



**STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY DR.  
JULIUS MAADA BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE, AT THE  
ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN FIRST LADIES  
FOR DEVELOPMENT (OAFLAD) CAMPAIGN  
AT THE FREETOWN INTERNATIONAL  
CONFERENCE CENTRE, ABERDEEN,  
FREETOWN - 2ND JULY 2024**

**Chairperson  
Your Excellencies, First Ladies from across Africa,  
Speaker and Members of Parliament  
The Honourable Acting Chief Justice  
Ministers of Government and Other State Functionaries  
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps  
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**

Good afternoon

1. It is my pleasure to warmly welcome our phenomenal First Ladies to this historic city of Freetown and I feel personally honoured by your kind invitation to be part of the launch of #WeAreEqual campaign in Sierra Leone, initiated by the Organization of African First Ladies for Development (OAFLAD).
2. The good news is - Sierra Leone is more than ready for this campaign. Our commitment and concerted efforts in widening the political, economic, social and legal space for the girl child and our women folks to express themselves and be part of our national development is unparalleled.
3. When I took along my daughter Amina to help me cast my ballot in the 2018 Presidential and General election, most people interpreted my action as a sign of family solidarity. But to me and my wife (now our First Lady), it was more than that.
4. To us, it was a declaration of a commitment to women and girls' empowerment, signalling that the place for our women and girls is at the forefront of national issues.
5. Ladies and gentlemen, my motivation and commitment to empowering women and girls is firmly rooted in my personal life journey.

6. In losing my father at a very tender age, my mother and my elder sister Agnes (both of blessed memory) immediately stepped in to assume parental responsibilities. They supported and encouraged me to pursue my dreams to the best of my ability.... In them, I saw the heart of a woman.
7. As President, you will sometimes turn to your inner circle for strength and courage when the shenanigans of political leadership and governance come ragging.
8. I am always grateful to my political allies, friends, and supporters; but one person that remains an unwavering constant, there through thick and thin - is my wife, Mrs. Fatima Bio.... In her, I daily see the love and strength of a woman.
9. Madam First Lady, I heartily thank you for your support. And on behalf of my brothers who are not here, I wish to also thank all the First Ladies present for your support to your husbands and the governance architecture of your respective countries.
10. We are proud of you and your contributions to delivering the developmental aspirations in your respective countries.
11. Your work is inspirational because it requires creativity, innovation, and commitment to collaboration to identify opportunities to serve your people diligently by complimenting the work of your respective governments.
12. Gone are the days when First Ladies were mere accessories. These are vestiges of the past that we are eager to discard because it signifies missed opportunities to

leverage such a powerful Office to extend the reach of government.

13. This generation of First Ladies have set a standard of excellence and have positioned their offices to drive policy, shape national discourse, and champion the causes of the vulnerable, especially our women and children in Africa who are seeking equity and equality.
14. Being surrounded by women of your caliber and strength, one is always assured of being nudged in the right direction and to gain better insights on the plight of constituents that lack agency.
15. I do not have any doubt that the ` campaign will further enhance the ability of our girls and women in nation building and global development.
16. When I assumed the presidency of our beloved nation in 2018, I saw an opportunity to widen the space, create the enabling environment, allocate the needed resources and promulgate and amend the necessary laws to empower our women and girls.
17. My government has launched and implemented the most radically progressive and impactful initiatives for the advancement of women and girls. Sierra Leone today is amongst the top performers on gender equality and empowerment.
18. The recent World Bank Report on Women, Business and the Law scored Sierra Leone 92.5 out of 100, significantly higher than the regional average of 74 in sub-Saharan Africa.

19. However, it is not a surprise that we are amongst the best performers because our reform agenda to drive gender equality was well planned and informed by my conviction that unlocking sustainable economic growth in Sierra Leone requires unleashing the power of its women.
20. For the benefit of our visitors, I would want to mention few of the interventions of my administration that have changed the narratives for women and girls in Sierra Leone:
21. At the base of our policy initiatives was the Free Quality Education launched in 2018. In addition to making education available to all (boys and girls) without any discrimination, this initiative also comprises a tuition-free component from primary to university, for girls opting to study Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM.)
22. To ensure that girls do not need to be absent from schools to attend to the natural period circles, we launched the Free Sanitary pads campaign for all school going girls, with myself and my wife as the Chief Campaigners.
23. In 2018, we declared a State of Emergency on rape to give momentum to the Hands Off Our Girls campaign. This was a campaign meant to criminalize and punish sexual violations of girls.
24. We have also established the Sexual Offences Model Court which is a specialized division of the High Court of Sierra Leone to expedite Sexual and Gender-Based Violence matters.
25. In 2019, we amended the Sexual Offences Act of 2012 and introduced the radical inclusion of pregnant girls in

normal school curriculum, which removed double victimization of pregnant girls and allowed them to pursue their dreams.

26. My administration now has a stand-alone Gender and Children's Affairs Ministry separated from the Ministry of Social Welfare to handle the affairs of women and children.
27. With the passing of a landmark law – the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act in 2022, women have been accorded 30% in all aspects of governance including 30% allocation of Cabinet positions and Parliamentary seats.
28. I am very proud to say that my appointment of cabinet ministers is in compliance with this provision – it is not just a political statement. We talk and we do.
29. The Abolition of Child Marriage Act of 2024; which came just before the first anniversary of my second term, is the catalyst for the launch of the #We Are Equal campaign in Sierra Leone, which resonates with the theme of the campaign - "Abolish Child Marriage to Keep them Learning".
30. At the international stage, my government co-piloted the adoption of two United Nations Resolutions - Access to Justice for Rape Victims and the UN World Day (November 18) for the Prevention of, and Healing from Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Violence.
31. All of these symbolize a significant step towards promoting equality and inclusivity in our nation and the world, which further resonates with the #WeAreEqual campaign.

32. It seems obvious that our Parliamentarians had the #WeAreEqual campaign in mind when they unanimously passed into law the Abolition of Child Marriage bill. The bill was initiated by a Private Member and supported by our dynamic First Lady of the Republic of Sierra Leone.
33. Ladies and gentlemen, today, I want to publicly acknowledge and pay special tribute to this generation of African First Ladies. What you are doing in your countries is game changing.
34. You are at the forefront of fights that are changing the course of history and giving voice to over half of our population who have been downtrodden, voiceless, and disempowered for far too long. You are leading the charge in righting a great wrong, and I will say it again, we are proud of you.
35. Today I am deeply satisfied because I have had the distinguished opportunity to work with my wife to raise the profile of women in Sierra Leone in honour of my late mother and sister Agnes who raised me; and my daughter Amina who helped cast my winning ballot in 2018.
36. This is an accomplishment that will define my administration and I hope it will be a seminal part of the story of how our women led the economic transformation of Sierra Leone making our country a beacon of hope in Africa, where women have boundless opportunities to lead, determine their own future, and inspire the world.
37. Let me conclude by encouraging all of us to nurture the habit and culture of appreciating the tenets of the #WeAreEqual phenomenon by eliminating all forms of discrimination, violence, exclusion and other vices against our women and girls.

38. At this juncture, I have the singular honour to launch the Organization of African First Ladies for Development (OAFLAD), #WeAreEqual campaign in Sierra Leone.

I thank you all for your kind attention!