

# FEMINISM

**VOICES FROM SIERRA LEONE**

A Compilation of the Experiences of  
Feminists in Sierra Leone



Compiled and Edited by  
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and Dr. Claudine Hingston

***FOREWORD – By Naasu G. Fofanah BSc (Hons), MA, EMPA***

FEMINISM: VOICES FROM SIERRA LEONE IS AN INTENTIONAL AND FORWARD THINKING CATALOGUE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCES THAT INVOKE DEEP SEATED CURIOSITIES IN THE READER ON MAKING SENSE OF FEMINISM WITHIN A LOCAL CONTEXT. THE DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES ARE A POWERFUL COMBINATION THAT DELIVERS APTLY ON CONVINCING BOTH WOMEN AND MEN TO BECOMING FEMINISTS. THOSE WHO ARE VESTED IN THE LIFE OF FEMINISM WILL BE FURTHER INSPIRED AND TREASURE THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES SHARED BY THE WRITERS. THOSE WHO ARE CRITICAL OF FEMINISM WOULD HAVE A POWERFUL INSIGHT OF LOCAL EXAMPLES AND LEARN MORE ON THE PROCESSES OF OWNING FEMINISM. POSITIVE CHANGE AGENTS WOULD LEARN A LOT FROM THESE STORIES IN TERMS OF HOW TO ESTABLISH LEGITIMACY, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONSENSUS IN POLICY AND NATIONAL DISCOURSE ON FEMINISM. DRAWING ON THEIR IMPRESSIVE LIVED EXPERIENCES, THE WRITERS HAVE PRODUCED A UNIQUELY INSIGHTFUL BOOK ON A HIGHLY CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE IN SIERRA LEONE. EVERYONE WHO IS INTERESTED IN THE BETTERMENT OF SIERRA LEONE SHOULD THANK

THE WRITERS FOR BOLDLY SHARING THEIR INTIMATE STORIES TO BETTER INFORM US ON WHY WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS.

THE VIEW ON FEMINISM EVOKES CONTROVERSIAL DISCOURSE IN SIERRA LEONE. AS A RESULT, MANY WOMEN AND MEN FIND IT DIFFICULT TO OPENLY ASSOCIATE WITH THE MOVEMENT, LET ALONE WRITE ABOUT THEIR FEMINIST EXPERIENCES. THERIYEH, MAKALAY, CLAUDINE, ABRAHAM, GIFTY, MADIANA, MAMBU AND ALICE MUST BE APPLAUDED FOR BOLDLY DOCUMENTING THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES AND THOUGHT PROCESSES. BY SHARING THEIR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, THEY ALSO CREATED A HUMAN CONNECTION AND HUMANIZED FEMINISM. THE STORIES SHARED ARE INTERESTING, EXCITING, THOUGHT-PROVOKING, INSIGHTFUL, SCINTILLATING AND INFORMATIVE, WHICH MAKES FEMINISM: VOICES FROM SIERRA LEONE A MUST READ.

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## **ABOUT THE BOOK: From the Editorial Team (Makalay Sonda, Theriyeh Koroma-Nenneh and Claudine Hingston)**

Feminism is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. Being that women are more marginalised and discriminated against than men, feminism advocates for women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes. In a country like Sierra Leone, where a substantial number of women and girls are marginalised, violated and discriminated against, it is important to foster the feminist ideology to redress the imbalance between men and women. A feminist movement has emerged in Sierra Leone that seeks to call attention to the gender inequalities inherent in the Sierra Leonean society and advocate for meaningful changes, particularly those that will empower women. Sierra Leone however is at that stage where many are suspicious about feminists and have negative perceptions of them. This compilation aims to capture the unfiltered voices of feminists in Sierra Leone as they share their stories of being feminists in Sierra Leone. It is a compilation of their voices in words. It provides an opportunity for them to share their lived experiences, thoughts and views and to have them acknowledged. When shared, these stories will help to foster an understanding of feminism and its importance for the fight for gender equality and equity in Sierra Leone.

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# **Contributors Profiles**



# THE RIYEH KOROMA-NENNEH

Theriyeh Koroma-Nenneh is the Founder and Team Leader of Feminists United Sierra Leone and Allies- a diverse movement of young and feminists

who mobilize forces to address deep rooted sexism and gender discriminations through advocacy, collective building and civic engagements.

She relies on her years of developing experience in the blend of social behavioural change communication and feminism advocacy to seek policy reforms and lead the feminism agenda in Sierra Leone.

Theriyeh is best identified as "The Warrior" an identify that reinforces her rebellious and stiff resistance to patriarchal ideals in the continent.

She is a feminist blogger and founder of the "Warrior Radicalo" website platform, where she has demonstrated passion to develop human interest stories for impacts and call to action especially on issues concerning women, girls and youth.

She is a Masters candidate pursuing Gender and Development studies and currently serves as the Communications Lead at the Children's Rights Innovation Fund (CRIF).



# MAKALAY SAIDIATU SONDA

Makalay Sadiatu Sonda is a feminist and communications professional whose work intersects at child rights advocacy, women's movement building, and youth

development. She is an agricultural extensionist and a lecturer at Njala University who dedicates her time to academic research and development-oriented projects.

She is one of the fiery and leading voices of young African feminists that use her blend of academia and communications to highlight critical issues of sexism, toxic masculinity, gender and domestic violence.

She has written a series of articles that provide a systematic analysis on how Sierra Leone is governed by patriarchy and has provided scholarly insights infused with thorough recommendations towards closing the wider gap of inequality in Sierra Leone and Africa at large. She is also the only Sierra Leonean contributor of the "In her words" anthology: An African Women's Perspective on Gender Equality'.

She is the founder of the rural focused Moonteen movement which provides sexual and reproductive health rights teachers and encourages peer mentorship among girls across the country. Her informed and calculated approach to crucial issues of human rights, has earned her respect among her peers.

She is currently pursuing her second master's degree in Gender Globalisation and Rights in the University of Galway, Ireland after receiving the Ireland-Africa Fellows Programme scholarship award. Makalay's activism is inspired by her deep passion to create a world that is safe for all especially men and women.

She enjoys writing and reading. Her feminists icons are Bell Hooks, Kimberle Crenshaw and Chimamada Adiche.





# CLAUDINE ANITA HINGSTON

Dr Claudine Anita Hingston is an academic, a gender expert, a researcher, a humanitarian,, an African feminist and an advocate for female empowerment and

women's rights. Born and bred in Sierra Leone, Dr Claudine Hingston went to the Annie Walsh Memorial School and studied at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. Dr Hingston has over twenty years working experience in various institutions. She was a Senior Information Officer at the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and part time lecturer at the Mass Communication department at Fourah Bay College. She eventually left Sierra Leone for the United Kingdom, where she worked as an employee of the Leeds City Council. She later relocated to South Africa, where she enrolled for a PhD in Gender studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2011 and simultaneously worked as a Gender studies lecturer/tutor and an academic writing tutor. She graduated in 2015 and she is currently a lecturer. She is actively engaged in research work and has written and published a number of articles on women, leadership and gender issues. Her areas of interest and expertise are gender, women's empowerment, leadership, feminism, media and Africanism. Dr Hingston is affiliated with several women and humanitarian organisations in Sierra Leone and seeks to make meaningful contributions to her country. Dr Hingston holds a B.A degree, a Diploma in Mass Communication, a Diploma in Cultural Studies, a Masters in Gender Studies and a PhD in Gender Studies.



# MADIANA NYAHORTA SIA MENSAH -GBORIE

Madiana Nyahorta Sia Mensah-Gborie is a University lecturer attached to the department of Languages and Cultural Studies, Njala University.

She is also the founder and President of a youth-led feminist organization called, Ladies With Vision which is geared towards advocating and empowering vulnerable women in Sierra Leone. The work area of this organisation is the Western Rural District and they are frantically working to actualize their set aims to empower vulnerable women and prevent them from being totally dependent on their families and communities. Madiana believes that if all feminists work together, devoid from all negativity such as unhealthy competitions and pulling-down syndrome, society will listen to their voices and join in the fight against the marginalization of women. This will in turn, usher in a gender balanced society and healthy world for all to live in.



# ABRAHAM SAHR PRINCE GBONDO

Abraham Sahr Prince Gbondo was born in Kono District, Eastern Sierra Leone on the 22nd of October.

He attended the R.C Boys Primary School, Assemblies of God Primary School Gbense High School and Koidu Secondary School. He is currently a student at the Cyprus International University (Cyprus), pursuing a Degree in Economics.

