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Sierra Leone: Gender laws mean greater rights and protection for women

Last week's passage of a law outlawing domestic violence and establishing the rights of women when it comes to inheritance and the registration of customary marriages is an important step forward in improving the status of women -- particularly rural women -- and ensuring greater protection for women and girls against violence in the home and community across Sierra Leone.

The domestic violence law gives family support units in the police the necessary tools to either mediate disputes or to support women who decide to take criminal and civil action when their rights are violated.

Registering customary marriages provides women with the legal right to own property and other rights in marriage, making this a great step forward for rural women in particular.

The inheritance law ensures that throughout Sierra Leone women have access to the property they are rightfully entitled to when their husband dies, without interference from extended family members.

"The passage of these bills shows that the government of Sierra Leone is taking a strong stand in support of its women and children. Other countries in Africa should follow this example," said Brima Sherif, the Director of Amnesty International in Sierra Leone who helped lead the campaign that contributed to the successful adoption of these bills.

"The greatest challenge now will be to ensure that women know these rights, exercise them and that they are enforced," said Brima Sherif.

A child rights bill was also passed, but failed to outlaw the practice of female genital mutilation.

"We hope that the government of Sierra Leone will build on last week's successes and quickly move towards outlawing the harmful practice of female genital mutilation, which has caused and still continues to cause so much pain and suffering for the girls of Sierra Leone," said Brima Sherif.

Background

In the last few months, there has been mounting pressure on the parliament of Sierra Leone to pass bills related to the rights of women and children. In a statement made on the 23 March 2007, President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah pledged to ensure that the bills would be fast-tracked to Parliament.

Further pressure by women's organizations and civil society both inside and outside Sierra Leone included a text message campaign by Amnesty International members worldwide.

Public Document

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