

UMAN GET RAYT

ADVOCAID'S FIVE YEAR STRATEGY



2021-2025

CONTENTS

Message from the AdvocAid Team	4
Introducing AdvocAid: Our Roots	6
The external context for AdvocAid's work	9
AdvocAid in 2020	14
AdvocAid's Strategy to 2025: Uman Get Rayt	17
Values and Approach	18
Strategic Directions	21
Thank you and call to continued action	33

MESSAGE FROM THE ADVOCAID TEAM

When the AdvocAid fambul¹ of women with lived experience, volunteers, staff and board gathered together to design our new strategy in March 2020, we had no idea that we were doing so on the eve of a global pandemic. We had no idea how much was about to be taken away from us, but also how much the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 would shine a light on the firm foundations AdvocAid has built over the past 14 years.

While we put the launch of this strategy temporarily on hold so as to focus our efforts where needed, that is all that has paused for us. We have adapted, pivoted, and reacted to ensure the health and safety of those in detention in Sierra Leone, that human rights are upheld, that those at most risk of being left behind - women and girls in contact with the law - remain firmly on the government's agenda, and that our staff and volunteers remain safe. This is something we will be eternally proud of.

As we launch this ambitious and feminist five-year strategy, it is with unshakable pride at how much the hard work of designing this strategy in March 2020 remains relevant for the new world we find ourselves in today. Despite all of the change, our five goals that will underpin this strategic period remain needed more than ever: **Pursuing Justice, Creating Opportunities for Women and Girls, Multiplying our Impact** (external goals), **Empowering our People**, and **Organisational Effectiveness** (internal goals).

Launching this strategy in 2021 coincides with celebrating our 15th year of working in Sierra Leone. Over that time frame we have come a long way, and as we embrace our adolescent years, we recognise a need to balance a number of polarities as we look to create sustainable change for women in girls in Sierra Leone, within changing global dynamics.

¹ In English, fambul means family

Not least, these include: maintaining our crucial dual role of service provision and advocacy so as to impact more women through reform; meeting immediate legal and welfare needs of women and girls while driving sustainable impact through education and economic empowerment; delivering to our strengths whilst working with others to leverage theirs; sharing our stories to inspire whilst ensuring we remain open to learning from others; balancing the ever fine line of challenging the government whilst being a supportive ally; and remembering to place as much value on strengthening our organisational sustainability as that which we place on serving the women and girls that drive us to be, do, and act every day.

We are delighted and proud to present this strategy, and spend the next five years driving the vision: that women and girls in Sierra Leone have their human rights respected and protected by a gender-responsive justice system, and are empowered to secure their rights and hold the system to account. This is why we have called it *Uman Get Rayt*, which translated from Krio to English means Women's Rights. We look forward to implementing it with you.

In solidarity,

The AdvocAid fambul - women with lived experience, volunteers, staff and board



INTRODUCING ADVOCAID:

OUR ROOTS

Founded in 2006,² AdvocAid is the only human rights organisation in Sierra Leone providing holistic access to justice, legal representation, legal empowerment and post-detention support to women and girls who come into contact with the law. This often includes the most vulnerable and marginalised women, including commercial sex workers, women working in the informal economy, survivors of abuse, and juveniles. We focus on women and girls due to the distinct disadvantages and abuse they face, recognising gender inequality as a driving factor behind women's incarceration.

Our team of dedicated paralegals, lawyers, and social workers work with women in contact with the law, to ensure they are supported and represented throughout the justice system – from police station to court to correctional centre³. We provide access

to justice, legal empowerment, psychosocial and welfare support, and post-detention support. As well as providing these immediate interventions, we advocate for law reform that is focused on changing the system that disproportionately traps women and girls in poverty and brings them into contact with the justice system.

Since 2006 we have:

- Successfully advocated for a new Legal Aid Act and a new Correctional Services Act
- Provided legal support to more than 6,000 women and girls
- Secured the establishment of two separate detention facilities for women, including Sierra Leone's first correctional centre for women in Freetown

² AdvocAid started as the Pademba Road Prison monitoring group in 2006, before registering AdvocAid as a charitable company in 2008.

³ Under the Correctional Act 2014, Sierra Leone renamed all Prisons as Correctional Centres

- Established the first prison library in Pademba Road Prison
- Strengthened police accountability with our police complaints manual and used the process to ensure disciplinary action was taken against police officers who threatened our paralegal when she intervened to stop women being charged bribes to obtain bail
- Secured the release of six women and three men from death row and successfully challenged the 21-day time limit within which to file an appeal for a person sentenced to death
- Reached over a million women through our legal education outreach work, including our award-winning edutainment TV series, Police Case
- Grown to a team of 27 full time staff, with nearly 70% women
- Creation of the *Go Bifo* support group for formerly detained women, providing them with an

opportunity to come together as a peer support network

- Continuous operation throughout the Ebola epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic

We believe in a partnership approach, which sees us working closely with the police, judiciary, correctional service, civil society, media, and women with lived experience of the justice system to improve conditions, secure human rights, and create a more gender-responsive justice system. AdvocAid centres itself on Sierra Leonean expertise but also values international and regional collaboration - through our partners, Board and staff - in order to foster different perspectives and to grow our networks.

