Dear representatives of Permanent Missions and NGOs, dear colleagues, good morning/afternoon.

My name is Foday M. Kawah and I am the Executive Director of Defence for Children International – Liberia (DCI-Liberia). I am honored to have been elected as the Chairman of the Liberia Child Rights NGO Coalition. And I am highly elated to deliver this statement on behalf of our coalition today for the Universal Periodic Review 36th Pre-Session of Liberia.

The Liberia Child Rights NGO Coalition (LCRNC) is a coalition of child rights NGOs, in Liberia and is registered as a Not-For-Profit Corporation in the Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Liberia. It was founded on July 19, 2012 by DCI-Liberia, ANPPCAN-Liberia, Plan International-Liberia, Save the Children-UK, Child Fund-Liberia, RADO, Rural Human Rights Activists Programme, FAWE-Liberia, Right to play and Think-Liberia etc. It previously had 35 members.

National child rights NGO coalitions already exist in many countries across Africa and in the world. They are strong national advocates for children’s rights. And indeed, they have brought about change in their countries by using their important voice at international, regional and national levels.

Ladies and gentlemen, today I am inspired. Today we should all be inspired, by the fact that all of you are present here, by the work being done by the organisations that you represent, by our shared dedication to promote and protect the rights of children in Liberia, and by the establishment of the Liberia NGO Child Rights NGO Coalition to work together and join efforts.

The major objective of this alternative report was to provide additional information that reflects the actual situation of children in Liberia. During the process of compiling the report, the first draft of the report was later discussed and validated at a meeting that was attended by the staff of all members of the coalition. It was also developed in the context of the Girl Advocacy Alliance programme.

This report highlighted recent issues on Child Rights and Protection as it relates to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other international human rights instruments, and other issues related to the Welfare of Children in Liberia.

The major findings of this report indicate that since the end of the civil war in Liberia in 2003, the Government and its partners have invested so much in policy and institutional reforms including rehabilitation and construction of infrastructure. However, the old and the newly passed laws do not provide framework for child protection system building. The laws are more substantive rather than procedural. They do not provide any explanation on the processes and mechanisms particularly for
strengthening of linkage between the formal and the traditional systems. In general, the current child protection system lacks an explicit and coherent vision and road map for meeting the holistic needs of children and their families.

So today and in the days to come, let us celebrate and embrace the work of the Liberia NGO Child Rights NGO Coalition. And let us deliberate on the way forward in promoting and protecting children’s rights in Liberia.

PROTECTION ISSUES:
For the sake of this report, three (3) issues were identified among the multitudes of vulnerabilities faced by children as being the most serious and urgent issues that require action at all levels but especially by the government of Liberia. These issues are:

I. Violence against children, with specific reference to girls and women
II. Child marriage
III. Access to education and decent employment, in particular for girls and young women.

1. VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN ESPECIALLY GIRLS:
The State of Liberia received 27 recommendations related to violence during the previous UPR cycle. The recommendations encompassed the adoption of the Domestic Violence Act, the criminalize of female genital mutilation and the enforcement of laws that protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation.
The State of Liberia should strengthen the units for the protection of women and children, granting them the necessary capacity to gather all evidence and investigate all cases of sexual and gender-based violence.
To support victims, especially women and children, many States recommended Liberia to improve access to justice and access to health services and economic assistance for the victims.

CHALLENGES AND IMPACT:
➢ Very few Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV) cases reported to GBV Response Actors resulted in a conviction.
➢ While many alleged perpetrators were arrested, they were rarely brought to trial due to legal and institutional weaknesses, social norms and attitudes, corruption, lack of will or diligence of authorities, and logistical constraints.
➢ Widespread culture of impunity for SGBV, particularly for rape, putting women and children at continued serious risk of sexual violence.
➢ Rape is the second most commonly reported serious crime in Liberia. Few individuals are convicted by the court of first instance. Countless additional cases are unreported due to numerous barriers faced by victims.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN:
I. Enact or strengthen National laws to criminalized sexual violence, including in marriage, as well as violence and abuse committed online;
II. Establish a fast track court system for all Sexual Gender Based Violence cases;
III. Provide prosecutors with extensive capacity building training on SGBV court proceeding;
IV. Ensure the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Justice and other relevant partners cooperate and support civil society and organize multi-stakeholders dialogue meetings on the fight against SGBV;
V. Allocate financial or technical support for NGOs to regularly track all SGBV cases parallel to Government own responsibility so as to verify government own data from the civil society organisations;

