

Position Statement on the Passing of the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Care Act, 2024



18 December 2024

***This position statement is signed by Purposeful and feminist movement partners,
committed to ensuring that women and girls can live
in safety, dignity, and freedom.***

***It assumes the steadfast duty of Parliamentarians to protect women and girls,
and to now see this imperative enshrined in law.***

The passing of the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Care Act will mark a monumental and progressive step forward for our nation, abolishing a centuries-old law and outdated remnant of our colonial past. Both nationally and internationally, President Bio has been consistent— there can be no question that protecting the lives of women and girls in Sierra Leone is paramount. As he proclaimed in 2022 with unanimous cabinet approval:

“At a time when sexual and reproductive health rights for women are either being overturned or threatened, we are proud that Sierra Leone can once again lead with progressive reforms.”

For a nation that has made significant strides towards gender equality, Sierra Leone is primed to take the next steps toward safety and health equity for women and girls. The reforms outlined in this bill make essential and urgent provision for safe motherhood, with full and proper access to reproductive and maternal health services and care. More critically, the passing of this Act will undoubtedly pull our nation out of the reality that motherhood is all too often deadly in Sierra Leone.

This nightmare simply cannot continue.

The passing of this Act is a lifeline for Sierra Leonean women and girls. There is no more urgent time to ensure accessible and safe reproductive healthcare. Sierra Leone has the third-highest rate of maternal fatalities in the world at 1,120 deaths per 100,000 births. Unsafe abortions contribute to approximately 10% of these maternal deaths. Teenage pregnancy remains a significant challenge with nearly 30% of girls aged 15-19 giving birth and 25% unable to access family planning. Every day up to 4 women and girls die from preventable pregnancy complications. This is a national emergency threatening our mothers, daughters, and sisters risking the fracture of our families and communities.

Despite the fear mongering and outright lies of those that would impede our progress and sabotage these critical protections, this Act in no way promotes abortions. Rather, it will save the lives of so many of our women and girls who are forced to resort to clandestine and dangerous procedures. This Act will allow them - after counselling and support, to choose legal and safe abortions, in designated, and regulated centres. It will keep women and girls safer. The evidence bears this out: just six years after South Africa reformed its law, deaths from unsafe abortions reduced by 50%.

Women and girls should never have to risk death because of the agenda of those who would limit their access to reproductive care. In Sierra Leone we have faced generations of antiquated laws like the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, a law that dates back to a century before we gained independence. It remains the single greatest barrier to women's health and autonomy fueling the current public health crisis.

After years of listening to women and girls, tireless campaigning, and burying too many of our sisters and daughters, we know that these barriers to health care are designed to control women and girls rather than protect them. Our fight for safe motherhood and for reproductive care is a social justice issue making every other human and gender rights possible. Women and girls cannot access any other right without the right to make informed, safe choices about their bodies, health, and future. Let this generation be the last to experience the horrors of what happens when women's most basic reproductive health needs are pushed underground.

Punishing women and girls for exercising a fundamental right to their bodies is inconsistent with the principles of key international conventions that Sierra Leone is a party to. The Maputo Protocol, ratified by our the Government of Sierra Leone, affirms a woman's right to choose, and this Bill is firmly rooted in those principles. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights has mandated all member states to adopt legislative or other measures to give effect to the provisions of the Charter.

This position statement affirms the significance of this transformative and life-saving legislation.

We call on the parliament of Sierra Leone in the strongest terms, to repeal the colonial-era law, to uphold the safety and justice of all women and girls, and to see the swiftest passing of the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Healthcare Act, 2024.

SIGNED:

1. Purposeful - Headquartered in Freetown
2. Mother's Choice Foundation-W/A Rural, Kono, Koinadugu
3. Youth Movement for Sustainable Movement-S/L-
4. Pikin To Pikin Movement-Bombali, Tonkolili, Moyamba, Bonthe, Khailahum, W/A
5. Daindemben Federation-Koinadugu, Falaba
6. Girl Child Network-Bombali

7. AdvocAid-Western Area
8. Network of Advocacy for Youth Empowerment - Kambia District
9. Femme Collective-Western Area
10. Community Action to Restore Lives-Western Area
11. Women in the Media Sierra Leone(WIMSAL)-National
12. Feminist United Sierra Leone and Allies-Western Area
13. Children's Forum Network
14. Legal Access Through Women Yearning for Equality Right for Social Justice (LAWYERS)-National
15. Madam Wokie-Western Area
16. Rescue Hut for Women and Girls-Western Area
17. Women's Forum for Human Rights and Democracy- Bombali
18. Prevention First-National
19. Youterus Health-National
20. Marie Stopes Sierra Leone-National
21. Freedom Hub
22. Keep the Drum and Lose the Knife-Kambia
23. Katanya Women's Development Association -Koinadugu
24. Her Future Foundation
25. West Africa Youth and Children's Advocacy Network
26. Girl's Advocacy Development Network - SL
27. Mama Pikin Foundation
28. Initiative for Womens' Empowerment and Peace Promotion Sierra Leone