

PRESS STATEMENT FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Expression of Concern by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child Regarding the Ongoing Parliamentary Discussions on the Child Rights Act in the Republic of Sierra Leone

Maseru, 25 October 2024

On 25 October 2024, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC/ Committee) sent a letter of Urgent Appeal to the Republic of Sierra Leone expressing its concern over the ongoing debates in the Parliament regarding the provision prohibiting female genital mutilation (FGM) in the Child Rights Act.

The Committee notes the deliberations in the Parliament, and the pre-Legislative Hearing, raised arguments that FGM is integral to the communities' culture, and its prohibition in the Act could be perceived as an attack on traditional norms. Proposals were also made to separate FGM from the Child Rights Act. The Committee is of the view that if such perspectives persist, they could severely compromise the child protection efforts of the State Party.

Referring to Article 21(1) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Charter) and Article 5(b) of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women (Maputo Protocol), the Committee urges the Republic of Sierra Leone to retain the provision explicitly prohibiting FGM in the Child Rights Act. The ACERWC also reaffirms its Joint General Comment (GC) with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights on Female Genital Mutilation, emphasising that states parties bear the primary responsibility to eliminate FGM by enacting legislative and other measures, and must discourage *any* custom, tradition, cultural or religious practices that conflict with the Charter.

While the Committee acknowledges and appreciates the efforts that the Republic of Sierra Leone has made in recent years to advance child protection, such as the recent enactment of the Child Marriage Bill 2024, it is crucial to maintain the momentum and demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the rights and welfare of children in all legislative measures, including the Child Rights Act 2024.

As the second reading of the Act is scheduled for 31 October 2024, the ACERWC strongly urges the Republic of Sierra Leone to uphold its obligations under the Charter, the Maputo Protocol, and other relevant standards such as the Joint GC on FGM.

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child renews its commitment to supporting the Republic of Sierra Leone in its continued efforts towards the protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of children.

For further inquiries, please contact:

ACERWC Secretariat

Email: Acerwc-secretariat@africa-union.org

Nala House, Balfour Road, Maseru - Kingdom of Lesotho

Office: +266 6227 0666