

Statement by the MRU Secretary General on the Theme “Accelerating steps for Young Women’s Leadership in elections and advocacy for constitutional reform” hosted by Campaign for Good Governance (CGG)
To be delivered by Amb. Mrs. A. Medina Wesseh. on 12th April AT THE Bank Complex Kingtom at 9:30 a.m.

Madam Chairman, esteemed members of high table, permit me to start on established protocols, and greet all distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen, I feel honored to be here today, to give this address on the theme “Accelerating steps for Young Women’s Leadership in elections and advocacy for constitutional reform”

The Theme itself is very loaded and will need serious unbundling.

1. To Know what the steps for accelerating women leadership in elections
2. In advocacy for constitution and reform

Let me start by expressing our sincere appreciation to Campaign for Good Governance, for organizing this very important conference and for inviting me as MRU Secretary General to deliver the keynote address.

As you may be aware, for over a decade now, women’s organizations across Sierra Leone have been; and are still advocating to make The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s recommendation for a minimum Thirty Percent Quota for Women into law. However, although there are sustained efforts towards this, the realization still remains a dream.

We want the young women who are gathered here today in this conference under the aegis of the dynamic and irrepressible Marcella Samba Sesay and her team at the Campaign for Good Governance, we want you all to know that you are not alone in the West Africa sub region – the story is the same for women’s equality - for 30 percent or for 50-50 all over our sub region. The point that needs to be made today, is that you need to change the story and we are here to start the process. Further we need to change the narrative with what we do going forward. That is why you are here. We want to commend UN Women and all the development partners for initiating this process. To the young women you are being encouraged to make a positive dent.

To help bring about change. To accelerate the process. To advocate and add your views and your voices to change the story and bring about more and inclusive women participation in national politics most especially legislative politics.

Sierra Leone is signatory to international declarations which urge States to act towards attaining gender equality. -

The CEDAW Convention which was signed by Sierra Leone in the 1990s; states that “State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life of the country” (Art. 7).

The UN Beijing Platform for Action from 1995, signed by the governments of the world, states that governments should commit themselves to “Take measures, including, where appropriate, in electoral systems that encourage political parties to integrate women in elective and non-elective public positions in the same proportion and at the same levels as men” (FWCW 1995: Art.190b).

The protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ rights on the rights of Women in Africa from July 2003 points out that “States Parties shall take specific positive action to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries through affirmative action” (Art.9). By the way I was in Beijing in 1995. I even remembered some of my interventions and some words I suggested. I feel proud when I look back nearly 30 years ago.

Whilst National and local elections can support women’s political participation in multiple ways, specific measures may be required to overcome the barriers of gender discrimination.

Women, old and young, experienced or inexperienced – politics is an art, some say perhaps a national pastime: - However, national politics is a serious business which if you ask me to tell you how and what to do, my first reaction, like the wise ones before us, is to say, it is not clearly written in the text book. In few words there is no script to follow. One road I know is the political party road. If you are not a part yesterday after, today go and join a political party of your choice and that which shares your belief. On the other hand, if you have more zest and zeal, form a political party with the focus on the kind of change you need. Just so you know political

parties are formed primarily to get state power via way of elections and popular participation. It is always better to form or join an organization. It is only at the political party level that we will begin to see changes in representation that is not to say independent candidate do not go to parliament or win other national elections. The more inclusive way is to be a part of the organized political movement which you share believe systems with. We are very pleased to learn that 17 political parties are here represented. Whatever be the case new or old, you will need to be armed with a belief. An idea for positive change which clearly shows what you would like to do with others. You should always want to be a part of a forward-looking progressive culture for women advancement and more inclusive women is participation. The organization and yourselves must work to have the necessary financial mechanism which will help to take you to your destination.

Organization can be likened to a bus or a car or a train or a plane, it is a carrier, to take you from one point to the other but you need to know where you are going or better put, you get on the mode of transport, with a clear destiny in mind. This is a subject for a whole discussion at another time. The question you will need to ponder is where are you going and what are you gonna do when you get there.?

