



COI QUERY

Country of Origin	SIERRA LEONE
Main subject	<u>FGM/C</u>
Question(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <u>Brief overview on FGM/C in Sierra Leone</u>2. <u>FGM/C practices among the Mende ethnic group</u>3. <u>Support networks for women who refuse to perform FGM/C practices</u>
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The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision making authorities. The answer was finalised on 13 August 2021. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.

COI QUERY RESPONSE – Sierra Leone

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C)

1. Overview on FGM/C in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is ranked 4th amongst the top 10 countries where the practice of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) is most common.¹ Various sources reported that FGM practices in Sierra Leone are very common and that are rooted in traditional, cultural, religious customs and gender stereotypes.² Approximately 9 to 10 girls and women in Sierra Leone have undergone female genital mutilation,³ that is around 90 % of women between the age of 15-49.⁴ The UN General Assembly National Report on Sierra Leone reported that the percentage of girls and women aged between 15-49 who have undergone FGM/C has dropped from 89 % in 2011 to 86,1 % in 2019.⁵

During an EASO COI meeting, expert Idah Nabateregga, from the German NGO Terre des Femmes, explained:

‘90 % of the total population of women is affected. More than 16 ethnic groups live there, of whom Mende and Temne are the largest, and most of all these ethnic groups practice FGM. Except one, the Krio who do not practice FGM at all; they live in the western region of Sierra Leone. The highest rate of FGM depends on the region. In the Northern region prevalence is about 96%’.⁶

FGM/C practices are performed by the so called ‘soweis’ who are the traditional cutters.⁷ FGM is connected to the Bondo group and it is considered as the basis of the initiation into the ‘secret woman society’ of Bondo.⁸ Bondo societies consider FGM/C as a requirement for social acceptance⁹ and as a transition to womanhood.¹⁰ The circumcisers belong to the Bondo societies and their members have big influence on the politicians and at the communities at large.¹¹

The law, in Sierra Leone, does not prohibit any practices related to female genital mutilation.¹² The

¹ UNICEF, Understanding the Relationship between Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation: A statistical overview of their co-occurrence and risk factors, February 2021, [url](#), p. 12

² Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2020- Sierra Leone, 4 March 2020, [url](#); UNICEF, Statistical Profile on Female Genital Mutilation, Sierra Leone, May 2020, [url](#); BTI, 2020 Country Report Sierra Leone, 29 April 2020, [url](#), p. 21; USDOS, 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 30 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 16-17; Plan International, Fighting Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Changing Hearts and Minds in Sierra Leone, 13 May 2020, [url](#)

³ UNICEF, Female Genital Mutilation Country Profiles (Sierra Leone), May 2020, [url](#)

⁴ Thomson Reuters Foundation and 28 Too Many, Sierra Leone, The Law and FGM, September 2018, [url](#), p. 1

⁵ UN General Assembly, National report submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21*, 16 February 2021, [url](#), p.12

⁶ Nabateregga, I. in EASO COI Meeting Report, Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting (FGMC) & COI, 25-26 October 2016, [url](#), p.49

⁷ Thomson Reuters Foundation and 28 Too Many, Sierra Leone, The Law and FGM, September 2018, [url](#), pp.1, 4

⁸ Reuters, Seeking to save money, Sierra Leone village gives up FGM, 8 August 2019, [url](#)

⁹ 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Sierra Leone, June 2014, [url](#), pp. 49-51

¹⁰ USDOS, 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 16

¹¹ Nabateregga, I. in EASO COI Meeting Report, Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting (FGMC) & COI, 25-26 October 2016, [url](#), pp. 49-51

¹² USDOS, 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 30 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 16-17; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2020- Sierra Leone, 4 March 2020, [url](#); UN General Assembly, Compilation on Sierra Leone, Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 26 February 2021, [url](#)

existence of other national legislation and acts that could be considered as relevant to FGM/C does not prohibit or criminalise FGM practices, and FGM/C is not explicitly mentioned, or it has been removed from the acts under the pressure of the cultural acceptance of such practices. For example, the Child Rights Act 2007 regulates the legislative framework for any person under the age of 18. Under the pressure of the chiefs of the practicing communities, FGM was removed from the Section 46¹³ of the Act.¹⁴ Furthermore, FGM/C 'was excluded from the First Lady's 'Hands Off Our Girls' Campaign in 2019 that called for an end to child marriage and sexual violence'.¹⁵