AdvocAid was founded by women and is led by women, for women. We have not previously labelled ourselves as a feminist organisation, but since 2006 we have lived and acted feminist ideals. We will continue to do so through this strategy and our feminist staff, using intersectional feminist analysis to steer our programming.



THE EXTERNAL CONTEXT FOR ADVOCAID'S WORK

Women and girls

Since 2006, AdvocAid has provided legal support to more than 6,000 women and girls, while our rights awareness and policy and law reform have achieved long lasting structural change. In line with “nothing about us, without us”, the voices of women with lived criminal justice experience need to be fully involved in strategy and advocacy. We use these women’s insights to advise us of the challenges faced in the justice system and to shape our interventions.

In 2019, AdvocAid interviewed 86% of women detained in Correctional Centres at the time, as well as formerly incarcerated women and other justice sector professionals. In 2020, we released a ground-breaking report on these findings with the Vance Center: *Woman Wahala Na Prison – Causes And Consequences of Women's Imprisonment in Sierra Leone*⁴. The report found the following:

⁴ *Woman Wahala Na Prison – Causes And Consequences of Women's Imprisonment in Sierra Leone* (2020). <https://advocaidsl.org/wp->

<content/uploads/2020/08/Final-Woman-wahala-na-prison-web-version-.pdf>

Incarcerated women share similar social factors: they were mostly economically disadvantaged and primary caretakers of young children, survivors of violence, illiterate, and with unmet mental health needs. However, the study has also evidenced that structural inequality and gender discrimination play a fundamental role in women coming in contact with the law and in their experiences post-release.

- 62% of incarcerated women were held in **pre-trial detention**, with pre-trial detention contributing to overcrowding.
- **Criminalization of poverty** is one of the main reasons for over incarceration of women. 71% of interviewees said that before going to prison they could only afford one or two meals per day. 34% of women had been arrested and detained for survival, economic or petty crimes
- The majority of incarcerated women are **survivors of sexual and gender-based violence** – 48% during their childhood, 72% as adults at the hands of their partners, and 45% during adulthood from someone other than their partner.
- Out of the 24% of women who were in prison for committing a crime against their partner, 94% reported that the partner beat, bullied, belittled, or sexually harmed them before they committed the crime.
- The study shed light on **police misconduct** including women confessing to crimes without understanding the charges brought against them, police telling women they would be able to go home if they signed a confession, only to sign and be charged to court, and being presented with a written statement even though they were illiterate and were forced to thumbprint a confession they could not understand
- 54% of women said a **mental health** condition started or deteriorated while detained. One in 20 women had attempted suicide or had self-harmed while in prison.

Even **after release, women continue to face severe challenges**. Some women reported their partners abandoned their children and remarried when they went to prison. In some cases, the families and partners also sold the women's property, leaving them without anything or anyone to go back to when released. Due to the extremely limited earning opportunities for women detained, most of them leave prison with less financial means than when they entered.



71%

of women said that before going to prison they could only afford one or two meals per day.

46%

had been the main earners of their households



72%

of women told us that prior to prison they had suffered at least one type of abuse from their partner or spouse



35%

of women did not think they would be able to support themselves and their families post release.



52%

of women said they feared for their safety after release

Sustainable Development

Sierra Leone has identified two priority Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - SDG4 (education) and SDG16 (justice) to pursue its developmental agenda, and is a co-chair (alongside Argentina, The Netherlands and The Elders) of The Task Force on Justice, set up to accelerate delivery of the SDG targets for justice for all. In 2019, the Task Force released a groundbreaking *Justice for All* report and *Justice for Women* report⁵. The reports briefly mention incarcerated women, but they are not a significant feature, reflecting the low prioritization of this group globally.

National Justice frameworks

In 2012, Sierra Leone passed a progressive Legal Aid Act leading to the establishment of the Legal Aid Board in 2015. Also, in 2015 the Independent Police Complaints Board was established, and in 2019 new Bail Regulations were introduced. The Criminal Procedures Act 1965 is however yet to be amended, which would provide alternatives to detention, such as community based non-custodial measures. Detention is used as a matter of course, rather than a last resort, with insufficient investment in understanding and tackling drivers of imprisonment.

