

**GIRLS MANIFESTO FOR CONSIDERATION BY POLITICAL PARTIES FOR  
THE JUNE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL, PARLIAMENTARY AND LOCAL COUNCIL  
ELECTIONS IN SIERRA LEONE**

**Facilitated by Defence for Children International**

**March 2023**

## **Introduction**

The Girls Manifesto represents the voice of over 300 girls and young women and 36 boys who are directly participating in the She Leads project that is being implemented by Defence for Children International Sierra Leone in collaboration with Plan International and Women's Forum Sierra Leone. The document was developed through focus group discussions that were conducted in Freetown, Bo, Kenema, Moyamba, Kambia and Makeni for the girls and young women and some male youths. Following consultations with the girls and boys, they prioritized 10 most important and critical issues that they think political parties must consider including in their manifestos for the June 24th 2023 Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Council Elections in Sierra Leone. The 10 critical issues include:

**1. Access to Quality Education-** Girls and Young Women acknowledge and appreciate the government for introducing the Free Quality Education programme and investing 12% of its annual budget towards Education since 2018 to 2023. We can confirm that this programme has significantly increased enrolment of children particularly girls in schools across the country. Our concerns and worries are that a new government might have a shift of priority, which may reverse or distort gains made. We therefore recommend that access to education remains a top priority for the next government. The government must further address challenges that have kept some children out of school or are in school but not learning as much. These include:

1. Establish more Junior and Senior Secondary Schools in rural communities to prevent risky migration of students from their communities to other communities or reduce distances covered by students to attend schools in other communities;
2. Improve on quality to ensure that all students are learning;
3. Eradicate other costs imposed by school administration and teachers.

**2. Diversify Post School Career opportunities-** Whilst it is great to acknowledge significant increase in number of students particularly girls passing transitional public exams and gaining requirements to progress to universities and other tertiary institutions, the outlets are very limited and universities and colleges have become overwhelmed. If the government does not expand and diversify post school outlets, there will soon come a time when students who have passed the West Africa Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) will not have space in the universities and other colleges. Therefore, political parties should critically think of good strategies for diversification of post school options. The options should be tailored to the needs of the society so that when students graduate, they can easily be employed including creating their own employments. We therefore recommend that:

1. As young women, beyond academic education, we need skills that can enable us operate machineries for mining companies, agricultural institutions, new technologies and other enterprises in the private sector;
2. We also need skills that can enable us create our own jobs. As Sierra Leone is preparing to expand the private sector, we need skills to fit into the new era;
3. Develop standardized apprenticeship and other forms of skills development programmes that can accommodate both in school and out of school youths.

### **3. Employment and Income Earning**

We are aware of some economic empowerment programmes implemented by the Ministry of Youths and other government institutions to address poverty and unemployment among women and youths. However, we are concerned that those that targeted youths such as the Car Wash project and the Fishing Boat projects were entirely skewed towards the male youths. For those that targeted women, example the Small Medium Enterprise programme only benefited older women who have been in business or trade for a long time and could meet the requirements to access the funds. Female youths were either entirely left out or only very few may have benefited. We therefore recommend that:

1. Next government ensures that youth targeted economic empowerment programmes are gender friendly and tailored to the needs of the society;
2. Introduce new programmes that are tailored to the needs of female youths;
3. Women targeted economic empowerment programmes should be inclusive enough to cater for all categories, age groups and levels of women in society and efforts should be made to bring in young women who have less experience or limited financial base;
4. Create more jobs that can equally employ female youths including prioritizing female youths;
5. Ensure that contractors of government contracts are obligated to employ significant number of women. A clause must always be included in adverts and contracts for this.

### **4. Participation in politics, governance and decision making**

Girls and young women have suffered so much discrimination and marginalization especially when it comes to political representation and participation. In schools, communities and homes, boys are always given preference, and these are reflected in the way our society is structured. For example, currently, the Executives of all Youth Councils across Sierra Leone are over dominated by the male youths. We are therefore calling on political parties to make commitment towards the following:

1. Review the guidelines and procedures for election of officers of youth councils from village, to chiefdom, to district, to regional and to national level, and ensure that there should be equal (50% each) male/female representation in the executive positions through free and fair elections;
2. Create more space for equal political representation and participation of girls and young women;
3. Remove all traditional and cultural barriers that prevent girls and women's elections into leadership positions;
4. More opportunities should be created for gender friendly youth leadership and participation in governance and decision making at national, district and community levels. For example, establishment of youth leadership groups that can directly participate in decision making processes of government programmes.