The secret societies where FGM is performed are considered a 'vital communications link between politicians and rural communities', which is the reason why for the political elite of the country, abolishing these societies and FGM practices is 'taboo'.¹⁶ As explained by Idah Nabaterregga in 2016:

'Circumcisers have also a strong community influence, especially on the communities like the Bondo society. The fact that they belong to the Bondo societies, most of them have influence on the politicians. The politicians usually worry about their votes. If it is campaigning time also on, they won't do anything that will distort their votes or they won't come at loggerhead with cultures. At the end of it all they belong to these cultures.'¹⁷

A two month ban on FGM/C was imposed during February - March 2018 elections campaign in order to prevent candidates buying votes for the 'cutting ceremonies'.¹⁸ On January 2019, FGM/C was banned by the government as a response to violence related to men's secret societies, it was applied for women's initiations ceremonies too.¹⁹ Nevertheless, FGM remained prevalent in Sierra Leone and secret societies continued to practise female genital mutilation, including on underage girls, as reported by the UN in February 2021.²⁰

2. FGM/C practices among the Mende ethnic group

Among the public sources consulted within the time constraints for drafting this COI query response, scarce detailed information could be found regarding FGM/C practices specifically among the Mende ethnic group in Sierra Leone.

Mende are the second largest ethnic group (31 %) in Sierra Leone after the Temne (35 %) and they can be found in the Southern and Eastern provinces of the country.²¹ Citing a source from 1987, the organisation 28 Too Many reported that 75 % of the Mende group are Christians, mainly Catholic, 15 % Muslims and 10 % practise traditional beliefs.²² Traditional religion 'includes belief in a supreme creator god, ancestral spirits, and nature deities'.²³ Mende people believe that FGM/C is 'a religious requirement'.²⁴

¹³ Section 46 of the Act define the practices that are prohibited and criminalised in respect of the dignity of the children. Sierra Leone, The Child Right Act 2007, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁴; Thomson Reuters Foundation and 28 Too Many, Sierra Leone, The Law and FGM, September 2018, [url](#), p.3

¹⁵ USDOS, 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p.16,

¹⁶ Guardian (The), Sierra Leone's secret FGM societies spread silent fear and sleepless nights, 24 August 2015, [url](#);

¹⁷ Nabaterregga, I. in EASO COI Meeting Report, Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting (FGMC) & COI, 25-26 October 2016, [url](#), p.51

¹⁸ Reuters, Seeking fair elections, Sierra Leone bans FGM during campaign season, 5 February 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹ Reuters, Sierra Leone bans FGM in clampdown on secret societies, 25 January 2019, [url](#);

²⁰ UN, Compilation on Sierra Leone, A/HRC/WG.6/38/SLE/2, 26 February 2021, [url](#) p. 4

²¹ 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Sierra Leone, June 2014, [url](#), pp. 15, 27

²² 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Sierra Leone, June 2014, [url](#), p. 27

²³ Britannica, Mende people, 21 December 2017, [url](#)

²⁴ 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Sierra Leone, June 2014, [url](#), p.4

According to a study conducted in 2013, the FGM prevalence for the three largest ethnic groups in Sierra Leone (Temme, Mende, Limba) is 80%. The same study indicates that ‘there is a strong connection between ethnicity and the Bondo Society as each ethnic group has its own ‘Bondo Bush’²⁵. So, for example, a Mende girl will attend a Mende Bondo Bush and will not attend a Limba Bondo Bush’.²⁶

Within the Mende ethnic group, the initiating secret society is called ‘Sande’; the head of the society (or bush) is called ‘Sowei’ or ‘Majo’ or ‘Digba’; the new initiate is named ‘Mborgbinie’, and the non-initiate is called ‘Kpowei’.²⁷ The same source explained that there are five main phases of the ceremony surrounding the practice of FGM and the names of these phases, as well as some details of the ceremony itself may differ according to the ethnic groups. The source added:

