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PRESS RELEASE

Sierra Leone Movement to End Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting announces two landmark cases in huge strides towards legal reform and ending the violence

Today, we announce the filing of two landmark legal cases in the effort to end Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) in Sierra Leone - one in the domestic courts of Sierra Leone and the other at the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) Community Court of Justice. After years of lobbying and campaigning, these are unprecedented landmark legal moments for the country towards ending FGM/C.

Globally, it is estimated at least 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone some form of FGM/C. Sierra Leone features among the countries with the highest rates in the world, with recent data showing over eight out of ten women (83%) between 15 and 49 years old in Sierra Leone have experienced FGM/C. Today, we call attention to the story of a 34-year-old woman from Kenema, Sierra Leone, who was forcibly cut in 2016 and has been seeking justice ever since. She is one of thousands of women and girls in Sierra Leone whose dignity and bodily autonomy have been violated through the practice of FGM/C.

In Sierra Leone, there is no specific law criminalising FGM/C. These cases we have filed hold individual perpetrators accountable on one hand, and the State, on the other. More significantly, in bringing a criminal case in Sierra Leone courts while raising another case at the highest level at the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, representing fifteen Member States, these cases assert the simultaneous criminal acts and violations of human rights related to acts of FGM/C. They spotlight the shocking failure of successive governments to protect their citizens from harm and the legal reform that is urgently needed by the government of Sierra Leone to fulfil the mandates of the treaties it has signed, including the Maputo Protocol, which names FGM/C as a human rights violation, and to take concrete action to enact a law that explicitly bans FGM.

Today, The Forum Against Harmful Practices (FAHP) with the Institute for Human Rights and Development Africa (IHRDA) name the violence of FGM/C against women and girls as one of the most profound expressions of the unequal power relations between women and men

and just one manifestation of systemic oppression, so devastating for millions of girls and women across the world.

“This is a Sierra Leonean fight led by Sierra Leonean women over practices that have always been against the law. These acts of violence against girls and women should be called out for what they are - crimes against the state - and dealt with accordingly by our justice system.”

– Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, Human Rights Lawyer.

The goal is to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls while upholding the power and possibility of sacred female-only spaces and working towards a world where our lives and bodies are fully our own.

“FGM has been blighting the lives of girls and women for too long and this has to change. It has the same harmful effect for all ages - the older the person, the more dangerous it is. As a survivor myself, there is no justification or basis for any violence against women and girls - it simply must end.” – Aminata Koroma, Executive Secretary of the Forum Against Harmful Practices (FAHP).

We use this opportunity to call on all who believe in creating a world that is safe for women and girls to support this shared journey to justice.

“The movement to end FGM in Sierra Leone is alive and well and full of power to change the world for girls. Strategic litigation is one tool in a range of movement-building strategies to build the world we imagine. Purposeful is proud to stand alongside movement leaders to support this work.” – Nicky Spencer-Coker, Senior Legal Advisor – Purposeful.

It is expected that these cases will serve as inspiration for other countries in the sub-region and Africa as a whole in the global fight against FGM/C.

“We are positive that these cases will generate trend-setting jurisprudence in matters of FGM/C and women/girls’ rights in Africa. We believe a win in the fight against FGM/C in Sierra Leone, which is one of the major FGM/C hotspots in Africa and the world, is likely to inspire other countries on the continent to make similar moves.” – IHRDA Senior Legal Officer, Oludayo Fagbemi.

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About FAHP

FAHP is a coalition of national and international organisations working towards ending Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) in Sierra Leone. It was established in 2014 to respond to the increasing need for collaborative work among organisations working towards the reduction and ultimate eradication of Harmful Practices. These practices include but are not limited to child/forced marriage and FGM/C. FAHP has a membership of 26 organisations working in the five regions of Sierra Leone and has representation in all districts.

About IHRDA

IHRDA is a Pan-African non-governmental organisation created in 1998 and based in The Gambia. IHRDA works to promote human rights in Africa and improve the effectiveness of the African human rights system. IHRDA envisages an African continent where all have access to justice via national, African and international human rights mechanisms. IHRDA's work can be summarised in three words: defend, educate, and inform. IHRDA engages in legal advocacy via pro-bono strategic litigation and has massive experience litigating before regional human rights mechanisms. It diversifies the scope of its efforts to ensure the effective implementation of decisions and recommendations. IHRDA also plays a lead role in skills development for State and non-State actors on the use of international legal instruments and mechanisms for the promotion and protection of human rights.