Abraham is a born-again Christian, a full-blown feminist, a Writer, a Poet, a Youth advocate and a Child rights activist. He has spent over ten years of his life working with different groups and organizations on Youths, Women, and Child rights issues. He is currently a campaign leader against substance abuse. Among many others, he is:

- A member of Feminist United Sierra Leone and Allies
- Head of Media and Communications – Alliance of
- Concerned Sierra Leoneans (Kono)
- President: Students' in action for Peer Education.
- Executive Director of Feminist Council of Africa, SL.



# GIFTY RENNER

Gifty Renner is a Gender and Development Studies student at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone.

She is a gender activist, a feminist, a poet, a writer and an actress. She is currently the Director of Marketing at Keita world of Art and a volunteer for Berose International Foundation and several charity organisations. She has won awards and certificates for her tremendous contribution towards humanitarian work. She is also the owner of an online magazine, TYNIA magazine that seeks to promote the world of fashion and to make sure women voices are heard. As a young adult, she aspires to inspire



## MAMBU M. MASSAQUOI

Mambu M. Massaquoi is a Sierra Leonean. He holds a B.Sc in Sociology and an M.A. in Peace and Development studies from the

School of Social Sciences and Law at Njala University in Sierra Leone. He works as an academic staff in the department of Peace and Development Studies at Njala University. He is also experienced in relevant training programmes that support his profession as a university lecturer. He is affiliated with a number of professional associations that include, the Academic Staff Association of Njala University in Sierra Leone (ASA), and WASSERN (West Africa Social Sciences Emergency Research Network) among others. He is a strong advocate for women and girls in Sierra Leone. His professional interest is focused on women and leadership as a core component of Human Rights and Good Governance in developing countries.



# ALICE NENNEH JAMES

Alice is currently the Senior Programme Advisor at Purposeful. This is an Africa-rooted global hub for girls activism, funding and resourcing young feminists to transform the world with and for girls.

Previously, she served as Head of Programmes at FoRUT (Sierra Leone), an organisation that aims to empower men, women and children to fight poverty, corruption, injustice, alcoholism and drug abuse through social mobilization, advocacy, capacity building, and provision of services for long-term development. Prior to this, she has served in a number of capacities such as programme manager at the British Council in Sierra Leone and as regional manager for the Northern Regional Programme (NRO), Action Aid (Sierra Leone).

She holds a Bachelor of ARTS from Fourah Bay College, a Master of Science degree in Public Health from the University of East London– UK and a Master of Science in Strategic Human Resource at the University of Roehampton, UK. She has worked in the field of human rights, particularly women’s rights and has over 20 years of vast experience and knowledge. Over the years, she has acquired a wealth of results-based skills and experience in human rights-based programming, people’s management and resource mobilization. She is also passionate about gender related research.

## **FEMINISM AS A SAVIOR**

*By Makalay Saidiatu Sonda*

It is an open secret and a sad reality that Sierra Leone has an enormous gender equality gap. Many people think of gender inequality as something abstract. They also view it as insignificant. They are like “Yes, we know sometimes women get beaten up by their husbands. Women get raped, but this is not as a result of gender inequality. It’s not a gender issue.” “Bad things do happen in society. We have bad people”. I often get comments like these on my Facebook page whenever I do a blogpost on sexual and gender based violence relating it to sexism and inequality. People who think this way send me on the road of mind searching.

The random guy (a complete stranger) at ECOWAS street who called out to me “baby! baby!,” whilst I was walking and minding my business.. I refused to give him ears and he rushed at me and grabbed my hands. Did he do this because he just wanted to? Or because he thought I am a woman so he can touch me without permission? When I objected, he made sharp remarks that were like a testament of an owner on his property. “Shouldn’t I touch you? What do you think?”

You're so full of yourself. Do you think I have smelly hands?" Is this sexism at play or a random guy who just wants to be rude? This is a common narrative for many Sierra Leonean women and girls. The stories are similar. I, as a Sierra Leonean woman, have had so many experiences like this with random strangers. I have had conversations where men made it clear that it was impossible for an adult lady to be raped by a friend, husband or boyfriend. I have had conversations wherein people clearly stated that the raping of babies or toddlers is a spiritual problem and not a social problem or gender issue.

Sierra Leone has a sexual violence crisis. Does this (sexual violence) occur in a vacuum? President Julius Maada Bio declared an emergency on rape in 2019 after a number of sexual abuse cases were reported, wherein the victims are very young (toddlers and babies). Cases of victims as young as three (3) months old have been recorded. Several urgent steps were taken to halt this crisis. The sexual offences model court was formed, a hotline- 116 was established to report rape and Sexual Abuse and the Sexual Offences Act was amended to usher in life imprisonment for rape and "aggravated sexual assault." The term "aggravated sexual assault" was introduced, as it was not found in the old Act. Punishable offences were ushered in for solicitation of sex, sexual harassment in institution of learning, for family/relatives, community elders and chiefs that compromise rape and sexual abuse. One stop centers were established to provide support for sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) survivors and other initiatives were



implemented to bring solution to the problem including the First Lady's *Hands Off Our Girls Campaign*.

Over the past years, statistics have shown that the rate of sexual and gender based violence had doubled. In 2020, the Rainbow Centers reportedly recorded 3,339 cases across its five centers in the country with the youngest survivor being 3 months old (Source: Rainbow Initiative Statistics, 2020). These figures are as scary as the age of the victims and the plight in which victims are left in after these horrible incidents. In 2019, it was reported that a nine-year-old girl was brutally raped by a 28-year-old male relative. She was penetrated anally, and this terrible incident left her paralyzed, most likely never to walk again. Another incident involved a five-year-old, Kadija Saccoh. She was raped and murdered. This led to peaceful protests and demonstrations in Freetown and major district towns. Another notable case is that of Hannah, a lady that was raped and murdered along Aberdeen Beach in Freetown. Several of these cases remain unsolved and without any charge. With the Covid-19 pandemic situation, it is feared that these cases might have tripled as girls and women were stuck home with their abusers. In a country with a population of just slightly above 7 million, this is a grave concern.

Many Sierra Leoneans believe there is not much progress in addressing the rape epidemic, even with the enactment of so many policies and campaigns. In the backyards of our community, we keep hearing of the whispers of sexual and gender-based violence against a minor or

teenager, many of which go unreported. The million-dollar question is: *Why is there not much progress in fighting SGBV in Sierra Leone?* Is this question tied to the many narratives of women and girls? Narratives like mine? Is it tied to how women are treated and perceived generally by men in the society? Many gender activists and advocates are of the thought or opinion that the country has a culture of rape. What is a culture of rape? A culture of rape describes a setting where rape is prevalent and normalized due to societal attitudes about gender and sexuality. Do we have a rape culture in Sierra Leone? Among many activists including myself, the answer is yes. Why yes? For me, this is evident in the fact that many Sierra Leoneans including men and women most often blame victims and make excuses for rapists.

The average Sierra Leonean attitude towards rape and abuse signals this. This was clearly seen when a notable, famous entertainer, was accused by a lady of raping her in her hotel room where the alleged rapist is the owner/CEO. Social Media especially Facebook was blazing with arguments especially when other ladies including famous Sierra Leonean celebrities came forward to attest that this would not be a lie as they themselves have fallen victims in the hands of the perpetrator. Some also accused him of sexual harassment. The comments and posts of many people within the Sierra Leonean Facebook community signaled that indeed there is a culture of rape. Many argued that the ladies might have seduced him. Others did not believe the ladies because there was "no evidence." Many believed that it was impossible to rape an "adult woman." "Why didn't she scream?"

“Why bring it up now?” Some even said this was done out of envy and to ruin his (the perpetrator’s) career.

Further, one may want to question the attitude of many Sierra Leonean men towards women and girls. Having discourses such as these may help us understand how to tackle SGBV not just by bringing policies but by changing mind-sets as well. The implementation of policies can be marred if mind-sets are not changed. People make up the society, and it is people that are the first responders- the police, the medics, medical doctors and social workers. There are instances wherein police and medical officers have been accused of compromising cases of rape and abuse.

Thus, I believe changing mindsets will be one of the greatest solutions to SGBV. To change mindsets, the feminism ideology has a significant role to play. Feminism is a movement that pushes for equality of the sexes. It is the belief in social, economic and political equality of the sexes. Feminism causes revolution. What greater revolution would that be, than to have a Sierra Leone where the rights of women and girls are respected and upheld?

