



**Following another death from FGM in Sierra Leone, 130 women's rights groups around the world call on the government to criminalize FGM**

**KENYA, NAIROBI, February 1, 2022** - Following yet another tragic death in Sierra Leone due to female genital mutilation (FGM), women's rights organizations across the country and around the world have come together to co-sign an open letter calling on the Government of Sierra Leone to criminalize FGM and protect women and girls from this harmful practice.

On 20 December 2021, 21-year-old Maseray Sei died from acute bleeding and shock a day after being subjected to FGM, and this was confirmed by the post-mortem carried out on 14 January. A few days following Maseray's death, in a different region, a 15-year-old girl was admitted to hospital for urgent treatment after suffering serious complications due to FGM.

Sadly, these are not isolated incidents in Sierra Leone. Many women and girls in recent years have died or experienced devastating harm as a result of FGM, and during the latest holiday period, there were widespread reports of hundreds of young women and girls being cut.

Sierra Leone has one the highest FGM prevalence rates in Africa, with 83% of women and girls aged between 15 and 49 years having undergone the procedure according to the 2019 Demographic Health Survey.

Internationally recognized as a gross human rights violation, FGM involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. It is a form of violence against women and girls, a manifestation of gender inequality and discrimination, and recognized by the United Nations as a form of torture.

Short term complications arising from FGM include hemorrhaging; infections; severe pain; urine retention and other urinary tract problems; and psychological trauma. As with Maseray Sei and other victims, FGM can also result in death.

Longer term effects include chronic infections, cysts, and ulcers; painful scar tissue; problems affecting the bladder, uterus, and kidneys; sexual health issues; mental health issues; infertility; menstrual complications; difficulties during childbirth, and an increased risk of infant and maternal mortality.

**Sierra Leone's government is failing in its duty to protect women and girls from FGM**

Despite the harm caused by FGM, the Government of Sierra Leone has failed to criminalize this harmful practice. The country's penal code does not specifically prohibit FGM, and there have been no known prosecutions relating to FGM. Furthermore, gender discrimination in

Sierra Leone means that existing laws that are meant to uphold the rights of women and girls are not being effectively implemented to protect against FGM or punish perpetrators.

The failure to criminalize FGM has been further aggravated by a widespread lack of political will to end this harmful practice and the failure by the State to explicitly condemn FGM.

Following the deaths from FGM of 19-year-old Fatmata Turay in 2016, 10-year-old Marie Kamara, and now Maseray's death, organizations in Sierra Leone campaigning against FGM wrote each time to the President and Attorney General in office but never received a reply. This silence is deafening.

Of particular concern is how various politicians seeking election have made political pronouncements in support of FGM, with some even offering to pay for women and girls to be cut.

### **Sierra Leone must urgently enact and enforce a comprehensive anti-FGM law**

The signatories of this open letter call on the Government of Sierra Leone, H.E. President Julius Maada Bio, and Attorney General Mohamed Lamin Tarawalley Esq. to urgently enact a law that explicitly bans FGM for all ages, puts in place adequate measures to protect against and eliminate FGM and gives survivors and the families of victims a means to access justice.

We strongly condemn the actions of politicians who are supporting FGM. We also commend the politicians and other duty bearers who have spoken out and taken action against this harmful practice, and we call on others to join them.

We ask the State to prosecute all offenders putting the lives of women and girls at risk. This includes a comprehensive and swift police investigation and prosecution of all those responsible for the death of Maseray Sei. It is vital that justice is served in this case, and is seen to be served so that it can deter others from committing FGM.

### **Why Sierra Leone needs a law explicitly criminalizing FGM**

A law explicitly banning FGM in Sierra Leone would make it clear to its citizens that FGM is a human rights violation and a form of gender-based violence. It would define the government's obligations in providing protection to women and girls, demonstrate political will and intent, and communicate that the State is ready to take action.

A law against FGM would empower women and girls to recognize and assert their human rights and to seek and receive protection when vulnerable. For those whose rights have been violated, a law would provide legal recourse within the criminal justice system, and create tools to hold perpetrators to account. It would also act as an important deterrent to would-be offenders.

