

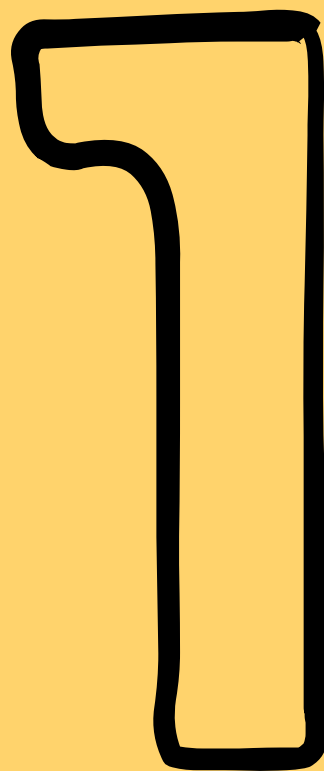
THREATS AGAINST PUBLIC-FACING WOMEN IN SIERRA LEONE

2022



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Introduction

In Sierra Leone, it has been documented in recent years that public-facing women – including women leaders, women human rights defenders (HRDs) and women journalists – face an increased risk of harassment, threats, intimidation, and violence, as well as targeted efforts to push them out of key public spaces, and censor/diminish their voices, both online and offline.

For example, in May 2018, the then-newly elected Mayor of Freetown, Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, sustained injuries to her arm after being physically and verbally assaulted by a group of people gathered outside a political party building – just yards away from the mayor’s own Freetown City Council office.[1]

In January 2021, local media reported concerns over personal and “ad hominem” attacks being launched against Sierra Leone’s Auditor General – Lara Taylor-Pearce – in reaction to her carrying out her professional duties and obligations.[2]

In April 2021, officials with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS) and the Chief Medical Officer were captured on video physically assaulting Dr. Catherine Jackson-Cole, who worked at Connaught hospital in Freetown, following her Twitter posts in which she claimed that the government had failed to pay cleaning staff at the hospital for more than a year.[3] Although MoHS apologized for the incident after the assault video was posted online, and made immediate payments to cleaning staff, Dr. Jackson-Cole claimed that officials also took another step, to demand that she then delete the video – which she did.[4]

On December 11th, 2021, Alhaji Amadu Bah – a popular though controversial rapper known as LAJ – posted a video[5] on Facebook in which he refers to Radio Democracy director, Asmaa James as a “bastard child” because of her station’s reporting about him, and he warned her that “the next time I see you I will piss on your face.” Referring to the video, the international non-profit organization, Reporters Without Borders condemned the rapper’s comments for being “obscene, disgraceful, irresponsible and dangerous” – and used the incident to call for an end to online harassment of journalists in Sierra Leone.[6]

For years, women and girls in Sierra Leone have struggled against Gender-Based Violence. During the country’s brutal civil war – which lasted from 1991 to 2002 – it is estimated that as many as 275,000 women and girls suffered inconceivable and dehumanizing acts of violence through rape, forced sexual slavery, abductions, mutilations, torture, and other cruel and inhumane acts.[7]

[1] Sierra Leone Telegraph: <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/freetown-mayor-yvonne-aki-sawyerr-attacked-by-thugs/>

[2] Sierra Leone Telegraph: <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/sierra-leones-auditor-general-is-under-siege-dont-shoot-the-messenger/>

[3] Politico SL: <https://www.politicosl.com/articles/doctors-boycott-connaught-after-female-colleague-assaulted>

[4] Catherine For Madina Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=801672100732011>

[5] YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYi_6cw4raw

[6] Reporters Without Borders: <https://rsf.org/en/news/sierra-leonean-rapper-posts-obscene-and-dangerous-comments-about-journalist>

[7] Truth and Reconciliation Commission “Women and the Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone”:

https://www.sierraleonetrcc.org/index.php/view-the-final-report/download-table-of-contents/volume-three-b/item/witness-to-the-truth-volume-three-b-chapter-3?category_id=14

And according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – which was created as part of the Lomé Peace Accord to investigate the root causes of the civil war and provide recommendations – women’s lack of awareness of their role in a democratic society (and consequent lack of participation in Sierra Leone’s economic, political, and social life), has been cited as one of the contributing factors that led to the war initially – as it was “relatively easy for successive governments before the war to ignore issues affecting women and girls.”

Additionally, the TRC’s final report also noted the importance of freedom of speech for all citizens, stating that: “A factor that contributed to causing the conflict was the suppression of political expression and dissent. The [TRC] Commission in its recommendations emphasizes that freedom of expression is the lifeblood of a democracy. A culture of public debate and tolerance of dissenting ideas is the sign of a vibrant and healthy democracy.”

Therefore, if there is a lesson to be learned from analyzing these specific causes of the civil war, it is that supporting and protecting safe spaces for women’s voices and expression is one of the critical imperatives for the peaceful advancement of the society. As the TRC report also stated: “It is only when the legal, social and political system treats women equally that they will realize their full potential. Women must be given full access to economic opportunities, which allow for their complete, holistic development. They must be able to participate freely in both public and private life. Developing robust accountability mechanisms for those who perpetrate gender-based crimes is a necessary part of this evolution, in order to ensure that women are never again dehumanized the moment the rules of society break down.”

Sierra Leone has made significant progress since the end of the civil war, to address many of the issues and recommendations highlighted by the TRC – yet significant gaps and barriers remain, particularly when it comes to ensuring women’s free and safe participation in both public and private life. Meanwhile – despite all of its many benefits, such as increased access to information and education, and opportunities for open discussion and debate, to name a few – the emergence of technology-facilitated communications (that is, communication that takes place via internet-connected devices, such as mobile phones, laptops, and social media platforms) has the potential to exacerbate/amplify harassment, hate speech, threats of violence, and intimidation, in order to silence free speech and dissent, disproportionately affecting women in the country.

The overwhelming growth of social media in Sierra Leone in recent years (including an estimated 21.4% increase in the number of active social media users, between January 2020 and January 2021 alone[8]) has opened a new “faceless forum” for violence in the country – including violence and harassment against women and girls. In fact, the UN has reported that, in sub-Saharan Africa (including Sierra Leone specifically), 34% of young people interviewed said they have personally been a victim of online bullying.[9] And, according to a series of online surveys conducted by the international nonprofit organization, Internews, during the month of December 2021, more than

[8] Hootsuite / We Are Social: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-sierra-leone>

[9] UN News: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1045532>

62% of female civil society representatives and activists surveyed in Sierra Leone were either victims of cyberbullying or reported experiencing behavior similar to cyberbullying.[10]

While some of these incidents in Sierra Leone have been publicly documented or reported on – and in some cases, even publicly condemned (by organizations such as Legal Link, for example, which, in late December 2021, publicly shared its condemnation of “the verbal attacks, intimidation and censorship of women in Sierra Leone by state and non-state actors”[11]) – there still remain a number of gaps, in terms of: i) understanding the evolving nature, scope and scale of the threats experienced by public-facing women in the country (especially by women HRDs and women journalists); ii) documenting the extent to which various stakeholders are currently acknowledging and/or responding to these threats; and iii) identifying the challenges and opportunities that exist, to keep women leaders active in vital spaces, including civil society and the media.

It was in acknowledgement of these gaps, that the Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism (SLAWIJ) – with technical support and funding from Internews, as well as technical support from the research organization, Baobab – undertook a three-month-long research project, starting in early 2022, with the objective to explore and document the nature, scale, and impact of threats faced by select categories of public-facing women in Sierra Leone. Specifically, by women human rights defenders (HRDs) and women journalists.

Specific objectives of the research project included: to establish whether women journalists and HRDs face harassment in Sierra Leone; to identify some of the types of (online and offline) harassment and/or threats experienced by women HRDs and women journalists in Sierra Leone; to explore the Legal Landscape in Sierra Leone and identify existing laws and/or legislation that relate to both online/technology-facilitated and offline violence against women and girls; to explore the Programmatic Landscape in Sierra Leone, and identify any existing initiatives aimed at addressing, responding to, and/or deterring threats against public-facing women; and to identify opportunities that exist for further protecting, addressing, responding to, and/or deterring threats against public-facing women in the country.

In line with these objectives, it is the methodology, findings, conclusions, and recommendations from this research project that are presented in the following sections of this report, titled “Threats Against Public Facing Women in Sierra Leone.”

[10] Internews in Sierra Leone Facebook Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/internewsSL/posts/pfbid08nDJ3qCGWsofJsCJkDJyiXzVBn8uuA8ZrcTZz5bXFdPBvSTaAk7HKR1wcohHkcz9I>

[11] Link Up With RMA Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/101334478241113/posts/442012557506635/?d=n>

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Research Methodology

In January 2022, the Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism (SLAWIJ) submitted a formal request for ethical clearance and research approval to the Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee, which falls under the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS). The request included a detailed research plan, tools, and templates, to be used in carrying out SLAWIJ's proposed research project – with the stated objective to explore and document the nature, scale, and impact of threats faced by select categories of public-facing women in Sierra Leone. Specifically, by women human rights defenders (HRDs) and women journalists. Approval by the Committee was granted, and SLAWIJ carried out the following research steps between January and March 2022.

Desk and Literature Review

In preparation of this research, SLAWIJ conducted a desk and literature review, which included the analysis of existing relevant documents, legislation, legal cases, reports (compiled by both state and non-state actors), news stories, case studies, and research related to threats/violence against public-facing women in Sierra Leone – with a special focus on online and/or technology-facilitated threats/violence, in addition to offline threats/violence.

Stakeholder Mapping Exercise

A stakeholder mapping exercise was facilitated by SLAWIJ in February 2022, aimed at identifying those actors (both state and non-state) who are actively working to address the issues, advocate for change, respond to incidents and/or provide support (legal, psychological, and/or financial) to those affected in Sierra Leone, by threats or violence against public facing women. The mapping exercise included an in-person meeting and group brainstorm session facilitated by SLAWIJ, with participants representing a range of organizations – including representatives and/or members of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), MenEngage SL, Mano Reporters, Girls in STEM, Girls Behind the Lens, Community Media Network, Skyy Women's Network, Human Rights Defenders Network, Campaign for Human Rights and Development International (CHREDI), Women's Forum SL, and the Initiative for Criminal Justice Reforms (ICJR).

Key Informant Consultations

During the months of February and March 2022, a total of 37 individuals (identified through the Stakeholder Mapping Exercise) filled out and/or responded to a carefully designed Key Informant "Questionnaire" tool, developed for this research activity. This tool featured a variety of multiple choice, open- and closed-ended questions, and respondents were consulted for their responses using a range of methods, including in-person visits and telephone conversations facilitated by a SLAWIJ researcher, as well as self-completion of either printed or electronic versions of the Key Informant questionnaire.

Of the 37 people who responded to the Key Informant questionnaires, four were male (representing 11% of the target respondents), including two Sierra Leone Police (SLP) officers, one Independent Media Commission (IMC) official, and one human rights activist. Among female respondents there were two representatives of the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL), two from the 50/50 Group, as well as the Executive Director of the Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), along with other prominent female journalists, CSO and NGO representatives. Overall, 20 of the Key Informant Questionnaire respondents (54%) listed journalism as their main or secondary occupation, and 16 respondents (43%) listed CSO and/or Human Rights as their main or secondary occupation. Three respondents were civil servants. [Note: Two journalists also listed CSO/HR activism as a main/secondary occupation, so the responses of these individuals were captured under both categories.] Thirty-one respondents (84%), including the four men, stated that they had at least university-level education. Geographically, 28 respondents were from the Freetown area (76%), and nine were from the Northern, Eastern, and Southern Provinces, as well as Western Rural Area (with represented districts including Pujehun, Tonkolili, Port Loko, Koinadugu, Kenema, and Bombali).

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

In addition to the above research initiatives, two focus group discussions (FGDs) – one in the Northern city of Makeni and one in the Southern city of Bo – were also facilitated by SLAWIJ during the month of March 2022. Each focus group was comprised of either 8 or 9 individuals – including female journalists, human rights defenders, and activists – and questions posed by SLAWIJ facilitators during these FGDs were aimed at capturing the experiences of, and barriers confronted by, Public Facing Women in Sierra Leone.

