



**SHAMED AND BLAMED: PREGNANT GIRLS
IN SIERRA LEONE DESERVE A FUTURE TOO**



Adama's story

"I hadn't started my periods yet when I got pregnant," says Adama, a young teenager in Sierra Leone. "A man forced me to have sex. He took me into a room and closed the door. I tried to resist but he forced me. I think I am about five months pregnant... The man has left the area"

Adama would like to keep going to school but she can't because she is pregnant. "I heard about a big man who said pregnant girls couldn't go to school."

She is right – the government of Sierra Leone issued a policy in 2015 banning girls who are visibly pregnant from attending school and taking exams.

"[Pregnant girls'] presence in the classroom would serve as a negative influence to other innocent girls."

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology


Shamed and blamed

As unfair as this is, it is the reality for Adama and thousands of girls in the country. They are shamed, blamed, punished and discriminated against for being pregnant while still in school, regardless of how or why they became pregnant – by choice, through lack of sex education, as a result of sexual abuse or any other factor.

For example, during the Ebola crisis of 2014/15, many young girls were raped, found themselves in abusive relationships or either lured or forced into having sex for money or goods. Many became pregnant as a result and were not allowed back in class when schools re-opened after the worst of the crisis.

"When I found out I was pregnant I felt bad because I am the eldest daughter and I was the hope of my mother as I was very good in school. I have the hope and the belief to be a lawyer." – Khadi





There was a spike in sexual violence during the 2014/15 Ebola crisis^{*}. Teen pregnancies shot up by 65% in some parts of Sierra Leone during the crisis^{}.**

^{*}Plan International, Save the Children, World Vision International, Unicef.

^{**}UNDP.

“[The teachers] called the nurse. The nurse touched her breasts, made her pass urine and made her take a pregnancy test. When they found out she was pregnant, they shouted at her and disgraced her. The girl was ashamed. She left school and did not come back.”

Young woman, 21 years



An unfair and humiliating policy

The policy puts all girls at risk of abuse. In some schools, girls are subjected to embarrassing and intrusive physical checks by teachers or nurses to find out if they are pregnant. If they are found to be pregnant, they are sent away and sometimes publicly shamed.

This treatment is humiliating for all the girls involved and many pregnant girls or girls who think they may be pregnant stay away from schools and exam centres out of fear. Others resort to strapping down their breasts and stomachs to hide their pregnancy, putting their health and the health of their baby at risk.

The government policy on pregnant girls and the way it is applied means thousands¹ of girls in Sierra Leone are at risk of being barred from school. This is a serious blow to their future.

“I was pregnant and I was not allowed to go to school. It was unfair. They didn’t allow me to have a future.”

