



**REMARKS BY HIS EXCELLENCY,
PRESIDENT JULIUS MAADA BIO ON THE
OCCASION OF THE LAUNCH OF THE
FLAGSHIP PROGRAMME OF THE FIRST
LADY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA
LEONE: “ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE AND
REDUCING TEENAGE PREGNANCY TO
EMPOWER WOMEN”**

Your excellences, the First Ladies of sister states

Ministers of Government,

Members of Diplomatic and Consular Corps,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good morning.

I welcome each and every one of you, our esteemed dignitaries. Your presence here is testament to your commitment to join others in making history. It is a commitment that will change the future for millions of women and their children yet unborn. It is a commitment that will change outcomes for millions of our girls. I join the first lady and the people of Sierra Leone therefore in warmly welcoming you and thanking

you for your historic commitment and presence in Sierra Leone for the launch of this initiative.

But I am torn in between emotions this morning.

How does one talk about an issue that rends the heart, perturbs the mind, and beggars belief? How does one even begin to understand the situation of child victims of rape and exploitation: their helplessness, their pain, their fears, and the sheer horror of their experiences? How does one talk about this as the father of a three-year old daughter and a President of a country all at once? Can we even justify this to our individual consciences or to our collective national conscience? As a man

raised by strong women, I believe every man should stand to make women strong.

“Hands Off Our Girls!” “Ne touche pas nos filles”!

Öona gi the gial pikin dem chance.

The message is clear and trenchant. Whatever the motivation; Whatever the justification; whatever the traditional or cultural reasoning or practice; whatever the religious rationale; whatever the economic pretext, **CHILD MARRIAGE IS WRONG AND IT MUST END;**

THE BRUTAL RAPE OF OUR GIRLS IS INHUMANE AND UNCONSCIONABLE AND IT MUST END;

CHILD PROSTITUTION IS A BLOT ON OUR
NATIONAL CONSCIENCE AND WE MUST
END IT;

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IS
UNDIGNIFIED AND WRONG AND WE MUST
END IT;

DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES AND
ACTIONS AGAINST OUR GIRLS MUST END;
MEN MUST TAKE PRIMARY
RESPONSIBILITY FOR TEENAGE
PREGNANCY AND END IT.

We have a moral and constitutional right to protect
the girl child and to change her outcomes. It is

ultimately good for our communities, our societies, and for our nation and our sub-region as a whole.

As a nation and as a region, we must be inspired to change that which is wrong about our societies.

We cannot achieve our goal of sustainable human capital development by discriminating against and summarily removing half of our population from schools and giving their hands in marriage, willy-nilly. Let us reduce this to a simple argument. By marrying off your girl child, you automatically terminate your child's education. The net impact of that selfish decision is that one of our valuable citizens drops out of school. That girl child with a low level of education may remain unemployed or

work for very little pay, if she ever does. With low income levels, she is most likely to live in poor housing and not have sufficient income to sustain a decent life. She may have multiple children and she may be prone to the possibility of child birth complications including fistula that may need significant medical intervention. Her children may have low health outcomes. Ponder the consequences of the action for marrying off your girl child for a moment then? A simple and often selfish decision has implications for our communities and for our national economies as a whole. By deliberately relegating half of our population to the lowest rungs of our society, we

burden our communities and we burden our nation.

We also forestall our national development. That decision deprives the nation of a valuable human resource. It creates or compounds maternal health issues, nutritional outcomes, and mental health and social status problems within our society. There is a huge economic and social cost to the nation. Our girls are not objects to be bartered away cheaply to comfort men in their beds; our girls are not brides. Our girls are Sierra Leoneans who deserve and must be given an equal opportunity to be all they can be.

A month ago, I was extremely gratified when the leading candidates in the Basic Education School certificate examinations were girls. Throughout the country, from Kenema to Makeni; from Kabala to Magburaka, hundreds of thousands of young girls lined up the streets and stadiums. In their determined and steely eyes; in their voices, I heard courage and I heard hope that my government will stand up for them and give them a chance. For the first lady of Sierra Leone, my wife, this campaign to end child marriage is more than a mission. It speaks directly to our national values and our national development priorities.