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**Research
Findings**

This section of the report focuses on highlighting key findings discovered through the SLAWIJ-led research project, by dividing them into three distinct categories. Specifically: i) findings regarding the Legal Landscape in Sierra Leone, highlighting existing laws and legislation that relate to both offline and online/technology-facilitated violence against women and girls in the country, in all its forms (contained within Part I: Legal Landscape); ii) findings from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted by SLAWIJ as part of this research project (contained within Part II: Experiences of Public-Facing Women); and iii) findings regarding the Programmatic Landscape in Sierra Leone, including initiatives aimed at addressing, responding to, and/or deterring threats against women – including public-facing women – in the country (contained within Part III: Programmatic Landscape). A “Summary of Findings” is then presented in the final Part IV of this section.

Part I: Legal Landscape

The Sierra Leone legal system is a combination of the Constitution, common law, statutory law, and customary law. Customary law, which is largely unwritten, refers to the rules of law that, by custom, are applicable to particular communities in Sierra Leone. It derives from the community's acceptance of it as a binding obligation on them, and it has the force of law in any chiefdom of the Provinces. Customary law is taken to include Islamic law. Local courts administer customary law in provincial communities outside the Western Area. However, section 76(1) of the 1991 Constitution states that Customary Law shall not prevail if it is in conflict with Natural Law, Equity, and good conscience.[12] Tribal chiefs and councils of elders generally apply customary law in local courts. The local courts exist independently of the judiciary, and lawyers cannot participate in their proceedings, meaning that a defendant or an accused person is not entitled to legal representation.[13]

The existing international and national obligations of the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL), as well as its published plans and policies, require coordinated and sustained actions at all levels of the Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) – as well as at all levels of the legal system – to address and prevent gender-based violence. Sierra Leone has adopted, ratified, and/or is accountable to the following international and national instruments related to gender equality and the prevention of violence against women (including public-facing women), in all its forms – both offline and online.

International Instruments

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[14] defines gender-based discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis

[12]NYU Law Hauser Global Law School Program: Sierra Leone Legal System and Legal Research: https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Sierra_Leone.html

[13]Human Rights Brief, 2005: Marriage, Divorce, and Inheritance Laws in Sierra Leone and Their Discriminatory Effects of Women: <http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1324&context=hrbrief>

[14]CEDAW: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf>

of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.” It provides a roadmap for realizing equality between men and women by ensuring women’s access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life.

Convention Against Torture And Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)[15]. A variety of forms of violence against women amount to torture and other ill-treatment[16]. Torture is defined as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person” for the purpose of obtaining information, or a confession, for the purpose of punishing, intimidating or coercing, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by, or instigated by, or committed with the knowledge of, a public official or a person acting in an official capacity.

Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women[17]. Article 1, defines “violence against women” as “any act of GBV that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” Article 2 details forms of abuse considered “violence against women,” to include physical, sexual, and psychological violence condoned and/or perpetrated by family, community members and state actors. Article 4 asks Member States, among others, to “[e]xercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and, in accordance with national legislation, punish acts of violence against women, whether those acts are perpetrated by the State or by private persons,” and to “[p]romote research, collect data and compile statistics, especially concerning domestic violence, relating to the prevalence of different forms of violence against women and encourage research on the causes, nature, seriousness and consequences of violence against women and on the effectiveness of measures implemented to prevent and redress violence against women; those statistics and findings of the research will be made public.”

Resolution 52/86 on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Measures to Eliminate Violence against Women[18] provides model strategies and practical measures for the elimination of violence against women and urges member states to, among others, review, evaluate, and revise their criminal laws in order to ensure that [...] individuals can be prohibited or restrained, within the framework of their national legal systems, from harassing, intimidating or threatening women; to hold offenders accountable for their acts related to violence against women; to stop violent behavior; to promote sanctions that are comparable to those for other violent crimes; and to protect the safety of victims and witnesses before, during, and after criminal proceedings.

[15]Convention Against Torture: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cat.pdf>

[16]OMCT World Organization Against Torture: <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/reports/new-briefing-report-protecting-women-from-violence-through-the-un-convention-against-torture-cat>

[17]Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.21_declaration%20elimination%20vaw.pdf

[18]GA Resolution 52/86: <https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Expert-group-meeting-Bangkok/GA-resolution-52-86.pdf>

Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court[19], Article 7 designates acts of rape, forced pregnancy, and other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity as “crimes against humanity” when committed in a widespread or systematic manner, whether or not in times of war.

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action[20] is considered the most progressive and comprehensive global policy framework and blueprint for action on advancing women’s rights. The Platform for Action is an agenda for women’s empowerment aiming to accelerate the implementation of strategies for the Advancement of Women and to remove all obstacles to women’s active participation in all spheres of public and private life through full and equal share in economic, social, cultural, and political decision-making. Chapter IV, A., “Actions to be taken at the national level,” urges governments to “[a]ddress the barriers faced by women, particularly by indigenous and other marginalized women, in accessing and participating in politics and decision-making, including lack of training, women’s double burden of paid and unpaid work” and to “[p]rovide equal opportunities and favorable conditions for women of all ages and backgrounds on equal terms with men by encouraging their entry into politics and their participation at all levels.”

U.N. Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children[21] establishes the first common international definition of trafficking in persons to mean “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.” The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons is irrelevant.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325[22] has four main pillars: participation of women, prevention of violence against women, protection of women and girls from gender-based violence (especially rape and other forms of sexual violence), and prosecution of perpetrators of such crimes. Article 11 emphasizes the responsibility of all States to end impunity and prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes including those relating to sexual and other violence against women and girls, and politically legitimizes women’s role in peace, security in conflict and post-conflict management.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 1820[23] Article 4 calls on States to end impunity for sexual violence and ensure that all victims of sexual violence, particularly women and girls, have equal protection under the law and equal access to justice.

[19]Rome Statute International Criminal Court: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf>

[20]Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action:

https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/PFA_E_Final_WEB.pdf

[21]Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons:

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/ProtocolonTrafficking.pdf>

[22]Resolution 1325: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/WPS%20SRES1325%20.pdf>

[23]Resolution 1820: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/CAC%20S%20RES%201820.pdf>

U.N. Security Council Resolution 1888 [24] on women, peace, and security encourages States, with the support of the international community, to increase access to health care, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and socio-economic reintegration services for victims of sexual violence, in particular in rural areas; and encourages leaders at the national and local level, including traditional leaders where they exist and religious leaders, to play a more active role in sensitizing communities on sexual violence to avoid marginalization and stigmatization of victims, to assist with their social reintegration, and to combat a culture of impunity for these crimes.

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa [25] (Maputo Protocol), defines violence against women as "all acts perpetrated against women which cause or could cause them physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm, including the threat to take such acts; or to undertake the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life in peace time and during situations of armed conflicts or of war." Article 4 states that: "[e]very woman shall be entitled to respect for her life and the integrity and security of her person. All forms of exploitation, cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment and treatment shall be prohibited." Article 9 requires States Parties to "take specific positive action to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries through affirmative action, enabling national legislation and other measures [...]." Article 10 states that "[w]omen have the right to a peaceful existence and the right to participate in the promotion and maintenance of peace." And article 25 establishes remedies: "States Parties shall undertake to: a) provide for appropriate remedies to any woman whose rights or freedoms, as herein recognized, have been violated; b) ensure that such remedies are determined by competent judicial, administrative, or legislative authorities, or by any other competent authority provided for by law."

Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA)[26] calls for the Member States' continuous action toward achieving gender equality and reinforcing their commitment to international and regional women's rights instruments. It also addresses state responsibility for tackling violence against women- and gender-based discrimination.

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)[27] establishes minimum core obligations for Member States, including to take measures to prevent violence against women and mitigate its impact on the physical and mental health of survivors by criminalizing rape, domestic violence, and sexual assault, and providing safe housing programs for women fleeing situations of domestic violence.

Resolution 111, ACHPR, on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Women and Girls Victims of Sexual Violence[28] urges all State Parties to identify the causes and consequences

[24]Resolution 1888: <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/N0953446.pdf>

[25]Maputo Protocol: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WG/ProtocolontheRightsofWomen.pdf>

[26]SDGEA: https://www.mrfcj.org/pdf/Solemn_Declaration_on_Gender_Equality_in_Africa.pdf

[27]ACHPR: https://www.achpr.org/public/Document/file/English/achpr_instr_guide_draft_esc_rights_eng.pdf

[28]ACHPR/Res.111: <https://www.achpr.org/sessions/resolutions?id=163>

of sexual violence and take measures to prevent and eradicate it, develop campaigns to raise public awareness on existing remedies for cases of sexual violence, and put in place efficient and accessible reparation programs that ensure information, rehabilitation, and compensation for survivors of sexual violence.

African Union Gender Policy[29] aims to offer opportunities for empowerment of women, guarantee their protection against violence and rape, as well as their participation in public and economic life; the Policy urges Member States to eradicate all forms of gender-based violence.

The Maputo Declaration on Gender Mainstreaming and Effective Participation of Women in the Africa Union[30] led to the amendment of the Pan African Parliament Protocol to include at least two women representatives from each member country. A country's delegation which does not satisfy this requirement will not be accredited for representation in the Parliament.[31][32]

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)[33] Article 3 requires that States Parties ensure equal rights of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights set forth in the Covenant.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)[34] Article 3 requires that States Parties ensure equal rights of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social, and cultural rights set forth in the Covenant.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948[35] reaffirmed the faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and in the equal rights of men and women and determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.

National Legislation (Sierra Leone)

1991 Constitution[36], under Article 15, states that every Sierra Leonean is entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual, regardless of their race, tribe, place of origin, political opinion, color, creed, or sex, including the right to life, liberty, security of person, the enjoyment of property and the protection of law. The GoSL's White Paper[37] on Constitutional Review published in 2022 accepted a recommendation to amend section 27, to

[29]AU Gender Policy: https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Gender/African_Union_Gender_Policy_2009.pdf

[30]The Maputo Declaration on Gender Mainstreaming: https://sarpn.org/documents/d0000480/P405_Gender_AU.pdf

[31]Protocol Pan-African Parliament: https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7806-treaty-0047_-_protocol_to_the_constitutive_act_of_the_african_union_relating_to_the_pan-african_parliament_e.pdf

[32] Note: At the time of writing this report, Sierra Leone only had one woman representative.

[33]ICCPR: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/ccpr.pdf>

[34]ICESCR: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cescr.pdf>

[35]Universal Declaration of Human Rights: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf

[36]Constitution of Sierra Leone: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Sierra_Leone_2008.pdf?lang=en

[37]2022 Constitutional Review White Paper Sierra Leone: <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/REPORT-ON-THE-REVIEW-OF-THE-2017-GOVERNMENT-WHITE-PAPER-ON-THE-CONSTITUTION-OF-SIERRA-LEONE-1991.pdf>

include provisions for equal opportunities for women in economic, political, cultural, and social spheres to provide for gender inclusivity in line with the New Direction manifesto, of at least 30% women participation in public elections; and to amend section 35 (2) and section 38 to provide for proportional representation to achieve women's participation in public elections.

Prevention Of Cruelty To Children Act, 1926[38], establishes that any person who willfully assaults, ill-treats, neglects, abandons, or exposes a child or causes or procures such child to be assaulted, ill-treated, neglected, abandoned, or exposed, in a manner likely to cause suffering or injury shall be guilty of a misdemeanor punished by up to two years in prison.

Children and Young Persons Act, 1945[39] has provisions on the elimination of child labour, protection of children and young persons, including Part IV on Children and Young Persons in need of care and protection. The Act applies to anyone below the age of 17 years old and governs the treatment of juveniles who violate the law.

Muslim Marriage Act, 1960[40] governs Muslim Marriages in Sierra Leone, but has no provisions to guide instances of divorce. This leaves the determination of divorce cases outside the jurisdiction of the courts and into the hands of Islamic scholars, who sometimes dissolve marriages without the female spouse's consent and for spurious reasons.[41]

Public Order Act, 1965[42] Article 4 criminalizes the use of violence, intimidation, physical stalking, or destruction of property against women and children.

Anti-Human Trafficking Act, 2005[43] defines "coercion" to mean "force or some form of non-violent or psychological force, including threats of serious harm to or physical restraint against any person; any scheme, plan, or pattern intended to cause a person to believe that failure to perform and act would result in serious harm to or physical restraint against any person; or the abuse or threatened abuse of the legal process." The Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force is mandated to enhance economic opportunities for potential victims of trafficking as a deterrent to trafficking, including programs to promote women's participation in economic decision making and programmes to keep children, especially girls, in schools.

