



**STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA
BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE,
AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE OPERATIONAL PLAN
FOR THE HANDS OFF OUR GIRLS CAMPAIGN AND THE
COMMEMORATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL
MENSTRUAL HYGIENE DAY. FREETOWN CITY COUNCIL
AUDITORIUM, 28TH MAY 2021**

The Honourable Vice President,
Madam First Lady,
Ministers of Government,
Your Worship, The Mayor of the Municipality of Freetown,
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,
Development partners,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

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1. As we pondered our New Direction manifesto, we asked a number of critical questions. Why was it that Marian, Tenneh, and Aisha who entered Class One with Joe, Michael, and Tommy could not be accounted for during the WASSCE examination for that cohort? The answers were grim.
2. Marian may have been married off early to an elderly and illiterate trader. She may have a three-year-old child, but she suffers from fistula and she is treated badly in the community.
3. Tenneh could be a single teenage mother who may have survived rape by an elderly relative and impregnated by an older man. She could not go back to school while she was pregnant because there was a ban on pregnant girls in school. Her five-year-old son is stunted, has learning disabilities, and not attending school because Tenneh cannot afford to pay fees.
4. Aisha could have died from complications from teenage pregnancy and because of the lack of comprehensive maternal health care.
5. These stories were and have been replayed over and over all over Sierra Leone. Their stories are a giant scab on the conscience of those who can change their stories but have successively never done so. Those girls and their children constitute 52% of our country's population but they are condemned through no fault of theirs to lives of penury, victimisation, and death.
6. The questions we have been confronted with are many. How do we help Sierra Leoneans, especially women and girls, to reach their full potential and contribute their fair share to inclusive national development? How do we correct cultural and other structural defects in how our society sees women? How do we nourish, protect, and support our women to be all that they can be?
7. Over the last three years we have taken bold risks. But we have been guided by the fervent belief that girls, like boys, must have an equal chance in life; that girls, like boys, must be empowered, invested in, and supported; and that girls, like boys, must be protected and respected.

8. That is why we declared human capital development as a national priority. That is why we provided free, equal, and inclusive quality education for all. That is why we supplied free teaching and learning materials in schools and school-feeding in some areas.

9. That is why we provided school buses and created safe spaces in schools. That is why we reviewed the curriculum, invested in more classrooms, equipped more libraries and laboratories.

10. That is why we reversed the ban on pregnant girls in school, implemented a policy of radical inclusion in our schools, and introduced the teaching of reproductive health. That is why we have spoken up about cervical cancer diagnosis and treatment personnel and facilities in-country.

11. That is why we have campaigned to demystify menstruation and we are providing free sanitary pads to girls nationwide. That is why we reviewed sexual assault laws and made them tougher, declared rape a national emergency, established one-stop centres for SGBV, and instituted sexual offences model courts to fast-track SGBV cases.

12. That is why gender inclusion is central to our Medium-Term National Development Plan and we have developed a Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment policy to guide our interventions in that regard.

13. But more so, that is why our indefatigable First Lady, Mrs. Fatima Maada Bio, has travelled to every corner of this nation and spoken from the heart – "Hands Off Our Girls! Hands Off Our Girls" to girls, women, men, boys, chiefs, and in communities.

14. Her work speaks for itself in this Operational Plan 2021-2023. She has raised awareness, and engaged state, non-state actors, the private sector, and institutions in advocacy and dialogue. Her work has brought "renewed hope and fresh ideas in fighting discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV) by prioritising our interventions in relation to teenage pregnancy, and early and forced marriage; child prostitution, forced labour, and trafficking; women's empowerment; maternal mortality; and sustainable childhood development" among others.

15. Today, more young girls feel empowered and believe that a brighter future is possible. The Hands Off Our Girls Campaign has been as

audacious as it has been inspirational. It has resonated with women, girls, and leaders beyond the borders of Sierra Leone. It has been truly impactful, and we owe its resounding success to the First Lady's passionate commitment, resolve, and drive.

16. Just yesterday, I received a delegation from AMCOW that appointed the First Lady Africa Champion for Water and Sanitation. Let me once again congratulate her publicly and thank her for her work and her service to Sierra Leone and now to Africa.

17. Her appointment is logically aligned with her passion to protect, inspire, and empower young and vulnerable girls. But her new line of work advocating for progressive changes in the WASH environment, policies, and outcomes is relevant to today's event even more.

18. The theme for this year's Menstrual Hygiene Day, "Action and Investment in Menstrual Hygiene and Health" urges all of us to take stock. Let us think deeply about what we can do about the hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leonean women who are confronted with challenges to properly manage their periods. Social and cultural stigma; lack of knowledge about menstruation; lack of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities; and more importantly, lack of menstrual hygiene products constitutes those barriers. The implications for education, social inclusion, and health have been well-documented and presented. For instance, girls can miss up to 20% of their education and consequently fail to complete and transition to higher education.

19. Our task as a nation is to address each of those barriers and, therefore, mitigate the associated threats to the safety, health, and well-being of girls and women.

20. We must question backward traditional notions and taboos around menstruation that cause anxiety, fear, and shame. We must fashion a common vision on menstruation. We must work to disseminate knowledge about menstruation to our girls and women by creating appropriate educational resources around menstruation both in formal and non-formal education spaces. We must also speak about the benefits of good menstrual hygiene for women and girls. Local champions, opinion leaders, citizens, can drive that change. A good communications plan that includes persons in the creative arts will also be helpful in changing attitudes.

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21. We must invest in safe, dignified, and female-friendly water and sanitation facilities at school and at home so that girls and women can safely practise menstrual hygiene. Women and girls, in particular, lack consistent access to menstrual hygiene products.

22. We must also seek to address the affordability of menstrual health products. Low-income households often prioritise what the family spends money on. Most of the time, it is not on menstrual hygiene products. Through the work of the First Lady, every school-going girl in Sierra Leone receives a year's worth of menstrual hygiene products. But we should devise strategies for making good quality menstrual hygiene products affordable and accessible to every girl or woman who needs them.

23. But in the long run, I deem broad cross-sectoral engagement to develop a comprehensive national menstrual health policy a necessity. The benefits are enormous. The Ministries of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Health and Sanitation, Water Resources, Gender and Children's Affairs, Social Welfare and other stakeholders can collaborate with development partners and international institutions to meet that objective.

24. All these interventions take collaboration, partnerships, and resource mobilisation within communities, across Government, with the private sector, institutions, and within regional organisations. We must ensure that our common vision for safe and dignified menstrual hygiene comes to fruition because of its benefits for human capital development, gender empowerment, and future inclusive national development.

Thank you all and I now formally launch the Operational Plan for the 'Hands Off our Girls' campaign – 2021-2023, and also formally open commemorations of International Menstruation Day 2021.