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KONRAD ADENAUER FOUNDATION (KAF)

“Support to the Legislative Assembly in Liberia”

Gender Awareness and Gender Equality in Liberian Politics

**Work shop in collaboration with COPPWIL
(Coalition of Political Parties Women in Liberia)**

16 – 18 June 2005

R e p o r t

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In recent years, the issue of mainstreaming gender into programs, policies and actions has continued to be the focus and point of collaboration for both national and international efforts. Since the Fourth World Conference on Women of 1994 during which states of the world affirmed their commitments to the cause of women, much attention has been given to the pursuit of gender equality at different levels: at the educational, economic, institutional and political levels, etc. How and where to begin from in the quest to improve the status of the world's women has continued to be a major challenge not only for women but also for national and international development agencies.

Women and Armed Conflict

For post-conflict situations especially, incorporating the issues of women into adopted resolution mechanisms and/or frameworks has posed a serious challenge. In furtherance of the United Nations Resolution 1325, however, efforts are being made to highlight the concerns of women, which include strengthening or building their capacity to enhance and/or increase their political participation at the national, regional and local levels.

Of course, building or strengthening women's capacity is crucial and critical for the pursuit of the goal of gender equality at all levels. In fact, in the absence of an effective strategy that will make the desired and immediate impact, it is almost impossible to imagine how women's role as valuable partners and positive catalysts in the peace-building and transformation processes can be recognized, appreciated, wholesomely acknowledged and reflected in whatever resolution formula that is eventually adopted.

For the Liberian situation, Increasing Women's Political Participation in the Post-War Reconstruction of Liberia national and international efforts are being consolidated towards the goal of equal political participation for women in the national recovery and renewal process. The women of Liberia are therefore fast becoming proactive and more pragmatic about their own situation, and how they can collaborate with the relevant international agencies to reverse their long years of marginalization in and exclusion from the conservative power structures that continue to inhibit their participation.

Various strategies for strengthening capacity are now underway. Some of these strategies are being formulated for the short, medium and long terms. The activities described in this Report were intended to have rather short-term objectives, which include conducting *awareness and sensitization workshops* for community Leaders, aspirants and/or candidates for the Lower and Upper Houses of the Liberian Legislature respectively.

Strengthening the capacities of the approximately seventy (70) women aspirants for the October elections is therefore a cardinal ingredient of the democratization process.

In pursuit of these objectives, a three-day Conference on “Gender Awareness and Equality” was held at the Pastoral Retreat Center of the Catholic Archdiocese of Gbarnga. The Conference brought together some fifty (50) members selected from four chapters of the Coalition of Political Parties Women in Liberia (COPPWIL), some local women leaders, three women Legislators, three Representatives from the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL), and some officials from the Ministry of Gender and Development, including the Minister.

Gradually, and as their country gears up for elections on October 11 this year, Liberian women are fast becoming a formidable force. Their response to empowerment schemes and efforts are gathering momentum.

Conference on “*Gender Awareness and Equality*”

In furtherance of its efforts to help strengthen women’s capacity, the Coalition of Political Parties Women in Liberia (COPPWIL) is receiving assistance from the European Union European Commission sponsored Support to the Legislature Assembly Project of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF). A three-day Conference on Gender Awareness and Equality was therefore held in Gbarnga, Bong County, as a first strategy. Held at the Pastoral Retreat Center of the Catholic Diocese of Gbarnga, the Conference brought together participants from Bomi, Margibi, Grand Bassa and Bong Counties.

Conference Objective, Methodologies and Expected Results

The three-day Conference on “Gender Awareness and Equality” was organized to serve as a vehicle for identifying the common obstacles inhibiting women’s political participation. The methodologies include presentations by women in decision-making and women professionals, thematic group discussions as well as the development of a conference report. The key result areas targeted are:

1. An enhanced women’s understanding of the gender problem;
2. Strategies to tackle obstacles, constraints and challenges developed;
3. Women’s self-confidence in their own leadership potentials built;

4. The way forward also identified.

The objectives, methodologies and key result areas constitute the main features of the Conference.