[38]Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act:

http://www.africanchildforum.org/cfr/Legislation%20Per%20Country/sierra%20leone/sierraleone_cruelty_1926_en.pdf

[39]Children and Young Persons Act, 1945:

http://www.africanchildforum.org/cfr/Legislation%20Per%20Country/sierra%20leone/sierraleone_childrenandyouth_1945_en.pdf

[40]Muslim Marriage Act, 1960:

http://www.africanchildforum.org/cfr/Legislation%20Per%20Country/sierra%20leone/sierraleone_muslimmarriage_1905_en.pdf

[41]Politico: Islamic Marriage Brought Before Sierra Leone's Supreme Court, 2020: <https://politicosl.com/articles/islamic-marriage-brought-sierra-leones-supreme-court>

[42]Public Order Act, 1965: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/1965-46s.pdf>

[43]Anti-Human Trafficking Act, 2005: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2005-7p.pdf>

Domestic Violence Act, 2007[44] criminalizes domestic violence, defined as physical or sexual abuse, economic abuse, emotional, verbal, or psychological abuse, including any conduct that makes another person feel constantly unhappy, humiliated, ridiculed, afraid or depressed or to feel inadequate or worthless; harassment and intimidation, danger to safety, undermining privacy, integrity, and security, or detracts or is likely to detract from a person's dignity. The Act requires that the government provide temporary safe homes for victims and empowers SLP's Family Support Unit to support women who seek legal actions and/or to mediate disputes.

Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, 2007[45] protects girls from forced marriage, makes 18 years the minimum age for customary marriages, and requires the consent of both the woman and the man to marry. Customary marriages and divorces must be registered, both parties must be issued a marriage certificate and they are prohibited from marrying another person while under legal union. It entitles women to acquire and dispose of property in their own right and stipulates that dowries don't have to be returned in the event of separation or divorce; it enables mothers to apply for child support when fathers fail financial responsibilities.

Devolution of Estates Act, 2007[46] provides that wives and children under customary law, as well as partners cohabitating (living together as husband and wife), have a legal right to inheritance. This entitles women to property upon the death of their husband/partner, without interference or claims from extended family members.

The Child Rights Act, 2007[47], Article 18 states that every child has the right to be protected from involvement in violent conflicts; Article 26 attributes the legal responsibility of parents to protect the child from neglect, discrimination, violence, abuse, exposure to physical and moral hazards and oppression; and Article 48 establishes responsibilities for a village committee, which includes the prevention of domestic violence and all forms of gender-based violence.

The Sexual Offences Act, 2012[48] as Amended in 2019[49] protects children, especially girls, from sexual abuse by persons in positions of trust, including by teachers and traditional leaders. It establishes higher prison terms for perpetrators of sexual penetration. Adults convicted of sexual penetration may receive a minimum of 15 years and up to life in prison; young persons convicted of sexual penetration may get a minimum of 10 years and up to life in prison; and children convicted of sexual penetration may get a minimum of 5 years and up to 15 years in prison. Measures for psycho-social support, protection of survivors and witnesses were either introduced or enhanced in the 2019 amendment, including a free medical treatment and report from any government hospital.

[44]Domestic Violence Act, 2007: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2007-20p.pdf>

[45]The Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, 2007: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2009-01.pdf>

[46]The Devolution of Estates Act, 2007: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2007-21p.pdf>

[47]The Child Right Act, 2007: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2007-7p.pdf>

[48]Sexual Offences Act, 2012: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2012-12.pdf>

[49]Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act, 2019: <https://old.sierralii.org/sl/legislation/act/2019/8>

Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021[50] criminalizes cyberstalking and cyberbullying, as someone who willfully and repeatedly communicates with someone with the purpose of creating a sense of fear of violence to that person, or damage, or loss of property. It defines “cyberstalking” as when a person intentionally initiates communications or a course of conduct directed at a specific person or persons with the intent to coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause emotional distress.

National Policies, Plans and Bills (Sierra Leone)

National Referral Protocol on Gender-Based Violence, 2012[51] is an agreement of cooperation among government MDAs, the Sierra Leone Police, NGOs, Community Based Organizations (CBOs), traditional authorities and Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) to ensure an effective response to, and coordination of, services for victims/survivors of GBV. The Protocol names government institutions and traditional authorities with legal responsibilities to address GBV cases and lists these responsibilities for each organization. It provides a referral pathway and diagrams to report GBV cases and emphasizes the need to minimize further trauma to survivors during the process.

Medium Term National Development Plan (2019-2023)[52] states that domestic and sexual violence, discrimination, weak systems/institutions to address gender issues, and poor collaboration among agencies responsible for women’s issues are key challenges facing women and girls. It establishes four targets to be delivered by 2023: 1. Ensure that there are more women in leadership positions in government than in 2018; 2. Ensure that more women are supported to engage in entrepreneurial activities than in 2018; 3. Develop and implement a national data and information management system on gender-based violence cases; 4. Drastically reduce by more than 50% the number of women experiencing GBV compared to 2018.

The Sierra Leone National Action Plan (SiLNAP) II[53] for the implementation of UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 (2019 – 2023) added several women focused pillars, including Pillar 2: for the protection and support of women, girls, and SGBV survivors and other vulnerable persons; Pillar 3: to prosecute and punish perpetrators of SGBV effectively and safeguard women’s adolescents’ and girls’ rights at all times as well as rehabilitate perpetrators; and Pillar 4: participation and representation of women in leadership at all levels of decision making in peace building and development processes.

[50]Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021:

<https://www.parliament.gov.sl/uploads/acts/THE%20CYBER%20SECURITY%20AND%20CRIME%20ACT,%202021.pdf>

[51]National Referral Protocol on GBV: <https://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/system/files/resource/files/Sierra-Leone-National-Referral-Protocol-on-GBV.pdf>

[52]Medium-Term National Development Plan 2019-2023:

https://www.slurc.org/uploads/1/0/9/7/109761391/sierra_leone_national_development_plan.pdf

[53]SiLNAP II: <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Sierra-Leone-2019-2023.pdf>

2020 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy[54] aims to review/create and enforce policies to ensure the active participation of women in political leadership and decision-making at all levels by at least 30% by 2022 and to harmonize relevant laws and strengthen implementation mechanisms to reduce the number of GBV cases by at least 60% by 2025.

2020 National Male Involvement Strategy[55] states that all persons are equal before and under the law in all spheres of political, economic, social, and cultural life and in every other respect and shall enjoy equal protection of the law. It aims to engage with male-led institutions, male stakeholders, and male community actors to transform "negative masculinities and gender norms" which create, reinforce, and justify violence against women and girls and the use of violence against men and boys by State and non-State actors. It recognizes and respects the right of women and girls to create, uphold and engage in women-only spaces, projects, and activities.

The Gender Empowerment Bill, 2021.

The bill seeks to promote gender equality by requiring 30% quota for women in elective and appointive public officers' positions. The bill defines "discrimination based on gender" as an action to prohibit or deny on the basis of sex or gender with the purpose of obstructing the right of a person to enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms equally. "Gender empowerment" means that a single gender shall not occupy less than 30% of elective and appointive positions in the public office; and "gender parity" means the equal representation of men and women contesting parliamentary elections, other than Paramount Chief elections, and provides a table with the exact number of seats reserved for women by district (see at right).

FIRST SCHEDULE
30% CONSTITUENCY RESERVED SEAT

DISTRICT	NO. OF CONSTITUENCIES	RESERVED SEAT (MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT)
KAILAHUN	10	3
KENEMA	11	3
KONO	9	3
EAST	30	9
BOMBALI	8	2
FALABA	4	1
KOINADUGU	4	1
TONKOLILI	10	3
NORTH	26	8
KAMBIA	6	2
KARENE	5	2
PORT LOKO	10	3
NORTH WEST	21	6
BO	11	3
BONTHE	4	1
MOYAMBA	6	2
PUJEHUN	6	2
SOUTH	27	8
WESTERN RURAL	8	2
WESTERN URBAN	20	6
WEST	28	8
TOTAL	132	40

[54]Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy: <https://mogca.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GEWE-Policy-Final.pdf>

[55]National Male Involvement Strategy For The Prevention Of Sexual And Gender-Based Violence In Sierra Leone:

[https://sierraleone.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-](https://sierraleone.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/National%20Male%20Involvement%20Strategy%20for%20the%20Prevention%20of%20GBV%20in%20SL%202020.pdf)

[pdf/National%20Male%20Involvement%20Strategy%20for%20the%20Prevention%20of%20GBV%20in%20SL%202020.pdf](https://sierraleone.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/National%20Male%20Involvement%20Strategy%20for%20the%20Prevention%20of%20GBV%20in%20SL%202020.pdf)

Legal Landscape Summary

Overall, the push for legislation to advance women's rights and protections has been significant in recent years, but with limited results. For example, women were able to achieve historical landmarks in Sierra Leone well before its independence. In 1938, Constance A. Cummings-John became the first woman to stand for office in Freetown, and win, and in 1961 she became the first Black woman to govern a capital city on the continent. In 1951 the Sierra Leone Women's Movement was founded, which set out to seek female representation on government bodies and in 1954, one of its founding members, Mabel Dove, became the first woman in West Africa to be elected to the legislature. So, when Sierra Leone achieved independence in 1961, the women may have been surprised to learn that men were unwilling to share positions of power equitably. The trend of preventing women's access to positions of leadership was maintained through successive administrations, with one recent positive development: while in 2022 only 12.3% of the Members of Parliament were women,[56] a significant 25.8% of the President's Cabinet were women.[57]

Part II: Experiences of Public-Facing Women

In 2019 Sierra Leone ranked 181 out of 189 countries in the Gender Inequality Index, according to data from the UNDP Human Development Indices – and the country continues to hold one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates.[58] In 2021 Sierra Leone lost 10 places in the Gender Gap Index compared to the previous year, placing the country 121st out of 156 measured states.[59] Sierra Leone ranked 136th in the Political Empowerment Index with just 12.3% of the Legislative being represented by female MPs. Women remain highly under-represented in policy and decision-making processes, in public and private spheres, and including in political parties. Even when, in 2018, some political parties took positive steps to attract more female candidates by offering to pay the nomination fees for female candidates, most of the women did not survive their parties' primary elections because they could not overcome other gender-based challenges like discrimination, intimidation, lack of campaign funds and low self-esteem.[60]

As part of the SLAWIJ-led research project – focusing on identifying and documenting existing and emerging barriers and threats faced by public-facing women in Sierra Leone – a total of 37 key informants (identified through the stakeholders' mapping exercise) filled out a Key Informant Interview (KII) Questionnaire, using either printed or electronic versions of the forms, provided by SLAWIJ. Additionally, follow up interviews were conducted with those who agreed, to provide more depth to their responses. Of the 37 who filled out questionnaire forms, only four were male

[56]Inter-Parliamentary Union: Sierra Leone: <https://www.ipu.org/parliament/SL>

[57]SierraLeone.org: President Bio's Third Cabinet: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/cabinet-bio3.html>

[58]UNDP 2019 Gender Inequality Index: <http://data.un.org/DocumentData.aspx?id=415>

[59]Global Gender Gap Report 2021, World Economic Forum: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf

[60]2021 GEWE Policy: <https://mogca.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GEWE-Policy-Final.pdf>

(11%), including two Sierra Leone Police (SLP) officers, one Independent Media Commission (IMC) official and one human rights activist. Among female respondents, there were two representatives of the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL), two from the 50/50 Group, as well as the Executive Director of the Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), among other prominent female CSO and NGO representatives. Overall, 20 of the KII respondents (54%), listed journalism as their main or secondary occupation, and 16 respondents (43%) listed CSO and/or Human Rights as their main or secondary occupation. Three respondents were civil servants. [Note: Two journalists listed CSO/HR activism as a main/secondary occupation.] Thirty-one respondents (84%), including the four men, stated that they had at least university-level education. Geographically, 27 respondents were from the capital city Freetown (73%), and ten were from the Northern, Eastern, and Southern Provinces, as well as Western Rural Area (with represented districts including Pujehun, Tonkolili, Port Loko, Koinadugu, Kenema and Bombali).

Additional data was collected during the two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), which were held in the cities of Makeni and Bo, and attended by a total of 15 participants, mainly journalists, but also Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and human and gender rights activists. One stakeholders' mapping exercise, held in Freetown and attended by 14 participants, also helped inform these findings.

Regarding technology and online usage, all 37 KII respondents listed WhatsApp as their main or secondary online communication platform, and all listed using SMS text communication via cellphones. The second most popular online communication platform was Facebook (used by 51% of the respondents), followed by TikTok (used by 16% of the respondents). Only three respondents reported using Twitter.