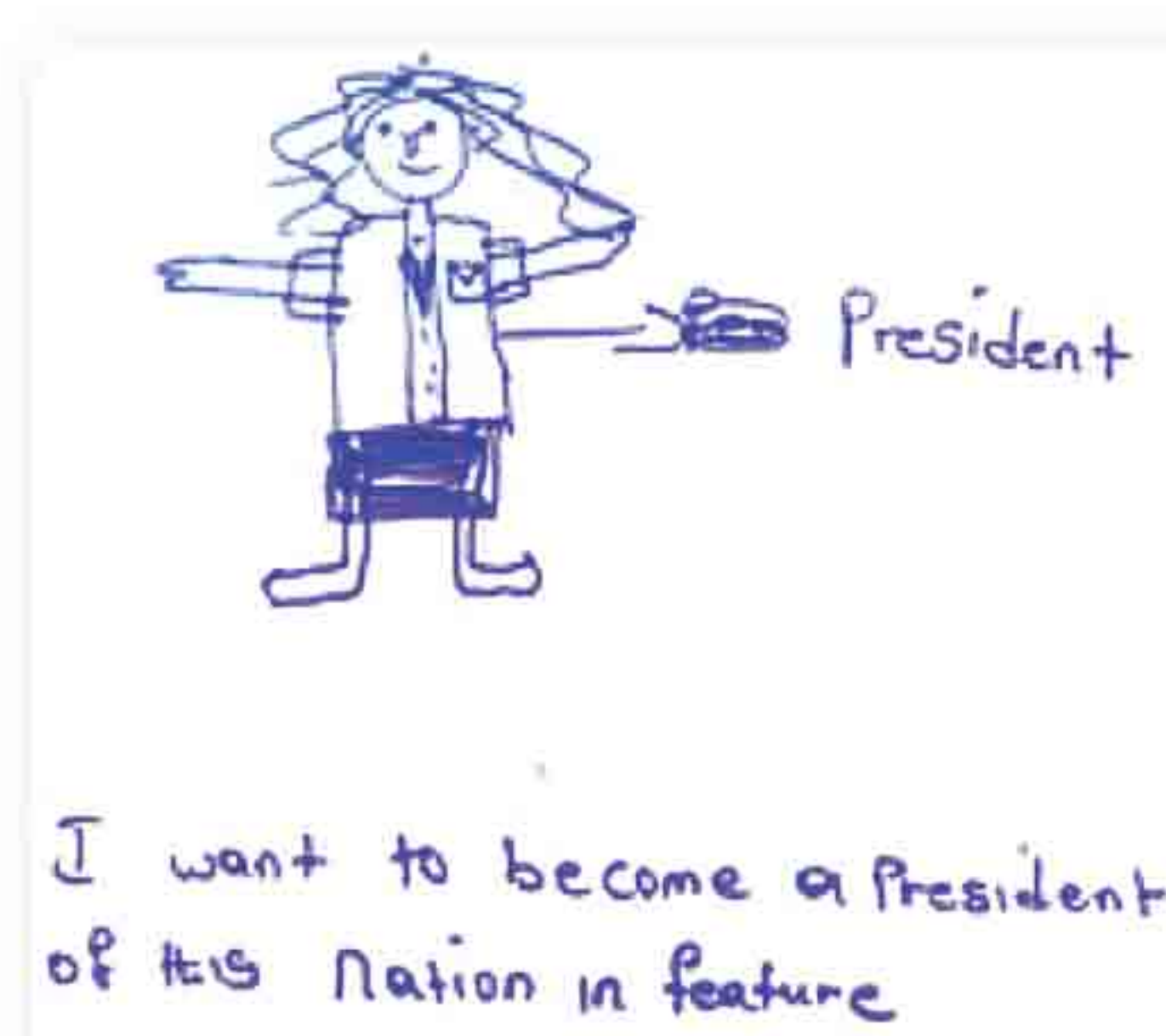
Amie, teenage girl

Girls’ rights at risk

It is also a blatant violation of several of their rights, including the right:

- To not be discriminated against
- To be treated with dignity and live free from inhuman treatment or punishment
- To education
- To the highest level of healthcare available
- To equality
- To privacy
- To information about their sexual and reproductive rights, including the goods and services they are entitled to

“When I found out that I was pregnant I thought that was the end of my life. I felt awful because my sister could go to school and take exams, while I had to stay home.” – Eliane, 16 years



¹ Official figures estimate 3,000 girls are at risk. Studies suggest this may be as many as 10,000 girls.

Only girls have to endure this discrimination and violation of their rights. The boys and men who get them pregnant suffer no such consequences. Neither do the people who fail to protect, defend and care for these young girls.

Girls' futures threatened

The government of Sierra Leone has put in place a temporary alternative school system for pregnant girls. But the discrimination continues because the girls have to attend classes in separate premises or at different times from other children and they still cannot take the crucial exams they need to continue with their education.

“We cannot have pregnant girls sitting alongside normal girls in normal school. This will not send out the right signal at all. It sends the wrong message and it encourages other girls in the class to get pregnant.”

Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs

The #ShamedandBlamed campaign – for girls’ rights, for girls’ futures

According to government figures, almost half of all girls aged 15 to 24 in Sierra Leone are not formally literate and 1 in 4 girls aged 15 to 19 already have children or are pregnant. In such a context, human rights violations like these put the country’s future at serious risk.

Adama would like to keep going to school and she should be able to, without suffering shame or discrimination or being stigmatised for being pregnant. She and thousands of girls like her have a right to education, just like other children, and deserve a future too.

