

NEWSLETTER

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Minister of Gender and Children's
Affairs - Madam Manty Tarawalli



AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF GIRLS IN THE MEDIA FOR A DIGNIFIED FUTURE

women and girls are often referred to as a marginalised groups in Sierra Leone as they continue to face discrimination in political, economic, social, cultural, civic and justice spheres.



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On the horizon: a law that tackles long-running political and economic gender disparities in Sierra Leone

Achieving gender equality has been a long quest for women in Sierra Leone. In the 1990s and early 2000, women's groups like 50/50 and Women's Forum championed campaigns for increased political participation and equal representation of women in decision-making processes and the advancement of women and girls rights throughout the country.

The 50/50 Group campaign for equal representation and participation of women and men in public life and governance processes was to bear such fruit as— having a female president, 30 percent representation of women in Parliament, Local Government and decision-making



SLAWIJ'S Executive President Millicent Kargbo and team at Bottom Oku

Female Journalists Leading Covid-19 Awareness

The media has a responsibility to share credible information with the public. And as female journalists who play a leading role in promoting women and girls' rights through the media in communities, the *Mama En Pikin Welbodi* campaign was a timely initiative. Women are normally referred to as primary caregivers in the home. They have assumed such responsibility, taking care of the entire family including their old parents. In the wake of the Ebola Pandemic in Sierra Leone in 2014, more women were reported dead because they were not targeted with Ebola prevention messages early to stop the spread of the virus to their families.

IN THIS EDITION

- Female Journalists Leading Covid-19 Awareness
- On the horizon: a law that tackles long-running political and economic gender disparities in Sierra Leone
- Amplifying the voices of girls in the media for a dignified future
- Orientation of new members into SLAWIJ
- Scholarship for Female Journalists



Editorial

Challenge, amplify and celebrate
By Millicent Kargbo

Welcome to the first edition of the SLAWIJ Newsletter. This is just the beginning of many more to come and we at SLAWIJ are working to make this newsletter an important channel for challenging barriers; amplifying the voices of women in journalism and media, as well as those working in other areas to address the many issues that every Sierra Leonean woman faces. It is also a platform for celebrating our collective and individual achievements and progress as women. I am particularly excited to be leading the SLAWIJ project, working with a team of passionate, energetic and determined women to play our part in the long walk to women’s emancipation and empowerment on all fronts. We will work together to make this newsletter a consistent platform that dives into the issues affecting women in Sierra Leone, beyond the news that is reported in the media. The role of the media is key in building societies, and Sierra Leone as a developing country still offers few opportunities to women while serious barriers remain. As the struggle for equality continues, the need for a consistent voice that reechoes and amplifies the voices of women cannot be overstated. We will also use this newsletter and all other platforms available to us to celebrate the gains women are making, both in and out of the media, and pay tribute to the amazing work and achievements of those that came before us and those that continue to carry the torch. I take this opportunity to hail the women whose pioneering work and effort we all benefit from today, especially those that took the challenge of venturing into the media and other male-dominated spaces. It took courage and strength to do so and this generation of women journalists, media and communication workers draw our strength and inspiration from their legacy. More and more women are entering journalism, a profession long dominated by men. Some have chosen to focus on specialized reporting— covering gender issues, human rights violations, corruption, or other subjects in their communities. They often become targets of threats, intimidation, and physical violence because of their reporting. These threats are sometimes extended to their families or communities.

The barriers are still very visible to date. Choosing journalism as a profession in some communities is considered a break away from traditional norms. Stereotypes of women in the media is also another baggage very heavy to carry. Hence, many shy away from their passion to become journalists. Added to the many other challenges are low-level of education and opportunities for further learning; low and unequal pay or sometimes no pay at all; sexual harassment— all contributing to an unhealthy work environment that undermines women’s confidence and discourage other women who want to aspire to higher heights within the media profession. Our women will not stop working hard and we are encouraged by their resilience to stay in the profession. Our vision is to build an empowered female media community that will, in the years ahead, not only be reporters, station managers or editors, but owners of media businesses, call the shots on content and have a much bigger influence. This is very important because we cannot have a voice if we do not have the tool and have control over it. We will continue to push the boundaries of patriarchy by standing together and working with partners, as well as our male counterparts— some of whom have been very supportive of the emancipation agenda. Enjoy this first edition of the SLAWIJ newsletter and we hope to bring you many more that challenge, amplify and celebrate.

