strongly recommends the explicit criminalisation of female genital mutilation, alongside stronger enforcement of gender equality laws and expanded protection for women and girls. It further urges stronger action against child marriage, child labour, and barriers to girls' education.

Finally, GICJ urges Sierra Leone to ratify key international treaties and strengthen protection against torture, arbitrary detention, and discrimination. It also calls for more investment in education, legal aid, and child protection, alongside stronger accountability and transparency of the State before its People and the International Community.

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