



## *International Advocacy Reports and Statements*

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### **Universal Periodic Review – Eleventh Session SINGAPORE, SIERRA LEONE, SAMOA May 2011, Geneva**

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a review process of the human rights records of all 192 UN Member States once every four years. The ultimate aim of this mechanism is to improve the human rights situation in all countries and address human rights violations wherever they occur.

#### **SINGAPORE**

*by Nina Joyce, IFWU volunteer*

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#### ***Qualified support for Human Rights***

Singapore stresses **social harmony** above all other values and will “accept some limits to freedoms in order to maintain harmony”. Ambassador-at-large Mr Ong Keng Yong stressed an “absolute need” to keep the lid on ethnic and religious tensions. Singapore takes its human rights treaty obligations very seriously and will only sign on to obligations that it intends to meet fully.

**Meritocracy** is an “economic imperative” as the country’s only resource are its people. “Women have the same educational, employment and career development opportunities as men. Every Singaporean has equal access to schools, healthcare and jobs.”

Delegates applauded Singapore’s achievements in literacy, healthcare, housing and gender empowerment. Literacy stands at 96% and Singapore ranks 27<sup>th</sup> in Human Development Index published by UNDP. More notably, Singapore ranks 16<sup>th</sup> in the world in gender empowerment.

#### ***Treatment and Protection of Foreign Workers***

India said that one third of Singapore’s workforce is migrant. Delegates called for a greater effort to protect the safety and dignity of its migrant and domestic workers.

Recommendations : 1) Clarify and enforce wages and working hours. 2) Curb excessive agency fees. 3) Provide proper legal channels to foreign workers to prevent their exploitation. 4) Institute a mandatory day off per week. 5) Extend legal protection benefits enjoyed by Singaporean workers to include domestic workers. 6) Cooperate with countries of origin of migrant workers in order to protect them. 7) Recommend education of migrant workers in their own language on their rights and legislation.

Singapore acknowledged the vulnerability of migrant and domestic workers and said it takes their wellbeing “very seriously”. Singapore is “committed to protecting the wellbeing of our labour force, both citizens and migrants, as our labour force is our only resource”.

Examples : 1) Employers undergo compulsory training on their obligations toward migrant workers. 2) Workers are interviewed randomly by the government. 3) The fine for an offence against a migrant worker is 1.5 times that for an offence against a Singaporean.

#### ***Trafficking***

Singapore is an attractive destination for traffickers of people and drugs. Its efforts to fight child sex tourism were commended.

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Recommendations : 1) Ratify the Palermo Protocol. 2) Strengthen laws against trafficking. 3) Protect victims by not treating them as offenders. Have suitable structures to host them during trial.

### ***Education***

With literacy at 96%, Singapore has achieved both widespread access to education and a world class standard. Success in education is driven by commitment to meritocracy and education is a “fundamental investment in the wellbeing of our people,” said the government.

Recommendations : 1) Improve education and housing for low-income citizens.

### ***Other Recommendations***

- 1) Abolish marital rape in all marriages. Singapore responded that the issue is under review for possible changes to the penal code.
- 2) Institute non-custodial measures for women prisoners. Follow UN rules for the treatment of women prisoners. Provide support for women prisoners with HIV/AIDS.
- 3) Ensure representation of women in the public and private sectors. Increase participation of women in decision-making process in both public and private sectors.

## **SIERRA LEONE**

*by Nina Joyce, IFWU volunteer*

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### ***Context of the report***

In evaluating the accomplishments and challenges of Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone’s Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Mr Franklyn Bai Kargbo said that it is important to take into account the nation’s recent eleven-year civil war. While war raged, “mass rape, forced marriage and forced recruitment were the order of the day. Under the circumstances it was impossible to honor our human rights obligations,” said Mr Kargbo.

Even though Sierra Leone is now at peace, poverty “hampers full enjoyment of human rights,” said the Bangladesh delegate. “Poverty and food shortages are the biggest threat to peace.”

Sierra Leone’s government has put its human rights review on hold until after elections in 2012, but will in the meanwhile pass laws. For example, legislation will require 30 per cent representation of women in public positions. This will be put in place before the elections.

Sierra Leone’s greatest human rights challenges remain the protection and promotion of women and girls. Traditions such as early marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) remain deep-rooted cultural practices. Mr Kargbo said that the government intends to abolish these practices, i.e. age of consent at 18 for all of these practices, and has launched a “massive sensitization project” on FGM.

