



**CLOSING REMARKS BY HIS  
EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA  
BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC  
OF SIERRA LEONE AT THE 10TH  
AFRICA CONFERENCE ON SEXUAL  
HEALTH AND RIGHTS, FREETOWN -  
1<sup>ST</sup> JULY 2022**

Your Excellency, Madam Jewel Howard-Taylor, Vice President of the Republic of Liberia,  
Madam First Lady,  
Ministers of Government,  
Honourable Members of Parliament,  
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,  
Development Partners,  
Advocates, Friends, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am delighted to join over 900 delegates from over 41 countries who have spent the last couple of days. It seems Africa is in Freetown to discuss sexual reproductive health rights. Thank you Purposeful for organising one of the largest international conferences in Freetown on such an invaluable topic.
2. The Conference's Chief Patron, our own First Lady, deserves a very special thank you. She has been tireless in working with partners to champion the causes of girls and women. She has given a voice to girls and women in the nether reaches our country. We thank you for your great work and for transforming and promoting the image of our country as a place that cares and does something about women's issues.
3. I hope too that delegates have discovered for themselves what is on offer in Freetown. I see mischievous smiles in the audience. I understand.
4. If I were you, I would also indulge in the beauty, rich culture, breathtaking beaches, delicious cuisine, and vibrant nightlife in one of Africa's most beautiful cities. I hope you have caused no trouble that should concern us.
5. But amidst the fun, Sierra Leone has been the centre of bold actions and visions for making the lives of girls and women better. We have led by example to tackle sexual violence in this country and to do something about structural inequalities that limit how far our women can go. We are determined to break the culture of violence against

women and girls. We are relentless because this is a fight for the moral core of our own humanity.

6. We believe that we can win that fight and achieve the promise of a better future for our girls and women if we work together. We can achieve a bold vision for the safety and dignity of our girls and women. We are, all of us, responsible for breaking the culture of violence, silence and impunity. That is why I am so delighted to see here today citizens from across this continent, including such a large youth delegation.
7. I am pleased to see distinguished dignitaries from Liberia, Nigeria, Gambia, etc, members of my Cabinet, Honourable Members of Parliament, development partners, the United Nations family, the private sector, and a rich tapestry of civil society organizations. Thank you for your presence. Thank you for your contributions. Thank you for staying engaged.
8. Our collective outrage as a nation – (activists, civil society, women’s groups, Chiefs, communities, other stakeholder groups, the entire nation) – and the persistent advocacy by Your conference Chief Patron- the First Lady of Sierra Leone have all borne outcomes that are globally recognised.
9. We followed our declaration of Rape and Sexual Violence a National Emergency in Sierra Leone with a full-bodied review of the Sexual Offences Act. The law is now one of the toughest in the world. We set up specialised Sexual Offences Model Courts that have convicted more offenders than ever in the history of this country. We also lock sexual offenders up in jail for some of the longest periods in the world.
10. But we have also focused on the welfare of survivors. We have included in our response package One Step centres, medical treatment, other facilities, and psycho-social care to deal with the aftermath of the ordeal.
11. In addition, we have, as a Government, supported nationwide advocacy by the First Lady – Hands Off our Girls -- and partnered with

civil society groups and development partners to deal with other elements of sexual violence and injustice.

12. On the global stage, we have sponsored United Nations resolutions on survivor rights and justice and we have tirelessly associated with global voices against sexual and gender-based violence.
13. We do so because we believe that we need to engage the minds of our young people and develop model global citizens, with ideals and values of respect, dignity and inclusion for all. This is why I have been so passionate and committed to a human capital development agenda for Sierra Leone. At the centre of our free quality education component of our agenda are civic education and sexual and reproductive rights. Comprehensive policies such as radical inclusion, pregnant girls in school, parent learners, 17 years of fully sponsored STEM education, comprehensive safety, gender parity, and other transformative policies are associated with Sierra Leone on the global stage. We have removed institutional and structural frameworks that excluded or discriminated against girls – especially pregnant girls, children from poor backgrounds, children in rural areas, and children with disabilities.
14. Last Summer, I joined other world leaders in discussing girls in Education. This week, in Paris, I engaged a High-Level Steering Committee at UNESCO – that I co-chair with the Director General of UNESCO – to call for transforming education, especially for girls. These strategic global alliances follow the crafting of the Freetown Manifesto on transforming education
15. We do all this on the national and global stage because we want to nurture an inclusive society where girls grow up to know and believe that they have equal rights that are guaranteed in law, respected by their communities and men, and they can and will be all they wish to be in a society that empowers them and gives them opportunities to attain a brighter future.
16. That is why we have taken even bolder steps to guarantee more political representation and participation; proportionate and just access

to resources, protection, and justice; more proactive and woman-centric policies across Government; and urging Parliament to pass the first Gender Empowerment and Women's Equality bill.

17. If our women and girls must share in the great promise of tomorrow; if they should be partners in building just, peaceful, and inclusive societies; we must and should end rape and sexual violence in this lifetime.

18. We must advance women's political participation and move towards breaking all glass ceilings for girls in our country. The gender equality and women's empowerment bill will guarantee a minimum 30% quota of women for all elected and appointed positions across all levels of Government. We cannot build the promise of our nation when women continue to be shut out of decision-making from the villages to the Parliament and everywhere in between. I continue to urge Parliament to follow the lead of my Cabinet to pass this long-overdue legislation.

19. You may have seen the signs of the national Menstrual Hygiene campaign as you have travelled across Freetown. We are campaigning as a nation that menstruation is and can no longer be a source of shame and exclusion for girls. I want it to be a norm that as an African man, an African leader, I can and should speak freely and publicly about menstruation because there is no shame in menstruation. The only shame is that our girls continue to be held back and left behind, shut out of the classroom for over eighty days of a year. We must act now to remove the stigma and national Governments must work to provide safe and affordable sanitary products for girls.

20. As stated earlier, we have complemented this with a progressive sexuality education component in the national curriculum that is science and evidence-based. It will ensure that all our children can access the tools and the information they need to make informed choices about their lives and their bodies.

21. At a time in the world when sexual and reproductive health rights for women are either being overturned or threatened, we are proud

that Sierra Leone can once again lead with progressive reforms. My Government has unanimously approved a Safe Motherhood bill that will include a range of critical provisions to ensure the health and dignity of all girls and women of reproductive age in this country.

22. Friends, let us pledge to continue working to create the world we all dream of - an equitable world free of violence against every girl and woman. We must make courageous, evidence-based and audacious choices as leaders and as citizens if we are to build a country of inclusion, dignity, and safety for everyone.
23. As a leader, I have done and will continue to do what I do to protect and promote women's rights because it matters to me that girls and young women across this country can grow up in safety and dignity. It matters to me that girls can receive equal and quality education, good healthcare, while they know they have assured access to resources, services, and opportunities. It matters to me that our daughters can step into their roles as political and community leaders, entrepreneurs, doctors, scientists, and propel this nation on the path of sustainable development. of this country.
24. Fellow citizens of Africa and leaders of this continent, I invite all of you to join us as we set out to achieve this bold and progressive vision for our shared futures.
25. To the young people who have presented to us, we have heard you and we share your concerns and aspirations. We will do all we can about our shared ambitions.
26. To our development partners, I urge you to join us to act boldly and with purpose. To our delegates who have deliberated, I urge us all to leave this conference inspired by what we know now and moved by a common desire to be part of making this bigger dream come true.
27. I commit the full support of my government as we give flesh to this collective vision and implement these strategies to achieve the promise of a better tomorrow.

28. Thank you for visiting us and I wish you all safe travels back to your respective destinations.