WRITERS

- ◊ Millicent Kargbo
- ◊ Yeama Sarah Thompson
- ◊ Frank Baiden PhD
- ◊ Ngozi Obi Sesay
- ◊ Mamusu Hawa Turay-Senesie
- ◊ Cecilia Alice Sesay

PHOTO GALLERY



Rewarding good work: Our ladies get recognised



Florence Sesay:
Our very own Eminent Lady Florence Sesay, a seasoned media practitioner and Project Director for Media Matters for Women (MMW) Sierra Leone, received the prestigious 2020 Bronze Award from the BPeace Women Forward Organization based in the USA. Florence is the first female from Sierra Leone to receive this honour. Overwhelmed, as she recounted her work that led to this achievement she said, “Working with women on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), sexual and reproductive health issues and other socio-cultural issues”, even at personal risks is one of my key achievements, she said.



Millicent and Patricia:
Two of our strong inspiring women, Millicent Kargbo the Executive President and Eminent Lady Patricia Ganda were both awarded a plaque by Youth and Children's Advocacy Panel (YACAP) on the commemoration of International Day of the Girl Child 2020 in recognition of their relentless and outstanding service to women and girls. These two women have been mentoring young women and girls in and out of the journalism community.



Margaret Misor Mansaray:
Meet our proud winner of Plan International Sierra Leone Women in Gender Transformation Award 2021 for Koinadugu District, Eminent Lady Margaret Misor Mansaray. Margaret is unarguably the best female advocate within the field of journalism in her district on human interest stories and promoting women and girl's rights using the media. She produces and presents the two most-listened to programs on Radio Bintumani called 'Woman Tok' and 'Pikin Tok' which look into sexual penetration, early marriage, girl's education, FGM, wife

battering and a lot more. Margaret's passion to change the narrative of women and girls in her district is the more reason she goes down to small communities and villages engaging women and girls and bring their stories to the fore.



FEMALE JOURNALISTS LEADING COVID-19 AWARENESS



Following the rapid spread of Covid-19 in early 2020, SLAWIJ proactively initiated the *Mama En Pikin Welbodi* campaign to reach communities, and crafted messages from trusted sources such as the Ministry of Health on the prevention of the virus. Radio has and is still regarded as the fastest and most reliable means of sharing information to reach mass audiences in Sierra Leone. Therefore, jingles were developed in four local languages in Sierra Leone— Krio, Mende, Limba and Temne. These were distributed to community radio stations across the country. It created a huge impact as the audience were able to relate to the messages broken down in their local languages. It also helped to bust myths and misinformation about COVID-19 and the Coronavirus.

Discussions on radio, targeting women, also played a great role in the campaign. The community outreach and donation of facemasks, hygiene materials including soap and buckets were part of the highlights in the SLAWIJ media campaign and outreach against Covid-19.

One of the communities that benefitted from the donation was Bottom Oku, a slum community in eastern Freetown. This community was hard hit by the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone in 2014, recording many deaths. Women and children suffered the most. The local Chief Pa Alimamy Conteh and Councilor of Ward 403 Arthur Sheku Mansaray thanked SLAWIJ for the gesture and said Bottom Oku community was less prioritised for an important campaign against a deadly disease like Covid-19. Similar donations and community education on the prevention of Covid-19 was done at the Leicester Road community in Freetown, Kono district- (Blind school, Gbense market Yardu road market, Koeyor park, Hill station market and Karmadu Amputee Camp). In Pujehun district, SLAWIJ reached market women with Covid-19 prevention messages and facemasks. In Koinadugu district, SLAWIJ conducted interviews with businesswomen who were affected economically by the pandemic and were also engaged in the prevention of the virus. Sierra Leone was able to suppress the spread of the first wave of the virus



through proactive public education involving various stakeholders supporting government's efforts. SLAWIJ has been playing a critical role the country's fight against COVID-19. In order to maintain the campaign and continue the timely flow of information, SLAWIJ secured airtime with community radio stations for a 'SLAWIJ Hour'—a platform that is dedicated to women and the impact of COVID-19 on them.

