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‘Ma Ellen’ is delivering Liberia

By Swanee Hunt | March 8, 2007

DRIVING DOWN a dusty dirt road littered with cavernous potholes recently, Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf ordered her 10-car motorcade to stop. Flanked by 15 bodyguards, including UN peacekeepers toting AK-47s, she stepped out to investigate the quality of bricks being laid by construction workers. A former UN development program official, she wanted assurance that all the bricks would come from the same factory, so as to provide a consistent and solid foundation for the boulevard.

It has been a year since "Ma Ellen," the first woman elected president in Africa, began to lay a solid foundation for her country. Today we celebrate International Women's Day, which recognizes women as agents of change. Johnson-Sirleaf has demonstrated that one of her principal themes is elevating women in all sectors of society. And as she reflects on her first year in office, she can point to success.

Despite 14 years of civil war, Johnson-Sirleaf demonstrated that she is capable of leading Liberia into new possibilities. Her government embraces minorities and opposition members. She has initiated sweeping anti corruption reforms as well as initiatives to resettle and reintegrate tens of thousands of refugees and ex-combatants. Sanctions on timber have been lifted. Her administration has begun training new security forces, restored electricity and water to parts of the capital, substantially increased primary school enrollment, and begun to rebuild roads. She has increased government revenues by more than 40 percent; and not only is foreign aid streaming in, there's even a growing trickle of foreign investment.

Although countries that are ruled with guns tend to marginalize women, Liberians are optimistic that Johnson-Sirleaf will fulfill her promise to deliver their country from ruin to renewal. The president has shown tough love, confronting 80 percent unemployment and \$3.2 billion in debt. But Liberia is in shambles, literally and metaphorically, and it will take more than one super-woman to put it back together.

Johnson-Sirleaf is blending the themes of female leadership and self-responsibility. As she does, she is changing the way Liberians, and the rest of us, view women and power.

She has appointed women ministers of finance, defense, sports and youth, commerce, and justice, as well as chief of police and president of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The theme is contagious: Last April, I flew to a remote village on the border of Sierra Leone. As the assembled townspeople cheered, an elderly woman declared, "If you look today where the big house is, a woman is sitting there. And if she is there, we can be leaders here! Men -- listen up -- we no longer walk behind you. We're side by side." Women's energy can fuel reconstruction. The international community would do well to redesign its programs, creating not only employment for demobilized militias, but a leadership development program for women. Education is, of course, key. We saw few women at the university, but the needs are even more basic. While visiting some 80 widowed farmers "back country," I asked how many could read or write. A commotion ensued before one lone woman was pushed to the front. When I asked the crowd how many would be willing to spend an hour studying each day, almost every hand shot up.

We witnessed that same enthusiasm at the ministry for gender. In a speech to uneducated rural women, a Liberian diplomat said, "This country was destroyed. But someone has come to deliver new life. But she can't do it alone. You . . . are the mid wives."

The metaphor is familiar. The president herself draws on maternity when inspiring women leaders. "As a mother, I understand what is needed," she asserts. "As a grandmother, I'm thinking about our future." Rather than tip-toeing around the charged issue of gender, Johnson-Sirleaf is stamping the world with her own brand of maternal leadership. As she strikes the delicate balance between providing help and nurturing independence, the international community is on call.

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