

# Sierra Leone



## Gender, Justice and Security Hub

**The Gender, Justice and Security Hub (GJS Hub) brings together researchers, practitioners, and activists through a collection of projects to advance gender justice and inclusive peace in conflict-affected societies. We work in seven focus countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, Kurdistan-Iraq, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Uganda with projects in 17 additional countries across Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia.**

**Spanning from gendered migration, masculinities and sexualities to land rights and transformative justice, each project amplifies the voices of women and marginalised groups. The Hub's work aims to advance Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.**

## Country Context

### A Decade of Civil War

The Sierra Leone Civil War, which began 1991, stemmed from multiple intersecting factors. Disputes over diamond-rich territories, political instability, government corruption, economic inequality, and resource mismanagement issues all played a part in marginalising certain ethnic groups and regions. The decade of fighting, primarily between the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and Sierra Leone Army (SLA), was characterised by widespread atrocities, significant loss of life, recruitment of child soldiers, and mass displacement of civilians. Multiple regional and international military and peacekeeping interventions laid the foundations for The Lomé Peace Accord between the SLA and RUF, which was signed in 1999, though fighting continued in some parts of the country until 2002.

### Peace and Progress?

The civil war resulted in social, economic, and political devastation, and since the end of the conflict, Sierra Leone has faced severe challenges, with a significant portion of the population living in poverty. Continued reliance on mining and agriculture leaves the country vulnerable to global market fluctuations and environmental changes. Despite this, the country has made substantial efforts towards justice and reconciliation. The Special Court for Sierra Leone and the

Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which were established to address wartime atrocities, have sought to prosecute war criminals and provide a forum for victims' voices to be heard. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives has been hindered by lack of resources and issues in implementation.

### Ongoing Security Challenges

Security in the nation has gradually improved in the two decades since the conflict's end. Reconstructing the local police force and military, and implementing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs for former combatants have been important parts of this process. Yet, Sierra Leone continues to face security issues, including occasional outbreaks of violence and a fragile, under-resourced justice system.

### The Gendered Legacy of War

The conflict, the economic impact of it, and the retrenchment of patriarchal gender norms have worsened existing gender inequality in Sierra Leone. Women and girls suffered, and continue to suffer, disproportionately from the effects of the war, which includes high levels of sexual and gender-based violence, economic and political marginalisation, and lack of access to justice. Despite grassroots work, international interventions, and legislative efforts (including the three Gender Acts of 2007) throughout the two decades of peace, pervasive gender inequality persists.

# The GJS Hub in Sierra Leone

The GJS Hub research in Sierra Leone is led by the Land Policy, Gender and Plural Legal Systems research project. This project uses qualitative fieldwork and empirical analysis to critically examine: (1) socio-legal and policy frameworks, (2) engagement and adaptation of customary tenure, (3) tenurial constraints and opportunities, and (4) current policy positions and reform debates in Sierra Leone. Although the project examines the tenure rights of vulnerable people in general, it focuses specifically on the tenurial (in)security of women, the structures and practices that shape women's land rights, and their experiences of pluralistic legal regimes.

## The Challenge

**Corporate Land Interests are Prioritised Over Gender Justice.** Sierra Leone's economic recovery and development strategy has prioritised foreign direct investment and private sector-led growth. However, there is a lack of political will to prioritise or balance gender justice with corporate interest in land, meaning post-war development has come at the expense of women's land rights and livelihood.

**Limited Access to Land Rights for Women.** Several legislative and policy changes have been made to ensure women in Sierra Leone have equal opportunity to own, access, and use land. While these are progressive changes, they have had very little impact in local communities due to poor implementation and structural issues. Women in rural areas still experience significant gender-based barriers to exercising their tenurial rights to family and communal land, which continues to be governed by customary law.

**Continued Gender Inequality in Land Governance.** Patriarchal norms and practices continue to influence decision-making structures in Sierra Leone. This is a barrier to women's representation in decision-making processes and it limits their participation in development planning. Women do not have equal representation in negotiations with foreign companies or state and traditional authorities, which in turn means their interests, needs, and challenges are neglected.

**No Effective Access to Justice.** Sierra Leone has implemented justice sector reform programmes intended to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of state institutions (e.g., courts and police). However, the system still does not provide speedy, accessible, and affordable land dispute resolution. This is compounded by grievances related to land dispossession, environmental degradation, and labour issues as companies acquire rural land for their operations.

