



**REMARKS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS  
MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC  
OF SIERRA LEONE, ON THE OCCASION OF  
SIGNING INTO LAW THE GENDER EQUALITY  
AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT BILL 2022.  
FOREIGN SERVICE ACADEMY, FREETOWN -  
19<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2023**

The Honourable Vice President,  
Madam First Lady,  
The Chief Minister and Ministers of Government,  
Honourable Members of Parliament,  
Our Revered Traditional and Religious Leaders,  
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

**1.** The Gender Equality And Women's Empowerment Bill has been a **LONG** time coming. A society is only as free and empowered as its women are free and empowered.

**2.** Today, I join the women and girls, men and boys of our country, in celebrating all those who worked tirelessly to bring this crucial piece of inclusive legislation to reality.

**3.** I have often told the story of my humble and selfless mother, Yei Amie Navo Bio, who, upon my father's passing, bore the burden of raising our family and inculcating in us the work ethic and sense of service I am privileged to have today.

**4.** Yei Amie is who I first think of when I think of strong women and leaders. She and other resilient women in my family formed the foundation upon which I stand. They come from a long history of Sierra Leonean women who have been the foundation of our people and communities as mothers, leaders, warriors, educators and, very crucially, peacemakers.

**5.** From **Queen Nyarroh** of Bendasuma (modern-day Bandajuma), a warrior, a leader, a mediator and a peacemaker; to **Madam Yoko**, one of our most prominent historical leaders and a notable mediator; to the prominent **Madam Nenge** of Baoma Chiefdom born into a hierarchy of warriors; to **Adelaide Casely-Hayford** who fought for the rights of women, the preservation of African cultural heritage and formulated a plan for girls education over 100 years ago; to **Constance Cummings-John** who pushed for vocational education of girls and was the first woman in Africa to join a municipal council in 1938. The list is endless.

**6.** There is no path to a democratic, free, stable and prosperous society that does not include women's central and uninhibited participation.

**7.** We cannot write the history of Sierra Leonean democracy without the brave women who risked and sometimes lost their lives to fight for peace. This **HIS**-tory is also **HER**-story.

**8.** It is the story of the women who organised one of the largest demonstrations our country had ever seen to sue for peace at the height of our civil war. It is the story of the women who died protesting for peace and ending the fighting.

**9.** It is the story of the women who sat alongside the men actively contributing at round table conferences during conflict resolution periods and in post-war reconstruction.

**10.** This story is why, now that we have a stable and peaceful Sierra Leone, **we cannot afford to have women, who make up 52% of our population**, not featuring prominently in politics and leadership.

**11.** Women's Rights are Human Rights. Women's rights are not about making women better or stronger.

**12.** Our **families** show us that **women are great and strong**. Our **industries**, where women do back-breaking work, show that **women are resilient**. Our **academia**, where women do important intellectual work, shows us that **women are brilliant**. Our **politics**, where women are a binding and stabilising force, shows us that **women are necessary**.

**13.** Our **history** shows that **women are a force for peace** even when men are busy beating war drums. We, men, have yet to see or acknowledge women's rightful position fully, and this GEWE law will give us tools to correct that.

**14.** There is an appointed time for everything. The time for righting historical, cultural, and economic injustices; the time for addressing unequal access to economic empowerment, land, justice, healthcare, education, and

political participation; the time for protecting and promoting the rights of women; the time for closing the gender gap in Sierra Leone, **IS NOW**.

**15.** When I became President, I proclaimed that gender is firmly on my New Direction Agenda. The future of Sierra Leone is female; we must do all it takes to facilitate the timely, full, and unconditional inclusion of women in our national life, governance, and development.

**16.** For me, women's economic empowerment and protection are not political rhetoric. Empowering women is essential to the health and social development of families, communities and countries. Women can reach their full potential when they live safe, fulfilled, productive lives.

**17.** Over the last four and half years, my Government has taken on the deep-rooted and multifaceted challenges confronting women in our country. Our framework for action has been a broad and even sweep of these challenges – from introducing progressive policies and measures to reviewing existing laws and proposing new legislation.

**18.** We created a standalone Ministry tasked with coordinating actions, collaborating with partners, and developing coherent policies and responses that address the challenges faced by women. We have since developed the national framework for driving gender equality, and we are implementing the agenda across all sectors of the country.

**19.** Under challenging economic circumstances brought on by external factors since the COVID-19 pandemic's onset, we have opened the door to opportunity and empowerment by investing heavily in education, especially for girls.

**20.** We have achieved gender parity at the basic education level, registered higher achievement and learning outcomes for girls in secondary schools, and guaranteed tuition-free education from primary school to university graduation for all girls studying STEM disciplines.

**21.** In four short years, we have made significant progress in educating girls, especially in STEM disciplines, and providing them with more access to

digitalisation. That portends well for the next generation of women, especially as the global economy is becoming irreversibly digitalised.

**22.** Ultimately, I believe that our investments in education for girls will narrow health and digital access disparities, promote female entrepreneurship, reduce persistent poverty among women and change gender norms in this country forever.