The feminism ideology is alive, and its movement has already begun in the country, even though there are so many myths that cause stumbling blocks to its acceptability by many Sierra Leoneans. Pushing the feminism ideology has given me great joy because I know that many of the social problems we face as a country, will be ameliorated by feminism. I have been a feminist and will always be regardless of the misconceptions. I have been told that because I am a feminist, my marriage will collapse because feminists do not listen or

“submit” to their husbands. Regardless, I say we should all be feminists, because it is only when we have an equal world, that we will have a better world.

Sierra Leone’s development is tied down to the empowering of women and girls. Should we sit back and watch our future to a better country go down the drain? Shouldn’t we be willing to unlearn misogynistic and sexist attitudes and beliefs that hold women aback? Shouldn’t we fight for women and girls? Wouldn’t we all rather be feminists to solve our country’s problems? Right through history, with the first wave feminism to the third wave, feminists have fought the status quo and ushered in revolutions that gave us many of the fundamental rights we enjoy today – the right of women to vote, the right of women to work, the right of women to have access to contraceptives, education and key economic rights and freedoms.

These have been made possible because of feminism. Feminism in Sierra Leone and Africa generally carries with it so many myths and misconceptions in the eyes of its average viewers. However, the ideology is thriving, although when you call yourself a feminist, people tend to perceive it negatively.

“I’m a feminist and I think that ...” “Don’t call yourself that, Makalay,” my in-law interjected in the middle of a conversation we were having about economic independence for women in the home. All he knows is that I am a good wife and a “good” wife is not a feminist. He later went on to say women must submit to their husbands and feminism does not make women do that. This scenario and many more that I have experienced, reflect the attitudes of people toward feminism. Must we therefore be

“good” daughters and wives at the expense of the enjoyment of our rights and full humanity? The stranger dude for instance who held my hand in the street, was expecting me to be a “good girl” by throwing no objection about him not respecting boundaries. My in-law was expecting a “good” wife that embraces submission and endorses women being enslaved in financial dependency. This is the same way family members would expect a girl to keep quiet after being sexually abused by a male relative because she must be a “good” daughter and protect the family’s reputation. It is the same way a battered wife is encouraged to stay in abusive marriage because she must be a “good” wife and sacrifice for the sake of her children.

In kicking against patriarchal notions, one is labelled “a rebel” and “badly behaved woman”. Feminism gives women voice, and of course, society does not like “loud” women. To bring change, many people will have to feel uncomfortable. True positive sustainable change will never be offered to us on a platter of gold. We must disrupt systems. We must shake the unshakable. Feminism history has taught us this. To solve the problem of rampant abuse, sexism, harassment and abuse of women’s right, we must be ready to be feminists and “badly behaved women.” Would we rather be good women and suffer in silence, and leave a bad future for our daughters? OR Should we be bad women, enjoy a better life and leave behind a better future for our daughters?

Embracing feminism and having more feminist champions will lead to a better Sierra Leone, where the rights of women and girls are upheld. The foundation to this future is being laid presently with

feminist organizations rising- organizations such as Feminists United Sierra Leone and Allies, Femme Collective, Purposeful, to name but a few. These organizations have the feminism ideology central to their theory of change. Before now, many of the organizations fighting for gender equality refuse to explicitly associate themselves with the feminism ideology. This I believe had been detrimental to the fight for gender equality and equity in the country. With the feminism ideology being pushed now by organizations and individuals, there is hope for a win in the fight against inequality in the near future.

Feminism is important because it is an ideology and when people uphold this ideology they go beyond the donor funds. They fight for equality beyond their job specifications. They fight for equality not because it's their job, but because they believe in their hearts and minds that they must fight for an equal and just society. It becomes a religion: they teach their sons how to treat others, including women, better and they teach their daughters that they can achieve or be anything they want and that their potentials are not tied down to dogmas, stereotypes and conventions. Feminism gives power to those that wield it and enable you to fight for yourself and others anytime you have to.

Feminism gives you the intentionality to bring change and be the change. I believe feminism is the solution to many of the mirage of social problems, including the sexual and gender based violence that we face as a country. We must remember that change comes with change in attitude/mind-set and not merely by the enactment and implementation of policies. A sustainable change happens only when

minds are changed positively. In the case of SGBV, change comes when we believe we must treat our women and girls better; when we believe that girls must thrive and be who they want; when we believe the girl child is as equally important as the boy child within the family unit; when women and girls are no longer seen as sexual objects; when we believe that as a society we must recognize and uphold the full humanity of women. The change starts with FEMINISM.

## **MY LIFE THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS**

*By Theriyeh Koroma-Nenneh*

Growing up in Sierra Leone, a society that is largely patriarchal, the social imbalance and gender stereotypes all became quite visible to me even at a very early stage. As naive as I was though, I still could make sense of certain things that I felt were just not right including why my mother wanted me to stay in the kitchen while my brothers and male cousins head out to play football. Yes, football! Reminiscing, football was one amazing game that I was very drawn to. I liked playing football, and I had an innate skill for it. On several instances, I used to be the lead mobilizer- calling on other interested persons to join the game. Often times, I noticed that there was almost no other girl interested to play the game but me. Even as it was, for unknown reasons, I just could see every other player though dominantly male, as just any other human. They did not really appear to me as boys who are typically known to play the game. I saw myself as a critical part of the fraction and not so alone in a field that I should feel alone or as the only woman. My passion was soon halted. It was one of the days when everyone had converged at our usual kind of mini field in the frontage of the community school were my mother and I were residing. We were about to play, when my mother suddenly stood up, came to the middle of our pitch and seized the ball, and gave me a command to stop playing hence forth. This pattern of depriving me went on and on ever since because my mother had been warned to “watch me” or else, I would begin to assert as a boy than as a girl.



I had several questions bubbling on my inside- some of which I couldn't perceive well to rightly put in words. Why would I be restrained from playing football? Why would I be made to stay in the kitchen whilst others (the boys) had the leeway to head out and play? These were some of the questions that were hitting so hard.

My days at my primary school, I remember being forced to shrink myself as a sport-loving fan due to peer pressure. On most occasions, opting to join the boys to play in our school's mini pitch would be either intolerable or will happen as an after-thought, when there is no other male player to fill in. School they say is a great agent of socialization. It is where children form their thought-patterns through social interactions with peers. Such a platform is so powerful that it can invoke self-esteem issues. This period in my primary school also was such a defining moment for me as a child. It spurred an identity issue about who I truly was and handed me a second-guessing authority about my self-esteem. For the most part, I was discriminated against because of my gender among the boys. The girls on the other hand think of my kind of girl as different from what they know a girl should be. I was not that girl who was fond of the 'known-to-be girly' games which were open for girls to play. In fact, I barely knew how to play the popular "Idie", "Nottie" etc. I knew I was a girl but only that I asserted quite different of a person- apart from the standards society had set. At some point, with this mental struggle, it was harder to tell which one of the 'circles' I would be welcomed to join. The girls' 'circle' saw me as a different kind of girl with a wild feat that could be aligned with those members of the

boys' 'circle'. They assumed I had an appearance which could be likened to some masculine characters and were not ready to accept me within the Princesses' camp. On the other hand, with the boys, I was obviously considered as an intruder, a spy or someone that was missing her right fold to be with – with the girls. Neither the boys, nor the girls saw me fit within their owned spaces. I was weary with lots of reasons to question why my experience was not only unfairly different, but so unkind, cruel and brutal to my peaceful desire to associate with my peers who however could mostly see differences than any similarities I could be sharing with them. Similarities that I was a human like they were, I was a girl as every other girl was, and above all, that I was a child who needed a sense of belonging as every other pupil in the school had a craving for.

That was society opening up its sexist nature and stereotypical norms to me at a very tender age. At this phase, I was old enough to think or make absolute sense of the world I had found myself in. Those children represented the younger version of society because their views on gender roles or gender expectations were not so much different from what they had been raised to believe and see as normal. This is how society essentially translates it from, to its unfolding generations upon generations. My problematic identity issue did not end at my primary school level. In fact, it was worsened when I moved onto Secondary school level. During this time, the emotional scars of the past were still fresh even as it was just another phase. The problem was really not far away from me because I had gained admission with some colleague pupils whose perception of me being a "Tom boy" refused to change.

