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Sierra Leone: The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM); the government's position with respect to the practice; consequences of refusing to become an FGM practitioner in Bondo Society, specifically, if a daughter of a practitioner refuses to succeed her mother

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Female genital mutilation (FGM) is "widely" practised in Sierra Leone, with up to 90 percent of women in the country having undergone the procedure (US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 5; BBC 19 Oct. 2006; UN 8 Mar. 2005). It is a "deeply rooted" cultural tradition that is practised across all socio-economic classes and all ethnic groups, with the exception of the Krios [also referred to as "Creoles" (UN 14 Dec. 2006, 12.5.5; *ibid.* Mar. 2005)] (UN 14 Dec. 2006, 12.5.5; Fanthorpe Aug. 2007, 16, 19; US 1 June 2001). While Krio Muslims are said to practise FGM, Krio Christians of the Western Area reportedly do not (Fanthorpe Aug. 2007, 16).

FGM is part of an initiation ritual into women's "secret societies" and a rite of passage into adulthood (*ibid.*, 2, 17; IPS 8 Aug. 2007; UN 8 Mar. 2005; US 1 June 2001). These secret societies are known as "Sande" in the south of Sierra Leone and as "Bondo" in the north and in Freetown (Fanthorpe Aug. 2007, 2; see also IAC June 2008, 1; UN 14 Dec. 2006, 12.5.6; US 1 June 2001). A woman must be initiated into a secret society in order to be "socially accepted" and to be deemed eligible for marriage (UN 8 Mar. 2005; IAC June 2008, 2).

The age at which FGM is carried out in Sierra Leone reportedly varies by ethnic group (UN Mar. 2005). Although traditionally carried out on girls around the age of puberty (*ibid.*; Fanthorpe Aug. 2007, 17), FGM is also performed on "very young" girls and babies (IAC June 2008, 3; UN Mar. 2005). According to a 2007 Writenet report entitled *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, With Special Reference to Female Genital Mutilation*, which was commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in post-war Sierra Leone, fully grown adults have also been subjected to FGM as part of initiation into Bondo or Sande (Fanthorpe Aug. 2007, 17).

Government's position

A March 2007 report of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights states that the Sierra Leone government's response to the widespread practice of FGM in the country "is at best ambivalent in that it has neither condemned the practice nor has it put in place any legal enforcement mechanism to end or curtail it" (2 Mar. 2007, para. 2).

Sierra Leone is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which both call for an end to the practice of FGM (IPS 8 Aug. 2007). However, there is no law that specifically bans FGM in the country (*ibid.*; US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 5; UN 26 Feb. 2008, para. 3). Nevertheless, sources consulted by the Research Directorate indicate that an individual may be charged under article 4 of the 1926 *Ordinance on Prevention of Cruelty to Children* (UN 14 Dec. 2006, para. 12.5.4; see also IAC Nov. 2006), which states that

[i]f any person over the age of sixteen years, who has the custody, charge, or care of any child, wilfully assaults, ill-treats, neglects, abandons, or exposes such child or causes or procures such child to be assaulted, ill-treated, neglected, abandoned, or exposed, in a manner likely to cause such child unnecessary suffering or injury to his health (including injury to or loss of sight, or hearing, or limb or organ of the body and any mental derangement), that person shall be guilty of a misdemeanour and shall be liable-

(a) on conviction before the Supreme Court to a fine not exceeding one hundred pounds, or alternatively, or in default of payment of such fine, or in addition thereto, to imprisonment, with or without hard labour, for any period not exceeding two years; and

(b) on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding twenty-five pounds, or alternatively, or in default of payment of such fine, or in addition thereto, to imprisonment, with or without hard labour, for any period not exceeding six months. (Sierra Leone 1926)

An individual can also reportedly be charged under Section 43 of Sierra Leone's *Offence against the Person Act* of 1861, which states that "[p]ersons convicted of aggravated assault on females and boys under fourteen years of age may be imprisoned or fined and bound over to keep the peace" (UN 14 Dec. 2006, para. 12.5.3).

Despite the existence of this legislation, sources consulted by the Research Directorate indicate that in general, the police in Sierra Leone do not interfere in the practice of FGM (US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 5; UN 2 Mar. 2007, para. 11). The United States (US) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008* states that "[a]lthough police occasionally detained practitioners on accusations of forced mutilation or manslaughter, human rights workers reported that police remained hesitant to interfere in cultural practices" (25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 5). In May 2006, 14 primary school-aged girls in Eastern Sierra Leone were reportedly forcefully taken and initiated into Bondo Society through FGM without the consent of the parents (UN 2 Mar. 2007, para. 11). The police are said to have "refused to take action" when the matter was reported to them (ibid.).

