



ENHANCING CAPACITY OF COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS ON LAWS PROTECTING WOMEN AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

With support from UNDP and Irish Aid, the Directorate of Gender and Children's Affairs of the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL) has concluded a nationwide engagement and awareness raising with community stakeholders on laws and policies, especially the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act of 2022 and the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 as amended in 2019, protecting women and children's rights.



The engagements took place from the 14th to the 22nd of August in the five regions of the country. The thrust was to equip community stakeholders with the necessary knowledge of these laws to support community sensitization and identify progress, challenges, and proffer recommendations.

A total of 250 participants attended the engagement which was spearheaded by the Directorate of Gender and Children's Affairs with support from the regional offices in the five regions.

Despite the enactment of several laws and policies protecting the rights of women and children, the lack of awareness and understanding of these laws at the community level remains a significant challenge.

During the engagements, facilitators took participants through the GEWE Act, the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 as amended in 2019, the Child Rights Act, the



three gender justice laws, and the mandate and functions of HRCSL to ensure better understanding.



While the GEWE Act of 2022 speaks to the 30% quota system, prohibition on discrimination against women in employment, prohibition of sexual harassment, requirement for paid maternity leave, requirement for financial institutions to improve women's access to finance and women empowerment, the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 as amended in 2019 addresses rape and sexual penetration, compromise, indecent exposure, incest, aggravated sexual assault and non-consent from a child, and prescribe penalties with life imprisonment as the highest.

Also, the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act of 2009 deals mainly with types of marriage, registration of customary marriages and cohabitation, among others. Key areas in the Child Rights Act include parental duty and responsibility, minimum age of recruitment, treatment of disabled children, protection from exploitative labour, and protection from tortured and degrading treatment.



The participants, who were carefully selected from CSOs, District Human Rights Committees, government institutions, and ordinary people in the communities, appreciated the training because according to them, they had little knowledge of these laws. In Bo, a member of the Traders Union specifically commended the Commission on the awareness raising on the SOAA and noted that their members who are victims of SGBV often call on them to act. She said with the knowledge gained she can appropriately advise these members.



Head of Women Advocacy and Agriculture Development Organization in Waterloo, Madam Doris Fatima Webber said “Majority of those living in these rural areas are not aware of laws protecting women and children. This session will serve as an eye-opener in letting our people better understand these laws,” she said.

She urged the Commission to host the session on a regular basis to remind community people about provisions in the gender laws and policies.



Across the various regions, Commissioners of HRCSL spoke about the establishment of the Commission which has a mandate to protect and promote the rights of all in Sierra Leone



They refer to public education as one of the ways the Commission uses to ensure the protection and promotion of the rights of all and urge participants to put into practice what they have learned.