



UN WOMEN LIBERIA NEWSLETTER FOR 2023



FOREWORD BY UN WOMEN LIBERIA COUNTRY REPRESENTATIVE

Welcome to the first edition of the UN Women Liberia newsletter for 2023.

The newsletter highlights UN Women Liberia's contribution to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women in the last quarter of 2022 and the first quarter of 2023. The newsletter is intended to give readers a broad insight into UN Women's collaborations, achievements and impact in Liberia.

The year 2023 is a significant year for Liberia, as the country is going to the polls to elect a president and legislators for both the House of Representatives and the Senate. The elections are being held at a time when women are grossly underrepresented, with only 10.7 per cent of lawmakers being women. At UN Women, we know from evidence that, when women are represented in the legislature, it strengthens both democratic and development processes, by ensuring more inclusive and broad-based decision-making, and facilitates prioritizing policies that address women's quality of life such as health care, women's empowerment, and education. We are working with various stakeholders to support their efforts to increase women's political participation and achieve gender equality.

Significant developments have taken place in recent months to prevent violence against women and girls and to eliminate harmful practices in Liberia. The main highlight is the ban on the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), which was announced by the National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia (NACCCEL) on the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation on 6 February 2023 in Sonkay Town, Montserrado County, Liberia. We commend the Government and people of Liberia, NACCCEL, women's organizations, civil society organizations, development partners, Government of Sweden, European Union and United

Nations Spotlight Initiative for their efforts to eliminate FGM in Liberia over the years. We also acknowledge the advocacy efforts of Jaha Dukureh, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for Africa, who first visited the country ahead of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence in 2022 to intensify efforts to eliminate FGM in Liberia and who subsequently visited in February 2023.

Liberia also joined the rest of the world in commemorating International Women's Day (IWD) which was held under the global theme 'DigitAll: Innovation and technology for gender equality' and the national theme 'Innovating with technology to promote gender quality'. We commend President George Weah for declaring the month of March 'Women's month' in recognition of women's socioeconomic contribution. In this edition of the newsletter, we also highlight some of the activities held as part of the celebrations for Women's month.

The global theme for IWD aligned with the priority theme for the 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), 'Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls'. A delegation from Liberia, led by the Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Honourable Williametta Saydee-Tarr, participated in a CSW side event for Liberia that was held in New York and focused on the topic 'Pathway to eradicating FGM in Liberia – An intentional participatory process'. During the discussions, delegates from The Gambia, Liberia and Sierra Leone shared their experiences of ending FGM. Traditional leaders from Liberia also attended the CSW side event.

We are continuing to work in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and partner organizations to provide the necessary support to ensure that women and girls in Liberia are not left behind. We thank all our partners and donors, including the European Union and the Governments of Sweden, Canada and Ireland, as well as the Peacebuilding Fund, for their unwavering support over the years.

Through this newsletter, we hope you will get a better insight into our partnership with the Government and people of Liberia as we work to strengthen the voices and contributions of women and girls to national development and to advance gender equality.

Happy reading!

Comfort Lamptey, Country Representative

THE UNITED NATIONS IN LIBERIA COMMENDS NEC ON THE SIGNING OF AN MOU ON SECTION 4.5 OF THE ELECTIONS LAW

The United Nations in Liberia, through the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) commends political parties and the National Elections Commission (NEC) on the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Section 4.5 of the Elections Law, which governs the nomination of candidates for elective positions in the upcoming elections. The signing of the MoU on 11 May 2023, is a significant milestone towards greater inclusion of women in the 2023 elections as it strengthens the commitment of political parties to ensure not less than 30 percent women on their candidate listings.

The United Nations also recognizes the important role of the Interparty Consultative Committee in drafting and validating the MoU. This MoU on candidate nomination follows the signing of the Farmington Declaration which reaffirms the commitment of political parties to implement the Violence Against Women in Elections Protocol, and to foster peaceful, more inclusive elections.

Liberia is currently ranked 162 out of 185 on the Inter-parliamentary Union's list of women in national parliaments. Despite women and girls constituting around 50 percent of the population, women in Liberia occupy less than 11 percent of the 103 seats in the Legislature. The percentage of women has fallen since 2006 – a trend which correlates to a decrease in the percentage of women on candidate listings over time. The United Nations commends national partners – the NEC; Women's Legislative Caucus; the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection; women's rights organizations; and other civil society organizations - for their efforts to promote reforms of Liberia's Elections Law. The concerted and continued efforts of these partners and their engagements with the Legislature and the political parties have paved the way for Legislative passage of Amendment 4.5 of the Elections Law, and for the signing of the MOU by political parties to include a minimum of 30 percent representation of women on their candidates list.



Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative. © UN Women Liberia

The United Nations further commends those political parties that have taken concrete steps to include 40 percent or more women on their candidate listings. This demonstrates a strong commitment to fostering more internally democratic political parties and to achieving a more inclusive and equitable Liberia.

The United Nations calls on political actors to consistently enforce the MOU and stands ready to support national partners – including Ministries, Agencies and Commissions, local government structures, and political parties – to develop or reform laws and policies that provide for temporary special measures, including gender quotas for elected and appointed positions, in line with Liberia's international, regional, and national commitments.

The United Nations in Liberia acknowledges the partnership and support of the European Union, Government of Sweden, Government of Ireland, and the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund in promoting greater gender equality and women's engagement in political and governance processes in Liberia.



National Elections Commission and the political parties in Liberia sign an MOU to ensure a minimum 30 percent gender quota on candidate listings. © UN Women Liberia

DIALOGUE ON ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

As Liberia prepares for elections this year, the Swedish Embassy, in collaboration with the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Centre for Women and Development (EJS Centre) and UN Women Liberia, hosted a diplomatic dialogue on Wednesday 5 April 2023, to discuss the role of political parties in promoting women's political participation.

The event was held at the EJS Centre and attended by members of the diplomatic community and representatives of various political parties, civil society and the media.

In her keynote address, former President of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf noted that women worldwide face the same obstacles and barriers to political participation, and there is a need to challenge these barriers and stereotypes. She said that women should have the same opportunities as men to learn, be informed and compete.

She also challenged political parties to give women the 'space' to compete, saying "Women need the opportunity to compete and to challenge. Women will come forward if they know that they are tested based on their capabilities, performance and contribution to national development."

Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf emphasized that it was now time to recognize the value that gender equality brings to society. She noted that each country has an obligation to find a way to close the gender gap: "Other countries use gender quota systems to provide opportunities for women." She explained that others had changed constitutions to bring equal rights, while others had changed policies in accordance with their own laws and specifications.



Former President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. © UN Women Liberia

Women's rights activist Caroline Bowah highlighted the downward trend in women's political representation in Liberia. In 2006, representation of women in the legislature amounted to 16 per cent; however, this had declined to 13 per cent by 2012, 11 per cent by 2014 and 10 per cent by 2021. She noted that this downward trend is continuing even though there are more female voters than male voters.

Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative, moderated a panel discussion with representatives of key political parties and coalitions with wider membership, including the Alternative National Congress, the Congress for Democratic Change, the Liberty Party and the Unity Party, and an independent representative. The political party representatives highlighted their efforts in promoting women's political participation.

Ms. Lamptey commended the political parties that had already committed for voluntary quotas and encouraged others to commit to adopting the same and beyond.

The main message from the participants was that there is a need to foster a common agenda for women's political participation, to achieve an increase in the representation of women in the legislature after the 2023 presidential and legislative elections.

