The Future of Development in Liberia: Keeping Women on the Agenda

BY HALA HANNA
AND
ANNA LUCIA ALFARO

The year 2011 has been a good one for Liberian women: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was re-elected to the presidency, shortly after receiving, with her compatriot Leymah Gbowee, the Nobel Peace Prize. The recognition of these two women’s work stems from their lifelong dedication to the non-violent struggle for women’s rights and the safety of women in their country. The prize stands as a symbol of the strength of Liberian women. Indeed, during Liberia’s fifteen-year-long civil war, women ensured their families’ survival through farming; women also brought an end to the war. Peace activist Gbowee was at the head of the interfaith peace movement that is largely credited with restoring peace in the country.

When President Sirleaf came to power in 2006, she made women’s rights one of her priorities. In addition to building, from scratch, the country’s institutions and convincing the international community to forgive Liberia’s debt, Sirleaf’s administration placed a renewed focus on the plight of women in Liberia. During her first term, women’s political voices were strengthened. First, she established the Women’s Legislative Caucus, a multiparty committee in the House of Representatives that ensures a gender-sensitive approach to the legislature. Second, women’s representation was increased from 6 percent in 1995 to 13 percent in 2010 in the National Legislature, and to 17 percent in the Senate. The Inheritance Act was also passed, establishing rights of inheritance for spouses of both statutory and customary marriages. And rape, long used as a weapon of war, was made punishable, with a maximum sentence of life in prison.

Under President’s Sirleaf’s leadership, Liberia has also made significant progress in achieving several Millennium
Development Goals (MDGs). Most impressive, the gender gap in primary education has almost disappeared in the past six years. The ratio of female to male enrollment increased from 72 percent in 2000 to 90 percent in 2009 at the primary level, and from 71 percent to 75 percent at the secondary level. Improvements were also achieved in the areas of macroeconomic stability, governance and the rule of law, commitment to fiscal responsibility, and increased engagement with strategic development partners.¹ As a result, the country’s performance on major development indices and socioeconomic indicators has improved. For example, in 2009, the country rose to 169 (out of 182 countries) on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). After years at the bottom of the HDI ranking, this is a significant improvement.

Despite the herculean efforts that President Sirleaf and her administration have already made, the challenges confronting Liberian women remain immense. Liberia still suffers from the fragile conditions that typically plague post-conflict states, hindering its progress in the important areas of security and socioeconomic development.

Rape and sexual violence against women remain the country’s largest crime problem: around 17.6 percent of women ages 15–49 and around 22 percent of those ages 25–39 (that is, more than one in five women) have experienced sexual violence. This makes the spread of HIV/AIDS that much harder to control. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS remains higher for women than for men in both urban and rural areas.² Furthermore, the majority of Liberian female workers are still laboring in the unpaid and informal sectors, characterized by insecurity and low productivity. Around 90 percent of Liberian women are employed in the least productive sectors of the informal economy or agriculture, compared with 75 percent of working men.³ Significant headway is needed to achieve the MDGs related to gender equality and women’s empowerment. Despite the significant gains in gender equity in education among youth, there is still a remarkable gap in adult literacy rates; in rural areas, only 30 percent of women are literate, compared with 60 percent of men.⁴ Liberia still suffers from one of the world’s highest maternal mortality rates at 1,000 per 100,000 births. Due to poor transportation, only 46 percent of all births are attended by skilled health personnel (doctors, nurses, or midwives).

The goals of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, improving maternal health, and combating the spread of HIV/AIDS are all necessary to make progress toward giving Liberian women equal and productive roles in society. To help
achieve these goals, President Sirleaf must nurture an environment that will guarantee women’s rights and access to justice. Increasing women’s access to courts and truth commissions and implementing gender-sensitive legal reform and gender-responsive reparations programs are two of the policy recommendations that UN Women provides for post-conflict governments facing challenges similar to Liberia’s. Furthermore, the Liberian government should increase support for women’s legal organizations, position more women at the frontline of law enforcement to increase the reporting of sexual violence, and, most importantly, prioritize gender equality at the heart of Liberia’s Millennium Development Goals.

Liberia has made great strides in improving the economic, social, political, and legal statuses of women over the last six years. President Sirleaf continues to transform her country from war-torn devastation to one of growth and opportunity for women and men alike. However, the country continues to face many urgent and difficult challenges, especially with regard to gender equality and women’s rights. These must be overcome to ensure that every entity of Liberian society plays a positive role in its future.

Endnotes


2 http://data.unaids.org/Publications/Fact-Sheets01/liberia_en.pdf.


5 UN Women is the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.
