

**PRESS RELEASE – 6<sup>th</sup> May, 2015.**

**Non-governmental education organisations call on government to urgently act on international commitments to guarantee pregnant girls' right to education**

As key partners in the education sector and defenders of children's right to education, we the undersigned non-governmental education organisations have been supporting the reopening of schools as the Ebola outbreak gradually comes to an end. We are however saddened and concerned about the Ministry of Education Science and Technology's decision, in consultation with the Parliamentary Committee on Education, that pregnant girl in Junior Secondary School III will not be allowed to take the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). We believe that such a decision has a long standing effect on girls' ability to access education, especially as Sierra Leone currently has a high level of girls dropping out of school. Global evidence shows that educated mothers are more likely to have healthy children, and broaden opportunities to create a livelihood that collectively lifts families out of the cycle of poverty.

Education is recognized as a fundamental human right nationally, regionally and internationally. The Sierra Leone Education Act of 2004 states the principle of non-discrimination in accessing Education (Art. 4 section 1). More specifically, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the African Youth Charter provides that the State shall ensure that girls and young women who become pregnant before completing their education shall have the opportunity to continue their education. Furthermore, it is in violation of the International human rights treaties ratified by Sierra Leone that guarantee the right to education without discrimination (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Despite international, regional and national standards and repeated commitments to reduce the gender gap in education, girls (especially pregnant girls) are often denied their right to education. Research shows that young girls seldom become pregnant by choice. Pregnancy amongst young girls is often a consequence of other rights violations, including coercion and/or sexual violence and rape, lack of information related to girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights, and harmful cultural practices such as early marriage. The Ebola crisis has exacerbated the already existing inequalities and vulnerabilities of girls to violence. The many months of school closure due to Ebola may also have resulted in an increase in teenage pregnancy and early and forced marriage, all of which have life-long consequences for girls as their opportunities for economic independence are restricted and they continue to be vulnerable to domestic violence and to the health consequences of early pregnancy.

The Government of Sierra Leone has the obligation to protect and secure all girls' right to continue education, including those who have become pregnant. We recognise that there are perceptions in some parts of society that find it difficult to accept pregnant girls in school, but we equally recognise that there are also a significant number of people who believe that all children have the right to education, whatever their circumstance. In building equal rights to education, it would be of national benefit for the Government of Sierra Leone to open the debate and share evidence of the incredible abilities of both girls and boys in education in Sierra Leone and work to dispel the myths that pregnancy affects a girl's ability to learn and excel in education.

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**As partners in education, we call on the Government of Sierra Leone to allow pregnant girls to have equal access to education by putting the following provisions in place:**

- Publicly announce the Government's commendable position on encouraging girls who have become mothers to go back to formal education.
- Remove urgently the decision that forbids pregnant girls' to attend the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE).
- Make provisions for pregnant girls to attend BECE in collaboration with the West African Examination Council.
- Introduce policies, programmes and mechanisms, based on the principle of the best interest of the child, to ensure that pregnant girls and adolescent mothers can complete their formal education in a non-discriminatory environment.
- Ensure that schools provide care and support to pregnant girls and adolescent mothers such as psychosocial counselling and legal support to report and prosecute incidents of violence.
- Consistently provide boys and girls with comprehensive HIV&AIDS education and sexual and reproductive health and rights education and services.

**Signed by Organizations below:**



**Save the Children**