The dialogue session was held as part of the Diplomatic Dialogue series hosted by foreign missions to Liberia and initiated by the German Embassy and the Economic Community of West African States. Thanks to the Ambassador of Sweden to Liberia and Sierra Leone, Urban Sjostrom, for facilitating the dialogue.



Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative, moderates a panel discussion with representatives of political parties and coalitions, including the Alternative National Congress (ANC), Congress for Democratic Change (CDC), Liberty Party, Unity Party (UP) and an independent representative. © UN Women Liberia

ASPIRING FEMALE POLITICIANS ACQUIRE SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL MARKETING SKILLS AHEAD OF GENERAL ELECTIONS

Twenty-five aspiring female politicians who attended the pilot social media and digital marketing skills training facilitated by UN Women Liberia in collaboration with the Orange Digital Center from 18 to 20 April 2023 are now equipped to use social media and digital marketing tools, Facebook, WhatsApp and Tik Tok, among others, to advance their political career, communicate and run effective campaigns ahead of the October 2023 general elections.

Aspirants from various political parties in Liberia attended the training. *“I learnt how to use WhatsApp to broadcast messages to many people and how to use digital tools to create an event on Facebook,”* says **Siah McCarthy Hare**, an aspiring candidate.

“I am happy that we have completed the training and will be able to demonstrate what we have learnt. I want to assure UN Women and Orange Digital Center that what they have imparted to us will not be wasted. They will see the positive results. The digital skills I learnt will help to boost my campaign and help me to reach out to people online through different platforms,” she said.

“Before the training, I could not use some functions of the phone. I have learnt how to send messages to many people in a minute. I used to pay people to design fliers and plan events for me. With the knowledge I have acquired, I can now create events on Facebook on my own,” said **Ms. McCarthy Hare**.

Another participant, Victoria Torlo Koiquan, said she would use the digital skills she acquired to enhance her campaign and to help people know that she is running for a senatorial post during the upcoming elections.



Social media and digital marketing skills training for aspiring female politicians in Liberia. © UN Women Liberia

“I had never posted a message on my WhatsApp status, but during the training, I posted a message, and within minutes, I received more than 100 messages in response. This means we can showcase our work in the community through WhatsApp. Some people are not on Facebook, but they are on WhatsApp. I will continue sharing messages on various social media platforms because I want more people to know I am running,” she said.

Ms. Koiquan highlighted that she had learnt a lot during the training: *“I learnt to post on my story, broadcast messages through WhatsApp and create events,”* she said.

Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative, applauded the female political aspirants for their decision to stand as candidates and for embracing social media as a tool to advance their political careers and carry out more effective campaigns and fundraising in the upcoming elections.

“In today’s world, social media and digital platforms are critical tools for connecting with voters, building a strong campaign, and sharing messages with a broader audience,” said **Ms. Lamptey**.

In addition, Zaza Mulbah, Orange Digital Center’s Senior Manager, highlighted that his organization was proud to be associated with women who want to make a change. He encouraged the aspirants to embrace social media and set a good example so their voices could be heard and the training could be extended to women in other parts of the country. *“If you have aspired to go into politics and want to advance your career, there is no way you can avoid social media,”* he said.



PEACE HUT WOMAN APPOINTED TOWN CHIEF

In Edina, Grand Bassa County, peace hut member, Rebecca Droben was appointed as Town Chief of Edina City. UN Women, in collaboration with the Women’s NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL) and affiliate women’s group ‘What the Women Say’, has been strengthening the leadership and advocacy capacity of women from community associations and ‘peace huts’ (women-led structures that promote peace and positive changes for women and girls and the wider community). The partners began the intervention in late July 2022, providing transformative leadership training aimed at enhancing women’s skills and their confidence to pursue leadership positions and at building solidarity among women, to influence changes in discriminatory norms, attitudes and practices and get local leaders to accept and even promote women’s participation and leadership in politics, local governance and peacebuilding architecture.

As a result of this training and with support from women in the community, Chief Droben gained the confidence and moral support to vie for the open chieftaincy position in the town. WONGOSOL also supported a multi-stakeholder dialogue on women’s right to participate in politics and public life, and the city mayor promised to promote women’s leadership and also Rebecca’s bid for Town Chief. In addition, the women who participated in the intervention carried out activities to raise community awareness of women’s participation and encouraged other women to rally around Rebecca. Recounting her path to the appointment, **Chief Droben** said,

“I was appointed by the Edina City Mayor, Azetha Spiller, backed up by other women to be Town Chief; that was how I accepted it and decided to lead my people.”

She was also able to use her skills to engage with men more effectively, as she explained: *“I built an alliance with the former (male) Town Chief, with whom I was able to gain the support of traditional people from the Poro/Sande ‘secret society’, of which I am not a member.”* After her appointment, Chief Droben has continued to exercise transformative leadership, and she has engaged with men even more since the intervention began, to support women-led advocacy with men in the community. **Chief Droben** recalls, *“When I was appointed, I knew within myself the former male Town Chief will not be happy with me because he will feel like I undermine him, so I went to him and make him to understand that I was appointed to lead in your position as Town Chief, but it doesn’t mean that we cannot work together.”* **Chief Droben** says that, to gain the support of the former chief, she told him that she would continue to work with him, to solve problems together: *“Since I took over from him, when there is any problem in our area, I can call him for us to hang head [strategize] and settle it together. One of the main reasons I did it like that is because he is zoe man and I am not zoe woman, so when I receive zoe problem case, he can help handle it, so that’s how we are working together.”* This demonstrates her ability to reach out to different groups and find means of solving problems collaboratively.



Rebecca Droben, Town Chief of Edina City, Grand Bassa County, Liberia. © UN Women Liberia

UN Women is partnering with the Orange Digital Center and the Government of Sweden to strengthen the capacity of female aspirants contributing to women’s equal participation as candidates ahead of the October 2023 elections in Liberia. Women are grossly underrepresented in the legislature, where only 10.7 per cent of elected lawmakers are women.

LIBERIA CELEBRATES INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Women from all walks of life thronged the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Ministerial Complex in Congo Town, Liberia, to celebrate International Women's Day on Friday 3 March 2023.

The celebrations were marked by a parade from SKD Boulevard Junction to the Ministerial Complex and a health screening session.

As part of the official proceedings, the Vice President of Liberia, Chief Dr. Jewel Howard Taylor, moderated a panel discussion on 'Innovating with technology to promote gender equality' in line with the national theme.

Panellists comprised Sara Buchanan, Executive Director of the Orange Foundation; Josephine Kou Gaye, Commissioner from the National Elections Commission; Zoquay Konneh Beyslow, senior reporter from Liberia Broadcasting System; and engineer Janetta John Roberts.

The panellists highlighted the importance of using new technologies for marketing purposes and business transactions, voter registration, working with technologies and promoting women's political participation. The role of the media was also emphasized.

Meanwhile, women who excelled in various disciplines were honoured and received awards for outstanding work in promoting gender equality. The President of Liberia, His Excellency George Manneh Weah, was also honoured and received a gift inscribed with 'Feminist in Chief'.

In his remarks, **President Weah** reiterated his government's commitment to empowering Liberian women through technology: "My government will continue to work closely with all partners and stakeholders to ensure that women are empowered by innovating with technology to promote gender equality."

The government will continue to enhance strategic partnerships with the private sector with support from all stakeholders and donors, to ensure that the financial resources needed are available to support this initiative.



