

Intervention by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

At Clinton Global Initiative's Panel Discussion

On "Empowering Girls and Women"

New York, Tuesday, September 21, 2010

This panel explored new ways to empower girls and women, and discussed strategies for enabling girls and women to access education, health care and economic opportunities. The panelists: President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia; Queen Rania of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan; and Mr. Muhtar Kent, Chairman and CEO of the Coca-Cola Company. The Moderator: Katie Couric, Anchor and Managing Editor, the CBS Evening News.

President Sirleaf on empowering girls and women:

Our greatest constituency is women; we owe our electoral vote to women, particularly the women in the informal sector. We focused on what we could do to empower them, starting with the fundamental of addressing girls' education by making primary education compulsory and free. But that wasn't enough, and so we focused on improving the situation of women in the informal sector – our market women – giving them literacy training and better working conditions. What that has done is to give them some upward mobility, being able to work under different conditions and having some literacy where they understand the basic tenets of business. Then the women wanted to do trade, and so we moved them into cross-border trade, where they go across the borders to fetch marketable goods and bring them back to sell. Enabling them to do so moved them up to a different level.

We also recognized that the majority of our women are farmers. We therefore help women farmers to produce the foods that they have been going across the borders to fetch, and where sometimes they faced serious obstacles in transport, and custom guards infringing on their rights. And so we got the World Food Programme (WFP) to buy their produce.

Violence in the society remains a big issue. Rape continues to be a problem with us, coming from the effects of many years of conflict, as well as gender-based violence and domestic violence. We have a tough Rape Law in which rape is a non-bailable crime. There are still challenges to that by lawyers who think it's an infringement on rights, but it's something we are going to maintain. We established a Special Court to deal with domestic violence against women, as well as a Special Unit in the Ministry of Justice. All of those measures are responses to these problems. There has been a lot of progress made, and I think this has given women much more freedom, and enabled them to overcome the obstacles of lack of access to the means production, to justice, and to equal opportunity. All of this has had some beneficial effect, but we still have challenges in that regard.

President Sirleaf on integrating market women into the greater economic picture in Liberia:

We started to improve the conditions under which market women work. If you looked at some of the film that was just played, you saw the women with their goods on the ground, on a piece of cloth. So we built markets for them. The women take their children into the marketplace with them – the ones that are too young for school – and so our modern buildings ensure that we have daycare and primary schools where the kids can go to school, and we make sure that they have basic sanitation facilities and water. We are doing

this in the urban areas and trying as much as possible to do the same in the rural areas.

But oftentimes that was not enough because many of the women did not understand how to do business: when they go across the border to buy goods, how much to sell them for. Many couldn't read, so we introduced literacy training programs for the market women. Many of these programs were supported by some of the people in this room. The Government did not have enough money to undertake this, so we mobilized private donations from individuals, foundations and institutions to be able to do so.

Today, many of the women aspire to just be able, in the next election, not to have to use their thumb print, and to be able to read what's on the ballot and to check their choice of candidate. So that has empowered them in such a way, giving them a voice in decision-making at their levels, whereby they felt sufficiently strong, sufficiently independent that they could stand up, in a community meeting, and speak their minds, and talk about their rights. These programs have made a big difference for these women.

Our education program is long-term in getting the effect; but we've been able to make a difference in market women's lives right away, touching them in the things they do day-to-day. It is still a big challenge for us, but I can see the transformation that comes when a market woman says to me, "there was a time when conditions were so tough that I prayed for God to take me, for me to die quickly. And now, I just want to live long so I can be whatever I want to be." That's the kind of transformation which, to us, is a big difference.

Education and economic progress seem connected to each other. What do you see as the most critical first step to making progress in this area? Is it education, is it safety, is it economic opportunity?

Coming from where we've come, we started with the first step of education. Education is not necessarily formal education; it's just access to knowledge. If it's for girls, it could be in schools and academia. If it's for women, it will involve literacy training to equip them properly.

We've got a great program that came out of the Clinton Global Initiative a couple of years ago [the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) project in Liberia], in which we wanted to do something about adolescent girls. In that program, which is supported by the World Bank, the Nike Foundation, and the NoVo Foundation, what it seeks to do is to train adolescent girls in particular skills for which there is a demand by the private sector, for most of our concessions that are opening up. We train them to go into particular jobs, the kinds of short-term measures that form part of first steps. We don't have to stick with one thing; we do several things that achieve the objective.

On addressing property and land rights in Liberia:

Liberian women have the right to land, to property and to inheritance. If there are any constraints, it's the constraint of attitudes. Women are working the land, women are much more conscious, much more dedicated, and much more diligent in working the land. All we do for them is to give them the tools and some technical assistance, and if you look all over today, the farms that being produced are being produced by the women. The men prefer to play drums.

On how to end violence against girls and women:

Rape will not be aailable offense. The lawyers say that a person is innocent until proven guilty; that you have to go to court before you can do that. We say that if you rape a four-year-old child, the

charge will be moved from rape to murder, making it more intense. The biggest thing to stay passionate about is to stay on course; to keep sensitizing the public; to introduce in our educational systems the need for the protection of women, the role that women play in our society; and to have those instruments and laws that will protect women so that we continue to make progress.

On child brides:

This is a big problem. Our challenge is the retention of girls in school; once they get to secondary school, they leave and chances are they will become a young bride and a young mother. That's a program we're trying to focus on, namely, what to do to keep young girls in school long enough so that they are not diverted into early marriage.

On what the average person can do to help Liberia's adolescent girls:

We count on organizations that focus on girls' and women's rights being advocates so as to change some of the attitudes towards girls. If we can get more advocates from the people in this room, working through the specific organizations and institutions, that helps to make it easier for us to carry that message across.