On the horizon: a law that tackles long-running political and economic gender disparities in Sierra Leone



positions at all levels and a coalition of women who will provide support for aspiring women for leadership positions. In 2007 a host of other women’s groups became proponents of the 30 percent quota for women in government and leadership position as they were of the view that more political representation of women in governance will be the beginning of social change for women in Sierra Leone. Meanwhile, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was first to call for a “30 percent representation of women in elected assemblies, cabinets and other political posts, to increase to 50/50 gender parity within the next 10 years.” The 30 percent quota was like the icebreaker for discussions on addressing issues of equality. Similarly in 2007 the popular gender act was passed to support elimination of barriers to women’s empowerment which included three main **laws**: the registration of customary marriage and divorce; devolution of estate; and the domestic violence act. 15 years on women have not achieved their goal of minimum 30 percent representation in politics and public life. A new Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) Policy was launched by President Julius Maada Bio 2020. The policy generally affirms Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5—which is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. At the launch of this ambitious policy, President Bio said “We are here to set ourselves new challenges that will touch and transform the lives of 52% of our population. It will place them where they belong: at the centre of our nation’s development process with all due rights, access, opportunities, and resources. We are not about to witness history.

Together, we are making history.” It is already 25 years since Sierra Leone adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and 20 years after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (Women, Peace, and Security); yet the country still grapples with gender parity. The GEWE policy comes with set objectives—review and enforce policies to ensure Sierra Leonean women’s active participation in political leadership and decision-making levels by 30% minimum by 2022; Strengthen women’s access to and control over productive resources to lessen poverty among women in Sierra Leone by 2025; Ensure effective mainstreaming of gender perspectives in humanitarian disaster interventions. According to the Minister of Gender and Children’s Affairs, Madam Manty Tarawalli the GEWE policy aimed at mainstreaming gender into all development and political processes in Sierra Leone and to ensure livelihood and social protection for women, men, boys and girls for sustainable peace and economic growth. Getting things right will mostly involve extra efforts, that’s what seem to have been done as the GEWE has given birth to a proposed Gender Empowerment Bill. This was unanimously approved by the Sierra Leone Cabinet for debate at the Parliament of Sierra Leone. The Minister of Gender has said the Gender Empowerment Bill will seek to address the political and economic empowerment of women. It focuses on four development areas—minimum 30% political representation through a process that would reserve constituencies from each

From page 4



From page 10

The findings forcefully make the case that despite women’s low level of radio ownership and use, radio is an important primary source of COVID-19 information. It also shows that there is considerable unexplored mileage in the use of radio to disseminate COVID-19 information to women in Sierra Leone.

If information is a cornerstone of accountability, participation, and citizen voice, then women in Sierra Leone need to be supported through interventions to promote radio ownership and use. Community radios should involve local voices of familiar stakeholders and influencers. Such approaches will be in tune with traditional practices and will be consistent with the expectations of women.

One of the challenges confronting the roll out of vaccine against COVID-19 in Sierra Leone is low uptake among women. The National Covid-19 Emergency Response Centre (NaCOVERC) is using the findings of the survey to re-align resources and give priority to empowering local radios and developing content that involve and target women.

Just as in the outbreak of Ebola virus disease in 2014 – 2016, COVID -19 and its response are highlighting the systemic factors that hinder the women’s access to prevention and care. Access to primary sources of health information can significantly prevent communicable diseases from escalating and inform prevention, treatment, and control strategies.

district for only women across various political parties to contest, minimum 30% appointment positions, Improved Access to Finance for women and Gender Mainstreaming across all sectors. This looks golden but the Minister emphasized that "women should begin to prepare now for these positions," as it will be disheartening to find out that at elections time, there are limited women to contest for these seats. With all hopes high, the long quest for gender parity and women’s representation in politics will come to fruition if the new Gender Empowerment Bill is passed.

The Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression recognized this potential in 2002 and emphasized the importance of the enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression—specifically the right to seek, receive, and impart information—as a precondition for the implementation of effective health information campaigns to combat epidemics

Mégane Ghorbani in her writings on *‘A Gendered Lens on the Current Ebola Epidemic in West Africa*, Thomson Reuters’ argues that “Health information campaigns by intergovernmental organizations, states, and civil society have made major contributions to preventing and controlling the spread of Ebola. Unfortunately, both discrepancies in the ability of men and women to access information—which stem partly from gender inequalities in literacy and secondary education—and inadequate provision of gender-sensitive information continue to pose threats to ending the spread of disease.”

