

Liberian Women Battle To Bridge Generation Gap

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Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf wants women to help reconstruct the country, but there's tension between older and younger women

Women are fast rising to positions of power in Liberia, as the country gradually emerges from a long civil war. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first elected female head of state, says women have certain unique attributes that enable them to reconstruct their country. As the economy rebounds from stagnation, they are expected to become increasingly involved in industry in Liberia. But some in the country feel that women won't be able to take their rightful place in Liberian society – unless the apparent "tension" between the younger and older generations is resolved. VOA's Darren Taylor reports on this, in the fourth part of a series on Liberian women.

During the civil war that raged for 14 years in Liberia until a peace agreement between rebels and government forces was sealed in 2003, the country's education system crumbled to the point of non-existence. Most young people were forced to abandon their classrooms to participate in what remains one of Africa's most brutal bush wars, or to flee for their lives to refugee camps.

Before the conflict, an impressive number of Liberians had received a good education.

"Before the war, most Liberians could read and write," says Juanita Jarrett, a lawyer and one of the stalwarts of Liberia's peace process. "But when the violence came, everything changed."

"What we're faced with here, in terms of this generation gap, is really a problem of education," explains Meima Karneh, an assistant minister in Liberia's Department of Commerce.

"The older generation, like President Sirleaf, have mostly been the recipients of good education, whereas the young people, especially the women, are very poorly educated because of the war. And this disparity is breeding tension. Some of the young women can't even read or write, and they resent the older women who are better educated and therefore more powerful in society."

The present generation of Liberian political leaders, and most notably its female members, have been educated at leading international universities. President Sirleaf, herself, is a Harvard-trained economist.

According to Karneh, Liberia is one of the few countries in the world where older people are better educated than younger citizens.

"There's certainly a feeling amongst young people in Liberia that the older generation is excluding them from the reconstruction process, and that Mrs. Sirleaf, as a member of the older generation, thus doesn't fully represent them," Karneh acknowledges.

Leymah Gbowee, commissioner-designate for Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a leading human rights activist in West Africa, considers herself to be part of the younger generation of Liberian women.

"After the elections, we women congratulated ourselves for having done a great job. But Liberian women have so far failed miserably in bridging the intergenerational gap between older and younger women in Liberia," she says.

But Hawah Goll-Kotchi, a deputy minister in Liberia's ministry of education, disagrees.

"I can understand if someone says there's a divide between the indigenous (rural) women and the women in the urban areas, and we're making serious efforts to bridge that divide. But younger women, as opposed to older women? I will beg to differ on that."

Jarret is a founding member of the Mano River Women's Peace Network, MARWOPNET – an organization credited by the international community with being instrumental in securing peace in Liberia. The members of MARWOPNET are largely veteran activists. Jarrett acknowledges that there's tension between her older generation, and younger women in the country.

Gbowee, who also played a big role in the country's peace process, recalls how she and other younger activists avoided cooperating with their older colleagues, like Jarrett, in the past. Some of these "bad feelings" persist, she says.

"We avoided linking up with MARWOPNET because we felt they had never bothered to carry us along – their generation. They were doing their work exclusively amongst their age and social class group. So we thought, okay, we'll start our own thing," Gbowee reflects, before adding: "The older women had their efforts, and we younger women had ours. We are trying to bridge this gap, but it's hard given that most younger women aren't educated. We want to engage with the girls, so that they don't feel hateful towards us, as we felt hateful towards the women who were older than us."

But Alomiza Ennos, a representative to Liberia's House of Assembly and chairperson of the women's caucus, says "too much is being made" of this "so-called generation gap" between the women of Liberia.

"It's not true that the girls hate us or anything; they see us as role models; they see us as women who are making the way for them tomorrow. And they realize that the only way they can take our place in the future, is to educate themselves and even be more educated than us. So it is not true that the younger girls are frustrated; they are going back to school and they are looking forward to us making a mark for them, which they're going to follow later on," Ennos maintains.

She says the older generation of women leaders who have risen to prominence in Liberia, especially since Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's election victory, are not deliberately excluding their younger counterparts from the rebuilding efforts.

"This impression comes from the fact that it's the older women who are better educated at the moment, and who are therefore in a better position to lead the reconstruction than the younger generation, who really suffered during the war. Most have very basic education – if they have any education at all. As soon as our education system improves and the young become educated, we will welcome them with open arms to take the lead in the revitalization of Liberia," Ennos pledges.

Karneh says "initiatives are on the go" to groom young Liberian women for leadership positions in the future.

"I'm presently involved with that activity, and what we do is that, during vacations when schools are closed, we bring together young women from senior high schools and young women from early years of university, and we expose them to leadership positions. We make them to interact

with women in positions, so that they'll be able to see women in decision-making positions as their role models, so that they can learn from them and to empower them."

Ennos denies that the youth of Liberia have "lost respect for older women – I think that's putting it a little bit too strong." But she does acknowledge a looming "disaster" if efforts are not made to educate young Liberians, and especially girls.

"The experts will tell you that Liberia is the only country where you find that the adults are more educated than the youth. And if we continue on this trend, it is going to be a disaster. But we're encouraged that many young girls are going back to school. Teenage pregnancy is now reducing. If it can continue like this for two, three, four years, we're going to have more women in college," says Ennos.

Carla Koppell, of the Initiative for Inclusive Security, a Washington D.C.-based think tank that's doing extensive work in Liberia, has met with the country's female political leaders.

"They identified the mentoring of the next generation as really critical. It is one of their highest priorities, along with closing the education gap," says Koppell.

Gbowee, and other younger Liberian women leaders, are hoping that this is, indeed, the case.

"Unless it happens," she states, "there will be an impression that there is one Liberia for a certain section of people, and another for the youngsters. And this is very dangerous."

But Liberia's women leaders are confident that with good education, the younger women will begin to connect with the older generation, to the advantage of all Liberians.

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