I shared the same class with these kinds - people who could jump on the opportunity to describe my character to those new friends who were yet to form perceptions about me. "This na man kak" or "Man dorie" they were quick to describe me to others. Unlike my primary school which was co-education, my secondary school was strictly for girls. It was an environment generally cultured to behave as good girls. There, the social activities we would engage in were mainly to demonstrate our feminine sides as girls. I remember not ever fitting in to play games like "Circle game" which was a platform that would entertain only participants who knew how to flip around their hips and do some "girly" stuff. Because my character was not that "worthy" to participate in such circles, I had few friends who appeared to "care" to renew my identity and lost the old me which they thought was not an ideal version of how I should be represented. This socialization process started off with a friend tutoring me on how to tone my voice because, in her estimation, I was too loud for a girl. I was also influenced to begin to walk in a certain girly way because that was what felt as the right way to behave. My original identity met with a fierce confrontation to succumb. I had faced with more option to yield to the so much pressure. All of these phases aimed at one thing- to unjustifiably regulate my behaviour without thinking of what possible consequences such an attempt could bear on the victim-me.

During my secondary school day, I spent more time succumbing to the unending desire to reshape my original personality than about generally exploring that very environment in ways that could generate the necessary exposure vital for a school girl like me. Waking up to school every morning, I had a daily duty to reconcile my character with the normal way. No matter how inconvenient this would be, I should have a way of achieving that, otherwise, I would be failing to make a step progress on becoming the new me which almost all of my friends were so particular about achieving. Gradually, my interest in football started to derail because there was hardly the environment to demonstrate this passion. Throughout my six years in secondary school, I was a direct victim of societal norms and blatant gender stereotypes geared to not only discriminate against my person but to also constantly force me to adapt to a character shift. This affected my academic performance because I found myself in a position that required societal validity in any way possible. All of these experiences were not really different from what I got at home- in the cosmopolitan, slum-like vicinity where I lived with my parents. However, even with the enormous strive which society made to reform my personality, I still had some part of me which exuded my original character which I have now come to embrace and believe to be natural and innate in me.

Few years down the line, I hooked up with a boyfriend. We became very intimate friends and set goals for the relationship. One outstanding goal on his part was to shape me into the true version of a "woman". "There is still something about the way you talk, walk and

dress that needs changing” he would say. The day I first heard of the word FEMINISM through one of Chimamanda’s presentations, was the day that I began to proclaim the liberty to give meaning to why society was treating me the way it always had. “Feminism is guaranteeing the Political, Social and Economic rights of both sexes” said Chimamanda in her *“We should all be feminists”* presentation. Like I had earlier mentioned, I knew I had questions waiting to be asked and generally had the feeling that something was not right with my experience of sexism and discrimination because I could not assert enough as a woman. When I began to immerse myself in the word Feminism, I began to learn how the gender roles affect the peaceful coexistence of sexes. Boys are expected to behave in a certain way that demonstrates authority, girls are raised to see themselves as caregivers right from a very tender age, men have the leverage to freely decide when to get marry whilst women are influenced to always aspire for marriage and on top of that, to place that desire on top of their life choices.

However, I remember still being a feminist and at the same time willingly stepping in to support my boyfriend with basic domestic chores. However, I knew fully well that I was now doing this not because I consider it to be a duty I should perform. I think it was love that drove me to that curtesy knowing that this guy was a bit lazy to even launder for himself. On mostly Saturdays, I was there to help out with the washing. Sometimes I would even extend further to wash for his brothers or aunty with whom he was leaving at the time.

Then one day, something very absurd happened. I got hit by fever on one of those days that I paid him a visit. I went to the bathroom to have a quick shower. As I hastily reached back to the room, I figured that I had forgotten to wash my pant, so I pleaded with him to help out with that. His response was "I am sorry dear, I cannot wash a woman's panties because I am afraid of being seen as a dummy". Apparently, he had this catalogue of myth that said when a guy washes his woman's pant, that action has a great tendency to make him less of a man, and it was not necessarily the man's job to, above all, wash his woman's pant. His quoted words got into the fiber of my being and so I made up my mind to relieve myself off the voluntary duty to support him in washing his clothes or any other task that constituted domestic duty. I strongly believe that feminism is not averse to being nice to people when they need help in the same way I consider that paying the bill should not be about gender but about who has more at the time to pay.

In Sierra Leone, people tend to picture the indispensable ideology of feminism quite differently from what it really is. There are several negative connotations placed around it and some will attempt to justify the myths of feminism as a "man hating" ideology, or that "all feminists" are lesbians- which is not only absurd but that such views do not foresee men being feminists. During my elections campaign to take on the presidency of the Mass Communications Students' Association at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, I noticed that most of my campaign team members either thought I overstated my being a feminist or just did not like me stating that it at all. "If possible, try as much to avoid describing yourself as a feminist

because that is not really the selling point of your candidacy” one of them said. “Also, not everyone will want to vote for a feminist especially when they are mostly seen as women who want to challenge men’s authority” another added. However, I knew deep down all of these were not true, knowing that it is feminism that inspired me to challenge myself for that very role with the belief that “a woman can do it”. Also, I have always had this intuition that I, proudly identifying as a feminist enhances my confidence as a strong and independent woman. I eventually won the election, becoming the first female president of the Mass Communication department. The experience of student leadership greatly exposed me to the reality of how society relates to women leaders. Even though there are efforts to support women’s empowerment, there are also several efforts that are undermining these very laudable efforts that push for women's empowerment. I soon realized that female leaders are judged quite differently from male and that society holds women to very higher standards than they do hold men to. Yet, when a woman leader asserts as disciplined or result-oriented, they misjudged her as being bossy whilst they hail male leaders for exhibiting the same qualities women are criticized for.

As a feminist, founder and team leader of FEMINISTS UNITED SERRA LEONE AND ALLIES, I believe that feminism is the driving mechanism for the world to achieve gender equality. This is because even the name first acknowledged the vast inequalities which typically indict women.

It recognizes how long women have stayed below the very rungs of leadership platforms, and how they have been side-lined from engaging on issues which directly affect them. Being a feminist, my greatest achievement has so far been to enjoy the experience of self-created freedom to aspire and be and doing whatever that is in my best interest without first feeling the need to be validated. Living by societal standards was a huge mistake I once made as a woman. My aspiration is for every woman to embrace their true self, dare to speak up and consider themselves very integral towards societal growth.



## **FEMINIST REFLECTIONS**

***By Dr. Claudine Hingston***

I am Claudine, an unapologetic feminist. Initially, I did not want to brand myself a feminist because of the negative connotations ascribed to it. However, after an intense self-introspection, I came to the conclusion that one cannot be a feminist, yet reluctant to declare it. In fact, I now feel proud to say it because I know that by upholding the tenets of feminism, I am in essence upholding human rights and advocating for a just and equal society. This is because feminism is all about equal rights, equal treatment and equal opportunities for both men and women. Feminism also condemns sexism and other forms of gender based injustices and discrimination and seeks to empower women and redress the injustices meted to them. Being a feminist has developed my gender lens to be more aware of both subtle and glaring discrimination of women in society. It has also provided me with the voice to advocate for and motivate for equal rights of men and women in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of society.

I was attracted to feminism because I saw it as the key to a gender equal world, where men and women will be treated the same and offered the same opportunities and rights. I also saw it as the key that would unlock the potentials of women and eliminate any forms of discrimination against them. I further saw it as the platform that would give women the voice to challenge systemic oppressions. I became a feminist after seeing the way women were treated in Sierra Leone.

I guess I was a feminist, long before I started identifying with the word. One of the earliest experience that opened my eyes to the harsh realities that women and girls faced, was the forced and early marriage of a friend who was only 13 years old, the same age as me, by then. Her school life ended with her marriage and whenever she saw me in my school uniform, she cried. From that point, I started taking a keen interest in the way, women and girls around me were treated, including myself. I saw that we were discriminated against in various ways and viewed as inferior to men. I saw women being beaten by their partners for simple things like cooking an unappetizing meal, women being thrown out of their houses at the whim of their partners, girls being denied education, widows being bullied and deprived inheritance rights and girls and women being forced into marriage. As recent as 2020, a family member who was divorced and finding a house to rent, found it difficult to do so because she is single and does not have a man. Some home owners told her that they do not rent a house to a single woman, whilst others told her that she had to bring a man to stand for her.

On a personal note, I have also had experiences where I was marginalised because of me being a woman. I will share one such experience. Some years back, I attended a joint committee meeting, where I was the only female at the meeting. In the first place, the men present seem surprised that I was there. I think they were not expecting any woman to be in attendance. During the meeting, I realised that they were not interested in listening to what I had to say and they acted as if I was non-existent. I was not about to let that go.

I stood up and asked them if there was something wrong with me. One of them asked me why I said so, and I told them that it is apparent that I was not welcome and that they were not interested in listening to me. Of course he denied that was not the case, although a guilty expression was on all of their faces. Suffice it to say, they paid attention thereafter and I am proud to say that the suggestions I came up with, were the most meaningful.

