

PRESS RELEASE: 8 July 2025

In a Monumental Win for Women and Girls, ECOWAS Court Rules Sierra Leone Violated Rights by Failing to Criminalise FGM

In a groundbreaking ruling, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice has found the Government of Sierra Leone in violation of women's and girls' rights for failing to explicitly criminalise Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

The Court declared FGM as *“one of the worst forms of violence against women”*, and that intentionally inflicted, *“it meets the threshold for torture”*. It ruled that the state's failure to act breaches the Maputo Protocol, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and other international human rights obligations that require states to outlaw harmful practices, specifically FGM. Thus, Sierra Leone's inaction has caused grave physical, psychological, and social harm.

This landmark decision, delivered by a panel of judges representing the 12 ECOWAS Member States, holds Sierra Leone accountable — and sets a monumental legal precedent for the protection of women and girls across the region.

The lawsuit was brought by Kadija, a survivor, 31 movement partners from The Forum Against Harmful Practices, and Purposeful. It called into international attention the case of a woman who was forcibly subjected to FGM in 2016 and has been seeking justice ever since.

The judgment now mandates Sierra Leone to take immediate legislative measures to prohibit FGM, to promptly and effectively investigate and prosecute perpetrators of the FGM committed against the survivor, and to provide redress to the survivor, including financial compensation of \$30,000 US Dollars, payable in Leones, to the survivor for the violations of her rights.

“This is a hard-won victory that has been ten years coming. While we celebrate today, this is for all girls and women, and the fight continues,” said Kadija.

“This historic win is not only for the survivor, and tenacity and her courage, along with the first responders, but for the 230 million women and girls alive today who have been subjected to the violence of FGM. Inaction is not an option. Sierra Leone has a duty to fully protect our women and girls,” said Dr Ramatu Bangura, Co-CEO, Purposeful.

“The ruling goes well beyond a legal win - it is a significant moral victory and a moment of reckoning for our country that now has the responsibility to eliminate this violence that has scarred generations of women and girls,” said Rugiatu Neneh Koroma, Chairperson of the Forum Against Harmful Practices (FAHP).

The judgment is timely as Sierra Leone's women and girls now wait for the Child Rights Amendment Act to be sent back to Parliament for the enactment of laws that fully protect and uphold their human

rights. And the world now watches Sierra Leone and ECOWAS for the implementation of this judgment to bring impunity out of the shadows, once and for all.

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Editors Notes

About the Forum Against Harmful Practices (FAHP)

FAHP is a movement of national and international organisations working towards ending Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) in Sierra Leone. It was established in 2014 to respond to the increasing need for collaborative work among organisations working towards the reduction and ultimate eradication of Harmful Practices. These practices include but are not limited to child/forced marriage and FGM/C. FAHP has a membership of 31 organisations working in the five regions of Sierra Leone and has representation in all districts.

About Purposeful

Headquartered in Sierra Leone, we are the world's first Africa-rooted hub resourcing girls and young people in over 120 countries. We centre their visions, realities, power - and liberation - and in their activism, our world is re-imagined. Across the globe, girls and young feminists are organising, pushing back, and demanding a future of justice, dignity, and joy. We hold space for girls and young feminists to build a base for their shared struggles, and we disrupt spaces where they have been shut out, we amplify girls' voices to make sure they are heard in all realms of power, we centre feminist education as the bedrock of social justice, and we move money directly into their hands, and where they are, so that power and money is returned at scale to those whom it has always really belonged.

About the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA)

IHRDA is a Pan-African non-governmental organisation created in 1998 and based in The Gambia. IHRDA works to promote human rights in Africa and improve the effectiveness of the African human rights system. IHRDA envisages an African continent where all have access to justice via national, African and international human rights mechanisms. IHRDA's work can be summarised in three words: defend, educate, and inform. IHRDA engages in legal advocacy via pro-bono strategic litigation and has massive experience litigating before regional human rights mechanisms. It diversifies the scope of its efforts to ensure the effective implementation of decisions and recommendations. IHRDA also plays a lead role in skills development for State and non-State actors on the use of international legal instruments and mechanisms for the promotion and protection of human rights.