The path for you as young women who may want to enter the national political stage for an elected or appointed position, is to know that you have an idea or a focus to want to help change a condition or a situation. To go for an elected position is to want to make laws to improve or to change a condition. You will need to join others to propose legislative action's – let your families know, we should not frighten them, we are going in to help make or pass good laws. That may be a simple answer on the why or the what do you want to do. You may want to increase the number beyond the 12% of women but you want to bring quality you come from some where or you live in a ward or constituency. You may want to put yourself forward to represent the people of your area.

If and when you give your word to members of your constituency, it is your bond with your people. So take your time, to know your people and have a focus on what you and your political party want to do to effect the change and hold word with them. It takes character, courage, integrity and some other common moral values to aspire to be a good leader who wants to advocate and accelerate the process of change.

We are all aware that Women candidates may face gaps in capacities or resources that prevent them from competing effectively, for instance other issues to frustrate women may be as simple as the location of voter registration centers and / pooling centers which might be challenging for women as they might be unsafe for them or just plain far for them. You have many hurdles but the first stop is the political party bus stop. When you join and become active in any political party of your choice, you must learn to work along with the makers and framers of the manifesto for each and every election.

Furthermore, at the national level, Electoral Management Bodies are sometimes unaware, or may underestimate hinderances to women's participation because they do not have the knowledge, skills or data to analyze and correct these. A whole new set of advocacy tools and skills are required to shift or change the narrative in favor of more and inclusive women's participation. We encourage you all to have a focus and set skills to examine some of these national laws and institution which hinder inclusive participation or gender parity at the entrance level of politics for women participation. In short if you want to operate along the path of advocacy, you will need to study the challenges. Know the issues and plan a way to address these. The mass media at the national level and social media at the global level can all help but what is formative is, organization at the grass root level with the people. You can never go wrong if you are grounded with the people.

Young politically conscious women must be supported across the entire electoral cycle either as advocates or aspirants to ensure their active participation and subsequent success in electoral processes. Conscious and politically focused civil society organizations in partnership with other coalitions and targeted government institutions like the Ministry of Gender, could support young women to become politically conscious and to aspire to be leaders through training, provisions of counselling, mentorship and other forms of social activism.

It is also vital to ensure that women, especially politically, active and conscious young women with ideas who want to make a difference; have fair opportunities to campaign and register to vote and be voted for. and should be protected from election-related violence. No one has or should have monopoly over violence. There shall be no violence period. Advocacy against violence, let alone violence against women must be resisted in the firmest possible way and manner during national or local political election. Violence targeted at women across the

political spectrum should be a national red flag- a no go area. This is where women cross the divide. Political violence is a sign of intolerance. Do not accept it to be done to you or any other women you must resist it.

As we continue to advocate for more women to effectively and efficiently participate in politics; women and young girls need to know – that if you see it as an art on a sport you first have to love it, take interest and want to change or make society better. It's usually a long road but take the first baby step and don't be afraid to walk fall-get up and get going again.

As I conclude these brief remarks, I will like to reiterate the MRUs commitment towards accelerating steps for young women's leadership not only in Sierra Leone, but across the sub region as we greatly value women's active and meaningful participation and inclusivity at all levels of governance in our sub region. I would be remis in my duty if I do not pay particular and singular thanks to the UN Women Country office and its leadership for supporting the CGG to organize this platform for young women to consider their place and role in embarking on a journey in national politics for the betterment of society. We thank the Ministers of Government of Sierra Leone for their of commitment, commendation to the Ambassador of the republic of Ireland for her country's firm belief in women leadership and for the support the Campaign for Good Governance

I encourage all of us, especially our young women to remain focused during these discussions over the next two days and participate actively. Let yourselves and your mind loose, ask question, as the old African proverb goes, she who is not afraid to ask question, will not miss the road.

I end on this now famous quote of Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, then Leader of Liberia – Africa's first elected female president when she charged the graduating class of Harvard University on 26th May 2011, “if your dreams do not scare you, then they are not big enough.’

I wish you new energy and focus in your deliberations over the next two days.