



3 March 2016

His Excellency Ernest Bai Koroma
President of the Republic of Sierra Leone
State House, Freetown

Re: Safe Abortion Act 2015

Dear President Koroma,

We were greatly disappointed to learn yesterday that you have sent the Safe Abortion Act 2015 back to the Sierra Leone Parliament for a second time, unsigned.

This is a great blow to the tenets and practice of democracy. The people of your country have expressed wide support for this law. Their representatives in your Parliament have confirmed their support by passing it nearly unanimously, not once but twice. The international human rights community, e.g. the head of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, has publicly supported the passage of this law and encouraged you to implement it for the sake of the health and lives of women and girls in your country. Human rights groups, women's groups, public health professionals and many NGOs from around the world, including many from across Africa, have signed letters to you and to the leaders of your Parliament calling on you to give your signature to this law and implement it.

We had understood that you yourself originally encouraged this law to be drafted and taken forward. Where has the courage of your own convictions gone then?

We thought that you recognised women's need for safe abortion in the face of unwanted pregnancies, including pregnancies that are a risk to the woman's life and health and those arising from rape, sexual abuse, being young, being single, being in school, being unsupported by the partner, having completed their family, due to contraceptive failure or fetal anomalies, being unable to cope with an additional child, having a low income and living in poverty, and/or not wanting to become a mother. Why have you turned your back on the women and girls of Sierra Leone, who commonly find themselves in these situations? Why are you ignoring the many deaths from unsafe abortions in your country which affect not only the girl/woman herself but her partner, her family and her existing children when she has them? Why have you forgotten about the ones who survive but need hospital treatment, costing your country far more in health services resources than safe abortion, which you can ill afford? Why are you not acting in line with the decision of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, who called in January for the decriminalisation of abortion across Africa? You are in a position to take the leading role here, why have you turned your back?

I would like to tell you the story of King Badouin of Belgium in 1990, who was also in a quandary about an abortion law, though not for the same reasons as you. At that time, the King in Belgium was required to sign every law passed by the Belgian Parliament; it was his main political responsibility. In 1990, he was presented with a law on abortion, which is on the statute books today, that the Parliament had debated and passed. The King refused to sign it because of his own

personal religious beliefs. Such a refusal to sign had not occurred for the previous 90 years with any other law. In support of the democratic process, an agreement was made that the King would stand down for 24 hours, allowing the bill to become law, and he would then be reinstated as King. And that is what happened. Perhaps you should consider doing the same?

The International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion, with more than 1,000 members in 100 countries, appeals to you to sign the Safe Abortion Act 2015 into law, or ensure that it happens without you, as the only democratic thing to do.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marge Berer". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Marge" and last name "Berer" clearly distinguishable.

Marge Berer
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