Sierra Leone school defies state ban on pregnant girls in class

Monday 22 July 2019, by **NICODAMUS Pearl** (Date first published: 17 July 2019).

A 15-year-old Sierra Leone learner Mariatu Sesay realised she was pregnant at 14 and what scared her more than the social isolation she went through in class, was when Sierra Leone law banned her from attending school at all because she was expecting.

Africa has the highest adolescent pregnancy rates in the world and 18 African countries require pregnant girls to drop out of school.

Determined to get her education, Sesay continued to show up to the school and begged her teachers to let her attend classes, even at the painful ridicule by other children because of her growing belly.

Touched by Sesay's tenacity, the school principal Eric Conteh defied the law, risking his career and becoming an unwitting figurehead in the fight against a rule that rights groups say is outdated and stigmatises teenage pregnancy.

The ban in Sierra Leone was adopted in 2015 when teenage pregnancies rose amid the chaos of a massive Ebola outbreak, in part due to a surge in rapes.

Sesay now has a 9-month-old baby girl, she recalls sadly the bullying she endured from school mates. "They would call me names, laugh at me and try to tear at my uniform, whenever I showed up everyone would provoke me, but I love education, so I summed up the courage to keep going," she said.

The school, whose name is withheld at principal Conteh's request, is the only one in Sierra Leone known to be allowing a pregnant girl to continue to attend classes, but pressure against the law is mounting.

One 14-year-old in the capital Freetown, who was kicked out of school and her parents' home last September after becoming pregnant, said she hopes ECOWAS will overturn the ban and allow her to study to become a journalist.

"Just because someone gets pregnant, it doesn't mean their life is over," said the girl, whose name has been withheld to protect her privacy.

Women's rights group Equality Now filed a challenge to Sierra Leone's ban last year before the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) court in Nigeria.

The court heard arguments last month and is expected to rule in November.

The government says allowing pregnant girls to attend regular schools would tire them out, expose them to ridicule and encourage others to get pregnant. It has created part-time centres where they can study.

Since taking office last year, President Julius Maada Bio has expanded primary school access. His wife, Fatima Jabbie-Bio, is an advocate for new legal protections against sexual violence. But they have not moved to lift the ban on pregnant students.

Sesay herself was persuaded into having sex for the first time with an older man, a motorcycle taxi driver, and two months later realised she was pregnant.

"If you're in school, you're there to learn. If you're not, you're just going to get married or get pregnant again," she said.

Conteh said a regional education official visited the school when Sesay was late in her pregnancy but was so impressed by her success that he chose not to report her.

"There is no reason that a child should be denied her basic human rights just because she's pregnant," said Conteh. "Any pregnant girl who wants to learn is welcome at our school."

The principal could, in theory, be fired from his job by the education authorities for allowing a pregnant girl to continue studying.

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