The study in Sierra Leone has identified vulnerabilities in women’s access to information on COVID-19. It has however also identified the potential in the use of radio to overcome the vulnerabilities.

Scholarship for Female Journalists



Cecelia
Alice
Sesay



The feminization of journalism, a process taking place in numerous countries worldwide, has been advancing at a much higher rate in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in the sub-region. This trend is based on both global and specifically national factors. The gradual migration of journalism from being a typically male profession to also a largely female one brings about a number of inner transformations and creates a certain inner psychological climate. To fully understand these changes, new goals should be set based on an analysis of gender transformations in journalism and on investigations of possible problems and conflicts entailed in the process. It’s good that we now have more females in Journalism. It shows the growth of the media landscape, but it is also prudent to secure a safer space for females in Journalism. Most often than not, females don’t occupy leadership positions in media institutions, this is so because there are not many opportunities for female journalists in the country as most of them do not have the opportunity to pursue a professional course in Mass communication. The Fourah Bay College University of Sierra Leone Mass Communication Department has been the hub of academic excellence. Since its establishment in 1993, the department has become very popular because of the demand for qualified journalists and media personnel. Although females apply yearly for mass communication courses and graduate with good degrees, most of them do not stay long in the media. The profession itself is not attractive, coupled with other barriers they are faced with. More importantly so, many practising now wishes to pursue further education in journalism to enhance their profession but because of financial challenges they could not.

It is prudent that government and other organizations consider providing scholarship support to female journalists in tertiary institutions around the country so they will be capacitated to expose under-reported but critical global issues, undertake ambitious projects that challenge traditional media narratives, develop field-based expertise and strengthen careers, pursue critical skills training and leadership opportunities, launch entrepreneurial news projects or acquire the skills to pursue professional journalism. Thus, it is believed that with the provision of scholarship opportunities, more female journalists will be better prepared to occupy strategic management positions and function effectively even more than their male counterparts



AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF GIRLS IN THE MEDIA FOR A DIGNIFIED FUTURE



In 2020, countries around the world commemorated 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action— the global agenda for advancing the rights and empowerment of women and girls. Also in 2020, the UN launched *Generation Equality* as a multi-year, multi-partner campaign and movement for bold action on gender equality. The commemoration of International Day of the Girl Child 2020 was more than just a mere celebration. Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism (SLAWIJ) joined other campaigners and activists to mark the day in an effort to inspire girls for future life’s encounter. With increasing reports of sexual assault, teenage pregnancy, sexual penetration, early marriage and harmful traditional practices that affect many girls, there must be a voice or platform to amplify the voices of girls. It is also necessary to build and strengthen girls’ capacity to speak out on issues that affect them. To mark the day therefore, SLAWIJ in collaboration with the Mass Communication Department at Fourah Bay College (SLAWIJ) held a debating competition for girls. The event, hosted at FBC carried the theme “Amplifying the Voices of Girls in the Media for a Dignified Future.” Four secondary schools— St. Joseph’s Convent, Methodist Girls High School, Freetown Secondary School for Girls and Ahmadiyya Secondary School competed.

The Executive President of SLAWIJ, Millicent Kargbo in her statement said International Day of the Girl Child aims to promote girl’s empowerment by highlighting the challenges that girls face worldwide. In this quest, upholding and maintaining the rights of girls is paramount at all times. “As a female media organisation that does not only promote the rights of its members, but also the advancement of all women and girls’ rights, we believe this year’s theme puts us on the spot to examine our role in providing a platform for girls through our work”, she said. She added that the challenges girls face in Sierra Leone cannot be eradicated without the

contribution of journalists and their media institutions. Worldwide, the media stands as an important tool that impact strongly on the development of communities and countries. In that light, female journalists are a strong force to create a platform to promote this agenda in Sierra Leone, she said. Dr. Willette P.R.O James, head of the Mass Communication department at Fourah Bay College said the department has been partnering with Young Women Initiative and other female organisations in carrying out grooming sessions on campus. “We believe in investing in the lives of our girls by giving them adequate information that will empower them,” Dr James said. She added that the young girls should be bold and brave to articulate their issues using the appropriate media tools. “This is the future we want and the future we foresee”, she added. The debate Coordinator Alex A. Bah said “we are pleased that our girls were outspoken, eloquent and coherent in their presentation, earning the respect of all in attendance.” Dolcie Kailee of Methodist Girls High School snatched the first prize as Best Debater with Esther Thorlie of Freetown Secondary School for Girls as 1st Runner’s up while Ramatulai Kamara, Ahmadiya Muslim Secondary School was 2nd Runner’s up. Coincidentally, Esther’s school Freetown Secondary School for Girls won the trophy for Best Participating School.



