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**Statement
by**

**Her Excellency Madam Vabah K. Gayflor
Minister of Gender and Development
Republic of Liberia**

At

**The Opening of the 55th Session of the Commission
on the Status of Women**

**“Access and participation of women and girls to
education, training, science and technology,
including for the promotion of women’s equal access
to full employment and decent work”.**

**United Nations Headquarters
New York
February 22, 2011**

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Chair,
Deputy Secretary-General
Under-Secretary-General
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

I. Efforts to mainstream a gender perspective in formal and non-formal education policies.

In recent years the Government of Liberia has put significant effort into ensuring that a gender perspective is mainstreamed in the development, implementation and evaluation of national policies and programs.

The main actions taken to achieve this were the establishment of the Ministry of Gender and Development - which is responsible for mainstreaming gender in all policies, plans and programs of the government - and the creation of the National Gender Forum, which acts as a policy advisory body to the government on gender issues.

The Forum is comprised of cabinet ministers, heads of government ministries and agencies, higher institutions of learning, both the Judiciary and Legislative branches of government, representatives of the private sector, heads of local and international non-governmental organizations and UN agencies, and Gender Focal Points, with the President of Liberia serving as its chair.

The Gender Focal Points are individuals who have been established within line ministries and agencies to ensure that gender issues are prioritized in the policies and programs of their respective agencies.

As a result of these efforts, several instruments have been or are being developed to create a more just and equitable Liberia for men women and children by promoting equal educational opportunities.

Some notable examples include:

- The National Gender Policy
 - To guide the country towards achieving gender equity and equality by creating and strengthening gender responsive structures, processes and mechanisms for development in which both women and men, boys and girls can equally participate in and benefit from national development goals

- Decent Work Bill
 - Addresses issues such as equal work for equal pay, sex discrimination, work and family responsibilities, and sexual harassment.
- Non-formal Education Policy
 - Prioritizes women's access to scholarships and training opportunities.
- Gender Equity in Politics Act
 - Requires that women have at least 30 percent representation in government, which will ensure that the voices of women are heard in decision making at the national, regional and local levels.
- The Children's Act
 - Protects rights of children.
- The National Policy on Girls' Education
 - Aims to lessen the gender inequality that exists within the educational system.
- The Bilateral Scholarships Policy
 - Designed to ensure that the process for awarding of bilateral scholarships is fair, transparent, and gender-balanced.
- The Free and Compulsory Primary Education Policy
 - Mandates that all Liberian children receive a primary school education
- The Girls Education Unit
 - Acts as a coordinating and monitoring arm of the Ministry of Education for the proper implementation of all programs and initiatives related to girl's education.
- The Special Girls Education Initiative (SGEI)
 - An all girls night school program for teenage girls who are pregnant and have had to drop out as a result, as well as older women who want to be educated.
- The Take-home Ration Program
 - Aims to encourage 30,000 girl children to enroll and remain in school by providing take home food rations.
- The revised National Education Curriculum
 - Aims to eliminate outdated gender stereotypes found in the previous curriculum.
- The "Preventing and Reporting System"
 - Aims to set up counseling centers in major public and primary schools in order to monitor cases of GBV, teenage pregnancy, school drop-out rates, and human rights abuses.
- The Liberian Education Trust
 - LET's mission is to build and rehab 50 schools; train 500 teachers; award 5,000 scholarships principally to girls to enroll in school and to stay in school; to support women to enter teacher training colleges; and, to enroll market women in literacy programs

- The construction of two girl's hostels under the Danish funded MDG3 project to enable girls in rural areas to have access to secondary schools.

As a result of these actions, there has been a marked improvement in girls' enrollment in school. Overall, enrolments in public primary schools have increased by 82% between 2005/06 and 2007/08, or from 597,316 to 1,087,257. Enrollment in secondary schools increased by 16% over the same period from 132,224 to 153,467 (PRS 2008: 112). This has contributed to the closing of the gender gap in primary school enrollment rates.

II. Gender-responsive budgeting and official development assistance (ODA) in support of formal and non-formal education.

At the moment, gender-responsive budgeting procedures have not been fully introduced, as only minimal training has been provided to staff at the Ministry of Gender and Development, as well as other key ministries and agencies. However, while there is still work to be done with regard to the development of gender-responsive budgeting procedures, it does not mean that significant resources have not been allocated for the formal and non-formal education of women and girls. The Government and its partners have introduced many programs and initiatives including scholarship programs, take-home rations programs, adult literacy and job skills training.

The nearly USD \$ 20 million of Danish support to Liberia for the achievement of MDG 3 is a good example. This money has ensured women and girls are targeted in programming for youth, programs for agriculture, microfinance, literacy and education, and technical programs.

Additionally, the budget of the Ministry of Gender and Development has steadily increased over the past five years, further demonstrating the Government's commitment to ensuring that a gender perspective is considered across all sectors - including formal and non-formal education.

III. Programs to facilitate women's and girls' access to and participation in non-formal education, including job training and literacy programs.