Snapshot of Key Informants



54%

selected Journalism as a main or secondary profession



43%

selected CSO / HR activist as a main or secondary profession



8%

identified themselves as Civil Servants

Types of Threats Experienced by Public-Facing Women (PFW)

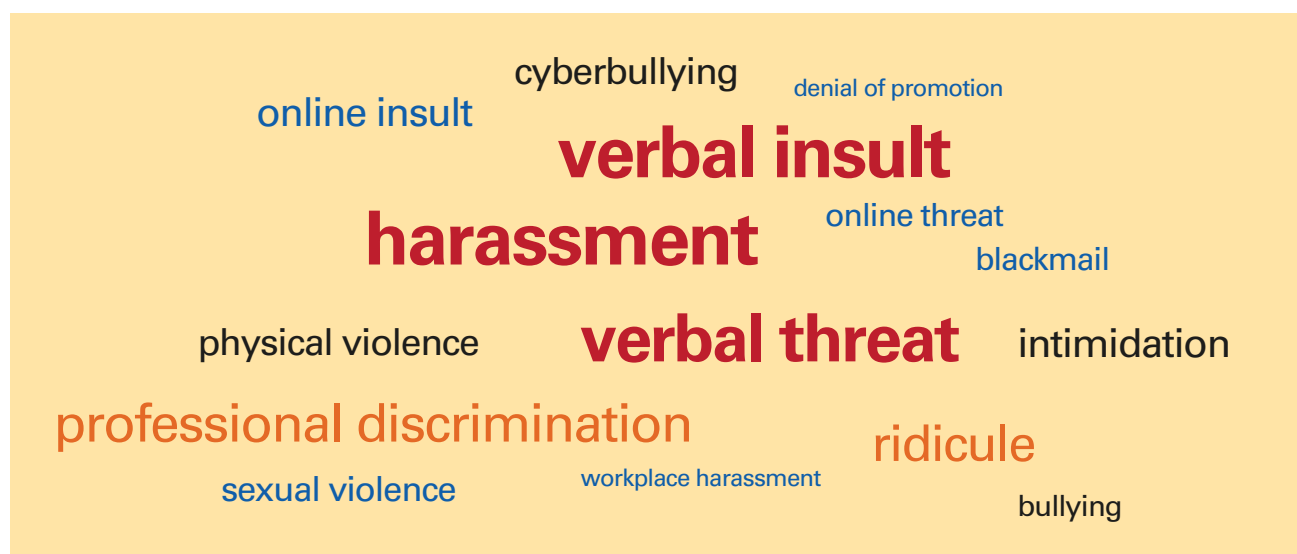
Women participants from the stakeholder mapping exercise and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) led by SLAWIJ facilitators strongly stated that almost all have suffered some form of online and/or offline harassment and/or violence, including personal attacks and/or threats and attacks against family members, as well as accusations of witchcraft.

“All of us sitting here, we are victims, one way or the other,” said one female CSO representative, during SLAWIJ’s stakeholder mapping session in Freetown. “Everyone here has gone through harassment,” stated another woman journalist, who took part in the in-person focus group discussion in Makeni. “And we are tired of it,” she added.

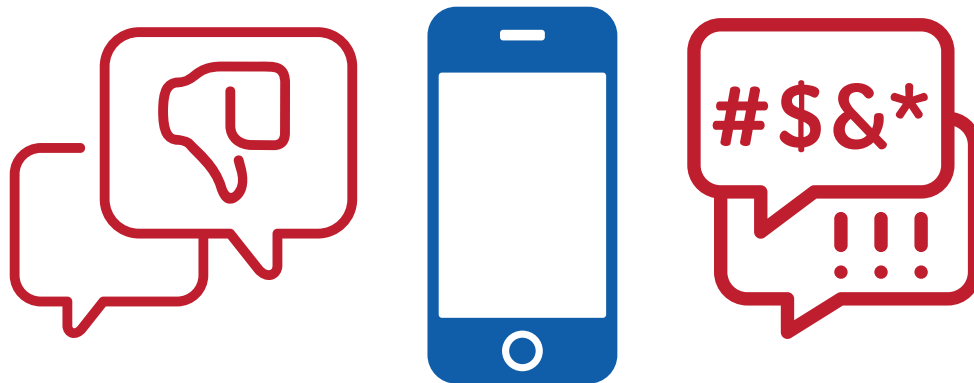
Meanwhile, a female radio reporter from Port Loko said that the threats and intimidation can be extreme. “You will not even be spared any privacy,” she explained, because attackers in her case sought to expose her and her family’s private information, and share made up stories.

All ten of the female key informants from outside of Freetown (100%) stated that they have experienced at least one form of abuse, with harassment and intimidation reported by 50% of them. However, when asked if they were willing to share additional information about the abuse, only three agreed – reflecting a possible ongoing hesitancy to speak out about such issues. By comparison, roughly half of the female respondents from Freetown (48%) experienced at least one form of abuse. Only four agreed to further talk about their experiences. Of the female respondents in Freetown who experienced forms of abuse, 64% reported insult, 55% reported harassment, and 46% reported receiving threats. One reported experiencing sexual violence.

Overall, 64% of all female respondents from Freetown and the provinces reported personally experiencing at least one form of threat that was listed in the questionnaire. When asked which threats they believe are the three most serious threats against PFWs in Sierra Leone, respondents identified harassment, verbal insults, and verbal threats as their leading concerns - as demonstrated in the word cloud of their responses, included below.

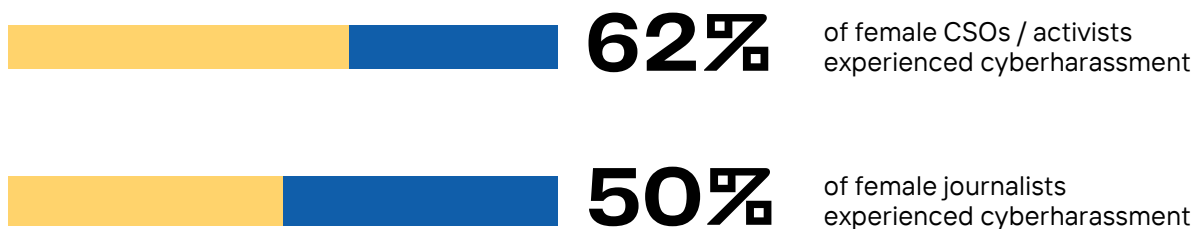


SLAWIJ's findings in this area are largely in-line with those from another recent assessment activity that looked at this issue. Specifically, in December 2021, a series of online "Internet Safety" surveys conducted by Internews found that 62% of female CSO respondents in Sierra Leone, and 50% of the female journalist respondents in Sierra Leone were either targets of online harassment or reported experiencing behavior similar to online harassment.[61]



Percentage of respondents in Sierra Leone who reported being targets of online harassment and/or experiencing behavior similar to online harassment

Data Source: Internews "Online Safety" surveys, Dec. 2021



When asked about the types of threats that Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone face (rather than about the type of threats they had personally experienced), most of SLAWIJ's 37 Key Informant Interview respondents selected at least three of the 18 options listed, and 17 respondents (representing 46%) selected ten or more types of threats. Verbal threats, insult, and harassment were again identified as the top three most significant abuses that Public-Facing Women are at risk of. [However, please note: Participants who submitted online forms frequently selected from the first four options of potential threats against PFW, without inputting any response for the remaining 14 options. By comparison, 79% of those who filled out printed versions of the Questionnaire forms identified ten or more threats against PFW. This could mean that respondents more easily checked boxes on paper than selecting from a drawdown arrow, which could have affected the outcome / resulted in less threats being listed by respondents who replied online.]

[61] Internews in Sierra Leone Facebook Page:
<https://www.facebook.com/internewsSL/posts/pfbid08nDJ3qCGWsofJsCJkDJyiXzVBn8uuA8ZrcTZz5bXFdPBvSTaAk7HKR1wcohHkcz9l>

Type of threats experienced by Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone, ranked by the number of respondents who identified each threat.

Data Source: SLAWIJ Key Informant Questionnaires (2022)

Rank	Type of Threat	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
1	Verbal Threats	35	95%
2	Verbal Insult	28	76%
3	Harassment	28	76%
4	Ridicule	20	54%
5	Intimidation	19	51%
6	Online Insult	19	51%
7	Online Threats	18	49%
8	Online Harassment	18	49%
9	Cyberbullying	16	43%
10	Denial of Promotion	14	38%
11	Workplace Harassment	14	38%
12	Blackmail	13	35%
13	Professional Discrimination	13	35%
14	Sexual Violence	11	30%
15	Physical Violence	10	27%
16	Denial of Access to Finances	10	27%
17	Arrest	9	24%
18	Revenge	8	22%

Incident Reporting

Of the 21 female Key Informant Questionnaire respondents who reported experiencing harassment, only seven agreed to talk about the abuse, representing 33%. Journalists who also work as activists said that it was difficult to share personal experiences about harassment and threats because the audiences generally don't believe them. "We end up in ridicule," said one female journalist from Kono District, explaining that community members in her area often believe that activists cannot be attacked by others. This may explain why some of the HRDs and journalists might be hesitant to publicly speak out against, or officially report threats (experienced either online or offline) when they are the target. The public sees these individuals as their protectors, so when the protectors are victimized, the public may lose confidence in the system. In a few isolated cases, respondents also reported fear of violent retaliation, such as physical and/or sexual assault if they reported their abusers. One Key Informant Questionnaire respondent specifically noted that she was sexually assaulted by a law enforcement officer, that she was threatened, and that she would have been in fear of her life if she had officially reported it.

Meanwhile, of the 21 female respondents who reported being targeted by abuse, threatened and/or harassed, only two reported it to authorities, and none of these women reported receiving any type of support. One respondent said that she was in fear of violence and feels that her life is threatened. Also, most significantly, none of these respondents collected any evidence of their abuse. In fact, of all 37 Key Informant Questionnaire respondents, only one male police officer said he collected evidence of the abuse that happened to a group of females. This is a significant finding, indicating that lack of knowledge and/or inability to collect evidence may contribute to, or worsen, the perception that "no one believes" the Public-Facing Women who experience such threats, and this may make any official reports and investigations extremely difficult if survivors do decide to report threats later on.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Sierra Leone is "grossly under-reported due mainly to stigma, reprisal and ostracism and inadequate, weak, and inconsistent response and support mechanisms," according to the GoSL's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy (GEWE) 2020. "To make matters worse, perpetrators are often not brought to justice due mainly to inconsistencies in the laws, inefficiency of the police coupled with their lack of resources, victims/survivors' fear of reprisal and limited and unequal access for women to the justice system, compromise and lack of evidence," the same source noted.[62]

Offline Threats Against Women and Girls in Sierra Leone

In addition to online and technology-facilitated threats, respondents to SLAWIJ's Key Informant Questionnaires and participants from its Focus Group Discussions made it clear that Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone also continue to face a myriad of "offline" threats and GBV – along

[62]MGCA, GEWE Policy 2021: <https://mogca.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GEWE-Policy-Final.pdf>

with other women and girls, located across the country. Nationwide, an estimated 61% of women aged 15–49 reported having experienced physical or sexual violence since the age of 15, and 43% experienced physical violence often or sometimes during the 12 months preceding the 2019 Sierra Leone Domestic Household Survey (SLDHS).[63] With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was feared that the rates of GBV would be heightened. Women in the North Western province are more likely (68%) to have experienced physical violence since age 15 than women in the Eastern Province (64%), Southern Province and Western Area (60% each), and Northern Province (55%).



Experience of physical violence is more common among women who are employed for cash (66%) than among women who are employed but do not earn cash (60%) and women who are not employed (56%); and the percentage of women who have experienced physical violence since age 15 is lowest among those with more than a secondary education (55%) and highest among those with only primary education (69%), according to the 2019 SLDHS report.

Experience of physical violence is more common among women who are employed for cash (66%) than among women who are employed but do not earn cash (60%) and women who are not employed (56%).

President Julius Maada Bio declared a six-month National Public Emergency Against Rape and Sexual Violence in February 2019, and set an agenda to address SGBV, including free medical treatment and certificates for survivors of sex abuse, the creation of a special division dealing with sex abuses against minors within the Sierra Leone Police/Family Support Unit, and trying all new cases of rape and sexual penetration at the High Court. The President also instructed the introduction of a dedicated telephone number for reporting rape and sexual violence. And in July 2020 the President launched the Sexual Offences Model Court (SOMC) to try all SGBV cases with an emphasis on rape. First Lady, Fatima Maada Bio, also launched a multi-year, boots on the ground campaign to combat sexual assault particularly aimed at underage children, and to end child marriage. She focused specifically on engaging traditional leaders, local chiefs, and religious leaders (overwhelmingly male), as well as female leaders who could impact and change attitudes.

