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PRESS RELEASE
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PARLIAMENT FINALLY RATIFIES THE MAPUTO PROTOCOL

The Parliament of Sierra Leone on the 02nd July, 2015, after a marathon debate has unanimously ratified a Government Motion on the AU Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, dated 11th July, 2003.

In presenting the Protocol to the House, prior to ratification (while both lower and upper galleries in the Chamber were filled to capacity with concerned women), the Minister for Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, Mr. Moijueh Kaikai, said that Sierra Leone is yet to ratify the Protocol since it was signed on the 11th July, 2003, 12 years ago. He furthered that most of the Articles in the Protocol are provided for in the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone, and are also contained in the policies and programmes of the Agenda for Prosperity (AfP), like Pillars 6 and 8. He also said that most of the provisions in the Articles have already been domesticated, citing the passage of the Child Rights Act, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CEDAW, the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 amongst others. He enumerated some of the benefits relating to women's rights and empowerment such as education, non discrimination, violence, access to justice, participation in all levels of governance, marriages, abortion, property rights amongst others which are complementary to our existing laws. He apprised MPs that this Protocol had been discussed and concluded in Cabinet with reservations, cognizant of our cultural practices on female circumcision that children should not be initiated until they are 18, the age of self-determination and consent. He told the audience in Krio that "we mama en sowe mamie dem, we nor cam ya for ban bondo biznes"; whilst he noted the recognition and preservation of civil, Muslim, and Christian marriages in the country.

Hon. Josephine Emma Kowa said that the Protocol had come and gone out of Parliament, and hoped that this time it would be ratified by the House as it is dealing with issues relating to the advancement of women and children. She also said that the ratification of the Protocol would strengthen the laws that have already been passed by Parliament to protect women from rape, and any other form of violence against women.

Hon. Jariatu K. Smith speaking on Article 4 of the Protocol said that a rehabilitation centre should be built for women who had been raped. She also spoke about human trafficking in Kuwait of which Sierra Leoneans are victims of sexual slavery, and low pay, urging the Foreign Ministry to intervene as slavery

had been abolished long ago. She assured the Galleries that the House was not discussing the ban of the "BONDO SOCIETY", a cultural practice which some of them had gone through, and called for it to be maintained, whilst saying that circumcision below 18 should be criminalized. She also said that certain abortions are necessary on the grounds of rape, and proven medical conditions.

Hon. Umar Paran Tarawally recognized the Galleries for experiencing the debate physically and emotionally on the ratification of the Maputo Protocol which is pegged on their lives and welfare. He said that it behooves Parliament to ratify the Protocol as Sierra Leone is the last of the 16-Countries in West Africa to do so. He said that the ratification of the Protocol would reinforce our domestic legislations, and provide our women with food, shelter, education, rights of the widow, and protection of elderly women. He posited that he is not against the "Bondo Society", but that he is opposed to the "cutting" which should be abolished. He said that the Protocol could be reviewed after it had been ratified.

Hon. Ajibola Manly-Spain said that the Protocol was signed in 2003, and that it should be ratified for good reasons that are not in conflict with our laws. He said further that the benefits of ratifying the Protocol far outweigh those that will be taken from our women. On the reservations relating to FGM, type of marriage, and reproductive health, he noted that no provision in the Protocol would affect favourable legislations of State Parties. He stated that the reservations in Articles 5, 6, and 14 can be overcome by our domestic legislations. He referenced the 3 Gender Acts that had been passed, including the Sexual Offences Act, 2012 which aims at protecting and developing the women of Sierra Leone. He also said that men are not going to lose ground on the ratification of the Protocol as it is aimed at producing enlightened women for the development of the country.

Hon. Moiwa Momoh told the House that he was part of a delegation to Geneva where they deliberated on the need for the ratification of the Maputo Protocol. He said that he informed the delegation that Parliament cannot ratify what was not before the House. He said Article 14 which deals with child bearing, is cherished in Africa and should not be determined by the woman alone whether to give birth or not; whilst noting that the Protocol gives prominence to Western culture over the African's. He also said that the Protocol is long overdue for ratification, and it does not have any intention to ban the "Bondo Society" that should now be decided on when the child has reached the age of consent.