VI. Government Agencies access and contribute to an online formal data base system to report national statistics in parallel of NGOs reporting

2. CHILD MARRIAGE
The State of Liberia received several recommendations on the issue of child marriage during the Second Cycle of the UPR (2015).

The recommendations supported included: working to combat child, early and forced marriage, to legally prohibit FGMs and to increase support to girls from the poorest households and rural areas who are reportedly more at risk of being subject to these practices.

The State is also supposed to systematically pursue current initiatives to combat harmful practices against women and children, in particular female genital mutilation and early marriage.

The Optional Protocol to the UN CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and on the sale of children child prostitution and child pornography, were both signed in 2004, but were not ratified.

CHALLENGES AND IMPACT:
➢ Despite efforts by the State to implement the international legal frameworks at the national level, gaps still exist between these legislations and the customary laws in particular those relating to child rights issues.

➢ The Constitution dictates that national legislation should take precedence over customary laws. In practice, customary laws are much more widely used particularly in rural areas and affect the majority of the population primarily because it is felt that the traditional system is much more accessible, easier to understand, cheaper to access and with shorter proceedings.

➢ The old and the newly passed laws relevant to child protection do not provide a framework for child protection system building. There is no explanation provided on the processes and mechanisms particularly for strengthening of linkage between the formal and the traditional systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON CHILD MARRIAGE:
I. Protect children from all forms of violence;
II. Abolish traditional harmful practices;
III. Child marriage should have no legal effect, and States must set a minimum age of marriage;
IV. Set the minimum age of marriage for both girls and boys at 18 years old in national law;
V. Refer to girls who have been married at a young age as “married girls” to avoid removing all agency by solely referring to them as “victims” and promote their empowerment and active participation;
VI. Ratify the Optional Protocols of the UN CRC.

3. ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND DECENT WORK, IN PARTICULAR FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN.

During the second cycle of the UPR, the State of Liberia received 5 recommendations on the issue of education which were accepted by the government.

States recommended to incorporate the principle of equality between women and men into the Constitution, and seek to combat gender-based discrimination, in particular against girls in rural areas.
It was also discussed to put in place targeted measures to reduce the high dropout rates of girls from high schools, and intensify efforts to eradicate illiteracy, especially among women and girls.

**CHALLENGES AND IMPACT:**

- The TVET subsector is fragmented among several government ministries and agencies (youth and sports, education, health and agriculture) and dysfunctional and does not address the skills required by young people in Liberia both in rural and urban communities.
- Poor public perception and low social status of TVET, the multiplicity of testing and certification standards, poor articulation and credit transfer mechanisms between training institutions, and the weak linkages between the formal TVET system and the world of work.
- There are few opportunities to enter in paid employment: most of Liberian women earn income on a day-to-day basis by trading on local markets or as day laborers in precarious conditions. More than a quarter of young people are unemployed. Youth unemployment is higher among young women.

**RECOMMENDATIONS ON ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND DECENT WORK FOR YOUNG WOMEN AND GIRLS:**

I. Address decent work in a holistic way that includes transforming socio-economic constraints as well as challenging existing gender roles;

II. Ensure young women and girls participate in decision making processes;

III. Promote a human rights-based approach to decent work. Emphasizing the human rights impacts in addition to economic impacts;

IV. Further unpack, analyze and provide guidance on how to best address the complex relationship between gender-based violence and decent work;

V. Eliminate discrimination against women in employment (CEDAW Article 11).

Thank you for your attention, I look forward to continuing the discussion.

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