

Liberian Women Demand Full Inclusion Into Security Sector Structures

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Women played a crucial role in bringing to an end Liberia's 14-year civil war, and they are also playing an important role in the country's reconstruction. There are about six females in President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's cabinet. The President has also set a goal of having 20 percent women in the national police and military. Still there are challenges in Liberia's attempt to increase the capacity of women in the country's reconstruction, particularly in the security sector.

Six women, all of them key players in the Liberian security sector, gathered in Washington Thursday at a forum on integrating women into Liberia's new security forces. The event was sponsored by the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington.

Asatu Bah-Kenneth is deputy director of police for administration. She praised the United Nations for retraining the Liberian national police into a more professional force. But she said when it comes to deployment

"You have female and male going to the training academy; they do the same criteria to enter the academy, but when they graduate from the academy opportunities are only to the male officers. They believe that the female officer must always prove herself before she can be given opportunities. And we are trying to discourage the old boys network," she said

Asatu Bah-Kenneth also said Liberian women police officers are being encouraged to learn specialized skills.

"We want have women who can be accident investigators. We want to have women who can be trained in sexual exploitation and abuse because we believe that women victims are more comfortable in reporting cases to them," Bah-Kenneth said

Ciatta Harris-Clarke is assistant to the Liberian minister of national defense and director of staff. She praised the U.S. DynCorp International for the job it's doing in training the new Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). She said unlike the pre-war Liberian military, which had a negative image, high standards are being set to professionalize the new army.

"If you are not up to the task, you are nationalistic, we will not have you there. You must be a high school or close to that equivalent. If you must be an officer you must be a college student," she said.

Also speaking was Cerue Konah Garlo, executive director of the Women NGOs Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL). She said some of the criteria being set for recruiting women in the security sector are too rigid.

"I want to join the military, but I do not need to climb a six-foot wall to be included into the military because I'm a professional accountant and social worker. My skills as accountant and social worker can be utilized in the military, can be utilized in the police. But I don't need to climb

a six-foot wall. So we in civil society are saying the criteria are too stiff. At some point we have to be flexible to have women included into the security sector," she said.

Konah Garlo said it was important for women to be highly recruited into the new Liberian military and police because she said women bring a different flavor to the security sector. She also said more needs to be done to recruit women into other security sectors like the immigration.

Precious Dennis Mitchell is a founding member of the Security for Women through Advocacy Coalition, which is trying to dispel the misconceptions that people have about the Liberian army and police after 14 years of war. She said some women have refused to join the army because some of them say either they or their children were raped by military personnel during Liberia's civil war.

"We think that if we have more women in the security sector women won't rape women, and there will not be war because women are good negotiators. There will not be a case of women being raped at night or women running from the police. We should run to the security instead of running from them," Mitchell said.

Representative Regina Sokan-Teah serves on the Defense Committee, which has oversight over the Liberian security sector reform. She also thanked the United States for its role in bringing peace to Liberia. But she said the legislature is concerned about the fact that it has not received from the U.S. DynCorp International the official documents on how the Liberian army was dissolved and reformed.

"The documents need to be in our hands as an oversight to be able to compliment them because at the end of every good job there should someone to say thank you for a job well done. One example for the oversight is that the army was created by an act of the legislature and it's being dissolved without a new act because there should be an act of the legislature dissolving the old army and creating the new army," Sokan-Teah said

The Liberian women also said although Liberia has a new law against rape, challenges still remain. For example, they say the Liberian judicial system is too slow and frustrating for women and it is not decentralized. The women- also say the trial process is traumatizing for women rape victims. And they called for more female judges because they say Liberian judges are predominantly men who tend to have their own definition of rape.

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