

Goodwill Message

By

Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

At the Official Program of

International Women's Day

March 8, 2008

Antoinette Tubman Stadium

Monrovia, Liberia

I greet all the women of Liberia today in celebration of International Women's Day.

We remain enthused that this day has been carved out to celebrate the spirit and strength of women. I am even more enthused by how Liberians are beginning to understand why we matter. We are 50 percent of the population, and more engaged than we have ever been in Liberia's history. It's a testament of our leadership in every sector of this country's development path. It's also a testament of the small strides we take every day in ensuring that our young girls are empowered to reach for the stars.

It is fitting that the theme for this year's International Women's Day is *"Investing in Women and Girls"*. My administration acknowledges the importance of financial allocations to address gender inequities that have been entrenched in Liberia for years.

We are all aware of the glaring realities in Liberia and elsewhere in the world. From the beginning of their lives, female children get less attention in terms of food and education, while available resources are used on their brothers. The education and sometimes the lives of female children are seen as less valuable than those of their male counterparts thus setting a pattern that constrains women in their entire lives, affecting their abilities to make decisions at the village, community, national, and global level.

We are attempting to turn that tide in Liberia with the assistance of ardent supporters. Female life expectancy is increasing in response to our preventive Health Care. Our primary school enrollment has doubled and more girls are going to school and attending university in record numbers. Government resources are matched by initiatives such as the Liberian Education Trust (LET), a private fund providing scholarships to young women. We are training our people to understand the vitality of girls' education, because we know that when you educate a girl, you educate a nation. This is all a part of our drive to "change minds and change attitudes" about gender constructs. More women are in the paid workforce; and, my administration is enforcing the country's first ever rape law, enabling us to take legal action against perpetrators of sexual violence against women and girls.

The incidence of rape in Liberia is astonishing, and we as a government are committed to bringing to justice and naming and shaming perpetrators of our rape law. The support of men and boys in denouncing violence against their female relatives is essential, so we are working on involving them in the process. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has emphasized the detrimental effects of gender-based violence and has, to that end, launched a multi-year campaign to intensify action to end violence against women and girls.

Liberia commends his efforts because we have seen first hand how gender-based violence rips apart families, breeds distrust, and undermines development and progress.

We are in the process of finalizing the National Gender Policy after wide consultations. We have already developed a National Plan of Action against Gender Based Violence (GBV), and we will follow that up with mechanisms to clearly articulate to the Liberian public that violence against women and girls will be treated with severe legal action.

We clearly need to do more in terms of financing gender equality. The answer does not lie only in an increase in donor funds towards specific gender research and activities – what we seek are innovative methods and strategies to ensure the limited resources we have to re-build our roads, schools, re-instate water and electricity supply and rejuvenate our economy is gender sensitive and enables the promotion of the equality of women and girls. This type of sustainable investment is suitable for the kind of policy changes we would like to see in our lifetime.

Indeed, investing in Liberian women and girls is an imperative. Let me join you in celebrating International Women’s Day, as we all attempt to make our country more accountable to the tenets of gender equality.

Thank you.