

#HUMANRIGHTS #FEMINISTFOREIGNPOLICY

# *7 Questions and a dream*

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Embassy  
of the Federal Republic of Germany  
Freetown

Gender activism and  
German cooperation in  
Sierra Leone 2023

*“It is about learning from each other, about looking within  
yourself and hopefully helping others.”*

*Annalena Baerbock,  
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany  
in New York, September 20, 2023*

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# Foreword

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*“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”*

These simple words, enshrined in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are so promising, yet so difficult to achieve. The fight for human rights, for women's rights, in short for rights, is far from over; for many, it has not even begun.

It is Germany's hard learned lesson from our dark past that whenever human rights are threatened, we will stand side by side with those fighting for their rights. We always stand by those who fight for their rights. But to fight for your rights, you must know your rights and you have to have examples to follow.

Deeply impressed by the devotion and determination of the women and men of Sierra Leone to achieve the promise of the Universal Declaration the German Embassy has supported numerous projects in

2023. It is a great honour to give a voice to the promoters of these projects. Their testimonies give deep insight into their struggles and their achievements in realising equality.

I sincerely hope that many will follow in their footsteps and engage in order to make their dreams come true.



Jens Kraus-Massé  
Ambassador of the Federal Republic  
of Germany to Sierra Leone

# Prologue

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This book was inspired by incredible devotion and inspiring engagement to fight for individual human rights in Sierra Leone in 2023.

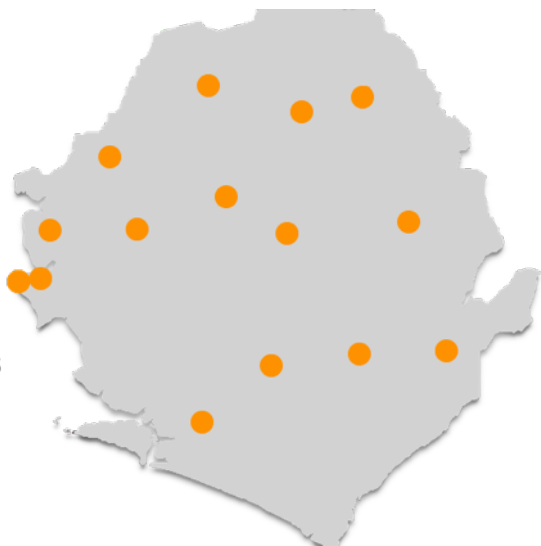
In 2023, organisations, schools and communities from Makeni to Kenema were supported by the German Embassy Freetown with the aim of promoting human rights and the participation of women and disadvantaged groups. We were profoundly moved by the commitment of all personalities and their stories in the fight for gender equality and human rights. With the aim of capturing their voices and to share experiences that will inspire others around the globe, we asked for responses to seven questions and a dream.

● Project locations

We would like to thank all participants and activists for their inspiring pictures of gender activism commitment and German cooperation.

The German Embassy in Freetown supports projects that are particularly committed to equality for women and disadvantaged groups in Sierra Leone.

Gender equality and gender justice are what Germany stands for worldwide.



# AdvocAid

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*AdvocAid has advocated for the rights of women and Girls in Sierra Leone since 2006. Their aim is to provide the right access to justice and finding ways to create systemic change. One example is their project GoBifo, an approach to build sustainable and resilient future for formerly incarcerated women.*

*We asked Alison French as the CEO of AdvocAid and Elizabeth Love Kpaka as a former participant of a project to who later developed to become an activist for the organisation in Freetown, Makeni, Kabala, Kenema and Bo.*

## ALISON FRENCH

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

Growing up in a society where women and girls are faced with constant discrimination, exposed to various forms of violence and are forced into silence simply because of their gender, I was no exception, as I have experienced this personally. What worsens these experiences further is that

institutions mandated to provide justice and protect women and girls including the criminal justice system constantly fail them leaving women and girls to lose trust in the system which all points to the systematic and institutionalised gender based discrimination in our society. Witnessing such gross impunity at an early age made me realise how important it is for me to speak up on issues to do with gender equality; raise awareness on



the urgency to enhance access to justice to women and girls; empower women and girls to know their legal rights; and also support and empower other women especially the next generation.

*What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

As a gender equality activist, I believe that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but the bedrock for a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous and sustainable Sierra Leone. Looking at the various crises that Sierra Leone has experienced from the civil war,

Ebola and then Covid-19, women and girls have suffered the most. With such problems in a country, these are always reflected in the country's correctional centres which are usually overcrowded and underfunded. Currently, the female correctional centres are the most underfunded resulting into various challenges such as a women lacking hygienic facilities for their menstruation period; children living in prisons with their incarcerated mothers are malnourished and have had their rights, wellbeing and general child development affected; and limited access to economic skilling programs to facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration etc.

For Sierra Leone to achieve the development and growth it has set to attain, then its development and growth indicators have to be gender responsive and sensitive to those that are most marginalised in the community. This can be achieved if Sierra Leone prioritises and invests in gender mainstreaming in all government programs, institutions, funding and budgeting and lastly its laws and policies with emphasis on the need to advance a gender sensitive criminal justice system as this will accelerate the accessibility

of justice to women and girls. Women and girls represent half of Sierra Leone's population so investing in gender equality and human rights means progress for Sierra Leone as it will accelerate social and economic progress.

*What is life like as an activist?  
How does your environment  
perceive your work?*

Life as an activist is a constant struggle because every other day, there is an injustice that a woman or girl has experienced simply because of their gender. There is little or no rest for us as activists because we always have to be responsive to these injustices as institutions mandated to protect women and girls are unresponsive. Unfortunately, society does not provide the enabling environment for success despite them knowing the depth and gravity of the work and the positive impacts that it would eventually yield.

***“Life as an activist is a constant struggle because every other day, there is an injustice that a woman or girl has experienced simply because of their gender”***

“However, even with all this, being an activist is fulfilling as I believe that I am contributing to building a safe and just world for women and girls. What makes it easier is knowing that you are not alone on this journey, as I work with other activists in this space. It always refuels me to come back and carry on with this work.

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your projects?*

Some of the biggest challenges we encountered on this project included:

1. Limited resources. Since we work with a large number of women, we were optimistic that we would be able to support them all financially with the project. However, as resources were limited, we had to reduce the number of women, especially in the areas of skills training and the provision of the



start-up kits in the different regions where the project was implemented.

2. Due to societal stigma, some of the women we work with have faced challenges finding meaningful employment or engaging in community service after a history of exposure to Sierra Leone's patriarchal criminal justice system.

### *What does it take to encourage others?*

To me, encouraging others means continually choosing to work and excel in the field of work that advances gender equality, regardless of what society thinks or does to thwart the process. I believe that my actions are a source of encouragement to others, inspiring them to appreciate our work, get involved and support the cause

### *What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?*

Being able to positively influence others to believe in a cause you care about, getting others to join in and

advance it, and making a positive impact is success to me.

My recipe for success lies in the precise communication of a shared vision and a clear organisation of the mission. This includes, for example, clarity about what is needed from the team and ensuring that everyone is on board, that the team feels valued and that every effort is made to ensure we achieve a high quality goal.

### *What is your dream for "Salone 2035"?*

My dream for Salone 2035 is that we become a peaceful country; an inclusive country that respects and promotes the human rights of their most vulnerable and marginalised populations; a Salone that advances gender responsive institutions, laws and policies that better protect women and girls in Sierra Leone. I also look forward to a Salone where girls, pregnant women and women with infants are not incarcerated.

## ELIZABETH LOVE KPAKA

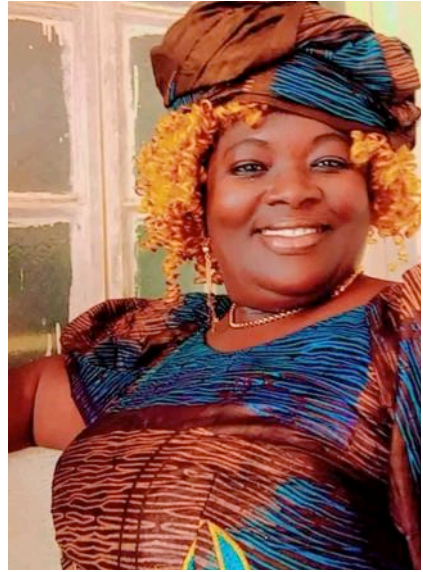
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### *How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I became a participant of the project because at the time, I was a member and President of the Kenema GoBifo Women Association and benefited from all project activities and also supported in coordinating some of the activities. Currently, I am the President of the National Federation of GoBifo Women-Sierra Leone, an umbrella association that brings together all regional associations of formerly incarcerated women and girls in Sierra Leone.

### *Why did you take part in this project?*

I took part in this project for various reasons because I am a formerly incarcerated woman living in Kenema. This project empowers and supports formerly incarcerated women by identifying our unique needs and experiences giving me a unique opportunity to self-reliance that can only be accessed through this project.



The project also creates a platform for me to share my experience with women and girls who were formerly incarcerated, those still in detention and those who have never come in contact with the law. Thanks to the project, I learned to mobilise and join other women in fighting against discrimination of formerly incarcerated women. It also gives me an opportunity to strengthen the association, so that it can support its members and the children of women in detention.

### *Has your family and/ or community supported you to participate in this project?*

Yes. My family encouraged me in different ways to participate in this project. Because of their encouragement and support, I have been able to understand that I have a supporting system that will always welcome me and love me. This has allowed me to overcome a personal stigma that I directed towards myself. With some of the positive feedback from the community that we received while undertaking the community outreaches, it has enabled me to build my confidence to continue as a GoBifo women advocate, to self-advocate and to also undertake advocacy on a national level.

### *What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

I still experience discrimination in some communities which usually is directed towards us during the community outreaches. Their responses and attitudes are negative and disheartening.

Sustainability is a very important issue for women like us because this will address recidivism and any recurrence of GBV so limited financial resources do not allow us

to achieve this to the extent that we would want it to.

### *How has this project helped to support gender equality, women's and girls' rights or to balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

The project has supported gender equality, women's and girls' rights. It balances the interests of marginalised groups in so many ways such as it has enhanced accessibility for formerly incarcerated women to control and own key assets, such as their businesses, start-up capital, financial and business management tools and even become employment attractive. The project has also increased our agency and equipped us with leadership skills which includes; being able to self-advocate for our needs and priorities and having decision-making power at household, community, national, and international levels.

