

# Libéria : les sociétés secrètes

Renseignement de l'analyse-pays de l'OSAR

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## **Mentions légales**

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Ce rapport repose sur des renseignements d'expert-e-s et sur les propres recherches de l'Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés (OSAR). Conformément aux standards COI, l'OSAR fonde ses recherches sur des sources accessibles publiquement. Lorsque les informations obtenues dans le temps imparti sont insuffisantes, elle fait appel à des expert-e-s. L'OSAR documente ses sources de manière transparente et traçable, mais peut toutefois décider de les anonymiser, afin de garantir la protection de ses contacts.

# 1 Introduction

Le présent document a été rédigé par l'analyse-pays de l'Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés (OSAR) à la suite d'une demande qui lui a été adressée. Il se penche sur les questions suivantes :

## Questions :

1. De quelles informations dispose-t-on sur les sociétés secrètes, en particulier la société Poro et la société Sande, au Libéria ?
2. Les membres sont-ils parfois recrutés de force ?
3. Les personnes qui quittent ces sociétés ou les critiquent courent-elles un risque de subir des discriminations ou des violences ?
4. Les femmes qui refusent les initiations pour éviter les mutilations génitales féminines peuvent-elles obtenir une protection de la police ?
5. L'État offre-t-il une quelconque protection aux personnes recrutées de force ou à celles qui sont menacées par ces sociétés ?

L'analyse-pays de l'OSAR observe les développements au Libéria depuis plusieurs années.<sup>1</sup> Sur la base de ses propres recherches ainsi que de renseignements transmis par des expert-e-s externes, elle apporte les réponses suivantes aux questions ci-dessus.

## 2 Les sociétés secrètes au Liberia

**Les sociétés secrètes Poro (pour les hommes) et Sande (pour les femmes) sont présentes dans la plupart des régions du pays.** Dans sa réponse à une requête sur la société secrète Sande au Libéria, la *Commission de l'immigration et du statut de réfugié du Canada* (IRB) indique sur la base de plusieurs sources que Sande est une société secrète féminine et que Poro est son équivalent masculin. Ces deux sociétés secrètes sont présentes dans le nord et l'ouest du pays, ainsi que dans le centre, mais qu'elles n'ont pas ou peu de présence dans le sud-est. Il existerait d'autres sociétés secrètes dans le pays, mais ces dernières ne soumettent pas les filles à des mutilations génitales féminines (MGF) (IRB, 22 février 2017). Dans son dernier rapport sur les libertés religieuses au Libéria, le *Département d'État américain* (USDOS) indique que les sociétés traditionnelles Poro (pour les hommes) et Sande (pour les femmes), qui sont souvent appelées « écoles de brousse » ou « sociétés secrètes » sont présentes dans les régions du nord, de l'ouest et du centre du pays. Celles-ci combinent des pratiques religieuses et culturelles traditionnelles (USDOS, 30 juin 2024).

**Considérées comme « gardiennes de la culture » et garantes de « l'harmonie communautaire », les sociétés secrètes jouent un rôle important dans la transmission des connaissances traditionnelles. Les activités et pratiques des sociétés secrètes ont un**

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<sup>1</sup> [www.osar.ch/publications/rapports-sur-les-pays-dorigine](http://www.osar.ch/publications/rapports-sur-les-pays-dorigine)

**caractère sacré.** Dans sa réponse à une requête sur la société secrète Poro, l'Agence de l'Union européenne pour l'asile (EUAA) indique que, selon un rapport de 2015 de la *Mission des Nations unies au Libéria* (MINUL), les sociétés Poro et Sande sont considérées comme « les gardiens de confiance de la culture dans une grande partie du Libéria et sont présentes dans la région depuis des siècles ». Ces sociétés sont considérées comme inculquant des valeurs et des compétences propices à « l'harmonie communautaire ». Elles initient les enfants à l'âge adulte. Citant le *Haut-Commissariat aux droits de l'homme* (HCDH), l'EUAA indique qu'en l'absence de structures éducatives, ces sociétés ont fourni une formation aux jeunes adultes et ont joué un rôle de transmission des connaissances traditionnelles. L'EUAA cite également des informations du journal *New Dawn*, selon lequel ces sociétés « gèrent des écoles de brousse où des filles et des garçons âgés de trois à cinq ans reçoivent un enseignement sur les questions de la vie, y compris des leçons de guerre ». Parmi les leçons enseignées aux garçons figurent notamment la chasse, l'agriculture, les soins et la défense de la famille. Pour les filles, les leçons incluent la cuisine, les soins aux futurs maris, aux bébés et aux membres de la famille (EUAA, 28 mai 2024). Selon l'EUAA, qui cite le rapport de 2015 de la MINUL, les pratiques et les activités des sociétés secrètes, sont considérées comme sacrées et les membres ne peuvent pas en discuter ouvertement. L'observation de ces pratiques par des non-membres est considérée comme une « transgression du caractère sacré de ces pratiques » (EUAA, 28 mai 2024).

**Pratiques traditionnelles néfastes, y compris meurtres rituels et mutilations génitales féminines (MGF).** Selon USDOS, qui se base sur des informations d'organisations de défense des droits humains, les sociétés secrètes traditionnelles, telle que la société Sande, sont responsables de pratiques traditionnelles néfastes, y compris de la sorcellerie, des meurtres rituels, ainsi que d'autres pratiques violentes telles que les MGF (USDOS, 2 juin 2022). Des sources consultées par l'EUAA confirment que l'initiation des femmes par la société Sande inclut les MGF (EUAA, 28 mai 2024).

**Des sociétés secrètes puissantes et influentes, même au niveau gouvernemental.** Selon les sources consultées par l'IRB, les sociétés Poro et Sande sont puissantes et influentes et sont tenues en haute estime par la société, notamment en raison du rôle qu'elles jouent dans la transmission des valeurs et des compétences. Ces sociétés peuvent également régler des différends dans les communautés et condamner les personnes qui ont enfreint les normes sociales. Les décisions importantes du village seraient prises par les sociétés secrètes. Appartenir à une société secrète serait une condition pour exercer le pouvoir dans sa communauté (IRB, 22 février 2017). Selon la MINUL, citée par l'IRB, le chef Poro Zoe dirige le *Conseil national des chefs et des anciens* (NCCE) qui est l'organe représentatif des autorités traditionnelles au Libéria. Le NCCE a une grande influence et est consulté par le gouvernement sur toutes les questions liées à la société. Son mandat est d'aider le gouvernement à maintenir la paix. Les sociétés secrètes sont supervisées par le ministère de l'Intérieur et par le ministère de l'Information, des Affaires culturelles et du Tourisme (IRB, 22 février 2017).

## 2.1 La société Sande

**Au moins la moitié des femmes âgées de 15 à 49 ans seraient membres de la société Sande. Plus répandue dans les zones rurales et pauvres.** Citant l'ONG *28 Too Many*, l'IRB indique que 85 % de la population libérienne est composée de groupes ethniques pratiquant le Sande. Le Sande serait particulièrement actif dans les zones rurales et les personnes

pauvres sont plus susceptibles d'être membres de Sande. L'IRB cite une enquête de 2014 selon laquelle près de 50% des Libériennes âgées de 15 à 49 ans sont membres de Sande (IRB, 22 février 2017).