I recoil in anger and thinly suppressed rage
whenever I have heard broadcasts or read stories
about fully grown, adult men who violently rape
and batter young girls. What kind of a man are you
who rapes a 5 year old child? What kind of a man
are you who rapes and sodomizes a 10 year old
child? Our society has no place for such bestial
depravity. I have called for heavy penalties and
tougher sentencing laws that will ensure that each
rape becomes the last rape. A rape must be the
very last time that person walks this earth freely;
each rape should become the last time the society
or community hears about that person; each rape
becomes the last act of a perverted beast who has

no place among normal Sierra Leoneans who are focused on crafting a future for all Sierra Leoneans. The laws of our country should be applied fully and without mercy.

Child prostitution and teenage pregnancy are wrong and destructive. Children are children whether they are yours or whether they are out on the streets; they are not grown-up adult women.

Men who pay for abusing children are no better than rapists. Men who use their social standing and money to force children into sexual encounters are no better than rapists.

Men who inflict random and often irrational acts of violence on women have no place in our society. There could be no justification for gender-based violence. You do not become more of a man for beating up a woman no matter what the motive is or whether it is to satisfy some primordial and base masculine instinct. I could go on about why we should keep our hands off our girls but I would be pre-empting the engagements and views that will be expressed on this issue over the next two days. I intend to listen, be informed, and be ready to act to protect our girl children and their future and work with my colleague leaders in the sub-region to push forward for this common agenda.

As a government, we have started work on these issues by overhauling and strengthening national laws and policies for the protection of children in general and girls in particular. The Ministry of Social Welfare, gender, and Children's Affairs is finalizing a comprehensive review of a Sexual Offences Act. The cabinet and I expect to act on a final version that will be ready for the legislature. We expect ratification of stiffer and uncompromising consequences for persons who commit sexual offences in Sierra Leone.

In our public engagements, the First Lady and I have advocated strongly for the protection of the girl child from early marriage and other discriminatory practices. Her great work gives greater regional visibility to this campaign. As a government, it is my considered view that we should be deliberate and purposeful about how we create a national advocacy framework. We should fully and critically look at every issue, deficiencies or deficits in applicable laws, identify stakeholders or stakeholder networks, plan a comprehensive programme of engagement and action, and implement well thought-out action plans with a close eye on evidence.

Inter-sectoral collaboration, say among the Ministry of Social Welfare, gender and Children's Affairs, The Attorney General and Minister of Justice, The Police within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and other security sector and civil education agencies, is critical in a coordinated push back at the motives (economic or otherwise) and attitudes (cultural or social) that are used for justifying these discriminatory and unjustifiable acts against our girl child. As a government, we will therefore fully support community-based and national initiatives and campaigns for the rights of the girl-child.

As a government, we are looking at enriching and deeply engaging our development partners and civil society organizations especially because our objectives coalesce and we all wish for the same outcomes – the protection of our girls and ensuring that we remove barriers that prevent their full participation in our national polity and development. We also look to fully engage international organizations that work to prevent child trafficking and advocate for the rights of the girl child. The pathway forward, to our mind, is in cooperation and continuous engagement with one another.

Our fight is going to be robust and sustained. We have devised a tripartite approach. First, there is political commitment and support at the highest levels from my office and championed by the First Lady. The First Lady has also built a solid coalition of partners across the region as you can see here today. So there is significant buy-in.

Second, we want our laws and governance institutions to stay fully engaged in not only addressing deficits in law and policy but in enforcing all such laws and policies without fear or favour. Thirdly, we believe that advocacy and continuous civic education will change the minds

of persons who are stuck in old ways of thinking about this problem that has real implications for human lives and for our communities and nation as a whole. We should continue reminding one another why we should keep our hands off our girls. We should keep reminding one another why we must protect our girls.

I thank everyone present and I look forward to the outcome of this ground-breaking and highly commendable national and regional initiative.