GUESTS AND PARTICIPANTS

Guests

The following Dignitaries attended the three-day Conference on “Gender Awareness and Equality”:

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| 1. Honorable Vabah K. Gayflor | -Minister of Gender and Development; |
| 2. Honorable Ruth G. Caesar | -Chairperson of the NTLA Committee on Gender, Equity and Child Development; |
| 3. Honorable Bartu Dolley | -Co-Chairperson NTLA Committee on Gender, Equity and Child Development |
| 4. Honorable Clarice Jah | -Member of the NTLA; |
| 5. Cllr. Comfort Natt | -Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL); |
| 6. Attorney Muna Sio | -Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL); |
| 7. Professor Kulubo Kollie | - University of Liberia; |
| 8. Mr. Daniel F. Weetol | - Superintendent of Bong County; |
| 10. Mr. Wilmot J. Paye | - Special Assistant to the Minister of Gender and Development/Assistant Minister; |
| 11.Cllr. Frances Johnson Morris | - Chairperson of the National Elections Commission (NEC); |
| 12. Dr Heinz Jockers | Program Manager EU Konrad Foundation |
| 13. Ms Menekeh Pshorr | Program officer EU Konrad Foundation |

Participants

The identification and selection process for participants was done in close collaboration with the Coalition of Political Parties Women in Liberia (COPPWIL). The Coalition has of late become an effective vehicle for mobilizing women and it draws its membership from all registered political parties.

However, due to the lack of full awareness about its activities, COPPWIL has not as yet fully established its presence in all fifteen political sub-divisions of Liberia, even though efforts are underway to establish chapters throughout the country.

Because of this situation, participants for the conference were selected from only four out of the fifteen counties: Bomi, Margibi, Grand Bassa and Bong. Plans are however in the offing to extend this exercise to the rest of the counties in the soonest possible time period before the October elections.

FORMAL OPENING CEREMONY

The three-day Conferences on “Gender Awareness and Equality” was formally opened on Friday, June 17, 2005. It commenced in a somewhat elaborate manner, allowing for various comments including a keynote address by the Minister of Gender and Development, Honorable Vabah K. Gayflor, who stressed the following key points:

- ✓ Increased women’s political participation as the greatest challenge facing both women and policy-makers alike;
- ✓ Outcome of conference to be fully utilized in the struggle for equal political participation;
- ✓ Conference unravels an opportunity for advancing the women’s cause and further highlights the criticality of women’s role in the nation-building process;
- ✓ The marginalization or exclusion of women limits mass participation and thus *diminishes democracy*;
- ✓ Women are a vehicle for reconstruction, social integration and societal transformation.

Earlier, the conference formalities and logistics were briefly explained. Superintendent Daniel F. Weetol of Bong County then followed by acknowledging women’s invaluable contributions and role in spite of their marginalization in the political decision-making process. The Superintendent expressed appreciation for the international intervention in Liberia and the gains made so far, which is largely responsible for the level of peace and sanity now

prevailing in the county. He expressed delight to the organizers for selecting Gbarnga as the ideal venue for the conference.

OVERVIEW OF WORKSHOP

Dr. Heinz Jockers of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF), the key implementing agency for the European Union's/Commission's project titled, "*Support to the Legislative Assembly in Liberia*" which is being funded through the 9th European Development Fund (EDF). Dr. Jockers pledged the Foundation's support and emphasized the need to shift from the mere expression of women's rights to placing greater emphasis on women themselves becoming more aware of their duties and responsibilities as they press for equal political participation. He however noted the autonomy of conference and the need to adopt strategies that can be supported from time to time.

Ms. Menekeh Pshorr, a Representative of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, reminded participants of the focus on rural women's involvement and again stressed the objective of the conference. Ms. Pshorr encouraged participants to de-emphasize the focus or mindset that elections are an end in themselves. She urged women to keep focused in their pursuit of equal political participation, assuring however of KAF's neutrality.