**L'objectif de la société Sande est de préparer les filles à devenir des femmes « prêtes à marier ».** Selon les sources consultées par l'IRB, le rôle de la société secrète Sande est de préparer les filles à devenir des femmes, en particulier comment devenir des épouses et prendre soin de leur mari, comment gérer leur foyer, comment devenir mère, quel est le comportement sexuel correct, quelle est la bonne étiquette sociale, et comment occuper des positions sociales. La société leur enseigne des « secrets qui ne doivent pas être partagés ». Cette formation a généralement lieu dans des écoles de brousse où les filles sont formées à la vie domestique et sociale. A la fin de la formation, qui comprend également l'imposition de MGF, les femmes sont considérées comme prêtes à être mariées (IRB, 22 février 2017).

**Le Sande est dirigé par des « Zoés » qui ont une très grande influence sur la communauté et dont la fonction se transmet de mère à fille.** Selon les sources consultées par l'IRB, le Sande est organisé de manière hiérarchique et dirigé par des « Zoés », ou praticiennes traditionnelles, qui dirigent les écoles de brousse et pratiquent les MGF. Ces Zoés auraient une influence considérable sur leur communauté. La hiérarchie serait fondée sur le secret ; plus le statut d'une personne est élevé et plus les connaissances secrètes qui lui sont révélées sont importantes. Le pouvoir d'une Zoé est héréditaire et se transmet généralement d'une mère à sa fille ainée (IRB, 22 février 2017). Selon l'*International crisis group* (ICG), cité par l'IRB, les Zoés ont une grande influence dans les communautés et les politicien·e·s les utilisent souvent pour gagner le soutien et assoir leur légitimité dans les zones rurales (IRB, 22 février 2017).

### 3 Recrutement (forcé) des membres

**Enlèvement et initiation forcée de membres d'organisations religieuses par les sociétés secrètes.** USDOS indique que des organisations religieuses, y compris des groupes chrétiens et musulmans, ainsi que l'Assemblée spirituelle nationale des Bahaïs au Liberia, ont rapporté que certains de leurs membres continuaient à faire l'objet d'enlèvement par les sociétés secrètes traditionnelles Poro et Sande et ceci à des fins d'initiation forcée (USDOS, 30 juin 2024). Selon l'EUAA, qui cite un article de janvier 2024 de la *New Republic*, un homme de 22 ans a été enlevé par des membres de la société Poro dans le comté de Lofa et initié de force. Au cours de l'incident, le grand-père de l'homme aurait été battu. L'homme aurait ensuite été libéré au bout de quelques jours grâce à l'intervention de chefs traditionnels (EUAA, 28 mai 2024). Selon USDOS, qui se base sur des informations de la *National Imam Council of Liberia* (NICOL), en octobre 2022, un homme de 60 ans, originaire de la ville de Zuaah, dans le district de Seuhn Mecca, a été enlevé par des sociétés secrètes alors qu'il ramassait du bois, et a ensuite été victime d'une initiation forcée. La NICOL a également rapporté le même mois l'enlèvement par des membres des sociétés secrètes de deux adolescents dans la ville de Sumo, également dans le district de Seuhn Mecca. Après avoir subi une initiation forcée et avoir été détenus pendant deux mois, les deux adolescents ont finalement été libérés. Toujours en octobre 2022, c'est un homme de 28 ans, officier du service d'incendie et de secours du Liberia et membre de l'église United Liberia Inland à Sanniquellie, dans le comté de Nimba, qui a été enlevé. Face aux protestations de son église, il a été libéré

après une semaine et les kidnappeurs se sont excusés (USDOS, 15 mai 2023). L'EUAA cite le HCDH, selon lequel, en octobre 2021, un membre du personnel de l'ONU a été enlevé par la société Poro alors qu'il était en voyage et initié de force. Grâce à l'intervention de l'ONU, l'homme a été libéré au bout d'une semaine (EUAA, 28 mai 2024).

## 4 Violences basées sur le genre et sociétés secrètes

**Forte prévalence des violences basées sur le genre au Libéria. Les MGF sont très répandues.** Pour la *European External Action Service* (EEAS) de l'Union européenne, les violences sexuelles et sexistes, y compris les MGF, restent un problème majeur au Libéria et ces actes restent largement impunis (EEAS, 22 juin 2020). Selon la *Bertelsmann Stiftung*, la violence de genre reste très prévalente au Libéria, en particulier la violence domestique et la clitoridectomie, qui est laissée sans réponse par l'État (*Bertelsmann Stiftung*, 19 mars 2024). L'USDOS, qui cite *l'Enquête démographique et sanitaire du Libéria 2019-20* (LDHS), indique que 38% des filles et des femmes âgées de 15 à 49 ans ont subi des MGF/E. La prévalence est particulièrement élevée dans les régions du nord (USDOS, 20 mars 2023).

**Rôle important joué par les sociétés secrètes dans la perpétuation des MGF, pratiquées lors des rites d'initiation.** Selon l'EEAS, les sociétés secrètes jouent un rôle important dans la perpétuation des MGF à travers des rites d'initiation (EEAS, 22 juin 2020). Selon la *Bertelsmann Stiftung*, alors que le nombre de membres des sociétés secrètes diminue parce que les gens résistent plus souvent aux mutilations génitales féminines, les enlèvements et les initiations forcées aux sociétés secrètes ont augmenté ces dernières années (*Bertelsmann Stiftung*, 19 mars 2024). Dans son rapport de mars 2020 devant le *Conseil des droits de l'homme* (HRC), le Comité pour l'élimination de la discrimination à l'égard des femmes a recommandé au gouvernement du Libéria de mettre en place des mécanismes de contrôle pour lutter contre le recrutement des filles dans la société secrète Sande et de prévenir et d'éliminer les abus et les violences sexuelles perpétrés contre les filles et de veiller à ce que les auteurs de ces actes soient dûment sanctionnés. Le rapport inclut également des observations de la MINUL et du HCDH, selon lesquels certaines pratiques sous couvert de "tradition" ou de "culture", telles que les mutilations génitales féminines et l'initiation forcée à des sociétés secrètes étaient incompatibles avec les normes universelles en matière de droits de l'homme (HRC, 6 mars 2020). Selon USDOS, la société secrète Sande, qui combine des pratiques religieuses et culturelles traditionnelles, fait subir des MGF à ses membres dans le cadre de cérémonies d'endoctrinement (USDOS, 20 mars 2023).

## 5 Traitement par les sociétés secrètes des personnes qui les opposent

**Forte stigmatisation des familles qui quittent les sociétés secrètes.** Selon l'IRB, les personnes qui sont initiées par la société Sande doivent prêter serment de ne rien divulguer sur leur initiation ou les pratiques de la société secrète au risque de subir des sanctions surnaturelles ou physiques qui peuvent aller jusqu'à la mort. Les familles qui se retirent des sociétés secrètes seraient considérées comme des « pécheurs » et seraient traitées comme des

« parias ». Elles ne pourraient plus prendre part aux décisions concernant le village (IRB, 22 février 2017).