The issue of gender equality in Sierra Leone is still a long way from reality. Although some strides are being made as women continue to break glass ceilings, women in Sierra Leone are still marginalised. They are marginalised in all sectors – political, religious, social and cultural. Social, religious and cultural constructs uphold men as the dominant sex and thus, men are constantly being viewed as superior to women. I strongly believe that socio –cultural and religious factors are responsible for gender inequalities in Sierra Leone. Most Sierra Leonean cultural traditions uphold male superiority over women and relegate women to a secondary position to men. In some parts of Sierra Leone for instance, women are not allowed to be chiefs. Even local Sierra Leonean proverbs and idioms foster male supremacy. Idioms such as *uman fol no day crow* (a hen does not crow) means that a woman has no voice or should be voiceless. This idiom indicates that women should be quiet and should not be involved in leadership and decision-making initiatives. It also encourages the marginalization of women and endorses that it is a man's world.

Religion is also a big factor. I have attended weddings for instance, wherein the clergy lays the responsibility of keeping the marriage alive on the woman. In a wedding I once attended, the pastor admonished the bride to be always patient and that even if the husband comes home at 3am in the morning, she should open the door, welcome him home with a smile and serve him a meal. He also told her that whenever her husband says no to something, she should accept it, even if it was something that would have been in her own best interest. He never offered any such advice to the husband and just told him to always handle his woman very well in bed. Such narratives are what continue to perpetuate gender inequalities and abuse of women in Sierra Leone.

Stereotypical views of the expected roles, responsibilities and capabilities of men and women also fuel gender inequalities. The expectation for instance that men should be the sole decision maker in the house tends to silence the voice and opinions of women. In terms of expected capabilities of men and women, I will share an experience that left me fuming. On knowing that I am an academic doctor and have a PhD, a lady told me that I had the brains of a man. She probably thought that she was complimenting me. I guess that the only way she could fathom the idea of a woman having a doctorate was that I had the brain of a man, since she believes that it only men who should be so highly educated. I was cross, but I patiently explained to her that women are equally as intelligent as men. It is amazing the extent to which some men will go to justify male superiority over women. I have heard a man once say,

that the fact that men stand when they urinate and women stoop to do so, shows that men are created to rule over women. I have also heard a guy say that he does not expect much from creatures who bleed every month. I was flabbergasted to say the least. I must mention here that although men are the main critics of feminism, there are some Sierra Leonean men who have identified with the concept and have committed to upholding its ideology. Kudos to those feminist men.

In reality, most Sierra Leoneans are not comfortable with feminism, and that includes not only men, but also some women. Men in general are suspicious of it, as they see it as a threat to the patriarchal dividends they enjoy. A guy once told me that feminism is not a good thing for Africans as it encourages women to want to wear the trousers in the house and to tell their husbands what to do. He even stated that he will never marry a feminist and that something must be wrong with men, who call themselves feminists. The perception that feminism promotes female control and dominance over men is a fallacy. Within feminism, no sex is deemed more important than the other. There is a tendency for Sierra Leoneans to also view feminism as a western concept, as a concept that derails African culture. Men as well as women have told me that feminism is a western concept and do not think that it is applicable in the Sierra Leone context. There also seems to be a very negative perception of women who declare themselves as feminists. There is a misleading perception that they are disrespectful, loud mouthed, unladylike, vulgar and hate men.

I have been repeatedly told that I do not fit the profile of a feminist as I am married. I have also been told that I am too lady like to be a feminist. People are always therefore surprised when I take a feminist stance. My exterior apparently belies my interior. When the feminist in me comes out, a few people have told me that they never expected me to have such radical views. Radical for them means me airing certain views such as recommending castration for men who rape women. Despite all the negativity surrounding it, feminism is slowly taking roots in the Sierra Leonean society.

Since it is still in its infant stage in Sierra Leone, I will advocate for the promotion of liberal feminism for now. Liberal feminism proposes equality for men and women in the eyes of the law, society and in the workplace. It also allows for women to influence policies and raise awareness of issues pertaining to them. Based on this, I believe it is the most appropriate form of feminism that should be promoted in Sierra Leone currently, in the attempt to get people to embrace it. This is not to say that practicing feminists should strictly adhere to this model, as they have a right to practice whatever brand of feminism they choose. The fight for gender equality is still an ongoing battle and far away from being won. The fight however must be relentless. I have outlined some suggestions below, which I believe can help to foster a gender equal society in Sierra Leone, starting with the education of girls.

Education is the tool that will enable girls and women to challenge discriminatory and abusive practices against them. Every girl in Sierra Leone must therefore be given the opportunity to go to school. The practice of positive discrimination could be used to attract and retain girls in school. Through the practice of positive discrimination, girls can be prioritised in the awarding of scholarships and educational aids such as the provision of uniforms, books and food to girls from poor families. In a nutshell, an enabling environment should be put in place that will assist girls to access schooling and pursue higher education. I will also suggest that gender studies be taught in schools from an early grade. Both boys and girls should be exposed at an early age to the knowledge that although they differ biologically, they should be treated equally. This will go a long way in changing the mind-sets of the upcoming generation. It will further provide the opportunity for them to engage with issues affecting women and to explore ways to address them. It will also put them in a better position to be able to identify and address inequalities in various spheres of life.

In the drive to foster a gender equal society in Sierra Leone, efforts should be made by the government and other stakeholders to place more women in leadership positions. This will enable Sierra Leonean women to have a say in issues affecting their lives and provide the opportunity for them to redress it. Community Conversations, wherein feminists and gender activists can go into communities to discuss and dialogue about gender issues, will also assist in fostering gender equality in society.

Men, women and community leaders should all be included in such dialogues. Religious leaders should also be targeted and encouraged to influence their congregants in positive ways that will foster gender equality and harmony. Since the media has the power to influence attitudes and behavior, this power could be exploited to promote women's empowerment and gender equality. Media institutions should embark on a massive mass media campaign and advocacy to promote female empowerment and women's rights.

All of the above ideas are good, but it takes people to implement them. I will therefore take the opportunity at this point to challenge all feminists in Sierra Leone to take action towards a gender equal society. Change starts from all of us, including myself. On my own part, I am active in promoting feminism in Sierra Leone. I am an affiliate of Feminist United Sierra Leone and Allies, a group committed to fostering feminism in Sierra Leone and advocating for meaningful changes, particularly those that will empower women. I also mentor many young Sierra Leonean youths, and I ensure that I encourage them to uphold gender equality and avoid all forms of gender based discrimination. I also use social media to motivate for gender equality and I am involved in a number of female empowerment initiatives, as well..

In a country like Sierra Leone, where a substantial number of women and girls are marginalised, violated and discriminated against, it is important to foster the feminist ideology to redress the imbalance between men and women.



I encourage women in particular to embrace the feminist ideology because it is what will offer them freedom from the discrimination, violence and the abuse many Sierra Leonean women suffer from. As Sierra Leonean women, we should unite under the umbrella of feminism and continue to liberate and defend ourselves from limited notions of womanhood. My vision for Sierra Leone is for it to be a country where no child, woman or man will be left behind or excluded, on the basis of gender. I wish for a Sierra Leone, where women are empowered to play their rightful role in society and full gender equality is maintained in all spheres of life. I pray and hope that this vision becomes a reality some day in the land that I love, my Sierra Leone.

## **SOCIETAL PERCEPTION OF BEING A FEMINIST**

*By Madiana Nyahorta Sia Mensah-Gborie*

Feminism is a radical movement that fights against patriarchy, male chauvinism and all forms of marginalization against women. Centuries past, women and girls have been ostracized due to traditional customs, beliefs and practices. The saying, "Women are meant to be seen and not heard" was a predominant belief which contributed to restricting the speaking rights of women. Young girls were relegated to the kitchen while the boys were sent to school. Early marriage and illiteracy, was and is still the order of the day.

Today, the aspect of feminism has diluted some traditional beliefs with respect to the marginalization of women and girls in society. As a feminist, I believe feminism has drastically changed the mindset of many and I trust there is more to be done to achieve gender equity. The prevalence of Gender Based Violence is still a burning issue which the justice system is yet to tackle. It is rather disheartening to note that most times, victims are not catered for and are left neglected and traumatized.

I am not an exception to the gender disparities meted out on women. One of the dominant examples, is that of societal perception on the manner in which a woman should behave, dress, the career she should embark on, when to get married, to name but a few. It is as a result of these stereotypical thoughts that have made gender equity difficult to achieve in Sierra Leone.