**No Post-Conflict Transformative Change of Economic and Democratic Processes.** Sierra Leone's post-war peacebuilding and democratisation processes have been relatively successful. However, these reforms have not transformed the political and social system itself, which continues to concentrate power and resources in a small class of people. State institutions like the judiciary and police are still prone to being hijacked by the ruling elite to consolidate power and exclude political opponents from governance. The economic system still does not allow for fair distribution of wealth, particularly to marginalised groups like youth and rural women.

## Key Findings

- **Land Access and Discrimination:** Poverty, gender and regional location influence who has access to land. Poverty is the main factor limiting access to and acquisition of land, followed by being a migrant or non-local in a community. This is particularly the case for women who, to different extents depending on their location, also face cultural patriarchal norms restricting their tenurial rights to family and communal land.
- **Land Disputes and Inequitable Representation:** Post-war competition for land has led to major land-related disputes, the most prominent being land grabbing by corporate actors from the poor or those with little or no access to justice. While not systematic across the country, women disproportionately have insufficient access to representation in land dispute mechanisms.
- **Post-War Economics and Possibilities for Gender Justice:** The conflict and subsequent commercialisation of land has shifted the way local communities identify with and measure the value of land. In some ways, this has opened conversations about inclusive ownership and access, with women advocating for themselves in family and community discussions. In this sense, post-war economic recovery is challenging patriarchal norms and traditions regarding land rights and governance.
- **Resurgent Capitalism and Inequality:** While patriarchy is being challenged, capitalism is being reinforced. Although women have begun to participate more in conversations about family and community land, most profits from land use continue to be controlled by local and international owners of capital. Further, companies are taking advantage of the liberalisation of the local economy to deny access to land and to dispossess women. Economic development is being prioritised over social justice and women's empowerment, inhibiting efforts to establish long-term gender justice and inclusive peace.
- **Neoliberal Reforms and Performative Gender Justice:** Neoliberal reforms are endorsed as ways to 'emancipate women', but they are often only performative for international audiences. State actors and institutions have interests and motivations that can complicate the gender equality agenda. Laws and policies are influenced by the international community, and these pressures are prioritised over genuine efforts to help those who are most marginalised. Rather than creating opportunities for rural women, neoliberal reforms at times offer most benefits to State actors and policymakers themselves.

# Recommendations

## Government of Sierra Leone:

- **Policy Reform and Implementation:** Legal and policy reform needs to be strengthened and must be implemented in ways that are inclusive of women. The laws and policies guaranteeing equal ownership and access to land for women must be fully implemented, which means providing equitable and adequate resources, training, personnel, and oversight.
- **Land Policy and Inclusivity:** Review and update existing land policy to incorporate the progressive provisions outlined in the National Land Commission Act (2022) and the Customary Land Rights Act (2022). This should be accompanied by the development of a comprehensive land law. Women in local communities, not just educated and elite women, should be included in these processes.
- **Women's Rights and Corporate Interests:** Protect the rights of women when they conflict with corporate land interests. The current market-driven economic system, which is underpinned by capitalist values, does not empower women economically. The laws and policies relating to land rights must temper or balance corporate interests with gender justice. This includes closing legal loopholes that allow women's rights, including land rights, to be compromised in the name of development.
- **Civil Society and Local Organisations:** Support civil society and local organisations working on the ground. These organisations are working in communities, where structural issues reproduce disadvantages for women every day. They should be engaged, funded and better supported at a national and local level to continue this vital work.

## Traditional Authorities:

- **Customary Law and Gender Equality:** The institution of chieftaincy should be reformed. This should focus on equal representation and participation of women in chieftain decision making, including in committees set up to manage land and land resources. As customary law is dynamic, those rules that discriminate against women should be changed to allow greater female participation in the rural economy and governance.

## Civil Society Organisations/NGOs

- **Land Justice and Non-State Actors:** Paralegal and dispute resolution assistance to women should be enhanced. Women must be fairly represented in land deals and have access to justice when their rights are violated. As changes to the formal state system take time to reach rural communities, they do not provide timely and appropriate justice in the short term. The capacity of non-state actors must be expanded to help women navigate existing systems of governance and justice. This includes supporting education and information sharing about new laws and policies that are beneficial to women, especially in poor rural communities.

This country brief draws on findings and recommendations from the [Land Policy, Gender and Plural Legal Systems project](#).