**Menaces d'initiation forcée, de MGF et attaques contre les personnes critiques ou qui sont perçues comme ayant eu un comportement « offensant » envers la société secrète Sande.** Selon l'IRB, les non-membres sont interdits d'assister aux activités de la société secrète ou même d'en discuter sous peine de subir diverses sanctions, y compris l'initiation forcée ou des mutilations génitales féminines. Les activistes ou les journalistes qui critiquent les sociétés secrètes peuvent subir des menaces ou des attaques (IRB, 22 février 2017). Comme elle l'a récemment confié au journal libérien *Daily Observer*, en 2012, la journaliste d'investigation Mae Azango a dû entrer dans la clandestinité en raison d'un article qu'elle avait publié sur l'école Sande Society de Todee. En réaction, des chefs traditionnels ont menacé de lui faire subir une initiation forcée s'ils la retrouvaient (*Daily Observer*, 5 mai 2024). Selon le journal en ligne *Front Page Africa*, en 2024, la société Sande a enlevé quatre jeunes femmes qui auraient prétendument eu un comportement offensant à l'égard de la société Sande. Pour les punir, des membres de la société auraient ainsi emmené ces jeunes femmes de force pour leur faire subir une initiation (*Front Page Africa*, 8 avril 2024). Selon USDOS, des médias ont rapporté en octobre 2021 que les dirigeants de la société secrète Poro ont arrêté onze membres de l'église Saint Assembly Ministries International Church à Gbartala, dans le comté de Bong. Ces arrestations auraient été liées à des activités de prosélytisme des membres de cette église dans la région de Gbartala, mais également à des critiques formulées à l'encontre de la culture et des traditions de cette communauté, qualifiées de « démoniaques » (USDOS, 2 juin 2022).

## 6 Protection de l'État pour les victimes des sociétés secrètes

**Pas d'interdiction légale des MGF. Absence de volonté politique de les interdire car ce serait contraire aux intérêts de la société secrète.** Selon l'EEAS, les MGF sont autorisées par la loi. En 2019, le Parlement du Libéria a adopté un projet de loi sur la violence domestique, mais celui-ci ne couvre pas les MGF (EEAS, 22 juin 2020). L'USDOS indique également que la loi n'interdit pas les MGF et, selon des informations fournies par des ONG, les autorités ne font preuve d'aucune volonté pour s'attaquer à ce problème. Le sujet est particulièrement sensible et est étroitement associé avec les traditions culturelles de certaines tribus et sociétés secrètes dans les comtés les plus peuplés (USDOS, 20 mars 2023). Selon l'IRB, en 2016, les représentants du parlement ont supprimé l'interdiction des MGF du projet de loi sur la violence domestique car elle allait à l'encontre des intérêts des Sande et risquait donc de leur coûter des voix lors des élections (IRB, 22 février 2017). Selon le journal en ligne *Front Page Africa*, il existe actuellement deux projets de loi devant le Parlement libérien qui visent à interdire les MGF (*Front Page Africa*, 8 avril 2024).

**La loi interdit certaines pratiques des sociétés secrètes comme les initiations forcées et les MGF sur enfants ou adultes non-consentantes. En février 2022, le Conseil national traditionnel a imposé un moratoire de trois ans sur la pratique des MGF.** Selon l'IRB, qui cite un rapport de l'ONU, le droit pénal libérien criminalise certaines activités qui peuvent être associées aux pratiques traditionnelles, notamment l'agression, l'enlèvement, la contrainte criminelle ou la mise en danger du bien-être d'un-e enfant. La loi interdit également certaines



pratiques des sociétés secrètes, telles que l'initiation forcée, les meurtres rituels et la pratique de MGF sur des enfants ou adultes non-consentantes (IRB, 22 février 2017). Selon l'IRB, qui citent plusieurs sources, les autorités ont fait des efforts pour tenter d'encadrer les pratiques des sociétés secrètes pour limiter les abus, notamment l'initiation forcée. En 2012, le gouvernement a annoncé l'arrêt des activités de la Sande et a cessé de délivrer des permis autorisant les Zoés à pratiquer les MGF. Toutefois, selon l'ONU, en 2014 les enlèvements, l'initiation forcée, les MGF et les écoles de brousse se poursuivaient (IRB, 22 février 2017). Selon USDOS, en février 2022, le Conseil national traditionnel a suspendu la pratique des mutilations génitales féminines pour une durée de trois ans (USDOS, 20 mars 2023). Le journal en ligne *Front Page Africa* indique également qu'en février 2022, le chef du Conseil national traditionnel du Liberia a annoncé une suspension de trois ans des MGF (*Front Page Africa*, 8 avril 2024). Selon le journal *New Dawn*, malgré cette interdiction temporaire, des rapports font état de la poursuite des MGF forcées (*New Dawn*, 23 octobre 2023).

**L'impunité reste importante et ces pratiques restent largement ignorées par le système judiciaire.** Selon les sources consultées par l'IRB, malgré le cadre juridique existant, les sociétés secrètes agissent en toute impunité au Libéria. Citant la MINUL, l'IRB souligne que ces pratiques préjudiciables sont largement ignorées par le système judiciaire formel car elles sont largement considérées comme faisant partie de la culture et des traditions nationales. L'IRB estime que le non-respect des lois entrave la protection des victimes et l'État de droit (IRB, 22 février 2017). Des sources consultées par l'IRB indiquent qu'en ce qui concerne les questions liées aux traditions et à la culture, c'est le système traditionnel de droit coutumier qui s'applique. Il est également mentionné que les autorités sont réticentes à intervenir sur ces questions pour des raisons politiques ou financières. Certains ont peur du pouvoir des sociétés secrètes ou sont eux-mêmes membres, et la loyauté aux sociétés secrètes l'emporte sur celle à l'État (IRB, 22 février 2017). Selon le *Robert Lansing institute for global threats and democracies* (IGTDS) peu de cas de MGF ont été traités par le système judiciaire. En l'absence d'une loi spécifique, les MGF tombent sous le coup de l'article 242 du Code pénal, qui prévoit une peine de prison pouvant atteindre cinq ans si une personne est reconnue coupable d'avoir blessé « malicieusement et illégalement une autre personne en lui coupant ou en la privant d'une manière ou d'une autre de l'un des membres de son corps ». Toutefois, selon cette source, cet article n'aurait encore jamais été appliqué pour les MGF (IGTDS, 14 mars 2024). Selon la MINUL et le HCDH, cités par le *Conseil des droits de l'homme*, malgré un cadre juridique interdisant certaines pratiques comme les MGF sans consentement ou les initiations forcées, le système judiciaire officiel laisse celles-ci sans réponse. Le *Conseil des droits de l'homme* a encouragé le gouvernement de veiller à ce que toutes les allégations et indications selon lesquelles de telles pratiques ont été commises, y compris par des sociétés secrètes, fassent l'objet d'une enquête efficace et que les personnes présumées coupables soient poursuivies et, si elles sont reconnues coupables, punies par des sanctions adéquates (HRC, 6 mars 2020).

**Condamnation de deux cheffes Zoés accusées d'enlèvement et d'initiation forcée.** Selon le journal en ligne *Front Page Africa*, en avril 2024, deux organisations de défense des droits des femmes ont déposé une demande d'habeas corpus devant un tribunal pénal contre Hannah Tarr, cheffe de la société Sande de la ville de Corpus Kpaans, ainsi que contre d'autres membres de la société. Dans cette requête, les deux organisations ont accusé Hannah Tarr d'être responsable de l'enlèvement et de l'initiation forcée de quatre jeunes femmes. Outre la libération des quatre jeunes femmes, les deux organisations ont également demandé que les responsables de l'enlèvement soient puni·e·s (*Front Page Africa*, 8 avril 2024). Selon le

journal libérien *New Dawn*, quelques jours après le dépôt de la requête d'habeas corpus, le tribunal a placé la cheffe Zoé Nora Samuel en détention provisoire à la prison centrale de Monrovia pour n'avoir pas libéré les jeunes femmes enlevées. Une autre cheffe Zoé a également été condamnée par le tribunal, mais elle a été libérée pour pouvoir aller chercher les jeunes filles enlevées (*New Dawn*, 10 avril 2024).

