

ECOWAS Parliament seeks legal frameworks to tackle child exploitation, street vulnerability

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Parliament is ramping up efforts to combat child exploitation and the growing number of children living in street situations across the sub-region. This comes as it convenes a high-level joint committee meeting in Freetown from April 8 to 12, 2026. The five-day meeting, hosted in Sierra Leone, brought together key parliamentary committees, including those on Social Affairs, Gender, Women Empowerment and Persons with Disabilities; Legal Affairs and Human Rights; Trade, Customs and Free Movement; and Political Affairs, Peace, Security and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM).

The gathering themed “Parliamentary Approaches to Safeguarding Children in Street Situations and Addressing Child Exploitation in the ECOWAS Region,” reflecting growing regional concerns over the rising number of vulnerable children living and working on the streets. According to a statement issued by the regional bloc, the meeting aligns with the Parliament's legislative oversight mandate to ensure effective implementation of child protection commitments by Member States. West African countries have previously adopted key policy frameworks, including the ECOWAS Child Policy and Strategic Plan of Action (2019–2030) and the ECOWAS Gender Strategy, both designed to prevent and respond to child vulnerability. “However, despite these frameworks, the region continues to grapple with worsening socio-economic conditions that expose children to heightened risks. “Across the sub-region, factors such as economic hardship, rapid urbanization, displacement, and recurring humanitarian crises have contributed to a surge in the number of children forced into street life,” the statement read. These children, as the Parliament noted, face multiple and overlapping threats, including exploitation, hazardous labour, violence, substance abuse, and limited access to essential protection services. While many ECOWAS Member States have established legal frameworks to

safeguard children, challenges persist. “These include weak implementation, inadequate funding, and poor coordination among relevant agencies, all of which undermine the effectiveness of existing laws and policies. “The situation is further complicated by the region's porous borders and high levels of intra-regional migration. “Variations in legal standards, child protection procedures, data systems, and enforcement capacity across countries have created protection gaps, particularly for children who cross borders or engage in informal economic activities,” the statement added.

Against this backdrop, the ECOWAS Parliament emphasized the urgent need for harmonized legislative approaches, stronger parliamentary oversight, and deeper antiparliamentary collaboration to ensure that regional commitments translate into concrete protections for children. As part of the meeting, participants are expected to review Sierra Leone's national child protection strategies and service delivery systems, with a view to identifying best practices that can be replicated across the region. The programme will also feature field-oriented



and participatory sessions, allowing lawmakers and stakeholders to engage directly with ongoing interventions and assess their impact on vulnerable children.