

To
H.E. President Julius Maada Bio
State Avenue
Freetown
Sierra Leone

Your Excellency,
President of the State of Sierra Leone, Mr. Julius Maada Bio, Berlin, 24 February 2022

Following yet another tragic death in Sierra Leone due to female genital mutilation (FGM), **women's and human rights organizations across Germany** have come together – in support of women's and human rights organizations across Sierra Leone - to address you, honorable Mr. President, in a plea to the Government of Sierra Leone to **criminalize FGM and protect women and girls in Sierra Leone** 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 2022. Sadly, this was not an exceptional case. Many women and girls in recent years have died or experienced devastating harm as a result of FGM, among them 10-year-old Marie Kamara in 2018 and 19-year-old Fatmata Turay in 2016 who both died after undergoing FGM.

FGM is internationally recognized as a grave human rights violation against women and girls. Short term complications and long-term effects include, to name just a few, hemorrhaging infections, severe pain, urinary tract problems, psychological trauma, cysts, fistula, sexual health issues, infertility, and an increased risk of infant and maternal mortality.

Only six countries worldwide have not yet criminalized FGM, among them Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone has one of the highest FGM prevalence rates worldwide, with 83 % of women and girls aged between 15 and 49 years having undergone the practice according to the 2019 Demographic Health Survey.

Sierra Leone has signed several international and regional agreements which strictly and unanimously condemn the harmful practice of FGM and prescribe its prohibition, through legislative measures backed by sanctions, in order to eradicate all forms of FGM. Further, the agreements demand of the signatory states to effectively protect women and girls at risk from FGM and its severe consequences. These international and regional agreements include, among others:

- The **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**, especially Article 6 Right to life and Article 7 Ban of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment
- The **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**, especially Article 10 Protection of Children and the Family and Article 12 Right to Health

- The **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, especially Article 2 Rights of children to gender equality and Article 19.1 Freedom from all forms of mental and physical violence and maltreatment. Article 24.3 explicitly requires states to take all effective and appropriate measures to abolish traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.
- The **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**, especially General Recommendation No. 14: Female Genital Mutilation
- The **Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa**, also known as "Maputo Protocol", especially Article 5 Elimination of Harmful Practices

We criticize that the Government of Sierra Leone, despite having signed the above agreements, has until now not introduced any kind of national legislation against FGM and has not adopted any kind of national action plan to reduce and finally eradicate the harmful practice. We criticize that the Government of Sierra Leone has launched a campaign called "Hands Off Our Girls", which, despite explicitly aiming at eliminating "all forms of abuses against woman and girls", excludes the recognition of FGM as harmful practice and therefore does not entail preventive and sanctioning measures against it. We criticize that the Government of Sierra Leone has so far not met its constitutional and humanitarian obligation to protect women and girls in Sierra Leone from FGM.

Dear Mr. President, we are not at all against upholding traditions and value the important social and cultural role of the Bondo secret society in Sierra Leone. We are further not opposed to initiation rituals for girls on the verge of womanhood. We recognize and fully respect the sovereignty of the Government and people of Sierra Leone to exert practices promoting social cohesion and national identification. However, we fiercely believe that these practices should not cause any harm to women and girls and violate any of their human rights. Therefore, we strongly oppose the harmful practice of FGM and its continuation in all possible contexts in the future. We demand a ban of all forms of FGM because it has been extensively proven, among others by medical scientists from Sierra Leone and numerous other places in the world, that FGM causes excessive, very often lifelong harm to women and girls. It gravely violates women's and girls' rights to health, security, and physical integrity, their right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and their right to life when the procedure results in death.

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. 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.

We as women's and human rights organizations from Germany, express our solidarity with women's and human rights organizations from Sierra Leone committed against all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls. We respect and value the Government, people, and culture of Sierra Leone. We do not reject traditions. **Our unique joint aim is to ensure the recognition, respect, and enforcement of the human rights of women and girls as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to protect women and girls from FGM.** German officials and the German public have also acknowledged the importance of preventing and eradicating FGM as pursued by organizations like the Forum Against Harmful Traditional Practices and Amazonian Initiative Movement in Sierra Leone by, among other things, awarding the AIM leader, Rugiatu Turay, with the Theodor-Haecker-Prize 2020 for her tireless commitment to ending FGM and protecting women and girls in Sierra Leone.

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.

SIGNED BY:

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| <p>1. TERRE DES FEMMES - Human Rights for Women, Berlin, Germany (Initiator)</p> |  <p>TERRE DES FEMMES Menschenrechte für die Frau e.V. www.frauenrechte.de</p> |
| <p>2. ACAT Germany (Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture), Hildesheim, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>3. ADRA Deutschland e.V., Berlin, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>4. Akifra - Aktionsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Frauenrechte e.V., Dresden, Germany</p> |  <p>Aktionsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Frauenrechte e.V.</p> |

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| <p>5. BAfF e.V., Bundesweite Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Psychosozialen Zentren für Flüchtlinge und Folteropfer, Berlin, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>6. Bread for the World – Protestant Development Service, Berlin, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>7. Federal Association of Vietnamese Refugees in the Federal Republic of Germany, Frankfurt, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>8. commit and act e.V. Germany, Aschaffenburg, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>9. Deutscher Caritas-Verband e.V. / Caritas Germany, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>10. Deutsches Medikamenten-Hilfswerk action medeor e.V., Toenisvorst, Germany</p> |  |

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| <p>11. Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung, Berlin, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>12. German Doctors e.V., Bonn, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>13. Johanniter International Assistance, Berlin, Germany</p> |  <p>JOHANNITER</p> |
| <p>14. LESSAN e.V. – Be The Changemaker!, Hamburg, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>15. medica mondiale e.V., Cologne, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>16. missio - Internationales Katholisches Missionswerk Ludwig Missionsverein KdöR, Munich, Germany</p> | <p>missio </p> |
| <p>17. One Day e.V., Hoesbach, Germany</p> |  |

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| <p>18. Pfefferminz Green e.V., Frankfurt, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>19. Plan International Deutschland e.V., Hamburg, Germany</p> |  |
| <p>20. TABU International e.V., Dortmund, Germany</p> |  <p>TABU INTERNATIONAL e.V. Gegen Genitalverstümmelung Für Frauen- und Kinderrechte</p> |
| <p>21. UCC Orphanage e.V., Veldenz, Germany</p> |  <p>UCC ORPHANAGE EVERY CHILD DESERVES A CHILDHOOD</p> |
| <p>22. Urgewald e.V., Sassenberg, Germany</p> |  <p>urgewald</p> |
| <p>23. Weltgebetstag der Frauen – Deutsches Komitee e.V., Stein, Germany</p> |  <p>© Weltgebetstag der Frauen – Deutsches Komitee e.V.</p> |