## 7 Sources:

Bertelsmann Stiftung, 19 mars 2024 :

*« Violence against women and domestic violence were widespread during the review period. The prevalence of clitoridectomy remains high and is left unaddressed by the state. As membership in secret societies is decreasing because people are more often resisting female genital mutilation, abductions and forced initiations into secret societies have been on the rise during the reporting period. »* Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung: BTI 2024 Country Report Liberia, 19 mars 2024, p.9,11 : [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2105917/country\\_report\\_2024\\_LBR.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2105917/country_report_2024_LBR.pdf)

Daily Observer, 5 mai 2024 :

*« [...] Mae Azango a senior Investigative journalist at the FrontPage Africa Newspaper in Liberia, says being a female investigative journalist is tough. "At times, you are at risk of sexual harassment. It becomes more risky, especially when going undercover to do a story."*

*In 2012, Mae went into hiding because she reported a story about how girls were graduating from the Sande Society school in Todee after the government of former president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf announced a three-week closure of the Sande bush for a time indefinitely.*

*The story was published on International Women's Day that year. Mae was haunted by the traditional leaders who threatened to initiate her into the Sande society if she was caught.*

*"What puzzled the international community was the fact that the first African Female president did not act when a female reporter's life was threatened over a woman's issue. However, after three weeks, the government announced the closure of the Sande bush for a time indefinitely. That was how I left hiding because the traditional people's attention was drawn to the government who had made the pronouncement instead of me," Azango said. [...]* » Source: Daily Observer, How Women Journalists Make It in Liberia, 5 mai 2024: [https://www.liberi-anobserver.com/news/how-women-journalists-make-it-in-liberia/article\\_62e36466-0aee-11ef-9616-4feb23af2b0a.html](https://www.liberi-anobserver.com/news/how-women-journalists-make-it-in-liberia/article_62e36466-0aee-11ef-9616-4feb23af2b0a.html)

EEAS, 22 juin 2020 :

*« Human rights concerns remain in the areas of death penalty (de-facto moratorium), enforcement of legislation against child labour and exploitation, as well as access to justice, health and education, lengthy pre-trial detention, poor prison conditions and questions regarding the sound management of Liberia's significant natural resources. Sexual and gender based*

*violence (SGBV) continues to be a major challenge, and impunity for such acts remains high. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), affecting a significant part of Liberian women and girls, is not prohibited by law, and is perpetuated by secret societies through initiation rites.*

*On 4 July 2019, the Parliament voted to pass into law the Domestic Violence Bill. The bill, among other things, is seeking tighter punishment for perpetrators of domestic violence and protection for victims/survivors. Attempts to introduce FGM in the domestic violence bill failed. Same-sex sexual conduct between consenting adults is criminalised and there have been attempts to increase penalties. Groups advocating for the rights of LGBTI persons are particularly vulnerable to harassment. Liberia's Constitution protects freedom of expression and the environment for human rights defenders (HRDs) in Liberia is generally benign, although there are incidents (harassment, detention or fines of individual HRD or journalists). » Source: European External Action Service (EEAS), European Union: EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World; 2019 Country Updates, 22 June 2020, p.118: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/201007\\_eu\\_country\\_updates\\_on\\_human\\_rights\\_and\\_democracy\\_2019.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/201007_eu_country_updates_on_human_rights_and_democracy_2019.pdf)*

EUAA, 28 mai 2024 :

« 1. Background information

*According to a December 2015 report on traditional practices in Liberia by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), a UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia that completed its mandate in 2018, cultural societies, such as the Poro society (for men) and its equivalent Sande society (for women), are considered 'the trusted custodians of "culture" in much of Liberia and have been present in the region for centuries'. These societies, which are often referred to as "bush" or secret societies, have presence in the northern, western, and central regions of the country.*

*Secret societies, including Poro, use traditional religious and cultural practices and are 'traditionally believed to inculcate values and teach skills conducive to communal harmony' and to initiate children into adulthood. Similarly, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) noted that these societies 'have historically provided training for young adults in the absence of formal education structures and in more modern times, they have become places to pass on traditional knowledge'.*

*According to the New Dawn, a local newspaper based in Monrovia, Liberia, these societies, including the Poro, 'operate bush schools where girls and boys as young as three to five years, are enrolled and taught issues of life, including war lessons'. According to the same source, these 'schools' provide 'traditional education', and '[I]essons taught among others include hunting, farming, caring and defending the family – for males, and cooking, caring for future husbands, babies, and family members – for females, respectively'. Furthermore, sources report that initiation of women and girls into the Sande society includes female genital mutilation (FGM).*

*Reporting on the issue of gender-based violence, and especially prevalence of FGM, the 2024 country report by Bertelsmann Stiftung on Liberia, noted that '[a]s membership in secret societies is decreasing because people are more often resisting female genital*

**mutilation, abductions and forced initiations into secret societies have been on the rise' during the reporting period of the report [1 February 2021 to 31 January 2023].**

According to sources, **practices and activities of the secret societies, including the Poro society, were considered sacred and couldn't be openly discussed. According to the abovementioned 2015 UNMIL report, practices and rituals of these societies adhere to 'strict cultural rules', and their observation by non-members is deemed as 'a transgression of the sanctity of these practices'.**

## 2. Recruitment practices

The US Department of State (**USDOS**) in its report on religious freedom in Liberia, covering 2022, noted that **several religious organizations, including Christian and Muslim groups and the Baha'i Spiritual Assembly, continued to raise their concerns over 'forced initiation of their members' by leaders of secret societies, including the Poro society.**

Incidents relating to recruitment practices by the Poro secret society, as reported by sources, include:

- **On 9 January 2024, an article by the New Republic reported, citing local sources, that a 22-year-old man was allegedly taken against his will by members of the Poro society in Lofa County and was forcibly initiated. The man's grandfather was reportedly beaten by members of the Poro society during the incident. The same news source reported that on 11 January 2024 the man was released in Foya district, Lofa County, following the 'intervention of some traditional leaders'. According to the source, the man's family confirmed that he was in good health.**
- **USDOS noted that, according to NICOL (National Imam Council of Liberia), in October 2022, at two separate incidents a 60-year-old man and two teenage boys were abducted in Zuaah and Sumo respectively, two predominantly Muslim towns in Seuhn Mecca District, in Bomi County, by members of 'traditional secret societies' and forcibly initiated. Concerning the latter incident, it was reported that the two boys were released after two months approximately, in late November to early December 2022, whereas the source does not include any additional information on the first incident.**
- **The local newspaper Independent Probe reported in an article that on 24 September 2022, an officer of the Liberia Immigration Service was abducted by the Poro Society while on duty in Sanniquellie, Nimba County. The victim, who was Christian and a member of the United Liberia Inland church, was released a few days later, on 3 October 2022. According to the article, his release occurred following a protest by the church and an intervention of the Sanniquellie Christian Fellowship and national leaders of the United Liberia Inland Church, who 'engaged the Nimba County Administration and leaders of the Poro Society in a closed-door meeting' demanding his release. It was also reported that during this meeting the 'leaders of the Poro Society apologized for their actions and asked for the period of two weeks' to release him.**
- **According to OHCHR, in October 2021, a member of the UN personnel was abducted and forcibly initiated into Poro society, while traveling. The man was released after a week, following intervention by the UN. In November 2021, a local news source, Front Page Africa,**

reported that the Minister of Internal Affairs suspended a traditional chief in Panta District, Bong County for 'illegally operating a Poro Bush' and for the forceful abduction and initiation of a personnel of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Corroborating information on whether the information mentioned above referred to the same incident could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within the time constraints.

