

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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DCI urges the Government of Sierra Leone to invest on innovations by women and girls to achieve gender equality and promote women and girls' empowerment

On the 8th of March, International Women's Day, Defence for Children International Sierra Leone (DCI-SL) is urging the Government of Sierra Leone to take immediate actions to invest on innovations by women and girls to advance gender equality, promote women and girls' empowerment and contribute to the sustainable development of Sierra Leone -**#BalanceforBetter**.

The theme for this year's campaign is *"Think equal, build smart, innovate for change."* The focus is to remind Member States including Sierra Leone to put innovations both created by and for women and girls at the heart of the national development agenda to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, particularly in the areas of social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure.

Women account for 51% of Sierra Leone's population and their empowerment is critical to poverty reduction at the household level and to the overall sustainable development of the country. Meanwhile, for Sierra Leone to achieve the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015-2030, the country requires transformative shifts, integrated approaches and new solutions to advance gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Furthermore, 70% of young people in Sierra Leone, including women, are unemployed and formal job opportunities for these young women are relatively low in the formal sector. Because of lack of social and legal protection systems, limited access to public services and the absence of sustainable measures to invest on innovations by women and girls, especially in the rural areas, the rate of inequality and economic exclusion is high. Due to dominant social patriarchal norms, limited access to markets, training, finance, infrastructure, technology, as well as education and entrepreneurship development, girls and young women have limited access to productive assets and sustainable economic opportunities, thereby increasing their vulnerability and dependence on a predominantly male dominated society.

While DCI-Sierra Leone welcomes the Government's launch of the *"Free Quality School Education Programme," "Medium Term National Development Plan 2019-2023,"* and the declaration of rape and sexual violence as a *"national emergency,"* it is also calling on the Government to immediately take concrete measures to improve the quality, relevance and gender-responsiveness of teaching and learning to enhance the capacity of young women of graduates to enable them to compete effectively for jobs in the labour market. Moreover, the Government should also design and implement innovative approaches that disrupt *"business as usual,"* removes structural barriers and ensures that no woman for girl is left behind in the sustainable development of Sierra Leone.

Additionally, DCI-SL urges the Government of Sierra Leone to rapidly expand access to inclusive training and educational opportunities, change social norms and create social innovations/initiatives that work for both women and men and leave no one behind - **#BalanceforBetter**. Subsequently, the Government should provide direct support in the form of finance, market information, technology and technical advice to young people (including women) to engage in commercial agriculture and agro-processing activities. Also, the Government should promptly examine the ways in which innovation and technology can remove barriers and accelerate progress for gender equality, encourage investment in gender-responsive social systems, and build services and infrastructure that meet the needs of women and girls and bring them into the workforce. Consequently, DCI-SL also reminds the Government to immediately lift the ban on pregnant girls attending school, and to promote safe learning environment for girls to continue to stay in schools and strive.

Finally, DCI-SL is calling on the Government to domesticate and implement national and international instruments in support of gender equality and women's empowerment by creating opportunities for women and girls to play an active role in building more inclusive systems, efficient services and sustainable infrastructure to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs and gender equality thereby help creating a **#BalanceforBetter** Sierra Leone for women and girls.

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