



Sierra Leone – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 21 April 2011

Information on risks to women in Sierra Leone from FGM and other harmful cultural practices. Any information on a culture called Bondo or a secret society called Mende.

An *Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada* response to a query on the practice of FGM in Sierra Leone states:

“Female genital mutilation (FGM) is ‘widely’ practised in Sierra Leone, with up to 90 percent of women in the country having undergone the procedure. It is a ‘deeply rooted’ cultural tradition that is practised across all socio-economic classes and all ethnic groups, with the exception of the Krios [also referred to as ‘Creoles’]. While Krio Muslims are said to practise FGM, Krio Christians of the Western Area reportedly do not. (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (27 March 2009) *SLE103015.E – Sierra Leone: The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM); the government’s position with respect to the practice; consequences of refusing to become an FGM practitioner in Bondo Society, specifically, if a daughter of a practitioner refuses to succeed her mother*)

This response refers to FGM as being part of the initiation ritual into a Bondo society as follows:

“FGM is part of an initiation ritual into women’s ‘secret societies’ and a rite of passage into adulthood. These secret societies are known as ‘Sande’ in the south of Sierra Leone and as ‘Bondo’ in the north and in Freetown. A woman must be initiated into a secret society in order to be ‘socially accepted’ and to be deemed eligible for marriage.” (ibid)

An *IRIN News* report states:

“Custom dictates that girls must sacrifice their clitoris as a pre-requisite for entry into the sacred realm of The Bondo Secret Society. Only by becoming Bondo members will they be socially accepted by their community and will they be considered eligible for marriage. It’s the beginning and the end of the very existence of women. If you do not become a member of that society you can’t find a husband, you can’t even find somebody to marry you, it’s completely out of the question as men don’t marry women who are not part of that ceremony. This girl has recently been told by her family that her time has come to enter Bondo Society. So frightened about what will happen to her, she has run away from her village and is currently hiding in Freetown. She was too scared to show her face for fear her family would recognise her and force her under the circumcision knife. I’m scared because they told me that they use razors to join that society and when they use razors you will be having uncontrollable bleeding, and if you don’t have the strength you will just lose your life. So secretive is Bondo Society that no uncircumcised women, and certainly no men, have ever witnessed a Bondo circumcision ceremony. Women who have attempted to do so in the past have been abducted by Bondo members and then forcibly circumcised as punishment. What is clear is that what goes on in Bondo Society is not a topic for

discussion for anyone in Sierra Leone and is a feared subject even among politicians.” (IRIN News (8 March 2005) *Africa-Asia: Razor's Edge: The Controversy of Female Genital Mutilation*)

See also *IRIN News* report which states:

“Most Sierra Leonean girls – the World Health Organization estimates 94 percent – are initiated at puberty into ‘Bondo’, also known as the Sande Secret Society. As part of the rite, a woman known as a ‘sowei’ in the Mende language cuts the clitoris and prepares the girl for adulthood through singing, dancing and teaching domestic skills. For the initiation girls spend up to three months in the bush.” (IRIN News (16 April 2009) *Sierra Leone: Chiefs ban genital cutting for girls under 18*)

In a section titled “Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)” (paragraph 12.5.5) a report from the *UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women* states:

“Traditionally in rural areas, women who have gone through the initiation ceremony are regarded with more respect than those who have not. In Sierra Leone all classes of women of the different ethnic groups including the elite practice FGM with the exception of the Creoles. The power of FGM lies in the Secret society ‘sande’ and ‘bondo’.” (UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (14 December 2006) *Combined Initial, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Periodic Reports of States Parties, Sierra Leone*, p.31)

In paragraph 12.5.6 this report states:

“Bondo is a secret society and therefore initiates are reluctant to talk about it. FGM has become a very contentious issue in Sierra Leone. Generally, people approach it with caution. The Sierra Leone Association of University Women (SLAUW) adopted such a cautious approach to addressing issues surrounding the practice. One major achievement that could be attributed to SLAUW’s intervention in this issue is the growing public awareness it created about the harm associated with this practice and its effects. However, women who were involved in advocating against this practice faced resistance from the general populace including men, many of whom preferred getting married to women who have gone through this traditional rite.” (ibid, p.31)

