

Special Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
At Official Launch
Of Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women Project
Monrovia City Hall
Tuesday, March 30, 2010

Representatives of the World Bank, the Nike Foundation, and the Government of Denmark;

Ministers and Officials of Government;

Members of the Diplomatic Corps;

EPAG Project Trainers and Trainees;

Private Sector Representatives;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

Friends:

I am pleased to participate in this official launch of the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) project. This particular initiative is special to me for a number of reasons.

In 2008, former U.S. President Bill Clinton announced, at the opening of the Clinton Global Initiative in New York, a new partnership for adolescent girls in Liberia.

This innovative public-private partnership involved the World Bank, Liberia, the Nike Foundation, and the Government of Denmark. I said at the time that I expected this collaboration to serve as a model for Africa and the world.

I signed Liberia up to participate in a project which aimed to increase economic opportunities for adolescent girls as part of efforts to reconstruct our country following a 14-year civil war. I did so because as President, and as a woman, I knew that any program aimed at empowering girls and young women would, undoubtedly, be in

Liberia's best interest. Any project that would increase girls' economic opportunities – by providing business development and job skills training – had to be one that I wanted for my country, where youth unemployment is so very high.

Let me, at the outset, express our sincere thanks to all the partners that have made this project a reality: the Clinton Global Initiative for having come up with such an excellent idea; the Nike Foundation, which provided the initial funding, and has remained a key partner throughout; and the Government of Denmark, whose support of this three-year pilot project has been invaluable.

Let me also commend the Ministry of Gender and Development and its implementing partners – including the service providers – who have spent the past six months laying the technical and logistical foundations necessary before the commencement of training. In that process, communities were engaged, training curricula developed, trainees recruited, training venues selected, and the baseline assessment completed.

Earlier this month, I'm proud to note, classes began for the training of the first group of 1,273 adolescent girls and young women, aged 16 to 27. Under the two major training components, 35 percent of the students are receiving job skills training, while the larger, 65 percent are receiving training in business development skills. This ratio makes perfect sense in the context of the Liberian economy, where there's more opportunity for entrepreneurs of small businesses. We are working hard to develop our entrepreneurs – particularly our women – into the successful, influential members of our society, and indeed, participants in our economy, that we know they can be. And EPAG is a crucial part of this effort.

It has been wonderful to be a witness as the EPAG project has moved from the concept and design stages to reality! What a huge difference this training will make to the lives of these girls and young women who hail from all over Greater Monrovia – West Point, Battery Factory, New Kru Town, Doe Community, Bassa Community, Old Road, and Red Light – as well as from Bentol and Kakata. We eagerly look forward to next year, when the remaining 1,250 students will commence their training, in Round 2 of this worthy project.

Imagine the significant contribution that this total of 2,500 girls and young women will make in their respective communities once they acquire the technical, professional/behavioral, and life skills which the EPAG has to impart to them! As empowered girls and young women, able to stand on their own, their lives will forever be changed – for the better.

The EPAG project contributes, I might add, to the Economic Revitalization Pillar of our Poverty Reduction Strategy, by creating more and better jobs for Liberian girls and women. And because it promotes gender equality and empowers women, the project also promotes the achievement of Millennium Development Goal No. 3. Additionally, our Ministries of Youth & Sports and Education are already engaged in myriad activities related to youth empowerment and development, and I expect the EPAG project to add an important piece to this overall picture.

EPAG is unique for three key reasons: its focus on girls; it is market driven; and it offers high-quality training.

It is, therefore, fair to say that the EPAG project is not only for girls; it will benefit the entire community. It goes without saying that when you improve a girl's life, many others benefit: her parents, siblings, and especially her own family when she is ready to have one. As an educated mother, an active citizen, an ambitious entrepreneur or prepared employee, she will contribute immeasurably in breaking the cycle of poverty.

A word of advice to you girls and young women – EPAG Trainees: So much time, money and effort has gone into getting you to this point. You, too, went through a rigorous selection process to get this far. I urge you to make the most of this opportunity of a lifetime. You may never get such a chance again, so stay the course, and stay in school. You will be a better person for having done so, and so will the lives of those who depend upon you. I wish you the best of luck and success.

With these few remarks, it is with the genuine pleasure, Ladies and Gentlemen, that I declare the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) project officially launched in Liberia!