Having a legal framework which states FGM is unacceptable and unlawful is a vital component of promoting the social and behavioral change needed to encourage people at the community level to abandon the practice.

To ensure the full implementation of the law, a Multi-Sectoral Approach (MSA) should be applied which brings together state and non-state actors working in collaboration. Authorities need to deliver adequate funding to grassroots organizations and other stakeholders, and legislation should be accompanied by community engagement, awareness raising about the dangers of FGM, and empowerment of women and girls.

As part of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, all countries - including Sierra Leone - are duty-bound to measure the extent to which FGM occurs amongst their population. It is vital that information is gathered and made publically available. Such data is invaluable in efforts to end FGM because it makes clear the need for action, and provides a baseline from which the scale up and effectiveness of interventions to end it can be measured.

Importantly, by criminalizing FGM, Sierra Leone's government would be meeting their commitments to the African Union's Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol) and to the UN Convention on the Elimination Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

We, the undersigned, call on the Government of Sierra Leone to honor its national, regional, and international human rights obligations and finally fulfill its duty of care in protecting girls and women from FGM.

SIGNED BY:

1. A Girl At A Time Sierra Leone
2. A Well Informed Adolescent (AWA) Initiative (Nigeria)
3. Aberdeen Women's Centre (Scotland)
4. African Women Rights Advocates (regional)
5. Amazonian Initiative Movement (AIM) (Sierra Leone)
6. AMFE (Association pour le Maintien des Filles à l'École) (Senegal)
7. Arab Women Organization of Jordan (AWO)
8. Association Beogo-Neere (Burkina Faso)
9. Association de Developpement Durable et Equitable ADDE (Tunisia)
10. Association des Blogueurs du Bénin (AB-Bénin)
11. Association des Femmes Juristes de Côte D'Ivoire (AFJCI)
12. Association of the Egyptian Female Lawyers (AEFL)
13. Association Mairie des Jeunes du Bénin
14. Association pour l'Education et la Santé de la Femme et de l'Enfant (AESFE) (Mauritania)
15. Better Lives Foundation (Sierra Leone/ UK)
16. Bai Bureh Heritage Foundation (Sierra Leone)
17. Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR)
18. Centre de Formation en Mécanismes de Protection des Droits Humains (Bénin)
19. Coalition des Volontaires pour la Paix et le Développement (Democratic Republic of the Congo)
20. Commission Indépendante des Droits de l'Homme en Afrique du Nord (CIDH) (Morocco)
21. Conseil National du Dialogue Social (Tunisia)
22. Construisons Ensemble le Monde (ONG CEM) (Democratic Republic of the Congo)
23. Cotton Tree Foundation SL (Sierra Leone)
24. DAPTAR (Russia)
25. David Sylvester Gindeh Memorial Counselling Foundation SL (Sierra Leone)
26. Droits Pour Tous (Côte d'Ivoire)

