

Liberian Women Rise To The Fore

By Darren Taylor
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The government of Africa's first elected female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, has been in office in Liberia for almost two years. The president has announced an ambitious reconstruction program, but much of the country remains devastated as a result of a vicious civil war that raged for 14 years and killed about 200,000 people. Mrs. Sirleaf has appointed several women to high posts in her administration, and has pledged that Liberian women will play major roles in the rebuilding of their homeland. And although some continue to feel marginalized, others have seen their influence in society expand in recent times. In the second part of a series on the women of Liberia, VOA's Darren Taylor reports on their experiences since a woman has ascended to the helm of their country.

Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf says women are key to her country's reconstruction

After she was elected to much jubilation in late 2005, President Sirleaf made it a priority to greatly involve women in the arduous process of reconstruction. It didn't take her long to prove true to her promise, and women now occupy key ministries – including those of commerce, finance and justice. Mrs. Sirleaf also appointed women as five of Liberia's 15 county superintendents.

In reality, women have long played central parts in Liberian life. Many took active part in the civil war, joining rebel groups and fighting the government forces of former President Charles Taylor. Indeed, some rebel units consisted wholly of women, and females received dubious recognition as some of the best guerilla fighters to participate in the war.

But women also made up a great percentage of those killed or maimed in the conflict, and the international community has largely credited Liberian women's groups for eventually bringing about peace.

Now, President Sirleaf says their participation is crucial to the successful rebuilding of their damaged nation, which is still without such essential services as water and electricity and continues to languish in the economic doldrums, despite recent reforms and improvements.

But as women are rising to take their places alongside men in the reconstruction of Liberia, it must be remembered that many of them remain "very traumatized," says Juanita Jarrett, a veteran human rights activist in Monrovia and one of the country's leading lawyers.

"The women of Liberia are women who suffered rape. They are women whose young sons and daughters were enticed into (being) gun-toting child soldiers. They are women who lost loved ones, who lost properties, who went from sleeping in their houses that they had worked for and built to being displaced. I was displaced; I was even taken out of line twice to be shot because they (the rebels) said I looked like a particular group, or tribe, that was being sought for during

the wars," recalls Jarrett, a founding member of West Africa's Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) a group that fosters peace-building in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

Jarrett, however, stresses that the women of Liberia aren't looking for any excuses as to why they can't take part in the reconstruction of their nation.

"When you see women now, playing a pivotal role, it's because they feel that they have to let their voices be heard. They have to be part of the reconstruction, because they want a better, stable environment for themselves and for their children."

She says President Sirleaf's leadership continues to inspire all Liberians.

"It has raised the deserved profile of women. Because you know that during the war, women played a major role in the peace process. But they've never really been given the kind of exposure and the kind of recognition that their efforts (deserved). And having Mrs. Sirleaf as president right now just exposes Liberian women to so much recognition," Jarrett reflects.

According to Hawah Goll-Kotchi, a deputy minister in Liberia's ministry of education, the "greatest effect" of Mrs. Sirleaf's leadership has been girls returning to school "en masse."

"Education broke down during the war. But many schools have reopened, and the women are now taking their education seriously, because we can always point to Mrs. Sirleaf and say: 'Look what women can achieve,'" Goll-Kotchi says.

But Liberian women are doing "far more" than enrolling in school, she says: "There are just so many young women now that have gone into business. And I think it's a process that's going to gradually grow. And I think a lot of young women see Mrs. Sirleaf's ascension to power as something positive and encouraging, given the fact that many of them are now going back to school."

Jarrett says the true value of having a woman as the head of the country at this "fragile" point in Liberia's history may only be realized in years to come.

"Essential to Liberia's reconstruction is obviously peace. I don't think a man would've placed so much emphasis on reconciliation in Liberia as Mrs. Sirleaf has. The only way that a nation can prosper is if it is peaceful. Mrs. Sirleaf and the women leaders of Liberia realize this, and that's why there's so much emphasis on peace building. There are some men who say we are wasting time, that we should rather concentrate on reconstructing the economy first, and lastly on reconciliation. But we see it differently. Only by having mental reconciliation will our physical reconstruction be successful."

Alomiza Ennos, a representative to Liberia's House of Assembly and chairperson of the women's caucus, says the war thrust "independence" upon the nation's women.

"It has given them great confidence. Because for the past 14 years, women have been the breadwinners in the homes, we took the position as the head of the families; we had to go out during the war to pass out the bullets and the grenades and to get food for our families, to get medication for our sons. We had to hide our husbands and our sons and our fathers. And we went out there and we took the mantle of the man for 14 years," Ennos emphasizes, before adding: "We are not now prepared to sit by the side and let men take 100 per cent of the decisions in this country."