As a young girl, I attended co-educational schools and being in such schools as an intelligent girl, raised eyebrows especially from classmates who were boys who had a mindset that a girl should not lead them in terms of academic performance but should rather depend on them. They also believed that girls get pregnant and drop out of school somewhere along the line. Fortunately, that did not dull my sparkle. Instead, it made me learn from the experiences gained and later replicated it in my journey to success.

Moreover, gaining admission in the university came with much excitement and readiness for the task ahead. I opted to read Linguistics and Literature. On a fateful day, I went to purchase some books for further reading. The book seller was curious and asked me why I was buying such sophisticated books. I told him they were part of my course of study. The startled book seller asked "Do you think you can succeed in this course as a woman?" At first I became dejected at his question but probed him to know why he was doubting my capacity to succeed in the course. Then he responded by saying, "Linguistics is masculine". I responded by confidently telling him that, one's gender should not limit him or her from pursuing their interests. Everyone must be at liberty to achieve whatever they want. His action was a clear manifestation that societal mindset can be sexist and that there is a tendency for certain careers to be thought of as exclusively male or female domains.

Also, whilst I was studying at the university, there were untamed perceptions that girls are meant to be dependent on boys in the classroom- something that was obviously in disparity with my firmly held ideology (which believes that both genders should work together, not one completely dependent on the other where necessary). By virtue of my contrary ideological view, I was viewed as an alien. However, that very ideology helped me through my years in the university and made me totally dependent on myself to excel.

More so, being in the corporate world, my life experience about gender related issues has broadened. As a lecturer in one of the biggest universities in Sierra Leone (Njala University) which will be considered as an elitist platform, I however experienced ugly perceptions towards unmarried women who thrive academically. Society always feels that women who are single and are in academia will always face difficulty settling with a spouse. I once had an encounter with someone who told me that since I am highly educated, men will find it difficult to come closer to me because of my status.

I laughed and told her that such a perception only seeks to prevent women from empowering themselves and in the end, renders them dependent on men.

However, drawing on all of these misconceptions of gender norms which clearly exist in my society, I was inspired to form a feminist

organization called Ladies with Vision which advocates for the right of marginalized women and girls in Sierra Leone. Starting such organization was a herculean task in a society that believes there should be ascribed gender roles on how women and men should be and should not. Going contrary to this is bound to ignite conflicts with such societal beliefs. Despite all odds, the organisation is frantically working to ensure that women and girls are empowered and since 2018 till date, we have engaged in many activities that aim at sensitizing and empowering women in Sierra Leone. Currently, we are engaged in empowering disabled women in the Western Rural District by giving them finances to start up their own businesses and empower themselves, their families and communities. I look forward to continuing my feminist advocacy and empowering more women to attain success.

In a nut-shell, I think our society needs Radical feminism because being liberal has not yielded much result amidst the continued discrimination against women. In ensuring it materializes, we need to be seen working together as feminists because most times there are challenges that are likely to strain us as a collective. Feminists should not be seen working in disarray particularly when we are fighting a single course. I think it is time for the world to see us in communal action which can inspire them in turn to work with us in making sure we win this fight. I will gladly look forward to a time in my society when gender discrimination against women will be a thing of the past- and women will be seen as an integral aspect in the development of Sierra Leone.

## **MY FEMINIST MONOLOGUE**

*By Gifty Renner*

For me, feminism is a tool we use to exonerate societal inequalities. Everybody deserves equal opportunities in life, be it socially, economically and politically. Feminism brings out the will power and courage in someone to fight and stand up for what they believe. The feminist's core value of equal opportunities for all aligns with my perspective of life.

It's funny how this may sound, but I was a feminist even before I had come across the word feminism. The society I found myself in, is full of people with low mentality who always made me feel like my gender is a barrier. Gender stereotypes and biases were the anthem of their beliefs. However, my persona does not exclude stubbornness. I loved doing what society imposed on boys as theirs. I loved playing football and hated playing with dolls. I often got flogged by my mother for playing football. She said that it is a game for boys. I told her that football is not just for men, and that I love playing it anyway. My speaking up always made her to give me more strokes of the cane.

I cried but I never stopped playing football. I played football whenever I can, caring less about the consequences. I would always say to myself, "at the end 'kanda (skin) wam (warm), kanda kol (cold).'" I kept playing and my mom kept flogging. She eventually got tired, and allowed me to be. So even as a 10 years old girl, I have been fighting stereotypical beliefs and patriarchy. Years later, fast forward to now, I am still a fighter against Patriarchy.

Thanks to my community of feminists at Feminists United Sierra Leone and Allies, I have a platform where I can continue to raise my voice and say no to women's oppression and subjugation.

I can clearly still recall the first time I associated myself with feminism objectives and core values. Since then, I have been bossy and sassy, not in a way of taking advantage of anyone though. People refer to me as a feminist without me even telling them that I was one. My attribute and personality reflects feminism even though that was not the reason or my claims for being a feminist. I do not only believe in the feminism goal- equality; I also practice it. I do not tolerate any inequality against women or men in society. I do the things that society says women cannot do because I want to rebuke their statement and prove to them that my sex does not define my potential and capabilities, neither does it stop me from actualizing my dreams.

Clearly, men are still holding a significant advantage over women in terms of equality in society. No doubt, the effort is there but women continue to lack opportunities and self-confidence because they face discrimination in various spheres of life - politically, socially, religiously and economically. The percentage of women holding higher positions in public and private sector is very small, considering the fact that women make up the greater percentage of the population of Sierra Leone. Men who are in the minority in terms of the population ratio by sex, hold majority of elected and unelected positions in public service. It is quite disappointing. Patriarchy- the male dominance culture and society continue to prevent women from attaining higher heights and

enjoying equal opportunities as men in the social and political contexts.

I have been discriminated against many times because of my sex. One time I will never forget is when I was in secondary school. I was completely taken advantage of because of my sex. I was in line waiting to be called next to collect my report card when a boy from the back came and stood in front of me in the queue. I was stunned and then I told him to go back and wait for his turn but he adamantly refused saying that "me na boy pikin anytin way r wan do r for do" (I am a boy and can do anything I want to). That got me so mad and I said to him that I would not allow him to jump the queue especially since I had been waiting patiently for my turn. Other students however started supporting him because I was a girl. Suddenly a teacher intervened in the matter and asked what was going on. I wanted to explain, but the teacher asked the boy to explain first. After the boy finished explaining, the teacher did not allow me to explain. He instead asked me to go to the back of the queue and let the boy be. I was hurt, and powerless to go against school authority. As I feared being punished. I reluctantly agreed and went to the back

There are several legislations to bridge the gender gap in Sierra Leone. However, in practice, the process has been slow. There are still many challenges hindering the progress of achieving gender equality. Only a very small percentage of parliamentarians are women. Girls are still forced and deceived into undergoing the harmful cultural practice of Female genital mutilation (FGM). Many girls in some societies within Sierra Leone are not allowed to reach higher level education, but forced



into early marriage. In countless times, we see it all over the news how women and girls are being sexually abused and subjected to domestic violence. Not long ago, a five years old girl was raped and killed brutally. Women continue to face discrimination socially, politically and economically. Nevertheless, women are making an impact. Women are now considered as part of decision making and policy making processes. Even though the progress to achieve equality is quite slow, women are slowly winning the fight for gender equality.

As an optimistic feminist, my vision is to see economic growth, quality education, good electricity, access to clean water and women holding high positions in various spheres in Sierra Leone. I long for these in the near future, and this is why I will continue the fight against inequality, tribalism and political influence.

## **FEMINIST VIEWS FROM A MALE PERSPECTIVE**

*By Abraham Sahr Prince Gbondo*

I decided to be a feminist because of my desire to see a gender equal society and leave behind a better society for the next generation. I grew up in a world where there are clear differences between the ways men and women are treated, with women being on the disadvantaged side. The high level of injustice in society's treatment of women and the need to be part of the solution in addressing these issues are the forces that motivated me to embrace feminism. I would love to do my part in making a positive change in society. I want to contribute to raising a better generation, where everyone, regardless of their gender will have equal rights and opportunities in all facets of life and be treated fairly. Growing up, I had no idea about any social movement that advocates for gender equality. I also had no idea about feminism. I however knew that there were certain disparities between men and women and boys and girls in how they were treated and the opportunities given to them. Even though I had no idea of gender equality and feminism at that time, I was aware that women were treated unfairly and I felt that they deserved better. I was very uncomfortable with the way women were treated and society's perspective of them. I saw this unfair treatment of women even in my own home, my school and my immediate neighbourhood. In my school, girls were forced to sweep the classrooms and fetch water for classroom use.