International Women's Day celebrations in Liberia. © UN Women Liberia

President Weah declared the month of March as Liberian Women's Month and encouraged everyone to continue recognizing women's rights.

He called on political parties to respect the guidelines on ending violence against women in elections and politics.

On her part, the Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Honourable Williametta Saydee-Tarr, highlighted key achievements made in promoting gender equality, including the ban on female genital mutilation in Liberia.

UN Women Liberia Country Representative Comfort Lamptey delivered the UN Secretary General's message for International Women's Day, and highlighted the need to close the digital divide and increase the representation of women and girls in science and technology, saying:

Today, women make up under a third of the workforce in science, technology, engineering, and maths. And when women are underrepresented in developing new technologies, discrimination may be baked in from the start. That is why we must close the digital divide and increase the representation of women and girls in science and technology.

In addition, Ms. Lamptey noted that this year's theme 'Innovating with technology to promote gender equality' is highly relevant to Liberia as the country prepares for elections.

Chief Justice Her Honour Sie-A-Nyene Gyapay Youh, other government officials, members of the diplomatic corps, civil society organizations, representatives from the United Nations in Liberia and women of Liberia, among others, attended the International Women's Day celebrations.



Celebration of IWD in Liberia. © UN Women Liberia

WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY FORUM

As part of the commemoration of International Women's Day and Liberian Women's Month, UN Women Liberia in collaboration with the Orange Foundation and Girls in Tech held a forum entitled 'Women in Technology' on Friday 17 March 2023, at the Orange Digital Center in Monrovia. The forum was held under the theme 'DigitAll: Innovation and technology for gender equality'.

Panellists comprised Abigail Jallah, Data Scientist at Orange Liberia; Gwatoh Kroma, Executive Officer and Founder of PeppaJar Kids; and Sara Buchanan, Executive Director of the Orange Foundation. They facilitated discussions on the status of women and girls in the technology field. They also discussed the impact of using technology, existing opportunities in the technology field for women and girls, and ways in which digital innovations could be used to promote gender equality and empower women in Liberia.

In her opening remarks, Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative, highlighted the underrepresentation of women in the technology sector. She called on stakeholders to close the gender digital divide, citing that a persistent gender gap in digital access keeps women from unlocking technology's full potential.

During panel discussions, Ms. Buchanan urged women and girls to take advantage of the free services offered at the Orange Digital Center and other digital schools for women and girls, to learn to use digital technologies.

UN RESIDENT COORDINATOR HOSTS EVENT TO MARK END OF LIBERIAN WOMEN'S MONTH

The United Nations Resident Coordinator in Liberia, Christine Umutoni, hosted a 'meet and greet' event for female staff of the United Nations in Liberia, to close the Liberian Women's Month celebrations. Staff had the opportunity to learn from the inspiring experience-sharing session with senior management.

Ms. Umutoni chronicled her journey from being a child refugee to being the first female ambassador and, subsequently, the first female resident coordinator for the United Nations in Liberia.



UN Liberia female staff celebrate IWD 2023 as part of the women's month activities © UN Liberia



Women in Technology Forum held in commemoration of IWD 2023.

© UN Women Liberia

Panellists highlighted that many opportunities are being created for women and girls to use technologies, but that uptake is low. They noted a need to create awareness so that young women and girls know about the benefits. They also recommended a review of the school curriculum so that technology is included.

UN Women is working in collaboration with the Orange Foundation to empower young women and girls to use new technologies.

Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative, shared her experience of career development, while Bidisha Pillai, UNFPA Liberia Country Representative, shared her experience of working outside the United Nations, and Joanna Mulbah, UNDP Liberia Human Resources, talked about the United Nations policy on work-life balance.

The key message from all of the speakers was that perseverance, risk-taking, building networks, making choices and mentorship are some of the critical ingredients to climbing the corporate ladder.



Christine Umutoni, UN Liberia Resident Coordinator © UN Liberia

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY SECTOR IN LIBERIA

By Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative

International Women's Day is celebrated every year on 8 March. In 2023, the day was celebrated under the global theme 'DigitAll: Innovation and technology for gender equality'.

The theme recognizes and celebrates women and girls who are championing the advancement of transformative technology and digital education, while also acknowledging the persisting gaps to bridging the gender digital gap.

In Liberia, International Women's Day was commemorated on 3 March 2023. His Excellency President George Manneh Weah, who officiated the event, stressed the need to celebrate and highlight the strides made by the great women in Liberia. He declared the entire month of March as Liberian Women's Month.

Many activities were held during Liberian Women's Month to highlight the importance of technology for advancing gender equality, including a high-level dialogue between media executives and women leaders to discuss the role of the media in promoting gender-responsive reporting during elections in the digital age; a women in technology forum convened by UN Women in collaboration with the Orange Foundation and Girls in Tech, which assessed the existing opportunities for women in the technology sector; and a graduation ceremony for young women who had completed a six-month digital skills training programme in Bong County and Grand Bassa County. We salute all Liberian women who are harnessing technology to drive positive change and development in their communities.

The recent introduction of digital platforms, such as the 'Buy from Women' platform launched by UN Women in partnership with the Orange Foundation and with support of the Government of Liberia,

is an important technology-driven initiative that will provide rural women farmers with digital access to information, finances and markets. Similarly, the introduction of call centres for survivors to report cases of sexual and gender-based violence by the Government of Liberia further illustrates the value of technology in addressing development priorities.

While strides are being made, women and girls remain underrepresented across the creation, use and regulation of technology, and are left out of innovation. Globally, women comprise under a third of the workforce in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. In Africa, women account for about 30 per cent of the continent's technology professionals. In Liberia, approximately 22 per cent of the population has internet access. Women are less likely than rural men to own a phone, and even less likely to use mobile money and mobile internet. These gaps are more pronounced for women in rural areas.

Yet, technology can increase awareness of women's and girls' rights and expand pathways to education and other opportunities. Bringing women into the technology forum will create more creative solutions and will generate greater potential for the design of innovations that meet women's needs and promote gender equality.

As we look ahead, following the conclusion of Liberian Women's Month, we reaffirm our commitment to partner with the Government of Liberia and other stakeholders to promote gender-responsive approaches to innovation and technology, and to design innovations that include women as end users. Let us all come together, women, men, girls and boys, to accelerate development goals and harness technology to advance gender equality, leaving no one behind. Let us DigitAll!



Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Country Representative. © UN Women Liberia

WOMEN'S INNOVATIVE DIGITAL PROJECT TRANSFORMS LIVES OF RURAL WOMEN IN LIBERIA

On Tuesday, 4 October 2022, during a field visit to the women's innovative digital project, delegates from the Orange Foundation, Ministry of Agriculture and UN Women visited and interacted with members of the Suah Yelle multipurpose cooperative in the Gbartala Buy from Women pilot community in Bong County, in the north-central part of Liberia.

Members of the Suah Yelle cooperative explained how the women's innovative digital project has positively transformed their lives and impacted on their community and expressed appreciation for the support being given by UN Women and the Orange Foundation. "We never knew how to read and write. We never knew how to spell our own names. But, today, because of Orange Foundation and UN Women, we can spell our names. From our business, we can calculate how much we are getting and how much we are selling because of the business school we attended. I can sell Orange mobile money in the market and I can pay tuition fees for my two children," says **Satta Flomo**, a beneficiary and member of the Gbartala 'Buy from Women' pilot community.