• **On 5 October 2021, it was reported that 11 members of the Saint Assembly Ministries International Church were detained by leaders of the secret Poro Society in Gbartala, Bong County.** According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, local community leaders claimed that they have detained all 11 men, who were reportedly on a preaching mission, with the intention to turn them over to the local authority, **because they have criticized the culture violating the traditional cultural norms of the community, provoking negative reactions among the local residents.** The 11 men were released on 7 October 2021, following the intervention of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and protests by Church members at the ministry in Monrovia. The men were allegedly initiated by force into the Poro society before their release, an allegation that the traditional leaders denied.

• USDOS noted that according to the NMCL (National Muslim Council of Liberia), **two men of Mandingo ethnicity were forcibly initiated into the Poro society by traditional leaders in Bong County during October 2021.** Further specific information on recruitment practices of the Poro secret society in Liberia could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints. » Source: EUAA - European Union Agency for Asylum (formerly: European Asylum Support Office, EASO): Liberia; Poro secret society [Q31-2024], 28 mai 2024 : [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2110031/2024\\_05\\_EUAA\\_COI\\_Query\\_Response\\_Q31\\_Liberia\\_Poro\\_secret\\_society.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2110031/2024_05_EUAA_COI_Query_Response_Q31_Liberia_Poro_secret_society.pdf)

Front Page Africa, 8 avril 2024 :

« **Two prominent organizations, the Organization for Women and Children (ORWOCH) and the Community Healthcare Initiative (CHI), have filed a petition for a writ of habeas corpus against Hannah Tarr, the head of the Traditional Sande Society in Corpus Kpaans Town, and all those under her command.**

The Writ was filed before the 1st Judicial Circuit, Criminal Court A of Montserrado County,

**The petition, filed before His Honor Roosevelt Willie, alleges that Tarr and her associates are responsible for the abduction of four young women for alleged offensive behavior. According to the petitioners, the victims were forcibly taken for initiation into the Sande society, a traditional bush society operating illegally in Kpaans Town.**

**The petitioners, registered women's rights organizations in Liberia, argue that the actions of Tarr and her group constitute a violation of the constitutional rights of the victims. They cite Article 13, 20 (a), and Article 21 (c), (e), (f) of the Constitution of Liberia, which guarantee the right to movement without restrictions, due process, and protection from torture.**

**Furthermore, the petitioners assert that the initiation process, which allegedly involves cutting and removing body parts without consent, violates Article 6 Section 4d of the**



**Children's Law of Liberia, which prohibits practices that may inflict physical or emotional harm on children.**

Attorney Mmonbeydo Nadine Joah, representing the petitioners, argues that a writ of habeas corpus is necessary to compel the respondents to produce the abducted women and ensure their safe return. The petitioners seek not only the release of the victims but also accountability for the alleged violation of their rights.

In response to the petition, Tarr and her associates are expected to appear before the court to provide justification for their actions and to show cause why they should not be held in contempt for usurping the functions of the judiciary.

**On February 6, 2023, the National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia (NACCEL) made a historic proclamation to ban female genital mutilation (FGM) in Liberia. The international community welcomed the ban.**

**Liberia is one of three West African countries that does not have a law criminalizing FGM. In 2018, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf signed an executive order to ban FGM on girls under 18, but the ban expired in February 2019. In February 2022, Chief Zanzan Karwor, head of the Traditional Council of Liberia, announced a three-year suspension on FGM. Two anti-FGM bills are currently pending before Liberian Parliament, seeking to permanently outlaw FGM in the country.**

**The FGM bill before the national legislature is titled an 'Act Prohibiting Female Genital Mutilation of 2022'. If it becomes law, it could fulfill the wishes of activists who have long campaigned for FGM to be outlawed in Liberia, a country. Supporters of FGM argued that the ritual involving the partial or total removal of the external genitalia is a key rite of passage. According to the WHO, it often causes health problems and can be fatal. [...] »**  
Source: Front Page Africa, Liberia: Four Girls Abducted into Sande Bush for Genital Cutting over 'Offensive Behavior', 8 avril 2024: <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/gender-issues/liberia-four-girls-abducted-into-sande-bush-for-genital-cutting-over-offensive-behavior/>

HRC, 6 mars 2020 :

« 51. **The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women** was concerned about the low school enrolment and retention rates among girls, gender disparities in access to scholarships and the increasing number of girls who dropped out of school. It **reiterated its recommendations that Liberia** introduce programmes that encouraged the enrolment and retention of girls in school, **introduce monitoring mechanisms to address the recruitment of girls into the Sande secret society, and prevent and eliminate abuse and sexual violence perpetrated against girls at school and ensure that perpetrators were adequately punished.** The Committee recommended promoting re-entry into school for girls after they had given birth and integrating age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights into school curricula. [...]

54. **UNMIL and OHCHR** observed that some practices carried out in Liberia under the guise of "tradition" or "culture" were incompatible with universal human rights standards, such as female genital mutilation, forcible initiation into secret societies, trial by ordeal, allegations of witchcraft and ritualistic killings. **UNMIL and OHCHR also noted that,**

**despite the domestic legal framework prohibiting some of those practices, harmful practices were largely left unaddressed by the formal justice system. The Human Rights Committee recommended that Liberia ensure that all allegations and indications that such practices had been committed, including by secret societies, were effectively investigated and that the alleged perpetrators were prosecuted and, if convicted, punished with adequate sanctions. UNMIL and OHCHR recommended that Liberia enhance the national protection system to prevent and respond to human rights violations arising from harmful traditional practices, and protect and assist victims. UNMIL and OHCHR also recommended guaranteeing nonrecurrence and conducting large-scale sensitization of traditional actors on human rights issues arising from some of those practices. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women had similar concerns and recommendations. »**  
Source: UN Human Rights Council (HRC), Compilation on Liberia; Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 6 March 2020, p.7-8:  
[https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2028447/A\\_HRC\\_WG.6\\_36\\_LBR\\_2\\_E.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2028447/A_HRC_WG.6_36_LBR_2_E.pdf)

IRB, 22 février 2017 :

« 1. *Sande and Secret Societies in Liberia*

*In a December 2015 report on traditional practices in Liberia, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) describes secret societies as follows:*

*[UN English version]*

***The Sande and Poro societies are the trusted custodians of “culture” in much of Liberia and have been present in the region for centuries. These societies are traditionally believed to inculcate values and teach skills conducive to communal harmony and to prepare children for the rigors of adulthood. They also have a spiritual dimension, though they are not considered to be religious institutions as such, and most Sande and Poro members are also adherents of Christianity or Islam. (UN Dec. 2015, para. 14)***

***Sande is a secret female society (Norway 30 Mar 2010, 3; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015, 2). Poro is its male equivalent (IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7; UN Dec. 2015, para. 7). For more information about that society, please refer to Response to Information Request LBR27521, published in August 1997.***

***Sande and Poro have a presence in the north and the west (IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7; UN Dec. 2015, para. 15) as well as in central Liberia (ibid.). However, they have very little or no presence in the southeast (ibid.; IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7). There are other secret societies in that region, but they differ from the others in that the girls are not necessarily subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM) (IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7; UN Dec. 2015, para. 16). A charity organization named 28 Too Many, which works to put an end to FGM, reports that 85 percent of the Liberian population is composed of Sande-practising ethnic groups (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 9, 31). Sources indicate that Sande is mainly active in rural areas (AFP 30 March 2012; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 10). In addition, the UNMIL report indicates that individuals from the poorest segments of the Liberian population are more likely to be members of Sande (UN Dec. 2015, para. 8). According to the Demographic and Health Survey 2013, prepared by the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services***

(LISGIS), **49.8 percent of Liberians between the ages of 15 and 49 are members of Sande** (LISGIS et al. 2014, 276).

