

Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
On “Development Opportunities in Liberia”
At Reception Hosted in Her Honor
By Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority
Hyatt Regency Hotel, St. Louis, Missouri
Saturday, July 10, 2010

Sorors of Alpha Kappa Alpha:

Thank you for inviting me, all the way from Liberia, to join in celebrating our Sorority’s 102 years of service to mankind.

My thanks to the organizers for making it possible for us to be here. Special thanks to International President Barbara McKinzie, who has gone out of her way to spearhead worthy causes in Liberia, most especially to support our market women. I thank you most sincerely, Dear Sisters, on behalf of the women of Liberia and on my own behalf, for all you have done, and continue to do, for us.

You’ve asked me to talk briefly about “Development Opportunities in Liberia.” Let me say, first off, that Liberia is a country blessed with many resources: with mineral, agriculture, forestry and marine resources, and now we are also exploring for oil off our shores.

We are glad that, finally, U.S. companies are beginning to realize Liberia’s potential and are starting to invest in the various sectors, especially agriculture and oil exploration. We are also attracting investors from other parts of the world. This will provide the basis for our private sector growth and development.

It is particularly noteworthy that the Robert L. Johnson Corporation has invested in the hotel sector and is considering investment in housing construction. Bob Johnson has opened the door for investment by African-Americans, which we very much value.

However, beyond these major investments are the basic development needs of the people, particularly women and children. There is, as you can imagine, much that needs to be done in a country coming out of more than a decade of civil war and mayhem.

I wish to highlight three areas, all related to education and learning and training. You can be a partner in this effort. You can join us in empowering and enhancing the role of women and girls through the following programs.

Adult Literacy Program

The first has to do with adult literacy. AKA is already involved with this project in Liberia, through the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund. As a matter of fact, it was during her visit to Liberia, in June 2009, that Soror Barbara McKinzie officially launched the Adult Literacy Program for Market Women.

My reason for highlighting this area is that while I believe the literacy program to be valuable, a six-month program is not enough for any real comprehension, especially for women who have never entered a classroom.

What we need, beyond such short-term courses, are specialized adult education programs. I'm thinking about two or three specialty schools where the women could get schooling, say, up to the sixth grade. A sixth-grade, primary school education might seem inconsequential to those with advanced and post-graduate degrees, but in my Liberia, where the illiteracy rate is particularly high among females, a level of education beyond mere literacy will enable women and girls to better function in a 21st century world.

What we seek, therefore, is assistance in educating our adult female population up to the level of the sixth grade by enabling them to attend evening and night school. Undertaking an expanded adult literacy project would require: funding for teachers, training materials, training workshops, mini-generators and/or solar panels to light the classrooms at night. Such a project would be undertaken in collaboration with our Education Ministry,

which has established a National Council for Adult and Non-formal Education.

Whatever AKA could do to get such a program up and running would make an immense difference in the lives of our women and girls.

Community Libraries

There are many privileges which people in affluent societies take for granted – like libraries – the second area I wish to highlight. Do you know that post-war Liberia does not have a single public library? Liberia has 1.6 million children, out of its total population of 3.5 million. Most have never seen a library, nor know what it does. That is a sobering truth. With our limited resources, we have had to focus on the building and renovation of schools in order to enforce compulsory primary education.

As President, I often ask myself: How will we ever lift ourselves out of poverty if our children never know what it is to go to a library, to read and savor the knowledge to be discovered between the covers of books, and to learn, using the Internet and a computer, about the greater world out there?

While a national public library system is our ultimate goal, we need to start somewhere. And that place could be the setting up of community libraries with a focus on children. If we can capture, at an early age, the imaginations of children and instill in them a love of books, the day will come when we will no longer need to appeal to you, Sorors, to support expanded adult literacy programs in Liberia.

Each community library could include a reading room filled with books and a world of information, and serving as a safe place where children could go to learn and explore. Such libraries, operated by trained librarians, would need to be equipped with the basics: children's books, 2-3 computers where the children could engage and interact; internet access and electricity; tables and chairs.

Benefiting from AGOA

The third and final area I want to touch upon has to do with training Liberian women in how to produce quality goods, thereby adding value to our products.

At the moment, Liberia's biggest exports to the United States are raw materials – iron ore, rubber, wood chips, cocoa, and palm oil – but our country is simply extracting then sending them overseas.

So why haven't we been able to capitalize on our abundantly available raw materials – turn rubber into surgical gloves or condoms, plastic buckets and chairs; turn cocoa into free-trade organic chocolate; make furniture from our wonderful tropical woods?

A lot of that is due to our long civil war, during which our industrial sector was devastated. We lost a generation of artisans and technicians, and our apprentices have missed the opportunities to learn their craft properly.

As a result, we make products of low quality and poor standards, which makes it hard to sell our goods to other markets. Our women produce all kinds of crafts as well as beautifully designed fabrics which we call "country cloth," exemplified by what I have on tonight, but they lack the technical expertise of how to finish these products to bring them up to standards where they can compete for U.S. market share. Liberia needs to be making things again, and to make them well.

In fact, Liberia is one of the African countries that benefits from special preferences offered by the U.S. Government under the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). This arrangement allows us to export goods made in Liberia to the United States duty free. This means that an investor can come to our country, set up a business to train young women in making clothes, and then sell the clothes to the U.S. market at prices that are competitive or even lower than those made in another country that does not enjoy AGOA benefits.

And like our natural resources, we could be taking better advantage of the benefits offered. In fact, in 2009, of the US\$78 million worth of goods we exported to the United States, only a measly US\$3,000 came under AGOA. Some change started this year, with a Liberian producing, on a small scale, garments for export.

To start making things again, we need the know-how and the technology, and we need experience in how to make things well. We know that the United States is a competitive market, so we need to make quality products that consumers want.

That's where you come in, Dear Sorors. You, in this room, have a wealth of relevant knowledge and experience, as consumers or as business people. We hope that you can think of the ways you can share that valuable experience and know-how with the people of my country, especially the women – our greatest resource. This can be through training, setting up vocational schools, or providing equipment. You may even want to consider investment opportunities in Liberia.

In short, we seek AKA's help to train our women in a way that their goods gain market access, thereby making AGOA work for Liberia.

Imagine the huge contribution these women and girls would make in their respective communities once they acquire the technical skills required to produce quality products that can compete on the world market. As empowered women and girls, able to stand on their own, their lives would forever be changed – for the better.

Conclusion

These are the ideas that I want to lay before you educators, scientists, businesswomen, entrepreneurs and so much more. We welcome your support, if you are able.

When I visited Washington, D.C. in May, I made a bold promise that in 10 years, if Liberia stays on the path of reform, my country will no longer need foreign assistance and be able to self-finance its own development. Let me

rephrase that statement for this particular audience: If you help us today, tomorrow we will stand, unsupported, as proud Liberians.

I thank you.