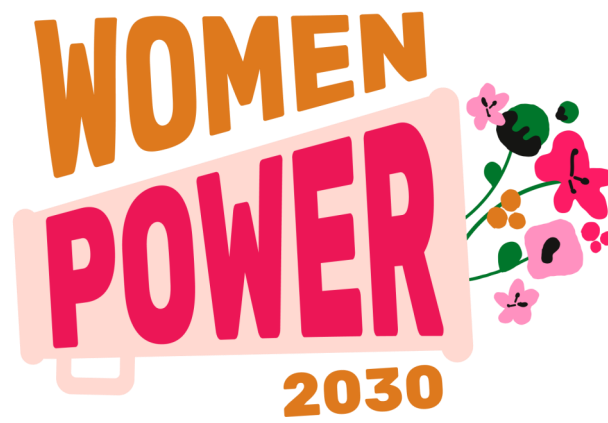




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# POLICY BRIEF

## 2026

**Strengthening Policy Advocacy**

**For The Protection**

**Of Women And Children's Right**

**In Sierra Leone**

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**JUNE 2026**

# **Policy Brief: Strengthening Policies for Women's and Children's Rights in Sierra Leone**

## **Executive summary**

Sierra Leone has adopted important legal and policy measures to protect women and children, including the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act 2022, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, the Sexual Offences Act, the Child Rights Act, and sectoral policies on reproductive health and gender-based violence. Yet the main challenge is no longer only the absence of laws; it is the persistent gap between policy intent and implementation, especially in rural and underserved communities where services, enforcement, and accountability remain weak.

This brief refines the existing draft by organizing the problem around five priority policy areas: gender-based violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, adolescent pregnancy, and women's political participation. It argues for a practical reform agenda centered on stronger enforcement, better financing, survivor and child-centered services, district-level accountability, inclusive participation, and a dedicated monitoring framework to track results.

## **Policy context**

The current policy landscape shows that Sierra Leone has made visible progress in formal commitment to gender equality and child protection. Existing instruments identified in the gap analysis include the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act 2022, the Sexual Offences Act, the National Strategy on Gender-Based Violence, the Child Rights Act, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, and reproductive health policies that support adolescent health and school re-entry measures.

However, the brief correctly notes that weak enforcement, low public awareness, limited institutional coordination, and inadequate financing continue to undermine these protections. The gap analysis further shows that these weaknesses are most visible in poor service coverage in rural areas, insufficient shelters and psychosocial support, weak community-level enforcement, stigma, limited youth-friendly reproductive health services, and poor implementation of women's leadership provisions.

## **Priority gaps**

### **1. Gender-based violence**

The policy gap analysis identifies a strong formal framework on GBV, but weak enforcement and monitoring, limited access to services in rural areas, inadequate shelters, and low reporting due to stigma and fear. The analysis also notes severe consequences for women and girls, including poor physical and mental health outcomes and reduced participation in education and economic life.

### **2. Child marriage**

The gap analysis finds that the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024 and the Child Rights Act provide an important legal basis, but social norms, economic pressure, and weak local enforcement continue to sustain child marriage. The effects identified include school dropout, early pregnancy, maternal health risks, and deepened poverty among affected girls and households.

### **3. Female genital mutilation**

The analysis identifies a major legislative gap: there is no comprehensive national law that specifically criminalizes FGM, despite child protection provisions in existing law. This weakens prevention, survivor protection, and prosecution, while allowing harmful practices to continue in some communities.

### **4. Adolescent pregnancy**

The gap analysis shows that adolescent pregnancy remains linked to poverty, child marriage, limited sexuality education, stigma, and poor access to youth-friendly reproductive health services. This contributes to school dropout, maternal health risks, and long-term economic exclusion for girls.

### **5. Women's participation in decision-making**

The analyses show that women's political participation remains constrained by limited implementation of quota provisions, financial barriers, and gender stereotypes, even under a more progressive legal framework. Weak representation in leadership reduces the visibility of women's priorities in lawmaking, budgeting, and oversight.

## **Evidence from the gap analysis**

The gap analysis includes several figures that reinforce the urgency of reform. It reports that about 60.7% of women and girls aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical violence, and 7.4% have experienced sexual violence since age 15. It also notes that

approximately 62% of women aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical or sexual violence, that the share of women aged 20 to 24 married before age 18 declined from 48% in 2008 to 30% in 2019 but remains high, that roughly one-third of girls are still married before age 18, that about 83% of women have undergone FGM, and that 28% of girls aged 15 to 19 had begun childbearing according to national data.

