



ADDRESS

BY HIS EXCELLENCY

JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE

REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE,

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY -

FREETOWN,

8 MARCH 2019.

Fellow Sierra Leoneans,

On this day, let us, as Sierra Leoneans recognise and celebrate the innumerable and invaluable contributions of our nation's women to our collective history, peace, and development. Let us also use this day to challenge and commit ourselves to affirming the rights, safety, and access to opportunities for our women and girls.

We cannot afford the huge cost of excluding women from our national development process. We cannot afford to not empower and include 51% of our population in our nation's governance and its social and economic development. We must, in line with this year's theme, "Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change."

Nations that are most successful the world over are nations that have harnessed the entirety of their human capital. My government will continue to escalate investments in human capital development across the entire population but with particular emphasis on women and girls.

We have launched new efforts to promote women's safety, health, access to opportunity, and to promote economic empowerment. Our free quality education programme not only opens a unique opportunity to close the wide gaps on access to education, it has a strong retention and completion component that strongly encourages every Sierra Leonean to ensure that girls persist and succeed in school. At the tertiary levels, we have introduced automatic grants-in-aid for women accepted in STEM disciplines right across the board.

Women are involved in equal numbers in my government's Directorate for Science, Technology, and Innovation that seeds, tests, and scales innovation in collaboration with the private sector, governance and research institutions. The welfare of women and girls is at the centre of our peripheral health unit programmes, free ambulance services, primary health care initiative, and the training of more healthcare staff.

Our push to establish a comprehensive diagnostic and cancer care treatment centre in Sierra Leone will address the disproportionate deaths of our women and girls of ovarian, cervical, and breast cancers. That initiative is accompanied by a cancer

awareness programme and the training of cancer care specialists made possible by partners. Our food security initiatives and other social safety schemes are well underway.

We are finalising financial empowerment initiatives that will grant women access to lending for agriculture and small enterprise development. Comprehensive national ID schemes will enhance financial inclusion and access to financial institutions. Women are at the centre of continuing justice sector reforms that will address equal access and protection. We are reviewing and strengthening laws to ensure the safety and protection of women and girls. In the interim, we have declared a national emergency on rape and sexual violence, and we are working to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.

Civil society organisations, women's advocacy organisations, our bilateral and multilateral development partners continue to inform, enhance, and advance our determined fight to create a new Sierra Leone in which women and girls thrive in safety and contribute to the development of our country.

Our commitment is beyond mere words and beyond mere acknowledgement of an obligation. The protection and empowerment of our women and girls is critical to our existence and progress as a nation. Together, we can do better; together, we will be better as a nation. We must “Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change” with our women at the centre of the development process.

I thank you.