MARKING 2021 INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY IN SIAYA COUNTY

PRESS STATEMENT

2021 THEME: “WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: ACHIEVING AN EQUAL FUTURE IN A COVID-19 WORLD”

BACKGROUND

Siaya Muungano Network and Young Women Christian Association Siaya Branch are CSO’s committed to promoting gender equality and empowerment for women and girls. This year International Women’s Day 2021 to be celebrated on 8th March, marks another opportunity to come together and mobilize women and communicate to the decision makers in Kenya and Siaya to support mechanisms drummed up to promote gender equality and ensure women voices and participation in leadership and decision making. The theme for this year International Women’s Day to be commemorated on the 8th of March 2021 is “Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future in a Covid-19 World”.

We join the rest of the women in the World, Kenya and Siaya as a whole to observe the International Women’s Day 2021. International Women's Day is significant in celebrating the social, political and economic achievements of women while focusing on areas that require further action. For this reason, we salute all the hardworking women in the world, Kenya and Siaya County and urges them to continue pressing on for progress in line with this year’s theme. The day provides an opportunity to reflect on the strides being made to empower women and other special interest groups to ensure they have an opportunity to make meaningful contribution to national development including their participation in leadership spaces. As organisations advocating for gender equality and women and girls’ voices, we have observed deliberate measures put in place by government and stakeholders to empower women and girls on socio-economic and political spheres.

Women & Covid-19 Pandemic in Siaya County

The COVID-19 pandemic has had major impacts in the lives of women, especially those living in rural areas of Kenya, Siaya County included. During any emergencies women disproportionately bear the resulting social and economic shocks. Out of the 993,183 population in Siaya County, 521,496 are women, a majority of whom depend on small scale agriculture and
business for their livelihoods (KNBS, 2019). Gender roles and responsibilities assigned to women during times of emergencies including taking care of the sick, children and the older members of society, rural women have endured the greatest brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Restriction measures put by the Government to control and slow the spread of COVID-19 disrupted agricultural value chains and food systems, led to the loss of employment and small-scale businesses, an increased burden of care in the families. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to mental stress particularly among families that lost their jobs and those with conditions that needed frequent health check. Data from the Health Department in Siaya and other authorities such as the police in Siaya, shows an increase in Gender – Based Violence, child defilements and child pregnancies during the pandemic. Access to reproductive health rights and service for the young women and adolescents’ girls in the health institutions was also negatively affected during the pandemic and women and girls were stigmatized to go to hospitals due to the fear of contracting Covid-19 virus. Maternal and child healthcare services was also reduced since most women opted to stay away from hospital environment due to the restrictions to control spread of Covid-19.

Other noticeable emerging Issues affecting women and girls

Majority of women in Siaya have borne the brunt of social, economic and political inequalities that have been perpetuated over the years in various communities in Siaya County. The systemic inequalities have rendered women powerless and incapable of exploiting their full potentials in representative and professional leadership positions. Historically, there have been significant instances where countable women have stood tall and proven their mantle in contested leadership positions, but as the years go by, the possibility of sustainably having women in contestable leadership positions appears to be token oriented rather than women’s alienable rights, hence the need to continuously project the power, limitations and potentials of women in leadership. During this year’s celebration of the International Women’s Day, we join in highlighting the gaps in women leadership and the possible remedies for these gaps.

Rising cases of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in Siaya County – there are incessant exposure of women and young girls to sexual and gender-based violence in the county. These are characterized by physical assaults, rapes and defilements leading to maternal deaths,
teenage pregnancies and early marriages, school dropouts, abortions among other eventualities which continue to suppress the potential of women in our communities.

Social cultural barriers which have a root in the predominant Luo culture such as wife inheritance have limited the capacity of women to fully and independently thrive. Even though the practice is waning, there are still instance of its occurrence. On the same breath, women’s rights to access land and property in Siaya County have inhibited women’s economic growth especially in access to matrimonial property and resources thereby limiting access to economic power which is a strong determinant for leadership.

Access to 30% Government Procurement Opportunities in Siaya County for women in Siaya County is also a gray area of concern in regards to addressing women economic stability in Siaya County and clumping together budget allocations by the county government of Siaya for special interest groups, women, youth and PWD’s making it difficult for women to benefit fully.

With regard to political leadership, women have faced leadership issues including inadequate women forums and mentorship programs, under representation of women in politics and decision making and inadequate knowledge and information on how to deal with duty bearers. Additionally, there are ineffective policies to support women in leadership and decision making even in political parties. Majority of women find their way into political leadership in Siaya County by virtue of being nominated which has limitations.

Recommended Actions

As we prepare to mark International Women’s Day 2021 on the 8th of March next week, we therefore propose the following to the County Government of Siaya and other stakeholders working towards improving women and girl’s status in Siaya.

- Increase uptake of sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) to reduce mortalities and vulnerabilities associated with unplanned pregnancies for young women and adolescent girls in Siaya County.
- Increase and strengthen referral and linkages for access to health institutions, financial services and other essential support services for women and girls especially during this post-covid-19 recovery period.
• Prioritize skills development, capacity enhancement and mentorship on leadership, entrepreneurship and other leadership related fields targeting women and girls by the County Government of Siaya and stakeholders. This can be done by the resources they allocate for Women Empowerment in the Directorate of Gender & Social Services to support mentorship and leadership programmes for women in Siaya to build a vibrant generation of women that will be able to adapt to emerging issues such as emergencies and address women vulnerabilities in Siaya.

• Improve women’s economic dependence by improving their access to decent and quality employment by improving the policy landscape. The County Government of Siaya should put in place adequate measures that would ensure women access 30% procurement opportunities by even reducing the stringent measures to suit local women especially during this period when the community more so women are recovering from the economic impacts of covid-19 pandemic.

• Increase civic education and awareness on governance issues targeting women in Siaya, improve women’s participation and engagement on county budget and policy development platforms and consider women and girls agenda in county planning.

• The County Government of Siaya to put in place measures and resources to strengthen social protection measures for vulnerable women and their households in their covid-19 recovery plans.

• Work with civil society organisations to create safe spaces, forums and support networks for girls and boys with information, life skills training and opportunities to deepen existing and form new connections and friendships within the community. Through these networks, work to ensure children’s participation and ownership in platforms for creating awareness, as peer educators and advocates, about the negative consequences of child marriage.

• The County Government of Siaya to work with the office of the County Commissioner to tackle all forms of violence against children, including gender-based violence, in and around schools, by increasing safety on school premises, and ensuring effective codes of conduct and child-friendly reporting and support mechanisms to respond to such violence. The Chiefs and the Assistant Chiefs in Siaya County should also enhance their surveillance measures and report all forms of gender-based violence in their jurisdiction.
As we conclude, we call upon the duty bearers and the county government of Siaya to put in place strategies to meet the needs of women and girls in Siaya County, respond to constraints that women face in Siaya County and ensure that women in Siaya can easily obtain information and resources they need to take advantage of the opportunities presented by devolution in Siaya especially during this covid-19 recovery period. Women and girls must also have a voice in shaping devolution in Siaya, so that they can truly benefit and contribute to real change in the County of Siaya.

Finally, women and particularly the rural women play a critical role in the response and recovery process and therefore response and recovery measures should be gender-responsive, specific and sensitive to needs and contributions of women and girls.

We therefore, request the County Government of Siaya to equip rural women in Siaya with adequate tools, information and incentives to prepare for and mitigate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and this should be demonstrated in their plans and budgets.