Through support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law – Sierra Leone (CARL-SL) implemented an initiative aimed at strengthening access to justice for vulnerable groups and advancing people-centered justice reforms for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence across Falaba, Moyamba and Kailahun districts. There have been some indications of successes already:

Success Story 1- Falaba district: Breaking the silence in remote communities: How access to information and support is helping SGBV survivors to seek justice in Falaba District.

In remote communities across Falaba District, geographical isolation, limited access to essential services and the stigma associated with Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) continue to prevent many survivors from reporting abuse and seeking justice. For some women and girls, fear of discrimination, social exclusion and the absence of accessible support systems often force them to suffer in silence.

The experience of Zainab, 22 years illustrates how access to information, timely assistance and survivor-centred interventions can help break this silence and create pathways to justice.

Following an incident of sexual penetration, Zainab found herself isolated and living in hiding, with limited knowledge of where to seek assistance or how to pursue justice. The stigma surrounding sexual penetration, coupled with the challenges of accessing support in her community, further compounded her situation. However, through a project-sponsored radio awareness programme, Zainab learned about her rights and the support services available to survivors of SGBV. Encouraged by the information, she found the courage to seek help and access the assistance she needed.

With support from the project's paralegal services, Zainab was connected to essential medical care, emergency shelter and legal guidance. This assistance helped her navigate the reporting and justice processes while addressing some of the immediate protection and recovery needs arising from her experience. With the necessary support and engagement of relevant actors, her case progressed through the justice system and is now before the Magistrate.

Beyond her personal journey, Zainab's decision to speak out has encouraged other survivors to seek assistance, demonstrating the importance of community awareness, accessible referral pathways and survivor-centred support in addressing SGBV. The intervention has also contributed to strengthening institutional responses. Following engagements with relevant stakeholders, family support unit, referral system for SGBV cases, aimed at improving coordination and facilitating more timely referrals for survivors seeking protection and justice.

Zainab's experience demonstrates that access to information can empower survivors to break the silence, while coordinated medical, psychosocial, legal and protection services can help them pursue justice and rebuild their lives. Nevertheless, many women and girls in remote communities across Falaba continue to face geographical, financial and social barriers to accessing justice and essential support services. Expanding community awareness, strengthening referral mechanisms and improving the availability of survivor-centred services remain critical to ensuring that no survivor is left behind.

Zainab's story reminds us that when survivors know their rights and have access to appropriate support, silence can give way to courage, and courage can inspire change across entire communities.

Success story2 – Moyamba District: Sustaining access to justice, for child survivor: Princess's journey towards justice and educational recovery in Moyamba district.

In Moyamba District, financial constraints and social stigma continue to create significant barriers for child survivors of sexual and gender-based violence seeking justice and support. The experience of a 16-year-old Princess Sheriff Highlights how targeted interventions can help overcome these challenges and protect the rights and wellbeing of vulnerable children.

Princess reported an alleged incident of sexual penetration at the Taiama Police Post, prompting the Family Support Unit (FSU) to commence investigations. However, her family's inability to afford transportation for investigative procedures threatened to delay progress on the case. Through project-supported transportation assistance, Princess and key witnesses were able to participate in the investigation, contributing to the case being charged to court and subsequently committed to the High Court. Beyond the legal challenges, Princess also experienced social stigma that forced her to withdraw from school. Recognising the importance of her emotional wellbeing and continued education, the project provided psychosocial support and engaged school authorities to facilitate her safe return to the classroom.

Today, Princess has resumed her education while awaiting trial. Her experience demonstrates how practical financial assistance, psychosocial support and institutional collaboration can help prevent poverty and stigma from undermining survivors' access to justice and other fundamental rights. Although the judicial process remains ongoing, her progress represents an important step towards restoring hope, dignity and opportunities for a child survivor.

Through support from the UNDP, the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law – Sierra Leone (CARL-SL) continues to strengthen survivor-centred interventions and promote access to justice for vulnerable survivors.

No child should be denied justice because of poverty or forced out of school because of stigma.

Success story 3 – Kailahun District: From Survivor to Advocate: Hawa's Journey from Stigma to Justice and Empowerment

In Kailahun District, survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) often face significant barriers to accessing justice and support, including stigma, discrimination, fear and social isolation. For many, the trauma of abuse is compounded by the silence and rejection they experience within their communities.

For Hawa a 17-year-old, these challenges were a painful reality. Following an experience of sexual violence, she found herself ostracized and without a safe environment in which to seek help or begin her recovery. However, through the support provided under the project, Hawa accessed essential medical care, psychosocial counselling and legal representation, enabling her to begin rebuilding her life while pursuing justice. In a space of three months, her perpetrator was convicted, marking what was reported as a historic milestone for her chiefdom and demonstrating the importance of survivor-centered support and effective access to justice.

Today, Hawa has transformed her painful experience into a source of strength and inspiration. She now serves as a youth peer educator, engaging young people and raising awareness about SGBV prevention, survivors' rights and the

importance of speaking out against sexual violence. Through her advocacy, she has reached more than 800 young people, encouraging greater awareness, responsibility and community action against SGBV.

