

# Sierra Leone

## MODERATE ADVANCEMENT

In 2024, Sierra Leone made moderate advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The government enacted the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, which establishes age 18 as the minimum age for marriage without exception and empowers designated officials to raise awareness about the risks of child marriage, which include reduced educational attainment and increased risk of child labor for both boys and girls. Criminal enforcement officials received specialized trainings on the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act and the National Referral Mechanism for victim identification and protection. The multi-stakeholder Anti-Trafficking in Persons Task Force adopted a new National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children for 2024–2028. The government also held stakeholder engagements in child-trafficking and child labor hotspots, educating community members about anti-trafficking laws, the National Referral Mechanism and how to use it, and best practices for victim identification, referral, assistance, and protection. Finally, authorities expanded services to two additional shelters for trafficking victims outside the capital, in the districts of Kambia and Bo. Although the government made meaningful efforts in all relevant areas during the reporting period, the education law does not provide free basic education, which does not meet international standards, and enforcement authorities did not impose any penalties on or obtain any convictions of individuals or entities subjecting children to any of the worst forms of child labor. Gaps also remain in interagency coordination and data sharing on child labor, and Sierra Leone lacks policies to address all relevant worst forms of child labor, including commercial sexual exploitation, mining, and quarrying.

## PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

Statistics on Children’s Work and Education		
Children	Age	Percent and Population
Working	5 to 14	35.1% (Unavailable)
Hazardous Work by Children	15 to 17	Unavailable
Attending School	5 to 14	78.2%
Combining Work and School	7 to 14	32.2%

Children in Sierra Leone are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking, and forced labor in mining. Children also engage in dangerous tasks in quarrying stone and fishing.

Overview of Children’s Work by Sector and Activity	
Agriculture	Working in agriculture, including cultivating palm fruit, cocoa, and coffee, and processing harvested produce. Fishing,† including artisanal fishing. Forestry, including working in logging.
Industry	Mining,† including for diamonds. Quarrying† and crushing stone, including granite, and shoveling gravel. Construction, including housing construction and serving as laborers for contractors. Working in manufacturing.†
Services	Scavenging scrap metals and recyclable materials from dumpsites. Domestic work and street work, including begging, trading, and selling goods. Porterage, including carrying heavy loads.† Working as apprentices, including in auto repair shops, and on transportation vehicles, including minibuses and motorbike taxis.
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡	Forced begging. Forced domestic work. Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking. Forced labor in street hawking, quarrying, mining (including for alluvial diamonds), rock breaking, agriculture, scavenging for scrap metal, and motorbike taxi driving. Use in illicit activities, including the cultivation and trafficking of drugs.

† Determined by national law or regulation as hazardous and, as such, relevant to Article 3(d) of ILO C. 182.

‡ Child labor understood as the worst forms of child labor *per se* under Article 3(a)–(c) of ILO C. 182.

## SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ELIMINATE CHILD LABOR

The suggested government actions below would close gaps USDOL has identified in Sierra Leone's implementation of its international commitments to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.

Area	Suggested Action
<b>Legal Framework</b>	Ensure that the light work provisions in the Child Rights Act and the Employment Act specify the number of hours, activities, and conditions in which light work may be undertaken.
	Ensure that hazardous work occupations prohibited for children are comprehensive, including by prohibiting scavenging at dumpsites.
	Ensure that free basic public education is guaranteed by law for all children in Sierra Leone.
<b>Enforcement</b>	Provide the labor inspectorate with regular training and sufficient financial, material, and human resources to adequately enforce child labor laws, including in the informal sector, aiming to increase the number of labor inspectors from 28 to at least 70 to ensure adequate coverage of the labor force of approximately 2.8 million people.
	Collect and publish complete information on labor law enforcement efforts, including the number and type of inspections conducted, the number of violations found, and the penalties imposed and collected.
	Impose penalties on individuals or entities employing children against the law, including in the informal sector and in hazardous activities such as mining.
	Ensure that unannounced inspections are conducted, and cease the practice of informing employers ahead of time.
	Ensure that complaint mechanisms for the public to report suspected cases of child labor and the worst forms of child labor are operational and well known.
	Institutionalize training for criminal law enforcement personnel, including police, investigators, prosecutors, judges, and chiefs, to ensure that worst forms of child labor violations are adequately investigated and prosecuted.
	Improve criminal law enforcement data collection and sharing between the Sierra Leone Police, the Director of Public Prosecution, and border and immigration authorities to better track and prosecute the worst forms of child labor crimes, including forced domestic labor, forced begging, and commercial sexual exploitation.
	Increase efforts to prosecute and convict perpetrators of the worst forms of child labor, including forced begging, other forms of forced child labor, and commercial sexual exploitation, to hold offenders accountable, build trust in the judicial system, and serve as a deterrent to future offenders.
<b>Coordination</b>	Ensure that village-level and chiefdom-level Child Welfare Committees are established and operational in all districts.
	Improve interagency coordination to ensure that child labor violations identified by any stakeholder across government and civil society are properly monitored and victims are referred to appropriate services.
<b>Government Policies</b>	Adopt policies to address the worst forms of child labor in all relevant sectors, including mining, quarrying, and commercial sexual exploitation.
	Implement actions detailed in the National Action Plan for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor, and send periodic reports to the Ministry of Labor on activities and outcomes.
<b>Social Programs</b>	Remove barriers to education by reducing school-related costs, providing transportation to schools in rural areas, increasing the number of teachers and secondary schools, improving facilities for students with disabilities, and eliminating abuse, including sexual and other violence perpetrated by teachers and other students.
	Increase the availability of and funding for shelters and safe houses for survivors of forced labor and children removed from street work.
	Institute programs to address child labor in agriculture, domestic work, and street work.
	Create public outreach and education campaigns to provide youth and their families with more information on their rights, responsibilities, and risks in relation to <i>men pikin</i> (foster care) arrangements.