Women and girls play a critical role in the economy of Liberia. They produce 60 percent of the nation's agricultural products, carry out 80 percent of trading activities in rural areas, create important links between rural and urban markets, and dominate small-scale trade in urban areas. Yet, despite the important role they play in Liberia's economy, limited access to education and skills training impedes women and girls' ability to enter the formal labor market, thus limiting their economic opportunities. In response to this issue, the Government of Liberia, along with its partners, has developed several programs specifically aimed at increasing women and girls' access to various types of non-formal education. Examples of these include:

- *The Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls Project (EPAG):* Since its launch in March 2010, the project has trained approximately 1,200 adolescent girls and young women. The classroom training in technical and life skills, during which the retention rate for participants was close to 95 percent, concluded in August 2010. All girls now have savings accounts with local banks. Presently, the girls are being supported in their transition from the classroom to the real world through mentoring, internships, job placements, business plan competitions, and linkages to business capital. This "mentoring and support" phase will continue through February 2011.

- *The Joint Program for Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment (GEWEE):*
In 2010, 169 rural women were trained and mobilized into seven Village Savings and Loan Associations. In addition, three micro finance institutions were awarded a total of \$400,000 for onward lending to women in Lofa, Nimba, Bong, Bomi, Cape Mount and Margibi counties. Over 3,000 women have thus far benefited from these loans. The GEWEE program also extended literacy classes to 44 communities in ten counties, sponsored the first National Conference for Women in Cross Border Trade, and identified 950 women to benefit from the Next Level Business Program for Market Women.
- *The Building Women's Entrepreneurship Program:*
In 2010, post-Colloquium activities included teaching 100 illiterate rural women to spell and write their names, providing 70 women with intensive training courses in master weaving, and constructing a training center to facilitate future training.
- *The Sirleaf Market Women's Fund:*
The SMWF completed the construction of the Saclepea Market and dedicated it on March 11, 2010. Under its adult literacy program, the Fund trained 322 market women. Under its special initiative, the Fund constructed a warehouse, a hand dug well and an eight room latrine for the market women of Saclepea, a warehouse and a hand dug well for the market women of Unification Town, and a warehouse for the market women of Redemption Day Market and ELWA. In addition, 303 market women from seven markets received training and loans.
- *The Joint Program for Food Security and Nutrition (FSN):*
Conducts trainings and provides farming inputs to rural farmers with particular emphasis on women, **who represent the majority of small-holder producers, and of the agricultural labor force in general in Liberia.** Trainings cover topics such as power tiller operations and maintenance, post-harvest technology, crop husbandry, seed production techniques, the use of fertilizer, poultry production, inland fish farming, pest management, and agriculture as a business.

Over the coming year, many of these programs are slated to continue and expand to reach more women and girls throughout Liberia with job skills and literacy training.

IV. Measures to improve women's transition from school/training to work.

Recognizing that productive employment is central to maintaining peace and security, reducing poverty, and enhancing the overall wellbeing of the Liberian population, the Government of Liberia has made rapid job creation a priority. In designing its approach to this challenge, the Government has identified weak linkages between education and labor market needs, as well as limited opportunities for women, as priority areas. The Government, along with its partners, has implemented the following programs to specifically address those challenges:

- The Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls Project (EPAG) is designed to produce young women who are well equipped to enter into productive employment. EPAG strives to achieve this by:
 1. Training girls for wage employment, in job skills that are in demand, rather than focusing solely on traditional "female" roles;
 2. Providing business development services and links to microcredit for young women entrepreneurs;
 3. Providing job placement assistance through career fairs, networking opportunities, and public-private partnerships aimed at creating meaningful economic opportunities for young women; and
 4. Providing performance bonuses to training providers who successfully place their graduates in jobs or small businesses.

- The Purchase for Progress (P4P) Project works to provide women with agricultural and business skills training and access to improved post-harvest facilities, to increase production to a level that allows the direct sale of their surplus production of rice to WFP.

- The Youth Employment and Empowerment Program (YEE) Joint program will provide 500 professional apprenticeships specifically for young women. This is in addition to multiple activities aimed at helping both young men and women make the transition from school/training to work.

- Liberia hosted the International Women's Colloquium in March of 2009, which showcased women in non-traditional sectors including the security sector, construction, maintenance, mining and women in business. Post colloquium activities are geared at creating more and better job opportunities for 300 women's groups (22,000 beneficiaries).

- The Government of Liberia/ILO joint program for Poverty Reduction through Decent Employment Creation in Liberia (PREDEC) project created sustainable jobs for poor youth, women and men in the areas of road work, waste management, and by providing entrepreneurship and skills training.

- Numerous microfinance programs have also been implemented to assist Liberians in entering into employment. The following are examples of microfinance programs specifically for women:
 1. 3,000 women received microloans through the New Partnership for Africa Development (NEPAD) project for income generating activities such as small-scale business and agriculture.
 2. 3,500 women in 5 counties have received microloans under the GEWEE joint program.
 3. 147 women have received microloans through Sirleaf Market Women Fund.
 4. The Building Women's Entrepreneurship Program provides small business loans to women to make improvements on their businesses, primarily cook shops.

Finally, we would like to express our congratulations to Madam Michelle Bachelet for her appointment as Executive Director of UN Women and we look forward to more fruitful collaboration in the coming year.