Access to justice for women and protection of their rights, were among the post-war Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) recommendations. Sierra Leone has made progress towards tackling **gender inequality** and discrimination in the past 10 years. These include the three Gender Acts⁶ of 2007, Child Rights Act 2007, Sexual Offences Act 2012 and its amendment in 2019 (Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 2019). Also, in 2019 the Government declared rape a national emergency. These laws are an important starting point; however, they need to be understood, implemented and enforced to be meaningful. The Gender Equality bill, which prescribes a 30% quota for women in political office, has yet to be passed, while the Domestic Violence Act has been used to prosecute women in cases where, in similar circumstances, men would not be arrested and charged to court.

Sierra Leone's **justice system** continues to face many challenges such as excessive periods of pre-trial detention, trials routinely taking years to conclude, excessive and inconsistent sentences handed down, antiquated laws⁷, inability to access case files, and lack of access to appeal. Legal representation is still out of reach for most of the population despite the creation of the Legal Aid Board, not least due to the inadequate number of lawyers, particularly in the provinces, and the cost. Without the intervention of legal aid providers, an overwhelming majority of people in detention in Sierra Leone would go through the legal system without access to full representation. The mandatory death penalty and lack of gender-responsive training and sentencing

⁵ Pathfinders, Justice for All – Report of the Task Force for Justice

<https://www.justice.sdg16.plus/report>

⁶ These are: Domestic Violence Act 2007, Devolution of Estates Act 2007 and the Registration of Customary Marriage & Divorce Act 2009.

⁷ E.g.: small debts, including those incurred by husbands or partners, and other petty crimes such as loitering. These have not been decriminalised despite continued advocacy by AdvocAid and partners and recommendations from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights



guidelines means that a history of abuse or mental illness is often not considered.

Redress mechanisms exist for those who have suffered abuse from the police, whether from over-constitutional detention or excessive use of force. Legal aid providers are still needed to support survivors to know about their rights and to support them to enforce them.

Despite the passage of the Sierra Leone Correctional Service Act in 2014⁸, progress on improving the **conditions of female detention** has been limited. The Sierra Leone Correctional Service (SLCS) often lacks the resources and skills to respond to women's specific needs particularly with regard to rehabilitation services. Policy and practice in female correctional centres

routinely fall short of the standards established by the The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules) and other international standards. Detention facilities are congested, stretching already-meagre welfare services such as food, sanitation and medical care. In January 2019, the Freetown Female Correctional Centre exceeded its capacity by over 400%.⁹ A lack of understanding exists around the pathways to women's imprisonment, leading to significant stigma and lack of prioritization of this group. There are no state services to support formerly incarcerated women.

⁸ Replacing the Prisons Act of 1960

⁹ CARL and AdvocAid (2019). Decriminalising Poverty in Sierra Leone: Petty Offences Baseline Research

Global Advocacy and Trends

It is important that we reflect on this national context within a series of international frameworks, trends, and movements. SDG 16.3 specifically emphasises equal access to justice for all, and SDG 5 on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. There is a particular focus on “leaving no one behind”. 2020 marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the most progressive agenda for the empowerment of women and girls. 2020 also marks the 10th anniversary of the Bangkok Rules – specific rules for the treatment of incarcerated women. While 2020 should have been a celebration of gains made towards these declarations, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only stalled global development but regressed on decades of gains. Early reports indicate that in a six-month period in 2020, extreme poverty has gone up by 7 percent and 37 million people have been pushed below the US\$1.90 a day extreme poverty line.¹⁰ Women and girls have been disproportionately affected due to stark existing gender inequalities. In particular the pandemic has exacerbated gender-based violence, increased the unpaid care burden shouldered by women, and destroyed the health or economic security women may have had. Worldwide, household economic and food insecurity and confined living conditions due to lockdown and social isolation measures has resulted in a marked increase in all forms of domestic violence.¹¹

¹⁰ 2020 Goalkeepers Report: Covid-19 -A Global Perspective
<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/goalkeepers/report/2020-report/#GlobalPerspective>

“*We are witnessing that the new COVID-19 restrictions are without a doubt disproportionately and negatively affecting the most vulnerable in our community; our women and girl children.*”

-Lydia Kembabazi, AdvocAid Legal Manager

The #MeToo movement has globally mobilised against sexual harassment and abuse, increasing the space to talk about and address sexual harassment and abuse. However, too many women and girls' voices remain unheard, including those affected by abuse before, during and after incarceration. The global movement to “Defund the Police” is advocating for an end to mass incarceration and divesting funds from police departments into non-policing forms of public safety and community support, such as social services, youth services, housing, education, healthcare and other community resources. Similarly, the “Prison Abolition” movement is advocating for a critical rethinking of our approach to criminal justice and advocating for alternatives which address the core problems that lead to incarceration and to end the persecution of marginalised communities.

