

Liberia Voluntary Presentation: Review Theme:
**"Challenges and Achievements in the Implementation of the Millennium
Development Goals for Women and Girls."**

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The delegation of Liberia welcomes the opportunity to deliver its voluntary presentation which is based on key thematic areas of the agreed conclusions of the 58th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Our delegation would also like to use this platform to indicate its appreciation to our partners, Canada and Norway who will constructively critique this presentation being delivered by Liberia, on the review theme **“Challenges and Achievements in the Implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for Women and Girls”**.

Mr. Chair,

Excellencies,

Fellow Delegates,

As a member State who participated in the 58th Session of CSW and further endorsed the agreed conclusions, Liberia as a nation, is fully cognizant that the realization of women’s and girl’s rights is critical to the achievement of sustainable development. Women’s and girls, full potential can only be a reality when their rights are protected in every facet: be it Socio-Economic, Cultural , or Political.

1. the inter-linkages between the full realization of women’s and girls’ human rights and sustainable development;

All persons irrespective of race, sex, religion, political and cultural backgrounds are guaranteed to enjoy all fundamental rights and freedom under the Liberian Constitution. The Government of Liberia remains committed to ensure gender equality and the promotion of women rights through various national laws and policies, in addition to institutions and interventions

Further, the Liberian constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex (cf. Articles 8, 11, 18). However, statutory laws sometimes discriminate against women and, more frequently, there is a lack of specific laws as well as a lack of enforcement to ensure women’s rights are protected.

In addition, the Constitution also recognizes customary laws “in accordance with the standards enacted by the Legislature” (Article 65). Through the Revised Regulations Governing the Hinterland of Liberia (Customary Law), people in rural areas may be governed by the customary laws of any of the 16 ethnic groups. Whilst the laws are not identical, they frequently discriminate against women. Article 2 of the Constitution authorizes the Supreme Court to declare all laws, customs etc., inconsistent with the constitution to be null and void, and the adjudication of customary laws to be supervised by the regional administration (Revised Regulations), however, these provisions most frequently are not exercised, especially during conflict.

The inter-linkages between the full recognition, realization and protection of women and girls' human rights and sustainable development,- A good and concrete example of this is the work of Plan Parenthood Association of Liberia (PPAL) in the area of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in 13 counties of Liberia with support from International Planned Parenthood Africa Region (IPPFAR), UNFPA, IRC, UN Women along with other CSOs to champion sexual and reproductive health and rights through advocacy, empowering women and girls to make informed SRH choices, and serving women and girls with quality integrated SRH services.

PPAL in 2016 increased the knowledge of 53,345 youths through radio talk shows on the importance of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in schools, to make informed SRH&R choices, provided 628,883 Family Planning, 5,878 Post Abortion Care, 1,507 HIV, 12,067 STI, 243,294 Other SRH, 597,702 Youth SRH, and 63,436 CYP (contraceptive) Services.

We solely believe that through the following measures: like the development of National Action Plan on Human Trafficking launched in 2014; (b) The National Health and Social Welfare Plan, 2011-2021 to respond to health care at all levels; (c) The strengthening of Criminal Court E (mandated to hear cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence)by the appointment of a second Judge and decentralization of the Criminal Court “E” to other counties; (d) The establishment of a Sexual and Gender-based Violence

Crimes Unit within the prosecution system; and (e) And the strengthening of the Women and Children Protection Unit in the Police service, through training of personnel's are all positive steps in the protection of and advancement of women's rights.

The Girls' Manifesto was developed, launched in 2016 and operationalized to address the issues of challenges being encountered by adolescent girls particularly, rape and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) as well as the launching of the End Child Marriage Campaign in adherence with the African Union (AU) Campaign on End Child Marriage in Africa.

The Children's Law which seeks to protect Children from being abused was also enacted and saw the creation of the Children's Parliament. For the first time, the Children's Parliament is headed by a brilliant young girl in person of Satta F. Sheriff who has also represented Liberia at the International Day of the Girl Child in the United States.

2. The need for an enabling environment including a macro-economic framework that promotes gender equality and systematic gender mainstreaming across all policies;

Liberia adopted a number of critical policies and action plans for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women , few , including the Revised National Gender-Based Violence Plan of Action, the New National Health Policy , the Revised Girls Education Policy, the New Education Law ,The HIV and AIDS Law, the HIV/AIDS Strategic Plan of Action , Poverty Alleviation and Wealth Creation through Small Enterprise Development, National Gender Policy and the draft Domestic Violence Bill, endorsed by the Liberian Cabinet in June 2015, which is before the National Legislature for enactment.

