



Joint press release – 04 October 2016

DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL - SIERRA LEONE AND PLAN INTERNATIONAL-SIERRA LEONE LAUNCH PROGRAMMETO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN SIERRA LEONE.

Freetown– Defence for Children International Sierra Leone (DCI-SL) and Plan International - Sierra Leone launched today a national campaign to end all forms of gender-based violence (GBV) against girls and young women, such as child and forced marriage, teenage pregnancy and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), and to promote their economic empowerment. This campaign is an integral part of the Girls Advocacy Alliance (GAA) project, which is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

“Sierra Leone has a great opportunity to save hundreds of girls and young women’s lives by adopting required changes,” Mr. Abdul Manaff Kemokai, Executive Director, DCI-SL said. “This campaign is a cornerstone project to advance girls and young women’s rights to protection, justice, empowerment, and access to essential services in a country where gender-based violence rates are one of the highest in the world.”

Experts from the two child rights organisations reminded that girls and young women in Sierra Leone continue to be exposed to traditional harmful practices and various forms of sexual violence. They called upon all Sierra Leoneans to show solidarity with girls and young women exposed to and survivors of gender based violence in Sierra Leone.

Data from the 2008 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) indicated that 91.3% of females aged 15-59 years had experienced FGM while 56% were married before reaching 18 years of age. Currently, no law exists in Sierra Leone prohibiting and criminalising FGM. Child marriage is banned under the Child Rights Act of 2007 but customary law continues to allow the marriage of children aged sixteen years and above based on parental consent.

Furthermore, according to The Overseas Development Institute’s (ODI) 2012 report, 99% of sexual violence cases reported to the Family Support Unit and the Rainbo Centres are perpetuated against girls. While laws have been put in place to counter GBV, implementation is clearly lacking. For example, the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 prohibits forced sex in marriage and protects the girl child from abuse by teachers, religious and traditional authorities and stipulates stringent minimum sentences for offenders. However, in practice, it has been noted that women continue to face discrimination under formal, Islamic, and customary laws. Their rights and position are largely contingent on (local) customary laws and the ethnic group to which they belong.

Moreover, GBV and discrimination also negatively affect girls and young women’s equal access to and completion of post-primary education, and contributes to their de facto exclusion from job and entrepreneurship opportunities. Vice versa, girls and young women’s educational and economic exclusion, which is highly prevalent across all four geographical regions (the Northern Province, Eastern Province, Southern Province and the Western Area) and fourteen districts of Sierra Leone, only reinforce their vulnerability to gender-based violence. During periods of school shutdowns in the 2014-15 academic year, it has been estimated that 15,000 girls became pregnant, therefore showing the pressure under

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which they are consistently put. While pregnant girls face serious discrimination, the stigmatisation is even grater when they are not married.

Bearing in mind the various challenges facing girls and young women in Sierra Leone, Defence for Children International – Sierra Leone and Plan International - Sierra Leone are committed to reinforce existing child protection systems and enhance the economic empowerment of girls and young women.

To do so, DCI-SL and PLAN-SL will strengthen the capacities of civil society organisations (CSOs) and networks, especially member organisations of the Child Rights Coalition Sierra Leone, in establishing and running advocacy and awareness-raising programmes for girls and young women’s rights and economic empowerment.

Moreover, advocacy and lobby activities for the review and/or enforcement and implementation of local by-laws on preventing early marriage, child FGM, and sexual exploitation and abuse in schools, will be conducted.

Additionally, DCI-Sierra Leone and Plan International - Sierra Leone will take appropriate measures to ensure that girls and young women who are victims of gender-based violence can not only effectively access justice but also access crucial services, including post-primary education, jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities.

“With this campaign, Sierra Leone will become one of the leading African nations to take effective measures to increase public support, at all levels, for girls’ and young women’s (equal) access to post-primary education as well as job and entrepreneurship opportunities,” Mr. Kemokai said.

The child rights experts also called on local businesses to “increasingly demonstrate a strong commitment for ensuring equal opportunities for young women to be economically empowered and protect themselves against gender based violence.”

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