¹¹ 2 UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, A Bottom-up View of the Shadow Pandemic: Impact of COVID-19 on Violence Against Women Through the Lens of Civil Society and Women’s Rights Organizations, (2020)

ADVOCAID IN 2020

AdvocAid strives to effectively respond to the current situation for women and girls in Sierra Leone whilst also advocating for improved legal and judicial reform inspired by the best policy and practice from around the world. At a national level we listen to and work in close partnership with women and girls, and the whole legal and judicial system to empower and support human rights fulfilment. Internationally, we engage with others and exchange evidence and best practices to bring about awareness and action for global feminist law and policy reform, and a reduction in the over incarceration of women.

AdvocAid's daily police station and court monitoring across Sierra Leone shows us that women and girls rarely have appropriate legal support, and many do not know their legal rights. We continue to see that poverty and imprisonment frequently go hand-in-hand, and that Sierra Leone's laws continue to be shaped by men for men. Whichever reason propels a woman or girl to be in contact with the law, the stigma of time in prison leaves women

shunned by their families, communities, and society, and so begins again the cycle of risky coping mechanisms making them increasingly likely to come into contact with the law. It is this unjust inequality that drives our organisation as much today as it did in 2006. And it is this gender-blind system we are operating in which encourages us to continue our feminist approach under this new strategy.

Today, as much as 14 years ago when we were founded, we operate within a development sector that poses both opportunities and challenges to our operations. These are opportunities undoubtedly to grow, strengthen our operations and capacity, and share our evidence and expertise with a network of inspirational organisations from whom we learn. AdvocAid has built important partnerships with a range of strategic donors, however, this funding is rarely feminist, affecting our ability to adapt and react to the needs of the women and girls we work with. The sector continues to operate based on power imbalances that rarely put civil society or the Global South in

the driving seat. Four years on from The Grand Bargain, localisation is not happening in practice. Whilst AdvocAid was proudly able to continue delivering our vital legal, advocacy and welfare services¹² during the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak, it was far from easy and rebuilding our resilience has taken time.

What have we learned from 14 years of operations?

AdvocAid has always aimed to create systemic change for women and girls, informed by the services we deliver, and the challenges faced by the women and girls we work with. We have not been afraid to tackle some of the most challenging or controversial issues - such as abolition of the death penalty (see below), abuse of sex workers by the police, criminalisation of abortion, or criminalisation of poverty. We recognise the importance of amplifying the voices of women with lived experience of these issues in a safe and empowering way, such as through the documentary—[Kolonko](#)—where sex workers were able to

“ *We want to encourage states that have the death penalty to really look again at this situation where the lack of gender equality is allowing these women to be considered perpetrators, rather than being considered as victims who need protection.*

-Simitie Lavalu, AdvocAid board member at the 75th UN General Assembly

¹² AdvocAid, Law in the Time of Ebola: Perspectives from Kono (2014) <https://advocaidsl.org/law-in-the-time-of-ebola/>

share their powerful stories in an anonymised way or our [Voices Inside](#) series where incarcerated women shared their experiences of imprisonment.

In designing this new strategy, we have reflected on what we have learned since 2006. Having seen first-hand the harmful impact of detention on women, girls and their families, a primary lesson has been that we need to continue addressing the inequalities that lead women to come into contact with the law. We have learned from the challenges in being an organisation that focuses on delivery of services and advocacy while working to maintain positive working relationships with the justice sector. However, we know our day to day work is invaluable in gathering data and insights for wider systemic change. Though we have tried to do as much as we can to support the women and girls we work with, we have learned that we cannot do everything and are confronted frequently with the limitations of what we can do within the systems we operate in. Continuing to expand our partnerships is essential in tackling this.

And we have learned that where so much of our focus has been external in trying to respond to needs, we have not always placed the same energy and priority on building AdvocAid internally so that we can be operationally and financially strong. We cannot rely only on traditional donor models, particularly when we work on issues that are not prioritised. We need to employ innovation and energy on creating more flexible and varied income streams and core funding.



ADVOCAID'S STRATEGY TO 2025: UMAN GET RAYT

AdvocAid has an exceptionally important role to play in Sierra Leone - we can leverage insights from our hands-on legal services and projects in order to elevate the voices of women and girls to national and international platforms, in turn creating change for generations of Sierra Leonean girls to come.

In March 2020, through a consultative and collaborative process that engaged staff, volunteers, women with lived experience, and board members, we developed a strategy with passion, ambition, feminism, and human rights at its heart. The strategic period will run from January 2021 (our 15th year of operation) to December 2025, and we are collectively proud to implement this strategy in order to achieve the following:

Our vision that women and girls in Sierra Leone have their human rights respected and protected by a gender-responsive justice system and are empowered to secure their rights and hold the system to account.

Our mission to drive sustainable and impactful change in Sierra Leone's justice system via gender-responsive reform, to provide women and girls with the knowledge and tools to secure their human rights, and to demonstrate best practice through the provision of legal, social, and empowerment services to women and girls who come in contact with the law.