Beneficiary of the innovative digital project demonstrates skills. @ UN Women Liberia

Another beneficiary, Martha Jones, expressed appreciation for UN Women and the Orange Foundation for introducing adult literacy training in Liberia. Ms. Jones, like many members of the community, highlighted that she could not read or write. She was also unable to count money and calculate profits or use innovative technologies such as the Orange mobile money, but, following a series of training sessions on the use of mobile money, adult literacy and business development training, she has acquired new skills.

According to **Ms. Jones**, "Before entering the adult literacy programme, it was difficult for me. I never knew how to read or spell my name. But, now, because of this programme, I can spell my name and write it ... I did not understand how to do business. I did not know how to give 'change' to customers. I will give people money [that did not deserve it]. But now that I joined the programme, no one can get my money because I now know how to calculate my money."

Ms. Jones is also a beneficiary of the climate smart agriculture project: "We acquired 10 acres of land where we are planting corn and vegetables. When we harvest, we can sell the products and put the money into our savings."

Women from the Suah Yelle cooperative who are implementing the climate smart agriculture projects are now looking forward to using the 'Buy from Women' digital platform to access information and markets.

The visiting delegates comprised UN Women France Executive Director, Fanny Benedett; Orange Foundation Vice President, Elizabeth Tchoungi; UN Women Liberia Country Representative, Comfort Lamptey; and Orange Foundation Liberia Executive Director, Sara Buchanan.



A delegation from Orange Foundation, Ministry of Agriculture and UN Women visits members of the Suah Yelle multi-purpose cooperative in the Gbartala Buy from women pilot community in Bong Count, in the north central part of Liberia. © UN Women Liberia

UN Women and the Orange Foundation are partnering to support rural women smallholder farmers with targeted interventions aimed at strengthening the Buy from Women pilot initiative for connecting women producers to climate smart and disaster risk reduction information, renewable energy, finance and markets. The partnership also aims to bridge the technological divide and promote digital inclusion by increasing women's and young people's access to modern technology by supporting their empowerment through education and employment.

UN WOMEN INTEGRATES DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES INTO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES

In Liberia, UN Women is collaborating with the Orange Foundation and the Government of Liberia to economically empower women through digital innovations and technology, to promote gender equality.

Empowerment programmes being implemented by UN Women include digital literacy training for women to be 'Orange' mobile money agents. More than 70 women have gained employment with Orange as agents, and 700 more are using and managing mobile money accounts following capacity-building training conducted in 2022.

The training programmes are set to benefit women in both rural and urban areas. Rural women are attending digital literacy classes at two women's digital centres established at the Totota Peace Hut and the Gboinyee Tarr Town Peace Hut.



Ramon Garway, Women Economic Empowerment Program Manager for UN Women Liberia. © UN Women Liberia

As Ramon Garway, Women Economic Empowerment Programme Manager for UN Women Liberia, explains "At the digital centres, women are trained to use devices such as computers and tablets to access information, finances and market links. UN Women is working with Orange Foundation to build the capacity of women entrepreneurs to leverage social media to advertise and market their products. Women are also taught literacy, numeracy, business skills and other women's economic empowerment programmes."

UN Women and the Orange Foundation are also piloting the innovative 'Buy from Women' digital programme, which aims to connect women producers with climatesmart and disaster risk reduction information, digital financial services and markets. At least 1,200 rural women in Liberia are set to benefit from this programme.

In addition, UN Women has adopted an innovative means of providing extension and advisory services to rural farmers by using social media platforms such as WhatsApp to share knowledge products and provide technical assistance to more than 800 women and young farmers through various farming cooperatives.



Rebecca Moyo from Bong County in Liberia demonstrates how to use the 'Buy from Women' platform. © UN Women Liberia

While progress is being made in using innovation and technology to empower women, some challenges exist. Most rural women are still uncomfortable using mobile money or banking services because of perception issues. Mr. Garway noted:

A typical rural woman feels more secure tying her money on a cloth than having it in her phone because she thinks she will lose her money if her phone goes missing. We are advising them that if one loses their phone, she can go back to retrieve the sim card and recover her money. A lot needs to be done to correct the misconceptions and change the norms, attitudes and behaviours.

The majority of rural women are uncomfortable using mobile phones because of high levels of digital illiteracy. They prefer traditional approaches to access skills training, like teaching them how to read and write from a blackboard and having a training workshop and writing on a blackboard or writing on flipcharts, than actually using new technologies.

The other challenge is that internet access is not widely available in rural areas. Literacy levels are also low; some women cannot read and write. We are encouraging women who want to get into the technology sector to complete at least two levels of literacy and numerous skills classes before they start considering joining technology classes.

Nevertheless, the benefits of using technology outweigh the disadvantages. There is a need to scale up the pilot interventions being supported by UN Women so that more women can be reached and the impact is more meaningful.

As we celebrated Liberian Women's Month under the global theme 'DigitAll: Innovation and technology for gender equality' and the national theme 'Innovating with technology to promote gender equality', we applauded women and girls in Liberia who are using innovation and technology to promote gender equality.

"I KNEW NOTHING ABOUT A COMPUTER OR HOW TO SWITCH IT ON, BUT, AFTER ATTENDING THE TRAINING, I CAN NOW SWITCH ON A COMPUTER"

Mercy Beyan, a 19-year-old from Bong County in the north-central part of Liberia, is a graduate of the digital literacy skills training programme facilitated by UN Women in collaboration with the Orange Foundation. She is one of 45 young women who graduated from the Totota Women's Digital Centre on 30 March 2023 after completing a six-month digital literacy training programme.

The graduation ceremony was held as part of the Liberian Women's Month celebrations, which were held under the global theme 'DigitAll: Innovation and technology for gender equality' and the national theme 'Innovating with technology to promote gender equality'.

I knew nothing about a computer or how to switch it on. But now, after attending the training, I can now switch on a computer. I didn't know the different types of computers. I now know about laptops, tablets and desktops and the different parts of a computer, which are mouse, monitor, keyboard and central processing unit.

I encountered some challenges when I first started the training. Everything was so confusing, but now I understand.

I joined the digital literacy programme because I realized that everything in the world is about technology. I want to continue attending digital literacy classes to improve my skills.

I encourage other girls to leave the streets and come and learn about technology because it is something that will benefit them in the future. Learning about technology is important because even the phone we are using is technology. Learning to use technology can help one to get a job or to start a business.

I would like to thank UN Women and Orange Foundation for introducing this programme. I appeal to them to continue supporting us so that we do not just graduate and sit. We want to do business and sustain ourselves. Life is tough.

UN Women is partnering with the Orange Foundation and the Government of Liberia to economically empower women through digital innovations and technology to promote gender equality.



Mercy Beyan from Bong County in the north-central part of Liberia receives her certificate from Sara Buchanan, Executive Director of Orange Foundation Liberia (L) and Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative. © UN Women Liberia

YOUNG WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS ARE CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL GAP THROUGH DIGITAL MARKETING

Young Liberian women are eager to go into small-scale business ventures as a means of self-empowerment and self-development. Some women see business as a dream, while others pursue it as a call to action. However, the lack of an encouraging business environment, difficulty in accessing loans and limited digital empowerment opportunities for young enterprising women have reportedly been major obstacles.

In support of emerging Liberian businesses, a UN Working Group of Experts on Business and Human Rights, which visited the country in November 2022, called on the Government of Liberia to help improve the business climate and alleviate the poor labour conditions across different sectors and in plantations or concessions areas, among undertaking other initiatives to improve businesses.

