

“Education is Fundamental to Progress and Development”

Keynote Address

By H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

**At CEP Graduation Ceremony for the Economic Empowerment of
Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) Project**

St. Kizito Catholic Parish, Red Light, Paynesville

Monday, February 28, 2011

Officials of Government;

Representatives of the World Bank;

EPAG Project Graduates, Mentors, Trainers, and Staff;

Proud Parents and Community Members;

Private Sector Representatives;

Members of St. Kizito Catholic Parish;

Civil Society Partners;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for the invitation to address this Graduation Ceremony. You know, it is one thing to be invited to deliver a commencement address; it is even more special to deliver such an address at a program in which you have been so closely associated, as I have been with the EPAG.

Recognizing the opportunities such a project could offer to our girls and young women, in 2008 I signed up Liberia to be the pilot project for the World Bank’s global Adolescent Girls Initiative (AGI). Here was a program with enormous promise and possibility – one with a focus on adolescent girls, which aimed to increase their economic opportunities by providing business development, job and life skills training. This was training that was badly needed in our efforts to rebuild our country and empower our girls and young women who were often marginalized and neglected.

And so, a year ago last March, we launched the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) Project with great enthusiasm and great expectations. It has paid off immeasurably, judging from this fifth Graduation Exercise.

With today's graduation of the last group of 176 students from Round 1 of the training cycle – for a total of 1,200 trainees – I can say with pride and joy that my hopes and expectations were well placed. I eagerly look forward to Round 2 of this beneficial and worthwhile project, when the first group from among 1,300 candidates will commence their training in July.

Picture, if you will, the huge economic and social impact that 2,500 young girls and women, professionally trained with business development and job skills, will have on their communities and on our country as a whole. Just imagine! It will be immense.

Today's Graduates come from Doe Community, Battery Factory, and Red Light, but others have come from West Point, and New Kru Town, and Bassa Community, and Old Road, as well as from Bentol and Kakata. Our objective is to give girls in as many communities as possible the chance to improve their condition over the course of this three-year project.

Congratulations to all of you for making it this far. I'm sure it wasn't always easy to juggle the training and your personal life, but you stayed with the program because you knew that doing so would help you in the future. I am proud of you and the other EPAG Girls who sat where you are sitting today, ready to take on the world with newly acquired skills and a whole different attitude.

I congratulate you, on behalf of our Government, and in my own name. I also applaud your family and friends who have been there for you, and encouraged you, as you stuck with the program.

We say thank you to the Ministry of Gender and Development, which has led coordination of the project with a team of service providers, including the Community Empowerment Program (CEP), and all the mentors, trainers, and staff, for your commitment and dedication to this project and for your guidance and support of the EPAG Girls.

Let me also express our deepest thanks and appreciation to the partners that have made this project a reality. The Clinton Global Initiative came up with the idea originally. The project is implemented by our Government with financial support from the Nike Foundation and the Government of Denmark, and it is administered by the World Bank.

Dear Graduates;
Ladies and Gentlemen;
Fellow Liberians:

Education is fundamental to our nation's progress and to our personal development. For that reason, education – especially girls' education – has been, and remains, the highest priority on my personal agenda. Empowering girls is a strategic investment, and this learning environment contributes to the realization of our hopes and dreams for our girls and young women.

Our vision – our promise – is to transform our young population into a skilled, educated and vibrant labor force. With two-thirds, or 66 percent, of our population aged 25 or under, it is imperative that we do so. We know only too well that we will not achieve our development goals until we have enabled our youth to become educated future leaders. This is one reason we advocate for, in addition to academic learning, vocational training, such as EPAG, for those who have no skills, to return to them their dignity through employment.

Today, 176 girls are graduating with skills in hospitality, professional cleaning/waste management, professional driving, and security guard services – all of them much-needed skills in our society. Many of them have served in internships or are gainfully employed at well-known business establishments around town.

I am pleased to note that some of you are already putting your training into action! Allow me to mention a few success stories of EPAG Girls:

- There's Princess Sheriff, a CEP trainee who is now a waitress at one of our best hotels. Princess grew up in a refugee camp in Ghana, and returned home in 2008 with no livelihood, until she was selected for EPAG. She plans to work, save money, and return to school to become a banker, to encourage other women to save.
- There's also Patience Bestman, a LEED (Liberia Entrepreneurial & Economic Development) job skills house painting trainee from New Kru Town who, together with some of her classmates, have started their own painting company, Women of Tomorrow, believing that women can do anything men can do.
- With the business skills she learned from IRC (the International Rescue Committee) and CAP (the Children's Assistance Program), Mamie Jabbah of Bentol, a fifth-grade dropout, has built a small provisions shop in Low Cost Village. Her small business is flourishing, and so is her sense of empowerment.
- Among the nearly 200 trainees from Kakata was Tutu-Girl Paye, who was trained by the ARC/NAEAL (American Refugee Committee/National Adult Education Association of Liberia) team in business development skills. Before EPAG, Tutu-Girl spent all her time in video clubs and had low self-

esteem. Today she sells onions in the market and keeps detailed records. Her new-found confidence and income are empowering and enabling her to support her two small children.

- Last October, Kebbeh Kamara and Christiana Jackson represented the EPAG at a Washington, D.C. workshop for leadership training. Kebbeh is one of IRC's business trainees. The EPAG project came about at a low point in her life. It helped her reunite with her family and get her life on track. She is now involved in a small business and is back in school. She has even started a scholarship fund for high school dropouts. Christiana, a LEED's hospitality trainee, is working at a hotel and is starting a community clean-up project in her Old Road Community.

What great examples of EPAG Girls doing what we hoped and knew they could and would do – gainfully employed or self-employed and developing into entrepreneurs; into successful, influential members of our society and participants in our economy. With EPAG we are also “Lifting Liberia,” and promoting gender equality and empowering our girls. I should tell you that since I signed up Liberia for this program, eight other countries have followed, seeing its merit and value.

To you, EPAG Graduates, some final words: Your training may be over, but your education continues. As you go out into the world of work, seize every opportunity to learn. Have a good attitude; show patience and fortitude; be proactive; work hard; communicate with your employer; ask questions. Make the most of the skills you learned in class.

I also urge you to hold yourself to the highest standards. We are counting on you to help us cultivate a new culture of professionalism in Liberia. Serve yourselves and your country well

and make us proud of you as EPAG ambassadors. Use your EPAG experience as a stepping-stone to realizing your dreams. So much was invested in you – so much time, money and effort. You were given the opportunity to better your condition, and you took it. Continue to profit from it.

We will continue to follow the progress of the EPAG Girls, as you go about the business of life and fulfilling your personal and professional goals.

We salute you, and wish you the best of luck and success. We have every confidence that all of you will excel in whatever you set out to do. The foundation has been laid. You must now build upon it!

Congratulations, once more, and well done, to the graduating class of the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women Project. May God richly bless you.

I thank you.