



7th March 2022

Open Letter

Addressed to:

African Union
 British High Commission
 Chinese Embassy
 Economic Community of West African States
 European Union
 Mano River Union Secretariat
 United States Embassy
 United Nations

Dear Your Excellency,

International Community's Support to Encourage the Government of Sierra Leone to uphold their commitment on Women's Empowerment

We, the undersigned organisations, are gravely concerned over the current impasse between the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) and the Freetown City Council (FCC). As the standoff drags on, it is the city of Freetown and, ultimately, the people of Sierra Leone that suffer.

We also note a lack of movement on the case of Madam Lara Taylor-Pearce, who was suspended last year, with a tribunal put in place to investigate allegations about her work. While different, these two situations both reveal a chilling climate for women's empowerment and leadership in Sierra Leone, notwithstanding laudable efforts as can be seen in both the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) policy and efforts to develop and pass a related Bill.

Current national attempts to resolve these issues have not worked. As Sierra Leone gets ready to celebrate International Women's Day (IWD) on March 8, 2022, which fittingly has as its



theme, "Time to break the bias," we are writing to the international community to help break the bias that women in leadership continue to face in Sierra Leone. Given your commitment to supporting the government to promote development that is grounded in women's empowerment and gender equality, we urge you, as our international development partners, to be more robust in holding the Government of Sierra Leone accountable in keeping with its national and international commitments.

Let us elaborate on how and why the two cases mentioned above illustrate a pressing need for your attention and intervention, and provide opportunities for you to show your unwavering commitment to making gender equality and women's empowerment a critical national priority.

In November 2021, the Government suspended the Auditor-General, Madam Lara Taylor-Pearce, and one of her deputies. The reasons for the suspension have not been made public. The Government set up a tribunal to investigate the affairs of the Audit Service Sierra Leone and, in particular, the performance of the Auditor General. To date, the tribunal has not commenced a single hearing. The Auditor-General filed a case in the Supreme Court challenging her suspension. Without any reasonable explanation, to date, the matter has not been listed for hearing and there is no indication whether it will be listed for hearing. The basic constitutional human rights of the Auditor General to access the court and a fair trial have been denied.

In the past couple of years, the Mayor of Freetown, Madam Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, has been continuously hampered in the execution of her duties. She has been subjected to an investigation by the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Parliamentary Accounts Committee and an Administrative Inquiry 'to examine the general administration of the Freetown City Council (the FCC or Council), including assessing the quality of financial management and to recommend ways of remedying the key challenges undermining effective service delivery.' She has been singled out for multiple investigations despite allegations of corruption and concerns raised about others in the FCC, such as the Chief Administrator, as well as allegations of corruption in other institutions. These investigations against the Mayor are in direct contradiction with the statement made by the President in 2019 when he launched the Transform Freetown initiative and pledged that his "government is committed to working for Freetown and in making our Freetown a better city for all of us."



We are disappointed about the perceived harassment of these two women who hold senior public office and are concerned about the impact on other women in the public sphere. As you know, and has been frequently mentioned in Election Observation Mission (EOM) reports, there is also a dearth of women in senior public positions in the country. According to the Politico newspaper, in March 2021, only 18.5% of cabinet ministers are women, and women make up a paltry 12.3% in Parliament. There are fewer still in other public offices. As a result, GoSL committed to mainstream "gender into all development and political processes in Sierra Leone."

To its credit, as aforementioned, the Government developed a GEWE policy. They committed to undertake measures to ensure that more women take up public offices. The Government also committed to translate this policy into law, although the Bill submitted to Parliament could be more comprehensive.

In addition to its national commitments, Sierra Leone has several regional and international obligations it has ratified and is obliged to comply with. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. Sierra Leone is also committed to realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), of which SDG 5 targets ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere and ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.

As international development partners working in Sierra Leone and supporting the country's development agenda, these are obligations, commitments, and declarations that we know are central to your work. It is important to ensure that these commitments are fully complied with. We must go beyond rhetoric, and support meaningful change for the women of Sierra Leone. We call on you, as independent outside voices, to work with the government and the citizens of Sierra Leone to "break the bias" against these two women, and to facilitate a favourable resolution of the two above-mentioned issues. Sierra Leone needs more women in leadership, and for this, an environment that is conducive to their participation is crucial. At the same time, it is important to note that these women represent only two examples of a struggle that countless other women in Sierra Leone face, often without a platform to publicise their cause. While often nameless and faceless, this letter is a call to action for them all.



Without empowerment, about 52% of our population will remain marginalised. It is incumbent on you to use whatever channel you have at your disposal to emphasise this message and ensure that the Government of Sierra Leone takes concrete measures to redress this marginalisation. We thank you in advance for your attention to these matters.

We stand ready to work with you, the government, and all Sierra Leoneans to make Sierra Leone a better place for women's empowerment and gender equality. **We urge you to stand with the women of Sierra Leone. We encourage you to do more.**

For further details, or clarification, kindly contact Madam Valnora Edwin (+23276620700), Public Relations Officer, the 50/50 Group or Madam Basita Michael, Governing Officer, ILRAJ on (+23278000001).

Sincerely,



B. Michael

Valnora Edwin (50/50 PRO) and Basita Michael (Director, ILRAJ)
(on behalf of the below-listed organisations)

1. The Fifty-Fifty Group Sierra Leone
2. The Institute for Legal Research and Advocacy (ILRAJ)
3. African Women Leadership Network (AWLN)–SL Chapter
4. AdvocAid
5. Campaign for Good Governance (CGG)
6. Legal Access through Women Yearning For Equality, Rights and Social Justice (LAWYERS)
7. Women's Shadow Parliament (WSP)
8. West African Network for Peacebuilding, Sierra Leone (WANEP-SL)