

Walking the Talk: Why President Bio's sponsored UN General Assembly Resolution is relevant in the fight against sexual and gender-based violence in Sierra Leone

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On the 23rd September 2021, His Excellency the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Dr. Julius Maada Bio, moved a United Nation Resolution on sexual violence survivors, a historic feature that marks the first time in the history of United Nation General Assembly for sexual violence survivors to be on the agenda. The resolution was approved by 193 member states, thereby according Sierra Leone the lead nation that other countries should seek permission from if they wanted to introduce a resolution under that agenda item.

In one of the many issues discussed during his address to the UN General Assembly, the President discussed his government's strong efforts at addressing Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Sierra Leone. In 2019, for example, a year after he was elected, the President said he declared a State of Public Emergency on sexual violence and also supported reforms in national laws relating to sexual violence. He also spoke about the establishment of a Sexual Offences Model Court to fast track such cases and enhance the integrity of proceedings relating thereto. Under his administration, he said one-stop centres for responding to sexual assault cases have also been established in at least 6 districts to provide comprehensive package of quality services, which include health, psychosocial etc.

The Family Support Unit (FSU) was established in 2001 with a mandate to investigate all forms of abuse (sexual abuse and violence, physical abuse, exploitation, including commercial exploitation, including internal and cross border trafficking). The FSU, a specialist unit attached to police stations across Sierra Leone, also has a mandate to investigate allegations of sexual and

domestic violence and commercial and other forms of exploitation against women and vulnerable members of society. In addition to its investigation and prosecution responsibilities, the FSU also issues police medical reports for referral and medical treatment of victims/survivors, offers counselling services to victims/survivors, refers victims/survivors to service providers, monitors court proceedings, and makes follow up visit with victims/survivors.

In spite of some progress and the tremendous efforts by these institutions, the Family Support Unit (FSU) particularly faces persisting challenges. In addition to limited workplace facility, it also faces personnel inadequacy, limited fleet and operational support budget, among others. Unless these challenges are addressed – and without delay – the FSU cannot effectively deliver on its mandate. Over the years, however, the FSU has faced funding constraints mainly because it exclusively depends on resources allocated to it by the leadership of the Sierra Leone Police. Since the Sierra Leone Police hardly receives the funds required to fully support its operations, certain units within the institution, including the FSU, invariably get to receive far less resources than they actually need.

His Excellency's sponsored resolution of access to service for victims of sexual violence is absolutely commendable, but his administration – like all other governments – can only give meaning to it by ensuring that the required support is provided to key agencies established to respond to the justice, health and social needs of victims. As the saying goes, all justice is local. Now is the time for the Bio administration to walk the talk by empowering the Family Support Unit and other service delivery agencies in order to respond to the needs of victims of sexual and gender-based violence in Sierra Leone.

The Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law (CARL), with funds from an international NGO, Trocaire, is currently leading an advocacy campaign to help

improve the capacity of state institutions in responding to incidents of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls. In particular, we have been working with the Family Support Unit (FSU) to advocate for a separate or ring-fenced budget for the institution. Whilst our advocacy efforts have not been wholly successful, significant progress has been made in terms of getting a separate or ring-fenced budget for the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police. The Inspector-General of the Sierra Leone Police, Mr. Ambrose Sovula, through the Budget Team of the Sierra Leone Police, has for the first time ring-fenced a budget or specific amount for the FSU in the 2022 budget for Sierra Leone Police. This is an important first step, and it is hoped that the Sierra Leone Parliament will approve it, and that the Ministry of Finance will disburse the approved budget to FSU in a timely manner.