

Women Prepare To Break Male Dominance of Liberian Economy

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Liberia's women leaders agree that unemployment is one of the greatest challenges facing the West African nation

As Liberia begins to recover from a long period of civil war, the authorities are trying to involve more women in the reconstruction of their country. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first elected female head of state, says women are essential to the successful rebuilding of Liberia. She's appointed women to top positions in her administration. Liberian women are also preparing to enter industries that were previously dominated by men, such as timber and mining. In the final part of a series focusing on the women of Liberia, VOA's Darren Taylor reports on the special skills they plan to use to make their homeland a better place.

The female leaders of Liberia, who've risen to prominence since President Sirleaf's inauguration, say there've been several notable improvements in the country recently that have happened as a direct consequence of the fact that a woman is head of state.

At first, though, they're hesitant to sing one another's praises.

"I don't want it to sound as if we think we are more important than men!" laughs Hawah Goll-Kotchi, a deputy minister in Liberia's education department.

But modesty soon fades as the discussion deepens about the challenges facing Liberia – a country where even the most basic of services, such as running water, are non-existent and where the authorities are locked into a war against corruption and a battle to improve their poor economy.

"Accountability, for one thing (wouldn't have happened unless a woman was in charge of the country)," says Goll-Kotchi. "We're trying to institutionalize a lot of things that have not been there in the past. Mrs. Sirleaf is very emphatic about accountability, and just getting rid of corruption; trying to institutionalize those two issues – bringing them up to the public domain. It's only a woman, perhaps, who could have this kind of courage."

President Sirleaf has appointed women – Justice Minister Francis Johnson-Morris, Finance Minister Antoinette Sayeh and Commerce Minister Olubanke King-Akerele – as the pillars of her anti-graft program.

"It's not a mistake that women head the important ministries of commerce, finance and justice – and are in control of the agencies that are fighting corruption," says Meima Sirleaf-Karneh, assistant minister in the Department of Commerce. "It's clear that Mrs. Sirleaf wanted women to be the key players in the war on corruption. Women are just more serious in fighting this than men. Women are far less likely to become involved in corruption than men."

Alomiza Ennos, a representative to Liberia's House of Assembly and chairperson of the women's

caucus, doesn't want to create the impression that "all men are corrupt." But, she says, international research has shown that women are less corrupt, and this is reflected in Liberia.

"That is proven from our economy. You can see that our revenue has doubled (since President Sirleaf was appointed)... And so we are really seeing the economy growing with a woman being in power."

Liberia's economy is indeed showing signs of gradual improvement, but women are almost completely absent from the most lucrative sectors of the country's economy.

"Liberian women are currently absent from the profitable economic sectors like cash crops, forestry, mining, infrastructure and public works," says a member of the World Bank's Gender Unit, Waafas Ofusu-Amaah, who recently completed an assessment of Liberia's economy.

Karneh counters this by pointing to the fact that some of these sectors have until recently been subject to severe restrictions that didn't allow Liberians – men and women – to become involved in them. Liberia couldn't legally trade in diamonds, for example, because according to international law it was still considered a conflict zone and its gems were therefore classified as "blood diamonds." But the Liberian government recently signed a compact pledging to trade "conflict-free" diamonds – gems that aren't mined by rebel groups, for example. Liberia's diamond industry is opening up, creating more opportunities for women to become involved in this business.

"Those (sectors mentioned by the World Bank) are areas that have not even been open (until very recently)! The timber industry has not really opened up... I think people need to give this government maybe another year to see how things unfold. Once all of the industries, once all of the concessionary areas have been opened up, I'm sure women will rise up to that (and occupy senior positions in these industries)," says Karneh.

Sectors such as mining and timber are dominated by men "all over the world," she maintains, and it's therefore unfair to expect Liberian women to suddenly "transform" this "status quo." But Karneh thinks Liberian women will soon "break through" into these industries.

"We'll provide scholarships for top female students. We're targeting certain areas of the economy for young women to go into, and timber, mining and infrastructure are some of those areas."

Ennos says it's "just a matter of time" before women control key parts of Liberia's economy. In fact, she says, this is already happening.

"When these industries open – when the forestry opens and when the diamond mines open – women are going into it. I know women who are now (working) at the gold mines (in Liberia), because they are digging gold. Women are into the gold business. These are things that women were not into before, because they believed that it was all men's job. But we have rediscovered ourselves, and the sky is the limit for us as women in Liberia."

Goll-Kotchi agrees that women are currently missing from the most lucrative sectors of Liberia's economy, but says "it can't be disputed" that women "bring special skills to the table" that enable them to be successful participants in reconstruction efforts.

"Women come into any position with a certain level of commitment, a certain level of seriousness and trying to build a system to do the right thing. It's true that we do not have many women specialists in...the timber industry, in the gold and diamond mining industries. But eventually, we will get to that."

Goll-Kotchi says men are "impatient, quick to anger, cause confrontation" and are tempted "more easily" than women into corruption.

"Women are better negotiators, and we all know that negotiating is an essential tool to do good

business. They are also cooler under pressure and don't panic," she maintains.

Karneh adds that women have "humanity" and as mothers, "they know what's good for their children. They are more patient than men and are nurturers. More women in leadership positions can only be good for Liberia."

She's encouraged that more Liberian women are becoming involved in cross-border trade with neighboring countries in West Africa, and in international commerce.

"Before the war, a lot of women were not into cross border trade. Now you find that a lot of Liberian women are into cross border trade, where women are traveling to – not only West Africa, but they're also going to Asia; they are going to Europe and the United States, and buying things and carrying them back to Liberia (to sell)," says Karneh.

Ennos exclaims that Liberian women have "left the kitchen!" and are now immersed in "every sector of life and decision-making in the country. Every way we think we can make money – we're going to be there. Right now, you find (Liberian) women doing international businesses. Women go to Thailand, they go to Ghana – and we're still playing the roles of the heads of most homes (in Liberia), because the economy is not so good yet, and most of the men don't have jobs."

Juanita Jarrett, a veteran peace activist, human rights lawyer and a leading member of various women's organizations in West Africa, says Liberian women aren't "waiting for invites" to improve their standing in the region's business community.

"Nearly 80 per cent of women in Liberia are illiterate, but they can still use their hands and get an income. There are women in Liberia who can't read or write, but they're making bricks so that they can assist with the reconstruction of the country. And they're going to sell those bricks. Most Liberians cannot afford cement, so a lot of the reconstruction is happening through the use of mud bricks."

Women are training as tailors, says Jarrett, and are hoping that the government will award them contracts to make school uniforms for Liberia's burgeoning school-going population. Many women who were previously in exile have returned to Liberia, equipped with a new array of skills.

"Many of the women who went to Ghana learnt skills in commerce, because the Ghanaian women have been businesswomen for a very long time," Jarrett explains.

But Ennos acknowledges that the "biggest challenge" facing Liberians at the moment is unemployment. According to Jarrett, "even highly educated" Liberians can't find work, and are forced to become small traders at local markets.

"Some of them have degrees in economics but you'll find them sitting in the sun selling fruit," Jarrett sighs.

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