

Issues Facing Women in Liberia
Presentation at General Board of Church and Society's Board Meeting
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PRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S ISSUES

AIDS

- ❖ As in most African nations, the number one issue facing women and children in Liberia is the rising rate of HIV/AIDS infection. In a recent article, posted on www.allafrica.com, the Liberian President, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, has recognized HIV/AIDS as a serious and detrimental problem in Liberia. The average national estimated rate of infection is about 12% and is even much higher and prevalent among women and children.
- ❖ Historically, the presence of HIV/AIDS came to public attention between the mid to late 1980s and gradually increased over time. However, the current upsurge of this deadly disease in Liberia is attributed to Liberia's 14 year civil war. During the war, guns were used to intimidate and terrorize women to engage in sexual activities against their will. To date, the UN estimates that over 40% of women and girls were raped during the civil war. Furthermore, the severe scarcity of food and other basic necessities forced women to establish sexual relationships with HIV infected soldiers—rebels and peacekeeping troops, many of whom came from several southern African countries that have the highest AIDS infection rates registered in the world.
- ❖ The Liberian government recently launched a new HIV/AIDS public awareness campaign in collaboration with the World Health Organization and the African Union. They are seeking to raise greater awareness and provide education and information regarding the HIV/AIDS pandemic. There is a call for nationwide testing in order to get a clearer picture of the challenges that lie ahead.

HEALTH ISSUES

- ❖ In conjunction with the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Liberia, the health status of women in Liberia is also of critical concern. Because of the civil war, the country's health infrastructure is malfunctioning. Most Liberians have no access to healthcare and face greatly increased risks of illness and death as a result of communicable diseases contracted through poor sanitation and contaminated or polluted water.

- ❖ Due to Liberia's poor health delivery system, many women and their children are plagued with and threatened by numerous diseases. Some of these threats include diarrhoeal diseases like cholera and dysentery, Malaria, Acute Respiratory Infection, measles, malnutrition, and—for pregnant women—complications of delivery because they have no means obtaining regular checkups during their pregnancies. Many of these diseases are curable, but as mentioned previously, most Liberians have no access to healthcare.
- ❖ These health concerns are especially prevalent in the rural parts of Liberia where roads and referral hospital are non-existent. There is a grave need for health facilities, trained doctors, nurses, and other health workers in Liberia as the country moves towards reconstruction.

RAPE AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

- ❖ Another prevalent and detrimental issue facing women in Liberia is rape. Before the civil war, the issue or cognizance of rape was rare in Liberia but this silent oppressor became more common during the civil war. Many women and girls were raped by rebels during the civil war. Some of them were forced into becoming sex slaves and others fell prey to the brutality and indecency of rebels in fear of execution and starvation. Today, women, young girls, and even children are increasingly being raped.
- ❖ Because of the rise of rape cases, several women organizations, The Association of Liberia Female Lawyers in particular, felt compelled to request legislative enactment against rape. Their insistent request yielded the ratification of a recent legislation, The Rape Amendment Act, which considers rape a first degree felony. Despite the efforts of the Association of Liberian Female Lawyers, and other female groups and organizations, the rights and dignity of women in Liberia is still dismal. There is still a general reluctance from the government to prosecute rape cases. Rape and other forms of sexual exploitation continue to pose serious problems for the women, young girls, and children of Liberia.
- ❖ Parallel to the issue of rape is the issue of female, mainly teenagers, prostitution in Liberia. A recent article reported that this practice is rampant at the Roberts International Airport where girls under the age of 16 are at the core of prostitution. A women's advocacy group known as W A H T (Women Against Human Trafficking) reported that females flood the airport to trade sex for a mere U.S. \$20.
- ❖ Many of these girls are engaged in such practices because their parents can not afford to pay their school tuition nor take care of them. With no infrastructure, prostitution serves as the best alternative for these young girls to accomplish their academic sojourn and sometimes even provide for the livelihood of their families.