### ***Violence against women and customary law***

Delegates repeatedly expressed concern over high levels of violence against women, particularly **FGM**, which threatens the lives of the 90% of women subjected to it. Several delegates recommended the prohibition and criminalization of FGM regardless of consent. Mr Kargbo responded that “as a government we are committed to the elimination of the practice” and that the government needs to redouble its efforts.

In cases of **rape and domestic violence**, a culture of impunity prevails alongside a persistently high incidence of gender related crime. Impunity is fostered by a) women’s lack of access to police, b) exorbitant fees charged by medical officers for the cost of a medical report (required to report and

prosecute domestic violence), c) pressure to make out of court settlements, d) lack of prosecution capacity, e) poor investigations, and f) interference by traditional leaders in judicial matters.

Recommendations : 1) Awareness raising and training of police, officials and medical personnel to handle violence against women. In particular, train police to deal with sexual violence cases. 2) Provide free medical examination report and legal assistance to women.

Mr Kargbo responded that there is extensive publicity regarding negative effects of gender related violence.

### ***Customary and Constitutional Law***

Structural and institutional inequality persists for women in Sierra Leone and the country's legislation contains discrimination. At the level of local courts, customary law often discriminates against women.

In the workplace, discrimination jeopardizes women's future job opportunities. Sexual harassment in the workplace is problematic, particularly because sexual harassment is not prohibited, therefore women cannot pursue claims in court.

Recommendations : 1) Roll back discriminatory laws, practices and traditions which entrench gender inequality. 2) Provide human rights training to administrators at the local court level. 3) Launch a national gender equality plan. 4) Full application of CEDAW protocols. 4) Ensure that women are represented in political and active life. 5) Remove obstacles to women's effective access to justice, particularly in rural areas. 6) Promote legal assistance and awareness of rights.

### ***Maternal and infant mortality***

Sierra Leone has the world's highest rate of maternal and child mortality. The lifetime risk of a woman dying from pregnancy or childbirth complications is one in eight. To tackle this, last year the government instituted its Free Health Care policy. This provides free healthcare for pregnant women, nursing mothers and children under the age of five.

Sierra Leone was roundly commended for its Free Health Care policy, launched in spite of severe financial constraints and a brain drain of doctors and medical personnel. However more must be done to address the actual causes of maternal mortality: FGM, early marriage, teenage pregnancies, unsafe abortions, lack of access to family planning or reproductive health services.

### ***Civil conflict***

Sierra Leone saw systematic abuse of women and girls during the civil conflict and gender-based violence continues. Delegates commended Sierra Leone for issuing a presidential apology to women and girls for their suffering during the civil war.

### ***Education***

Over 50% of Sierra Leone's women are illiterate, a major factor impeding their participation in development. The government will provide free primary education for all by 2015. Current teacher pupil ratio is 1:50 and the school environment is not conducive to learning due to inadequate infrastructure, harmful discipline techniques, low teacher moral and inappropriate teaching materials and methods. Pregnant girls are often expelled from schools.

Recommendation : 1) Increase budget to 20% to investigate and improve teaching environment and methods. 2) Human rights education programmes in schools. 3) Use education to promote changes in attitudes towards sexual relations and practices.

It was the first time, the Working Group of the Human Rights Council undertook the Universal Periodic Review of the State of Samoa. The country was represented by a delegation headed by Deputy Prime Minister Hon. Fonotoe Pierre Lauofo. In his presentation, he said that Samoa's priorities are as follow:

a) improving the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of the people of Samoa; b) legislative reviews; c) further promote public awareness and advocacy on fundamental human rights including the rights of children and women; d) ratification of core international human rights instruments and reporting obligations.

***Women***

Samoa was questioned on the following topics: decriminalization of abortion; traditional attitudes towards domestic violence and gender discrimination as well as the protection of these victims; marital rape; possibility to change the legal status of patrilineal inheritance which prevents women from having an equal right to ownership and enjoyment of property; representation of women in the Parliament and equal participation in the political sphere.

***Children***

The most important question concerned child labor (domestic work and street vendors) and what measures could be taken by the government to ensure that the rights of the child are protected.

Other items were discussed for instance to provide training of the police force on human rights and the establishment of a national human rights institution.

Samoa was also asked to sign and ratify all Human Rights instruments still pending.

The next step of the review will be the outcome document prepared by the working group which has to be adopted first by the working group and then ratified during a plenary session of the Human Rights Council. The State has then four years to work on the implementation of the accepted items.