***“I will teach my family to fight for gender equality and human rights because gender equality and human rights are essential for creating a fair and inclusive society”***

Our economic status has improved, which has greatly reduced the rates of recidivism and also reduced the chances of the recurrence of GBV. Finally, this project has enabled us to found a National Federation and other organisational structures through which we created a safe space for formerly incarcerated women.

***Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?***

Yes. I will teach my family to fight for gender equality and human rights because gender equality and human rights are essential for creating a fair and inclusive society. Having this knowledge will enable them to foster respect, challenge stereotypes, build inclusive communities and empower them to address discrimination and inequality.

***What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?***

My dream for Salone 2035 includes: A Salone where marginalised women like me (women with lived experiences of incarceration) are not discriminated against in various aspects like job opportunities, education opportunities, access to capital etc. A Salone that establishes safe homes for survivors of GBV. A Salone that creates policies that end the over criminalisation and over incarceration of women and girls. A Salone that empowers women and girls with lived experiences of incarceration while still in detention so that upon release, they have skills to rebuild their lives. A Salone that is safe for formerly incarcerated women to exist and thrive.

# SIRADEO

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*SIRADEO is a community based organisation in Sella Limba Chiefdom, Karene District near Kamakwie, Northern Sierra Leone. The organisation helps to empower women technically and economically to become independent farmers by learning farming, management and marketing skills.*

*Mark Saidu Sheriff as the organisation's leader, and Rosaline Bangura as a former participant of SIRADEO's projects shared her experiences with us.*

## MARK SAIDU SHERIFF

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

Being an activist for human rights and gender equality means having the passion to make a contribution; to give women, girls, and marginalised groups a voice; providing an advocacy network to empower them and help them realise their income and livelihood dreams; it is to protect their rights and interest.



*What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I believe this is a great opportunity to lay a foundation to work towards empowering women, girls and marginalised groups to protect their rights and interests.

*What is life like as an activist?  
How does your environment  
perceive your work?*

Life can be fulfilling but also challenging when it involves passionate advocacy for social and political causes and participation in awareness campaigns.

Our community recognises the project staff's inclusion and commitment to collaboration and transparency in our project implementation.

*“Being an activist for human rights and gender equality means to have the passion to contribute, to give women, girls and marginalised groups a voice”*

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your projects?*

The biggest challenges we encounter are as follows

1. Sites are waterlogged and need some time to dry up before they would be ready for ploughing
2. We lack warehouse facilities for storage of groundnuts after the extraction.

3. We also lack dry pads for drying groundnut seeds.

*What does it take to encourage others?*

1. Inclusivity, commitment, and transparency of the project implementation.
2. An awareness raising campaign about the project, and advocacy for policy change.
3. Fostering inclusive dialogue on project activities.
4. Inspired courage through sensitisation on the project and its effects on the income and livelihood of participants.
5. It takes to promote legal reforms to ensure equal rights and opportunities on our project implementation process.

*What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?*

As success is based on accountability and transparency, our organisation achieved the following:

1. The distribution of groundnut seeds to 50 women farmers has started and is on-going
2. The farmers' implementation process on groundnut seeds is in progress and developing.

3. Women and family members are cooperatively participating on groundnut seed projects.

*What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?*

A Salone 2035 in my dream should achieve the sustainable

development goals, such as to end poverty, end hunger, achieve gender equality, promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise a global partnership for sustainable development.

## **ROSALINE BANGURA**

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

Being an activist of an advocacy network on the empowerment of women to enhance their income and livelihood. We had sensitisation meetings with women on their roles on the project implementation and achieved the project aims and objectives.

Our project supports gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone, which plays a pivotal role for national cohesion and development, as well as safety for the project participant. We see it as a driver for fundamental human rights.

*Why did you take part in this project?*



It is a fundamental human right to protect the rights and interests of women, to actively involve empower them and support the improvement of income livelihoods. As a participant of this project, I not only protect these

rights and interests but help to fill the gap in gender equality.

*Has your family and/ or community supported you to participate in this project?*

Yes. We hired family members to accelerate ongoing land preparation activities. They help improve our family's income and livelihood.

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

I had neither the financial resources nor the local labor necessary to brush or plow wet sites that needed time to dry. We also lacked storage facilities to store the peanut seeds after extraction and lacked a drying area so that the peanut seeds could be preserved for the next growing season.

*How has this project helped to support gender equality, women's and girls' rights or to balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

To empower women economically in income and livelihood after a farming season, to foster an inclusive society that enhances unity, peace and justice, and to create a foundation for sustainable development finally contributes to a

more stable and harmonious environment.

*Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?*

Yes, as women, girls and marginalised groups are not aware of their rights and gender equality responsibility. It is necessary to teach on gender equality and human rights in sensitisation meeting and campaigns on this key domain.

*What is your dream for "Salone 2035"?*

My dream for Salone 2035 is to prioritise the achievement of gender equality and the upholding of human rights. That especially includes empowering women economically, ensuring equal opportunities in education and addressing social norms that perpetuate gender disparities. We also need strong legal reform to be in place to protect human rights, foster an inclusive society that respects diversity and promotes social justice.



*“To empower women economically in income and livelihood after a farming season, to foster an inclusive society that enhances unity, peace and justice, and to create a foundation for sustainable development finally contributes to a more stable and harmonious environment”*

# Human Rights Defenders Network

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*Human Rights Defenders Network is a national community of human rights defenders that works on national, regional and international levels to promote and protect human rights. The organisation specifically supports Human Rights Defenders, strengthens human rights standards and systems, and leads member organisations for human rights change in Sierra Leone.*

*We spoke to Jane Emily Williams, who supports the organisation in communications, as well as Marie Turay, who has been a participant of the organisation's trainings on human rights.*

## **JANE EMILY WILLIAMS**

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I started by first reporting on issues of human rights violations in early 2018, wherein I would go to the streets of Freetown to interview

ordinary citizens about some challenges they face and later started involving in the works of the Human Rights Defenders Network Sierra Leone by reporting on their activities and officially started working for the network as the Communications Officer in 2020.

I gathered the interest in human rights Issues in Secondary School when we had a visit from a lady from the Civic Education Commission.

*What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

One thing that motivates me is the realisation that these issues are not new, and they have been in existence from our forefathers. I would like to see how much my own contributions would go into the elimination or reductions of these issues in the country.

*What is life like as an activist? How does your environment perceive your work?*

My environment has over time become accepting of my work as a human rights activist.

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your projects?*

Some of the biggest challenges we faced during the project included a limited budget, inadequate capacities of staff, and a lack of necessary tools. These were some of the reasons why we could not continue the project, as the participants could not be maintained throughout the project.

*What does it take to encourage others?*

For me, what it takes to encourage others as an activist for human rights and gender equality involves fostering empathy, raising awareness, and inspiring collective action to dismantle injustices and build a more inclusive and equitable society.

***“What it takes to encourage others as an activist for human rights and gender equality involves fostering empathy, raising awareness, and inspiring collective action to dismantle injustices and build a more inclusive and equitable society”***

*What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?*

Success for me from a human rights activist perspective means effecting positive, tangible change in laws, policies, and societal attitudes to protect and empower marginalised groups, fostering a more just and equitable world.

### *What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?*

The dream I envisioned for Sierra Leone is a future that reflects the

tireless efforts of human rights activists and advocates working towards a country where everyone, regardless of gender, enjoys equal rights, opportunities, and dignity.

## **MARIE TURAY**

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### *How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I was invited by some staff at my Hastings outlet to be a participant of the training that has to do with human rights issues and gender equality in 2020.

### *Why did you take part in this project?*

I took part in the training because I was interested in what I was told the training was about, and I wanted to see the intended outcome of the training.

### *Has your family and/or community supported you to participate in this project?*

No, I did not have their initial support, but they have now accepted me for the role I am playing in the community, as I am frequently asked after for advice in

certain topics by some the women in our community.

### *What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

One of the initial challenges I had was the stiff resistance of my fellow women to the issues of human rights, but they were somehow accepting towards the areas of gender equality.

Another challenge I faced was the message of peace, as they were used to having quarrels amongst themselves. Now, Thank God, the quarrels and fightings have ceased. Another major problem I faced was the loss of sales during my outreach/ sensitisation time towards the issues for the market and some community women.

### *How has this project helped to support gender equality, women’s and girls’ rights or to*

*balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

The project has so far been able to stop the frequent fighting and quarrels in the marketplace.

It has changed the way some of the traders talk to the children or wards, and it has also discouraged the issue of school dropout in the market community.

***“When family members are equipped with the knowledge and skills to advocate for gender equality and human rights, they are more likely to extend these principles to their communities and beyond”***

*Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?*

I definitely will teach my family to fight for gender equality and human rights because when family

members are equipped with the knowledge and skills to advocate for gender equality and human rights, they are more likely to extend these principles to their communities and beyond. By teaching my family, my children will be able to tell their friends about what they are being taught, and my husband will tell his friends. This is how the message could spread far and wide because they all interact with different set of people.

*What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?*

My dream for Salone 2035 is that the country has overcome historical challenges faced in regards to gender based violence, gender inequality, and promotes more youth engagement, as well as serious legal reforms. Equality in the work force or work space and general issues of human rights should have been left in the past and the country should be recognised globally for its commitment to human rights, gender equality, and inclusive development.

# Für Sierra Leone e.V.

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*The association Für Sierra Leone e.V. (FSL) was founded in 2013 by committed African-interested citizens from Bavaria/ Germany and Sierra Leone. All projects focus on transparency, traceability, and sustainability.*

*FSL project focus areas are in education and training, infrastructure in the fields of water supply and health care, youth entrepreneurship, emergency aid, and an international understanding between Sierra Leone and Bavaria.*

*Joseph Cole leads FSL's projects in Campbell Town near Waterloo, Western Rural Area in Sierra Leone. Mariatu Conteh is one of the Campbell Town students.*

## MR. JOSEPH COLE

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

On a trip to Turkmenistan, we encountered women who were not permitted to speak after permission from their husbands or brothers. This was very disturbing. We

wanted to provide a forum for young women to become educated, engage with each other and hear diverse voices to empower them and to become involved in decision making in their country. There was no better place to have implemented such initiative than Sierra Leone, whose women



participation into decision making in the rural areas was challenging.

*What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

FSL was founded by the Honorary Consul in Bavaria for Sierra Leone. Frequent visits to Sierra Leone established that women are the backbone of society but do not have a strong voice. The idea of girl's education, women engaging with each other and hearing diverse voices to empower them seemed to fit here as well.

*What is life like as an activist? How does your environment perceive your work?*

It can be challenging when you want to make the required ethical changes in the minds of people in the rural communities that have deep traditional and cultural roots.

