

STATEMENT

UPR Pre-Session on Sierra Leone

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On behalf of: Women's Network for Environmental Sustainability (WoNES)

This statement is delivered on behalf of the Women's Network for Environmental Sustainability (WoNES), a non-governmental organization in Sierra Leone working to uphold the right of all people—particularly women—to a safe, balanced, and healthy environment.

This submission is informed by consultations conducted with our partners, networks, and members across the country. It highlights key challenges affecting women's rights in Sierra Leone, particularly gender-based violence, insecure land rights, women's economic marginalization, and the limited participation of women in environmental and natural resource governance.

Key concerns include:

- High rates of gender-based violence, with approximately 61% of women experiencing GBV in their lifetime;
- Limited access to sustainable, environmentally friendly livelihoods that support women's economic resilience;
- Insecure land rights for women, which continue to undermine gender equality; and
- The under-representation of women in natural resource management and environmental decision-making.

Issue 1: Land Rights

Although Article 27(2) of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, Article 27(4)(d) excludes laws relating to marriage, divorce, and inheritance from this protection. This constitutional exception allows discriminatory customary laws to persist, severely affecting women—particularly widows and separated women—by denying them equal inheritance and land ownership rights.

Under customary law, land is largely controlled through male lineage and chieftaincy systems. Women rarely serve as chiefs or family heads and are routinely excluded from decisions on land allocation, transfer, and inheritance.

The Customary Land Rights Act 2022 and the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act 2022 represent important progress, including the

requirement that at least 30% of land committee members be women. However, implementation has been slow and uneven, and awareness of these laws remains low, especially in rural communities.

To address these gaps, WoNES, in partnership with Christian Aid, the 50/50 Group, NMJD, and Green Scenery, is implementing a UN Peacebuilding Fund-supported initiative, “*Uman, Land En Kol At*” (*Women’s Land for Peace*), across Kono, Kailahun, Port Loko, and Tonkolili districts. The project works with marginalized women, civil society, and powerholders to dismantle systemic barriers to women’s land rights and promote inclusive, peace-building processes.

Despite these efforts, women continue to face systemic exclusion due to entrenched patriarchal norms and weak enforcement of existing laws. In several districts, land committees and the National Land Commission remain non-functional, and women’s participation in land governance is often tokenistic rather than meaningful.

Issue 2: Gender Justice

Sierra Leone currently ranks **185 out of 193** countries on the UN Gender Inequality Index. The passage of the GEWE Act in 2023 was a landmark achievement; however, its implementation has been partial and inconsistent, particularly in rural areas.

Significant gaps also exist within the Act itself. Its protections are largely limited to the formal sector, excluding the vast majority of women—approximately **97%**—who work in the informal economy. As a result, provisions on equal pay, maternity protection, and non-discrimination fail to reach those most in need.

Macroeconomic policies further compound gender inequality. For example, the reduction of the Goods and Services Tax registration threshold in 2022 disproportionately affected women-owned small businesses. While advocacy efforts led to an increase in the threshold in 2024, broader fiscal and tax policies remain largely gender-blind.

The government’s Medium-Term Revenue Strategy (2023–2027) was developed without meaningful consultation with women’s rights organizations and without gender impact analysis, reinforcing existing inequalities.

Recommendations

WoNES respectfully recommends that the Government of Sierra Leone:

1. **Ensure all public policies are informed by gender-disaggregated data** and that gender impact assessments are systematically conducted, published, and integrated at every stage of fiscal and economic policymaking.

2. **Improve access to financial services and financial literacy** for women in the informal sector, including the removal of bureaucratic barriers that prevent women from accessing affordable credit and low-interest loans.
3. **Fast-track and strengthen monitoring of the implementation of the GEWE Act**, with particular focus on rural and marginalized communities.
4. **Expand the scope of the GEWE Act** to explicitly protect and promote the human rights of women working in the informal sector, including access to social protection, employment safeguards, and economic empowerment programmes.
5. Ensure meaningful—not symbolic—participation of women in land governance by enforcing mandatory women’s representation with decision-making powers in Community Development Committees and Local structures in mineral rich resource areas, in line with the Mines and Minerals Development Act, 2022.
6. Align customary practices with constitutional and international human rights obligations. Harmonize customary law with constitutional and international human rights obligations by removing legal exceptions that permit discrimination against women in land ownership and inheritance and by issuing binding guidance to traditional authorities to apply non-discrimination principles in customary land governance

Chair and distinguished delegates,

Women’s land rights are not only a gender issue—they are fundamental to peace, environmental sustainability, and inclusive development in Sierra Leone.

We urge this Review to support strong, actionable recommendations that move the country from progressive laws to real change in women’s lives.

Thank you.