

Dr. Juldeh Jalloh and Madame Fatima Bio Support Group

Keynote Address:

Women in Politics in Sierra Leone: The 2018 Elections and Madame Fatima Bio

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As probably all of you had the chance to see for yourselves on this Inauguration Day at the jammed packed National Stadium, Mrs. Fatima Bio stood gallantly by her President, my President, your President, the President of all Sierra Leoneans, His Excellency, Retired Brigadier Maada Bio. Our First Lady is not only beautiful, graceful and elegant, Mrs. Fatima Bio is the embodiment of every Sierra Leonean woman: Her success is a testament to the achievements of women generally and specifically in the 2018 elections!

In The Gambia, while I was a graduate student doing fieldwork for my doctorate, the name Fatima Jabbie was already nationally known. She must have been barely twenty something (because I was still in my late twenties) but already Mama Fatima was a superstar. She was known for organizing national events on behalf of the then First Lady of Gambia, Madame Zainab Jammeh among other glamorous events. I recall that she also organized a Woman of Substance awards, recognizing the amazing contributions of women in The Gambia. She spearheaded the Miss Gambia Pageant. In fact, seeing this pageant live and being impressed by the lady in charge, inspired me to create The Miss Sierra Leone USA pageant when I returned to the U.S.

But it has been over 15 years since I left The Gambia and so it is just mesmerizing for me to see how Madame Fatima's life has advanced so rapidly to what is now the highest echelon of power at the shoulder of the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, right in the land of my own heritage.

In this 15 year period Madame Fatima had moved to the U. K. and completed her undergraduate studies. She honed her acting skills, starred in critically acclaimed Nollywood films and won several coveted acting awards. Above all, she landed the most eligible bachelor in Sierra Leone!

In all her media interviews, Madame Fatima is the epitome of poise, composure, and maturity beyond her years.

I can say from working with both Gambian and Sierra Leonean women at the grassroots for over 20 years that Madame Fatima Bio, our First Lady, is the best thing to happen to us right now at this point in our unique political history. In the global and local news, we often hear about the horrible statistics associated with women and girls in Sierra Leone - highest rates of maternal and infant mortality, unplanned teenage pregnancies, child marriage, high illiteracy, lack of political participation, discrimination in relation to land and property, domestic abuse, and sexual violence.

However, we rarely see the positive covered in the national and international media.

I would like to suggest that a closer look at the 2018 general elections in Sierra Leone reveals a lot that is positive about the women of Sierra Leone.

First, there is the resourcefulness of women in partnering with husbands or male relatives to achieve political goals.

Second, we saw women's amazing organizational skills in rural and urban areas, villages and markets.

Third, with the success of two female chiefs as new members of parliament for the first time in the history of Sierra Leone, we witnessed the breakthrough of traditional women in our national political institutions.

Fourth, we understood clearly that women were the financial backbone of many campaigns pooling together resources to pay for food, water, t-shirts, banners and other promotional materials.

And, finally, we realized that women are not unaware of their own power as kingmakers in our country.

I believe our FLOSL understands all the depressing and disparaging reports associated with women in Sierra Leone and that she will work hard to improve the lives of women and girls in key areas.

But importantly, we have seen her connect with and empower women in areas of strength that we already possess as women. In the recent political campaign, we saw our First Lady harness the political involvement of women at the grassroots; we saw her model hard work and resourcefulness for all women to emulate; we saw her stand by her man with a resoluteness and joy that we can all admire; we saw her humility and unpretentiousness; we saw that our Kono sister has both beauty and brains, that she is unapologetically smart and capable.

As a Kono woman, a Sierra Leonean woman, and a woman with my own very strong connections to The Gambia, I am deeply honored and so very humbled to have this moment to shout out to the world what a wonderful mother, wife and role model we have in Madame Fatima Bio, our First Lady of Sierra Leone!!!