

Remarks

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Building Strong Institutions for Sustainable Development in Conflict-affected Countries - Liberia's Experience in the Effects of Conflict and the Pandemic on women

Excellencies, Colleagues, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to express my gratitude for this opportunity to join you in this important meeting and to share my perspectives; with a focus on the effects of conflict and pandemic on women - using Liberia as a case study.

Firstly, I must state that Liberia was engulfed in a senseless and protracted civil upheaval that spanned close to fifteen years. It adversely affected almost every fabric of the society; and to present, we are still reeling from its devastating effects. Even-though, before its outbreak, there were imminent signs of a conflict, but no one ever imagined how extensive and catastrophic it would be. The conflict claimed the lives of approximately 250,000.

Why many adults and young men were the main perpetrators of the war, women and young girls were constantly raped, used as sex slaves by fighters and many were coerced into being wives to rebel fighters. As the war near its end, many women became widows; some losing their husbands in battle, while other men were either killed because of their tribal identities, inadvertently, or from shock and depression. Some women were even forced to witness the murder of their husbands and loved ones. Many also witnessed helplessly, as their children were forcibly recruited by various fighting groups. Others were fortunate in concealing their husbands and sons from being recruited.

In-spite of the harsh conditions women faced, they were able to surmount the injustices meted out to them. Consequently, the women of Liberia were not only victims of the conflict, they also displayed great valor. They were the ones venturing outdoors, walking several miles to fetch food for their families, as many men could not dare outdoor, fearing for their lives. Even when it demanded that the women surrounded their pride just to acquire food for their families, they still played the role of being bread winners.

More importantly, in the absence of functional institutions, and unable to countenance the brunt of the fighting and continued killings, a small group of women made a decision that would eventually change the dynamics in the country in 2003. They organized themselves into a strong advocacy group called "Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace". This group grew to be a political force against violence and the existing Government, and embarked on a sustained protest both in Ghana and Liberia. The women pressured warlords and other stakeholders to reach a peace deal in Accra Ghana; thus achieving peace in Liberia. Then, with Ellen Johnson's presidency, women's rights were further promoted.

As we began to heal and rise out of the ashes, Liberia was plagued with the Ebola Virus Epidemic which broke out in March 2014. We did not have institutions and structures in place, and were not knowledgeable in dealing with such epidemic that was peculiar to us. As a result, we lost many lives to Ebola, especially female nurses. To present, half of the 6,000 Ebola survivors are widows. They need our attention and support.

Similarly, the Covid-19 pandemic has not been particularly kind to women and girls, including in Liberia. It has heightened the social and economic imbalance and security concerns of women and girls. As Liberia adopted measures to combat/contain the spread of Covid-19, including the lockdown, women and girls in Liberia faced significant and persistent threats of violence, including domestic violence, and rape.

President Weah of Liberia acted decisively and robustly to protect women and girls against such uncivilized behavior. The application of the domestic violence law became even more apparent. The law clearly spells out punitive measures for perpetrators of domestic violence and remains an important instrument which endeavors to curb and eradicate the scourge of domestic violence in the society.

To further step up efforts to mitigate gender-based and sexual violence, the Liberian President declared rape a national emergency, designated a special prosecutor to handle rape cases and set up a national sex offender registry. He also created a national security task force to handle sexual and gender-based violence and allocated \$2 million to address the issue.

With all of the above, I cannot further underscore the critical importance of building strong institutions to achieve sustainable development in conflict-affected countries. To this end, we remain grateful to partners for accompanying us during our difficult years. Today, we are proud to have institutions (the Peacebuilding Commission for example; partnerships (regional and international) including with AU, ECOWAS, World Bank, WHO, etcetera. We have structures, and frameworks to mitigate conflict and to respond to pandemics. The adoption of a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, the Spotlight initiatives are among frameworks and programs that geared towards the protection of women's rights and empowerment.

In conclusion, conflict, as we have seen, brings immeasurable and unimaginable suffering and trauma to women. And as women grapple with conflict in the wake of pandemics, that's even worse. Therefore, we must endeavor collectively to prevent conflict and enhance multilateral efforts to address pandemics, as we are acting today against Covid-19. The continued protection and empowerment of women will not only make our world a better place, it will also help us in achieving the sustainable development goals and enable us to build lasting institutions - with the sole intend of leaving no one behind.

I Thank you!