

Let's talk about the intersection between social justice and climate change: A pathway to incarceration for women and girls in Sierra Leone. By Thabile Cele



Climate change is not just an environmental issue; it is a [social justice](#) crisis that disproportionately affects vulnerable communities, particularly women and girls in Sierra Leone, where agriculture is the backbone of the economy and the primary source of livelihood for many. The impacts of climate change—such as extreme heat, drought and flooding—are increasingly dire. These environmental challenges not only threaten food security but also foster a cycle of debt that ultimately contributes to the [incarceration of women and girls](#).

In Sierra Leone, women play a critical role in farming and food production. They are often the primary caregivers of their families and responsible for cultivating crops that provide sustenance and income. When climate change leads to unpredictable weather patterns, it directly impacts the quality and quantity of the produce they can sell at the markets. A failed harvest means not only a lack of food for their families but also a significant loss of income. For many women, this is the difference between survival and destitution.

As their crop yield dwindles due to environmental challenges, women in particular find themselves increasingly reliant on unsecured loans or micro credit to sustain their households. Unfortunately, the financial systems available to them are often exploitative without the clear terms and conditions being made known to the women. The creditors, who prey on their desperation, charge exorbitantly high interest rates, trapping women in a cycle of debt that is nearly impossible to escape. When the rains don't come early enough or when floods destroy their fields, their ability to repay these loans diminishes, and thereby forcing women to take on more debt just to keep their families afloat.

The repercussions of this cycle extend beyond financial strain; they can lead to troubles that result in incarceration. Women who cannot repay their debts often find themselves facing legal action as their creditors open criminal cases against them. In Sierra Leone, the criminalisation of debt is still a grim reality. The inability of women to pay back loans means that they will get arrested, go through the justice system and eventually be incarcerated for failure to meet their financial obligations. This not only disrupts their lives but also devastates their families, frequently leaving children without a

caregiver and thrusting families into greater poverty and criminality merely to sustain themselves while their mother is unjustly incarcerated.

The impact of incarceration on women and girls is profound. Women who are incarcerated face stigmatisation and often struggle to reintegrate into society once released. The loss of income, the psychological toll of incarceration, and the breakdown of family structures can create a generational cycle of poverty and disadvantage. Furthermore, girls may be forced to take on additional responsibilities at a young age, perpetuating the cycle of inequality and reducing their opportunities for education and empowerment.

Addressing the intersection between social justice and climate change is essential. Solutions must be [multi-faceted](#) and include access to sustainable agricultural practices, affordable lending options, and legal reform that protect women from exploitative financial practices. Programmes that promote climate resilience and educate women about the sustainable farming techniques can help mitigate the impacts of climate change on their livelihoods.

In conclusion, the intersection of social justice and climate change in Sierra Leone highlights a pressing issue: the systemic vulnerabilities that lead to incarceration of women and girls. By understanding and addressing these interconnected challenges, we can work towards a more equitable society where women are empowered, not imprisoned, by the very system meant to support them. The fight for climate justice and social justice must go hand in hand, ensuring that women in Sierra Leone can thrive amid the environmental challenges they face.