The Executive Summary of a *Writenet* report, in a paragraph headed “Secret Societies”, states:

“Secret societies are ancient cultural institutions in the Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa and their primary purpose is to regulate sexual identity and social conduct. The women’s society, known as Sande in the south and Bondo in the north and Freetown, is general to Sierra Leone.” (Writenet (August 2007) *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation*)

In a section titled “Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Sierra Leone” this report states:

“Type II FGM (excision of the entire clitoris and all or part of the labia minora) is performed in the context of Sande/Bondo initiation. Young men interviewed in 2003 claimed that girls from prosperous urban families who are sent back to their parents’ villages for initiation often undergo a less extensive operation (e.g. Type I FGM) than

rural girls, although no medical study has confirmed this claim. It is possible that different initiators, as a matter of personal choice, perform more or less extensive operations. Girls are normally subjected to Bondo/Sande initiation around the age of puberty, but in the post-war era very young girls as well as fully grown adults have been subjected to initiation.” (ibid, p.17)

In a section titled “Social Context and Post-War Changes” this report states:

“In spite of these changes, many Sierra Leoneans still consider Sande/Bondo initiation as a social and cultural necessity. Girls from all social backgrounds continue to suffer FGM, including the educated elite. For the latter group, initiating daughters may serve as a confirmation of African identity and Sierra Leoneans living abroad still bring their daughters back home to undergo initiation. Furthermore, rural men in particular fear and respect the women’s society, especially its putative power to punish them both spiritually and physically if they mistreat their wives or otherwise transgress Sande/Bondo medicine laws.” (ibid, p.19)

In a section titled “Profile of Individuals at Risk of Enforced Membership” (sub-section titled “Western Area Urban Poor”) this report refers to persons being forcibly initiated into a bondo society as follows:

“In April 2007, it was reported that a teenage secondary school student who had allegedly used ‘insulting words’ against the Bondo society was seized from her Freetown residence in the middle of the night and forcibly initiated. A similar case was reported in May 2007. Here, a young mother living in the Freetown suburb of Grafton allegedly had a row with a neighbour, who later told friends that the woman had said ‘all sorts of disparaging words about the Bondo society’. This woman was also seized and forcibly initiated.” (ibid, p.15)

See also article from the Sierra Leonean newspaper *Standard Times* which states:

“On the 24th March, 2007 a row erupted between a teenager (name withheld) and a certain Adama Turay who has gone through the (FGM). Adama Turay then alleged that the teenager used insulting words against the ‘Bondo Society’ which warranted Babby Boi Jebbeh, Marie Daniel, a certain Juliana and ‘Mammy Margret a ‘Soway’ commonly called “Mammy “Nendawah’ to forcefully entered into the house of the teenager and then dragged her into the ‘Bondo bush’ during the night hours. The teenager was mutilated on that faithful night with blade as Mammy Nendawah and colleagues used touch light to carry out the harmful practice on the teenager. The matter was reported at the CID headquarters in Freetown and the accused were dragged to CID where Chief Young of 1 Elizabeth Street used his influence and that of his party to secure the immediate release of the culprits.” (Standard Times (7 April 2007) *Enact Laws Against Forceful Initiation into the “Bondo Society”*)

In a section titled “Children’s rights” (paragraph 11) a 2007 *UN Human Rights Council* report states:

“The initiation of young girls into secret societies, some forcefully, is a preoccupying practice. In May 2006, a group of women belonging to Bondo society entered a primary school in a village in Luawa Chiefdom, Kailahun District, and forcefully took 14 girls to the Bondo bush and initiated them through female genital mutilation (FGM), without the consent of their parents. The girls were finally released after spending one month and two days in detention in the society bush at the detriment of their health and well-being. In Bonthe District, a 16-year-old girl, forcefully initiated,

escaped from the Bondo bush and reported the matter to the police who refused to take action. The Government has to take urgent steps to address the issue of forceful initiation of girls, even in case of parental consent.” (UN Human Rights Council (2 March 2007) *Assistance to Sierra Leone in the Field of Human Rights, Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, p.7)