### 1.1 Definition, Role and Activities

**Sande's role is to prepare girls for womanhood** (Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 3; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). According to the sources, **the initiation teaches them the following:**

- **how to become wives and take care of their husbands** (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7; VOA 13 Oct. 2016);
- **how to manage their homes** (ibid.; Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012);
- **how to become mothers** (IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7);
- **correct sexual behaviour** (VOA 13 Oct. 2016);
- **social etiquette** (ibid.; IBIS 18 Apr. 2012, 7);
- **how to hold societal positions** (Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015).

**During the initiation process, they learn "secret[s]" that are not to be shared** (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 20). For information about those secrets and Sande in general, please refer to Response to Information Requests LBR27521 from August 1997 and LBR38472 from March 2002.

**Sande member training takes place in bush schools [Sande bush, Sande grove, forest camps]** (UN Dec. 2015, para. 46; VOA 13 Oct. 2016). **Young girls take the time to get trained for domestic and social life, and they leave eligible for marriage** (ibid.; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015; IFEECH 14 Oct. 2015). **FGM is allegedly part of the initiation ritual** (UN Dec. 2015, para. 15; US 13 Apr. 2016, 16; VOA 13 Oct. 2016).

### 1.2 Organization, Hierarchy, Operation

**Sande is led by zoes, traditional practitioners** (UN 20 Mar. 2014, 13; UN Dec. 2015, 19; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 9) **who lead the bush schools, perform FGM and act as birth attendants** (ibid.). Sources indicate that **zoes hold significant influence in their community** (International Crisis Group 30 Jan. 2004, 21; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 9). **A chief zoe exercises authority over the Sande societies at a national level** (UN Dec. 2015, para. 19).

**The Sande is hierarchically organized** (Lavenda et al. 16 Feb. 2007 in Australia 6 Apr. 2009, sect. 1; Bledsoe 1980 in Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 6). **The hierarchy is based on secrecy: the higher a person's status, the greater the secret knowledge that is revealed to them** (ibid.; Lavenda, Robert et al. 16 Feb. 2007 in Australia 6 Apr. 2009, sect. 1). **It is also tied to age:**

**Young initiates are lowest in status, but have more prestige than the few people in their tribal group who are not members of the secret society, for many people believe that non-initiates are ignorant of important cultural secrets.** [...] In general, the older people are, the more status they have in secret society, even if they do not hold office. (Bledsoe 1980 in Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 6)

#### 1.2.1 Selecting Zoes

**In Sande, according to B.L. Bellman, author of The Language of Secrecy [1984], a zoe's power is hereditary and is passed from mother to daughter** (Australia 12 June 2007, sect. 5). **It is**



**typically passed on to the eldest daughter, but the selection for the replacement may also take into account the child's interest in and skill at working with "medicines."** (*ibid.*). Corroborating information or any information about the consequences for an individual who refuses to take on the role of zoe could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 2. The Relationship Between the State and Secret Societies

### 2.1 The Power of Secret Societies

**The Sande and Poro secret societies are seen as powerful institutions** (Norway 30 Mar. 2010, 3; Thomson Reuters Foundation 4 Aug. 2016) **and "influential"** (Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015; UN Dec. 2015, para. 15). The UNMIL report states that **they are held in high esteem by the public because of their role in passing on values and skills from one generation to the next** (UN Dec. 2015, para. 7).

**Secret societies hold power over the communities, resolving disputes** (International Crisis Group 6 Apr. 2006, i; Australia 5 Aug. 2009, 1) **and condemning members who have defied established social norms** (*ibid.*). In addition, **the village's important political decisions are made by the secret societies** (International Crisis Group 8 Dec. 2004, 26; Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012).

Some sources describe **membership in a secret society as a condition for exercising power in your community** (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 20; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). **Families who opt out of secret societies are considered "sinners" and are "treated as outcasts"** (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012). **Only individuals who are members of the Sande and Poro societies can take part in decisions concerning the village** (Thomson Reuters Foundation 6 Feb. 2014; Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012).

International Crisis Group also reported in 2004 that **since the zoes have considerable power and influence in the communities, politicians are using them to win support and legitimacy in rural areas** (International Crisis Group 30 Jan. 2004, 21). **They are also trying to become members of the secret societies and control them** (*ibid.*). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to UNMIL, **the chief Poro zoe is the head of the National Council of Chiefs and Elders (NCCE), the representative body of traditional authorities in Liberia** (UN Dec. 2015, para. 20). **The council is [UN English version] "highly influential" and is consulted by state authorities on all matters related to society; it plays an advisory role on internal affairs in the country and it is mandated to help the government maintain peace** (*ibid.*). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

### 2.2 The State's Power over Secret Societies

UNMIL explains **that in Liberia, two departments oversee secret societies: the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), which supervises the activities of secret societies and the NCCE, but the minister of which is second in authority (to the chief Poro zoe) with respect to**

**cultural affairs; and the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism (MICAT), which promotes and preserves culture but does not oversee traditional practices or cultural societies** (UN Dec. 2015, para. 21-22). Corroborating information or additional information about the state's power over secret societies could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

### 3. Sande's Treatment of Individuals who Speak out Against or Oppose its Activities

**During their initiation, Sande members take an oath not to reveal anything about what has taken place in the bush** (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; Thomson Reuters Foundation 6 Feb. 2014; UN Dec. 2015, para. 18). **They are forbidden from disclosing the practices of the secret society, at the risk of facing supernatural or physical sanctions** (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 20). **Those sanctions can even include death** (Pulitzer Center 30 March 2012; UN Dec. 2015, para. 13 and 18). **Non-members are also prohibited from discussing the secret society's activities or attending them, under threat of various sanctions** (*ibid.*, 13). According to 28 Too Many, **those sanctions can include forced initiation** (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 21; AFP 30 Mar. 2012), **while other sources mention FGM** (AFP 30 March 2012; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015).