On countless number of occasions, I witnessed domestic violence in my neighbourhood and women being deprived of the right to make important life choices. Even though I was unhappy with all of this, I kept silent for a while but later became vocal about it.

In my early secondary school days, I became a reproductive health activist and my love for activism grew. As I had no idea about social media by then, I was unable to voice out my dissatisfaction at that time to a large group of people. I however had a big platform in senior secondary school and I used it to advocate for children's right and the need to educate the girl child most importantly. Later in life and with exposure to the internet, I found out about the feminist movement. It instantly appealed to me and I embraced it. Since then, I have used every platform possible to advocate for a gender equal society, where everyone will thrive regardless of his or her sex.

Sierra Leone is rooted in patriarchy, where equality and fair treatment of women is spoken of rather than being acted upon. Some progress has been made to address the discriminatory treatment of women, but more needs to be done. Whilst there are new legislative acts and advocacy that advocates for equality and the need to protect the girl child and women, these laws are not that effective. There is still a lot of work to be done in order for Sierra Leone to become a gender equal nation.

The marginalization and discrimination of women in Sierra Leone is rampant, and two key factors are customs and traditions. There are some toxic customs and traditions that are not in women and girls best interest. In addition, they are male-biased and relegate women to secondary position to men. In fact, gender roles are mistaken for life skills and women are expected to follow commands rather than make choices. Discrimination of women happens in all regions the country and I have witnessed it in my own home and my immediate surroundings.

The normalization of sexual and domestic violence has also resulted in them being on the rise. Society has made them look normal and people tend to turn a blind eye to abuse of women by their male partners. Undoubtedly, there are various factors responsible for gender inequalities in Sierra Leone, such as customs and traditions, religion and stereotypical views. I also believe that poor education and sensitization of society about gender issues is also a contributing factor. In the fight for gender equality in Sierra Leone, I think radical feminism should be embraced to some extent. This involves taking the bull by the horn, penetrating glass ceilings in others and facilitating constant dialogues.

I cannot recall if I have been discriminated against because of my sex but I guess this is because I am a man. Society treats me in a different way from a woman. Since Sierra Leone is rooted in patriarchy, it will take a considerable amount of time to deconstruct that mentality. As feminists, we should aspire to it. The fight therefore for gender equality must be ongoing and I am hopeful that it will happen someday. Progress is slowly being made with the education of girls. Initially, boys used to dominate in education as most parents held back their girls at home. There has however been a huge flip in that area, as more parents are allowing their girls to go to school and girls are also excelling in school. The number of educated women is increasing in Sierra Leone and this is a good sign as it will make the fight for gender equality easier.

Although the feminist movement in Sierra Leone is gaining reasonable momentum and gradually drawing attention, more has to be done. I recommend that gender studies should be taught in schools. This will help boys and girls to understand gender issues/feminism at an early age and be able to uphold and foster gender equality when they become adults. On my part, I will keep on advocating for gender equality/feminism in Sierra Leone. I believe that one should speak up for what they believe in and speak against things that are wrong. In this modern world of social media and other platforms, I take every chance I get to speak against gender inequalities of all types and forms. I also work closely with like-minded people to take the feminist ideology forward. In the future, I want to see huge paradigm shifts that will positively influence the way, women are seen and treated in my country. Most of all, I want to see a Sierra Leone where rights and opportunities will not be given based on one's sex or gender.

## **PROUD TO BE A MALE FEMINIST**

*By Mambu M. Massaquoi*

Feminism, in a broad sense, is the pursuit of equal rights and opportunities for men and women in society, regardless of social class, economic background, political status, or cultural heritage. Feminism aims to prove that women's subordination is a socially produced construct that can be modified, rather than a biologically determined one. As a result, both men and women must play an active part in addressing the underlying causes of disparities that exists between them. I was attracted to feminism based on my experiences growing up as a child. My siblings and I were raised by a single parent (mother) who is now a widow. She comes from an ethnic group that is popularly known to have migrated from a foreign land. I later learned that she never had the opportunity to go to school and marriage was the only institution she thought could accommodate her for a lifetime. She was the second wife to my father, after divorcing her first husband and she suffered from domestic violence in both marriages. My father's family members gave her bitter experiences in her matrimonial home. To date, the scars of those experiences still remains with her.

Education have helped to broaden my understanding about the widespread nature of her situation and the need for a re-dress of the problem. When I intensively started reading on the concept of Human Rights while pursuing my postgraduate programme in the university, I realized that the issue of gender imbalance is to a greater extent a gross violation of fundamental human rights. It is much more comfortable for me to state that it is the greatest threat to human existence, given that women are uniquely God's creation who

contribute to societal growth and progress. I have also learned that it will be of great benefit to men and the nation as a whole, if women are given the space and rights they deserve as human beings. This is why I was inspired to join the feminist movement, as I feel it will enable me to help change the narrative for future generations.

I consider myself a feminist because for years, all my activities have revolved around the fight to provide women with the platform they need to realize their full potentials. I started from home, where I am the primary caregiver for everyone especially the female folks, including my mother, and have continued through classroom and community engagements. Campaigning for gender equality and equity is a top priority for me. I have supervised undergraduate students writing their dissertations on gender related topics and have also personally undertaken studies on gender issues in development. My career advancement aspiration is also directed towards female participation and policy issues in Sierra Leone. A lot of efforts have been made to make it a reality. In conjunction with young female university graduates, I am currently working on the formation of a gender-based organization. Despite the fact that the organization is still in the foetus stage, a lot of work has gone into defining its vision and objective. I consider gender equality as availing the platform for both men and women to exercise their abilities and unleash their potentials without prejudice and discrimination. I have a strong conviction that women can do every single activity just as men do.

I have however been discriminated against because I am a male who identifies with feminism. It is obvious that when a man decides to get involved in problems concerning women, he will be met with ridicule from his peers and, most likely, prejudice everywhere. I am no exception. On multiple instances, I have been called a womanizer by many people, including close friends and colleagues, for attempting to not only identify with women but also to promote gender equality. Sierra Leoneans in general have a negative conception of feminism. Whilst I strive to hold it in high esteem, many Sierra Leoneans trivialize it on the basis that it is an imitated western ideology by many. Some traditional fanatics even hold the view that feminism will not work here in Sierra Leone and therefore, they have persistently frustrated the efforts of those who support the fight.

The fight for gender equality in Sierra Leone is still ongoing. Women have been subjected to different forms of marginalization in all aspects of life with religion, marital relations and politics being the most crucial ones. Until now, men serve as gate keepers in all matters relating to attainment of political positions. Prominent among these is what is experienced in political party structures in Sierra Leone. The chairperson's status which commands ultimate authority is often reserved for men, thereby limiting women to leadership roles. This is why till date it is still but just a dream for women to hit the 30 percent quota recommended by Beijing Platform for Action as women's wing leadership cannot influence award of party symbols for elections.



It is also notable in the traditional native administrative leadership status attainment that women are prohibited from contesting – some parts of Sierra Leone are renowned for this.

Widows are usually stripped from their late husbands' inheritance. This is why the devolution of estate act was passed as a recommendation from the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women to address this aspect. Women are also limited by religion. In the Islamic religion for instance, women are not allowed to lead prayers. A myriad of factors are therefore responsible for gender inequalities in Sierra Leone. Rigid traditional norms and a shaky political will on gender equality campaigns are among those responsible for the gender imbalance. For example, until now only 12.3 percent is achieved of the 30 percent quota Beijing Platform for Action recommendations about female representation in the country's parliament. There are still stumbling blocks within political party structures limiting women's political participation that are yet to be amended. It is widely visible that even where some women have made their way up the cooperate ladder, they are still charged with domestic responsibilities.

Despite the above, I believe that Sierra Leone has the potential of achieving gender equality, taking into consideration the progress made so far. Among other key highlights, the under mentioned successes can be justifiable.

- In all academic cadres, there is a rise in female child enrolment and retention.
- Social roles are being redefined, with young and educated people assuming traditional leadership responsibilities such as paramount chieftaincy in most sections of the country.
- Women have more opportunities to advocate for gender equality. This can be seen all around Sierra Leone.
- Strict regulations are in place to protect women from sexual exploitation, which is one of the ways they are marginalized.
- Political leadership roles, notably women's involvement in decision-making, are on the rise, although on a snail pace.

Given the current gender challenges in Sierra Leone, I believe that a liberal feminist approach is the best way to promote gender equality.

