



**ADDRESS BY THE FIRST LADY OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE, MADAM  
FATIMA BIO ON THE COMMEMORATION  
OF WORLD CANCER DAY AT THE  
BINTUMANI INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
HALL, ABERDEEN, SIERRA LEONE, 4  
FEBRUARY 2019**

**ADDRESS BY THE FIRST LADY 2**

Your Excellency, President Julius Maada Bio,

Honourable Vice President

Honourable Ministers of Government

Honourable Members of Parliament

Paramount Chiefs

Members of Diplomatic and Consular Corps

Representatives of Development Partners,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning.

In October of 2018, I had the honour to address a High-

Level Ministerial Panel at the “**Merck Cancer Access**

**Programme,**” to discuss the challenges and solutions to

improve access to cancer care in Africa among other topics.

I made an impassioned appeal about the fate of my Sierra Leonean sisters who were battling or had lost the fight to cancer. I called the attention of the world body to the crippling financial burden of cancer treatment. I pointed out that it was unaffordable for the great majority of Sierra Leonean women. I shared with the world the stark reality that 70% of all Sierra Leonean women diagnosed with cervical, ovarian, and breast cancer will die of this preventable and curable disease. I also informed them that there are virtually no cervical and breast cancer screening and treatment facilities in my country. I told them about cultural attitudes and stigma to women suffering from cancer. I shared with

them the sad and shocking truths that there are **no oncology centres**, very few nurses and doctors who are trained in cancer care, and still very few to no healthcare personnel to provide public education on prevention, do early diagnosis, administer interventions, or manage cancer at all levels.

I concluded by telling them that my country, Sierra Leone, was in dire need of a cancer treatment hospital where patients, especially women can get quality and equitable cancer care. I advocated strongly for training opportunities for our local doctors and nurses in order to strengthen our local capacity for diagnosing and treating cancer. I challenged the world to help save the

lives of thousands of Sierra Leonean women. The world listened.

I am here this morning to share with you the good news:

Merck Foundation is sponsoring the training of TEN oncology specialists who will be trained at premier cancer-care institutions in India and Egypt. Upon their return to Sierra Leone after 1 year and two years respectively, local technical expertise around cancer diagnosis, treatment, and care will be strengthened. My office, through the Presidency, will continue to advocate for additional training opportunities for our nurses and doctors. In particular, I continue to work for a strong continuing partnership with the Merck Oncology Fellowship Programme.

My office has continued working on building a dedicated cancer care centre in Sierra Leone as a matter of urgency. Because of the magnitude of the cancer crisis among women in Sierra Leone in particular, the construction of a diagnostic and treatment centre is urgent. We have engaged architects who have designed and developed an architectural concept for a 300 bed facility. My office hereby presents both the concept and the architectural blueprint to the Government of Sierra Leone for consideration. We must dream big as a nation in order to solve our country's most pressing needs.

To the chiefs, community leaders, and other members of our communities, let us know and spread the news

that cancer is not a death sentence. Cancer should not be concealed. Cancer should not be treated with silence. Let us not treat women afflicted by cancer with stigma. The cure for cancer is not in spiritual churches. Cancer cannot be cured by local herbs. Cancer cannot be cured by witch doctors. The key to treating cancer is early diagnosis and treatment by a trained oncologist.

So, the theme of this year's three-year impact campaign "I am and I will" speaks to what I implore all women to do. I challenge every Sierra Leonean woman to be informed and to be empowered. We must raise awareness of cancer: we must inform one another in our communities, in our homes, in schools, in the marketplace, in churches, and in mosques. We must

speaking about the symptoms and encourage one another to seek early diagnosis. Early diagnosis saves lives.

To our development partners dedicated to providing healthcare services for women and civil society organizations, let us continue advocating very strongly and passionately in order to stop the needless deaths of thousands of our womenfolk.

I want to encourage every Sierra Leonean woman to continue to advocate for equitable access to affordable cancer care. Women have very low to no incomes. We must ensure that their financial situations do not stop them from getting quality cancer treatment and care.



I want to conclude by saluting the brave sisters who have survived cancer and whose presence here among us speak to the hope that in five years, more and more of our sisters will stand with us here and celebrate winning the battle over cancer. Sisters, you are a testament to strength; you are a testament to hope. You represent all of what we are working so hard on to make cancer history. “You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, smarter than you think, and twice as beautiful as you'd ever imagined.”

I thank you.