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PENNSYLVANIA

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# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 17, 2015

The Honorable John Hoover  
U.S. Ambassador to Sierra Leone  
Leicester Square, Regent  
Freetown, Sierra Leone

Dear Ambassador Hoover:

I write to commend the significant contributions of your team at U.S. Embassy Freetown in the fight against Ebola in Sierra Leone and to ask for your attention to the rights and opportunities of young women and girls, especially those who became more vulnerable following the Ebola crisis. Knowing of the work that the United States has done already to increase educational opportunities for women and girls in the region, I was deeply concerned to read a report from Amnesty International regarding a decision by the government of Sierra Leone to prohibit pregnant girls from attending classes and taking school examinations.

The Amnesty International report estimates that as many as 10,000 girls are effected by the government's decision to prohibit the girls from attending classes and taking exams. Furthermore, the report draws a correlation between the recent rise in adolescent pregnancies and a failure to protect girls from sexual violence while schools were closed during the Ebola outbreak and while health support was limited. Of particular concern is the fact that visibly pregnant girls are prevented from sitting for two critical exams, both of which are necessary for educational advancement and may be important for employment prospects.

Further, I was disturbed to read reports of school teachers and administrators forcing girls to take pregnancy tests or undergo invasive physical examinations if they were suspected to be pregnant. This is a clear violation of the girls' right to privacy. Amnesty asserts, "[...] the ban causes fear in many girls, pregnant or not, of being subjected to or having to witness humiliating and degrading tests, which violate their or their friends' physical and mental integrity and dignity." The Government of Sierra Leone should condemn this humiliating and degrading practice immediately and clarify their policies to ensure that girls are not mistreated in this manner.

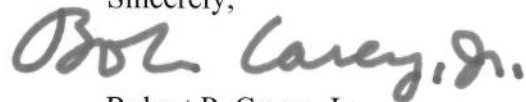
It is my understanding that the Embassy administers a grant program called the Ambassador's Special Self-Help Program, which in the past has supported the construction of schools and programs to empower women. I urge that your staff ensure that any grant funding provided under this program for education purposes support organizations and communities that do not discriminate against girls on the basis of pregnancy. I also appreciate that donors have established alternative classes for girls affected by the ban. These parallel school opportunities

for pregnant students should be optional and of equal quality, and girls electing to pursue alternative schooling should be allowed to sit for exams with their peers.

Girls in developing countries already face a number of serious obstacles to attaining education. Rather than discriminating against them, the Government of Sierra Leone should support and empower all girls to achieve their educational goals. Sierra Leone cannot afford for thousands of young women to be left behind, excluded from educational opportunities and stigmatized among their peers because of the misguided views and policies of its government.

I ask that you press the Sierra Leonean leadership, especially the Minister of Education, Science, and Technology to reverse this policy and that you use Embassy grant opportunities to support girls affected by the ban. Thank you for your attention to this issue and for your continued leadership at U.S. Embassy Freetown. I look forward to supporting your efforts in this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Bob Casey, Jr." in a cursive style.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.  
United States Senator