However, it can be fulfilling to say the least when your dream of making a positive change is achieved. Change is very difficult to effect and should be a gradual process. In the area of education, in sexual reproductive health education in particular, we have greatly impacted the lives of a community which never had such mentality.

The environment in which we operate has been very supportive and appreciative for the projects we have implemented in, not only at the FSL Secondary School, but also the community as a whole.

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your projects?*

Among the numerous challenges, poverty seems to be playing the biggest role in our project implementation process. Children using the pads are so amazed that the family members were asking them to share with their other siblings when they were on their monthly periods. For this reason, we had to distribute more than the required number of reusable pads to a girl so as to avoid the transfer of infections/ diseases to the direct beneficiaries. In addition, parents of the beneficiaries were called for

intense sensitisation on why one girl should use one pad. Since most of them come from large families, the perception and mind change should be continuously awake that menstruation is a normal thing and must not be stigmatised. Continuous sensitisation of the use of the hygiene kits was very challenging.

***“Change is very difficult to effect and should be a gradual process. In the area of education, in sexual reproductive health education in particular, we have greatly impacted the lives of a community”***

***What does it take to encourage others?***

It takes love from within and hard work to encourage those we have cross path with. Most especially our beneficiaries who needed to make a positive change in the way they think and do things. We have continuously been engaging the families and the community to effectively achieve our goals in any project implementation. We further try to be a part of the process by

practically involving in the change making process. It can be tough to encourage others with the limited resources at hand but once there is a will, there is a way. In most cases, we succeed in encouraging them for a change.

***What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?***

Success is to achieve set goals over a period of time. Over the past years, we have implemented projects in the field of WASH, Education and Entrepreneurship. In all of these projects, we have been able to create over 500 jobs for youths, supported over 700 girls to quality access to education and have provided over 3000 inhabitants with clean drinking water in various communities. We have also provided quality hygiene support and sexual reproductive health education to all pupils (girls and boys) at the FSL Secondary School in Campbell Town. All of these are considered successes towards the implementation of the various projects we have implemented.



### *What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?*

By 2035, I would like to see a Sierra Leone that gives equal opportunity to gender equality and give opportunity to women to perform in any sector in society. It is equally

my wish for Sierra Leone to have a society where more than 30% of the youths are able to get jobs and be self-reliant. Through which basic amenities such as healthcare, electricity, water supply and hygiene facilities will benefit 50% of the country’s population readily.

## **MARIATU CONTEH**

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### *How did you became a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

The project was open for all pupils at FSL Secondary School Campbell Town.



### *Why did you take part in this project?*

I took part because I knew that the workshop will be educative and it will be a springboard for broadening my understanding about the importance of empowering the child and how

equal opportunities will be beneficial for myself, my family, my community and for my country.

### *Has your family and/ or community supported you to participate in this project?*

Yes, my family supported fully, because they know participating in such projects will help me to know that empowering women / the girl child is essential to the health and social development of families, communities and countries. And also it will help me to understand that when women/girls are living safe, fulfilled and productive lives, they can reach their full potential, contributing their skills to the workforce and can raise happier and healthier children.

### *What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

The challenges which I encountered during this project are:

- 1) Time: The time was too short for the facilitators to complete the whole curriculum.
- 2) Issues related to gender equality and the empowerment of women/girls could have been discussed in more detail.
- 3) The period for the project was during the time of the normal classes. I found it difficult to compromise with my classes.

### *How has this project helped to support gender equality, women's and girls' rights or to balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

This project was really worth participating in. Gender equality, besides being a fundamental human right, is essential to achieve peaceful societies with full human potential and sustainable development. This project has helped me, the communities and societies, to attain better development ideas in all aspects when both genders are entitled to similar opportunities. Equal rights in decision making, health, politics, infrastructure, profession, etc. will advance our society to a new level. Moreover, the

project has helped us to know that empowering women spurs productivity and economic growth.

### *Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?*

Definitely I will encourage my family to always fight for gender equality and address the issues of human rights abuses, which we can achieve by:

- stopping child marriage,
  - empowering my mother/mothers,
  - give proper value to women's work,
  - regular talks to women/girls,
  - share household chores and childcare equally,
  - pay both genders the same respect,
  - ensure equal access to education,
  - prioritise the most marginalised.
- I will also encourage my family to protect reproductive rights.

### *What is your dream for "Salone 2035"?*

I want to see a country where equal rights and opportunities are possible for both genders (boys and girls).

A country where child marriage is an issue of the past.

Sierra Leone 2035, women should not be seen as house wives and house helps, but as supporters.

*“I want to see a country of self-sufficiency and a peaceful state. “Equal rights in decision making, health, politics, infrastructure, profession, etc. will advance our society to a new level”*

# Girl2Girl

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*We help girls in safe spaces - this is how Girl2Girl (G2G) Empowerment Movement briefly explained their work to us when we first met. Girl2Girl is a Sierra Leonean based young-women's organisation that seeks to equip girls with leadership skills to become advocates and change makers in their communities. G2G works with vulnerable girls and young women in slum areas in the Western Area Urban and Rural, in and around Freetown.*

*We spoke to Mary Stevens, Programme coordinator at Girl2Girl and Medoria P. Mansaray, a project participant of Girl2Girl.*

## MARY STEVENS

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

Making the world a better place for women and girls starts with you and that is how my activism began as a result of what I have experienced in my daily life both at family level and in the work place, how society placed women and girls at a disadvantaged end, I became an activist to help create change in the injustices women and girls faced on

a daily basis all throughout our lives regardless of class, social status. I believe everybody has equal rights and seeing injustice makes my blood boils with anger and wanting to make things right. I also became an activist to help create a positive change for the future generations through social change and gender transformative approaches. Being involved in activism made me realised the power I have within and use it for positive change.

*What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

Growing up as a child Sierra Leone and transitioning into the woman that I am today had never being an easy journey neither was it a bed of roses. I have faced numerous challenges, some which i was able to overcome and others I was not able to overcome so I had to live with the consequences. My daughter is one of my greatest sources of motivation because I don't want her to experience what ilwent through. And also I do not want the future generation to experience the same injustice.

*What is life like as an activist? How does your environment perceive your work?*

Living the life of an activist is a life changing experience with both positive and negative aspects. I have a sense of fulfilment and purpose when I see positive change in the lives of our beneficiaries and the wider community. On the other hand, when we handle sensitive cases or issues of FGM our lives become endangered as people keep making threats to us and this in itself is something that is a cause for concern because as human rights defenders, we don't have people to protect us neither our families.

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your projects?*

The biggest challenges encountered so far is the lack of protection for us as human rights activists. As the communities perceive us as home breakers, we are always accused of bringing strife in families because we encourage women to speak up ad defend their rights especially when it concerns issues of domestic and gender based violence which includes minors. We educate our beneficiaries and stakeholders not to compromise such issues and seeing that they are gradually



changing and defending the rights of their girls and themselves. We are activists are therefore branded as bad people.

Secondly, there are high community expectations from us, and they fail to realise that we cannot handle everything as an individual organisation, their dependency on us is very high despite several attempts to make them understand our position. We have been able to address it to some extent and hope to continue to make them understand our stance.

***“One needs to have great sense of passion for what you do and be able to practice what you preach, your action should go with your words and others will see you as a role model worth emulating”***

***What does it take to encourage others?***

In my opinion, one needs to have great sense of passion for what you do and be able to practice what you preach, your action should go with

your words and others will see you as a role model worth emulating. Consistency is also key; you need to have a focus and ensure that when you fix your eyes on doing something you ensure that you achieve your goal.

***What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?***

(no answer)

***What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?***

My 2035 dream for Sierra Leone is to see a country with more female in leadership, interagency collaboration among ministries departments and agencies with a national agenda that will be more gender focused and not have disjointed activities or work in isolation.

I want to see a Salone where women have liberty to financial freedom.

## MEDORIA P. MANSARAY

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### *How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

By seeing and hearing other people coming out to protect fundamental human rights and being envious of their zest got me to want to know and do more with the concept of gender equality.

### *Why did you take part in this project?*

I became part of the project to ensure I have a voice in the society where our rights and responsibilities are not based on our gender but our existence as human beings.

### *Has your family and/ or community supported you to participate in this project?*

Yes. My family and community always support all projects we bring forward to promote gender equality. They do what little they can to assure that what they do will uplift livelihood.

### *What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

Meeting some people who already accepted things as they are and

trying to change their perception and narrative is not an easy task, but working with them and guiding them to a path they would not regret is the goal.

### *How has this project helped to support gender equality, women's and girls' rights or to balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

The project has helped them by educating them to know about their rights and responsibilities, and by showing them examples of things they possess inside themselves and have not known, yet.



*Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?*

Yes, by starting to address inequalities within my family.

*What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?*

I hope to see a Sierra Leone where 80% of the Sierra Leonean youths, specifically women and girls, have a skill they use to earn for themselves, thereby not being marginalised by their dependency on others.

*“I became part of the project to ensure I have a voice in the society where our rights and responsibilities are not based on our gender but our existence as human beings”*



# St. Mary's Technical and Vocational School

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*The institution has been active since 1954. Its Congregation (Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary) was founded in 1924 to empower women with education and offer medical facilities to reduce mother and child mortality rates at birth or during infancy. These all geared towards giving women a chance to be better. Today, St. Mary's Technical and Vocational School in Bo covers a number of projects to support empowering women with skills in catering, computer skills, hairdressing, tailoring, creative arts, operations of a copy shop. They also invite other organisations to continue creating awareness on the protection of rights of girls, the fight against domestic violence and for the rights of women.*

*Sr. Pauline A. Ohalla leads projects at the St. Mary's School and invited Victoria T. Kamanda as a former student of the school.*

## SR. PAULINE A. OHALLA

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

While growing up in a small town in western Kenya at the age of eight,

I witnessed nuns welcoming children abandoned by their parents or orphaned. These nuns that had no children of their own respected the rights to life of these abandoned children, took them in



and gave them opportunity to grow in their secure homes. These children that did not have a chance either because of being abandoned by their mothers or were orphaned at a very tender age were given a chance in life by the nuns. This was a life changing experience and from that time I wanted to be a nun and give the vulnerable a chance like these nuns.

Our Congregation having been founded to empower women has been a fertile ground for all the sisters to look out and reach out to those that need empowerment whilst responding to the needs of the people.

My desire to serve the less privileged somehow aligned with

the Charism of the congregation and am therefore able to offer my best in my ministry.