## CHILDREN AT HIGHER RISK

Children in *men pikin* arrangements face heightened risk of labor exploitation in Sierra Leone. *Men pikin* is a Krio term for foster care, in which family members send children to relatives in urban areas with promises of better educational opportunities. However, some children are instead subjected to forced labor by their host families. Unhoused children and children living with disabilities also face increased risk of exploitation in street begging. In addition, children sent to Koranic schools face heightened risks of labor trafficking.

## BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS

Over the past several years, the government has implemented significant initiatives to make education free through secondary school and improve access for girls and children with disabilities. While primary enrollment has increased, barriers to access remain, including indirect costs (food, uniforms, supplies), illegitimate fees charged by schools, a lack of teachers and secondary schools, insufficient transportation for rural students, a lack of adequate facilities and teachers for children with disabilities, and violence (both physical and sexual) perpetrated by teachers and other students.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Sierra Leone has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor. However, Sierra Leone's laws do not meet international standards on light work, the identification of all relevant hazardous activities, or the guarantee of free basic public education.

Laws and Regulations on Child Labor			
Standard	Age	Meets International Standards	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	15	✓	Sections 125, 129, and 131 of the Child Rights Act; Section 95 of the Employment Act
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	18	✓	Sections 126, 128, and 131 of the Child Rights Act; Section 175 of the Mines and Minerals Development Act
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children		✓	Sections 128 and 131 of the Child Rights Act
Prohibition of Slavery, Debt Bondage, and Forced Labor		✓	Sections 1 and 12–14 of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act; Section 19 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone
Prohibition of Child Trafficking		✓	Sections 1, 12–14, and 17 of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children		✓	Sections 1, 12–14, and 17–19 of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act; Sections 26–34 of the 2012 Sexual Offenses Act
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities		✓	Sections 7 and 13 of the National Drugs Control Act
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	18	✓	Section 28 of the Child Rights Act
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military		✓*	Section 28 of the Child Rights Act
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups		✓	Sections 1 and 12 of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act

Laws and Regulations on Child Labor			
Standard	Age	Meets International Standards	Legislation
Compulsory Education Age	15	✓	Section 125 of the Child Rights Act; Section 24 of the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act
Free Public Education		X	Sections 1 and 22(2) of the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act

\* Country has no conscription

On July 1, 2024, the government enacted the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, after extensive engagement by civil society and support from the First Lady of Sierra Leone. The law establishes age 18 as the minimum age for marriage without exception and extends the same prohibition to cohabitation with a child. It empowers dedicated Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs officials to sensitize communities about the risks of child marriage, which include, among others, reduced educational attainment for both boys and girls. Both the current Child Rights Act and the draft Child Rights Act 2024 set the minimum age for light work at age 13, but they do not limit the number of hours per week for light work, determine the activities in which light work may be permitted, or specify the conditions in which light work may be undertaken, which is not in compliance with international standards. In addition, the list of hazardous occupations prohibited for children does not cover scavenging at dumpsites, an activity for which there is evidence that children in Sierra Leone are exposed to hazardous medical waste. Finally, the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act of 2023 does not guarantee free basic education.

## ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR

In 2024, labor and criminal law enforcement agencies in Sierra Leone took actions to address child labor. However, lack of follow-through on the part of enforcement officials to impose penalties for violations of civil and criminal child labor laws limited the government's impact in reducing the incidence of child labor.

Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement
<b>Ministry of Employment, Labor and Social Security (MELSS):</b> Through its Occupational Safety and Health/Child Labor Unit, formulates, implements, and monitors compliance with child labor regulations. Enforces labor laws in the formal sector via its District Labor Officers. Local-level District Councils handle enforcement of child labor laws in the informal sector. Currently working to put in place a Labor Market Information System intended to serve as an online labor violation information hub and complaint mechanism. Insufficient training and allocation of financial, human, and material resources hindered its efforts to enforce child labor laws.
<b>Sierra Leone Police:</b> Investigate child labor crimes through their Family Support Unit. Through the Transnational Organized Crime Unit, enforce human trafficking laws and provide statistical data and general information on cases of human trafficking. Refer cases for legal advice and prosecution to the Ministry of Justice's Director of Public Prosecution. Work with the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs to identify cases and coordinate services for victims. However, even when police forces have identified suspected perpetrators of child labor crimes, gaps in coordination with and follow-through by investigators and prosecutors have prevented successful prosecution of the alleged crimes.

