



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY,
DR. JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE AT THE
LAUNCH OF THE ONE-STOP CENTRES.
FREETOWN, 9 JULY 2020**

Ministers of Government,

Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps

Our Development Partners

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning:

Let me start off by thanking each one of you, your governments, and your institutions, for your consistent commitment and reliable support to fighting sexual and gender-based violence.

I acknowledge the recent media furore over the establishment of a Presidential Task Force to advise on rape and Sexual and Gender-based violence (SGBV). At a point, it was a good idea. But the issue of SGBV is so serious that an ad hoc, problem-solving approach is inadequate to address its full implications for inclusive and equal rights, inclusive education and health, inclusive and equal access to opportunity, and inclusive development.

So late in 2019, I decided instead to set up a stand-alone Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs with focused political leadership and a full complement of professional staff who would advise the presidency and national government on gender, draw up appropriate legislation, coordinate

partnerships, collaborate across ministries and with international and local partners, engage community stakeholders, make and implement policies, monitor and evaluate programmes, and do even much more. This is far more than an ad-hoc advisory taskforce.

So as with the myriad of problems we tackle head-on every day, my focus is to provide a more permanent fix for SGBV because the future of this nation depends on women, who constitute 51% of its population.

As I have maintained, gender is firmly on our country's agenda for development and it is a critical pillar in our National Medium-Term Development Plan -2019-2023.

In the last two years, my Government has undertaken to enhance women's financial and civic inclusion, access to justice, access to social safety nets and income support, access to healthcare, access to education (at the basic, secondary, tertiary, and TVET levels), and equal access to the opportunity to serve our country.

The Ministry of Basic and Secondary School Education's taskforce on sexual and reproductive health that I asked the Minister to set up has engaged other line ministries (in particular, Ministry of Health and Sanitation and Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs) to develop policies on school

health, radical inclusion, and comprehensive safety. Those ministries are also working to develop curriculum and teaching guides on comprehensive sexuality education.

The First Lady of the Republic has been an indefatigable campaigner on sexual and gender-based violence, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and breaking the stigma around menstruation that deters girls from being all they can be.

As a Government, we are determined to implement all gender-related laws and policies that protect our women and girls. The overhauled Sexual Offences Act is tougher on perpetrators and the Honourable Chief Justice has taken steps to accelerate the course of justice. I have charged our national institutions to develop comprehensive response systems to address outmoded and discriminatory cultural practices and beliefs.

I have noted with keen interest the Honourable Minister's presentation on One-Stop Centres. I am proud that we are early adopters of the concept in Africa. We are the second country to adopt One Stop Centres for SGBV response and one of only nine countries in the entire Africa. I am pleased that the six pilot centres will provide one-stop locations for multi-sectoral response services that support survivors.

I am also pleased that the One Stop Centres will ensure confidentiality, psychosocial counselling, free medical

examination and treatment, legal support, and access to safe homes and other referral pathways.

I have also noted that staff have been trained and the centres are fully equipped with computers on which case management software is installed (courtesy of UNICEF) to enable data collection and management. I note that Standard Operating Procedures for the One Stop Centres that ensure the highest quality of care and seamless and simplified referral pathway have also been developed. We want to make it easier for survivors to receive the highest quality of medical treatment and care, psychosocial support and rehabilitation, and simplified access to justice. So the standard operating procedures should reinforce productive professional relationships among staff from various sectors. Services must be coherent and of the same standards at all times and the centre must be truly one-stop in organisation and operation.

I am also pleased with the supportive monthly monitoring and supervision model proposed by the ministry.

As I have noted, be assured (development partners, Ministry officials, staff, fellow citizens) that my Government will continue to fully support all progressive legislation and policies on SGBV.

I expect that the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs will sustain engagement with development partners and various sectors of government on maintaining inclusive management committees for these One Stop Centres. Those committees, I would expect, will maintain standards of care, advise the Ministry and Government where necessary, and support effective operations at the centres.

As the pilot centres are located within district referral hospitals, I would expect that basic medical, diagnostic laboratory testing, and other basic supplies will be available and sufficient at all times for the treatment and comfort of survivors. I expect that survivors will be provided with information, testing, and care for possible medical conditions associated with sexual assault such as sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, and other internal and external injuries.

With trained professional staff in location at all times, I expect that staff capacity can be maintained through continuous education and training, as indicated in the Minister's presentation earlier. Remember that survivors are at the centre of this initiative and I expect that staff will provide care with great compassion and empathy. I must emphasise that it is most important for me that these One Stop Centres be child-

friendly, secure, and free of all intimidation or secondary victimisation.

I also expect that where these pilot centres are located, communities are fully informed of and encouraged to use the services offered. Such information must be cascaded in schools, markets, places of worship, other community centres. Citizens should know about and be encouraged to use the services offered at the One Stop Centres. Contiguous rural areas (villages and towns) must be included in public information campaigns so that they know that the One Stop Centres are also available for their use.

I am also satisfied that we will be using *Primero* for case and information management. I expect that such data is collected, managed, shared, and analysed with the highest levels of confidentiality and ethics. Data collected, I am hopeful, this data (in addition to other data collected outside One Stop Centres) will inform and drive our response to SGBV, policy making, and management.

My Government will also work on other key enablers for the objectives we have set today for survivor care and also access to justice. So for instance, low prosecution rates have been attributed to inadequate or non-existent forensic evidence. I am informed that a task-force comprising local and

international experts has recommended that for evidence to be acceptable in a court of law, DNA results must be provided by an accredited laboratory. I note, gratefully, that an accredited laboratory in Ireland will start training local staff this year on collecting samples that will be sent to this lab for testing. In the medium to long term, we envisage the setting up of an accredited laboratory in Sierra Leone.

In the medium term also, the integration of services and referrals will be a great enabler. The emergency 116 line may be integrated with the National Emergency Medical Services to convey survivors faster to the One Stop Centres. Where needed, diagnostic and lab testing services should be available to staff. My Government has recently started distributing laboratory and diagnostic testing equipment to all district hospitals. This may augment the range of services available to the One Stop Centres

So let me conclude these remarks by again thanking our development partners and various stakeholders for supporting Government's plans to prevent and respond to Sexual and Gender Based Violence. Our initiatives are driven by our firm commitment as a Government to protecting and providing opportunity to women and girls irrespective of region or

ethnicity. I am therefore pleased to launch our pilot One Stop Centres in Sierra Leone.

I thank you.