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Press statement

Victory for pregnant girls in Sierra Leone

ABUJA, Nigeria, Dec 12 – The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice has found that the government of Sierra Leone breached the right of pregnant girls to education by prohibiting pregnant school girls from accessing school.

In a succinct and powerful judgement the Court found that the government had not only put in place a discriminatory policy barring pregnant girls from school but had also failed to put in place measures to reduce teenage pregnancies in line with the National Strategy for the Reduction of Teen Pregnancies, which was adopted after the civil war.

Further, the court found that the government had discriminated against the girls by setting up parallel schools that were suboptimal and limiting in that girls would only be taught four subjects and learn for only three days a week.

In a landmark decision for the West African region and Africa in general, the Court declared the ban discriminatory and ordered the government of Sierra Leone to lift it with immediate effect. Further the court ordered the government of Sierra Leone to put in place measures including social programmes to address increased numbers of teenage pregnancies and sensitize the communities against discrimination.

Speaking in Abuja at the sidelines of the judgment reading, Miss Hannah Yambasu Executive Director Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society (W.A.V.E.S) said she was overjoyed. “This victory belongs to the girls in Sierra Leone who have been degraded and dehumanized because of their status since 2014. Now our government in Sierra Leone has no option but to comply with their obligations as declared by the Court.”

WAVES, Child Welfare Society, Equality Now and Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa IHRDA filed the case against the Sierra Leone Government in May 2018.

Ms Judy Gitau, Africa Regional Coordinator at Equality Now was also at the court as the agent of the girls and was excited by the outcome of their case. This is a great victory!!! Finally the girls have had their day in court and have emerged victorious. The ECOWAS court has given them their voices back and by that a chance at life again.”

Amnesty International who were Amicus Curiae in the case were also present at the judgment reading.

The Court sought to set the record straight regarding what a policy was since the government of Sierra Leone had initially denied the existence of a policy and claimed it was an unfortunate statement by their minister. The Court held that the government took what was a sporadic practice and entrenched it as state policy banning girls from accessing school on account of their status.

The Court specifically held that:



- There exists a policy which was discriminatory against pregnant school girls in Sierra Leone as it barred pregnant school girls from attending mainstream schools. Consequently, the court held that the Government was in breach of its commitments and responsibility under both local and international law particularly Articles 2, 3, 17, 18, 25 of the African Charter; Article 21 and 28a of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Articles 1 and 3 of the Convention Against Discrimination in Education.
- With regard to alternative schools for the pregnant girls, the Court held that the establishment of separate schools for pregnant with four taught subjects operating three days a week was discriminatory and a violation of the right to equal education.
- The Court therefore ordered that the prohibitive policy be revoked with immediate effect and that the Government of Sierra Leone takes steps to abolish the alternative schools established for pregnant girls.
- The Court also asked the Government of Sierra Leone to develop strategies and nationwide programmes that focus on reversing negative societal attitudes that support the discrimination and bias against pregnant girls. These strategies and programmes must enable teenage mothers to attend school.
- The Government of Sierra Leone was also ordered to integrate Sexual Reproductive Health Rights in school curriculum and to increase knowledge on family planning and contraceptive to address the high rate of teenage pregnancy.

ENDS

Editor's notes:

- **Background of sexual violence in Sierra Leone**

Sexual violence remains widespread in Sierra Leone with women and girls, who constitute more than 50 percent of the population, bearing the brunt of these violations. In 2018, the Family Unit of the Sierra Leone Police recorded 8,505 rape cases including 2,579 cases that involved minors. Admittedly, many more went unreported owing to the existing gaps in the country's reporting systems as well as stigma and shame that is associated with this violation. The situation became so dire that the Head of State declared rape a national emergency in 2019.

- **About WAVES**

Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society (WAVES) is a registered indigenous non-governmental organization with its vision, mission and values geared towards women's empowerment and protection. WAVES strives towards the achievement of a non-violent, non-discriminatory and non-exploitative environment for women and children (especially the girl-child); an environment that has respect for humanity, dignity and equality before the law.

- **About Equality Now**

Equality Now is an international non-governmental, human rights organization that was founded in 1992 to advance the rights of women and girls across the world. The organization holds governments



responsible for ending legal inequality, sex trafficking, sexual violence and harmful practices, such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and "child marriage". While working through various projects, Equality Now champions for legal and systemic change by setting important legal precedents and exposing barriers that hinder access to justice.

Equality Now has therefore been working with WAVES, Defence for Children International (DCI) Sierra Leone, Women's Partnership for Justice and Peace (WPJP), Graceland Sierra Leone, Child Welfare Society (CWS), and the Education for All Coalition – Sierra Leone, to call on the government to lift the ban on pregnant girls attending regular schools; to ensure that schools are safe spaces for girls; and to ensure that perpetrators of sexual violence against girls are punished.

- **About We are Purposeful**

Purposeful is a feminist movement-building hub for adolescent girls. We amplify girls' voices, resource their resistance, build solidarity between and across girls' movements, catalyse collaborative philanthropy and support innovation in grassroots programming with and for girls.

Purposeful convened a coalition for girls' education in Sierra Leone, launching a political advocacy campaign underpinned by media outreach to bring attention to the deep injustice of Sierra Leone's ban on pregnant girls' school attendance.

- **The Coalition for Girls Education**

It comprises over 30 organizations among them national NGOs, UN Agencies and international NGOs that focus on conveying the importance of girls' access to education, sparking a national conversation on the impact of the ban of the rights of girls in Sierra Leone. In addition, the Coalition for Girls Education is a subset of the Sierra Leone Adolescent Girls Network and works to empower adolescent girls with improved health, social, economic and cognitive assets while protecting their human rights and elevating their status in their communities.

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