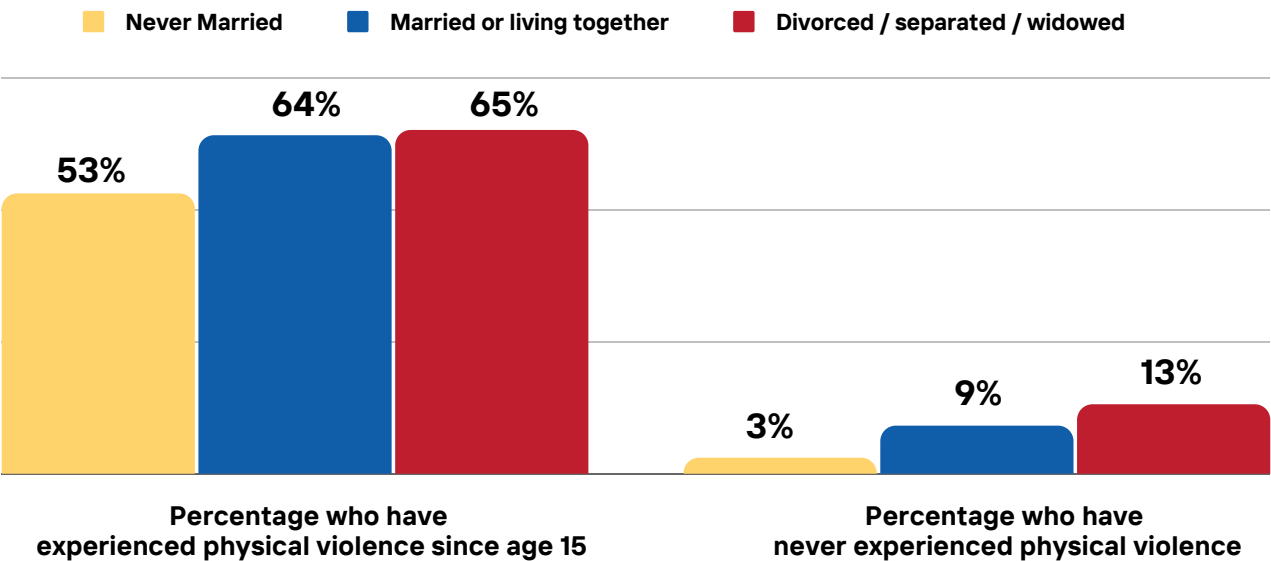
[63]2019 Sierra Leone DHS:

https://www.statistics.sl/images/StatisticsSL/Documents/2019SLDHS/SIERRA_LEONE_2019_DHS_REPORT.pdf

While the sustained efforts and awareness-raising may have encouraged more women and girls to report SGBV, research published by the Institute for Legal Research and Advocacy for Justice (ILRAJ) in 2021 found that “the prevailing sentiment amongst victims/survivors is that everything goes quiet after a few weeks and they are left with the consequences of the exposure,” by reporting the alleged crimes. At the cultural level, the report stated, “the most favored explanation as to why men engage in sexual abuse is that the men and their families are cursed and do it for ritual purposes to get power or money.”

Women's experience of violence by marital status

Data Source: SLDHS 2019



The SLDHS 2019 survey identified significantly lower rates of sexual violence among females aged 15 and above, compared to the rate of physical violence. And despite focused efforts by the GoSL and NGOs, the overall number of reported sexual and physical assaults against women continues to rise, with a noteworthy shift. For example, when comparing data from 2020 and 2021, Rainbo Initiative (a national NGO that works to end SGBV in Sierra Leone) noted a decrease in reported cases of SGBV among children below the age of 15, but a significant increase in the number of reported SGBV cases involving females above 15. It is important to note that the data released by Rainbo Initiative only reflects cases that are specifically reported to their organization, in the areas where they work – meaning that the actual number of cases may be significantly higher.

The table below shows the increase from 2020 to 2021 for each category of survivors, based on the cases that were specifically reported to Rainbo Initiative:

Category of GBV Survivor	15-18 years old	Students	Homeworkers	Housewives
% increase from 2020 to 2021	+19.7%	+27.6%	+1,100%	+183.3%

Additionally, in the first two months of 2022, Rainbo Initiative supported 474 women and girl survivors of SGBV, with 35 cases involving girls 5 years and below, and 51 cases involving girls between 6 and 10 years old. Girls between 11 and 15 years old are at the highest risk of sexual assault, based on Rainbo's data. It is possible that younger females (and/or their families) are more likely to report SGBV compared to adult females, who may see violence as normal, or who may fear shame, intimidation, and/or community stigmatization if they report. According to an annual report published by Rainbo, 75% of the SGBV cases reported through their organization are child sexual abuse cases, with fewer reported cases of physical/sexual abuses against adult females.[64]

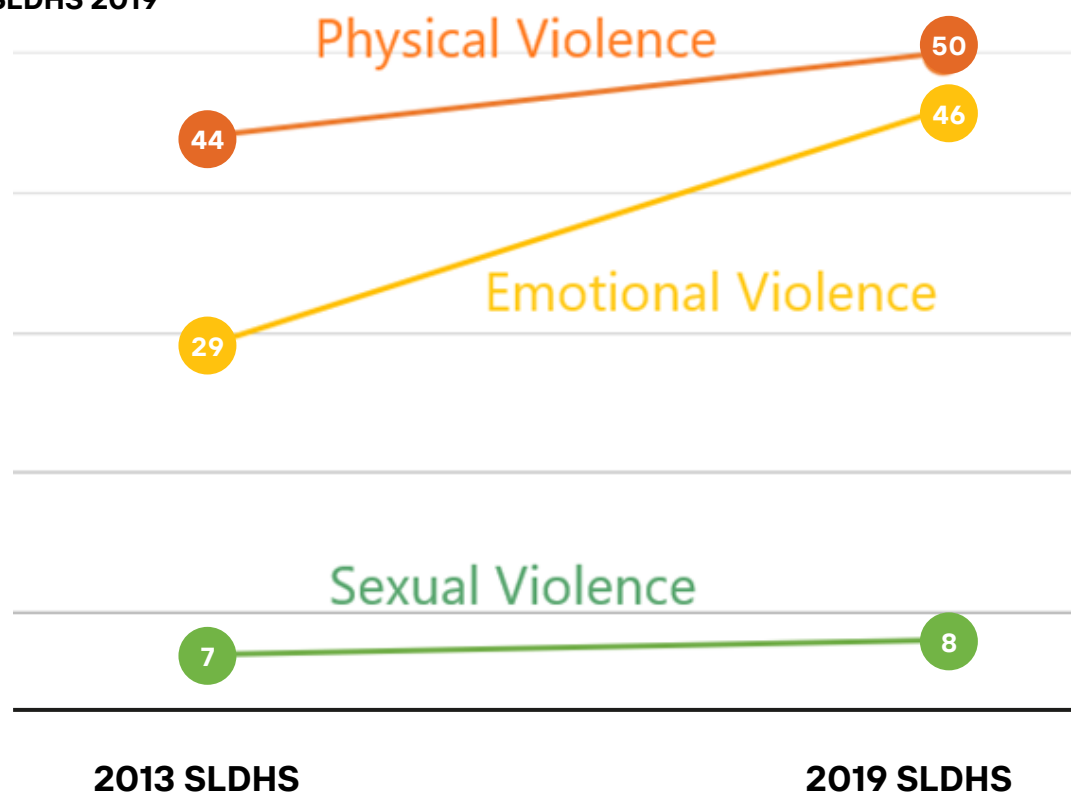
Year	2018	2019	2020	2021
Sexual & physical assaults reported to Rainbo Centers*	3,137	3,897	3,548	3,292

**Note: The data may include a small number of underage male survivors, generally under 50 cases each year.*

Overall, the 2019 SLDHS found significant increases in domestic violence, perpetrated mainly by partners, husbands, and fathers, but also by women, such as mothers-in-law, and other relatives.

Trends in Women's Experience of Spousal Violence

Data Source: SLDHS 2019



[64] Rainbo Initiative: <https://rainboinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Rainbo-Centre-GBV-Data-2021.pdf>

Impact on Survivors

Discouragement and low self-esteem were the words mostly used by female Key Informant Questionnaire respondents when asked about the impact of technology-facilitated GBV on Public-Facing Women. Journalists reported additional humiliation and public exclusion when trying to report these attacks. One respondent stated that she was asked by her family to quit her job as a result of an attack, and another one said that she was in fear for her life. And in Makeni, female journalist respondents said they may face termination if they refused advances from males who sponsored their media organization. A complicating factor may be the lack of knowledge on collecting evidence and making complete, official reports when the attacks cross into the sphere of violent threats. Male Key Informants also agreed. The Independent Media Commission (IMC) representative who was consulted said that they believed that women are discouraged from pursuing leadership positions in Sierra Leone as a result of online attacks and that it affects their self-esteem. Fear, depression, anger, guilt, and self-blame may also impact PFW but there is almost no awareness of these effects, and psychological support is almost nonexistent in Sierra Leone –where mental health services face critical systemic issues, and the estimated treatment gap is 98% for severe mental illness, for example.[65] Key Informant Questionnaire Respondents also reported, in a few isolated cases, blackmail and sexual violence against survivors of GBV.



"Some do feel *discouraged*, and sometimes [it] affects [PFW's] *self-esteem*."

"They feel *discouraged* and may want to *back down* from whatever [goal] they [were] pursuing."

"This actually *discourage[s]* so many women and make them want to *back out*."

"They get *discouraged* and *change their behavior* and sometimes actions."

"Some tend to *change their profession* to avoid the negative impact. Indeed, some get *discouraged*."

"It scares away other women from public life."

"We feel *discouraged* and sometimes even want to *stop working*."

"Scares women away from taking up leadership positions, lowers their *self-esteem*."



Source: Female Respondents to Key Informant Questionnaires, SLAWIJ, 2022

[65]Mental Health in Sierra Leone, Harris, Endale, Lind, et al. Cambridge University Press, 2019:

[https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-](https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/697A92A663E076DFB2E6870EAFD7CC9E/S2056474019000175a.pdf/mental_health_in_sierra_leone.pdf)

[core/content/view/697A92A663E076DFB2E6870EAFD7CC9E/S2056474019000175a.pdf/mental_health_in_sierra_leone.pdf](https://www.cambridge.org/core/content/view/697A92A663E076DFB2E6870EAFD7CC9E/S2056474019000175a.pdf/mental_health_in_sierra_leone.pdf)

Motivations of Attacks Against Public-Facing Women (PFWs)

Ideological and political agendas appear to be two of the leading reasons for offline and/or technology-facilitated GBV (i.e. any GBV carried out using the internet and/or mobile technology) in Sierra Leone. According to the beliefs of participants in the SLAWIJ-facilitated Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), men engage in targeted online attacks because they feel threatened by PFW's aspirations to leadership positions, and wish to prevent PFW from reaching leadership, prominent, and/or influential positions. Along with these reasons, participants also added restrictions imposed by culture, customs, and traditions – which, for example, may prohibit a female from becoming a Paramount Chief (the highest form of traditional ruler in the country), even when candidates can prove that they come from a ruling house in accordance with the set criteria.[66] Journalist Key Informant Questionnaire respondents also said that sometimes male guests they invite to their media organizations for interviews later engage in hate speech and online attacks against female reporters, if they ask tough or critical questions.

"My Aunt was very hard working and developmentally oriented, passionate and active in the Northern Province, but when she tried to contest for paramount chieftaincy, she was targeted with all forms of attacks, such as spiritual and secret society attacks," said one of the female journalists who participated in a Focus Group Discussion held in Bo City. However, these traditions have been partially defeated at least in the South Region of Sierra Leone, from where two females currently serve as Members of Parliament as Paramount Chiefs: Hon. P.C. Haja Bintu F.M. Kajue Koroma IV from Moyamba District, and Hon. P.C. Matilda Yayu Lansana Minah IV, of Pujehun District.[67]

Sexual desire, monetary need, anger, jealousy, and revenge are additional factors contributing to GBV affecting Public-Facing Women. Some of the female journalists consulted by SLAWIJ said that their bosses use them to attract financial opportunities and sometimes make them specific targets for men who sponsor their media organization. If the females refuse the sponsor's advances, the perpetrator informs the media house and places pressure on the female to either accept the sexual advances or be terminated from her job. One of these media managers, who attended an FGD hosted by SLAWIJ, explained that he had been under pressure to assign a particular female journalist on a work-related trip at a sponsor's specific request. He said that he had no option but to assign the journalist, without telling her about the request. Suspecting that the journalist may be at risk of getting into a sexual trap, he assigned another male journalist colleague to go on the trip as well, to "keep a watch" over the female journalist. He chose to take this action, rather than turn down the sponsor – as, he said, that would have negatively affected the organization from a financial perspective.

