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Women Are The Emerging Power Of The 21st Century

by Swanee Hunt

As the world celebrated International Women's Day on March 8, one gathering in particular testified to the resilience of the human spirit.

Some 800 guests assembled in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia on the coast of West Africa, for the International Colloquium on Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security. Most of the leaders present hailed from Africa, although a sizable number were Europeans and Americans. Among the colorful sea of head-dressed women were a handful of brave men.

Our car pulled up to a soccer stadium guarded by an all-female Indian battalion in snazzy blue uniforms. Inside, the crowd was seated in the middle of the field, theater-style, under a roof of green reeds laid across long bamboo stalks. With a sweet breeze, the air was remarkably cool; never mind that life outside the stadium was blighted with ruin from decades of war: young men with legs amputated at mid-thigh, burned-out buildings, cartoon posters warning girls not to be seduced by teachers promising grades for sex.

You exclude women, you fail. You empower women, you empower a nation. Women never forget that life is our most precious asset.

"This peace is so fragile," an aid worker whispered to me on the sidelines. "Illiteracy and unemployment at 80 percent or higher.... Meanwhile, we've thrown away tens of millions of dollars to train people badly for jobs that don't exist. Frankly, everything good here revolves around one person. One person only."

That one person is President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, former Liberian finance minister, World Bank official, and UN expert. This is the stadium where her opponent in the 2005 presidential contest, George Weah, must have kicked his way to soccer stardom -- without a high-school diploma.

It was crystal clear that the international guests had made the long trip to Liberia to stand with President Johnson-Sirleaf, the first woman to be elected head of state on the African continent. They know that "Ma Ellen" needs all the external support she can muster. Three years into her six-year term, donors' failure to deliver has meant that she hasn't been able to make good on her campaign promise to supply electricity to homes throughout the capital. That lapse means not only deprivation; these are the kind of disappointments that breed a coup.

Kagame's Stellar Record

Like Beijing before the Olympics, Monrovia went all out to prepare itself for the colloquium. Women took

their brooms into the streets; hotels made more improvements in the last two months than they had in two years. Still, most visitors had a story, though not necessarily a complaint. An Israeli politician spent the night in a room with no water or electricity. (The next day the embassy took her in.) The vice president of the European Commission told me that a family of mice paraded across her hotel room floor.

The person on the continent who can best identify with the challenges Johnson-Sirleaf faces flew in from Kigali, via Nairobi and Accra, to show his commitment. Rwanda's President Paul Kagame took the microphone to describe his regime's stellar record on empowering women in public life. No less than 56 percent of the lower house of parliament -- the first country in history to break the halfway mark. The same with the Supreme Court. And on and on.

Fifteen years after the genocide, Rwanda is relatively stable. Even so, Kagame's tall, broad-shouldered bodyguards were always standing by his chair, partially blocking the screen on which German Chancellor Angela Merkel and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered messages of solidarity.

Between the parade of speakers, the air was filled by the sound of eight female drummers, plus one shaking a gourd rattling in a bright red net. It seemed like a novel, almost whimsical, touch, until I realized that the drummers and dancers throughout the weekend had been abducted as child soldiers and sex slaves -- some forced to rape their sisters and mothers, others to kill their parents.

'Women Make Men'

Dr. Aicha al-Ghadafi, the daughter of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, stood tall, her blond hair covered casually with a sheer white scarf that fell over a long, perfectly fitted dress. She offered the saying, "Men make business and women make men." In other words, know your strength. Former Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik agreed: "It's not just China and India -- it's women who are the emerging power of the 21st century!"

I thought the most powerful speaker was Governor-General Michaëlle Jean of Canada, representing Britain's Queen Elizabeth II. Haitian by birth, she spoke eloquently of what she has learned "from the incredibly courageous women of Liberia...Female leaders who see every ordeal as an opportunity...who measure their success by what they give, rather than what they take. You exclude women, you fail. You empower women, you empower a nation. Women never forget that life is our most precious asset."

All in all, this meeting -- the result of two years of planning by the minister of foreign affairs and minister of gender and development -- was a huge success for the Liberians. Perhaps if we had seen how the sausage was made, we wouldn't want to eat it. But what a triumph all the same for Liberians to be hosting the party, not begging for crumbs.

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