

**Statement by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf  
At World Premiere of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund  
Video Documentary and Case Study: *God First, Second the Market:  
The Story of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund of Liberia*  
Monrovia City Hall Ballroom  
Thursday, August 23, 2012**

Thank you, and good evening, Excellencies, Dignitaries, Guests of Honor, Members of the Board of Directors of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund and, most especially, the market women of Liberia.

We have all been brought up to date on where the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund currently stands in Liberia and through its international base in New York City. Indeed, we have come a long way since it was merely an idea among friends.

Before going further, let us pay tribute to the market women who lost their lives during the war as they crossed enemy lines in order to feed Liberians on either side of the battle; to all of those who were incapacitated during that sad period and are still physically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually feeling that particular loss of self; and to the children who were denied their right to education and literacy as they endeavored to stay alive or keep others alive. We must also pay tribute for resilience in surviving those horrible 14 years, and having the strength to overcome personal challenges and to move forward.

In memory of all of those market women –truly the unsung heroines of Liberia's war and peace – I ask that we observe a moment of seated silence.

In the video we just saw, Lusu Sloan told us stories about market women during the war. I understand that she and Korto did the same thing at the 20<sup>th</sup> Gender Is My Agenda Committee (GIMAC) pre-Summit and at the African Union in Addis Ababa in July. Their stories represent two out of millions of stories that each market woman here tonight and throughout the country could share. Each story is personal, painful, engaging and compelling; it brings tears to your eyes and compassion to your soul. It is also a very inspirational story and a profound lesson about the resilience and determination of people not only to survive, but to win –win back their country, their lives, their families, their communities, their future and the future of their children.

We owe much to these women. They are our country's backbone. They also hold our future in their hands because their success is ours to share.

When I first came to office in 2006, markets across the country were demolished or in serious disrepair. As the hub of most communities, it was imperative that we find a way to rebuild the markets. With so many competing priorities to manage with a small national

budget, it became clear that we needed to enlist the support from outside of Liberia's borders. So, when Thelma Awori and Peg Snyder, from my days at the United Nations, approached me to find out how they and others could help Liberia, I quickly told them to help the market women.

They worked diligently with former Minister of Gender, Vabah Gayflor, and former Minister of Commerce and Industry, Olubanke King-Akerele, to create what became two non-governmental organizations: one in New York City and one here in Monrovia. They created systems and avenues where none had existed before. Starting with seed money from the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), another one of Thelma's several initiatives, they relied on the commitment and enthusiasm of women around the world to help rebuild Liberia.

My first meeting with the then Steering Committee of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund took place a few hours before I received the Hunger Prize in New York City, in October 2006. We met in a small conference room in the hotel. The late Wangari Maathai attended along with her daughter, Wanjira. The great writer and poet, Maya Angelou, was on the speaker phone with her booming and entrancing deep voice. The late Angela King was also there. Two potential donors had been invited so that I could help them decide to give the first donations. One was a real estate tycoon from New York City, and the other was a businessman from California. After talking to them about the market women in Liberia, they each decided to donate \$50,000 and \$25,000, respectively, to the Fund. This was the kick-off of donations. It went toward renovation of the Nancy B. Doe Cooperative Market.

A few months later, in early 2007, I was told that the Novo Foundation had donated one million dollars to build more markets. Everyone was so happy to hear this news. I had taken Jennifer Buffett, and husband, Peter, on an impromptu tour of the markets on one of their previous visits to Liberia.

Thelma was traveling back and forth to Liberia to ensure that the infrastructure of the organization here was also being built. SMWF had a small staff, consisting of Sekou Konneh as the Executive Director, and Irene Davies as the Accountant. They were housed in the Ministry of Gender and Development, and this was how the government could provide in-kind contribution to the effort. The SMWF Board in Liberia primarily consisted of Ministers or Members of Cabinet who could ensure that progress was being made.

The organization shaped up in New York City and Liberia, making an impact, on the ground, in markets around the country. In 2008, my alma mater, Harvard University, bestowed an honor on me in Cambridge, Massachusetts. No sooner had I received the honor than I was on a plane with Ambassador Charles A. Minor to New York City to attend SMWF's first fundraiser with Lusu Sloan and Massa Cousli. They had been flown to New York from Liberia by what used to be called UNIFEM and is now known as UN Women.