### *What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

Our sisters the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary have done a lot of empowerment of girls in Sierra Leone since 1948, many schools for girls were started and run by the sisters and many women young and old trace their success back to our sisters efforts.

There are still many girls who do not seem to have opportunity to go to school and even the ones that go to school and drop out at every stage, due to pregnancy, early marriages, lack of support from the parents or guardians while in school or just lack of commitment to the course.

With many young women facing economic hardship and most of them already burdened with children at a tender age, the only life changing opportunity is to learn a skill and empower themselves. We therefore open our doors to women to learn different skills in catering, hair dressing, tailoring, basic computer skills, bead work, hair dressing, gara tie and dye and until recently thanks to German Embassy

funding, they are learning skills in photocopy spiral binding, T-Shirt printing to widen their opportunities in the job market as well as understanding of a wider view of what's actually basic in some quarters.

*What is life like as an activist?  
How does your environment  
perceive your work?*

Sometimes when trying to empower young people, majority of them do not get the full picture of how much power they have within themselves to change their lives. I spend a lot of time trying to continuously create awareness on the need to stay focussed, remain steadfast till the end of training and whilst gathering as much skills as one can absorb as we offer a variety of skills in our institution. The people I empower think am putting too much pressure on them and I should allow them to enjoy themselves whatever enjoying themselves mean to them.

*What were the biggest  
challenges you encountered in  
your projects?*

The biggest challenge so far has been convincing the women that they have power within them to change their lives, that they can be as good as their dreams can carry

them and that being that they never had opportunity to go to school or even went to school and never completed does not define them but how willing they are to change their lives around and be the best versions of themselves.

There are other challenges connected to the first challenge, getting the women to stay on course, majority easily drop out for variety of reasons which is heartbreaking considering half training would not take them far. The other challenge would be to get funds to create more opportunities for those who have picked up and are on fire/ passionate about the skills.

*What does it take to encourage  
others?*

Loads of patience to see them fall and encourage them to sit crawl and continue with the journey. It needs personal conviction that they indeed can make it and convince them till they own the message.

It also needs to invite others who have been where they are to share their stories of growth and success. Finally, it is about encouraging different people with different experiences in different fields to share their stories. The bottom line

is usually hard work, so it needs a focus, prayers for the religious, and of course believing in oneself.

***“Success is holding the hands of others and rising together.”***

***What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?***

Success is when a student graduates and within one year of graduation she is sponsoring her younger sibling to learn a skill, was so impressed by this when it happened.

Success is when a catering student after graduation starts cooking under a tree, and after a while she gets a room, gradually grows to have bigger eating spaces, employs more young women from the



school, and then takes them in for training.

Success is holding the hands of others and rising together.

***What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?***

More women empowered, more women financially independent and running their lives with ease and confidence.

The empowered women holding the hands of the younger generation of women to empowerment.

**VICTORIA T. KAMANDA**

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***How did you become a participant of a project to***

***support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?***

I joined as a student in 1992 and after graduation i worked with the sisters briefly then came back to St. Mary's as one of the tutors.

I have empowered so many young women who are now in and out of Sierra Leone doing very well.

*Why did you take part in this project?*

Growing up in a polygamous family my parents gave opportunities to my brothers leaving us girls to take care of house chores and cook for the men. When i got the opportunity to come learn I put my whole heart into it and the sisters picked me as their best student and trained me further on making different cuisines.

I was given the opportunity to be better in life. I am now giving others the same opportunity. Paying back to the community/ society.

*Has your family and/ or community supported you to participate in this project?*

They once saw me as someone who grew up without hope. Then my life has changed, and after I started changing the lives of others, the great things I have achieved now seem unbelievable to them. Not only because I work in Bo today, but also because I was invited to train

women in different parts of Sierra Leone and empower them to prepare different foods using locally available products such as cassava, rice etc.

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

In our time there was a willingness to work hard and respect the teachers. A lot has changed with the younger generation. They are not willing to work hard, nor are they passionate about the skills they are asked to learn. Therefore, it is a big task to train them as I need extra strength for patience and skills to advise them and train them in the skills they could learn. It is a huge challenge.

*How has this project helped to support gender equality, women's and girls' rights or to balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

Thousands of women have been trained in various skills under the project since 1954 and most of them are doing very well in life.

After the war, many young women were brought back from the streets to school and given the opportunity to learn various skills on a weekly stipend. After graduating, they received starter packages that

helped them start a decent life off the street.

***“I was given opportunity to be better in life. I am now giving others the same opportunity.”***

We work with other organisations that educate women about their rights as women, raise awareness about domestic violence, why violence should not be tolerated, and who and where they can turn for help.

Many young people who had no chance in life were supported. Those who were serious changed their lives.

***Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?***

Yes.

***What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?***

We want women to be empowered and take on key positions in government institutions. We want reduced gender-based violence. We want independence and more women in parliament to draft women- and child-friendly laws.

# SEND

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*Almost every week a new project is publicly discussed and advertised by SEND, a non-governmental organisation that envisions to contribute to a Sierra Leone where people's rights and well-being are guaranteed. SEND Sierra Leone is part of a West African structure with a headquarters in Ghana and offices in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Its portfolio includes community development, WASH, health, nutrition, agriculture and women's empowerment. Intervention areas are in the districts of Kailahun, Kenema, Kono, Western Areas Urban, and Rural districts and more recently, the district of Bonthe.*

*Joseph Ayamga leads the organisation in Sierra Leone, and Julie Scott, a project participant.*

## JOSEPH AYAMGA

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

To me, activism is born out of necessity and curiosity. Sierra Leone has the ideal environment to create an activist. My journey as an activist begun when I first arrived in Sierra Leone to conduct a study on Youth Empowerment through the GIZ

Youth Employment Program. In this study, I worked on a Youth, Violence and Female Genital Mutilation project in Koinadugu and Kailahun. There, I realised how vulnerable people, especially women were and how socio-cultural dictates does not value a woman and offers her only a servant role in society. I realised

that majority of women in rural communities had accepted this fate and role and dared not to dream and aspire to be equal persons with men at the household and community level. This resonated with me dearly as I had grown up in a small village in Ghana where women were treated same, but I had seen some women like my mother fight hard not to accept this fate of been lesser persons in the household and community. I noticed how the cultural norms created a vacuum of untapped potential and filled it with distress and abuse by reinforcing wicked machoism which spurs men on to commit unjust acts against women. This was when I decided to pursue gender equality in Sierra Leone as far I as can, and I began working with organisations that aligned with my interest.

*What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

Like most uneducated households, many fathers subdue their wives through violence. My home was no exception. My father received some education but my mother did not. This meant that income was always tight and my parents struggled to make ends meet, causing constant



tension over finances of the household. My parents would argue a lot and whenever my father hit my mother, she would retort back, “you think because I did not go to school, I do not have rights? I have rights and I know my rights.” This was a profound statement that imprinted on my consciousness as I looked on helplessly to her been abused. My mother never allowed herself to be subdued when making decisions in the house even if it cost her bodily harm. She would always make sure her voice was heard and opinion taken. In high school, I moved to live with my aunt who frequently took out micro loans to pay for my education and to supplement her business. This sparked my interest in access to financial services. This interest led me to eventually pursuing a master’s in public policy at Hertie



College in Germany with an interest in access to financial services. Seeing how these two pivotal women in my life who fought their respective battles of fighting the abuse of men and accessing finance to support equality, education and entrepreneurship drove me to want to replicate their actions with women in Sierra Leone who were extremely marginalised that it had affected their self-belief of a possibility of been equal human beings of men. For close to ten years, I have seen the gradual gains of women in the most vulnerable communities and across Sierra Leone embrace the will power of my mother and aunty through development intervention projects supported by BMZ.

*What is life like as an activist?  
How does your environment  
perceive your work?*

As a man, it can be extremely dangerous with lots of reputational risks. Societies have certain negative perceptions and stereotypes about men working with women. It's often perceived that you must have some sort of transactional relationship with women in order to help them. Secondly, the nature of the work threatens the fabric of socio-

cultural structures that have been in place for generations. For example, there are some educated people that support FGM on the basis that it's part of sacred traditions that curtail female hyper-sexuality in work young's girls but what about boys. And to make it worse, a lot of development programs leave out men and focus primarily on women despite men also experiencing some of the same issues. And also, not realising that leaving them out fails to make them allies of change. This further creates a negative perception that our work seeks to topple established structures that make men perceived superior and establishes women rather as leaders which is seen as a threat to male relevance and dominance in communities.

But for me it is fulfilling seeing the gains that our activism makes in the lives in the women that we strive for. Been able to identify the noticeable differences within households and communities. Little gains like more women becoming more confident and been able to speak in public, mobilising savings as groups to invest into education of themselves and their children and business enterprises for financial self-reliance, women forming networks in governance to advocate

and support women to pursue political positions within their districts as Councillors and Members of Parliament. These gains make us realise that our work which challenges the fabric of traditional society pushes society towards advancement and development but also empowers women and brings our society to true gender equality.

***“Our work which challenges the fabric of traditional society pushes society towards advancement and development but also empowers women and brings our society to true gender equality.”***

***What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your projects?***

Most projects do not realise that blocks to gender transformation are entrenched deeply in traditions, cultural systems and how societies define themselves and the rights different people deserve. This is the root that must be addressed in order to have real sustainable change. Projects are also too specific to one place or only one part of life. This

doesn't allow interventions to go beyond one aspect, because women's needs are diverse. They are economic, social, political, emotional and political to say the least. It would be more appropriate and more valuable to have an integrated approach to women's empowerment.

There is also a lack of consistency in project focus. One of the reasons why SEND is able to succeed is consistency. SEND has thematic concerns that each project builds on. Many NGOs move from one area to another. The focus is funding, not impact.

***What does it take to encourage others?***

It is important that we shift thinking from gender empowerment as solely an equality issue but as a development issue as well. The effects of women's empowerment surpass only women, it impacts the entire society. Women would be able to contribute to economic and political discussions. And would also increase the economic, political and social capacity as a nation when they are empowered to make useful input in each of these respective sectors. It is in these that it is important to have experience

sharing sessions as women and male allies who have experienced growth are able to share their experiences and journeys which encourages other women to dare to dream and achieve similar to their fellow women and for men to realise from the experiences of their male allies that supporting women for equality does not diminish masculinity. Once these sessions are done on a community level it creates a level which pushes the community to adopt more progressive measures to support women in decision-making activities that challenges socio-cultural actions.