Organizations such as W A H T are gravely concerned for the future of these young girls and hope that the government and parents will take appropriate action to stop this unwholesome and degrading practice.

EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP

- ❖ Recent UN statistics puts Liberia's illiteracy rate at about 90-95%, with females as the most illiterate group. The history of education in Liberia shows that females have been marginalized by past administrations and parents—especially indigenous parents who have not seen the necessity of female education because they have the mentality that the girl's place is in the home and not the classroom.
- ❖ Women have constantly been denied equal opportunity to be educated as their male counterparts, and because of this, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has launched a Girls' Education Policy, which I call, "The no girl left behind Policy"—the first of its kind ever implemented in the history of Liberia. The President recognizes that education is vital to ensuring a better quality of life for all Liberians. The policy's primary concern is to focus on compulsory elementary education, reduction in the tuition of secondary education by at least 50%, and recruiting and training more female teachers.
- ❖ Despite the high illiteracy rate among women in Liberia, there have been some women who have been determined to be educated despite the odds against them. Nevertheless, as they acquired higher education and specialized skills, they too became a marginalized group as they were neglected from qualifying leadership positions.
- ❖ However, things have taken a drastic turn as more women are acquiring key leadership positions within the Liberian government and society. The current president of Liberia is a female, and she is determined to include and empower women and guarantee them the right to participate in the social, economic, and political life of Liberia.

THE CHURCH'S INVOLVEMENT

In light of all the issues just mentioned, I must also make notation of the church's involvement with addressing some of these issues. However, I must bring to your attention that because of the financial crisis and constraints facing both the country and the church, it is difficult for the church to honor all of its obligations.

AIDS

- ❖ In regards to the HIV/AIDS issue, the church is making tremendous effort in trying to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS. Churches collaborate with one another and form partnerships with other organizations and programs who are concerned about the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the nation. They meet to share information that will help improve the status of those living with HIV/AIDS. They also host workshops in which people are educated about HIV/AIDS and empowered raise awareness in their respective communities. Some churches that own health clinics provide voluntary testing for people in their communities are unable to provide drug treatments due to the unavailability of medications.
- ❖ Although the church is taking the initiative to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS, financial support/funding for HIV/AIDS programs is however limited. The church's dream is to establish community based HIV/AIDS programs that will include voluntary and confidential counseling and testing, hold awareness workshops on a consistent basis, and provide care for those living with this HIV/AIDS—mainly women and children. However, because of the lack of funding, this dream cannot yet be a reality for the many women and children who are suffering from this deadly disease.

HEALTH

- ❖ The church is also aiding in attending to the health needs of the Liberian people. There are several church owned hospitals and clinics that have been of tremendous help to those within their vicinities. With the meager drugs at their disposal, they are able to aid those who are in desperately in need of medical attention.

EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP

- ❖ The church has also been very influential in the education and empowerment of women in Liberia. There are several church owned schools—elementary, secondary, and higher educational schools—throughout Liberia to encourage parents to send their children to school—especially the girls. The education of women has gained significant momentum in the church's sector. I, personally am a beneficiary of obtaining my elementary, middle, and most of my secondary education from United Methodist accredited institutions in Liberia.
- ❖ The church continues to emphasize, recognize, and stress women empowerment. It sees the advocacy of women as a biblical imperative and seeks to fulfill that mandate. Women are beginning to occupy significant

leadership positions in the church and are even being encouraged to go into ministry. There is now an increasing number of women pastors in Liberia.

CONCLUSION:

I have been away from my country for about ten years but am always elated to hear about the pivotal role the church continues to play in attending to God's people in Liberia so that they can live wholesome and holistic lives. It is my call and my desire to return to Liberia in order to be a part of the ministry, life, and work of the church. There is much work to be done in my country and it will be unfair to my people and disobedience to God if I fail to return. My time in this country is preparation and equipment for what the Lord has called me and impressed upon my heart to do for the betterment of God's people and the building up of God's kingdom!