



Remarks by His Excellency, Dr. Julius Maada Bio, President of The Republic of Sierra Leone at the Virtual Engagement of “Women in Leadership,” in Commemoration of International Women’s Day, Freetown, 11 March 2021

Madam First Lady of the Republic of Sierra Leone,
Honourable Ministers of Government,
Development Partners,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good morning:

1. Let me, from the outset, thank each one of you participants for being very generous with your time this morning to join us for this all important meeting. This is an engagement in deep conversations with women in leadership about a subject that is very close to our hearts as a Government and as a nation.
2. About two years ago, I pronounced that gender is firmly on our agenda, and that as a Government, we will go beyond mere words and mere commitments to real action that will change lives and permanently change the life narratives of millions of our womenfolk for the better and change the future of our nation forever.
3. For us as a nation, human capital development involves empowering every Sierra Leonean to contribute his or her fair share to national development. This, to us, means, protecting, supporting, and opening up opportunity to every Sierra Leonean to be all that he or she can be.
4. So, on occasion of International Women’s Day, reflecting on how we have contended with and trammelled challenges and how we will face a future of great possibility for all, matters greatly, hence my great pleasure in joining each one of you this morning.
5. Permit me to briefly recount some of our interventions over the last two and half years in four key general categories: (1) Employment and Empowerment (2) Reproductive health, and (3) Social cohesion.
6. **Employment and Empowerment:** Our country has its own sets of rigid stereotypes and cultural strictures that have either kept women out of leadership or constrained them on the margins. For us to begin to understand how to

change this, I believe that we must understand that this gendered configuration where opportunity is unfairly mapped along gender lines must change. In her statement about a week ago, during her swearing-in ceremony as Supreme Court Justice, Justice Miatta Samba reminded every young girl that it is now possible in our nation for a young girl from humble beginnings to dream to sit as judge in the International Criminal Court in the Hague. As a Government, we have exceeded our target in the Medium Term National Development Plan of achieving an 18% threshold for women in leadership across Ministries, Departments, and Agencies. In parliament, we are proud to welcome two more women parliamentarians from both the All People's Congress Party and the Sierra Leone People's Party. As a Government, we will continue to strive to increase the number of women in leadership by creating more leadership opportunities for women because we recognise the impact of female leadership for changing lives, communities, and the nation.

7. Our Government's policy focus on education has led to increased enrolments for girls in schools, technical and vocational institutions, and in tertiary institutions. Our radical inclusion policy has reversed the ban on pregnant girls in school. Our First Lady's relentless advocacy against early marriage, rape, and her support for menstruation health have been invaluable. We have increased investments in school infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development. Preliminary data shows increased pass rates, and higher retention and completion rates for girls.
8. Beyond education and even through COVID-19, my Government has sustained the social safety net support for vulnerable populations and women. We have also supported opportunity for women in the informal business

sector with less onerous, low-interest business development MUNAFA microcredit loans. We will significantly expand this scheme in the coming months with more seed capital.

9. **Reproductive health:** Sierra Leone's maternal mortality figures have kept us at the bottom reaches of the Human Development Index. Pregnant teenagers constitute the largest cohort that we lose to maternal mortality each year. I look at this issue from a human capital and development perspective. The thousands of young mothers we lose each year means that otherwise vibrant participants in our economy and in our society are needlessly dying.
10. An easy solution would seem to simply reduce teenage pregnancy. But that is a very complicated issue in itself. Our options seem to be to track the family planning needs of young persons in communities and schools, map our pregnant teenagers and give them access to improved antenatal clinics and obstetric facilities, and to strengthen community healthcare programmes right across the country. Cross-ministerial engagement among the ministries of Gender, Social Welfare, Health, and Basic and Secondary School Education is ongoing. Sexuality Education and Gender Rights is offered at all levels of Basic and Secondary School Education as a core subject. We are also working on the related issue of stunting which denies our nation a significant proportion of possible participants in our economy especially in a global economy that is knowledge-driven. Integrated management of stunting and acute malnutrition, to our mind, supports the proportion of girls within that group who would otherwise be permanently excluded from the future economy. We have also made other investments in the healthcare sector that specifically target women's health.

11. **Social Cohesion:** On the final issue of social protection and cohesion, let me highlight our persistent fight against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). We see SGBV both as a social cohesion and human capital development issue. We now have an amended and tougher Sexual Offences Act, a dedicated Sexual Offences Model Court, and an unprecedented jump in prosecution and conviction rates for SGBV offences. The First Lady's campaign against SGBV is resonating with various populations. In addition to the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police, we now have a permanent infrastructure to support rape reporting through the 116 lines and the One Stop Centres that provide free survivor-centred services including medical examinations, reporting, psychosocial and legal support, and also access to safe homes.
12. Our national male involvement strategy is being implemented across the country by NGOs, and the Ministry of Youth through Youth councils where men and boys as advocates, recognise their responsibilities and duties. The Ministry of Social Welfare is also piloting a parenting strategy that will be measured and evaluated.
13. My Government has recruited more women in the military and security forces, more women in the public service including as teachers and nurses and supported more women entrepreneurship.
14. In December last year, I launched the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy (GEWE). The Gender Ministry will host a number of workshops to develop an implementation plan at all levels. This year, we will continue working on legislating GEWE into an Affirmative Action Bill that will permanently and significantly narrow or eliminate gender disparities in Sierra Leone.

15. Our work, as a Government, has been recognised by UN Women, Generation Equality, RISE, and more, and Sierra Leone has been invited to serve on the Board of the UN's Women Peace, Security, and Humanitarian action. Sierra Leone has been an early adopter of international instruments that serve to narrow gender gaps. We are on the right path and we will continue to do more.
16. As I close, I want to encourage more women to volunteer for leadership regardless of political stripe. On our part as a Government, we will continue working to dismantle institutional, structural, and other barriers to women's empowerment and advancement. I will closely follow the discussions and outcomes of this meeting and see how best they will inform or support our collective and dedicated push as a nation on this question.
17. Thank you again for the invitation and I wish you all fruitful deliberations.