‘The five main phases of the ceremony are the calling to the bondo bush; seclusion in the bush; FGM and other initiation rites; teaching and the coming out ceremony. These phases are called different names according to the ethnic group. The start of the ceremony is announced by the beating of the bondo drums and the Soweis entering the village to collect the children and any members of the society who wish to attend and leading them off to the bush, a segregated site several miles from the village. The first rite of the initiation is the ritual cutting of the girls’ genitalia, and while their wounds heal they are taught the secrets of the society, ritual dances and songs and domestic and sexual care of their husbands. This phase of teaching has been shortened in recent times to a matter of days or weeks, when it used to continue for up to a year. The final stage of the initiation and the lure used to get girls to agree to enter the society is the coming out celebrations. The girls are dressed in white and daubed with white clay (among the Mende), or given new clothes to wear, and are taken back to the village as newly formed adults and are the centre of all attention. They are accompanied by the bondo devil masquerade amid much rejoicing and acclamation of their new status. There follows a celebratory feast.’²⁸

3. Support network for women who refuse to practice FGM/C

Among the public sources consulted within the time constraints for drafting this COI query response, scarce information could be found regarding any support network for women who refuse to practice FGM/C in Sierra Leone. The available sources provide information on support networks and NGOs which fight against FGM/C practices in Sierra Leone.

FGM/C is a form of income for the circumcisers²⁹ so NGOs and anti-FGM/C groups try to provide the practitioners with alternative types of income³⁰ and empower women and girls to educate and go to school.³¹ Additionally, the NGOs spread information about the health risks, they coach the religious

²⁵ A Bondo Bush is the place where the FGM/C is performed. Sowei women are the head of the Bondo Bushes.

²⁶ Bjällkander, O. et al., Female Genital Mutilation in Sierra Leone: Forms, Reliability of Reported Status, and Accuracy of Related Demographic and Health Survey Questions in *Obstetrics and Gynaecology International*, vol.2013, 24 September 2013, [url](#), p.4

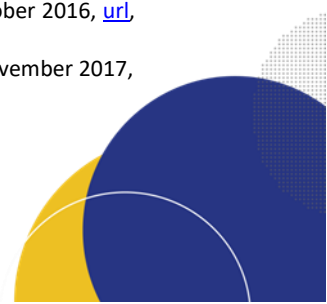
²⁷ 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Sierra Leone, June 2014, [url](#), p. 19

²⁸ 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Sierra Leone, June 2014, [url](#), p. 21

²⁹ 28 Too Many, Country Profile: FGM in Sierra Leone, June 2014, [url](#), p.20; Reuters, Seeking to save money, Sierra Leone village gives up FGM, 8 August 2019, [url](#); Nabaterregga, I. in EASO COI Meeting Report, Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting (FGMC) & COI, 25-26 October 2016, [url](#), p.51; UN Women, Rural women explore new solutions to counter customs and poverty driving FGM crisis, 14 November 2017, [url](#)

³⁰ Nabaterregga, I. in EASO COI Meeting Report, Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting (FGMC) & COI, 25-26 October 2016, [url](#), p.50; Reuters, Seeking to save money, Sierra Leone village gives up FGM, 8 August 2019, [url](#)

³¹ UN Women, Rural women explore new solutions to counter customs and poverty driving FGM crisis, 14 November 2017, [url](#)



leaders to condemn it and they encourage [the NGOs] the victims of FGM/C to speak out³² and ‘work in communities to advocate for an end to harmful practices’.³³

The main local and international NGOs and groups that fight against FGM/C in Sierra Leone are:

- Amazonian Initiative Movement (AIM): local NGO that fights to ban FGM/C in Sierra Leone by empowering women and girls to decide about their bodies. It was founded in 2002. They try to educate women and girls to read and write in order to provide themselves with other means of income.³⁴ According to the USDOS report on Human Rights Practices, during December 2019 ‘approximately 70 initiates aged above 19 underwent the Bondo secret society ceremony without the ritual circumcision as part of an initiative of the NGO’.³⁵
- AMNET: Advocacy Movement Network. Started operations in Sierra Leone during 2006. AMNET promotes the age of consent for the FGM/C as a mid-term solution. According to that ‘the age of consent means that no girl below the age of 18 shall undergo FGM in Sierra Leone. When she has come of age, she shall take a free and informed decision if she wants to undergo the procedure’. AMNET works directly with the soweis to change attitudes towards Bondo.³⁶
- Equality Now: is an advocacy organization that relies on national, international and human rights law in order to protect women and girls from harmful practices.³⁷
- FAHP: the Forum Against Harmful Practices is a coalition of civil society organizations that operate to end FGM and other harmful practices in Sierra Leone.³⁸ They cooperate with ‘religious leaders, schools, cutters and community-based organizations to raise awareness on the risks of FGM.C’. The forum now counts 15 organizations/members.³⁹
- Plan International: [it] ‘works with parents, community leaders, government authorities and children and young people to raise awareness, transform behaviour and put an end to harmful traditional practices’.⁴⁰ The organization ‘has been working in 20 communities around Makeni to help girls escape Bondo’.⁴¹
- Terre des Femmes: a German NGO which support women with vocational training. The organization’s project is called Lunsar and it is in collaboration with the Amazonian Initiative Movement (AIM).⁴² According to the organization:
‘There is also a safe house, opened in 2011. It was meant for about 15 to 20 girls, but because of a high need it accommodates over 25 girls. There are social workers on

³² Reuters, Seeking to save money, Sierra Leone village gives up FGM, 8 August 2019, [url](#)

³³ Thomson Reuters Foundation and 28 Too Many, Sierra Leone, The Law and FGM, September 2018, [url](#), p.7;

³⁴ Girl Generation (The), Amazonian Initiative Movement (AIM), n.d., [url](#); Borgen Project (The), Ending Female Genital Mutilation in Sierra Leone, 12 March 2019, [url](#)

³⁵ USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Sierra Leone, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p.16

³⁶ AMNET, Welcome to AMNET, n.d., [url](#); AMNET, Age of Consent or Total Abandonment? AMNET’s approach to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), n.d., [url](#); Borgen Project (The), Ending Female Genital Mutilation in Sierra Leone, 12 March 2019, [url](#); Open Democracy, Can Sierra’s Leone female secret societies be allies in the fight against female genital mutilation?, 26 February 2018, [url](#)

³⁷ Equality Now, Sierra Leone: Enact a comprehensive anti-FGM law, n.d., [url](#); Human Dignity Foundation, Equality Now, n.d., [url](#)

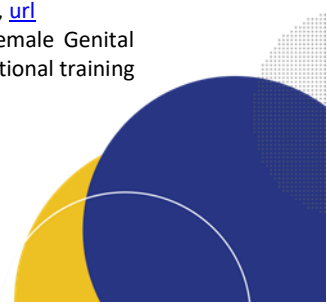
³⁸ Human Dignity Foundation, Forum Against Harmful Practices, n.d., [url](#)

³⁹ Organizer.Net (The), Sierra Leone: FAHP Activists and Others Call for More Efforts to Stamp Out Female Circumcision, 21 July 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁰ Plan International, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), n.d., [url](#); Plan International, Sierra Leone, n.d., [url](#)

⁴¹ Guardian (The), Sierra Leone’s secret FGM societies spread silent, fear and sleepless nights, 24 August 2015, [url](#)

⁴² Terre des Femmes, Sierra Leone, December 2019, [url](#); Nabaterregga, I. in EASO COI Meeting Report, Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting (FGMC) & COI, 25-26 October 2016, [url](#), p.51; Betterplace.org, The future is female – vocational training for young women in Sierra Leone!, updated 19 November 2020, [url](#)



site who are working with the girls, caretakers during the day and a night watchman, at least for the girls to be safe or not to be taken out by force by their parents.⁴³

- UN Women: the UN organization 'is working to shift public opinion and engaging traditional and religious leaders, as well as Parliamentarians, to understand the negative impacts of FGM' in collaboration with local and international partners.⁴⁴

For more detailed information regarding the practice of FGM/C in Sierra Leone, including on the general characteristics of FGM in the country and consequences for those who refuse to perform the practice, it is possible to consult the aforementioned [EASO COI Meeting Report, Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting \(FGMC\) & COI, 25-26 October 2016](#).

⁴³ Nabateregga, I. in EASO COI Meeting Report, Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting (FGMC) & COI, 25-26 October 2016, [url](#), p.51

⁴⁴ UN Women, Rural women explore new solutions to counter customs and poverty driving FGM crisis, 14 November 2017, [url](#)

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