These figures suggest that legal reform alone is insufficient without implementation systems that reach households, schools, clinics, police stations, courts, and local governance structures. They also point to the need for stronger prevention and early intervention, rather than relying only on case response after harm has already occurred.

## **Policy recommendations**

### **A. Strengthen implementation and enforcement**

Government should move from broad commitment to enforceable delivery plans by assigning clear responsibilities, timelines, and performance indicators to the ministries, agencies, councils, and justice institutions responsible for implementation. Priority actions should include stronger case management for GBV and child protection cases, improved judicial follow-through, and regular public reporting on enforcement outcomes.

### **B. Increase financing for protection and prevention**

This brief already highlights the need for increased budgetary allocations and gender-responsive budgeting. This should be translated into dedicated budget lines for GBV prevention and response, shelters, psychosocial support, child protection services, adolescent reproductive health, and community-level prevention programming, including in districts outside Freetown.

### **C. Close legislative gaps and align outdated provisions**

The analyses recommend reviewing and amending outdated laws and policies in line with human rights standards. A central legislative priority emerging from the gap analysis is the enactment of a comprehensive national law criminalizing FGM, alongside stronger survivor support and public education.

### **D. Expand access to quality services**

Service access should be treated as a policy implementation issue, not only a program issue. Sierra Leone should expand one-stop and referral services for survivors, district-level shelters and psychosocial support, youth-friendly reproductive health services, school re-entry support for pregnant girls, and community-based legal awareness mechanisms that help women and caregivers understand and use the protections available to them.

### **E. Strengthen local governance and community accountability**

The brief usefully points to stronger local governance structures as a reform priority. At district, chiefdom, ward, and community levels, this should mean clearer coordination among local councils, social welfare actors, police, schools, health workers, civil society organizations, traditional leaders, and community-based monitors so that policy protections are visible in practice.

### **F. Promote meaningful participation**

The analyses call for meaningful participation of women, youth, and children in policy formulation and decision-making. This should be operationalized through structured consultation processes, representation in local and national decision-making bodies, support for women's leadership, and feedback systems that allow affected groups to shape policy review, monitoring, and reform.

### **G. Build a national accountability framework**

A recurring issue is weak monitoring. Sierra Leone should establish a national accountability framework for women's and children's rights that consolidates indicators across GBV, child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, women's participation, service delivery, and legal enforcement, with annual review by relevant ministries, Parliament, civil society, and development partners.

## **Recommended advocacy priorities**

The following advocacy priorities emerge most clearly:

- Enforce existing laws and policies more consistently across all districts.
- Criminalize FGM through dedicated national legislation and strengthen survivor protection.
- Increase financing for GBV prevention, response services, and shelters.
- Expand girls' education, school retention, and support for girls affected by child marriage and adolescent pregnancy.
- Improve youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services.
- Enforce women's participation and representation commitments in leadership and governance.
- Create a measurable national monitoring and accountability mechanism to track results.

## Implementation roadmap

Timeframe	Priority action	Lead actors	Expected result
0–6 months	Validate the policy gap analysis and adopt priority recommendations	Lead ministry, Parliament, WEP-SL, CSOs, partners	Shared reform agenda and stakeholder buy-in
0–12 months	Create or strengthen budget lines for GBV, child protection, adolescent health, and district services	Ministry of Finance, sector ministries, local councils	Better resourced implementation
0–12 months	Develop a national accountability and monitoring framework with indicators	Relevant ministries, Statistics Sierra Leone, Parliament, CSOs	Regular tracking of results and gaps
6–18 months	Expand district-level support services and referral pathways	Health, social welfare, police, justice institutions, councils	Improved access to services in rural and underserved areas
6–18 months	Advance legislative reform on FGM and review outdated provisions	Parliament, line ministries, legal experts, advocacy coalitions	Stronger legal protection and policy coherence
Ongoing	Support public awareness, community engagement, and women’s leadership	Support public awareness, community engagement, and women’s leadership	Greater prevention, reporting, and local ownership

## Conclusion

Sierra Leone does not start from zero: the country already has a substantial legal and policy foundation for women’s and children’s rights. The next phase must focus on implementation quality, financing, accountability, and closing the most serious legal and service-delivery gaps so that protections are real in homes, schools, health facilities, courts, and communities.

A stronger policy response will depend on coordinated action by government, Parliament, justice institutions, local councils, civil society, traditional leaders, development partners, and communities. With sustained political will and practical follow-through, the reform agenda outlined in this brief can help reduce violence and exclusion, improve services, and advance the rights and wellbeing of women and children across Sierra Leone.