*What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?*

Success is when everyone has dignity and women are able to live full lives and have control over their lives. When women can go to

school, access hospital facilities and can speak for themselves and make critical contributions to society, that is success. Women being able to make their own decisions and take part in economic, political, social and cultural processes. Additionally being given the freedom, and being encouraged to make critical decisions in these different spheres of life, especially the governance sector. That is when I would say is success.

*What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?*

A Sierra Leone where the rights of women are guaranteed; having systems that are able to protect women. Additionally, having appropriate response mechanisms to problem management and crime. Fair judgement should be prioritised at all levels. Local economic development is prioritised.

## **JULIET SCOTT**

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

Before the Integrated Education and Women Empowerment project funded by BMZ, I was part of a local community women' group. The group was created to respond to the



needs of women. The women in my community struggled to address their needs and they did not have a mouthpiece strong enough to contend with men. Women lacked economic power, education, decision making power and leadership capabilities. Women were extremely vulnerable, manhandled and discriminated. So, when the BMZ funded project was introduced into the community that aimed to empower women to become bold and make contributions in society, we the community women, teamed up to amplify our voices and address our needs by gaining knowledge to become organised and structured.

### *Why did you take part in this project?*

I joined the network because I believed in the power of womanhood, togetherness, and unity. Speaking with one unified voice would make our voices louder and stronger. I however did not have the ability to speak publicly and lacked the self-belief that I could lead champion such. I believed that I was a mere supporter of such actions and never the leader but from early project awareness activities, I understood that even as person with a disability in my eyes, I too can become a champion of gender equality for women especially ones with disabilities. This awareness that I was given through the training, motivated me to participate in the project.

*Has your family and/ or community supported you to participate in this project?*

Yes. My husband has been supportive of me. He encouraged and supported me at every stage, so I truly thank him. He saw past my disability and believed me participating in this project would finally enable me to see past my disability and become a Leader of Gender Equality.

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

One of our main issues initially was solidarity, many saw themselves as different. And so, tensions easily arose between different women groups. Overtime tensions have erased, and there is more understanding, now we are truly a unified front.

Finances to take part in network activities is also a struggle because the project supported as with mainly training and did not provide us with startup grants to manage our affairs for a period to where we could be sustainable. Since most women are typically farmers, or paid poorly as teachers like me, it made mobilising finance to run the operation of the Network of Women in Governance difficult. It is

expensive to move from different communities to the city, Kailahun. It is also not easy to get women within my own community to attend community meetings. Many still do not understand the importance of what we are doing, and how much their voices are needed due to the entrenched level of socio-cultural practices that have psychologically affected most women. But with awareness raising, women are slowly coming on board. There were also educational constraints at the onset, as most women lack basic education. This illiteracy affects the ability of women to understand and express themselves properly despite their ability to show solidarity. But now thanks to the network we are better educated now. With improved education we are able to realise our potential and advocate better for our needs.

*How has this project helped to support gender equality, women's and girls' rights or to balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

The network advocates for equity and equality. It advocates for the girl child to have access to education and the same opportunities as men. Additionally, the network advocates against certain traditional and

cultural practices that disempower women as well. We also lobby with organisations to empower women. Together as a network, we advocated for the selection of a gender sensitive sitting Magistrate for Kailahun district. The Network has championed all sexual violence cases within the district, ensuring the security services and judiciary work to bring justice to all perpetrators and solace to GBV survivors.

We are an inclusive group and make conscious efforts to include PWDs. We give them positions and leadership opportunities as well.

***“I believe in equitable division of resources and opportunities for all genders and people.”***

***Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?***

Charity begins at home. My husband cooks, warms water and helps me with the chores. All the children in the house help with house chores equally. There are no gender divisions, because I am a proud Gender Model Family trained by SEND Sierra Leone and our household dynamics has become an icon in our communities, so we currently teach other households on gender equality.

***What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?***

I hope to see a transformed Sierra Leone, which values each individual regardless of gender. I believe in equitable division of resources and opportunities for all genders, and people.

# WellFound

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*Since 2005, WellFound has focussed its work in Africa. WellFound empowers communities until they are self-sufficient, educates on the power of water and cares for sanitation and hygiene to save lives. A special focus in agricultural education lies in the empowerment of women to maintain household gardens and farm diversities of crops and vegetables for an enhanced nutrition.*

*Jamila Bawoh and Hiltina Barnett are both active members of WellFound, both as programme managers and beneficiaries of WellFound's engagement in Sierra Leone's Moyamba District.*

## JAMILA BAWOH

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I emerged from a family deeply rooted in strong religious, cultural, and traditional values, where the prevailing belief was that boys should be prioritised for access to education over girls. This perspective was driven by economic challenges faced by many families in our community, leading them to

allocate educational opportunities to male children while girls were often relegated to domestic responsibilities at home. Despite these societal norms, my trajectory took a different turn, thanks to the intervention of my uncle who facilitated my late entry into the educational system. Subsequently, I owe a debt of gratitude to WellFound for affording me the chance to serve as an Equality and Sustainability Worker.



In my tenure with WellFound, my awareness of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act catalysed a profound interest and passion within me to champion this cause as a central advocacy issue in communities. My commitment is rooted in the vision of creating a more just, equal, and sustainable Sierra Leone, especially within the context of rural settings.

As I delved into this endeavour, I applied the principles of equality by actively engaging with women and girls, comprehending their barriers and aspirations, and seamlessly integrating them into our programs. A pivotal goal was to establish a new platform for women and the

marginalised to articulate their desires and dreams confidently, free from fear. Central to my efforts was ensuring that young girls embraced education from an early age, steering clear of the constraints imposed by cultural and traditional norms.

Through my work, I aspire to contribute to the ongoing fight for a society where gender equality is not just a principle but a lived reality, fostering an environment where every individual, regardless of gender, could flourish and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future for Sierra Leone.

### *What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

Embracing the role of an Equality Worker to advance gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone – particularly in remote villages embodies the change I aspire to witness. As I confront the escalating challenges characterised by restricted opportunities for women and girls, coupled with their diminished involvement in national and community development, I am unwavering in my belief that this transformation is not only possible but achievable through my personal



commitment. I am convinced that change is not solely the responsibility of others but a mission that I must personally undertake, translating my passion and innovative ideas into tangible actions.

Taking a decisive step, I have chosen to be a driving force in the endeavour to promote gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone. This decision is fueled by the realisation that my active involvement can contribute significantly to positive change.

Moreover, witnessing the tangible improvements among rural women and their swift transformation underscores the genuine motivation behind my efforts. Observing the constructive engagement of men, actively supporting their wives, mothers, and sisters, serves as a powerful testament to the transformative impact achievable through collective action. These positive changes serve as a compelling encouragement, motivating me to amplify my commitment and contribute even more to the cause of fostering gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone.

*“I do encounter a lot of backlashes such as a clash of cultures or ideas and perceptions towards concepts such as that women must not be given position of trust, take leadership roles but serve as mothers etc.”*

*What is life like as an activist? How does your environment perceive your work?*

I do encounter a lot of backlashes such as a clash of cultures or ideas and perceptions towards concepts such as that women must not be given position of trust, take leadership roles but serve as mothers etc.

As an activist, I feel fulfilled because my advocacy work has tremendous impact on communities. Women now participate in decision making, their husbands now support them in domestic chores like taking care of children when women are performing their normal works at homes and communal work like the market garden activities, before this time pregnant women hardly access hospitals because of limited

knowledge without knowing the risk giving birth at homes.

Through above highlighted activities communities perceive our work as impactful as they are involved in every stage of implementation and this has brought peace and unity, cohesion between women.

### *What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your projects?*

I encounter numerous challenges in my role, including clashes of ideas rooted in cultural norms and perceptions that resist concepts such as women holding positions of trust, assuming leadership roles, and serving as mothers simultaneously.

As an activist, the fulfilment I derive from my advocacy work is profound, given its substantial impact on communities. A notable transformation has occurred, with women actively participating in decision-making processes. Husbands now actively support their spouses in domestic responsibilities, including childcare, allowing women to fulfil their professional duties and engage in communal activities such as market garden initiatives. Previously,

pregnant women faced hurdles in accessing hospitals due to limited awareness, resulting in risky home births.

The positive changes resulting from our endeavours resonate deeply within communities. The inclusive approach we adopt ensures community involvement at every stage of implementation, fostering a perception of our work as impactful. This has not only brought about tangible improvements but has also cultivated peace, unity, and cohesion among women, creating a harmonious environment within these communities.

### *What does it take to encourage others?*

Achieving successful project implementation demands a combination of virtues, including courage, consistency, calmness, persuasion, effective leadership, assertiveness, patience, and hard work. The active engagement of people is crucial in this process, fostering a sense of ownership within communities.

This heightened involvement not only instils confidence but also facilitates interpersonal



connections through various initiatives such as market garden activities, village saving and loan associations, community advocacy structures, and focused group sessions. By embodying these qualities, we not only navigate challenges effectively but also nurture a collaborative environment that strengthens the bonds within the community.

*What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?*

Our unwavering commitment to gender equality and empowerment has yielded significant positive outcomes, dismantled barriers and fostering opportunities for women to flourish and actively contribute to their communities.

In Kargboro Chiefdom, our strategic focus on "gender transformation" has played a pivotal role in empowering disadvantaged rural women, ensuring a gender-balanced representation in village-level committees. This intentional approach has resulted in both male and female leaders contributing to decision-making processes. Initiatives like the Market Gardening and Village Savings and Loans (VSLA) scheme have been instrumental in transforming the lives of women. Beyond earning income, women now experience economic independence through loans obtained from the VSLA. These endeavours empower women to engage in entrepreneurial activities, providing support to their children and households.

Remarkably, men have emerged as advocates for gender equality, actively supporting the inclusion and empowerment of women in their communities. Despite the challenges associated with changing entrenched cultural norms, these men are inspired by the tangible upliftment of women in Kargboro Chiefdom.

Women who have benefited from the programme have acquired skills in market gardening, leadership, and record-keeping. They have seamlessly integrated into decision-making processes within their communities, playing crucial roles in supporting their children and husbands.

Men are actively participating in supporting their wives in decision-making and domestic chores. For instance, individuals like Mohamed,

having witnessed the positive impact of gender equality training, no longer hesitates to prepare meals for his children when his wife is engaged in project activities. His experience underscores the importance of empowering women from a young age, emphasising abilities over gender stereotypes.

### *What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?*

My dream for Sierra Leone 2035 is a Sierra Leone where all citizens, men, women, and children live in a free, equal, equitable and gender biased country and are able to eradicate poverty and uphold human rights in every facet of life.