[66] 2011 Submission by CGG for the UN Universal Periodic Review Sierra Leone: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session11/SL/CGG_CampaignforGoodGovernance-eng.pdf

[67] Sierra Leone Parliament List of MP: <https://www.parliament.gov.sl/members-of-parliament.html>

Limited Knowledge of Laws and Available Resources

Only four of the 33 female KII respondents – representing 12% of this group – listed existing laws, policies, and regulations that may protect PFW from harassment and violence. Five respondents said that they did not know any laws that may protect PFW from harassment, including three CSO representatives and two journalists. One respondent said that the laws are used against the powerless, while those in power are shielded from the laws. “Even if there are laws, they are ineffective because the perpetrators are part of the [system] of abuse,” said another female KII respondent. Even those who listed the laws cited mainly the “Gender Laws” generically (rather than specific laws/Acts), and only one respondent cited a more comprehensive list of the available legislation. By comparison, the male KII respondents provided an almost complete list of gender laws, but this may also be by virtue of their profession – as the male respondents included two police officers and one IMC representative.

Only 12% of the female KII respondents were able to list existing laws that protect women from harassment and violence.

Lack of knowledge of available laws protecting them – and/or a lack of confidence that the laws will be appropriately enforced – may help explain why female KII respondents said that they did not report their offender(s), after experiencing GBV or harassment. Most revert to blocking the offender, if the harassment is carried out using tech devices, for example, without collecting evidence first. They rarely seek redress through the judicial system, and when they do make official reports, it is generally in the hopes of making the aggressor stop, not necessarily to seek punitive action. Even those who know the laws, feel uncomfortable reporting abuses due to fear of retaliation – particularly in the workplace.



“I do not think there are any laws or regulations in Sierra Leone that help protect public-facing women and/or prosecute those who threaten or attack these women, except for the general laws and regulations that protect its citizens from threats and violence attacks and the cybercrime law/act which is not well known or popularized to the general populace of the country.”

– Female CSO representative, Freetown

“I am aware of laws that protect women, but because of the name of the institution, I am limited... it ties me up.”

– Female Journalist, Port Loko



Part III: Programmatic Landscape

While Sierra Leone does not have legislation specifically protecting public-facing women, there are a significant number of policies, laws, organizations, and initiatives which more broadly include protections and/or support for all women and girls. However, a majority of the Key Informants consulted by SLAWIJ were not able to identify these programs/initiatives as potential resources for Public Facing Women. For example, only nine of the 37 Key Informant Questionnaire respondents, representing 24%, listed names of organizations and/or programs that may provide support to PFW when they are targeted by online or technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). Overall, 23 respondents (62%) stated that they were not aware of any such programs and/or organizations. Among the organizations listed by the nine respondents are Advocaid, LAWYERS, Legal Aid Board, FSU/SLP, Green Scenery, Legal Link, SLAWIJ, WIMSAL, SLAJ, 50/50 Group, CGG, Rainbo Initiative, Eminent Women, and Human Rights Defenders Network – Sierra Leone (HRDN-SL).

Only 24% of Key Informant Questionnaire respondents were able to list available programs/organizations aimed at protecting and/or supporting Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone – and those who listed organizations said that the protections and resources they offered were limited.

Even those who did list organizations that may provide support to PFW expressed pessimism as to the actual scope and impact of the support available. Firstly, they stated that the current initiatives taken by the handful of women's groups produce limited impact mainly due to lack of resources and sustainability. And secondly, a senior female journalist based in Freetown also noted that even the larger female-focused organizations are more likely to represent high-profile cases or support women holding leadership positions, leaving the mid- and lower-level professionals without support.

The Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MGCA) is mandated to address issues of violence against women and children and liaise with development agencies and NGOs. It leads on the development and monitoring of policies related to Gender and Children's issues and collaborates with relevant Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs). MGCA's overall mission is to promote and protect the welfare and rights of women and children through the development and review of policies, advocacy, and coordination.

The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) investigates and prosecutes crimes, including those perpetrated against PFW. In one recent example, Dr. Yakama Manty Jones, economist at the Ministry of Finance reported being attacked by a male and his mother in her office for simply

doing her job as a public servant. She acknowledged the quick response of the SLP through the arrest and investigation of the individual.



“The reality is that violence against women and girls in Sierra Leone – and around the world—takes place every day. [...] For women and girls who lack access to resources, many of these attacks go unreported and perpetrators go unpunished.”

– Dr. Yakama Manty Jones, Economist, Ministry of Finance



The Cyber Crime Unit of the SLP is responsible to investigate and prosecute cybercrimes, including technology-facilitated GBV, criminalized under the Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021, which prohibits sharing online communication that is likely to cause “apprehension of fear or violence,” or which “detrimentally affects” someone. The Act also criminalizes sharing of content which is grossly offensive, pornographic, or of a menacing character. According to one SLP official, assigned by his leadership to interview for this report, the most significant online threats faced by PFWs are intimidation and online insults, but also cyberbullying and blackmail. Arrest was also listed as “sometimes” a threat to PFWs. Another emerging threat to PFWs that was highlighted by the SLP is “soliciting sex by a person in authority” which is criminalized by the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act and punished with a minimum of 15 years in prison and up to life.

Family Support Units (FSUs) are independent, specialized units attached to police stations across Sierra Leone, with a mandate to investigate all forms of child abuse and violence against children, allegations of sexual and domestic violence, as well as commercial and other forms of exploitation against women and vulnerable members of society. A social worker of the MGCA should be located in each FSU, being responsible for referrals for, or direct provision of, psychosocial care and legal advice. The main legislation in support of prosecuting these acts are the Domestic Violence Act, the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act, and the Public Order Act.

Human Rights Commission, Sierra Leone (HRCSL) launched the Directorate of Gender and Children’s Affairs in November 2019, responsible for engaging on human rights issues in relation to women, children, and other vulnerable groups. The Directorate monitors the implementation of provisions highlighted in national, regional, and international standards in relation to women, children, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. In 2019, HRCSL received 171 complaints from men and 155 from women.

SLAJ, SLAWIJ, and several other CSOs/NGOs immediately spoke up against the perpetrator of the online threat targeting journalist Asmaa James in December 2021 – which was highlighted in the Introduction section of this report. SLAJ, Legal Link, SLAWIJ, and other CSOs and women-focused organizations issued statements condemning the threats against James.[68]“This is

[68] Calabash Newspaper: <https://thecalabashnewspaper.com/as-slj-heavily-condemns-attack-on-female-journalist-laj-openly-apologizes-to-asmaa-james-all-women-of-sierra-leone/>

not only an attack on one of our respected and outstanding female journalists but also on our journalism profession and the women of this nation. This is absolutely unacceptable, and we condemn it entirely,” SLAJ’s statement read. Although James dropped the charges, the online threat constitutes a criminal offense under the Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021. It is unclear whether the SLP prosecuted it. SLAWIJ has also partnered with the MGCA to popularize the Gender Empowerment Bill, seeking to promote gender equality in government and elected officials’ positions, access to finance, and other opportunities for women.

Asmaa James is not only an impactful journalist, but she is also a transformative figure in the fight against SGBV in Sierra Leone. In 2018, after learning of the unthinkable sexual penetration (rape) of a four-year-old girl, Asmaa organized the Black Tuesday movement against sexual abuse.[69] Every Tuesday, women activists would dress in black and publicly demand an end to sexual violence. In 2019 the movement gained nationwide support after Asmaa reported on the sexual penetration – and eventual death – of a five-year-old girl, and mobilized support in the streets to demand justice for the victim, as well as call attention to the rising number of reported rapes.

Christian Lawyers Centre (Legal Link) is a legal advocacy group that seeks to provide legal assistance to religious communities and vulnerable groups through legal advocacy, public interest litigation, public and private sector accountability, compliance with good governance, democracy, and rule of law and ensuring respect for fundamental human rights. In 2021, Legal Link recommended to the government to establish an Equal Opportunities Commission to effectively address the growing inequalities and discrimination meted out against women and girls in Sierra Leone. Legal Link has also issued strong public statements when PFW have been targeted by verbal attacks, intimidation, and censorship by state and non-state actors.[70]

In another case, **Legal Access through Women Yearning for Equality Rights and Social Justice (L.A.W.Y.E.R.S.)** represented a Sierra Leonean female (although not necessarily a PFW) who was targeted when sexually explicit videos, purporting to be her, were widely shared without her consent. The case was tried at the Sexual Offences Model Court, and the perpetrator was charged under the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2019, for making, possessing, and circulating indecent materials.[71] He was sentenced to five years in prison and ordered to pay psychological damages. This was a precedent-setting case in Sierra Leone, which could also serve to pursue similar cases when PFW are targeted. L.A.W.Y.E.R.S. is an organization of female barristers founded in 1997 to offer pro bono legal representation to, and promote the rights of, women and girls in Sierra Leone on issues related to domestic disputes, child maintenance, sexual and domestic violence.

[69] Sierra Network Radio: <https://snradio.net/asmaa-james-foundation-calls-for-black-tuesday-in-support-of-abused-girls/>

[70] Legal Link Sierra Leone: <https://legallinksierraleone.org/blog-post-9.html>

[71] Sierra Network Radio: <https://snradio.net/justice-momoh-jah-stevens-imposes-5-years-imprisonment-for-circulating-sexual-video/>

AdvocAid provides women and girls in contact with the law with access to justice, upholds their rights within the justice system and provides them with legal representation through a network of lawyers and paralegals, and also provides psycho-social support when needed. In April 2022, AdvocAid jointly with the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA) filed a case at the ECOWAS court of justice against the GoSL to overturn the country's loitering laws, which they claim are discriminatory and allegedly used by police to extract bribes and sexually abuse women.[72]

Legal Aid Board Sierra Leone is an independent government organization established in 2015 by the country's Legal Aid Act. The main purpose of the board is to provide justice services to poor and marginalized people in Sierra Leone, who otherwise cannot afford legal services. Generally speaking, the Legal Aid Board may focus more on those who are in trouble with the law – arrested or prosecuted – however, more recently, it also represented a female regain possession of matrimonial property.[73]

The Institute for Legal Research and Advocacy for Justice (ILRAJ) is an independent non-partisan public policy research and educational think tank which, among others, works to increase awareness/understanding of, and promote, women's and children's rights, and support capacity building amongst women, the youth, disadvantaged communities, and groups. It supports litigation and advocacy to enforce the rights of individuals and disadvantaged groups and offers expertise to train human rights leaders, among others. In 2021 ILRAJ launched an in-depth analysis research in which it looked at the drivers of GBV violence, and cultural perceptions. It highlighted the methods women and girls have used to cope with the effects of sexual violence, including forming online communities to exchange information and discuss ways to protect themselves, seek justice, or help victims.[74]



"Being a woman in Sierra Leone is a colossal task. [...] Culture and customs continue to hold us back. We are over 50% of the population, but we lack political voice. Even the few women in powerful positions working hard and leading with integrity, face constant harassment and barrage of sexist behaviors."[75]

– Basita Michael, CEO, ILRAJ



Consortium of Progressive Political Parties (COPPP) is a group of 13 opposition political parties created to defend and safeguard democracy, accountability, human rights, and the rule

[72] The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/04/bid-to-overturn-sierra-leone-loitering-laws-that-activists-claim-criminalise-poverty>

[73] Legal Aid Board:

<https://www.facebook.com/legalaidboard.sl/posts/pfbid0xZr4gAYK8v2MFmH8RnGXHycKXsN4HmZMkqMLCWZ3URvfjpfruCL3LeHdf66pVDyl>

[74] ILRAJ, 2021: <https://www.ilraj.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ILRAJ-BOOK-FINAL-05032021.pdf>

[75] Basita Michael Tweet on March 8, 2022: <https://twitter.com/MichaelBasita/status/1501179662218764294?s=20&t=dE8douvnyRDT5cd2x2LR8A>

of law. When prominent female politician, Diana Finda Konomanyi, was arrested following a video she posted online, other women political leaders staged a peaceful protest at the police station in Freetown, led by the Chairlady of COPPP, Claudius Femi Cole. The protest ended with the arrest by the SLP of 20 more women, including Femi Claudius Cole. Following persistent media coverage and protests from CSOs and NGOs, the women were released several days later.[76] Legal Link condemned the “incessant verbal attacks, intimidation and censorship of women” by state and non-state actors, which is “a testament of a continued pattern, a rule, as well as an optic revealing the gauge and extent to which our society is still in denial of providing the space for women to fully participate in the social, political and decision-making processes in Sierra Leone.”