Women's Economic Empowerment and Financing

Endorsing women's economic empowerment and gender equality is highlighted by the Central Bank of Liberia (CBL). The CBL has empowered women through the microfinance Loan Scheme which

has impacted the lives of about 63,000 women group in Liberia, each group comprising of at least 25 members.

In 2016, the Central Bank of Liberia through the Microfinance & Financial Inclusion Unit (MFIU) incorporated a considerable segment of the non-bank financial sector, into the banking sector by augmenting access to financial services. The unit administered these function through established financial institutions, such as Village Savings & Loan Associations (VSLA), Credit Unions and Microfinance, and a host of mass-based grassroots organization. Several Susu Clubs (informal savings and credit clubs) were institutionalized into financial institutions. They affected business registration through the Liberia Business Registry, formulated and notarized by laws/constitution, obtained certification of affiliation with the apexes of Village Savings & Loan Association (NAPEX) and Liberia Credit Union National Association (LCUNA), and registration with CBL, etc. These processes facilitated those newly established financial intuitions to open and operate bank accounts. Consequently, this afforded thousands to be absorbed from the unbanked to the banking sector of Liberia.

Challenges:

The Central Bank was unable to recollect loans due to the outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease that devastated the country's economy. The amount given to these women could not be received according to terms because of the above mentioned situation. The process which is intended to be revolving is not meeting its objective because other women are not being empowered. However, before the outbreak, women were meeting up with their repayment terms and even now, although process is not effective, some are trying to meet up with their repayment plan.

Success Story

There are many success stories however, only one has been highlighted. One of the beneficiaries of the Loan Scheme is Mrs. Margaret Logan Yarkpa. She was a rock-crusher and the loan given to her by

the Central Bank of Liberia through the VSLA was used to improve her life. She is now a proud owner of a house, a shop and is currently the chairlady for the Village Savings and Loan Association.

2. Maximizing investments in gender equality, including through increased domestic resource mobilization and Official Development Assistance (ODA) and institutionalizing gender-responsive budgeting;

In 2014 the World Health Organization (WHO) described the outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in West Africa as the biggest ever recorded in the history of the world. In Liberia the EVD affected the socio-economic assets, health and education to name a few. The Ministry of Health reported a total of 10,172 cumulative Ebola cases with 4,466 deaths as of April 2015 in Liberia. Women were disproportionately affected by the EVD due to their role as caregivers. About 75% of cross-border women traders and 200,000 to 300,000 women in small scale artisanal mining, as well as 4,000 women involved in Village Saving Loan Schemes lost their livelihood or means of income generation. A World Bank survey conducted in February 2015 reveals that about 41% of household heads who were employed at the inception of the EVD were unemployed at the time of the survey. The World Bank survey also shows that about 43% women who were self-employed, engaged in petty trade and 19.3% women engaged in food processing business lost their businesses.

A National Post Ebola Recovery Plan was developed and it seeks to mitigate the impact of the EVD on the population. The primary goal of the Plan was to revamp the economy and bring it back to the country's medium and long term development plans. The Government is committed to ensure women's economic empowerment through access to finance, loan payments, savings, cross border trading, employment, access to roads and markets, food security and nutrition, as well as women's income generation schemes. The protection of women and girls from all forms of violence including sexual and gender based violence also form part of the government's post Ebola recovery strategies. Currently, Government, through the Ministries of Health and Gender, is providing medical and social assistance for Children and EVD Survivors.

The Government has increased Support to Rural Women under the GOL/UN Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (JP RWEE) with 3,800 rural women benefitting from the initiative. 12 Rural Women were sent to India and trained in Solar Electrification and Rain Harvesting; these would serve as trainers of trainers to other rural women who would be attending the Solar Engineering program at the Grand Bassa Community College. Currently, the site has been renovated at the College with rainwater harvesting facility made available by the Barefoot College thru the Government of India and the government of Liberia. The National Rural Women Structure, the Cross Border Traders Association and the Village Savings and Loans Association were established in the 15 counties to ensure that programs and projects are decentralized on the local level to enable women to participate in decision making as well as assist women to acquire funding for international trading. Today, we can boast of the Rural Women Structure being transformed into a strong autonomous structure which can source funding on their own making it possible to own farms in Lofa County with offices in all counties.

Under the Peace-Building project 4,000 women from seven counties were trained in Business Development Skills (BDS), literacy and numeracy and Village Savings Loan (VSL) scheme .In land rights and natural resource management,3,000 rural women were trained; Also, 74 Women Peace Hut Leaders were trained in Community Peace-building and Leadership initiative.