## **HILTINA BARNETT**

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### *How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I resided in a severely deprived village that received minimal support from the government or organisations. WellFound marked

the first organisation to visit my community. As a visually impaired individual, my life took an unfortunate turn with the loss of my mother during childbirth and the passing of my father when I was just a year old.

On a fateful day, I seized the opportunity to participate in a needs assessment meeting conducted in my village by WellFound, becoming an active participant in the process. During this meeting, I was privileged to share the challenges I faced as a visually impaired person, recounting experiences of marginalisation during community gatherings and other functions within the community.

### *Why did you take part in this project?*

WellFound has played a crucial role in encouraging community leaders to include individuals like me in their projects. Since that initiative, I have actively participated in every community meeting, and the community members have warmly embraced my involvement.

My decision to engage in this project was motivated by the positive change WellFound was advocating for, particularly in the areas of providing safe and clean drinking water, constructing latrines, establishing market gardens, and implementing Village Savings and Loans programs for the economic empowerment of women. Following my participation,

I took the initiative to establish a small business, enabling me to better care for my children.

### *Has your family and/or community supported you to participate in this project?*

I was supported by WellFound and community to attend meetings and also given some money by a WellFound staff as a start up to be part of the Village Savings and Loans. I was supported greatly because of my visual impairment and became economically empowered to start up my own business.

### *What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

I encountered several challenges throughout the project. Due to my limited eyesight, accessing the garden site posed a significant hurdle. Despite this obstacle, I expressed gratitude to the women who diligently returned from the garden.

Another obstacle was the difficulty in mobilising resources to contribute to the Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA). To address this, I engaged in palm kernel processing, with the support of my relatives, to generate the necessary funds within the

stipulated timeframe for my contribution.

*How has this project helped to support gender equality, women's and girls' rights or to balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

The project has significantly contributed to advancing gender equality, benefiting individuals like me and others who were historically marginalised. The inclusivity of marginalised groups, including persons with disabilities like me, has been a key aspect of the project. Additionally, the project has provided support in generating financial resources through the Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) box. Previously, securing funds to care for myself and my children was a formidable challenge. The inclusion of marginalised individuals like me in the VSLA program has been instrumental in addressing this financial barrier.

Furthermore, the project has played a pivotal role in shifting societal dynamics. Initially, men were hesitant to allow their wives to participate in decision-making processes. However, there has been a remarkable improvement, with men actively supporting their wives

in household chores. This positive change has contributed to enhanced peace and stability in the village, marking a significant transformation in community dynamics.

***“I will teach my family to fight for gender equality and human rights, encourage community people to be inclusive in decision making especially for women and girls”***

*Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?*

From what i have learnt from WellFound and experienced, I will teach my family to fight for gender equality and human rights, encourage community people to be inclusive in decision making especially for women and girls and advocate for women to take lead in decision making and father's allowing their girl child to go to school.

*What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?*

I want to see a Sierra Leone where  
the physically challenged -  
particularly women are held in high

esteem and opportunities created  
for all.

# WAVES

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*Sierra Leone counts lots of grassroots initiatives to safeguard the rights of women and girls. Woman Against Violence has become one of the most powerful organisations in Southern Sierra Leone. Established in 2005, their main focus is on women and girl children, in and out of school, on young women and teenage or child mothers, deprived women and adolescent girls.*

*Hannah Fatmata Yambasu is a renowned women activist in Sierra Leone and shares her story together with Sallay Bundu.*

## **HANNAH FATMATA YAMBASU**

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I am Hannah Fatmata Yambasu, Director, Women Against Violence and Exploitation In Society in Sierra Leone.

It is a fantastic pleasure to share with you the genesis of WAVES-SL journey to creating a safe and enabling environment for women and girls in our society.





I worked in administration at the Njala University. But in 1995, four years after the start of the civil war, the rebels entered Njala. I had to flee, and I went to Bo, where the youngest of my boys went to school. So, I decided to change jobs. I had this interest in human rights in me. And above all, I wanted to work my brain.

In Bo, I saw that MSF Belgium was very involved with the victims of the civil war.

They offered medical help. I became an Administrative Assistant. I saw terrible things. The suffering of women and children. I was wondering what I could do to prevent it from happening again. When the situation hardened and the international staff of MSF was evacuated, we continued the mission of MSF. I went to the bush, to the red (dangerous) areas. I was in contact with very vulnerable women, some with complicated pregnancies, to whom I had to provide emergency medical aid.

I started by reproducing what the MSF team was doing. And then I wondered if

there were other things to do.

When the Oxfam GB organisation arrived, they were looking for an

Office Manager. I applied; I was recruited.

And there it was different. We took the time to design actions. And above all, there was a “gender and development” component that suited me completely. I went to meetings, I went to the field, I thought about the strategy, the objectives to achieve. I was then offered to join the Freetown office, but I refused. I wanted to stay on the ground.

The war lasted for 11 years; from 23 March 1991 to 18 January 2002. The war caused so many atrocities.

Property was destroyed; lives lost.

The warring factions, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) and soldiers raped women and young girls, and they at times raped pregnant women. It also resulted in early marriages. The rebels conscripted young boys as child soldiers and used them as human shields.

There were many early marriages.

The victims were abandoned, and the perpetrators never gave account of their devilish actions nor did they take any responsibility for their actions. International Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) like OXFAM, Médecins Sans

Frontières (MSF) Belgium, etc, had to come to the rescue of these abandoned women and girls. They provided medical care and counselling to them.

In order to help the victims of the war as well as to raise awareness on these issues of violence against women, girls and young boys, I together with a team of three set up in Bo, Southern Sierra Leone a local Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and we called it, Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society, Sierra Leone (WAVES-SL) with the commitment to advocate against violence against women and girls in Sierra Leone.

It is a human rights organisation that aims to empower and create an enabling environment for women and children especially girls to claim their rights at local, national and international levels.

### *What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

During the Ebola scourge in 2014/15, WAVES witnessed first-hand how pandemics disproportionately affected women and girls; nearly 4,000 people died in Sierra Leone, many children were orphaned. It became more complicated for young girls who did

not know where to go, and who found themselves left to their own devices. Some were involved in prostitution simply for food, others were raped. Thousands of young girls were pregnant within a few months.

The government neglected children, especially girls. WAVES began to see an increase in sexual violence at the same time when communities were unable to access information and health services. The number of teenage girls becoming pregnant rose.

In the midst of the Ebola crisis, when Sierra Leone's government made the decision to reopen schools, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology prohibited visibly pregnant girls from taking national exams and attending mainstream schools. They feared allowing pregnant girls to attend school would lead to more pregnancies among adolescents. For WAVES-SL, this decision impacted 3,000 girls across the country who could not sit for exams for secondary school or universities or attend classes. I was outraged—outraged that girls were denied their right to education and made to feel ashamed and ostracised.

I traveled from Bo to the capital of Freetown on the coast to meet with allies and attend government meetings to urge a change in the policy. We then campaigned so that they were at least allowed to take their end-of-year exams.

The government feared that pregnant girls would have a negative influence on their classmates. But, for us, it made no sense. Pregnancy is not a contagious disease! And then these young girls attended their classes outside of school.

We told ourselves that these adolescent girls, who, in the vast majority of cases, wanted to continue their education, suffered double punishment. They had been victims of rape or prostitution during the war against Ebola and they found themselves victims of the school system which excluded them.

Discrimination is an argument that was put forward before the ECOWAS court of justice, which we seized after finding that our plea did not succeed with the Sierra Leonean constitution.

The government firmly refused to lift the ban. At one point, the Ministry of Education proposed to

create classrooms dedicated to these young mothers. However, the means were not finally made available.

They insisted on punishing the victim, not the perpetrator. The rapist had the right to continue his schooling or studies. Finally, we argued that this policy would not resolve the issue of the low school enrolment rate of young girls, who are known to contribute to increasing illiteracy and poverty. It was a long fight. I couldn't do it alone with my WAVES organisation. I, together with like-minded partners kept hitting a rock until we met with Equality Now who were eager to meet with us.

Equality Now, and us formed a coalition with other NGOs: Defense for Children International (DCI) Sierra Leone, Women's Partnership for Justice and Peace (WPJP), Graceland Sierra Leone, and Child Welfare Society (CWS). This network allowed us to weigh more. It was a difficult case to plead before the Abuja court, but I remain very optimistic.

Equality Now proposed strategic litigation in the Community Court of Justice, an institution within the

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

WAVES-SL and its legal allies Equality Now and the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA) took the Sierra Leone government to court for violating international treaties and breaching girls' rights to education. WAVES-SL collected testimonies from impacted girls in their community. They included accounts of girls being subjected to degrading procedures by those in positions of authority to determine if they were pregnant.

Girls' stories were critical evidence presented to the court that ultimately led to a victorious court decision in December 2019.

The court ruled that not only should Sierra Leone immediately revoke the ban, but also develop nationwide strategies to address gender inequality.

The court called upon the government to execute a plan to reverse bias towards pregnant girls and teenage mothers as well as integrate sexual and reproductive health education into school curricula.

The court decision intensified the growing international pressure necessary for the government to rescind the ban and develop a task force to implement the court's ruling.

***“I was outraged—  
outraged that girls were  
denied their right to  
education and made to  
feel ashamed and  
ostracised.”***

With school closures due to COVID-19, government efforts to realise the court ruling have slowed so far in 2020, but WAVES continue to work in local communities to ensure girls have a right to education. We want to ensure the schools accept the girls and have the mechanisms in place to welcome them. We are not going to allow the same thing to happen as during Ebola.

That notwithstanding, WAVES-SL continues to mobilise organisations and beneficiaries to end Harmful Traditional /Cultural Practices that affect women and Girls, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), Violence against women and Girls

and promote Sexual & Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), Women in leadership and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI).

*What is life like as an activist?  
How does your environment  
perceive your work?*

Building on the successes of my years of activist work with women and adolescence girls, and in response to a growing demand from communities for longer term initiatives to address women issues and other challenges facing women and adolescence girls, I feel very good to make the strategic decision to work more long-term development that will favour women and more focused on critical issues that affect women and more importantly based on my strength and capacity. Willingness to learn and undertake risk.

Transforming lives of women and girls through advocacy work.

Restoration of human dignity and respect the lives of women and adolescent boys and girls who are deprived and marginalised in the society.

Providing space and platform for women and girls to express themselves without fear.

I enjoy the fun from my work with women and girls using my skills and knowledge to make the most difference for their cause. I get coaching and mentoring from other colleagues.