Sources indicate that **activists and journalists who speak out against FGM or secret societies are putting themselves in danger** (Thomson Reuters Foundation 6 Feb. 2014; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 10). For example, **Phyllis Kimba [head of the National Association on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (NATPAH) (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 10)], had her house burnt down after she made a speech criticizing FGM before the UN** (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 10; PRI 19 Nov. 2012) in March 2012 (*ibid.*). **Liberian journalist Mae Azango, who published a report on the Sande ritual of FGM in the Liberian daily titled Front Page Africa on 8 March 2012 (Front Page Africa 8 Mar. 2012), was threatened by Sande members** (Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012; AFP 30 Mar. 2012; Thomson Reuters Foundation 6 Feb. 2014). According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), she received anonymous telephone calls, was sought after at her home and at the newspaper, and her daughter was almost taken by force to be cut (AFP 30 Mar. 2012). According to sources, she received death threats (AI 13 Mar. 2012; PRI 19 Nov. 2012), and other sources report that she had to go into hiding (AFP 30 Mar. 2012; Thomson Reuters Foundation 6 Feb. 2014; IFEECH 14 Oct. 2015).

UNMIL states the following:

**During the reporting period, HRPS documented seven cases (involving 11 victims) of the Sande society forcibly initiating or attempting to forcibly initiate adult women. In at least five of these cases, FGM was used as a threat or as a punishment for perceived wrongs committed against Sande members.** For example, in February 2012, in Tweh Town, Tappita District, Nimba County, five women were allegedly threatened with forcible initiation following an argument with two zoes. In January 2013, in Bacconee, District 5, Grand Bassa County, a woman and her three-month-old child were abducted, and the mother was allegedly subjected to FGM, allegedly in retaliation for insulting a Sande member. In July 2013, a 48-year-old nurse in Zuluyee Town, Nimba County, was threatened with forcible initiation and FGM for stating that traditional birth attendants should encourage pregnant women to use the local health facility in order to prevent maternal deaths. Her statement was reportedly considered an affront to Sande culture and tradition. (UN Dec. 2015, para. 63)

***In January 2010, a village chief sentenced Liberian Ruth Berry Peal to undergo FGM and be forcibly initiated into Sande because she had an argument with some initiates (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 21 and 58; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). When she launched proceedings against the women who cut her against her will, her husband and children were threatened by Sande zoes because she had disclosed Sande secrets (ibid.).***

#### 4. State Protection

*Liberia's penal law criminalizes some activities that may be associated with traditional practices, including assault, kidnapping, felonious restraint, endangering the welfare of a child or negligent homicide (UN Dec. 2015, para. 41). **Some of the secret societies' practices are officially prohibited under Liberian law, including forcible initiation, sassywood and ritualistic killings (ibid., para. 39-41). Performing FGM on children or on adults without their consent is also prohibited by law (ibid.; UN 29 Oct. 2015).***

*However, **sources indicate that secret societies, including Sande, act with impunity in Liberia (Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015; UN 18 Dec. 2015). According to UNMIL:***

***Despite the domestic legal framework prohibiting some of those practices, these and other harmful practices are largely left unaddressed by the formal justice system because they are widely considered as being part of the national culture and traditions. Hence these hinder the rule of law and the protection of victims. (UN Dec. 2015, para. 3)***

*In Liberia, according to some sources, **there is a traditional system of customary law that operates beyond the official justice system with respect to issues involving culture and traditions (Australia 5 Aug. 2009; UN 29 Oct. 2015; UN Dec. 2015, para. 10). According to a Liberian lawyer, who cited the case of Mae Azango as an example, [translation] "there is nothing the law can do" when a customary law such as FGM has been violated (AFP 30 Mar. 2012).***

***UN agencies report that authorities hesitate to intervene in issues involving secret societies, for political (UN 29 Oct. 2015; UN in Australia 5 Aug. 2009) or financial reasons (ibid.). If they oppose them, they could lose votes (UN 29 Oct. 2015; 28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 10). Others are simply scared (AFP 30 Mar. 2012; UN Dec. 2015, para. 18) or loyal, such as civil servants who are themselves sometimes members of these societies (ibid.).***

*Sources indicate that **Liberian authorities have made efforts in recent years to try and provide a framework for secret society practices in order to curtail abuse, such as forcible initiation (UN 20 Mar. 2014, 13; UN Dec. 2015, para. 105). In 2012, the government announced a shutdown of Sande's activities and stopped issuing permits that allow zoes to perform FGM (28 Too Many Dec. 2014, 58; Pulitzer Center 30 Mar. 2012) in the wake of the uproar of the Mae Azango affair (ibid.). The NCCE recommended abolishing forcible initiation of children and non-practising adults (UN Dec. 2015, para. 106). These commitments were reiterated by the government in 2013 (UN 20 Mar. 2014, 13; Equality Now 2 Oct. 2015). However, in 2014, the United Nations Human Rights Council concluded that kidnappings, forcible initiation, FGM and bush schools were continuing, despite state protection (UN 23 Feb. 2015, para. 32-33). According to UNMIL, the guidelines issued by the government presumed that any prosecution would take place within the traditional justice system rather than the formal justice system since zoes may only be tried under customary law (UN Dec.***

2015, para. 45). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. According to sources, **in 2016, in order to have the new Liberian domestic violence bill brought before the House of Representatives, the ban on FGM had to be removed as it risked costing representatives votes during the 2017 elections** (Front Page Africa 4 Oct. 2016; Thomson Reuters Foundation 4 Aug. 2016) **and because it went against Sande interests** (ibid.). » Source: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB), Liberia: The Sande secret society, its activities, organization, leaders and consequences of refusing the role of leader; Sande's power, its treatment of those who speak out against or oppose its practices; state protection for individuals threatened by Sande (2012-November 2016) [LBR105687.FE], 22 février 2017 : [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1395282/467832\\_en.html](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1395282/467832_en.html)

New Dawn, 10 avril 2024 :

**« Criminal Court 'A' has remanded Chief Zoe Nora Samuel at the Monrovia Central Prison for failing twice to bring the living bodies of three young women who were allegedly forcibly taken away, detained, and initiated in the Sande Society along the Marshall Highway.**

**According to our court correspondent, Judge Roosevelt Willie's decision was triggered by a petition for a Writ of Habeas Corpus filed on April 4th, 2024, before Criminal Court "A" by the Organization for Women and Children and Community Health Care Initiative.** [...]

**The court held two Zoes in contempt for refusing to respect the Court's order. The Judge, in his ruling, released one of the Zoes to bring the young women before the Court while the other, Nora Samuel, was committed to the Monrovia Central Prison pending adherence to the Court's writ.**

**While one of the Zoes is incarcerated at the Monrovia Central Prison, they will bring the children on Wednesday, April 10, 2024.**

**On February 6, 2023, the National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia (NACCEL), through its Chairperson, Chief Zanzan Karwor, made a historic proclamation to ban the practice of FGM in Liberia. Chief Zanzan Karwor declared, "By the power vested in me by all the Paramount Chiefs of the 15 political divisions in Liberia and signed by myself... FGM is banned in Liberia." [...].** » Source: New Dawn, Chief Zoe spends night in prison, 10 avril 2024: <https://thenewdawnliberia.com/chief-zoe-spends-night-in-prison/>

New Dawn, 23 octobre 2023 :

**« [...] Despite the ban in February 2023, reports indicate that many girls at a young age are still being subjected to this illegal and harmful practice without having a choice in the matter, which is described as a violation of their right to give informed consent for any procedure performed on their bodies.[...] »** Source: The New Dawn, Women want penalties for violators of FGM practice, 24 octobre 2023: <https://thenewdawnliberia.com/women-want-penalties-for-violators-of-fgm-practice/>

IGTDS, 14 mars 2024 :

« [...] *In the absence of a specific law against FGM, few cases have navigated the justice system, typically falling under Section 242 of the Penal Code, which addresses malicious and unlawful injuries resulting in felony charges punishable by up to five years in prison. However, that finds a person guilty of a felony and punishable for up to five years in prison if the person "...maliciously and unlawfully injures another by cutting off or otherwise depriving him of any of the members of his body..."* No cases have been reported under this provision for the practice of FGM/FGC,

*The declaration by traditional leaders paves the way for Liberia's Legislature to enact legislation criminalizing the practice. However, challenges persist, as demonstrated by cases such as the Ruth Berry Peal Case. She was said to have been forcibly subjected to FGM in 2011.*

*Despite initial convictions, perpetrators were released on bail pending appeal, and the case remains unresolved.* » Source: Robert Lansing institute for global threats and democracies (IGTDS), Liberia likely to join countries that criminalized FGM, 14 mars 2024: <https://lan-singinstitute.org/2024/03/14/liberia-likely-to-join-countries-that-criminalized-fgm/>.