As a result of Mrs. Sirleaf's leadership, she says, Liberian women now have the confidence to "stretch for the stars."

"Women have decided to come to the decision-making tables. And with Ellen's ascendancy as president of the Republic of Liberia, and the first female president in Africa, most of the young girls want to be president. If you ask a five-year-old little girl: 'What do you want to become when

you get big?' She's going to say: 'I want to be president, like Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.' And so her presidency has motivated women, and even young girls. And so it's a very good thing for Liberia, and even Africa."

But Leymah Gbowee, the executive director of the Women's Peace and Security Network for Africa, and commissioner-designate for Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, tempers what she calls the "back-slapping enthusiasm" surrounding the growing influence of women in her society.

She warns against a tendency to celebrate President Sirleaf as if she's "some kind of messiah." Liberian women are "celebrating too soon," she says, with the result that many now have a "laid back" attitude.

"(They say) We have a female president, and she's going to do it all for us. But that is not the case. And I don't mean to sound critical about our president, but this is the reality: She has so much on her hands, that she can't do it all. Women need to move away and understand that this is not a women's president. She is a woman, but she is the president of a nation. We need to continue our advocacy; we need to continue to develop policies; we need to continue to be in the limelight. Unfortunately, we are not," Gbowee remarks.

For her, the reality that President Sirleaf cannot be expected to champion the women of Liberia ahead of the nation hit home at a recent donor's conference in Monrovia. At the event, says Gbowee, the president outlined her priorities – but failed to mention gender equality "even once."

"The women were a bit disappointed, but I said to them: 'This is a challenge. We shouldn't take it in bad faith; we should take it in good faith.'"

Waafas Oforu-Amaah, a member of the World Bank's Gender Unit, says the institution recognizes that gender equality is "very important" for Liberia's reconstruction.

"We see women's economic empowerment as a means to promote both equitable poverty reduction and growth. It's the Bank's new policy of 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics' and we've selected Liberia as one of the focus countries for that new strategy," she explains.

In October last year, the Bank fielded its first mission to Liberia to assess women's economic empowerment in the country. According to Oforu-Amaah, the delegation concluded that more women should participate in formulating labor and workforce and land tenure policies in Liberia, to bolster their empowerment.

The Bank completed a "gender needs assessment" that analyzed women's roles in Liberia's economy. Women emerged as the "key players" in agricultural production in Liberia.

"They make up 53 per cent of the agricultural labor force and are responsible for 60 per cent of production – and these are conservative figures," Oforu-Amaah discloses.

"Investing in female farmers is therefore essential to increasing rural productivity and revitalizing Liberia's rural economy. Absolutely key to a lasting peace in the country is that women in the rural areas need to have viable, sustainable livelihoods."

Oforu-Amaah says special efforts need to be made in Liberia to invest in the training and education of women.

"Not just in basic education, but also in skills-based training and training that makes a link between basic education and life skills."

She says the Bank acknowledges that Liberian women are "dynamic entrepreneurs. Seventy-seven per cent of self-employed women in the urban areas proves that Liberian women

are a big presence in the private sector. They are in self-employment; they are creating jobs for themselves to feed their families.”

Ofosu-Amaah says the “most important” – and negative – finding of the Bank’s assessment is that “Liberian women are currently absent from the profitable economic sectors like cash crops, forestry, mining, infrastructure and public works.”

A lot more needs to be done, she says, to involve women in the “hands on” rebuilding of Liberia, but some questions deserve further analysis: “Roads are being built; this is creating a lot of jobs – short-term jobs. But what special efforts are being made to make sure that women will also be able to get some of those jobs? How is the contracting happening to make sure that the jobs are not going only to men?”

Gbowee says it’s “obvious at the moment” that Liberian women aren’t involved in urban works programs, not many are being employed by government contractors and only a few have “top notch” jobs in the lucrative, high-profile sectors of the economy.

But Jarrett prefers not to “dwell on negativity.” The women of Liberia, she maintains, have become “unstoppable” – a strength that has been forged by their painful past and a desire to prosper in the future.

“In the heat of war, we were just fed up. Women would say: ‘I’m going out to those rebels, whether they shoot me in the head or whether they do not.’ It’s that courage, that you cannot let the country go to complete ruin because you have a stake in the country, you have a stake in the peace process.”

And then Jarrett pauses, and articulates her faith that the women of Liberia will not surrender the gains – for both their gender and their nation – that they have made in the past two years.

“It’s like (watching) your child (drown) – you will (try to) save that child even when you know that you will get drowned when that child is drowning. It’s that determination.”

Jarrett says it’s that “sheer willpower” that will ultimately benefit Liberian women – and the nation as a whole.

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