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**"The Empowerment of Rural Women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development challenges and the way forward"**

**A presentation**

**At the**

**56th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)**

**BY:**

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**Headquarters of the United Nations**

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**Statement by  
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**At**

**The Opening of the 56<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women**

**“The Empowerment of Rural Women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication,  
development challenges and the way forward.”**

**Feb 28, 2012**

**Chair**

**Deputy Secretary – General**

**Under- Secretary – General**

**Excellencies**

**Distinguished delegates**

Women in Liberia suffer disproportionately from the effects of poverty, yet they have historically had limited opportunity to participate in the political, economic and social processes that can change that condition. This lack of voice maintains gender inequalities and keeps women trapped in a cycle of poverty. Thus, women’s participation and leadership in decision-making processes that affect their lives is crucial to breaking this cycle and building a peaceful and prosperous future.

The Rural Women in Liberia make up a good portion of the Country’s **population 60 %**. They are the major contributors to the well being of the families and are an integral and vital force in the development processes that are key to the socio-economic progress, as well as key contributors to the informal sector. They are the primary marketers and traders of agricultural goods and contribute to more than 75% of all cash and food crop production. In agriculture-producing households, rural women are involved in up to 76% of cash crop production and 93% of food crop production. In addition, they conduct 85% of all marketing and trading, a vital complement to crop production for income generation; despite their contributions to society, the economy, and development, rural women continue to have lack or have limited access to education, health, employment, resources and markets.

**Empowerment of Rural Women**

The Government of Liberia through the Ministry of Gender and Development established the National Rural Women Program in 2008 to ensure that all rural women are given a chance to partake in and benefit from all projects at a decentralized level. In addition, the program provides rural women with the structure through which they voice their priorities and needs, and lead initiatives in their own communities and counties.

**We have since the establishment of the Program implemented the following interventions:**

- Consistent with the Poverty Reduction Strategy which is the framework of our development agenda, the provision of farming inputs (seeds, tools, rain boots, fertilizer and agrochemical) were made available to female farmers. In line with this, the Government and its Partners

through the Ministry of Gender and Development complimented the Food Security and Nutrition Program.

- Provided funding to 12 of the 15 counties to assist 150 women groups in the construction of storage facilities.
- Established local leadership of the Rural Women Program in 15 counties and strengthened their existence by the provision of support in office space and stationary supplies for clerical work
- Hosting of yearly conference for the rural women which provided the platform to discuss, assess and take stock of the impact of the program for the development and advancement of rural women in Liberia.
- Construction of 16 sites of Peace Huts.
- The Ministry of Gender and Development in collaboration, UN Women and the Indian Government, in 2011, selected eight (8) rural women who are grandmothers from four counties to undergo six months (September 2011-March 2012) training course in Solar Electrification at the Bare Foot College in India. Upon graduation, they will reside in their respective counties and carryout village solar electrification in their various counties.
- In additional effort to combat the effects of climate change, we have implemented a pilot project for rural in Bomi county with support from UNPD . 40 rural women were trained in eco-stove project in an aim to reduce the use of charcoal which is a major driver of deforestation.

#### **Poverty and hunger Eradication**

**The Government has made significant efforts in the direction of Poverty and Hunger Eradication by providing economic opportunities for rural women and the implementation of the Joint program on food Security and Nutrition program.**

#### **Economic opportunities**

- The Government of Liberia worked to improve the livelihoods of over 1000 women from around the country in the informal sector by the establishment of the Cross- Border Trade Association. The Joint Program on Gender Equity and Women Empowerment (JPGEWEE) increased women's access to financial services where at least 4700 rural business women received macro loans for business expansion.
- 355 rural women through similar program established 15 Village Saving Loans Association (VSLA) in 5 of the 15 counties. Through the same effort, 975 rural women received basic literacy training while 983 women from 17 markets completed training in business planning, saving, credit, records keeping and the used of calculators and personal finance. Mean while, plans are being put into place to build hostel for 60 girls attending Ricks Institute.
- We have also worked towards strengthening the capacity of government and civil society to promote gender equality in the country. A directory of 879 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and women groups that worked across the country in areas of women empowerment and gender equality was published.