To assist young women venturing into start-ups, UN Women Liberia supports the use of social media for business. This initiative encourages young women to use their phones, internet and network to advertise and market their products.

UN Women is working in collaboration with the Orange Foundation to provide digital training services to young women and girls, to bridge the technology gap between men and women by increasing young women's access to modern technology and supporting their empowerment through education and employment. The training is mainly earmarked for people who are aged 18 years and above, high school graduates or people with intermediate skills in the use of social media.

Zaza Mulbah, a Senior Manager at Orange Digital Center Liberia, believes that UN Women and the Orange Foundation's digital empowerment training marks the beginning of important things to come for young women in Liberia. Mr. Mulbah explained "We kickstarted training in digital marketing, financial technology, ecommerce and e-business for 35 young women who were already into business, so that we could assist them to increase their income. Instead of using social media for watching movies and displaying their photos, the trainees were taught to use the platform to earn money and attain better standards of living." Training was given in three phases from June to October 2022.

Vicky Neufville was among the 35 young women who completed the digital training course offered by UN Women and the Orange Digital Center. She appreciated the training because she was exposed to the use of technology, which is critical in today's world and valuable to her as a young person. Ms. Neufville is now using her social media platform to support herself, and she is looking forward to seeing her entity grow and to help others grow as well.

For Hannah Kettor, another beneficiary of the training, life has changed for the better since she completed her digital e-business training in 2022. Her sales have gone up and she will soon stop face-to-face selling and focus on social media marketing.



Beneficiaries of the digital training program facilitated by UN Women Liberia in collaboration with Orange Foundation graduate at the Orange Digital Centre in August 2022. © UN Women Liberia

"I heard that I could sell more goods on Facebook, but I did not know how to do it. I had nobody to teach me until I enrolled into the digital training programme," said Ms. Kettor. Her main line of business is in selling dry goods like rice, oil and beans, and her business name is 'Hit the Web'.

The digital training focused on how to use social media to boost income generation, use online mobile technology to access financial services, and use e-commerce as a tool for buying and selling.

As we celebrate International Women's Day and Liberian Women's Month under the global theme 'DigitAll: Innovation and technology for gender equality' and the national theme 'Innovating with technology to promote gender equality', we celebrate young women and girls who are empowering themselves through the use of digital innovations and technology.

YOUNG WOMEN GRADUATE FROM DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMME AT THE WOMEN'S DIGITAL CENTER IN TOTOTA, BONG COUNTY, LIBERIA

Forty-five young women from Bong County in the north-central part of Liberia graduated from the Totota Women's Digital Center after completing a six-month digital literacy skills training programme facilitated by UN Women in collaboration with the Orange Foundation and the National Peace Hut Women of Liberia.

The graduation ceremony was held as part of the Liberian Women's Month celebrations, which were held under the International Women's Day global theme 'DigitAll: Innovation and technology for gender equality' and the national theme 'Innovating with technology to promote gender equality'.



Young women from Bong County in the north-central part of Liberia graduate from the Totota Women's Digital Centre after completing a six months digital literacy skills training program facilitated by UN Women in collaboration with Orange Foundation. © UN Women Liberia

Some graduates who testified that they did not know anything about computers before the training had the opportunity to demonstrate their newly acquired skills. They showcased how to send money using Orange Money, the Orange Telecom mobile money platform, and also how to switch on a laptop and log in.

Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative, applauded the graduates of the digital literacy programme for embracing technology, saying "I am so happy and proud of what you have achieved. You can't think about doing anything productive today if you don't have the knowledge of computers. Digital technology is so key for everything. It's great to see you all embrace it."

She hopes that the initiative can be expanded to different centres to show how women with knowledge of technology can improve their lives.



Graduates from the Totota Women's Digital Centre demonstrate their acquired skills after completing a six months digital literacy skills training program facilitated by UN Women in collaboration with Orange Foundation.

© UN Women Liberia

"Now, because you know how to use digital skills, you can go on the computer and get information anywhere in the world about any subject and use it to improve yourselves. You can sell and be mobile money agents and make money. You can become technopreneurs. You can use these digital skills to promote peace. We are going towards elections. We want to make sure that there are peaceful elections in Liberia," urged **Ms. Lamptey**.

Sara Buchanan, Executive Director of the Orange Foundation, highlighted that ensuring that women learn how to use technology is now an emergency, because 9 out of 10 jobs require someone who knows how to use technology.

Guest speaker Mr. Augustine Zabay, Principal of the E.J. Yancy High School, emphasized the need for computer education. Members of the Totota Peace Hut witnessed the graduation ceremony.

UN Women is partnering with the Orange Foundation, the Government of Liberia and other stakeholders to empower women economically and socially through digital innovations and technology to promote gender equality.

'BUY FROM WOMEN' INNOVATIVE DIGITAL PLATFORM LAUNCHED IN LIBERIA

Rural women farmers in Liberia will now have easy access to information, finance and markets following the official launch of the innovative digital platform 'Buy from Women' in Liberia on Thursday 1 December 2022. The launch event was held at the Orange Digital Center in Monrovia.

The 'Buy from Women' platform is an innovative women's digital inclusion project aimed at connecting women producers to climate-smart and disaster risk reduction information, digital financial services and markets. The platform is expected to benefit at least 1,200 rural women in Liberia.

Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative, highlighted that the 'Buy from Women' initiative is integral to UN Women's work on women's economic empowerment. She explained that the model allows farmers to sell their produce directly online and limits the use of middle persons.

"The platform will help to give information and knowledge to women farmers around disaster risk reduction and risk transfers. It can give information around weather forecasts and alerts. We hope that we can continue to improve it so that the Liberia model can be a model that other countries can learn from," says **Ms. Lamptey**.

The Executive Director of the Orange Foundation, Sara Buchanan, took the opportunity to demonstrate how the digital platform works and explained that her organization's partnership with UN Women aims to help women farmers and to champion gender equality through digital innovation.

Several dignitaries, including members of the Diplomatic Corps, African Development Bank, United Nations and civil society, congratulated UN Women and the Orange Foundation on their collaboration to empower rural women through digital innovations.

Rural women also hailed the development and highlighted that the launch of the platform will enhance their work and enable them to sell produce to international buyers.



Launch of the 'Buy from Women' innovative digital platform in Liberia. © UN Women Liberia

UN WOMEN SUPPORTS FARMING COOPERATIVE TO BOOST PRODUCTIVITY

UN Women Liberia is supporting rural women through their farming cooperative to increase food production and income generation in Bong County.

Over the years, women in Liberia have been left behind in terms of many development needs, such as functional literacy, access to farming loans, leadership role responsibilities and access to technology. For generations, antiquated norms have dictated the social structures of rural communities. Women farmers were often relegated to unpaid farm work and household tasks, while men received training, education, resources and land.

The Meni-Nina Farmers Incorporated Multipurpose Cooperative is a community-based agriculture and women's empowerment farming cooperative involved in food production, village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) and small-scale business entrepreneurship. The cooperative has a membership of 30 farmers, 25 women and five men.

With support from UN Women Liberia and other partners, the cooperative is empowering rural women. UN Women's assistance in the provision of support for VSLAs, adult literacy and agriculture has been hugely beneficial to women.

UN Women Liberia through its Women's Economic Empowerment Pillar, under the ClimateSmart Agriculture programme, supplied members with improved corn, bitter ball, pepper, watermelon, cucumber and peanut seeds. The seeds were distributed among two communities, which included the women's groups Meni-Nina Farmers Incorporated and Palaquelleh in Bellemu.