Hawa's journey demonstrates that when survivors receive timely support, protection and access to justice, they can move beyond victimization and become powerful advocates for change within their communities. Her transformation from a survivor who once faced stigma and isolation into a youth advocate illustrates the far-reaching impact of survivor-centred interventions.

Nevertheless, Hawa's experience also highlights the reality that many survivors continue to suffer in silence, unable to access the medical, psychosocial, legal and protection services they need. Expanding these services and strengthening community awareness remain critical to ensuring that no survivor is left behind.

Her story is a reminder that justice restores hope, support rebuilds confidence, and empowered survivors can become agents of lasting community change.

Success story 4 – Moyamba District: From inheritance dispute to economic independence: Isata reclaims her farmland in Moyamba district.

For many widows in Sierra Leone, the death of a husband can mark the beginning of another painful struggle: the fight to inherit their homes, land and other marital assets. Despite existing legal protections, women married under customary rites, and muslim laws often face discrimination, family pressure and attempts by relatives of their deceased husbands to deprive them of property they are legally entitled to inherit. For Isata, 45 years widow in Moyamba District, this was a reality that threatened not only her livelihood but also the future of her four children.

Following the death of her husband, Isata found herself in a difficult situation when some members of her late husband's family attempted to take control of her farmland. The land was her primary source of livelihood and an essential means of providing for her children. Losing it would have significantly undermined her ability to sustain her household and keep her children in school.

With limited resources and little knowledge of how to navigate the justice system, challenging the family's actions initially appeared overwhelming. However, through the legal aid support provided under an initiative implemented by the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law – Sierra Leone (CARL-SL), with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Isata gained access to the legal assistance she needed to pursue her inheritance rights.

Through the project's legal aid clinic, she received representation and guidance from a trained paralegal, alongside mediation support grounded in the provisions of the Devolution of Estates Act, 2007. This intervention helped addressed the inheritance dispute and strengthened her ability to assert her legal entitlement to her late husband's property.

Today, Isata has regained control of her farmland and is cultivating three acres of rice. The land has become a vital source of income and food security for her household, enabling her to support the education and welfare of her four children. What was once a source of uncertainty and distress has become a foundation for renewed hope, economic independence and family stability. Beyond the personal benefits, Isata's experience has encouraged other widows in her community to speak out and seek assistance when faced with similar inheritance disputes. Her determination has helped raise awareness about women's inheritance rights and demonstrated the importance of accessible legal aid in addressing discriminatory practices. Project monitoring further indicates a 30% increase in inheritance claims filed in the district, reflecting growing awareness and willingness among women to pursue their legal rights.

Isata's story illustrates how timely legal assistance, community-level mediation and awareness of existing legal protections can make a meaningful difference in the lives of vulnerable women. It also demonstrates that access to justice extends beyond resolving legal disputes; it can protect livelihoods, strengthen household resilience, keep children in school and restore the dignity of women who might otherwise be left economically and socially vulnerable.

For Isata, reclaiming her farmland was more than winning an inheritance dispute. It was reclaiming her independence, protecting her children's future and finding the confidence to inspire other women to stand up for their rights.

Success story 5 – Kailahun District: From losing her inheritance to reclaiming her rights: Zainab's journey to justice in Kailahun District

For Zainab, 38 years, a resident of Kailahun District, the death of her husband brought not only emotional pain but also an unexpected struggle to protect her property and secure her future. Following her husband's death, Zainab faced resistance from members of her late husband's family, who challenged her right to inherit and retain ownership of the property they had shared during their marriage.

Despite the challenges, Zainab remained determined to defend her rights and protect her home and farmland. However, navigating the complexities of inheritance rights and overcoming family resistance proved difficult. Her situation highlighted the challenges many women face in accessing justice, particularly when it comes to property ownership and inheritance following the death of a spouse.

Through the intervention and support of the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law – Sierra Leone (CARL-SL), with funds from UNDP, Zainab received assistance to pursue her inheritance rights and challenge the attempts to deprive her of her marital property. With this support, she successfully secured ownership of her home and farmland, restoring her sense of security, dignity and independence.

Today, Zainab's experience has become a source of inspiration for other women in her community. Having overcome the challenges surrounding her inheritance, she now actively participates in local community engagements, sharing her experience and raising awareness about women's property and inheritance rights. Through her advocacy, she is helping other women understand their legal entitlements, speak out against discriminatory practices and seek justice when their rights are abused.

Zainab's story demonstrates how access to justice can transform lives, strengthen women's empowerment and challenge harmful social practices that undermine women's rights. Beyond reclaiming her property, she has become an advocate for change, using her experience to encourage other women to stand up for their rights and avoid the injustices she once faced.

Her journey is a powerful reminder that justice is not only about reclaiming what has been lost; it is also about restoring dignity, securing livelihoods and empowering women to become agents of change in their communities.