Also, I enjoy learning new things, achieving goals for activism, and feel increased self-esteem.

The environment sees my work as somebody who enlightens the society on their human rights.

Building their knowledge and skills in policies, systems, structures, and legal standards.

*What were the biggest  
challenges you encountered in  
your projects?*

Weak implementation of the laws, low level knowledge of people in human rights, bad religious and traditional practices, rough terrain, lack of political will, delay in police investigation upon receipt of complaints, limited judicial structures within the country. Limited understanding among women and girls on activist work.

*What does it take to encourage  
others?*

Encouraging others takes time, their involvement at all levels, participation in the process throughout, create local capacity

through training and institution building, information collection and analysis, collaboration and partnership to guide the process of work.

*What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?*

Fruitful result, outcome of an adventure. It could be achievements realised from the implementation of an initiative.

My recipe for success includes the following:

Self Confidence, bold, dedication to work, polite, tidy, cheerful, honest, helpful, interested in work, appreciate others, loyal to my friends, independent, I do not prejudice, less interested in politics, love reading, inspired, planning.

*What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?*

1. Access to equal rights and justice.
2. A just Sierra Leone free from all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls.
3. Women economically empowered.
4. Households provided with safe drinking water.
5. Quality education for all irrespective of status.
6. Affordable healthcare services for everybody.
7. Affordable electricity for households.
8. The Family Support Unit (Sierra Leone Police) provided with adequate digitalised system for data management.
9. Magistrate and High Courts established at all district headquarter towns.
10. Embark on mechanised farming through the provision of viable agricultural seeds and seedlings.

## SALLAY BUNDU

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I was admitted or enlisted into the project as an adolescent girl of the established safe space in Benduma

community in 2020 through identification process following set criteria by the project Officer. An enrollment form and consent form was completed.

Presently, I serve as female mentor to support other adolescent girls at the safe space.

I have heard a lot of knowledge and information regarding gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone (particularly the negative effects and health complications associated with FGM).

As a member of the Adolescent Girls safe space and Human Right Club we have organised several community and school programs with other girls on FGM in order to sensitise and share adequate information about FGM.

I have acquired adequate knowledge and information about FGM that has made me grow to hate it because it is a harmful practice and has several negative and health consequences.

Together with my members we have used the knowledge and information acquired to engage stakeholders and have usually discussed the harmful practices of FGM.



We also conducted public campaigns on the negative effects of FGM with a view of influencing policy makers to enact policies banning the practice.

My movement is most time restricted when the FGM practice is done with in the community. It creates fear in me, and most times deprived me from meeting at the safe space.

In view of the above, I have chosen to lead a campaign to influence decision makers to support our movement by amplifying our voices about gender equality and human rights.

*Why did you take part in this project?*

To be a change agent to help identify and address issues affecting us as girls' human rights. Build an agency of girls to champion adolescents and women issues. Create a community of champions to collectively plan and take decisions to protect and promote gender equality and human rights.

*Has your family and/ or community supported you to participate in this project?*

My family and community members supported me to fully participate in the project. Together, they provided me with mentorship to be efficient and effective in the project work.

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

Limited supply of safe space materials.  
Low level knowledge of community members in gender equality and human rights.  
Poor participation of women in community meetings and development programs.

*How has this project helped to support gender equality, women's and girls' rights or to*

*balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

The project has built the knowledge and skills of targets in gender and human rights. Retention of girls in schools, understanding their human rights, their boldness in championing their own activities and increased of women participation in their community activities and also the involvement of women and girls in almost all community activities regardless of their statuses.

Women and girls now develop advocacy messages, deliver messages, and participate in discussion programs on gender equality and human rights. Now, there is an increased awareness about gender equality and human rights.

The community develops success stories on the change in attitudes in communities through engagement with their parents/ caregivers and community authorities. Together with community authorities, they also raise awareness on gender equality and human rights in communities through consultation, community outreach.



Girls in school engage out of schoolgirls in the community with adequate information about gender equality and human rights. Men and boys champions women and girls' rights, safety and protection in the community.

Women and Girls form a community of champions who take lead in public and community awareness campaigns about gender equality and human rights.

Women and Girls engage media on how to produce real stories about human rights and how to cascade adequate information through public education on the necessity of allowing girls to be girls in society.

They also meet stakeholders (religious sectors, traditional leaders, police, Line Ministries- MBSSE, MOH, MGCA, Family Support Unit, Health Service providers, human right commissions including parents etc) to have dialogue on human rights and breach the gap between stakeholders and women/girls.

Communities discourage discrimination, stigmatisation, which lead to poor participation and interaction of women and girls in development process.

***"I have chosen to lead a campaign to influence decision makers to support our movement by amplifying our voices about gender equality and human rights."***

***Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?***

I will teach my family to fight for gender equality and human rights.

***What is your dream for "Salone 2035"?***

1. Enacting the child rights act and all gender laws.
2. Equal right and opportunities for all irrespective of status.
3. Access to equal rights and justice.
4. A just Sierra Leone free from all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls.
5. Women economically empowered.
6. Households provided with safe drinking water.
7. Quality education for all irrespective of status.
8. Affordable healthcare services for everybody.
9. Affordable electricity for households.

10. The Family Support Unit (Sierra Leone Police) provided with adequate digitalised system for data management.

11. Magistrate and High Courts established at all district headquarter towns.

12 Embark on mechanised farming through the provision of viable agricultural seeds and seedlings for food sufficiency.

# Cotton Tree Foundation

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*Active in Sierra Leone since 2003, the Cotton Tree Foundation provides access to affordable quality education for deprived and underprivileged children. They support sustainable livelihoods for the vulnerable, advocate for women's and children's rights (including gender equality), and help transforming people - to improve lives and impact communities.*

## JAMES L. K. TUCKER

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I became an activist for human rights and gender equality as a result of my personal experiences and my passion for a sense of justice. Since my childhood, I have witnessed the injustices and inequalities that women and girls are subjected to everyday. These experiences aroused in me a determination to hold perpetrators accountable with the aim of bringing about a change. To see this

determination come through, I engaged myself in reading about human rights and gender equality issues, made good use of opportunities in attending workshops, and I collaborated with organisations that advocate for changes in these areas. Through my involvement in such collaborations, I was able to do awareness raising and sensitisation about the challenges encountered by women and girls. Through these collaborations, I was also able to join in the advocacy measures to



promote justice, equal rights and opportunities for women and girls. As an activist, I have had the opportunity to be a voice for the oppressed and work towards creating a more conducive environment where women and girls can freely operate in a more inclusive and equitable society.

*What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

My motivation for supporting gender equality and human rights is hinged on the premise that these are fundamental principles for promoting fairness, justice, and self-esteem for every human being regardless of race, tribe, religion, gender, colour, etc.

This motivation for supporting gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone is geared towards ensuring that everyone has equal access to opportunities, resources, etc., regardless of their gender. This will result in having a just and inclusive environment in which every individual thrives in a conducive environment to contribute to the well-being of the country.

*What is life like as an activist? How does your environment perceive your work?*

Life has a dual nature for an activist in Sierra Leone. On the one hand, it can be challenging but also rewarding on the other hand. Some of the challenges faced by gender and human rights activists in Sierra Leone are government resistance, inadequate resource availability, and pressures for various sectors of the society. In the face of these challenges, activists are rewarded by the opportunity to create a significant impact on issues having to do with human rights, social justice, and gender equality.

In Sierra Leone, the work of activists is met with a blend of support and skepticism. Within the respective

communities, there are people who demonstrate appreciation for the effort of activists in advocating for these changes, while at the same time, there are others who may be resistant to the work of activists and may view their efforts as being destructive to the existing social order. But to some extent, this is determined by the level of awareness/ sensitisation and understanding within particular communities.

***“Life has a dual nature for an activist in Sierra Leone. On the one hand, it can be challenging but also rewarding on the other hand.”***

***What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your projects?***

The biggest challenges we have encountered in our projects have to deal with:

1. Observance of cultural norms and upholding traditional beliefs. In Sierra Leone, we have deeply deep-rooted cultural norms that encourage perpetuation of gender inequalities and deprive women and girls of opportunities that their

male counterparts enjoy. These challenges have served as an obstacle in the implementation of our project, like the FGM project.

2. Lack of access to education. In Sierra Leone, particularly in the provincial areas, girls are subjected to limited access to education, thereby forcing women and girls to suffer the consequences of being unschooled. This lack of access to education, combined with the observance of cultural norms and traditional beliefs have been a hindrance to having maximum participation of women and girls in workshops, awareness raising and sensitisation relating to GBV and the rights of women and girls.
3. Limited resource availability. The organisation has been grappling with limited resources to respond to the needs of vulnerable groups and communities.

***What does it take to encourage others?***

In order to encourage others to take up the role of activists for gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone, one must utilise a strategic and inclusive approach. The undermentioned points will throw more light on this:

1. Self-education. An individual who aspires to become an activist

for gender equality and human rights needs to have a deep understanding of the issues related to gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone. To acquire this, it is important to have an understanding of the local laws, cultural practices, and challenges encountered.

## 2. Creating networks and alliances.

One who desires to become an activist has to connect with individuals and organisations that think the same and may already be working on similar causes. To meet this requirement, it is advised that the individual joins local advocacy and human rights organisations.

## 3. Community sensitisation and awareness raising.

As one educates him/herself and creates networks and alliances on gender equality and human rights, he/she must make good of every opportunity in participating in workshops, seminars, and public events that are geared towards awareness raising and sensitisation on gender inequality and human rights violations in Sierra Leone.

Conversely, one can make use of social media platforms, electronic and print media, and involve in community engagement so as to reach more people.

## 4. Facilitate community engagement and dialogue.

As one progresses in his/her involvement in advocating gender equality and human rights, conversations should be undertaken within various communities (eg. schools, workplaces) to bring out the importance of gender equality and human rights. This can be achieved by encouraging open and frank dialogue, and the establishment of women programs.

## 6. Advocating for policy change and domestication of International Laws.

The activist should be bold to approach the authorities to lobby for the creation, implementation and/or amendment of relevant policies. Furthermore, one should advocate for the domestication and/or operationalisation of relevant international laws by engaging politicians (sometimes in corridor diplomacy), decision-makers, and local/traditional leaders.

## 7. It should be noted that advocating for gender equality and human rights takes time, persistence, and collective effort. Therefore, the activists must be informed, motivated, dedicated and focused.

### *What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?*

For me, success is achieving one's goals or attaining a desired outcome. The recipe for this will include:

1. Setting SMART Goals. In order to achieve one's goal or attain a desired outcome, one's goal should be specific, measurable, accurate, realistic, and time bound. This provides a clear direction and helps the activist stay focused and motivated.