In a section titled “Children’s rights” (paragraph 11) a 2008 *UN Human Rights Council* report states:

“Notwithstanding the passage of the Child Rights Act, there are still a number of challenges before the full realization of children’s rights. Initiation of young girls into secret societies and female genital mutilation continued unabated. In February, reports received by UNIOSIL indicated that over 600 girls between 2 and 15 years of age were reportedly initiated into the Bondo Society, a female secret society, and subjected to female genital mutilation in Bo District, Southern Province.” (UN Human Rights Council (26 February 2008) *Assistance to Sierra Leone in the field of human rights: report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, p.6

An *Inter Press Service* report states:

“One major problem facing anti-FGM campaigners is the massive illiteracy standing at about 75 percent especially in the interior of the country where UNICEF estimates 90 percent of the women have been circumcised. There, it is a display of affluence and power. Family heads save for a whole year proceeds from the farming activities to spend lavishly on ‘Bondo’ ceremonies. ‘Bondo Society is what hold us together as a community and keeps our traditional heritage. We cannot sit idly by and allow outsiders to destroy it. We will fight it out,’ 56-year-old Ya Ndigba Thulla, an initiator in Makeni, the northern regional capital, told IPS in an interview. (Inter Press Service (19 April 2005) *Female Circumcision Used As a Weapon of Political Campaign*)

In a section titled “Secret Societies in Sierra Leone” (sub-section titled “Organization and Purpose”) this report refers to initiation into a Bondo society as follows:

“During their initiation period, girls work cooperatively on a variety of tasks for female elders, e.g. weeding farms, washing clothes, cooking and repairing mud and wattle houses. While these tasks are familiar to the girls from early childhood, initiation teaches them to view them anew as indexes of female identity. Cooperative tasking also serves as preparation for the girls’ future roles as wives and co-wives living and working together in their husbands’ compounds. When Sande/Bondo initiates complete their secluded instruction and return to the village, they usually emerge as a group, their feminine allure emphasized by cosmetics, jewellery and fine clothes. Accompanied by drumming and singing, they take turns to greet the village patriarchy, their studied deference announcing their moral as well as physical preparedness for marriage. On these occasions, some of the younger members of the society, initiated in previous years, will dress as men and brandish imitation wooden guns. These women lead the initiates back to the village, elbowing aside onlookers to make way for the procession.” (ibid, p.3)

In a sub-section titled “Political Role” this section of the report also states:

“Bondo/Sande leaders organize girls’ initiations and also tend to be drawn from local high-status families. Initiates and their families remain beholden to these patrons, since initiation guarantees community membership and its attendant social and

property rights. Elders may use that moral indebtedness to secure compliance with their decision making or claim resources from lower status families.” (ibid)

An *IRIN News* report on FGM in Sierra Leone states:

“A crudely performed operation to remove the clitoris from adolescent girls forms a key part of the initiation ceremonies held by powerful, women-only secret societies that prepare young girls for adult life, marriage and motherhood in the West African country. Koso-Thomas, who came to Sierra Leone from Nigeria, sees nothing wrong with such 'bundu' societies and their initiation ceremonies but, on medical grounds, she and a handful of other women's rights campaigners want the circumcision ritual replaced by something less brutal and hazardous. 'People got me wrong at first. When I was going to the communities and sensitising them, they thought I was against their society,' Koso-Thomas told IRIN. 'But it is as a doctor that I started campaigning and sensitising people about the health hazards, because I saw all the complications.' 'The real meaning of the bundu society is very good,' she said. 'It is where they train young girls to become women: they teach them how to sing, dance and cook ... girls who don't go to school learn how to use herbs and treat illnesses; they are taught to respect others.'” (IRIN News (17 March 2005) *Sierra Leone: Female circumcision is a vote winner*)