Chasing opportunities: A focus on the Internews fellowship programme



Mamusu Hawa Turay-Senesie



Fatmata Marian Sesay



Margaret Misor Mansaray



Kumba Jalloh

Building the capacity of our women in journalism sits at the core of our organisation's priority. On that note, SLAWIJ explores various opportunities for its members in academic and other capacity building skills. In order to get a clear sense of the challenges that hinders the academic growth of female journalists, SLAWIJ in 2020 conducted an online survey to ascertain the number of enrolled female journalists in tertiary institutions as well as to examine their source sponsorship and the constraints they face in pursuing their studies. At that time only about 5% of practicing female journalists were enrolled. Most of the respondents were self-sponsored students with only 1 with a government grant in aid. One of the respondent's stated that "most of us are still volunteers at the same time sponsoring our education, we are finding it difficult to handle such situation, and we need the intervention of the Government to give all female journalists in universities grant in aid to pursue our education."

Following this, a cross-section of the executive had an engagement with the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education in order to explore possibilities of government scholarship for practicing female journalists. Unfortunately, the Ministry stated that it was impossible to create such quota for female journalists as government grants were highly competitive for students across the country.

As the organisation continues its stride to capacitate its members, Internews announced its reporting fellowship for 2020 that catered for twelve journalists which included reporters from radio, newspapers, and television. Four of the twelve fellows were SLAWIJ members— Mamusu Hawa Turay Senensie (Pujehun), Margaret Misor Mansaray (Koinadugu), Kumba Jalloh (Koinadugu) and Fatmata Marian Sesay (Tonkolili) district. They worked on different story ideas together with the Internews mentors. The topics covered were as follows;

Mamusu Hawa Turay Senesie- "Education and health Security for Adolescent Girls."
Fatmata Marian Sesay- "Shortage of free healthcare drugs during Covid-19 in Yoni Chiefdom."
Margaret Misor Mansaray- "Sexual penetration of a 3year old by a 75 years old man."
Kumba Jalloh- "How teenage pregnancy affects young girls during Covid-19."

The fellowship was a learning platform for reporters to build new skills in reporting stories in the communities. Time management, packaging news report, scriptwriting, fact-finding, and steps in identifying what your audience needs in producing a good radio program were the modules dealt with during the session.

According to Mamusu, her story on *"Education and health Security for Adolescent Girls"* examined the impact of the closure of schools during Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 on adolescent girls. The ban on public gathering and the subsequent closure of schools, livelihood support for families became a huge challenge. Parents and caregivers used their children to support with petty trading and ignored the government's national school teaching program by the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary School adding up to another challenge of access to the program as only one radio station was to air the teaching program.

As a result, there was a repeat of the Ebola experience where many teenage girls got pregnant because they were at home with lots of house chores. Over 17 girls from age 13-16 in class 6 that sat to the National Primary School Examination (NPSE) got pregnant during the Covid-19 outbreak in Pujehun. "This fellowship has helped me to use a different lens in dealing with girl's issues, and has changed the format I have been using to produce radio programs, I have used my program to challenge these anomalies and gradually the narrative is changing," she said.

Fatmata Marian Sesay said "the fellowship has helped me a lot especially in reporting national issues, proper writing of script and time management."

Swelling the ranks: induction of new SLAWIJ members



Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism is a nonprofit corporate body established in March 2020, with the aim of promoting the welfare of female journalists and communication practitioners in Sierra Leone. It seeks to increase their visibility to transform the media and communication landscape through professional development programs and advocacy. Since its establishment, SLAWIJ has been a strong voice to promote equality and empowerment for female journalists nationwide whilst working together to support the enhancement of women's issues in the country. The Association has stretched its membership across the country, representing each of the five regions and sixteen (16) districts in implementing its mandates and functions. Since its establishment in March 2020, SLAWIJ has embarked on a number of activities, funded by the Association.

In early July, in a bid to fulfill the Association's mandate, SLAWIJ conducted a day orientation for new members and coordinators in Freetown on the theme: *"Women journalists taking Centre stage in media development."* This orientation brought together members from seven districts— Kono, Port Loko, Pujehun, Bonthe, Tonkolili, Kenema and Western Area.

