



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HIS  
EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA  
BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC  
OF SIERRA LEONE ON  
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY.  
KAMBIA, 8 MARCH 2020**

## 2020 INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2

Ministers of Government,  
Honourable Members of Parliament  
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps  
Our Development Partners  
Our revered Paramount Chiefs  
Senior Government Officials  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen  
Good afternoon.

Every year, the 8<sup>th</sup> of March is observed worldwide as International Women's Day – a day set aside to reflect on the progress, achievements, opportunities, and challenges of women in the political, social, economic, and cultural fields.

It is a day to recommit ourselves as a nation and as individuals to achieving the future we want for our daughters and for Sierra Leone – a future of inclusion, of respect, of hope, and of equal access and opportunity.

Twenty-five years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for the empowerment of women and girls, we believe, as a government, that we must upscale progressive action to fight against all forms of Gender Based Violence as defined by the United Nations. So we celebrate this year's International Women's Day with the theme:

*'I AM GENERATION EQUALITY:  
REALISING WOMEN'S RIGHTS'*

It is a theme that is aligned with the UN Women's multi-generational campaign, *Generation Equality*.

We affirm, as a nation, that violence in all its forms against women and girls is a violation of their human rights.

We believe, as a nation, that we must collectively challenge all forms of institutional, cultural, social, economic, and political discrimination and injustice against women/ We are duty-bound to also implement progressive policies to address those injustices.

We are also obligated, as a nation, to include, empower, and promote women to escape cycles of poverty and powerlessness. Gender is firmly on our agenda as a government not because we want to tick boxes, but because we believe that we can only develop the totality of our human capital when women, who constitute 51% of our population, are fully accounted for and included in our national development.

Only then can we be assured as a nation that every girl born in this our beloved nation can achieve her full potential and be all she can be.

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My government acknowledges and will endeavour to enhance the immense contributions of our women to our national development -- from healthcare (as doctors, midwives, nurses, and community healthcare workers); to education (as administrators, academic faculty, researchers, and teachers); to agriculture (as the key cultivators and producers of food); to business (as entrepreneurs and retail traders); to governance (as judges, ministers, parliamentarians, chiefs, technocrats, and senior administrators); to science and technology (as engineers, technical staff, and solar engineers); to civil society and journalism (where they keep women's issues on the front burner), and even more.

Our National Medium-Term Development Plan -2019-2023, under Cluster 6, recognises gender equality and women's empowerment as critical to national development.

Through the NCRA, we are improving biometric and digital identification to enhance financial and civic inclusion as well as access to justice. Our social safety net programmes in income support and healthcare are supporting the poorest and most vulnerable women and girls.

With our government's free quality school education at the Basic and Secondary school levels, over a million girls are in school.

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School feeding programmes support nutrition for over a million girls in school. Girls studying STEM disciplines at universities get automatic government scholarships. TVETS and other institutions are catering to the middle-level training needs of our women.

And together, we, as a Government, have worked seamlessly and tirelessly with the First Lady of the Republic (my wife, Madam Fatima Bio), to address such thorny issues as early marriage, teenage pregnancy, menstruation, and reproductive health and education.

The Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs has identified key priorities for the protection, promotion, and welfare of women and Children.

We followed my declaration of a National Emergency on Rape and Sexual Violence with a wholesome overhaul of the Sexual Offences Act to make it better for enforcement and tougher on perpetrators.

We are resolved and determined as a Government to implement the provisions of all Gender related Acts of Parliament, policies, and strategies to protect our women and girls.

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Our chiefs and community leaders have publicly committed to stand with the Government and the First Lady in fighting all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls

Our institutions – from the courts, the Police, the Social Welfare Ministry and other ministries and agencies have put in place a comprehensive response system.

But we believe we must do more and we will do more.

As we look at the data for Gender-based Violence, it would seem as if the impassioned appeals of our mothers, our sisters, our daughters and aunts, to respect their dignity and protect them from all forms of violence are not being heeded.

Recognise that gender based violence is not always just physical. We have, as a nation witnessed alarming levels of rape, sexual defilement and battering of children, incest, and sexual harassment even in our institutions of higher learning. We see girls forced into prostitution and also trafficked. At the cultural levels, we still see girls removed from school and forced into early marriages. The First Lady's national campaign has shone the spotlight on this. In spite of our laws, women are still denied economic assets and they are subjected to unspeakable forms of humiliation. There is even psychological violence with some girls conditioned into thinking that perfectly natural bodily

processes like menstruation are wrong and reason for them to exclude themselves from school for dozens of weeks every year. Indeed, some of our men and boys seem to believe that they have a cultural and social right to continue inflicting such mindless violence on women.

Worse still, there are men and boys who fail to raise a voice in condemnation of those damnable acts. That barbarous culture of impunity must end. The wicked culture of silence and complicity that sustains it must end.

What we need is a change in mind set – that mind-set that makes some men and boys believe that their being male accords them a special status, grants them unwritten and unlimited powers and privileges to do as they will to women. Real men and boys nurture and empower women and girls. They work with them respectfully as equals and as partners.