An *Inter Press Service* report which refers to Sierra Leonean politicians seeking the support of the Bondo societies states:

“Female genital mutilation (FGM) can make sex painful, complicate childbirth, lead to urinary tract infections, enable the transmission of HIV -- and induce a host of other ills. So, promising to fight this practice should be a winning strategy for someone hoping to be elected to parliament this Saturday in Sierra Leone -- where about 90 percent of girls and women undergo FGM, according to rights watchdog Amnesty International. Should be. But, isn't. In an inescapable irony, the issue is off limits even to aspiring women legislators who might have an unhappy experience of FGM, and who could lead the fight against the practice at the highest levels. The reason? FGM still enjoys support in large sections of the community, notably among members of secret 'Bondo' societies, made up exclusively of women, which use the practice to initiate girls into womanhood -- alongside teaching them various domestic skills. 'I cannot say a word now (against FGM) because I need their support,' Tinah Greene, a candidate for the Convention People's Party, told IPS. While the 2002 polls were held under a system of proportional representation, seen as conducive to helping women enter parliament, this year's general elections are being fought in the tougher world of constituency politics -- and women need to ensure they have the Bondo societies' votes in hand. 'You won't get a candidate to go out and say 'We're against this (FGM)',' Rodney Lowe, a volunteer for Amnesty International in Sierra Leone's capital -- Freetown -- told IPS. 'It can be political suicide.' (Inter Press Service (9 August 2007) *Sierra Leone: A Women's Issue That Women Are Wary of Campaigning About*)

See also article from the online magazine *Womens eNews* which states:

“Politicians routinely try to win the support of these societies, says Laurel Bangura, another anti-FGM campaigner based in Freetown, by offering to pay for the mutilation of girls and to win the votes and support of their parents. Bangura said it can cost up to \$200 to mutilate a girl, depending on her family's wealth. Bangura and Koso-Thomas both said politicians' fear of the influence of the practitioners and supporters of FGM were widely suspected last June when a clause outlawing female

circumcision was removed at the last minute from a child protection bill in parliament. Bangura said votes to outlaw the procedure could have meant the end of political careers and possible influence over the FGM practitioners who wield power in their communities. Bangura said politicians feared being voted out if they were to have supported illegalization of FGM during an election year.” (Womens eNews (7 September 2007) *FGM Practitioners Sway Elections in Sierra Leone*)

An article from the Sierra Leonean newspaper *Concord Times* states:

“Groups of female organizations including elderly women in Kenema are planning to protest against what they described as the continuous demoralization of traditional and cultural practices such as Bondo. Coordinator of the Women's Coalition in Kenema, Doris Kali disclosed to *Concord Times* that they have developed serious interest in the various discussion programmes on radio stations across the country condemning Bondo initiation and its connection with female genital mutilation (FGM). ‘We are going to demonstrate for the government and the international community to know that we are against their denouncement of FGM and that we will continue with the practice because we inherited it,’ she said. Kali opines that the denouncement of Bondo is an abuse on traditional leaders and their women because a large number of them, especially those in the provinces, are members of the society. ‘The denouncement of Bondo in Sierra Leone is an abuse to us as Sierra Leoneans.’” (Concord Times (27 February 2008) *Sierra Leone: Women Plan Protest for Bondo*)

A *Reporters Without Borders* report on the alleged treatment of four women journalists by Bondo members states:

“The four reporters - Manjama Balama-Samba of the United Nations radio and the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS), Henrietta Kpaka of the SLBS, Isha Jalloh of Eastern Radio and Jenneh Brima, also of Eastern Radio - were kidnapped on 6 February by members of Bondo, a secret society that practices FGM. The next day, their abductors forcibly undressed Balama-Samba and made her walk naked through the streets. The journalists had been conducting a series of interviews jointly with the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices in order to mark International Day of Zero Tolerance of Female Genital Mutilation, which was celebrated on 6 February for the 5th year running. The Bondo group regarded their questions and comments as a sign of disrespect for their traditions.” (Reporters Without Borders (10 February 2010) *Four women journalists kidnapped, one subjected to public humiliation, by supporters of female genital mutilation*)