27. EducAid (Sierra Leone)
28. Education for Development (UK)
29. End FGC Singapore
30. End FGM Canada
31. End FGM European Network
32. Equality Now (international)
33. Faith Word in Action (Democratic Republic of the Congo)
34. Femme Collective (Sierra Leone)
35. Fenix Helsinki (Finland)
36. Forum Against Harmful Practices (FAHP) Sierra Leone
37. Forward UK
38. Forward for Women (Germany)
39. Fondation des Jeunes Amazones pour le Développement (FJAD-ONG) (Bénin)
40. Fraternité UK
41. Friends of Diabetes International
42. Friends of Diabetes Sierra Leone
43. Girl Child Network Sierra Leone
44. Girl 2 Girl (G2G) (Sierra Leone)
45. Girls Empowerment Sierra Leone (GESL)
46. Girls Not Brides (international)
47. Girlkind Kenya
48. Girl Up Vine Club Sierra Leone
49. Global Comfort
50. Global Woman P.E.A.C.E. Foundation
51. Hawa Trust Foundation (Sierra Leone, UK)
52. Honour for Women and Girls (Sierra Leone)
53. Hope for Women (HFW) (Maldives)
54. Human Rights Priority (Bénin)
55. #IAmKadijah Movement (Sierra Leone)
56. Ifrah Foundation (Ireland, Somalia)
57. Inspired Girls Voices (Sierra Leone)
58. Institut Tonafo (Bénin)
59. Integrate UK
60. Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practises (IAC)
61. Joy for Children (Uganda)
62. Katanya Women's Development Association (KaWDA) (Sierra Leone)
63. Kalyanamitra (Indonesia)
64. Kadirat (Tunisia)
65. KMG Ethiopia
66. L'Association Malienne pour le Suivi et l'Orientation des Pratiques Traditionnelles (AMSOPT) (Mali)
67. La Fraternite Guinéenne (Guinea)
68. La Palabre (Senegal)
69. LIFT (Sierra Leone)
70. Mains-Universelles (Bénin)
71. Malaysian Doctors for Women and Children
72. Marem Group (Russia)
73. Men End FGM Foundation (Kenya)
74. Mehn Pikin Register (Sierra Leone)
75. Monde Sans Guerre et Sans Violence (Mauritania)
76. Musawah (international)
77. Muslims for Progressive Values (international, USA)
78. National Council of Women Leaders (India)
79. National Movement for Emancipation and Progress (NAMEP) (Sierra Leone)
80. Native Consortium Research Center (Sierra Leone)

81. Network AID (Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia)
82. Not In My Name (Sierra Leone)
83. ONG CO-GNA (Niger)
84. On Our Radar (Sierra Leone, UK)
85. One Voice (Sierra Leone)
86. PfefferminzGreen e.V. (Germany)
87. Plan International Sierra Leone
88. Plateforme des Femmes des Partis Politiques et de la Société Civile (Côte d'Ivoire)
89. Praise Foundation (Sierra Leone)
90. Purposeful (Sierra Leone)
91. Raising Teens Uganda
92. Reseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Developpement (Bénin)
93. Reseau de Recherche pour l'Intelligence Artificielle et les Droits de l'Homme (Bénin)
94. Réseau Nigérien des Défenseurs des Droits Humains (RNDDH) (Niger)
95. Safe Engage Foundation (Kenya)
96. Sahiyo U.S.
97. Self Help and Development Everywhere (SHADE) (Sierra Leone)
98. Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI) (international)
99. Sisters in Islam (Malaysia)
100. Society for the Improvement of Rural People (SIRP Nigeria)
101. Solida-TIC Benin
102. Southall Black Sisters (UK)
103. Stop FGM Iran
104. Tamareneh Gender Development (Sierra Leone)
105. Tanzania Women Lawyers Association (TAWLA) (Tanzania)
106. Terres des Femmes (Germany)
107. The Five Foundation (international)
108. The Oman Association for Human Rights
109. The Orchid Project (international)
110. The Village Rock (TVR) (Sierra Leone)
111. The YP Foundation (India)
112. There is No Limit Foundation (Guinea/ USA)
113. Third Way Movement Sierra Leone
114. Uncut/VOICES Press (international)
115. Unir pour Agir (Bénin)
116. Uthema (Maldives)
117. U.S. End FGM/C Network
118. Verre d'Eau Fraîche (VEF) (Bénin)
119. Virtual University for International Relations
120. WAYVE Foundation (India)
121. WeSpeakOut (India)
122. Wi Gial Pikin Dem Foundation Sierra Leone (WGF-SL)
123. Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society Sierra Leone (WAVES-SL)
124. Women Alive (Lebanon)
125. Women's Advocacy and Agricultural Development Organization (WAADO) (Sierra Leone)
126. YA-G-TU (Mali)
127. YESS London
128. Youth Action Hub Guinea
129. Youth Association for Development (YAD) (Pakistan)
130. YouthBuild Sierra Leone

END

**Notes to Editor**

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35 countries are represented amongst the NGOs that have signed the letter