We will implement this strategy through a set of core values and approaches.

Our Values

Feminism

We are passionate **feminist advocates** for women's rights and access to justice.

Trust

We earn the **trust** of women and girls and our partners by acting with integrity and with confidentiality.

Respect

We **respect** our partners, our staff and volunteers, and the women and girls we work with.

Standards

We are committed to the **highest standards and excellence** to ensure we achieve the maximum positive change for the women and girls we work with.

Empathy

We act with **empathy**, arriving at each conversation without judgement and the ability to listen so as to understand other perspectives and use them in designing solutions.

Inclusion

We ensure that we provide our services and support **without prejudice or discrimination** on any grounds.

Our Approach

Women and girls who come into contact with the law are at the **heart of everything we do**.

We take a **human rights-based approach** to access to justice.

We follow a **legal empowerment** approach to enable women and girls to know, understand, use and shape the law to advance their rights.

We bring a **holistic approach** to justice by supporting women with legal, social, physiological and educational and economic empowerment services.

We seek to use **innovation** and **creativity** in the advocacy and support services we provide to responsively tailor our support and services to the individual needs of each woman/girl we work with.

We use a **systems change approach** to our work, knowing that our advocacy and law reform work at a national level is crucial to achieve a truly gender responsive justice system.

We believe in a **collaborative approach**, knowing that we are more efficient, effective, and stronger together with our partners and networks both nationally and internationally.

We work with an **unwavering commitment** to legal reform in Sierra Leone and supporting an international movement to end the over-incarceration of women and girls worldwide.



STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

AdvocAid's 2021-2025 strategy is based around three core strategic directions for our work with women and girls. These will be supported by two internal areas of focus to enhance the quality of our delivery and organisational capacity and sustainability. Each Strategic Direction is outlined along with what success looks like when it is achieved, and how we will achieve that success.

External Strategic Directions

Strategic Direction 1: Pursuing Justice for Women and Girls

The core focus of our work remains pursuing justice for women and girls in Sierra Leone. Whilst we have seen changes and improvements made in access to justice since 2006 there is still a long way to go to realise an empowering and gender-responsive legal system which secures human rights at every stage. We have three core objectives that sit under this first strategic objective: Strengthening Legal Aid and Detainees' Rights, Strengthening Legal

Education and Empowerment; and Fostering Feminist Legal and Policy Reform.

1.1. Strengthening Legal Aid and Detainees' Rights

Achievement: AdvocAid provides women and girls in contact with the law with access to justice and upholds their rights within the justice system.

AdvocAid will continue and strengthen our core work of providing legal representation and advice to women and girls in contact with the law through our network of lawyers and paralegals. A driving force underlying this work is to pursue equal access to justice and recognition of the



harmful impacts of imprisonment on women and their families. Through police station monitoring and pushing for alternatives to incarceration, we aim for incarceration to be used as a measure of last resort.

AdvocAid's access to justice and monitoring work will ensure that women's rights within the justice system are upheld - such as their rights in detention or supporting them to file a complaint if rights are violated. We will also continue to provide psycho-social support to women, girls and their children in detention. We will continue to work in partnership, such as with the police, correctional service and the Independent Police Complaints Board (IPCB), to ensure that international and regional standards are implemented.

1.2. Strengthening Legal Education and Empowerment

Achievement: Women and girls we work with know, can use and shape the laws that impact them.

AdvocAid believes in putting the power of the law in people's hands. Legal education has always been a key part of our work. In this new strategic period, we want to build on this work and through our paralegals, social workers, creative communications and partnerships, work with women and girls so they can better know, use and shape the laws that impact them to further greater justice for women. This will be achieved through activities such as explaining laws and procedures to detained women, legal education in detention centres so women can better understand the system, work to empower sex workers and market women, and using creative communications and strategic litigation to support women to share their experiences to advocate for change.

“

I said that I was guilty because my husband told me to.

-MK, AdvocAid client who thumb printed a confession, which she was not able to read, that was later used against her in trial

1.3. Fostering Feminist Legal and Policy Reform

Achievement: Gender-responsive Sierra Leonean policy and legal frameworks represent the specific needs of women and girls through research, strategic litigation and advocacy that amplifies the voices of those with lived experience.

In this new strategic period, AdvocAid will build upon our work creating systemic change for women and girls, and look to create greater impact, not only in Sierra Leone but internationally through partnerships, such as our work with the Campaign to Decriminalise Petty Offences and our role in the global movement to end over incarceration of women.

AdvocAid will strengthen our internal capacity and expertise, and work in partnership to bring strategic litigation cases that create change in law, practice and public awareness. Linked to 1.1, AdvocAid's individual access to justice work will contribute to creating a more gender-responsive justice system through ensuring the specific needs and rights of women and girls are represented, for example by raising gender-specific mitigating factors or ensuring bail conditions take into account a woman's particular circumstances.