The Ministry also launched and made operational the impactful Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) Project that has trained over 4,700 adolescent girls and young women and 100 boys, thus, increasing the employment and income of Liberian women and young boys by providing livelihoods, life skills training and facilitating their transition to productive work. The EPAG program has given hope and inspiration to local women at the grass roots level. Latricia Wamah from Kakata who, with no support to further vocational or higher education took the initiative to enroll into this program at Round 2 of four rounds. She excelled in training and became a trainer. She received support to help cater to little children in her own Day Care. Today, the program has added early child

development and Latricia is not only for kids at home; she now has her own professional Day Care program in Kakata, Margibi County called the Comfort Christian Early Childhood Development Institute.

The Vulnerable Girls program is another initiative of the government through the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection where over 245 less fortunate and underprivileged girls are provided full time scholarship at Ricks Institute, Bromley Mission and Gbalatuah Mission. Because of this program including EPAG, the confidence level of our young girls have soared and for most of them, the sky appears to be the border to cross and open their potential. Few months ago, 23 young girls from the Vulnerable Girls Program travelled to the United States and were able to interact with the Former First Lady of the United States of America, Mrs Michelle Obama under the let girls learn program. They exuded confidence.

The Government also initiated the Social Cash Transfer Program with 11,031 Households and 55,000 individuals receiving direct cash from the Government which among other things help to reduce poverty, hunger and starvation in households that are extremely poor and at the same time, labor constrained, to increase school enrollment and attendance and improve health and nutritional status of children in all targeted households in the five counties of Grand Kru, Maryland, Bong, Bomi and Grand Cape Mount Counties

4. Strengthening the evidence base by improving data collection, reporting on gender indicators and development of new methodologies; and

Liberia has made efforts to improve its data collection mechanisms through real time provision of statistics on Gender Based Violence (GBV) cases, child abuses, location of vulnerable population in case of shock, and other gender indicators.

For instance, the ministry has deployed Community Based Organizations (COBs) and Social workers in the 107 districts in the 15 counties of Liberia to report on gender indicators. This was made available through the establishment of the GBV taskforce comprising of GOL, CSOs, NGOs network.

Also, the Government also launched the National Social Registry aim at improving data collection for gender indicators and reporting. Thanks to the World Bank and USAID for the funding.

However, the collection of relevant sex-disaggregated data to effectively diagnose gender inequalities and design appropriate strategies for the promotion of gender equality for national development in Liberia remains a major challenge. Much effort has not been made by state actors to design a system to generate sufficient targeted sex-disaggregated data needed to support interventions and create awareness on the social and economic implications of gender imbalances in Liberia.

5. Ensuring women's participation at all levels of decision-making and strengthening mechanisms for accountability.

Although the draft Affirmative Action Bill is still pending before the National Legislature, an amendment made on section 4.5 of the 1986 Election Law in 2014 incorporated the Fairness Bill provisions on women's equal representation and participation with men at all levels of the governance structure of Liberia. Section 4.5.1(b) of the amended election law states: "A political party or coalition in its submission to the commission, of its list of candidates for an election should endeavor to ensure that the governing body and its list of candidates has no less than 30% of its members from each gender, while Section 4.5.1c also states: A list of candidates submitted to the Commission for an election should endeavor to have no less than 30% of the candidates on the list from each gender". Moreover, it was adopted during the March 2014 National Constitutional Review conference that 50% representation in the national Legislature of each sex be enshrined in the Constitutional review Process pending the national referendum in 2017

Several leaderships training workshops have been conducted for women across the country and plans are underway to conduct training workshops for potential and suitable women candidates in negotiations, lobbying and campaign strategies design. The intend of these training workshops is to prepare women in authority at the local level in decision making processes.

The Establishment of the Women's Situation Room UNDER the Angie Brooks International Center(ABIC) which has gained recognition from the UN Security Council is a visible element of translating provisions enshrined in various instruments on women's rights and the participation of women in conflict resolution and mediation.

Additional institutional structures have been established to strengthen the accountability mechanism:
These include

Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection,

Women's Political Participation working group,

National Human Rights Action Plan Steering Committee

GBV Task Force

Women's Legislative Caucus

National Rural Women Structure

Whilst Liberia continues to exert efforts toward addressing the challenges encountered with regards to the implementation of provisions within the 2014 Agreed conclusions, concerted efforts have been institutionalized to ensure that the country meets its targets set with regards to the implementation of the Sustainable Development goals. following goals such as eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, reducing child mortality, improving maternal mortality, and combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases, the gap to overcome these challenges between now and 2015 is quite large.

Therefore, overcoming these challenges would require the following:

- Building of supporting institutions and infrastructures;
- Putting in place the requisite framework, policies and national legislations; and

- Collective and creative strategies are needed to mobilize resources, generate popular support and political will from all branches of government which are critical to achieving sustainable development.