Enforcement Mechanisms and Efforts	
Has a Labor Inspectorate	Yes
Able to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes
Routinely Conducted Worksite Inspections	Yes
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes
Has a Complaint Mechanism	Yes
Imposed Penalties for Child Labor Violations	No
Conducted Criminal Investigations for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	Yes
Imposed Penalties for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	No

In 2024, **28** labor inspectors conducted **340** worksite inspections, finding an **unknown** number of child labor violations. The government conducted **14**† investigations into suspected worst forms of child labor crimes, initiated an **unknown**‡ number of prosecutions, and convicted **0**‡ perpetrators.

‡ Data are for the period January to September 2024.

COORDINATION, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS

Sierra Leone established a mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor at the national level. However, gaps remain in coordination at the village and chiefdom levels.

Key Mechanism to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor

**National Technical Steering Committee on Child Labor:** Coordinates efforts to address child labor. Led by MELSS, with representatives from the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, the National Commission for Children, the Sierra Leone Police Family Support Unit, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, international organizations, and civil society organizations. Meets quarterly to advise on policies related to child labor. In 2024, the steering committee advised the government to empower and fund child labor programs and enforcement.

Sierra Leone established policies related to child labor. However, these policies do not cover all worst forms of child labor in the country, including in mining, quarrying, and commercial sexual exploitation.

Key Policies Related to Child Labor

**National Action Plan for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor, Including Child Trafficking (2022–2026):** Outlines actions to be taken to close gaps in national and community-level legal frameworks, expand access to education, increase social protection for the most vulnerable households, strengthen systems and coordination across the country, and provide services to victims and survivors. However, insufficient financial and human resources limited the government's ability to implement the action plan.

**National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children 2024–2028:**\* Developed by the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Task Force Secretariat with the support of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and officially launched in July 2024. Details specific actions to be taken to meet objectives in seven strategic areas: public awareness raising, stakeholder capacity building, livelihood and income support for vulnerable populations, victim services, criminal investigations, prosecutions and convictions, and data collection for policy formulation and programming. Includes a monitoring framework to support stakeholders in tracking progress toward targets. During the reporting period, community awareness-raising activities were conducted in human trafficking hotspots, including Waterloo, and new communications channels were created on social media to share anti-trafficking information with the public.

**National Migration Policy:** Rights-centered policy established by the government with support from the EU, IOM, and the United States Department of State. Makes specific reference to trafficking survivors, asylum seekers, and children. Also seeks to increase public awareness of human trafficking and build the capacity of law enforcement personnel to detect and prevent trafficking, especially child trafficking. Over several weeks in April, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Secretariat and IOM held stakeholder engagements in key border districts of Kono, educating community members about the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Act, the National Referral Mechanism and how to use it, and best practices for victim identification, referral, assistance, and protection.

\* Policy was approved during the reporting period.  
† The government had other policies that may have addressed child labor issues or had an impact on child labor.

Sierra Leone funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor. However, these social programs are inadequate to address child labor in all sectors across the country in which child labor has been identified, including agriculture, domestic work, and street vending.

### Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor

**Child Trafficking Shelters:**<sup>‡</sup> Provide accommodation and care to survivors of forced labor and human trafficking, including mental health services, trauma-informed care, family tracing, and reintegration assistance. In addition to funding the Freetown shelter operated by World Hope International, in 2024 the government expanded services to a shelter in Kambia district and another in Bo district, each with capacity for approximately 30 people, many of whom are children. However, shelter space remained insufficient to accommodate all victims in need, especially male victims.

**Free Quality School Education Program:**<sup>‡</sup> A Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education program intended to cover the costs of school tuition and fees and provide meals, textbooks, and some teaching materials in remote communities. Allocates over 20 percent of the country's budget to education. During the reporting period, the government trained pre-primary and early-grade teachers and reintegrated 3,079 out-of-school adolescent girls into formal education with support from UN agencies, and with funding from the World Bank it developed a training program for 8,037 primary school teachers focused on student literacy. However, the subsidies paid to government and government-assisted schools through this program reportedly do not cover all costs, and some families are still required to pay fees.

**School Feeding Program:**<sup>‡</sup> Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security program that supplies a combination of home-grown crops and partner-donated foods to schools. Aims to provide free, nutritious meals to schoolchildren to increase school attendance and improve academic performance. In 2024, reached over 500,000 students across the country.

<sup>‡</sup> Program is funded by the Government of Sierra Leone.

<sup>†</sup> The government had other social programs that may have included the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor.

For references, please visit [dol.gov/ChildLaborReports](https://dol.gov/ChildLaborReports)