**23.** In addition to our Radical Inclusion Policy, free learning and teaching materials, sanitation supplies distributed by the First Lady, and school feeding in places, more girls persist and succeed through the primary and secondary education levels. These policies and actions are highly regarded the world over as transformative.

**24.** Sierra Leone is lauded globally for the rapid progress in promoting and protecting the rights of girls and women. We have been resolute in stamping out sexual and gender-based violence through nationwide advocacy ("Hands Off Our Girls" campaign by the First Lady), strict laws, fast-track prosecutions, tough penalties, greater access to justice, and the absence of legal discrimination against women.

**25.** Besides our male involvement and other strategies for reducing gender-based violence, I urge all stakeholders to work on reducing and eliminating all forms of violence against women in their communities.

**26.** We have also worked with global partners, especially RISE, to fight for justice for survivors of sexual violence. The groundbreaking and unanimously passed United Nations resolution will guide international policies and actions.

**27.** In healthcare, we have invested more in women's health, trained more midwives, built and refurbished health facilities, and invested more in nutritional outcomes for pregnant and lactating mothers and their children across the country. We have recorded lower maternal and child mortality rates and stunting and malnutrition figures since May 2018.

**28.** We have rolled out several initiatives to promote women's economic empowerment. Through the MUNAFA Fund and the Women's

Entrepreneurship Fund, my Government has supported women's entrepreneurship and seeks to improve financial inclusion and access to capital further. Women dominate the informal economy, and data has shown that they are better at doing business, managing investments, and managing proceeds from those investments.

**29.** Beyond that, as a Government, we are eager to work with the private sector to create more jobs for women, harness business cultures that promote diversity and inclusion and invest in training programmes tailored to create more job opportunities for women.

**30.** Can we do more? Yes, and this Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act, which I am signing into law today, will now address the gender imbalances in this country comprehensively.

**31.** The key provisions of this law speak to the principles of inclusion, representation, participation, and a more responsive posture on gender. These include:

- At least 30% representation in Cabinet;
- At least 30% representation in Parliament;
- At least 30% of all appointments as Ambassadors/High Commissioners;
- At least 30% of all positions in Local Councils;
- At least 30% of all jobs in the Civil Service;
- At least 30% of all jobs in private institutions with 25 and more employees;
- Maternal leave extended from 12 weeks to 14 weeks;
- Financial inclusion for women;
- Mainstreaming of the gender requirements across all sectoral policies and legal frameworks;
- Gender Responsive Budgeting;
- Gender Units within every Planning Directorate within MDAs; and
- The creation of a multi-sectoral Gender Steering Committee to oversee the implementation of the GEWE Act.

**32.** With this law, we break barriers to parliamentary representation and look forward to a more vibrant and diverse parliament with greater numbers

of women and women's voices. When compiling their proportional representation lists, I urge political parties to go beyond the legal minimum of the number of women.

**33.** As I have said before, more women on ballots; more women voting; more women winning; and more women in Parliament are all the better for our politics and the future of our nation. But it is not only in Parliament, as this soon-to-be-law now states.

**34.** As the late **Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg** said, "Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception." We must ensure the presence and visibility of women in all spaces - private and public.

**35.** It is up to us all, especially men, to completely dismantle all remaining legal, structural, cultural and social barriers to women's participation in our politics and nation-building.

**36.** Every citizen has a stake in a peaceful and progressive nation. Women who wish to serve in public office and their supporters must not be undermined, belittled, intimidated or humiliated.

**37.** We must monitor electoral processes to ensure elections fairness, transparency, peace, and security. We must end the impunity for violence against women in elections and public life and punish all persons and entities found guilty of such violence.

**38.** My Government commits to making the playing field fair for women and upholding all laws that protect women in both public and private life.

**39.** I trust this legislation will provide the legal framework for more women to be more involved, as they have historically been in peace-making, confidence-building, and nation-building everywhere.

**40.** To quote my dear friend, politician and feminist **Dr Kadi Sesay**: "Why is it that each time you have elections, the women are the ones that dress up and jump in the streets and start dancing for these men? If the constitution says you are equal, let the men do some dancing for a change."

**41.** I hope that with this bill I am signing today into law, we will see more women in leadership and politics and more men supporting and acknowledging the central status of women as we work together for a vibrant, prosperous, inclusive and democratic Sierra Leone.

**42.** My assent to the GEWE Bill puts us on an irreversible path to achieving a more inclusive, equal, more just, more resilient, more sustainable, and more prosperous society for generations to come.

**43.** Once again, from the bottom of my heart, I thank everyone involved, individually and collectively, for making this landmark **GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S MPOWERMENT BILL** a reality. It was no easy feat to break the glass ceiling to gender parity.

**44.** Finally, to every child, especially girls in Sierra Leone, I say your dreams and aspirations are valid. My signature on the GEWE Bill is the license for you to get a quality education, work hard and aspire beyond your wildest imagination to be the best at anything you desire to be. Change has come to our great nation today.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR KIND ATTENTION. GOD BLESS YOU.**