As I gave my speech, I was struck by how diverse the audience was. There were many from the UN agencies, but also many more from a cross-section of all economic, social and cultural backgrounds in New York City. I had to assure them that Liberia, as a country, was

making progress developmentally, while being frank about our needs and the ways in which they could help us achieve our goals. In doing so, I had to bridge our reality of being a post-conflict country with the hustle and bustle norm of New York City.

Lusu and Massa helped me to do that by sitting in armchairs on the stage with me and participating in a joint conversation that told collective stories as Liberians who had been affected by the war. We responded to questions from the audience, with Thelma serving as interpreter because the New York audience was unfamiliar with Liberian English. But, in spite of the difference in dialect, people in the audience, who had never been to Liberia and, mostly, never stepped foot in a post-conflict country, really heard the stories of survival that Lusu and Massa told. They could feel the heroism of these women as individuals and as representatives of millions of women, like them, in Liberia. By the end of the evening, our market women had made us proud as well as the audience in the room. Everyone felt inspired to do something.

Almost a million dollars was raised that night alone through small donations and big donations. Luckily, some of my Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Sisters were in the audience. They contacted me afterwards to say that they wanted to raise \$500,000 from all of their chapters in the United States to build a market in Liberia. It took them about a year or two, but their contribution has enabled the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund to start the construction of the Omega Market in Whein Town. A big thank you to Sorors who are here tonight.

Because SMWF is an independent organization and has gained its footing, the Ministers of government were replaced on the SMWF/Liberia Board by representatives of civil society. This is when Olivia Shannon became Chair. In 2010, the UN Women Fund for Gender Equality granted a three million dollar award to the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund, which enabled it to hire a part-time Program Manager in New York City and build an eight more markets in the country. This was a great boost and brought SMWF greater international visibility.

I maintain my commitment by taking visiting dignitaries to Liberia on impromptu visits to the markets. These are usually eye-opening experiences for them, and they are always struck by the spirit of the market women. Some of these dignitaries have included: President Bill Clinton of the Clinton Global Initiative; Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and Founding Honorary Co-Chair of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund; key policymakers who came to Liberia in 2001 to attend the International Women's Colloquium that I co-hosted with the President of Finland; Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile and the first Executive Director of UN Women; and an assortment of other dignitaries.

During my visits to the United States and elsewhere, I always make sure to mention the market women in my speeches. In this way, I am able to bring and keep visibility on an integral segment of our economy that is usually kept invisible in many economies across Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen;  
Dear Friends:

My dream for the market women of Liberia is to not only rebuild or construct their markets, but to help them and their children become more literate so that their opportunities will increase. You saw in the video testimonials from some of the women about how being able to read has improved their lives exponentially. It has given them the power to reverse the trend of being victims. They can now count their change. They can now write their names. They can now read the signs of buildings hanging over their heads. This is very inspiring.

In doing so, they become even better role models for their children, their peers, and others in their communities. By helping them build their own capacities, they are helping us become a stronger nation. But, they will need the help of the larger community, nationally and internationally. So, I ask you here tonight, to think creatively about ways that you support the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund to meet its goal of building 50 markets, with such ancillary services as literacy programs, daycare programs, potable water, waste management, building infrastructure, and more. This program is a holistic approach to address multi-dimensional human needs.

The office of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund has now moved from the Ministry of Gender and Development to a house on 18<sup>th</sup> Street in Sinkor. It has a professional staff overseen by a new Executive Director, Pia Brown; and a hands-on Board of Directors in Liberia that is backed by an International Board of Directors based in New York City.

To those of you representing Embassies, I ask you to share this video with your capitals. I am sure you can find a way to complement the work of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund. To those of you who represent companies in Liberia, I call upon you to show your corporate responsibility – like Petrotrade and Alfaden – by supporting SMWF. In addition to money, find ways to partner with the organization on critically needed programs.

The future of Liberia is in our hands today. Let us work together to shape it the way we want it and need it to be.

I thank you.

***\*President Sirleaf delivered an abbreviated version of this statement, which she wanted released, in its entirety, for the record.***