

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 51/009/2006 (Public)

News Service No: 194

1 August 2006

**Embargo Date: 1 August 2006 00:01 GMT**

## **Sierra Leone: Women need rights and protection**

Amnesty International today launched a campaign to highlight the problems faced by women in Sierra Leone in accessing the justice system. Every day, women in rural Sierra Leone face discrimination and violence at the hands of the men in their homes and communities. When they try to access justice to address such abuses, they are often faced with further abuse and violence -- often as a result of local chiefs exceeding their legal authority and imposing punishments against women based on customary law.

Campaign participants will include both Amnesty International's worldwide membership as well as Sierra Leonean activists, through an in-country campaign led by Amnesty International's section in Sierra Leone.

"The problem for women in Sierra Leone stems from both the law itself -- which is inherently discriminatory in many areas -- and the fact that local chiefs are making grossly discriminatory rulings in cases they have no authority to preside over -- including in cases involving violence against women," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme. "Chiefs often illegally impose fines or imprison women based on their interpretation of customary law -- and the government of Sierra Leone has done little to curtail these practices"

Sierra Leonean customary law forms part of the common law, but is largely unwritten. It is defined in the constitution as "the rules of law which by custom are applicable to particular communities in Sierra Leone." Customary law regulates upon matters which impact upon women the most including marriage, inheritance, divorce, and property.

Under Sierra Leonean customary law, women's status in society is equal to that of a minor.

In cases of sexual and gender-based violence, local chiefs are usually the first point of contact outside the family for women. Chiefs often discourage women from taking their complaints outside the family.

One woman in Makeni town, Bombali district described to Amnesty International how, having been widowed and then remarried, she had been subjected to sexual violence by her husband. She and her four children were economically dependent on her husband. "I really did not know what to do. My family is not around as most died in the war and everyone else in the community, including the Chief, is advising me to sit tight. They warned me not to go to the police about my husband raping me or not paying for the children, they would just lock him up and then there would be no chance that he would pay."

Amnesty International also found that chiefs often illegally judged cases related to civil status, such as those involving marriage and divorce, which normally fall under the jurisdiction of the local or magistrates courts within Sierra Leone's legal system.

Amnesty International called on the government to accelerate the law reform process that began in 2003 and amend draft laws on marriage, inheritance, sexual offences and succession.

The organization also called on the government to be more involved in communities, including by monitoring the actions of chiefs and local court officials and taking action to stop illegal and discriminatory rulings against women.

Amnesty International also recommended the provision of paralegal and legal aid support to women in rural areas, saying that such services would have a major impact on women's lives as well as play a role in supporting and strengthening Sierra Leone's judicial system.

### **Background**

On the day of the release of Amnesty International's most recent report on violence against women in Sierra Leone on 17 May 2006, women and men from all over Sierra Leone came together to march against the discrimination and violence that women face in their country. The report was officially presented to Sierra Leone's Minister of Justice for his action and attention. Footage of these events can be found at <http://news.amnesty.org/pages/sle-240506-avarchives-eng>

To see the the May 2006 report, *Women face human rights abuses in the informal justice sector*, please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR510022006>

To see the December 2005 report *No one to turn to: Women's lack of access to justice in Sierra Leone*, please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR510112005>

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