Strategic Direction 2: Creating Opportunities for Women and Girls

The women and girls AdvocAid works with are often amongst the most marginalised in Sierra Leonean society. The stigma they face due to incarceration often means their safety nets of family, friends and their wider community is lost, risking increased vulnerability. The interlinked challenges of poverty and inequality they face means they often do not have the skills or opportunities to become financially independent upon release. In order to empower these women and girls and enable them to have lives and livelihoods they are proud of, AdvocAid will create opportunities for them to gain access to education and economic opportunities. In this next phase of AdvocAid's development, we see this as a key area of our future work. We have provided ad-hoc support to women in the past, particularly through the *Go Bifo* support group (a group of formerly incarcerated women) but would like to formalise this area of our work to drive greater impact. Our core objectives under this strategic direction are to empower women and girls through both education opportunities and economic empowerment.

“ *Here, I can just be myself without having my finger pointed at me. Here, we understand each other without having to explain a lot. It is a special kind of bond that connects us.*

-Kadie, Go Bifo group member

2.1. Empowering women and girls through Education

Achievement: AdvocAid, through partnerships, is able to provide women and girls at the different stages of the justice system with educational opportunities to meet their needs.

AdvocAid recognises the crucial importance of providing educational opportunities to empower women and girls - through knowledge of their rights (see 1.2) and provision of literacy and numeracy skills, which many have not had previous access to. This will contribute to improving their lives outside of the justice system. In this new strategic period, AdvocAid will build on its extensive experience and partnerships in these areas to provide more women and girls with the education they deserve.

2.2. Empowering women and girls through economic justice

Achievement: AdvocAid, through partnerships, is able to provide women and girls during and post incarceration with the economic empowerment they need to support themselves financially upon their release.

AdvocAid, building on our previous experience of supporting *Go Bifo* women groups, will work with partners to train, employ or provide small business support to more formerly incarcerated women. Within this, we have a vision to establish a social enterprise that supports women upon release, while simultaneously diversifying AdvocAid's income streams (linked to 5.3).

FEMALE CORRECTIONAL CENTRE F/TOWN

DATE 28 NOV 2018 UNLOCKED 731

FEMALE INMATES LESS
 LAKKA PC.M.H. C/HOSPITAL

IN 66

	IN	OUT
LIFE IMPRISONMENT	03	
CONVICTED	28	
TRIAL	32	6
REMAND	07	1
APPELLANT		
DETAINEE		
FOREIGN NATIONAL CONVICTED	01	1
FOREIGN NATIONAL REMAND		
FOREIGN NATIONAL TRIAL		
POLITICAL DETAINEE		
PROTECTIVE CUSTODY		
EMERGENCY HOSPITAL		
CONDEMN.	02	
TOTAL	73	



Strategic Direction 3: Multiplying our Impact

Our operational model has impact embedded at various levels: impact at an individual level for the women we directly work with; impact at a societal level through the laws we have advocated for; impact at an organisational level for the civil society organisations we partner with; and impact at an institutional level for the government departments and ministries we support. We know that strengthening Sierra Leone's justice system to be gender-responsive is

far bigger than just us however; there are a number of ways that we can be working to multiply our impact beyond our direct sphere of control and influence. We have identified three ways where we can achieve this, by building and nourishing partnerships; challenging societal and gender norms; and strengthening Sierra Leone's legal base.

3.1. Building and nourishing partnerships

Achievement: AdvocAid has formed and maintained partnerships with organisations both nationally and internationally in the core areas of our work which are enabling us to innovate and achieve our strategy.

We are stronger together. AdvocAid recognises the value and expertise our current and potential partners bring to our work. We already have extremely positive and impactful relationships with a number of key partners within Sierra Leone and internationally. Over the next five years we will seek to deepen our existing partnerships and establish new ones where we can work together to advocate for the rights and ensure the needs of women and girls are met. This could include government, judiciary, legal aid providers, civil society, education providers, businesses, social enterprises, artists and creatives, and academic institutions. This will not only enable us to strengthen women's voices and our legal and advocacy work but also work on meeting practical welfare and socio-economic needs without spreading ourselves too thin and outside our core areas of expertise. This may, for example, involve some alternative partnerships that help us reach new audiences, or partners that work in a new way, helping us to multiply our impact.



3.2. Challenging cultural and social norms

Achievement: AdvocAid is working in partnership with communities, groups, civil society and institutions to challenge and change the cultural and social norms which perpetuate the marginalisation and discrimination of women.

