

Judicial Scarcity and Its Impact on Women and Girls in Sierra Leone.

By Queen Maonde



On this **International Day of Women Judges**, AdvocAid celebrates the invaluable contributions of women judges worldwide. Across Africa, women constitute an average of four in ten judges, predominantly serving in lower courts. However, their representation dwindles in higher judicial positions, with few women reaching top roles (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023).

In Sierra Leone, the judiciary faces a critical shortage of judges. As of July 2024, a gender diagnostic study by Legal Access through Women Yearning for Equality Rights and Social Justice (L.A.W.Y.E.R.S) revealed that Sierra Leone had 34 magistrate court judges nationwide. However, only seven were women, accounting for approximately 20.6%. This falls short of the 30% benchmark set by the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act of 2022 (Government of Sierra Leone, 2022), hindering the effective administration of justice.

The shortage of judges exacerbates barriers to justice, especially for marginalised populations. Prolonged case backlogs delay legal proceedings, discouraging women from seeking justice. Limited judicial resources contribute to inefficiencies, preventing cases involving women and girls from receiving timely attention. This results in prolonged uncertainty and distress for victims, often forcing them to rely on [informal justice](#) mechanisms that may not uphold their rights or ensure fair outcomes. The need for more female judges in Sierra Leone is urgent, as their increased representation would help address systemic injustices within the legal system.

[AdvocAid](#) is committed to tackling these challenges by providing comprehensive support to women and girls entangled in Sierra Leone's legal system. Through free legal aid, the organisation ensures fair representation and the protection of women's rights. Additionally, AdvocAid conducts workshops and advocacy campaigns to raise awareness about legal rights, empowering women to navigate the justice system effectively.

Beyond direct support, the organisation collaborates with stakeholders to push for policy reforms that address judicial shortages and promote gender equality within the legal framework, working toward a more just and inclusive system.

Here are some of the ways, we show our commitment to changing this narrative through innovative initiatives designed to empower women and cultivate a new generation of female legal professionals@

- One of our key initiatives is the collaboration with local universities, particularly the University of Makeni (UniMak), under one of our flagship programmes, **the Feminist Law Series**, launched in 2024. This series focuses on vital topics such as African feminism, gender roles, and international conventions, equipping students with the knowledge and tools to challenge the status quo. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with over 70 students attending each session, reflecting a strong desire for progressive legal education that prioritises women's perspectives.
- At AdvocAid, we recognise various challenges, including financial barriers that many aspiring female lawyers face. The **Frances Claudia Wright Scholarship**, established in 2022, provides vital financial support to female law students experiencing economic hardships. By alleviating these financial burdens, we are not only enabling these women to pursue their legal education but also ensuring that the voices of women are heard in the corridors of justice.
- Waging Justice for Women Fellowship**, in partnership with the Clooney Foundation for Justice, is another way in which we seek to bridge the gap in female representation within the judicial system. This fellowship not only provides training and mentorship but also aims to create pathways for women to assume leadership roles in law and advocacy.

Looking ahead, the International Day of Women Judges emphasizes the vital role women play in upholding justice and equality. Addressing the shortage of judges in Sierra Leone is crucial for ensuring equitable access to justice for all citizens, particularly women and girls. By increasing the number of judges and promoting gender diversity within the judiciary, the legal system can become more responsive to the needs of all individuals. Continued efforts are necessary to overcome existing challenges and ensure that women have equal opportunities to serve at all levels of the judiciary.

AdvocAid remains instrumental in advancing these ideals by supporting and empowering women within the legal system, thereby strengthening the foundation of justice for all. As we commemorate this day, AdvocAid reaffirms its commitment to promoting gender equality in the judiciary and recognises the remarkable contributions of women judges in Sierra Leone and around the world.