Whilst making a presentation, the Executive President Millicent Kargbo said that the vision of the organization was to build an informed gender sensitive media with empowered women journalists in leadership position. She added that the organisation was formed with clear objectives, including to advocate for the rights of women journalists, to address the challenges of women journalists in Sierra Leone's media, to capacitate women journalists to report on women's issues and other male dominated areas of reporting and to organize and to unite media women in fellowship and link them with similar organisations internationally. The Executive President stated that in order for the organisation to meet one of its goals, which is to promote issues relating to women and girls on their various platforms, SLAWIJ has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with key Institutions, among them is the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, Legal Aid Board and Rainbow Initiative. In her closing statement, she encouraged members to maintain professional ethics and integrity in the discharge of their duties. This she stressed further is the mandate of the Association. The Head of Programs, Aminata Finda Massaquoi presented the four thematic areas of the organisation, this has to do with, Capacity Building and Training, Advocacy and Communication, Research Development and Outreach. She went further to mention a series of activities of SLAWIJ including a Country wide media campaign titled: "Mama En Pikin Welbodi Campaign", a 16 Day of Activism campaign across districts, donation of pads to women in quarantine homes at Kono in commemoration of World Menstrual Hygiene Day 2020; organizing a day's training for secondary school girls on gender awareness which attracted key stakeholders and four of their members who benefitted from an Internews Fellowship last year. In an interactive session, participants of the orientation expressed satisfaction towards the activities of SLAWIJ and how inspired they are to work professionally and uphold integrity in and out of their professional duties. Mariama Bah Sowe, a participant of the orientation said that the orientation was a great one as it is very important that "we have such network coming together to empower themselves and to promote women and girls issues", she added that the media is a very strong weapon that can make and break society, so with SLAWIJ they can preach equity and have women represented in news content. The orientation ended with members making commitments to work as a team to develop the organisation and pledge their commitment to the organisation. Certificates of membership of organisation were distributed. This is one of the many activities SLAWIJ will embark on in years to come. SLAWIJ operates active social media platforms on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and a website to reach its members and audience.

Survey reveals vulnerabilities in women’s access to COVID-19 information

- **Yeama Sarah Thompson MA** (Former Commissioner, Right to Access Information Commission Western Region and Southern Region),

• **Frank Baiden PhD** (Associate Professor, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, United Kingdom)
“In a society where the rights and potential of women are constrained, no man can be truly free. He may have power, but he will not have freedom.”

Mary Robinson, Former President of the Republic of Ireland and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (Salokar and Volcansek 1996)

Access to information is a fundamental right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This has been domesticated into law in Sierra Leone through the Right to Access Information Law 2013. Access to Information is critical for the exercise of other basic social and political rights, yet in Sierra Leone, the full enjoyment of the right of access to information is limited for more than half of its population - women and girls.

COVID-19 continues to cause significant health and social problems globally. Women and children in low and middle-income countries are among the most vulnerable. Timely access to complete and accurate information is essential to women’s empowerment regarding COVID-19 prevention, care, and access to impact-mitigation measures.

Promoting access to information from primary sources is important to reduce vulnerability to misinformation and rumour. A recent study conducted by Initiatives for Media Development (IMdev) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) has identified the sources of COVID-19 information for women in Sierra Leone and how use of these sources is affected by demographic and socioeconomic factors.

The COVID-19 Women and Children (CWC) Study a panel survey that involves 880 women living across Sierra Leone. explored how women and children are impacted by COVID-19 and how they are able to access the impact-mitigation measures. The top three sources of COVID-19 information mentioned by women in the first round of the survey between May and July 2021 were non-spousal relations (88.7% of survey women), radio (87.9%) and spouses (62.7%).

Only 51.6% of surveyed women reported ownership of radios and still fewer (29.5%) listened to radio frequently. Educational background, place of residence, relatedness of occupation to tourism and assets wealth were the determinants of whether a woman listens to radio often or not.



