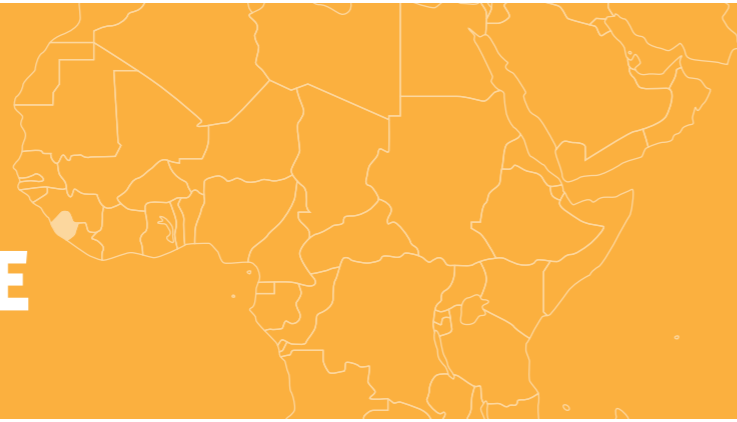


# SIERRA LEONE



Sierra Leone's population is estimated to be 60 to 65 per cent Muslim and 20 to 30 per cent Christian, with the remaining 5 to 10 per cent practising indigenous and other religious beliefs. Freedom of religion is provided for in the 1991 Constitution, which also accommodates religious laws and policies in several areas, including family law. General statutory law, English common law and customary law, which includes Islamic law, operate together. For Muslims, matters relating to marriage and divorce are regulated in part by the Mohammedan Marriage Ordinance of 1905. The country is still recovering from the devastating ten-year conflict that ended in 2001, in which women were particularly affected by loss of family members, displacement, widespread sexual violence and the responsibility of caring for their families.

## Equality in the Family is Necessary

- ▶ In Sierra Leone, social and cultural life, especially in the rural areas, is dominated by outdated values in which women are considered to be inferior to men. In the Northern Province, where women suffer the most marginalisation, they are denied status, public roles and positions in society.
- ▶ In the domestic sphere, women are generally voiceless. Their husbands or fathers hold all of the decision-making power for the family. Whatever the husband says is final, despite the Qur'anic command of mutual consultation between women and men. It is taboo for women to state their opinions in family gatherings, let alone to counter anything that had been previously suggested by a male counterpart.
- ▶ Women and girls suffer discrimination and abuse in a number of areas, including:
  - Domestic violence against women is common and is generally accepted in society. A UNICEF study showed that 85 percent of women felt that domestic beating was justified for actions such as going out without telling their husbands, neglecting the children, arguing with their husbands, refusing sex, or burning food. Few women report domestic violence to authorities, the police generally do not intervene even if the violence is reported, and perpetrators are seldom charged and even less seldom convicted of a crime.
  - Early marriage and forced marriage are common for girls under the age of 18.
  - Female genital mutilation is widely practised and is supported by community members.
  - Women are discriminated against in inheritance provisions and orphan girls are not granted inheritance from their deceased fathers.
  - Widows are often ill-treated by their former husbands' families.

## Equality in the Family is Possible

- ▶ Sierra Leone has ratified a number of the major international human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) without reservations and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- ▶ Sierra Leone now has its first female minister. Three important acts relating to women have recently passed in Parliament on the issues of violence against women; registration of customary marriages and divorces to require registration of marriages, prohibit early marriage and protect women's rights in divorce; and equitable property inheritance. In 2007, Parliament passed the Child Rights Act, which prohibits marriage of girls under age 18 and establishes family courts.
- ▶ Due to the work of many civil society and women's organisations, individual activists and advocacy groups, women from the Northern Province can now inherit property from their husbands and fathers.
- ▶ The Sierra Leone Muslim Missionaries Women's Group, which has branches all over the country, holds monthly meetings in Freetown in which they study the Qur'an and different topics related to gender and Islam. They also have a regular 30 minute programme on the Voice of Islam radio station on the theme 'The Role of Women in Islam'.

### Concluding Comments of the CEDAW Committee

Sierra Leone first reported to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2007 in a combined first, second, third, fourth and fifth periodic report. In its concluding comments, the Committee congratulated the Government on the three new bills relating to women that were then pending before Parliament (registration of customary marriages and divorce, intestate succession and domestic violence), but expressed concern about:

- ▶ 'the high levels of violence against women, including rape and sexual assault';
- ▶ 'the persistence of customary law and cultural practices that consider the physical chastisement of family members, in particular women, acceptable';
- ▶ 'that discriminatory provisions persist in customary law and the Mohammedan Marriage Act'; and
- ▶ 'that local courts, which apply customary law, are not part of the judicial system and consequently their decisions are not subject to appeal'.