The harvests from these vegetable farms were so huge that it put smiles on the women's faces. The cooperative also has a farm where watermelon is cultivated in commercial quantities, and it was looking for a buyer or market to sell its produce to. In addition, MeniNina also has an oil palm farm and grows lowland rice. Proceeds from the vegetables and rice go to supporting women's families and women sell the surplus to generate income that can be used to settle children's tuition fees and provide for other needs.

Kula Yarkpawolo, a cooperative member, started a petty trading business, selling locally made soap and imported slippers of all kinds. Her monthly profit ranged from L\$1,000 to L\$2,200 (US\$7–US\$8). These earnings could not support her family, and her children wanted to enrol in school. Initially, she could not afford the fees, although she eventually enrolled them in the government school, but paying fees and providing their meals was still difficult. Most days she was not able to give them breakfast, and lunch and dinner were always a challenge. She wanted to start a better business but could not because she had no capital or access to a loan.

Kula Yarkpawolo explained "Becoming a member of the UN Women – Meni-Nina Women Village Savings and Loan Association changed my life... I took a loan and started buying oil and caustic to produce soap. I now make a monthly profit of L\$10,000 [about US\$67]. I only want to say thanks to UN Women and the Meni-Nina VSLA for intervening to get me in business."

ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMME IMPACTS POSITIVELY ON THE LIVES OF RURAL WOMEN FARMERS IN COOPERATIVES

Over 600 rural women farmers in Bong, Grand Bassa, Nimba, Lofa and Margibi Counties are applying newly acquired literacy and numeracy skills after nine months of practical, hands-on training.

"The provision of adult literacy and numeracy skills has had a considerable impact on the lives of rural women farmers in cooperatives. It improved their reading and writing levels, boosted productivity, increased standards of living, and promoted awareness of basic human rights. The women are now using pencils and pens to write names on bags of produce they sell," said Joseph Yoko, Programme Manager at NAEAL (National Adult Education Association of Liberia). "NAEAL is grateful to UN Women Liberia and the Government of Sweden for the support," he added.

This NAEAL and UN Women partnership ran a vocational and adult literacy skills training programme for rural women in Liberia from November 2021 to December 2022. The women's numeracy skills have improved to the extent that they are able to calculate the prices of their goods and report their income accurately. Beneficiaries also received three months of business development and financial literacy mentorship.

The women's practical skills increased through learning how to hold a pen/pencil, trace letters, write and read the alphabet, and sign their names (no more use of thumb signatures). They mastered basic reading, writing and spelling, and can do basic arithmetic, read billboards, and use and recognize names on cell phones accurately.

“I NOW KNOW THAT I AM USEFUL IN SOCIETY”

Ophelia is a beneficiary of the adult literacy and business skills training programme. She stays in Soul Clinic Community in Monrovia, Liberia. She shares her story.

I did not know how to read and write. I heard about this programme and I joined on 15 November 2021. Because of this programme, I now know how to spell my name. I know how to read, how to write, one, two, three.

The programme has taught me a lot. It has taught me to identify numbers. I can now add numbers and know the total. I now know how to subtract.

I joined the adult literacy programme so that I could learn. If I had not joined, I would not be able to spell my name.

I have now started a bread making business. Before, I used to sell, but I did not know how to calculate profit. I just used to put the money together. But, from the business training, I learnt to separate the principal and the profit. I have learnt how to improve my business. I can now also prepare tea and eggs to add to my business. I am also selling flour, eggs, sugar, and I am adding value to my business.

I wake up at 4.30 a.m. every day to start making bread. I mix flour and by 5.30 a.m. I bake and go to sell. I can get L\$1,200 a day. Through making bread, I can send my children to school. I am able to feed myself. If I am not selling bread, I also sell coal. I only stop selling on Sunday or when I am sick.

I am a member of the village savings and loan association (VLSA). We meet every Sunday at 4 p.m. and we contribute L\$100. We are 30 members. We give out the money and you return with interest after one month. We share the money at the end of the year.

If you want to borrow money from the bank, you have to have collateral, but to borrow from VLSAs, you don't need collateral if you are a member.

I did not go to school because my parents didn't send me to school. But, I feel very happy because I now know that I am useful in society.

I want to thank UN Women for teaching me how to write and for continuing to think about us in Liberia. If you did this to me, I know you can do it to other women in Liberia.

My advice to other women is that, as God gave us hands, we should use them. We should not depend on men. Work with your hands. I am not depending on men.

Ophelia, is a single mother with four children: two boys and two girls.



@ UN Women

PEACE HUTS EMPOWER LIBERIAN WOMEN IN PEACEBUILDING

Forty-five-year-old Jebbeh Sambola is the Chairperson of the Bo Waterside Peace Hut in Grand Cape Mount County, in north-western Liberia. Bo Waterside is one of many Peace Huts supported by UN Women to enhance women's participation in peacebuilding and to empower them economically.

“The main activities conducted at the Peace Hut include conflict resolution and provision of counselling services. We provide adult literacy classes for members. Most women did not know how to read and write, but they can now write their names. I feel proud because I can also write my name, something I could not do before.

We did not know about our rights. We now know that women can own land. Through UN Women, the Peace Hut has empowered us to have more information. The life that we used to live has changed.

We were also taught to establish village savings and loan associations (VLSA) that help us to earn income. We are now doing business and most members are now able to pay school fees for their children. We

have established two shops as members of the Peace Hut. We use the profits to repay the VLSA loan, maintain and sustain our Peace Hut. The Peace Hut has made me stronger. I can now talk in front of people. I did not know that women can contest in elections as candidates. The Peace Hut taught us that woman can stand for elections.”

The Bo Waterside Peace Hut was established in 2019 and has a membership of 178 people (18 men and 160 women).

UN Women is supporting women from the Peace Huts with leadership and vocational skills training as well as economic empowerment initiatives to enhance gender equality in line with sustainable development goal 5.

UN WOMEN, PARTNERS SUPPORT COMMUNITIES ENHANCE GENDER EQUALITY, PEACEBUILDING IN MARYLAND COUNTY, LIBERIA

Rural women residing in Maryland County, in Liberia are gradually being allowed to form part of discussions around land issues, property inheritance, and participate in decision-making at the household and community levels.

This is a result of awareness-raising and training support they received on the new Land Rights Act, Local Government Act, and gender-based violence from the “Sustaining Peace and Reconciliation through strengthening Land Governance and Dispute Resolution Mechanisms,” jointly implemented by UN Women, UNDP, and WFP with funding from the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (PBF).

During a recent field trip to five (5) project communities in Maryland County, rural women - buttressed by their male counterparts - said the PBF project was empowering them in becoming more aware about their rights as women and their role as members of the communities in which they live.

“In the past the old law did not include us women, but the new land rights law that was passed in September 2018 allows women and youth to form part of land discussions,” said Patricia Dennis of Kaken-Gbolobo in Maryland County.

In addition, Wleetibo Dennis highlighted that, “In the past, women never discussed or owned land but today, women, men, and youth can sit together with the elders and decide issues on land ownership.”

The beneficiaries in the County, in separate gatherings, appealed to UN Women Liberia to expand its outreach and to organize more engagements on the awareness-raising campaigns on land rights and ownership, GBV education, and women's participation in local leadership and decision-making.