### **5. Girls Conference and Summits**

Efforts must be made by next government to put resources aside to support girls' annual summit or conference. There are many benefits that such conferences or summits can bring, which include, girls given opportunity to discuss and find solution to common issues that affect them

across the country, they can also analyze opportunities that exist, receive mentorship support from adult mentors, girls can work together, put their concerns and needs together and communicate them with the government in louder voice, and above all it can exemplify the status of girls in society.

#### **6. Implement of the progressive Gender friendly Acts and Pass the Child Rights Bill.**

The government has recently passed progressive gender friendly legislations in addition to the old ones to promote gender equality particularly in terms of equal participation in decision making and equal access to opportunities and public goods and services. The two most recent important legislations are the Gender Equality and Empowerment Act 2022, which provides for minimum 30% allocation of elected positions and political and other appointment to public offices to women and the Land Rights Act 2023, which provides for right to equal access of men and women to land and the Education. Additionally, girls and boys as well had put so much efforts towards review of the 2007 Child Rights Act and drafting a new Child Rights Bill 2022. However, the bill was not passed due to reasons that can best be explained by the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs and the leadership of the 5<sup>th</sup> Parliament of the Republic of Sierra Leone.

Whilst girls and young women appreciate government for these achievements, they recommend that political parties include in their manifesto's commitment to:

1. Fully implement these new progressive gender friendly Acts mentioned above;
2. Pass the Child Rights Bill;
3. Make special efforts to increase the number of female paramount chiefs and District Officers in the next five years.

#### **7. Health Care**

Recent reports on Sierra Leone have indicated that Sierra Leone have made significant progress in reducing maternal and infant mortality as well as teenage pregnancy due to increased access of women and girls to Sexual Reproductive Health Rights services. Girls and young women are however concerned that Sierra Leone still lacks basic health care facilities and services and several deaths are occurring due to lack of diagnostic facilities. We are therefore recommending that political parties make commitment towards the following:

1. Increase efforts to continue to reduce maternal and infant mortalities;
2. Increase access to SRHR services across the country;
3. Equip existing hospitals with modern diagnostic facilities and/or build new facilities that are accessible and affordable by the poorest;
4. Increase efforts to control diseases like malaria, typhoid, hepatitis B and any other that are killing people at a high scale;
5. Train and deploy more doctors, nurses and other health care workers across the country.

#### **8. Address Violence including Gender Based Violence**

In recent times including during the August 10 2022 protest, we saw high level of violence involving citizens and law enforcement officials in some parts of Sierra Leone including the capital Freetown. This led to the death of over 24 civilians and 5 police officers. Moreover, Gender Based Violence (GBV) remains one of the major life-threatening enemies of girls and young women.

Progress among girls in all sectors have been slow due to gender-based violence such as sexual harassment and exploitation. Thus, manifestos of political parties must include:

1. Peace building agenda (agenda to prevent violence and promote peace). Political parties must do everything possible to promote peace, prevent violence during and after elections;
2. Strategies to build on what has been achieved over the last five years in addressing sexual violence and should maintain the tempo;
3. More investment in prevention programmes particularly putting girls and young women in front in doing public education campaigns. There are vibrant girls and young women's led organisations that can now do effective campaigns if given funds;
4. Efforts to strengthen victims' care, protection, recovery and access to justice;
5. Expand victims centred programmes like the One Stop Centre initiative, Model Court and helpline (Toll Free Line).

### **9. Access to sufficient food (Food security)**

Sierra Leone is one of the hungriest nations in Sub Sahara Africa and previous governments have paid little attention to food sufficiency. Hunger is one of the main causes of girls indulging into early sexual relationships, prostitution, teenage pregnancy, early marriage and school dropout among girls. We therefore recommend that political parties' manifestos:

1. Put premium on agriculture and food production;
2. Express support towards female youths to do farming.

### **10. Access to safe drinking water**

More than half of Sierra Leoneans still lack access to safe drinking water. In this context, girls are the ones that suffer most because they are usually the ones that are asked by the parents/care givers to fetch water for the family. Many previous researches have identified water fetching as one of the main sources of teenage pregnancy. Lack of access to safe drinking water has also triggered internal trafficking of girls from rural areas to urban cities where they are exploited as domestic servitudes. Girls and young women therefore recommend that manifestos of political parties must include among their priorities their commitment to:

1. Increase citizens' access to safe drinking water across Sierra Leone;
2. Develop and implement clear plan to complete ongoing water supply projects and introduce new ones;
3. Train indigenes particularly in rural areas to be able to manage and repair their water supply sources.