USDOS, 30 juin 2024 :

« *Several religious organizations continued to protest the forced initiation and occasional abduction of their members by leaders of the traditional secret societies in rural communities. In Grand Gedeh County, the Baha'i community came to an agreement with traditional leaders to have Baha'is accused of witchcraft turned over to the Baha'i community for investigation rather than to traditional authorities.* [...]

*Christians reside across the country. Muslims belonging to the Mandingo and Fula ethnic groups also live throughout the country, while Muslims of the Vai ethnic group live predominantly in Grand Cape Mount County in the west. The traditional Poro (for males) and Sande (for females) societies – often referred to as "bush schools" or secret societies – combine traditional religious and cultural practices and are present in the northern, western, and central regions of the country. Other traditional cultural and religious societies, including the Kui Society and the Bodio (priests of the Glebo people), reside primarily in the southeast.* [...]

*Several religious organizations, including Christian and Muslim groups, and the National Spiritual Assembly of Bahai's in Liberia, continued to voice alarm over the forced initiation of their members by leaders of traditional Poro and Sande secret societies. During the year, the assembly met with the paramount chief of a clan in Grand Gedeh County, who apologized for the forced initiations in 2021 and 2022, and also agreed to hand over Baha'is accused of witchcraft to their own religious authorities instead of subjecting them to traditional practices in the community, which included alleged physical abuse.*

» Source: US Department of State (USDOS), 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 30 juin 2024: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2111905.html>

USDOS, 15 mai 2023 :



**« In October, NICOL noted the forced initiation of one of its members, 60-year-old Geebah Dorley from Zuaah Town, Seuhn Mecca District, in Bomi County. NICOL claimed traditional society members seized Dorley as he went to gather sticks to make charcoal.**

**NICOL also reported that in early October, members of traditional secret societies abducted two teenage boys in Sumo Town, Seuhn Mecca District, in Bomi County. NICOL noted that the abductors initiated and released the victims in late November/early December after being held for about two months, despite several appeals to the National Traditional Council of Liberia to release the boys. Both Zuaah and Sumo Towns are predominantly Muslim. Imam Mustapha Dorley of NICOL said that he was forced to call off the traditional celebration marking the birth of the prophet Muhammad in Bomi County due to fear of seizure and forced initiation by the secret societies. Imam Dorley remarked that he had received a tip that he was a target after he headed a delegation to present a petition to Minister of Internal Affairs Varney Ali Sirleaf that demanded the release of Geebah Dorley and the two teenage boys seized in Sumo Town.**

**On October 2, the newspaper Independent Probe reported that leaders of the secret Poro Society, also known as “bushmasters” or “zoes,” kidnapped a member of the United Liberia Inland Church in Sanniquellie, Nimba County. The victim, Aaron Gbain, a 28-year-old officer of the Liberia Fire and Rescue Service, was standing guard at an immigration checkpoint when the incident occurred. Gbain remained in the custody of the bushmasters for a week, but due to pressure from the church, which had planned to hold a peaceful protest for the release of their member, the bushmasters released him and apologized for their actions. In an unusual move, the traditional bushmasters apologized to the church for forcibly initiating their congregant. According to news reports, Aaron was the fourth abduction/initiation victim from the United Liberia Inland Church. » Source: US Department of State (USDOS), 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 15 mai 2023 : <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2091950.html>**

USDOS, 20 mars 2023 :

**« Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law does not prohibit the practice of FGM/C, and NGOs reported there was little political will within the legislature to address the issue. According to the 2019-20 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey (LDHS), the most recent data available, 38 percent of girls and women between ages 15 and 49 had undergone FGM/C, with a higher prevalence in the northern regions.**

**Political resistance to legislative prohibition of FGM/C continued because of the public sensitivity of the topic and its association with cultural traditions of certain tribes and secret societies in populous counties. For example, the Sande society for women and girls combined traditional religious and cultural practices, and members underwent FGM/C as part of their indoctrination ceremonies. On February 21, the National Traditional Council suspended the practice of FGM/C for three years. » Source: US Department of State (USDOS), 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Liberia, 20 mars 2023 : <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2089243.html>**

USDOS, 2 juin 2022 :

« **Human rights organizations continued to note an increase in reports of harmful traditional practices, including accusations of witchcraft and ritualistic killings, as well as other violent practices – such as female genital mutilation – within traditional secret societies, such as the Sande Society.** Religious and human rights organizations also stressed the need to clearly define the boundaries between traditional beliefs and religion so that religion would not be used to justify harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation.

Religious organizations stated that in some parts of the country, inhabitants held firm to traditional practices and did not welcome Christian evangelists.

On October 25, local media reported that **on October 5, leaders of the secret Poro Society detained 11 members of the Saint Assembly Ministries International Church in Gbartala, Bong County.** According to Assistant MIA Joseph Jangar, residents there had expressed anger when members of the Church, who had traveled from Monrovia to Gbartala to proselytize, criticized the culture and traditions of the community as “demonic.” Community leaders said villagers detained the Saint Assembly Ministries members in a nearby town in order to turn them over to the local authorities for violating traditional culture. The MIA confirmed the release of all 11 Church members on October 7 following a sit-in protest by Church members at the ministry in Monrovia demanding their release. The MIA said, however, that the Church members had been allegedly conscripted by force into the Poro Society before their release. » Source: US Department of State (USDOS), 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia, 2 juin 2022 : <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2074097.html>

En tant que principale organisation d'aide aux personnes réfugiées en Suisse et faïtière des œuvres d'entraide et des organisations actives dans les domaines de l'exil et de l'asile, l'Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés (OSAR) s'engage pour une Suisse qui accueille les personnes réfugiées, les protège efficacement, respecte leurs droits fondamentaux et humains, favorise leur participation dans la société et les traite avec respect et ouverture. Dans sa fonction, l'OSAR renforce et défend les intérêts et les droits des personnes bénéficiant d'une protection et favorise la compréhension de leurs conditions de vie. Grâce à son expertise avérée, elle marque le discours public et exerce une influence sur les conditions sociales et politiques.

D'autres publications de l'OSAR sont disponibles sur le site [www.osar.ch/publications](http://www.osar.ch/publications). La newsletter de l'OSAR, qui paraît régulièrement, vous informe des nouvelles publications. Inscription à l'adresse [www.osar.ch/newsletter](http://www.osar.ch/newsletter).