Although we continue to contend with capacity problems within institutions and weak collaboration among agencies responsible for addressing women's issues, we are determined to get better. We are wrestling with deeply entrenched cultures and traditions. We are battling irrational presumptions of male privilege, power, and status.

We know the nature of the task. But we are up to it and we will continue working on providing adequate responses. Already, we have a standalone Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs charged with the task of zeroing in on these key issues. The legal and policy frameworks have been bolstered. We have elevated national advocacy on key manifestations of gender based violence. But we must do more.

My Government, through the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, has developed the National Male Involvement Strategy for the Prevention of Gender- Based Violence in Sierra Leone. It is not a standalone idea. It is already rooted in existing policy frameworks and nationwide activities including the National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy and Child Marriage, Hands off Our Girls by the Office of the First Lady, and a task force already set up in the Ministry for Basic and Secondary School Education to address teenage pregnancy and reproductive health.

Men and boys must now collectively and personally take on the responsibility for stopping all forms of violence against women. Hence, the theme of this year's International Women's day; *"Men and Boys are standing for women and girls right"* is timely and appropriate.

Men are primarily responsible for gender based violence. We cannot continue to be perpetrators.

Men should take a second and closer look at themselves, who they are, what they think of themselves, and what they do. We must be accountable to ourselves, to our women and girls, and to our communities.

Men and boys are not born with those unacceptable attitudes and beliefs. They learn them socially from their communities, elders, and peers.

It is therefore time for men and boys to consider themselves as agents of change. We must recognise that we have a responsibility for challenging and addressing beliefs, attitudes, and practices that lead to gender based violence in all its forms. We must also change those social structures, social processes, and social and power relationships that facilitate gender based violence.

As change agents, we must first be the change that we seek to be and show. We must change those norms that we have been socialised into thinking are harmless.

We have a responsibility for creating safe spaces for our women and girls. We have a responsibility for creating conducive spaces for women and girls to fully realise their aspirations and fulfil their potential.

We cannot continue to ignore that we are perpetrators of gender-based violence. We are now joining the campaign to fight against gender-based violence.

My Government is launching the National Male Involvement Strategy because we believe it is a transformative social approach with the objective of fully involving men and boys in fighting against gender based violence at the personal, family, peer group, and community levels.

It is the outcome of reviews of policies and current efforts, consultative meetings,

Men must join the campaign as "*Male Champions.*"

As a male champion, you assert that gender based violence is a gross violation of human rights and it creates inequality that is unfair and unjust.

As a male champion, you commit yourself personally to changing those norms and attitudes that lead to gender based violence.

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As a male champion, you will not only acknowledge the complexity of gender based violence, but you will work hard to stem its causes, prevalence, and its impact on women and girls and on our communities and nation in general.

Male champions prevent, report, and actively work to stop gender based violence in all its forms.

Some months ago, in a meeting with UN Women, I volunteered to be a HeforShe campaigner and leader. I pledged then to mobilise my fellow men and boys in Sierra Leone and in Africa to recognise that their active participation in behaviour change campaigns and their promotion of women's rights and women's empowerment are critical if we are to prevent Gender Based Violence in Sierra Leone. I implore all us, men and boys here today to become active HeforShe campaigners.

The task does not end here. Let us engage in community mobilisation at the section, town/village, and chiefdom levels. Let us support victims actively by ensuring that legal and healthcare systems work for them.

I anticipate that the Gender and Children's Affairs Ministry will work closely with the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development on one hand and traditional and community

leaders on the other to develop effective participatory action plans to deal with GBV.

I also expect that the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs will work closely with the Ministry of Basic and Secondary School Education as well as the Ministry of Higher and Technical Education to effectively introduce, scale up, and sustain this National Male Involvement Strategy in schools, colleges, and technical and vocational institutions. Particularly, I am eager to see immediate implementation at the Early Childhood and Basic education levels. Socialise them young and early into a culture of respect and appreciation for women and girls.

I expect the Gender Affairs Ministry to work with the Ministry of Health to actively promote a National Male Involvement Strategy in maternal and child health campaigns which I have recently identified as a key pillar in my Government's Human Capital Development focus. I can also see how a national male involvement strategy can be particularly useful for reproductive health campaigns, menstrual education campaigns, or campaigns on HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis or even malaria.

The possibilities are seemingly endless. I can see how collaboration with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Social Welfare can help address levels of physical violence

especially those directed at women and girls or drug use, or single motherhood and even more.

I can see a National Male Involvement Strategy mobilising male law makers to be more actively engaged in generating new laws that address forms of Gender Based Violence that are still not addressed in the laws of Sierra Leone.

Indeed, I can see male journalists and civil society activists promoting, supporting, and adding their voices to this very transformative strategy.

As a Government, I have emphasised the critical role of data in formulating or emending policy, planning, and implementing solutions that fit best within our resources. I expect that we will develop a national database on Gender Based Violence and measure how well our policies and other interventions are working.

So I stand here today to proudly associate myself with and formally launch the National Male Involvement Strategy.

I thank you.