National Elections Watch (NEW) is a coalition of over 400 national and international CSOs and NGOs, established in 2002 primarily to observe and monitor the fairness, transparency, and credibility of public elections in Sierra Leone. NEW frequently monitors and reports on the issues leading to discrimination of women in the awarding of the political parties’ symbols and consistently engages women in their awareness and educational activities. NEW has issued public statements when PFW became targets of harassment, physical attacks, and/or threats. NEW Chairperson, Marcella Samba-Sesay, said that during the 2022-2023 elections cycle NEW is determined to ensure that women can engage in online discourse safely and free of harassment.

Rainbo Initiative (RI), a national NGO established in 2014, offers female survivors of physical and sexual assault, including PFW, free clinical care, psychosocial support, and referrals, and supports survivors’ access to justice. RI has also been involved in major female-focused initiatives both with government, non-governmental and international organizations and is one of the few groups that publishes quarterly and annual data on GBV in the country. It has periodically carried out awareness-raising on SGBV and evidence-based advocacy. Some of the challenges listed by RI in their pursuit of justice for the survivors is sometimes the non-cooperation of traditional leaders who have immense authority in their communities. “If the chiefs are not on our side, it’s a fight we will continue to lose,” one Rainbo official said.

Don Bosco Fambul Therapy Center is run by the Catholic Salesians of Don Bosco. They have two shelters dedicated exclusively to girls and women. The services provided to survivors, including sexually commercially exploited women, focus particularly on psychosocial care and healing from trauma. Survivors who are assessed and feel ready for reintegration are supported to enroll in public schools or sent to vocational training. Don Bosco also runs a hospital in the center and partners with Marie Stopes and Rainbo Initiative.

Purposeful is an Africa-rooted global hub for girls’ organizing and activism. In Sierra Leone, Purposeful has been a vocal opponent of the ban prohibiting pregnant girls from attending

[76] Sierra Leone Telegraph: <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/in-sierra-leone-10-apc-women-languish-in-jail-without-bail-over-bailable-riot-allegations/>

school in Sierra Leone. Together with Amnesty, WAVES, and other partners, Purposeful played a key role in the case before the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice that in 2019 ruled in favor of pregnant girls' education and ordered the GoSL to overturn the decade old ban.[77] President Bio lifted the ban in March 2020.[78] Purposeful has had numerous initiatives in Sierra Leone over the years, all in support and for the empowerment of women and girls.

Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society (WAVES), successfully challenged the policy banning pregnant girls from mainstream education as a violation of their rights under the African Charter and several other regional and international human rights instruments. The ECOWAS Court of Justice ruling, issued in December 2019, was implemented in March 2020, when President Bio announced the immediate end of the ban against visibly-pregnant girls from attending schools.[79] WAVES empowers girls to speak out against SGBV and become agents of change in their communities. The organization also conducts extensive community outreach and advocates for policy change to benefit girls and women.

UN Women, in collaboration with the **Gender Technical Team**, supports women in Sierra Leone through providing technical assistance to the women's civil society groups and the Ministry of Gender in preparation for the constitutional review and land tenure policy review; the promising catalytic role of the Sierra Leone Female Parliamentary Caucus (SLEFPAC);[80] preparing sensitization trainings for women on the gender equality bill; and preparing and offering gender training to women at all levels of governance.

The 50/50 Group is a non-partisan organization, advocating for increased political participation and equal representation of women in decision-making processes and initiatives at all levels in the Sierra Leone society. To increase awareness of women's legal rights, the 50/50 Group translated the three gender acts –The Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, the Domestic Violence Act, and the Devolution of Property Act – into Sierra Leone's four main languages. The group held workshops and extensive discussions with tribal and religious leaders, who were then asked to read the acts aloud, and the recordings of these sessions were played on the radio and broadcast throughout Sierra Leone.[81]

Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), a national NGO established in 1996, has advocated, promoted, and supported women's empowerment. In 2021 it launched the yellow ribbon campaign together with SLAWIJ. The campaign, which is made of civil society organizations and women's empowerment advocates with support from Trócaire, is the driving force behind the Gender Empowerment Bill (in Parliament as of May 2022) aimed at increasing women's

[77]Amnesty.org: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/12/sierra-leone-regional-court-ruling-gives-hope/>

[78]Amnesty.org: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/sierra-leone-discriminatory-ban-on-pregnant-girls/>

[79] ESCR-Net: <https://www.escr-net.org/caselaw/2020/women-against-violence-and-exploitation-society-waves-v-republic-sierra-leone>

[80]State House: <https://statehouse.gov.sl/female-parliamentary-caucus-presents-fact-finding-report-and-recommendations-to-president-julius-maada-bio/>

[81] World Justice Project: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/world-justice-forum-iv-interview-5050-group-sierra-leone>

representation in public offices, the parliament, and local councils.[82] CGG also created the Women's Solidarity Space supporting women who are targets of harassment and threats and who struggle to stay relevant in men-dominated spaces.

Gaps In Services

Several of the existing programs targeted at addressing and/or providing support to women survivors of violence in Sierra Leone focus primarily on providing emergency services to survivors of serious trauma, such as sexual assault and rape, and prioritize their support to the most vulnerable. Even so, these organizations are already overwhelmed by the growing demand of support/services from women and girls, and severely limited resources. Therefore, offering support to PFW specifically may be of a lesser priority – unless, perhaps, they are in urgent need of immediate medical or legal support. Even the few CSOs/NGOs who do provide some services to PFW have insufficient funding, training and/or sustainability. Moreover, as SLAWIJ's research shows, PFW are not all aware of existing services available to protect them, and when attacks or threats get out of hand, the only action many know to take is to make official complaints to the SLP.

Additionally, the services available are concentrated mainly in the capital of Sierra Leone, Freetown, with extremely limited offices in the rural areas.

According to those consulted by SLAWIJ through this research activity, government and private organizations' internal policies on gender discrimination are sometimes non-existent, and even where they exist, they are often not known or implemented/enforced by employers. This view was particularly expressed by mid-level career HRDs/CSOs/Journalist women and those working in small to midsize organizations. In one example, a Key Informant Questionnaire respondent from a women's rights group said that "prayers brought the psychological peace and calm required," after she was confronted, insulted, and harassed by a male during a staff meeting. The aggressor eventually resigned. In January 2022, Campaign for Human Rights and Development International (CHRDl) alleged that it had documented hundreds of sexual harassment and other GBV violations within the Armed Forces, which the GoSL strongly denied. [83] Certain media organizations may not always enforce their gender discrimination policies, if they exist at all.

Awareness-raising on the challenges faced by Public-Facing Women takes place closer to the general elections when women in politics are targeted more aggressively – but once elections are over, the activities on awareness-raising largely subside. Participants in SLAWIJ-led FGDs also emphasized the need for awareness raising about their rights, what qualifies as unacceptable behavior under legal and policy norms, or who is responsible to track, document, and act when women file complaints on attackers.

[82] Trocaire: <https://www.trocaire.org/news/the-women-of-sierra-leone-are-a-political-force-that-can-no-longer-be-ignored/>

[83]The Sierra Leone Telegraph: <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/chrdi-condemns-corruption-sexual-harassment-and-rights-violations-in-sierra-leone-military/>

Moreover, reporting online and/or technology facilitated GBV becomes challenging particularly in situations where women fear public stigma. Many of the PFW consulted by SLAWIJ as part of this research activity stated that they hesitate reporting cases because they don't think that they will be believed. Those who may wish to report cases, also fear retaliatory behavior from friends and/or family of the perpetrator or the organization involved.



Conclusions and Recommendations

In general, those consulted by SLAWIJ as part of this research activity agreed that PFW across Sierra Leone are consistently targeted by both online and offline attacks, including technology facilitated GBV – but noted that there are currently very limited programs or organizations they trust to address these issues. These challenges are not isolated to just urban-living PFW, but those residing in rural areas are faced with similar levels and types of attacks, while access to support is extremely diminished due to the remoteness of their location. Additionally, a number of those consulted noted that many perpetrators of technology facilitated GBV are politically-motivated individuals; and that women CSOs and journalists are often targeted by individuals who disagree with their campaigns or news coverage.

One senior female civil society activist consulted by SLAWIJ explained that the attacks against Public Facing Women represent a strategic move by perpetrators to silence their voices, and the perpetrators know they can get away with it, because many women in Sierra Leone tend to avoid speaking out about their personal issues. To inflict further fear, perpetrators often threaten to publicly reveal (or actually do reveal) private information regarding their target.

Complaints and Redress Mechanisms

According to the U.S. State Department Human Rights Report, 2021, the government of Sierra Leone has not enforced laws prohibiting discrimination in the workplace, and gender-based violence and harassment are prevalent in the workplace and in schools. According to the FSU and the HRCSL, violent acts against women, especially wife beating and spousal rape, were common and often shrouded by a culture of silence. Survivors seldom report sexual and gender-based violence due to their fear of social stigma and retaliation. The HRCSL and Rainbo Initiative observed an absence of medical personnel in most communities and lengthy court delays in processing cases. Meanwhile, First Lady Fatima Bio has actively promoted public awareness, calling on men to refrain from violence against women.

Key Informant Questionnaire respondents consulted by SLAWIJ had limited knowledge of existing laws and policies that are related to protecting women and girls (including PFW), and even among those who are aware, many said that they did not believe that they were effective. Female journalists, too, appear to have limited awareness of existing laws and policies that may protect them from technology based GBV. Those consulted by SLAWIJ said that they hesitate to make official complaints, for example, due to SLP's lack of specialized training and/or resources to thoroughly investigate these types of complaints, and/or a lack of confidence in the system. Both Key Informant Questionnaire respondents and Focus Group Discussion participants said that they were not very certain about the reliability of the reporting channels and cited SLP's poorly equipped investigative teams. On the other hand, SLP representatives who were consulted have added that in some cases, victims have been pressured by family, friends, or community members to not make official complaints, and those who do decide to make complaints sometimes drop them midway through the process, mainly due to family/community pressure.

For cases in which members of the Sierra Leone Police force are being accused of perpetrating crimes (including GBV), there are five bodies responsible for handling complaints: the SLP Force Complaints, Discipline, and Internal Investigations Department (CDIID); the Independent Police Complaints Board (IPBC); the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC); the Office of the Ombudsman; and the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings from its research efforts, highlighted in the previous sections of this report, SLAWIJ would like to present for consideration the following conclusions and subsequent recommendations for areas of possible intervention, advocacy efforts, and/or programmatic activities – each with the aim of overcoming existing barriers and supporting Public-Facing Women to continue carrying out their work (and continue their participation in public life), both safely and securely.

Conclusion #1:

There is extremely low awareness and understanding of the existing laws and policies that protect women from threats and violence in Sierra Leone. Women (and particularly Public-Facing Women) need training on the laws and policies that exist to protect them, in their work and in their daily lives.

There are several laws and policies that protect women in Sierra Leone from threats and violence (both offline and online), but knowledge of these laws is limited. Even those who have knowledge about the existing laws have expressed skepticism regarding the possibility of effectively reporting and punishing perpetrators. However, if more women – and particularly Public-Facing Women, who are themselves leaders in their communities – were aware of the laws, the tide could start to turn. Therefore, continued, sustained efforts are needed, beyond any election cycle, to ensure that women and girls are made aware of the most powerful laws in the country protecting them from violence, including the Public Order Act, 1965, which prohibits stalking, as well as the Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021, which criminalizes cyberharassment.

Conclusion #2:

Even when online attacks against Public-Facing Women (PFW) go “viral,” it remains the responsibility of the individual targeted to report the incident. However, a lack of knowledge regarding the relevant laws and policies, and a lack of knowledge regarding how to effectively collect evidence, and how/where to report such incidents to authorities, is often combined with pressure from family/friends/communities to avoid taking action – frequently resulting in the non-reporting of such incidents. Efforts are needed to support PFW to identify, document, and confidently report online attacks (in addition to offline attacks).