#### **New Partnership for Africa's Development Project (NEPAD)**

The government through the implementation of the NEPAD project funded by the Spanish Government, provided micro-loans as empowerment funds to 1,500 indigent rural women who are either engaged in small scale business ventures or small scale farming and agriculture activities in the five counties.



### **Hunger Eradication**

The Gol/ UN Joint Program Food Security and Nutrition was firstly implemented in 2008 as pilot program to mitigate the impact of domestic price increases, maintain access to food and improved nutrition for the most vulnerable homes by creating "safety nets" and, promoting the increase of domestic food production. The project focuses particularly on women, who represent the majority of small-holder producers and of the agricultural labor force in general in Liberia.

- The Food Security and Nutrition Program successfully sensitized, mobilized and engaged 43 farming groups in the rural women structures in three of the 15 counties in Liberia. The program delivered 37,457 pieces of assorted quality farming tools and 158 metric tons of seed rice to the 43 groups and provided training in power tiller operation, management, and maintenance and increased capacity of women in improved farming methods, land use, post harvest processing and organization development.
- Approximately 12,000 rural women farmers received from Government and its Partners farm inputs and implements including assorted seeds, hoes, shovels, cutlasses, rain boots, power tillers, cassava processing machines, rice mills and hand tools to boost their agricultural activities. As a result there is an increase in agriculture yield and productivity.
- The construction of storages, post harvest processing facilities, market facilities and rehabilitation Feeder roads to link women groups to market and storages from their towns and villages have also been undertaken under this program.

### **Challenges**

**Despite the numerous support rendered towards the empowerment of rural women in Liberia and the enormous contributions made by these women, there are still major challenges, being encountered by them;**

- The empowerment of women and girls living in rural areas is challenged by geographic disparities, shortages in infrastructure, financial and human resource as well as lack of access to adequate information and health services such as those related to family planning, pregnancy, emergency obstetric care and skilled care during childbirth.. Poverty, conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies also exacerbate reproductive health problems in many countries. The empowerment of women and girls living in rural areas is further challenged by limited educational and economic opportunities, as well as socio-cultural barriers. Addressing these challenges requires integrated policies and programmes that both involve and support rural women.
- .Additionally, low social and economic status of these rural women, increased the risk of having their human and reproductive rights violated, and leading to them suffering

disproportionately from gender-based violence, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and maternal complications and deaths.

- Insufficient farming/agricultural materials and equipment(labor intensive methods, primitive method of farming, equipment- the need for modern mechanized farming to increase their productions. There is also a need for methods of food preservation to ensure longevity of produces ( ex. Prevent spoilage of produces and to also ensure that during seasonal shortages produce are available). Poor farm to market roads and lack of sufficient storage facilities are also issues that are affecting the rural women in Liberia.

### **Conclusion**

Facilitating women's entry into the economy is critical, especially for countries like Liberia, which is not only recovering from a long and pervasive conflict that saw the complete devastation of the economy, but also working to end decades of social, political and legal discrimination that have largely excluded women from the decision-making processes that shape their lives.

Ensuring that rural women can claim their right to sexual and reproductive health is a critical first step in eradicating poverty and hunger. Improved access to reproductive health services contributes to women's economic empowerment – when a woman has autonomy over her choices pertaining to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights (for example, she is able to decide who and when to marry, how many children to have and when), she is in a better position to be economically empowered.

**We believe strongly** that empowering women economically has not only led to increase in their personal wellbeing, but also that of society as a whole.

**We also acknowledge** that by increasing women's participation in the labor force, there will be increased earning which is associated with reduced poverty, faster economic growth rates and better health and education outcomes for their children.

**Therefore**, we will remain committed and steadfast in providing economic opportunities for rural women thereby promoting their participation in the economy. But this could only be possible, **through Enhanced Participation, Collaboration and Coordination from the Women of Liberia: The task of building a brighter future for Liberia does not rest on Governments shoulders alone – civil society, women's groups, CBOs, FBOs etc must be proactive in working to rebuild the nation.**

**Finally, we call on** international partners to prioritize funding that reaches communities and the most vulnerable women. For Liberia where so much has been destroyed, the financial needs are great, but greater impacts could be made with programs by ensuring that larger percentages of aid packages are taking programs down to the community level and moving beyond technical capacity support and policy development. Although technical capacity and policy are necessary, our interventions must reach the women, particularly at a grass roots level.

**Thank You!**