Liberia Land Authority Administrator for Maryland County, Robert H. Moore, said land conflicts arising out of farming, mining, and ownership rights were widespread, and women participation in



Beneficiaries of the Peace Hut in Tamba Community, Maryland County, Liberia. © UN Women Liberia

dispute resolution mechanisms was now inevitable. According to him, unlike before when women used to be marginalized, they are now involved in decision making. Even when the husband dies, they are no longer ejected and denied properties.

Under this PBF joint project, UN Women Liberia leads on awareness-creation on the Land Rights Act and Local Government Act including components on rights of communities over customary land, women land rights, and alternative dispute resolution. WFP is responsible for enhancing livelihoods for concessions-affected communities through implementation of agricultural activities – providing seedlings, farming equipment's and trainings for communities. UNDP handles the capacity strengthening of land governance institutions at national and local levels as well as customary land formalization, boundary harmonization, and confirmatory survey. The project, funded by the PBF through the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, is implemented in close collaboration with the Liberia Land Authority, other national institutions, and civil society organizations.

LIBERIA BANS PRACTICE OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) has been permanently banned in Liberia following a proclamation by the chairperson of the National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia (NACCEL), Chief Zanzan Karwor, during the commemoration of the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation in Sonkay Town, Montserrado County, on 6 February 2023.

Declaring the ban, *Chief Karwor* said “On behalf of my people, by the power vested in me, as chairman of all the traditional chiefs in 15 counties, FGM is banned in this country.” He also called on chiefs and elders to share the message around the country.

Massa Kandakai, Head Zoe (traditional practitioner) for Montserrado County, accepted Chief Karwor’s pronouncement to end FGM. She disclosed that all of her zoes have abandoned their tools and were ready for a new lease of life. **Ms. Kandakai** said “Once our chief has ordered us to stop, we accept the ban on FGM and we will not do it.”

Ahead of the ban, traditional leaders conducted a traditional ceremony where all FGM practitioners returned the tools and permits they used to practise FGM. Similar rituals will be performed in the remaining 10 FGM-practising counties, to ensure that FGM is completely eliminated in the whole country.

Several pronouncements were made previously by NACCEL in an effort to eliminate FGM in Liberia, including the Ganta Declaration to suspend FGM for one year in 2019 and a further three-year ban from 2022 to 2025. The latest pronouncement by Chief Karwor in Sonkay Town is the most emphatic, as it calls for a permanent, not temporary, ban.

The UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for Africa on FGM and child marriage, Jaha Dukureh, reiterated Liberia’s progress on the fight against FGM, adding that Liberia is no longer focused on suspending FGM for three years but is focused on banning it. **Ambassador Dukureh**, a stalwart in the fight against FGM, congratulated the females zoes “for standing up for the rights of African women by freely accepting to prohibit FGM.”

Members of the international community who attended the event also congratulated Liberia for the landmark decision to end FGM. The Head of the European Union Delegation to Liberia, **Ambassador Laurent Delahousse**, said “If I were a little girl born in Africa, I would be happy today. Happy as all the little girls of Montserrado County because today marks the entry of your beautiful county into a new era, the era when modernity is reconciled with tradition, the era of initiation without mutilation.”



Several dignitaries including the Vice President of Liberia, Chief Dr. Jewel Howard Taylor; the Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Hon. Williametta Saydee Tarr and other Government officials; members of the Diplomatic community; UN Women Liberia Country Representative, Comfort Lamptey and other representatives from the UN in Liberia; the UN Goodwill Ambassador for Africa on ending FGM and child marriage, Jaha Dukureh; representatives of civil society organisations; traditional practitioners and the media witnessed the proclamation event on the ban on FGM. © UN Women Liberia

Furthermore, the Vice President of Liberia, Chief Dr. Jewel Howard Taylor, commended Chief Karwor, traditional leaders, ambassadors, the United Nations and friends of Liberia for the achievements. She appealed to development partners to help furnish the vocational and heritage centre in Montserrado County where the event was held.

Through the Spotlight Initiative of the United Nations, the European Union and the Government of Liberia, UN Women established four vocational and heritage centres in four counties, namely Montserrado, Grand Cape Mount, Lofa and Nimba, to provide alternative economic livelihood programmes to traditional practitioners as part of interventions to eliminate FGM in Liberia. The centres will serve as dedicated learning centres for traditional practitioners and young women and girls to acquire new livelihood skills.

The UN Women Liberia Country Representative Ms. Comfort Lamptey read the UN Secretary-General’s message in observance of the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, in which the **Secretary-General** called on all “men and boys everywhere to join in speaking out and stepping forward to end FGM for the benefit of all.”

The United Nations and the European Union have been supporting the Government of Liberia to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including harmful practices such as FGM, through the Spotlight Initiative.

CHIEF MUSLIM ZOE ABANDONS THE PRACTICE OF FGM AND URGES OTHER ZOES TO FOLLOW

In November 2022, Chief Muslim Zoe, Majula Darame, won the admiration of activists when she voluntarily took to the stage at a well-attended meeting in Monrovia – in front of senior zoes and high government officials – and boldly renounced the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM).

Amid thunderous applause from anti-FGM activists, and supported by her assistant zoes, **Chief Zoe Majula** said, “I have lived my entire life engaging in FGM. However, I want to let you all know today that I have decided to stop performing FGM permanently because I am now convinced that it is wrong to do FGM.”

The National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia (NACCEL), government officials, civil society organizations, and UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for Africa, Jaha Dukureh, were present at the time the statement was made. The fact that Chief Zoe Majula publicly abandoned a cultural practice she had nurtured her entire life highlighted the seriousness of the occasion and demonstrated that Liberians were finally prepared to put an end to a longstanding practice that is harmful to the health and well-being of the Liberian girl child.

In an interview, Chief Zoe Majula reiterated the views expressed in November 2022 and said that **Ambassador Dukureh’s** visit to Liberia helped to enlighten, educate, and inspire zoes and the local population: “In my opinion, Jaha has informed us on a topic we were afraid to talk about. I have made it clear that I will no longer perform FGM. I won’t support child marriage any longer. I became involved in FGM because my mother passed it down to me. The truth, however, is the truth. We now have the right knowledge.”

She emphasized that she was starting a campaign by taking a number of steps to encourage other zoes connected to her to end

the practice of FGM in Liberia: “Even after Jaha departs Liberia, the campaign should not stop. Today, I held a gathering at my home and let other women zoes know about it. I have informed the Imams about my decision. I will be in the mosque on Friday to tell our mothers. We are not abandoning our culture but will put a stop to FGM.”

In her ardent advocacy against FGM and child marriage in Liberia, Ambassador Dukureh championed the initially unfamiliar but now popular slogan ‘Initiation without Mutilation’ to emphasize that the campaign to end FGM was not about destroying Liberia’s culture but rather about upholding the rich traditions and getting rid of the cutting aspect.

Speaking to lawmakers on Capitol Hill, Monrovia, in November 2022, Ambassador Dukureh underscored the relevance of ‘initiation without mutilation’ in these words: “Now that we know FGM is harmful to young girls there is no need to continue it. What we are asking Liberians to do is not to take that rite of passage away, but we are asking you to take out the harmful parts, keep the good ones, and introduce ‘initiation without mutilation’ where we bring more economic values and education to the Sande schools without harming their bodies.”