A lot of the issues that we know women and girls tackle on a daily basis are ingrained in cultural and social norms that are inherently patriarchal. We can empower individual girls and women through the information and support we give them (agency), but this has limitations when they try and exercise it within a household or community (relations) or legal system (structures) that does not have the same information or opinions. While engaging in community outreach and broader gender empowerment programming could stretch AdvocAid too thinly, we can begin to work strategically, via partnerships and approaches that embrace our feminist, rights based, and gender responsive approach. This will include continuing to use art and creativity as ways to (1) challenge gender and post-incarceration stereotypes, (2) highlight the negative impact of incarceration on women and girls and demonstrate alternatives and (3) target the roots of gender inequality and pathways to imprisonment. It will also involve AdvocAid working with others to engage in new ways with new groups including religious leaders, community elders and men and boys.

3.3. Strengthening Sierra Leone's Legal Base

Achievement: AdvocAid has engaged its networks (legal providers, government, civil society and donors) to establish a scholarship scheme that increases the number of female lawyers and paralegals in Sierra Leone.

There are approximately 500 lawyers in Sierra Leone, for a population of 7.5 million. While the data is not easily accessible, a low proportion of these lawyers are women and most are based in the capital, Freetown. We believe that a stronger pool of female lawyers and paralegals would contribute greatly to our overall vision of a more gender-responsive justice system. We will achieve this by working with others to establish a scholarship scheme that embraces feminist legal training within this five-year strategic period, recognising that finance is a key barrier to women progressing through higher education. Funding is hard to come by for scholarships, so we know this will not be an easy outcome to achieve, but one we will pursue, not least for the career progression of our own paralegals (linked to 4.2).

Through funding from Open Society Foundation from 2013- 2015, AdvocAid supported our paralegal, Victoria Koroma, to **complete her law degree and also attend law school**. She now works part-time for AdvocAid as a lawyer. We were able to do the same for our legal intern, Alimamy Koroma, who continues to offer legal services to AdvocAid. In 2011, we were able to support Marvel Lombi to train as a paralegal. She was **a former AdvocAid client** and expressed her desire to train as a paralegal so she could help women who had been wrongly detained following her own experience.



Internal Strategic Directions

AdvocAid has intentionally developed two of our strategic directions to be internally focused. Our small organisation has grown considerably since 2006, and with growth comes both opportunities and challenges. We know that we can achieve more impact through streamlining and strengthening our systems, and we can only achieve what we do through continuing to build the inspirational staff we employ. It is only right therefore that these areas receive attention and investment as standalone strategic directions.



Strategic direction 4: Empowering our people

AdvocAid is only able to achieve what it does because of the hardworking, dedicated, passionate staff and volunteers at our helm. During this five-year period, we want to empower our people through two core means: reviewing and developing staff recognition and support processes; and strengthening staff professional development opportunities.

4.1. Reviewing and developing staff recognition and support processes

Achievement: AdvocAid staff feel recognised and valued for their hard work and commitment.

Our staff are the heart of AdvocAid. They have remained dedicated, hardworking and highly impactful through the toughest of challenges including Ebola and the current global COVID-19 pandemic, and their ripples on our internal workings. While we recognise and value their work as much as we can within our financial constraints, we also know that there are further ways we can ensure that this is felt throughout the team. Over the coming five years we will be working with the team to bring in new processes and rewards that mean every member of the team feels more valued and recognised. This will include building on our recent purchase of uniform elements for staff, providing more visibility through our website, events and public speaking opportunities, and continuous listening and responding to new ideas in this area from staff. We will be led by what makes them feel valued and recognised.

4.2. Strengthening staff professional development and opportunities

Achievement: AdvocAid has an established performance management system in operation which prioritises professional development. AdvocAid strongly believes that professional development is a crucial part of our ability to recognise, reward and give back to our team as well as allowing the organisation to grow and develop. We want to ensure that everyone in the AdvocAid team is able to develop new skills and experience through their roles with the organisation. The new performance management system will enable this through allowing individuals to set and be supported with their professional development goals in a variety of ways, which will span soft, technical and self-management skills. Furthermore, AdvocAid wishes to build on the several wonderful experiences we have had of women rising through the organisation to fulfil their potential and give back to the organisation. Therefore, whilst we will continue to value the huge expertise and contributions that new members of the team bring, we would also like to ensure that more of those who have worked within the organisation are able to progress to new positions, where the capacity and interest is present. This also aligns with 3.3.

“

I have learned how to build bridges....I simply feel like I have to do anything in my power to help the client, and I know this is because of the principles instilled in me by AdvocAid.

**-Alimamy Koroma, AdvocAid
volunteer lawyer**

Strategic Direction 5: Organisational Effectiveness

AdvocAid has grown significantly since 2006 in terms of the scope and reach of our work. This has kept our small team extremely busy and has meant we have not always had the time we would have liked to prioritise our own organisational development, as our priority has been responding to the expansive needs of the women and girls we work with. We recognise now is the time to prioritise these internal areas to prepare us for this next phase of the organisation's development and to ensure we can continue to work as effectively as possible. We will do this through three central means: Continuing to strengthen the organisation's processes and systems for effectiveness and efficiency; Strengthening how we use external communications to support the achievement of our strategic directions; and; Increasing and diversifying our funding, so as to provide the long-term financial sustainability, and nimble and adaptive programming that Women's Rights Organisations thrive on.