Hon. Alhassan Kamara said that the West has no moral ground to pressure Sierra Leone to ratify the Maputo Protocol. He said further that the Protocol would be ratified in the best interest relating to the development of our women. He remarked that if the West is serious about women's issues "let them cut aid to Bangladesh where women get married at the age of 15"; and challenged the West to free women that are serving as prisoners. Whilst describing the Protocol as a good one, he spoke about challenges bordering on marriages and divorce as contained in certain provisions. He also spoke about women in leadership, citing Madam Khadijatu Jallow, Head of EPA amongst others, and said that women are created to be equal to men. He said also that Article 5 is not intended to ban the

“Bondo Society”, and called for massive sensitization to people of the country on the merits of the Maputo Protocol.

Hon. Veronica K. Sesay also reaffirmed the Protocol as non-controversial, saying that it is not meant to ban the “Bondo Society”; whilst noting that the Articles in the Maputo Protocol have already been domesticated in our laws. She admonished those that will be writing projects after the ratification of the Protocol to consider the “Sowei Mamies” whose livelihood is hinged on such cultural practice. She condemned the act of abortion by “quack-doctors” which leads to excessive bleeding and removal of the uterus; whilst calling for the legalization of abortion to save more lives of women in Sierra Leone.

In the words of Hon. Patricia Browne, 12 years ago the Maputo Protocol was waiting for ratification. She noted that the Female Caucus in Parliament succeeded in convincing their male counter-parts to support the ratification of the Maputo Protocol which has 34 Articles. She also said that MPs are responsible to make right of what is wrong; whilst recognizing a West African Delegation that visited Parliament, and other women’s organizations to explore the possibility for ratification. She praised the Fourth Parliament for ratifying the Maputo Protocol which the Second and Third Parliaments had failed to do.

The Minority Leader, Hon. Dr. Bernadette Lahai deposed that the end justifies the means, and all that means well, ends well. She said that 34 years ago, the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights failed to cater for women’s rights; thus the need for the Maputo Protocol. She also noted that in her 13 years of experience in Parliament, the House has ratified a lot of protocols and conventions without dotting an “I” or crossing a “T”. She noted that Parliament had passed a lot of legislations whose provisions are contained in the Maputo Protocol. She highlighted the merits and demerits of early and late ratification of the Maputo Protocol. She also shared concerns on Articles 5 & 6 that are dealing with harmful cultural practices and marriages. She further talked on the criminalization or coercion of FGM under 18 with the view of promoting the development of the girl child. She furthered that the populace should be educated on the demand and supply side of the Maputo Protocol. She admonished Ministers to consult the people before signing protocols and conventions to determine any form of reservations; and not to put unnecessary pressure on MPs whose stay in Parliament might be short-lived on such ground; and called on the men to support the women on ratification as they are very solid supporters of men.

The Majority Leader, Hon. Ibrahim R. Bundu spoke about the cultural practices and values in Sierra Leone. He said that he entered Parliament in 2002, and the Protocol was signed in 2003, but was not ratified then. He furthered that the Maputo Protocol once ratified would enhance our laws as contained in the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone. He also said that the GoSL has a lot of respect for the dignity of the women of Sierra Leone; whilst referencing women in Holland who sell their bodies in transparent glass in exchange for money. He said also that there are good laws for the protection of women, but the problem he said, is

that those laws are yet to be fully tested. He encouraged the people of Sierra Leone to organize meetings, and come closer to their MPs to benefit fully from the laws of the land. He called on the people to trust in their leaders, and work honestly with them for the development of the country.

The women attempted to leave the Galleries when somebody rumored to them that the House was going to debate and ban the "Bondo Society" in the country.

The presiding Speaker, Hon. Chernor R.M Bah, put the question on the motion which was unanimously ratified by Parliament.