Even when online attacks against PFW go “viral” – and details are widely known and viewed by the public – authorities (including employers and law enforcement actors) tend to wait for complaints to be lodged, before taking any action. The burden of documenting and collecting evidence of the threats or violence therefore remains with those targeted – yet many PFW lack important knowledge regarding how to effectively collect evidence, and how/where to report such incidents to authorities.

In some cases, civil society organizations and activists have taken steps to support high profile PFW who have faced online attacks – however, there is concern (expressed to SLAWIJ through the process of this research activity) that many of the mid or lower career level PFW who face such attacks, typically do not receive any such support. Therefore, solutions are needed to focus on encouraging all levels of Public Facing Women (including female activists and female journalists at all levels of their career) to be able to identify online threats when they see them; collect the necessary evidence; and then report it to the appropriate authorities. Keeping quiet will only encourage the behavior and allow perpetrators to continue without consequence. Evidence and anecdotes have shown that when such threats are known to the public and authorities, then NGOs/CSOs will likely take actions to support the targets of such threats – but initial steps of documenting and reporting the case still need to be taken by those affected.

Additionally, SLAWIJ found that even though many of the PFW consulted through this research activity have personally experienced threats and/or violence during the course of their work, only two of the women actually reported the abuse to authorities (either to the police, or to Board Members at their organization) – and none of those experiencing abuse collected evidence of what took place. This points to a significant need for education on: how to identify the various forms of abuse (particularly online and technology facilitated abuse); how to collect and properly store evidence of the abuse as soon as it happens (and before blocking the abuser online); and how to create a strong, complete, and clear incident report for the police, for employers (if the abuse should occur at the workplace), and/or for NGOs or CSOs who may be able to offer support (particularly legal or advocacy support) to those affected.

Moreover, there is a need for increased efforts to sensitize communities and the public about the dangers faced by PFW. If PFW have an ally in the public, they may receive support, understanding, compassion and advice more readily, should they experience abuse and/or violence, either offline or online. If citizens are made aware of the dangers faced by PFW – as well as the various laws and policies that are in place to protect women from such threats – targeted individuals may receive better support from their family members/friends/communities, should they choose to report such incidents in future. Education is needed to sensitize the public (including members of the media, and particularly media managers and editors) on the risks that women journalists and activists face in the course of their work, and to share the message that reporting cases of abuse against them only strengthens the rights and protections for all women and girls.

Conclusion #3:

Low self-esteem among Public-Facing Women may contribute to a lack of reporting of online/offline threats and discourage PFW from taking on or continuing in leadership roles when they experience barriers and/or threats. There is a need for activities and initiatives that aim to improve and bolster the confidence of PFW – particularly when it comes to overcoming the effects of abuse, and/or speaking out about issues that are important to them and/or which affect them individually.

Anecdotal data collected by the MGCA showed that one of the reasons women have dropped out of political races or failed to survive primary elections is low self-esteem. Low-self-esteem combined with online/offline attacks, hate speech, and/or harassment can be devastating to the professional/political aspirations of a PFW. Additionally, one of the results of technology facilitated GBV is low self-esteem among targeted individuals. So, how do women work to preserve their self-esteem, their courage, and motor through attacks they may experience? ILRAJ's research (mentioned earlier in this report) found that many survivors of sexual abuse learn to master and overcome many of the traumatic consequences on their lives – and similar strategies could be identified and taught in programs to support women to overcome the effects of various types of abuse, including online and offline abuse targeting PFW. In line with this, initiatives that provide self-esteem and morale boosting support, psychosocial support, counselling and/or mentoring to PFW should be prioritized – to prepare PFW to resist and survive these attacks, and build the confidence and resiliency they need, to overcome barriers and continue in leadership roles.

Additionally, specialized training that builds the skills of PFW to comment and speak publicly (including through traditional media, as well as via social media) about issues that are important to them and/or which affect them individually could be introduced, to help build their confidence and improve the likelihood that they will speak out about challenges or barriers experienced by Public-Facing Women.

Conclusion #4:

Although many Public Facing Women admit to experiencing online and/or offline abuse, a lack of reporting and a lack of public awareness about these incidents may contribute to ongoing and/or increased occurrence of such incidents (as perpetrators continue without consequence), while those affected “suffer in silence.” Efforts to identify and address specific incidents, as well as efforts to increase public awareness about the negative impacts of such abuse, could help to reduce the enabling environment for such perpetrators to commit abuse, and provide crucial support to the PFW being targeted.

Although many PFW admit to experiencing online and/or offline abuse, SLAWIJ has found that only a small portion of the PFW affected by such abuse actually take steps to report it. This, combined with the fact that there seems to be limited understanding among the public about what all constitutes online and technology facilitated abuse (as well as about how frequently such abuse is perpetrated against PFW in Sierra Leone), contributes to: i) low levels of awareness about the serious impacts this type of abuse can have; and ii) fewer consequences for those who carry out such abuse.

In its own effort to monitor and help highlight the widespread and serious nature of such abuse, SLAWIJ is taking this opportunity to formally commit – with technical support and funding from Internews (U.S.) – to track and document threats against PFW in Sierra Leone for a 12-month period, with a special emphasis on tracking and documenting cases of online and technology facilitated threats, as an emerging and growing barrier to Public Facing Women in the country. SLAWIJ encourages other individuals and organizations passionate about this issue to join us in tracking and documenting threats and/or abuse against PFW [AK(1] – and encourages other actors to join SLAWIJ in additional efforts, such as developing advocacy initiatives aimed at highlighting the issue and/or awareness materials calling for a stop to abuse targeting PFW in Sierra Leone.

Additionally, in cases where social media posts and/or content that includes threats to PFWs go “viral” or become widely known, authorities should be encouraged to investigate the incidents – irrespective of the fact that, as this research indicates, the women targeted may suffer in silence (or even openly), but not formally report the case to authorities. While the women affected may be most focused on what they can do to put an immediate stop to the behavior (for example, by blocking the individuals, or by privatizing their own formerly public social media accounts), if a particular case of online abuse – in which an individual or individuals are clearly acting contrary to national law – goes “viral,” and is brought to the attention of local authorities, those authorities should be encouraged to investigate the perpetrators of such abuse, and/or take steps to otherwise address the situation, within their professional purview.

In such cases where online or technology facilitated GBV targeting Public-Facing Women goes “viral” or becomes well-known, NGOs and/or CSOs capable of offering legal services (whether paid or pro bono) are also encouraged to privately reach out to the PFW affected, as the woman or women involved may or may not be aware of legal steps they could take to help remedy the situation and/or protect herself from the abuse. These NGOs and CSOs could also form a coalition and/or “Digital Watchgroups” to monitor for instances where PFW are targeted by technology-facilitated hate speech/threats (particularly on WhatsApp groups, where Sierra Leoneans are very active), and play a leading role in: identifying and speaking out against harassment when it occurs; providing moral support and encouragement to affected PFWs; urging Group admin(s) to block perpetrators who continue to harass and/or bully others; and

reporting serious incidents directly to the social media platforms – who themselves, as companies, have harassment and bullying policies designed to protect individuals, and the responsibility to enforce those policies (particularly when cases are brought to their attention).

Finally, there is a need for awareness initiatives aimed at sensitizing communities about i) the barriers that Public-Facing Women experience which may limit their inclusion and leadership in civil society, journalism, and/or peacebuilding activities in the county; and ii) the importance of protecting PFW, and the importance of identifying, reporting, and putting a stop to all forms of abuse against Public-Facing Women. A special collaboration with traditional and religious leaders could also be encouraged, to convey positive worldviews of women, which support their rights (including their right to protection against abuse), and their important roles in leadership and decision-making processes.

Conclusion #5:

Female journalists have voiced concerns regarding abuse by persons in authority positions. SLAWIJ encourages media houses and media management to consider developing / updating and enforcing carefully considered policies (such as Gender Ethics Policies, Equal Pay Policies, and/or Stopping Sexual Harassment in the Newsroom Policies), which aim to support and protect female journalists.

As part of this research project, SLAWIJ has identified a number of cases in which female journalists were taken advantage of, abused, and/or put at risk, during the course of their professional reporting work. As part of its recommendations, SLAWIJ encourages media houses and media management to consider developing (or updating existing) policies – such as Gender Ethics Policies, policies supporting the equal pay of men and women journalists taking on similar positions, Stopping Sexual Harassment in the Newsroom Policies, etc. – which are aimed at supporting and protecting female journalists.

Additionally, SLAWIJ encourages efforts to train male media managers about the risks of not protecting female workers from abuses by people in positions of authority (including senior staff, management, Board Members, news sources, sponsors, and/or advertisers), as well as training of female staff on how to effectively document and safely report various types of abuse, should they experience it.

Conclusion #6:

Women have voiced their frustrations and disappointment at the failure of existing systems and laws to bring an end to the levels of sexual and other harassment that women in Sierra Leone face and endure. Further steps are highly encouraged, to ensure the effective implementation and enforcement of existing laws and policies, and to protect women (including Public-Facing Women) from harassment and abuse.

Through this research activity, women have voiced their frustrations and disappointment at the failure of systems and existing laws and policies to bring an end to the high levels of sexual and other harassment that women in Sierra Leone face and endure, often in silence. The mere existence of professional codes of ethics (such as the SLAJ Code of Ethics for journalists) and organizational codes of conduct are clearly not enough to deter harassment against Public-Facing Women – either within or outside of the workplace.

In terms of Freedom of Expression, the Government of Sierra Leone and relevant authorities are reminded of their obligation under Principle XI of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, which states that:

(1) Attacks such as the murder, kidnapping, intimidation of and threats to media practitioners and others exercising their right to freedom of expression, as well as the material destruction of communications facilities, undermines independent journalism, freedom of expression and the free flow of information to the public.

(2) States are under an obligation to take effective measures to prevent such attacks and, when they do occur, to investigate them, to punish perpetrators and to ensure that victims have access to effective remedies.

In terms of all forms of abuse and/or violence against Public-Facing Women, SLAWIJ urges authorities to prioritize the investigation and prosecution of cases in which PFW are threatened, abused, harassed, and/or injured. By applying the full penalty provided by law in these cases, a stronger message will be sent to would-be aggressors that this type of action is unacceptable. Moreover, at SLAWIJ we support the position that came from research participants directly, who recommended that a separate body or institution be formed with the sole legal mandate to ensure women are protected against sexual harassment. Without a specific body to champion this cause for the many women from start to finish, mere legal reforms will not achieve much by way of stopping the harm and harassment. This view is supported by the positive changes observed by stakeholders resulting from the recent transfer of sexual violence issues from trial by magistrate courts (which dealt with all matters), to a dedicated court set up for sexual offenses.

SLAWIJ also encourages GoSL and relevant authorities to use their influence and take steps to collaborate with owners of online platforms to report abuse and encourage action in specific cases; particularly those involving the “viral” or widespread sharing of threats against PFW in the country. For instance – despite apologies issued by LAJ, pertaining to the threats made against veteran media practitioner, Asmaa James back in December 2021, the original offensive two-minute-long video clip (which contains the threats) is still available for public to view on YouTube. Authorities could play a key role in working with i) perpetrators of online violence and/or ii) social media platforms, to ensure that offensive materials that constitute threats and/or harassment against Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone are reported and removed.

5

Glossary



Threats:

A statement or an action with an intention to inflict pain, injury, damage, or other hostile action on someone (for something done or not done; said or not said).

Online Threats:

All threats which are made through technology facilitated platforms such as on internet streams and telephone networks, especially social media platforms (including Facebook, WhatsApp, SMS, email, twitter, TikTok, and YouTube).

Hateful speech and online hate speech:

Speech or threats, both explicit and implicit, can be issued by an ill-intentioned internet user pretty much anywhere on the web. Hateful speech is a form of expression attacking a specific aspect of a person's identity, such as one's race, ethnicity, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, or disability. Hateful speech online often takes the form of ad hominem attacks, which invoke prejudicial feelings over intellectual arguments in order to avoid discussion of the topic at hand by attacking a person's character or attributes.

Offline Threats:

Threats in which the delivery does not involve technology (such as computers or mobile devices), or technology facilitated platforms (such as internet streams or online social media networks).

Violence:

Extremely forceful actions that are intended to hurt people or are likely to cause damage. An unjust, unwarranted, or unlawful display of force. Note: The damage inflicted by violence may be physical, psychological, or both.

Cyberbullying and cyber harassment:

These are umbrella terms (like "online harassment") meant to encompass a number of harassing online behaviours. Like physical bullying, "cyberbullying" is generally aimed at young people and may involve threats, embarrassment, or humiliation in an online setting.

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