5.1. Continuing to strengthen the organisation's processes and systems for effectiveness and efficiency

Achievement: AdvocAid has a strong internal structure, systems and processes which support our work.

Whilst we have placed an increasing focus on internal systems and procedures during recent years, the scale and depth of our work for a modestly sized team means this internal work was often last on the list. By placing it as a key component of our new strategy we are not only recognising how critical it is but how important it will be for our continued development and sustainability as an organisation. Over the next five years we will focus on a number of key areas which will be guided by regular organisational assessments and the practical challenges we face in delivering our key work. These areas will include further development of our Monitoring and Evaluation framework and special emphasis on strengthening our Accountability and Learning capacity; our data and knowledge management and security; organisational management and financial procedures; and the systems to track our contacts, partnerships and wider stakeholders.



5.2. Strengthening how we use creative communications to support achievement of our strategic directions

Achievement: AdvocAid has a strong, effective and creative communications strategy which allows us to increase our reach and impact both directly with women and girls and indirectly through our work with the government, judiciary, supporters, donors, wider partners and stakeholders.

AdvocAid has built up a strong communications presence in Sierra Leone both through traditional media including television and radio series, social media including Facebook and WhatsApp, and creative media including murals. We are able to reach our target audiences of women and girls, and we continue to work on how to improve this. We are also often reported and cited in newspapers nationally and internationally. Over the coming five years we will build on this strong base to enable our communications to become more effective for our legal advocacy work, growing our reach nationally and internationally to increase our supporter and individual donor base, linking our communications with our vital work in legal education and empowerment, and using our communications to achieve this five-year strategy. Approaching communications through the power of storytelling will be an important focus for us, as well as a concerted effort to shift the narrative around incarceration through language used by us and others.

5.3. Increasing and diversifying our Fundraising

Achievement: AdvocAid has financial security, and flexible funds that enable it to deliver and achieve its strategy and adapt to changing contexts.

AdvocAid has steadily grown its income since 2006 and has been increasingly able to secure funding from large institutional donors and a growing number of individual supporters. However, the organisation continues to face challenges in meeting the demand from women and girls for its work, covering core costs, and being able to adapt to challenging financial times (economic crises, Ebola and most recently COVID-19). We will work to increase both our reserves and unrestricted funding to provide stability for the organisation and our staff, programmes, and the women and girls we work with. We also need more flexible funds available to be able to adapt and innovate outside or ahead of the strategies and goals of the main donors, and thus truly be responsive to the needs of those we work for. Linking to 2.2, a social enterprise will be one such model that we intend to explore throughout the duration of this strategy. It is this flexible funding that is widely recognised as being one kind of resource that feminist and women's rights organisations need, to achieve the considerable impact they are known to have¹³.

¹³ AWID, Toward a Feminist Funding Ecosystem (2019)

https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/awid_funding_ecosystem_2019_final_eng.pdf



THANK YOU

AND CALL TO CONTINUED ACTION

AdvocAid would like to thank all those who have supported our journey as an organisation since 2006 and most importantly provided support to the women and girls we work with. We recognise all those who have contributed below including all our current and former staff, volunteers, board members, advisors, donors and wider supporters as well as the women and girls we work with who continue to be our source of drive and inspiration. However, we also recognise there are many who have given anonymously or supported us in small but important ways whose names might not be possible to include here - to all of you we also say a huge thank you!

This journey for gender-responsive justice reform in Sierra Leone is underway but there is still much more to do! We call upon you, wherever you may be, and however you can help, to join with AdvocAid and support us in our new strategy to ultimately combat poverty, inequality and discrimination to realise the **Sustainable Development Goal 16 to: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.**

AdvocAid thanks:

- Current and former staff, with special memory to the late Sonia Macauley, our former finance officer who continues to be in our hearts and minds. She embodied all that AdvocAid stands for and was an important part of inspiring our future vision.
- Current and former volunteers, board members, and AdvocAid Advisors
- All of our institutional, corporate, trust, foundation and individual donors as well as our wider network of AdvocAid Allies
- The women and girls we work with and for
- All of our partners who are too numerous to mention here, but with special recognition of the SLCS, Sierra Leone Police (SLP), and IPCB in Sierra Leone.



Head Office, Freetown
3rd Floor, 145 Circular Road
Tel.: +232 (0)79 193 414

Kenema Regional Office
2 Sannoh Street

Makeni Regional Hub
3 Roke Street

advocaidsl.org