Yeama Sarah Thompson is the first female Managing Director of the Sierra Leone News Agency (SLENA). She is also the Media Lead in the Risk Communications and Social Mobilisation pillar of the National COVID-19 Emergency response (NaCOVERC). She previously served as Commissioner of the Right to Access Information. Ms Thompson is the Executive Director of the Initiatives for Media Development (www.imdev.media), a non-governmental organisation working on media research, advocacy, and capacity building in Sierra Leone. She is also a founding member of the Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism (SLAWIJ) and co-principal investigator of the COVID-19 Women and Children (CWC) Study.

In qualitative exploration of the responses provided in the survey, most women explained their efforts as triangulating information from primary and secondary sources. A woman put this as follows “The first source is using the radio, also, if government wants to send information outside it should also use community stakeholders who will call their people and pass on the information.”

The limited ownership of radio and the potential vulnerability it creates is exemplified in the view of another woman as follows, “Community sensitization especially in villages should be done because many people cannot access radio or phones, and some have no interest in listening to radio programmes. People should be sent to villages to do community sensitisation.” Another woman put it as follows “Take a woman within the community that knows how to pass on health messages to her colleague women. If this woman talks to her colleague women through radio, they will trust the message.”

Reflection:



My Public Relations Journey

By: Ngozi Obi Sesay
Media and Communications Consultant

Public Relations (PR) is basically the practice of managing the spread of information between an individual or organisation and the public, according to *Wikipedia*. I would like to talk about what PR is not! One thing that PR is often compared or grouped with is advertising – wherein you pay money to get a placement in a media platform (magazine, newspapers, billboards, website, IG ads etc.). This gets your advert placed in a certain media for a certain amount of money and this is why is advertising a form a paid media because you are paying to get that media exposure. PR on the other hand is earned media. You talk about a person or individual’s image and how you carefully place information/ events to positively impact on your client’s image. Generally you don’t pay to get these placements and it’s more about the relationship between you as the publicists and the creator or editor on a particular platform. It takes a lot of different approaches, confidence and constantly being at it every day to maintain a favourable image. You have to know your business inside out – this helps especially when you’re dealing with a crisis. I majored in Public Relations during my five year Mass Communications degree at Fourah Bay College, from where I graduated with a first class in 2007. I didn’t really know the way to go after graduation but having had internship experience from Awoko Newspaper in 2004, I had developed a number of strong relationships with a number of media personalities. As an intern I was usually sent to cover court stories and gradually, moved on to cover PR events organised by private companies and government entities. During this time I fell in love with editing and upon graduation in 2007, I covered as a pro-bono sub-editor for the Exclusive newspaper for a number of years. I went on to become the Deputy News Editor at the defunct ‘Total News’ Newspaper and left when I got a job offer at the UBA Bank as a Branding Officer. This is where my journey truly began and I am forever grateful to this day for having landed on such an opportunity. I got to work with not all those in this business in Sierra Leone but in Nigeria and other parts of the African continent. Overnight, I became a communications specialists,

relationship builder, advisor, influencer, and reputation managers, all in one. I also learned the skill of being a fast-thinking strategizer who can adapt to any situation that may impact my organization’s public perception. That’s what makes this job so dynamic and engaging. Currently my job is Communications and PR for the Sierra Leone Economic Diversification Project. I have also worked in the banking sector and most recently, in the electricity and water sectors. It has been quite interesting, my day starts out with checking my emails, follow up with those items I may have penned down in my notebook. I also work with colleagues to get an idea of ‘the buzz’ which could depict how my day or week could look like. It’s also a lot of hard work staying organised to get through the day because on really busy days, it gets crazy. What I love most about my job is being able to connect my institution with the public and getting stakeholders to have a good idea of what that institution is about. I must state here that what has helped smoothen this ride is the relationship that I had built with my colleagues in the media. It was never a problem to get a colleague to cover an event at the last minute or get them to give whatever institution I worked for free publicity. As a PR professional you need to be able to build strong connections with multiple stakeholders — including government agencies and rely on them to shine the spotlight on your client (for all the right reasons). You have to be aggressive with building your network and having something news worthy to share with journalists/media. Most importantly, I learned how to be able to influence people – my boss and to try things differently. And because I had results to show for this, I have been able to gain the trust of those I work with. We have come a long way in the business. PR is only firmly gaining ground now in Sierra Leone. Before this time, professionals weren’t taken seriously and most companies felt that anyone could do the job. I think in PR, not only does the reputation of the company you work for matters, your reputation as a professional is also important. You don’t get to achieve or score big things in one day, it takes time and most often times, patience – as you may be frustrated out of your many ideas, before you can get your footing. My advice to those who are interested in becoming PR experts is to focus on cultivating a combination of hard and soft skills. These include writing skills, including composition, editing, proofreading, and adherence to brand guidelines and industry style guides, public speaking and some basic idea in graphics designing. It is important to note that you don’t get to develop these skills from the get go so never turn down an opportunity to gain work experience through internship or doing something ‘menial’ so as to help you gain familiarity with the industry. It’s also good to be great at multitasking as PR job is much more demanding as it looks.