2. Persistence, hard work and dedication. To achieve success, one needs to be persistent in pursuing a stated goal and not give up in the face of challenges. The demonstration of persistence will require an enormous amount of hard work and commitment.

3. Continuous self-education. Achieving success requires that one maintains a continuous self-improvement in the acquisition of additional knowledge and skills in a particular area of interest.

4. Ability to adapt and be flexible. The ability to demonstrate adaptability and flexibility in any given circumstances and modify or change one's approach gives one the ability to deal with challenges

and take advantage of emerging opportunities.

5. Ability to build network and create relationships. There is an adage that says, "no man is an island". Success always requires seeking the support of others in pursuit of new opportunities.

### *What is your dream for "Salone 2035"?*

My dream for Salone 2035 in terms of gender equality and upholding human rights, my dream includes:

1. Equal opportunities. A country where women and girls have equal access to quality education, healthcare, employment, and leadership positions, without having to deal with discrimination or barriers based on gender and other disparities.

2. Eradication of gender-based violence. That Salone will be a country where GBV is significantly reduced and eventually eradicated. Further to this will be ensuring that the legal frameworks are operational, that victims of GBV have access to confidential support services, and that awareness programmes are undertaken to promote gender equality.

3. Empowering women. That by 2035, Salone will join nations in the lead for creating a conducive

environment where women are empowered in multiple spheres (economically, politically, socially), so that they can actively and effectively participate in decision-making processes.

4. Upholding the rule of law and respecting human rights. By 2035, that Salone will become a country where the rule of law is applicable to all irrespective of gender, race, colour, region, etc.

## JOSEPH CONTEH

*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I have witnessed, firsthand, multiple gender-based violence perpetrated against women and girls. I have also seen situations in which women and girls have been marginalised and deprived of their basic human rights. I have witnessed these situations of women and girls in communities such as the barracks, college and my workplaces. These experiences borne in me the desire and determination to be involved in advocacy for the rights of women and girls.

As the project location (Mongegba) has quite a large number of underprivileged and disadvantaged children, I willingly volunteered to be teaching the children when I was approached by Reverend James Tucker to become involved in contributing to impacting the lives





of these children and giving them a better future. As the number of school children increased, I took a leading role in enlisting more teachers on a voluntary basis. Now as a result of the two-year teacher training I have received through the funding of Inter-Mission Germany, I am providing quality teaching services to the children and at the same time providing counselling services to children who are being subjected to domestic violence at the hands of their caregivers.

### *Why did you take part in this project?*

I took part in this project because I believe that children are a vulnerable group of people and that there is a growing need to help lay a firm foundation for a better future for them.

### *Has your family and/ or community supported you to participate in this project?*

My family has always given me the moral support to participate in advocating for gender equality and human rights, and when and where necessary, they have also financially supported me.

***“I believe that children are a vulnerable group of people and that there is a growing need to help lay a firm foundation for a better future for them”***

Also, some stakeholders in Mongegba and its environs have given me the moral support and encouragement to keep up the good fight and not to be discouraged by negative statements coming from a few individuals.

### *What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

The biggest challenge that I have encountered has been resistance by the local authorities to change their perceptions about children, particularly girls. This challenge has been due to cultural and/or societal norms.

### *How has this project helped to support gender equality, women’s and girls’ rights or to balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

It has provided an opportunity for more girls to be enrolled in our school.

*Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?*

Yes. Since we live in the new dispensation of democratic values, I believe that fighting for gender equality and human right should start in a family setting by telling our children at home that if they don't start practicing promoting the rights of women and girls at home, it will be hard for them to do so out of home.

Therefore, I will continue to teach them to fight for gender equality and human rights.

*What is your dream for "Salone 2035"?*

By 2035:

1. I want to see more female politicians, doctors, engineers, more female police and military commanders.
2. I want to see, at least, Salone has produced one female president.
3. I want to hear of little or no discrimination and violence against women.

## FIIDI

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*The Foundation for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Initiatives (FIIDI) actively supports women to become technically skilled in gara tie dyeing and tailoring skills.*

*We spoke with Johannes Sankoh, Programme Officer, and Mamasu Senessie as a FIIDI project participant in Marampa Chiefdom, Port Loko District.*

### JOHANNES SANKOH

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*How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

Born and experienced the pinch of a typical rural (traditional) life, my mother and all other women in the community had little power to make decisions on issues that affect them and their children. For this reason, I have always aspired to become a human rights/gender equality/women empowerment activist. In my infringing search for opportunities to be actively involved in human rights and women empowerment, I

volunteered for various community development programs involving women and girls and the youth including children. In June 2022 I volunteered for The Foundation for



Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Initiatives (FIIDI) and rose to the position of Program Officer. This is a dream that came-true.

*What motivates you to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I strongly believe that human rights have a universal imperative, and essence is that they are applicable to all in society. The Constitution of Sierra Leone provides for equal rights for women, but in practice women face both legal and societal discrimination. The female population in Sierra Leone, especially in Port Loko district where we operate, has continued to remain ignorant of their fundamental human rights and responsibilities as citizens of the state. FIIDI's goal to increase women's awareness on their legal rights, improve knowledge on types and the extent of sexual and gender based violence and its consequences, and how they can participate in promoting and protecting their rights motivated me to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone, especially in Port Loko district.

*What is life like as an activist? How does your environment perceive your work?*

Women's rights are human rights, and this is my firm belief and what I stand for. Port Loko district is known for negative cultural practices including forced early marriages for girl child, which constitutes rape crime. The early marriages for girls also imply that many girls do not go to school as they are prepared for marriage. Building the capacity of women and girls in fighting against sexual and gender based violence has proved to build individual self-esteem, confidence, and it gives women strong convening power. These are opportunities that FIIDI would like to exploit in building women's capacity to prevent and respond to gender based violence in Sierra Leone.

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your projects?*

Slow pace of community change of attitude about women's rights as human rights by the male population and community leadership are big challenges. Also, gender relations are power relations, and some men have continued to resist the change. However, because of the



importance of involving both men and women in the work we do at FIIDI, we engage with boys and men in the communities to develop interest in our projects. When addressing the empowerment of disadvantaged and vulnerable women, we recognise that we must engage boys and men in the process. Engaged boys and men have continued to play a positive role in ensuring that women are empowered socially and economically through our projects.

### *What does it take to encourage others?*

It takes the systematic results/ impact that we have registered over the years to encourage others to join us in promoting human rights/ gender equality in Sierra Leone. FIIDI uses an integrated approach

that promotes dialogue for the realisation of women power to challenge traditional attitudes that limit woman/girls potentials. This approach encourages others to join FIIDI's human rights and gender equality campaign in Sierra Leone, especially in Port Loko district where we operate.

### *What is success to you? Could you share your recipe for success with us?*

FIIDI's capacity building programs and activities on the rule of law as well as concept and definition of human rights has continued to raise awareness in the communities and schools we serve. This approach has definitely sustain the impact of our programs and activities at FIIDI. We work with communities from needs assessment to programs

implementation so that communities can take ownership and sustain the impact of our programs and activities. We constantly train our staff including volunteers and interns to be very active in making use of our community engagement programs and activities including events around the issue of sexual and gender based violence.

### *What is your dream for “Salone 2035”?*

Looking into the future (Salone 2035), our aim is to continue to be

relevant in the promotion and protection of human rights focusing on women empowerment and gender equality in Sierra Leone, especially in Port Loko district. Advancing gender equality is at the heart of our work at FIIDI. In the coming decade, all of our programs and activities will continue to be relevant in the empowerment of women and we will continue to implement specific projects to achieve these goals. Protecting and advancing women’s and girls’ human rights remains a top priority in the next decade.

## **MAMUSU SENESSIE**

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### *How did you become a participant of a project to support gender equality and human rights in Sierra Leone?*

I became a participant through FIIDI’s engagement with the leadership of our community. Prior to the start of the project, FIIDI held a meeting with all the women in our community and explained the purpose of the project and its importance to promote women empowerment and gender equality. During the meeting, I saw the importance of such a project for a

poor, illiterate and single mother like me, so I immediately registered and became a participant.

### *Why did you take part in this project?*

I participated in the project because it will ultimately help to increase self-reliance and enable social integration of disadvantaged women like me in Marampa chiefdom of Port Loko district in Sierra Leone. In addition, the project is free and also provides the

necessary materials, tools, and equipment for the economic empowerment of disadvantaged women like me. We are mostly single-parents, have experiences as prostitutes, widows, or teenage mothers. Most importantly, this project is a rare opportunity so I take advantage of having it in my community.

*Has your family and/ or community supported you to participate in this project?*

Yes, I was deeply encouraged by my family members, especially my children who are in school. My family cited the importance acquiring a skill to make money and become independent in life. Also, my friends are very supportive of my participation and encouraged me everyday to make sure I finish the program successfully.

*What were the biggest challenges you encountered in this project?*

My greatest challenge is being a single mother and a farmer, this is really difficult as I have to give up farming during the week to be at the training from Monday to Friday. This impacted my economic situation seriously as there was little to sell from my farm to make money and feed my children.

*How has this project helped to support gender equality, women's and girls' rights or to balance the interests of marginalised groups?*

The project focused on training of disadvantaged women like me in acquiring gara tie and dye and tailoring life skills to become self-reliant, run individual businesses and create jobs for myself and other women. Certainly, this project improves my economic status as it will help me escape from the traps of abject poverty because I have learnt a skill. Moreover, the project provides me with education, skills, and extra-curricular activities such as human rights awareness sessions, which give me hope for a better future.

*Will you teach your family to fight for gender equality and human rights?*

Absolutely yes, I will teach my family to fight against gender inequality and promote human rights. In fact, with what I have learnt from the project, I now encourage my kids to be serious with their education. My desire today is to join FIIDI in the fight against gender inequality, but I am challenged because I have never been to school. However, my hope is that FIIDI will consider me one day

as a voice for women in my community even though I am not educated.

*What is your dream for "Salone 2035"?*

Even though I could see that age is no longer on my side, but for the

sake of my girls (children), I look forward to "Salone 2035" with optimism. I want to see a future where men and women are treated equally with respect and given opportunities just like men in our community. What a bright future this could be!



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Editor: Sabine Yang-Schmidt

Supported by: Miatta Marke

German Embassy Freetown

3, Middle Hill Station

Freetown, Sierra Leone

[www.freetown.diplo.de](http://www.freetown.diplo.de)





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