A report from the *UN Human Rights Council*, in a section titled “Right to life, liberty and security of the person” (Paragraph 25), states:

“CRC, CEDAW and the High Commissioner continued to express concern about female genital mutilation (FGM) and forceful initiation into secret societies. UNCT reported that an estimated 90 per cent of women in Sierra Leone and the diaspora had gone through the practice, which was perceived as a cultural and traditional right that parents exercised in the interest of their children. UNCT noted that very young girls continued to be circumcised, sometimes in isolation from the initiation rites, with serious health consequences.” (UN Human Rights Council (21 February 2011) *Compilation: [Universal Periodic Review]: Sierra Leone / prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in accordance with paragraph 15 (b) of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 5/1, p.7*)

The 2011 United States Department of State country report for Sierra Leone, in a section titled "Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment"

"Compared to the previous year, fewer men and women were initiated forcibly into tribal secret societies, a process that for women usually involved female genital mutilation (FGM). Although data was hard to come by due to the secretive nature of these societies, government sources extrapolated the decrease in male initiations from observations that fewer young men were returning to their home villages, where initiation ceremonies are held, from their jobs in the country's main cities and towns. Decreases in female initiations were extrapolated from UN and NGO data on the decreasing prevalence of FGM, which is an integral part of female initiation ceremonies." (United States Department of State (8 April 2011) *2010 Human Rights Report: Sierra Leone*)

A *Concord Times* article states:

"As many advocacy groups continue to preach against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) - believed by many as a barbaric cultural practice in Sierra Leone - a dedicated health care worker in the Moyamba District has come under severe threats from a group of Bondo secret society women due to his advocacy against the practice. Mama Fanny has been relentless in advocating and encouraging women to avoid initiating their little girls into the Bondo society, citing long-term health complication and the general well-being of women. Such advocacy is said to have angered especially the initiators into the society locally known as 'Soweis', thus the repeated threats to harm her if she continues with her campaign." (Concord Times (Freetown) (28 February 2011) *Sierra Leone: Health Worker Faces Threats From Soweis*)

An article published by the Sierra Leonean newspaper *The Patriotic Vanguard* states:

"Katanya Women's Development Association (KAWDA) one of the leading advocates against Female Genital Mutilation in Sierra Leone has intensified its campaign against the age-old practice despite stiff resistance from traditionalists. Ann-Marie Caulker, the Executive Director of KAWDA says, 'We are not against people in the Bondo Secret Society which practices FGM, but it is the crude way it is done and the resultant effects that are of concern to us.' She says many children have lost their lives during FGM ceremonies. The age-old practice has been part of Sierra Leonean culture since the pre-colonial era. However, not everything is bad about the society. Some women are taught positive things during the initiation ceremony." (The Patriotic Vanguard (24 September 2010) *Sierra Leone: Anti-FGM campaign heats up*)

This article also states:

"A new law has been enacted in Sierra Leone making it unlawful for a girl below eighteen years to be initiated. In other words, she has to reach the age in which she can freely make a choice of her own; whether to be initiated or not. But Anti-FGM campaigners say even at eighteen, girls face the risk of dying especially with the crude method of mutilation. They pointed out that in many rural areas there are no medical facilities and the blades used are most times rusty and contagious. Some campaigners have pointed out the painful ordeals girls have revealed. Female Genital Mutilation is also known as Female Genital Cutting. Apparently, this (the cutting) has been the cause for Trina Fatima Kposowa's flight. Campaigners,

including KAWDA, say successive governments have been reticent over the issue because of political reasons. Either they fear resistance from the members or because of massive support for the society they are a force to reckon with in the political dispensation of the country. Any attempt to offend the members will apparently lead to social disorder or political suicide.” (ibid)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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