With respect to the position of politicians in Sierra Leone on the issue of FGM, an 8 March 2005 UN Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) article says that they tend to remain silent on the topic (see also IPS 8 Aug. 2007). Other sources consulted indicate that some politicians have openly supported the practice (IPS 8 Aug. 2007; *Women's eNews* 7 Sept. 2007; US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 5). FGM practitioners in Sierra Leone are seen as "influential," and politicians have tried to gain their support in order to win votes (*Women's eNews* 7 Sept. 2007; IPS 19 Apr. 2005; see also IPS 8 Aug. 2007). Some politicians have reportedly sponsored circumcisions in order to gain voter support (IPS 8 Aug. 2007; *Women's eNews* 7 Sept. 2007).

In June 2007, Sierra Leone's parliament passed a child rights bill; however, a clause outlawing FGM was removed from the bill before it was passed (AI 2008; BBC 8 June 2007; UN 26 Feb. 2008, para. 10). Some believe the clause was removed because parliamentarians did not want to risk their political careers (*Women's eNews* 7 Sept. 2007; IPS 8 Aug. 2007; BBC 8 June 2007).

Consequences for refusing to become a practitioner

A 2008 study on the profile of FGM practitioners in Sierra Leone indicates that practitioners generally inherit their profession from their mother or grandmother (IAC June 2008, 14, 16). Information on the consequences for refusing to become a practitioner, or the consequences for a daughter of a practitioner who refuses to succeed her mother, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. However, the following information may be of interest.

FGM practitioners in Sierra Leone are "very powerful and influential" both politically and socially (IAC June 2008, 18; see also *Women's eNews* 7 Sept. 2007). According to the 2007 Writenet report, "people who speak out against the societies risk violent confrontation and forced initiation" (Fanthorpe Aug. 2007, 16). Other sources consulted similarly indicate that those who oppose the practice may face "hostility" (IPS 19 Apr. 2005), and be subjected to "harassment and threats" (*Women's eNews* 7 Sept. 2007). In February 2009, Bondo Society members kidnapped four women journalists in the city of Kenema [Eastern Sierra Leone] who were conducting interviews to mark the 6 February International Day of Zero Tolerance of Female Genital Mutilation (Reuters 11 Feb. 2009; RSF 10 Feb. 2009). The Bondo members stripped the journalists of their clothing and forced one of them to walk naked through Kenema (ibid.; Reuters 11 Feb. 2009). It is reported that the Bondo members believed the journalists' questioning and comments were disrespectful to their traditions (RSF 10 Feb. 2009; see also Reuters 11 Feb. 2009).

In 11 March 2009 correspondence to the Research Directorate, the Executive Director of the Center for

Safe Motherhood, Youth and Child Organization (CESMYCO), a Sierra Leonean non-governmental organization (NGO) that campaigns against FGM (IAC June 2008, 7), stated that "[t]here is no protection for women and [anti-FGM] advocates in Sierra Leone" (CESMYCO 11 Mar. 2009).

Concerning risks faced by Sierra Leonean critics living abroad, the Writenet report states the following:

There have been no reports of Sierra Leoneans living abroad suffering persecution for criticizing the societies, nor have there been any reports of individuals suffering persecution abroad for citing a fear of forced initiation or ritual participation (e.g., forced performance of FGM) in asylum claims. (Fanthorpe Aug. 2007, 16)

Further or corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

There is apparently a "small but growing" number of individuals in Sierra Leone who are speaking out against FGM (*Women's eNews* 7 Sept. 2007; see also IAC June 2008, 18). There are also reports of FGM practitioners giving up the practice after being provided with another form of employment (UN Mar. 2005; *Women's eNews* 7 Sept. 2007; see also IAC June 2008, 7). For example, a March 2005 IRIN report indicates that an anti-FGM advocate convinced more than 400 practitioners to give up performing FGM (UN Mar. 2005; see also UN 8 Mar. 2005). In August 2006, 15 "top" FGM practitioners in the town of Lunsar [west-central Sierra Leone] reportedly announced their decision to give up their profession, and burned their instruments at a rally (*Feminist Daily News Wire* 8 Aug. 2006). *Country Reports 2007* reports that in 2006, some 1,800 practitioners "agreed to 'lay down their knives'" (US 11 Mar. 2008, Sec. 5).

Since 2000, CESMYCO has worked in various districts of the country to train and sensitize communities about the harms of FGM (IAC June 2008, 7). In Kambia District [northwest Sierra Leone], the organization is said to have registered over a million women to form cooperative groups and plan a "knife-laying ceremony" (*ibid.*).

Information on whether the above-mentioned practitioners faced any consequences for "laying down their knives" could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: A visiting research fellow in the Anthropology Department of the University of Sussex, United Kingdom (UK), who is an expert on the practice of FGM in Sierra Leone did not provide information within the

time constraints of this Response. Attempts to contact the Sierra Leone Association on Women's Welfare (SLAWW) were unsuccessful.

Internet sites, including: AllAfrica; British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); Child Rights Information Network (CRIN); European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net); Factiva; Female Genital Cutting Education and Networking Project; The Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (FORWARD); Peacewomen.org; ReliefWeb; United Kingdom Home Office.

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