The following are the primary concerns of liberal feminists:

- The hidden disadvantages, actual gender disparities that affect both men and women in a society but appear to benefit males.
- Rather than social structures and organizations, culture reinforces gender inequity.
- Gender roles and expectations that are stiff as a result of socialization processes, but that can be changed if enculturation is reinterpreted.
- That achieving gender equality does not necessitate haphazard measures, but rather systematic submission and strategies that work within current organizations.

Creation of equal opportunities has engulfed the liberal feminists' effort resulting in positive benefits for women. Postmodern, Marxist, and radical feminist resolutions, such as the accusation of a masculinist enlightenment project, the spontaneous eradication of gender inequality, and the superiority of the feminine, on the other hand, can be interpreted as a direct attack on men, who have the potential to resist change. In the bid to achieving an equal gendered society, the approach must be persuasive and not coercive. This means that, men who have subjected women to inferior statuses must not be directly accused as they have the potential to keep suppressing them, instead they must be lobbied to accept the inclusion. This strategy is what liberal feminist employ and it is yielding enormous dividend compared to other approaches.

On my own part, I strive to advance feminism in Sierra Leone and make a meaningful impact. I teach gender-related courses at the university, train non-profit organization personnel on practical gender education and practice tools to spread to a wider audience, and give public talks and advocacies from time to time. I have assisted a few of nongovernmental organizations in using Gender Model Family (GMF) to incorporate gender inclusion into their operational goals and strategies. GMF is a practical strategy for communities to redefining gender roles so that women can be economically productive, socially accepted, and physically healthy. For example, if the husband walks from the farmhouse, swinging a cutlass and leaving the wife with firewood on her head, a child at her back, and a basket in her hand, GMF encourages that husband to help the wife carry some items. This strategy has meant that men and women now collaborate on domestic and other tasks.

Political initiatives are important for fostering a gender equal society in Sierra Leone. Since feminism is a political ideology, political will is the ultimate fulcrum on which the wheel of gender equality will turn. Women's representation in governance will be extremely beneficial, as seen in nations where women have made significant political gains, such as Rwanda. There is a considerable representation of women at all levels of administration in Rwanda, thanks to the growing number of women in the Rwandan Parliament. I am convinced that if women are given a voice, they can effectively help to bring their demands to fruition. Former Liberian President Ellen Jonson Sirleaf, who became the country's first female president, showed compassion for women by prioritizing the battle for women's rights and pushing for education, justice, and equality.

"Knowledge is power," as the saying goes, and providing equal educational opportunities to girls and boys will have a significant impact on gender equality. Since 2002, this has been seen in women's emancipation efforts. The only premise for achieving it, as noted previously in the political capacity, is a respectable literacy rate among women. It is often assumed that the persistence of gender inequality is attributable to the high percentage of illiteracy among women. With proper educational possibilities for women, inequalities, marginalization, and subjugation will be detected and expressed by women themselves, resulting in a greater likelihood of finding a solution. Men and women are assigned socially defined roles from birth. Gender equality will be fostered if concentrated efforts are made to redirect this socialization to accept women as equal members of society. As a Sierra Leonean feminist, my vision is to see a Sierra Leone where men and women, boys and girls, may fully practice their fundamental human rights.

## **MY THOUGHTS ON FEMINISM**

*By Alice Neneh James*

For me, FEMINISM is all about the social, economic and political equality for both men and women. The conversation about feminism needs to be brought to the fore and applied to people's lives, in order to dismantle all the different kinds of discrimination and oppression people face. I decided to be a feminist because of my strong belief for equal rights and opportunities for every human being. I strongly respect diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths. I strive to empower all women to realise their full potentials. I consider myself a true feminist because of my high level of self-awareness. I always ensure that I keep my character in check, so that I can lead with an open mind. I love and care for myself a lot and also love others. In doing so, I consciously get rid of all forms of unfairness.

Sierra Leone has made a lot of progress in embracing the Beijing Declaration and we have made significant milestones in establishing some major legal framework in order to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Gender inequality however still persists and women are marginalised and discriminated against. My observation is that the marginalisation and discrimination of women in Sierra Leone can be attributed to the high levels of poverty, illiteracy, social customs, cultural beliefs and anti-female attitudes which are all the foundations of patriarchy. Poverty, Illiteracy, Unemployment, Social Customs and Anti-Female Attitude are no doubt some of the factors responsible for gender inequalities in Sierra Leone.

I also think that one of the major causes of gender inequality is the lack of awareness among women about their rights and their ability to achieve equality. This lack of awareness is often due to the prevailing cultural and social norms, which dictate that women should be subservient to men. As a woman, I have been discriminated against and marginalised. I always fight back though.

The fight for gender equality in Sierra Leone should be persistent. I think we have worked hard to debunk patriarchy by giving girls access to education. Women now have platforms to be in power and achieve economic success. We have four (4) gender laws in place to which some have been reviewed. There is now a court that deals specifically with cases of rape. Lots of campaigns have been mounted to end violence and sexual assault against women/girls, as well as child marriage. Girls and women are now being provided with access to menstrual health facilities. We are slowly winning.

I think radical and intersectional feminism is the most appropriate for promoting feminism in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leoneans however tend to be judgemental of feminists thoughts. There is a beliefs that feminists just talk and do not make sense. This is because of the way many Sierra Leoneans were socialised to associate women with subordinate positions.

Personally, in order to advance feminism in Sierra Leone and make an impact, I operate a talk show that brings the voices of women to the fore. This show is all about women issues and dismantling biases.

I believe Sierra Leone has a chance of becoming a gender equal society if all forms of violence are ended, if women support women and gender empowerment laws are passed that that makes provision for more women in parliament. As a feminist, my vision for Sierra Leone is a Sierra Leone where everyone is treated equally with all fairness.

## **MYTHS ABOUT FEMINISM**

### ***FEMINISTS ARE OPPOSED TO MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD (False)***

Feminists actively fight for the rights of mothers and many feminists are married and are mothers. Feminists recognize that happy families are important and believe that families are strengthened when the wellbeing of all members, male and female, are supported. However, marriage and motherhood can be a choice for some people whether be they feminists or not.

### ***FEMINISM IS A WESTERN IDEOLOGY (False)***

The struggle for women's liberation is said to have started in the 1800's with the Suffragette Movement but prior to that time, Africa had had female warriors who ruled kingdoms. Queen Masarico (Mali) Queen Amira (Nigeria) for eg, in the 16th century commanded an army of 2000 or more men. These women and more in history did not think less of their capabilities because of their sex- by which act is a true call of Feminism. What then was probably not clear was the terminology itself, Feminism. In modern day, the word Feminism has been embraced by women who no longer wish to make the movement about race, status or gender but about a solidarity journey towards equality.

### ***ALL FEMINISTS AGREE (False)***

Diversity of opinions within feminism is the norm, not the exception. That's a good thing. Yes, even feminists sometimes get things wrong, and are swiftly called out. This process is the heart of feminist analysis, a rigorous ideal that never remains silent simply in the name of uniformity. Vibrant and enthusiastic debate among feminists can sometimes become heated,



but it is important to remember that while we may disagree on tactics, some of the best solutions for fighting patriarchy come from honest discourse and respectful disagreement.

### ***FEMINISM ONLY BENEFITS WOMEN (False)***

People often forget that gender roles impact both men and women. They say all women are supposed to be submissive, then all men are supposed to be dominant. What about the woman who is a natural born leader? What about the man with a kind and gentle soul? Strictly defined gender roles hurt men and women. As actress Emma Watson said in a speech to the United Nations, "Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive or strong. It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, instead of two sets of opposing ideals."

### ***ONLY WOMEN ARE FEMINISTS (False)***

Men too can be feminists. Feminism is an ideology that both men and women can embrace.

### ***TO BE A REAL FEMINIST, A WOMAN CANNOT BE FEMININE OR DEMURE. (False)***

Feminism is not about the way you look or dress. It is the way you act and the views you uphold.

## **SUMMARY**

*Feminism is a complex topic in Sierra Leone and there are lot of negative perceptions about it. However, as a country where a substantial number of women and girls are marginalised and discriminated against, there is a need to foster the feminist ideology to redress the imbalance between men and women. In fostering the feminist agenda, it is important that people are well informed about feminism and are able to appreciate the need for it in Sierra Leone. This book is a compilation of the unfiltered voices of Sierra Leonean feminists wherein they share their stories of being feminists in Sierra Leone. Through their stories, they create an understanding of feminism and call attention to the gender inequalities inherent in the Sierra Leonean society. Through their stories, they also advocate for gender equality and equity in Sierra Leone. Most importantly, their stories provoke thoughts on feminism that will hopefully lead to an appreciation of it.*

*Cover art by Gideon Bangura*