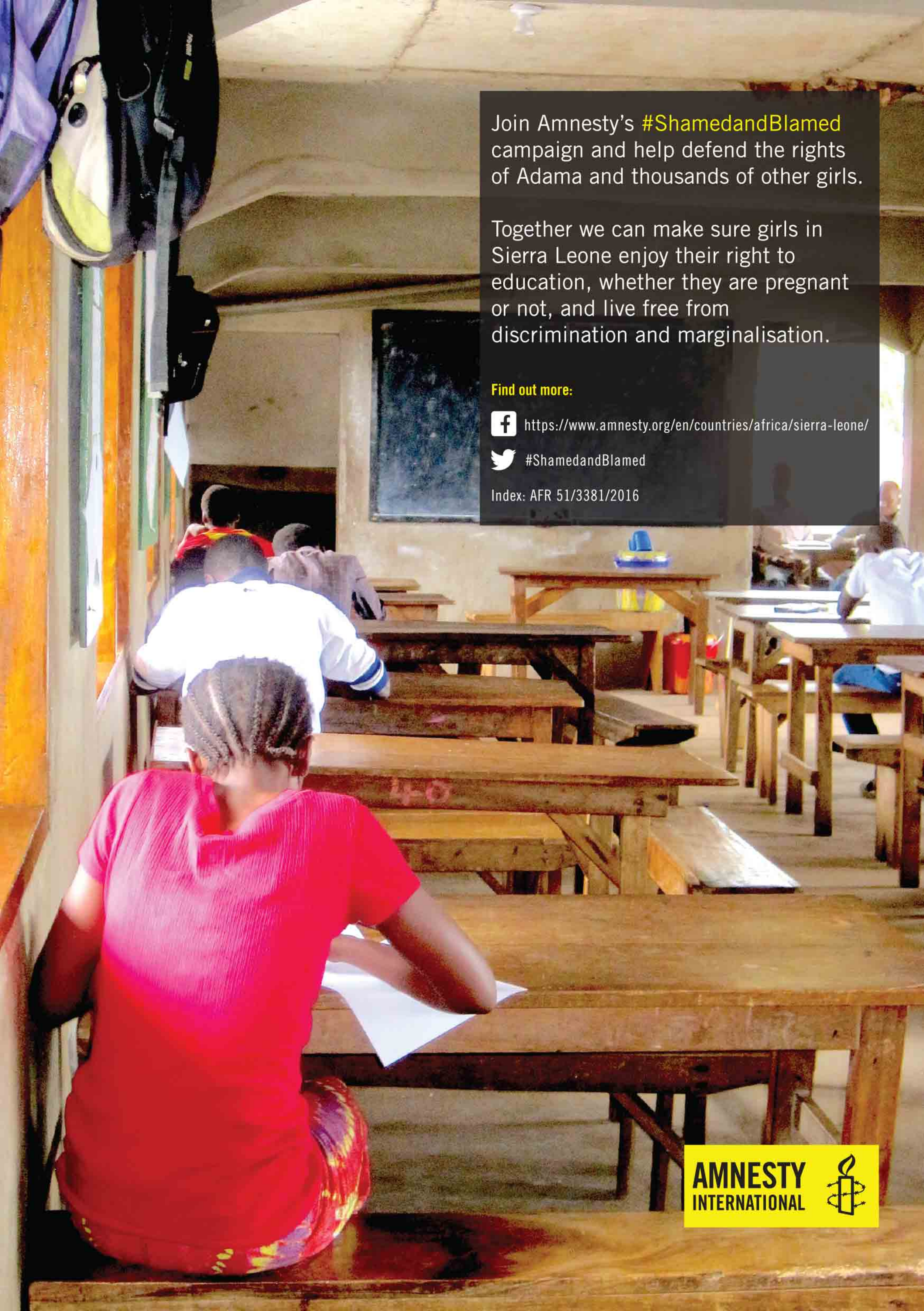
Through our #ShamedandBlamed campaign, Amnesty International is standing with Adama and all girls affected by this policy.

We are asking the government of Sierra Leone to:

- Lift the ban on pregnant girls attending school with other children and taking exams.
- Stop schools from physically checking girls for pregnancy or making them take pregnancy tests.
- Ensure pregnant girls can choose freely whether to keep going to school with other children or attend the alternative system, which should be of equal quality and content.
- Increase efforts to end violence against girls and punish all forms of harassment, violence and abuse against girls.
- Guarantee girls’ right to health, including access to the information, goods and services they are entitled to regarding their sexual and reproductive health and post-rape care.

“We had to register and queue to get an attendance slip for the exams. The female teachers told all the girls we would be searched as pregnant girls are not allowed to sit exams. We were made to line up and we were checked. They touched our breasts and stomach to see if we were pregnant. Some girls were made to take urine tests. The teacher was wearing gloves when she was checking us, but only used one pair of gloves throughout the process which is dangerous during Ebola times. I felt really embarrassed when this happened to me. Many girls left as they were scared the teachers would find out they are pregnant. About 12 pregnant girls did not sit their exams.” – Schoolgirl, 18 years





Join Amnesty's **#ShamedandBlamed** campaign and help defend the rights of Adama and thousands of other girls.

Together we can make sure girls in Sierra Leone enjoy their right to education, whether they are pregnant or not, and live free from discrimination and marginalisation.

Find out more:



<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/sierra-leone/>



#ShamedandBlamed

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