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ON KHADIJA SACCOH'S DEATH



On 17 June 2020, pictures of a beautiful girl identified as Khadija Madinatu Saccoh flooded social media and was tagged as another sexual penetration incident of a minor. A young man who might be in his 20s featured in some of the photos and was alleged as the perpetrator. This incident did not only trigger widespread public outrage, but also nationwide protests led by female activists and rights groups in the country.

In 2019, the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police released disturbing statistics of rape cases reported for the year 2018, which was 3,252 nationwide. This included the brutal sexual penetration of a five year old girl in September 2018 that left her paralyzed. Khadija's death attracted more attention and in the minds of many, it was going to be the last straw that will break the camel's back and put a stern warning to perpetrators of sexual penetration and assault. The First Lady, Mrs. Fatima Bio stated in a post on Facebook said that "immediate actions should be taken to investigate Khadija's death", and more stringent measures will be enforced on perpetrators. The then UN Resident Coordinator in Sierra Leone, Sunil Saigal in a press release said "we also call for swift investigation and conclusion of all pending cases of violence against women and girls, so justice can be delivered without delay". The statement further expressed the UN's shock and how "deeply saddened" they were by "the horrendous murder and alleged acts of rape and torture of a five-year old girl". Four accused persons, including the biological brother of the deceased; the aunt, who Khadija stayed with till her death; a schoolteacher and maid were immediately arrested, and the police commenced investigation into the matter. The remains of the deceased were kept in the morgue awaiting postmortem examination. Earlier reports (unverified) on social media alleged that the cause of death of five-year old Khadija was Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and that the deceased died of severe bleeding.

However, in July 2020 the matter was brought before Magistrate Mark Ngegba in court No. 2 of the Freetown Magistrate Court. In that court sitting, medical report presented by Sierra Leone's only Pathologist Dr. Simeon Owizz Koroma showed "murder by strangulation." While the Prosecution asked for date to lead Dr. Owizz Koroma in evidence, two count charges were levied on the accused persons for conspiracy to murder and murder.

As the trial continued and the matter assigned to a Judge in November 2020, the father of the deceased was granted clearance by the State in January 2021 to proceed with funeral arrangements to lay Khadijah to rest. This was six month after her controversial death. On January 22, 2021 a huge crowd including pupils, activists, ordinary citizens and family members joined the solidarity procession from Hill Station Mosque through the center of Freetown and to the Kissy Road cemetery where she was buried. Soaked in tears, the father Abu Bakarr Saccoh said "I still count on the court for justice" for what he believes

was the killing of his daughter. With the public especially female activists sitting on the edge waiting for the High Court's ruling on the matter, in March 2020 Justice John Bosco Allieu found the accused Mariama Sajor Barrie and Ibrahim Bah not guilty on the recommendation of a twelve-person jury. The Judge delivered his verdict on the indictment that was presented before the court for 'conspiracy to murder and murder' and not sexual penetration as the public had thought.

This came with huge disappointment for campaigners who had believed that Khadija's case would send a strong message on sexual abuse in the country. Meanwhile, the father Abu Bakarr Saccoh was held in contempt for a statement he made on Facebook regarding the death of his daughter while the matter was before the court. Prosecutor Joseph Andrew Khalil Sesay had said the State would appeal.

Obviously, Sierra Leone has recorded many other cases of sexual penetration even after the alleged sexual penetration of Khadija. In 2020, Rainbo Initiative a leading organisation working on gender-based violence recorded 3,584 cases of gender-based violence from five centers Freetown, Makeni, Kono Kenema and Bo.

In 2019, President Julius Maada Bio declared rape and sexual violence a national emergency and in July 2020, there was launch of the first Sexual Offences Model Court for rape proceedings. This special court was to fast track proceedings on sexual related offences. The Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs operate a toll line for rape and One Stop Centers in various parts of the country.