In her introductory remarks, Ms. Marayah Fyneah, President of the Coalition of Political Parties Women in Liberia (COPPWIL), reemphasized women's determination to rise to the occasion, acknowledging the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's support and urging women to forge a united front in the struggle for equality. Ms. Fyneah stressed women's desire for a New Liberia free of biases, disunity, envy and the vices that inhibit socio-economic, political and cultural integration.

GROUND RULES

The following *Ground Rules* were adopted to govern the various sessions of the Conference:

- ✓ Switching off of all cell phones to the silent mode;
- ✓ Seeking recognition before speaking;
- ✓ Speaking at level comprehensible by all;
- ✓ Participants forbidden from chewing gum;
- ✓ No side meeting or talking;
- ✓ Respect and tolerance for others' views.

PRESENTATIONS

Various carefully selected topics were used to guide deliberations during the course of the Conference. Presentations were made on the following specific topics, which formed the basis for discussions:

- 1) Women in Leadership: The Liberian Case;
- 2) Women's Political Role now and in the Upcoming Elections: Which Chances for Leadership;
- 3) Women's Experiences in the Legislature;
- 4) Women and Society: Duties and Rights-Legal Aspects;
- 5) Strategies so far and Perspectives;
- 6) Women and the Electoral Process: Right or Privilege?

OBSTACLES INHIBITING INCREASED WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Following two days of deliberations, the thirty Participants were able to identify many of the key issues that are of concern to women. Consensus was unanimous that these issues so far constitute the *main obstacles that inhibit increased women's participation in power and decision-making*.

Consensus on these obstacles is of critical and crucial necessity if the goal of empowering women and ensuring their equal political participation is to be attained. The obstacles identified thus include:

- ✓ Lack of focus on *qualitative leadership* even among women themselves;
- ✓ Lack of financial resources;
- ✓ Growing waves of *opportunism* in society;
- ✓ Lack of *self-awareness and self-realization* among women;
- ✓ Growing levels of *envy, disunity and hatred* among women;
- ✓ Absence of potential women politicians from women-focused meetings and initiatives;
- ✓ The level of deceptions, hypocrisy, lies, intolerance and existing gaps between urban women and rural women;
- ✓ Failure of women to seek memberships in existing political parties;
- ✓ The disproportionately limited number of women in policy-and decision – making positions;
- ✓ Defeat of the 30-% Affirmative Action Bill by the overwhelmingly male-dominated National Transitional Legislative Assembly (NTLA). (There are only four women in this 76-member Body.)

OUTCOME, STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conference also developed strategies and advanced some recommendations that, if promptly considered, could help smoothen the path to equal political participation for the women of Liberia:

- ❖ Women's perspective of leadership to de-emphasize personal greed and instead focus on the pursuit of qualitative leadership at all times using past and present leaders as role models;
- ❖ Women seek to provide and pursue result-oriented leadership which is lacking in Liberia;
- ❖ Women abhor opportunistic tendencies in their pursuit of equal political participation;
- ❖ That women pursue and epitomize truth, honesty, transparency and justice;
- ❖ Women seek, at all times, to uphold and support fellow women in leadership positions, since the failure of one affects all;
- ❖ Increase awareness and sensitization in order to build women's self-confidence;
- ❖ Organize a *Reconciliation Forum* for women leaders to help remove suspicions, apprehensions and dispel wrong perceptions about others;
- ❖ Women Legislators and political leaders to speak out on issues and always seek to expose acts that hinder women's political participation;
- ❖ Potential women politicians to seek memberships in existing political parties;
- ❖ Women to fight envy, hatred, jealousy and the problem of disunity among themselves;
- ❖ Women in politics to arouse the interest of other women by making politics attractive through positive attitudes;
- ❖ Women to develop skills in lobbying, which are critical and crucial for a successful participation in politics, particularly in Legislative politics;
- ❖ That women avoid the wrong assumption that any woman will support the cause of gender equality in the political process;
- ❖ Women should seek and uphold *integrity*, which is crucial for winning public trust and confidence, truth, justice and transparency.