Chief Zoe Majula’s open, public statement on FGM was a major step against a practice that has negatively affected Liberian women and girls for nearly two centuries of the country’s existence. Thanks to Majula and her assistants for abandoning FGM, there was now a glimmer of hope that others would follow in her steps and Liberia - supported by its traditional leaders, government, and development partners - was gradually edging towards a total ban on the practice.



Extreme left - Chief Muslim Zoe, Majula © UN Women Liberia

IN THE WORDS OF JAHA DUKUREH: “AS LONG AS I AM ALIVE, I WILL WAKE UP EVERY SINGLE DAY AND SCREAM TO THE WORLD THAT FGM [FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION] IS WRONG AND CHILD MARRIAGE IS NOT DIFFERENT FROM RAPE.”

Jaha Dukureh is the UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for Africa. A renowned activist, she herself is a survivor of female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. On 19–27 November 2022, Jaha undertook a mission to Liberia to support the Liberian Government in their efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including harmful practices such as FGM and child marriage.

I went through FGM when I was one week old. I have been a child bride twice in my life. The first time when I was married off, I was 15 years old. Girls like me don't usually make it this far.

One of the greatest honours of my life has been the appointment as UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for Africa. I care about this work. It's my life and passion. It's about my daughter's future and the future of girls in our continent.

In my country alone [The Gambia], more than 77 per cent of women have already been subjected to FGM. Globally, it is estimated that more than 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone female genital mutilation.

Every year, more than 600 million girls around the world are forced to get married against their will. When you do this, you are giving another person the right to rape them over and over again.

Hundreds of millions of girls have gone through some of the things that I have been through, but they never get the opportunity or the platform to stand in front of people and share their story and get seen and get heard. It's not an easy thing to come and share my story over and over again, but I feel like someone has to do it. We cannot import solutions and expect change. Change has to be led by people with the lived experience that can stand up and say, we are against this for this reason because we know what it feels like and we have been through it.

This is why when it gets tough and I want to give up, I really can't do it because I know that if I give up it will be harder for the next girl to stand up.

As long as I am alive, I will wake up every single day and scream to the world that FGM is wrong, and scream to the world that child marriage is not different from rape. We all have a moral obligation to ensure that violence against women ends. We can do this through advocacy. We can do this through individual work. We cannot stay silent.

We need to ensure that we are supporting communities to lead that change themselves. Because if we do anything other than get communities to lead the change themselves, 20 years from now, 30 years from now, we will be back in the same communities talking about ending FGM, ending violence against women and girls, and all these things we have been talking about for decades.

Right now, what is crucial is handing power back into the hands of communities and looking at different, better ways to build prosperity. A lot of times we consider FGM and issues like that as fixed traditional practices. The only way we can change that is if we work hand in hand with traditional leaders who understand our traditions and understand that tradition is not static. Cultures change. We have a lot of traditions, but once we realize as a community that not all these traditions are good for us, we leave them behind. Now it's time to ensure that no girl, not only in Africa, but around the world, continues to suffer as a result of FGM.

Violence against women and girls continues to happen in this continent because women are not economically empowered. Until women are earning their own money, we will not end violence against women.

My commitment to the people and Government of Liberia is that I will make myself available and I will work with you to ensure that the lessons that we have learnt from other countries can be considered in relation to Liberia so that we don't lose anything. It's a win-win for everyone. We stay strong. We uplift women out of poverty.



Jaha Dukureh chats with Setta Fofana Saah the National Coordinator of the National Council of Chiefs and Elders. © UN Women Liberia

UN WOMEN HANDS OVER HERITAGE CENTRE IN MONTERRADO COUNTY TO GOVERNMENT OF LIBERIA AS GOODWILL AMBASSADOR PLEDGES TO ATTRACT PARTNERSHIP SUPPORT FOR CONSTRUCTION OF SEVEN MORE CENTRES



UN Women hands over heritage centre in Montserrado County to Government of Liberia and National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia. @UN Women Liberia

UN Women has handed over a vocational and heritage centre in Sonkay Town, Montserrado County, to the Government of Liberia and the National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia (NACCEL). The centre will serve as a hub to provide alternative economic livelihood support to former practitioners of female genital mutilation (FGM) and promote the sociocultural heritage of traditional communities, including alternative rites of passage that exclude FGM.

The handover ceremony was held during the launch of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, which spanned the period 25 November to 10 December 2022. The Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Honourable Williametta Saydee-Tarr, hosted the launch event.

The vocational and heritage centre in Montserrado County is one of four centres constructed by UN Women under the European Union and United Nations Spotlight Initiative. Other centres have been constructed in Grand Cape Mount, Nimba and Lofa Counties.

Jaha Dukureh, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for Africa on ending FGM and child marriage, who also launched the 16 Days campaign, pledged to help mobilize partnership support towards the construction of similar centres in the remaining seven FGM-practising counties, to ensure that women are economically empowered and that Liberia is free from all forms of violence against women and girls. Eleven of the 15 counties in Liberia practise FGM.

Ms. Dukureh pleaded with the traditional leaders to support the initiative to eliminate FGM in Liberia because it is harmful to women and girls, saying: “It is important to make sure that these practices are taken away from here and not because someone is giving us

something. We have to do it because we believe it is wrong. We ask you to stand with us and understand that we are not against our tradition. We are not against our culture. The only thing that we want is, let's continue the initiation without mutilation of girls. When we do that, we can be a model for the rest of the world,” she said.

In her keynote address, Vice President Chief Dr. Jewel Howard Taylor called on the chairperson of NACCEL, Chief Zanzan Karwor, to intervene and engage with the legislature and the international community to ensure the speedy passage of the anti-FGM bill into law. Liberia is one of the three countries in the region that do not have a law to criminalize FGM. She also requested that Chief Zanzan Karwor visit all of the counties where FGM is still being practised and ask traditional practitioners to stop the practice.

UN Women Liberia Country Representative and Acting United Nations Resident Coordinator Ms. Comfort Lamptey delivered a special message from the United Nations Secretary General, which called on governments to increase funding to women's rights organizations and movements by 50 per cent by 2026.

This year's 16 Days campaign was launched under the global theme ‘UNITE! Activism to End Violence Against Women and Girls’ and the national theme ‘With One Voice, Let's End Violence Against Women, Girls and Children’.

The event was attended by several dignitaries including EU Ambassador Laurent Delahousse, government officials, civil society organizations and traditional leaders from various counties.

The United Nations supports efforts of the Government of Liberia to eliminate gender-based violence through the Spotlight Initiative, a global programme that aims to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including harmful practices such as FGM.



Newly constructed heritage centre in Montserrado County, Liberia.

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STAKEHOLDERS FROM FIVE COUNTIES HOLD COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEETING TO END FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Various stakeholders, including community members and traditional practitioners from Montserrado, Bomi, Bong, Grand Cape Mount and Margibi Counties, among others, participated in an interactive community engagement meeting on ending female genital mutilation (FGM), held on Wednesday 8 January 2023 in Sonkay, Montserrado County. The United Nations in Liberia and its partners supported the meeting.



Community engagement meeting on FGM in Sonkay town, Montserrado County. © UN Women Liberia

The community engagement meeting was held to ascertain whether community members clearly understood the ban on FGM proclaimed by the Chairperson of the National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia, Chief Zanzan Karwor. The meeting also set out what had been done well and what needed to be improved in the process of eliminating FGM in Liberia.

From the discussions, it was clear that most community members and traditional practitioners were aware of the ban on FGM and accepted the development.

In Liberia, some traditional practitioners performed FGM for economic gain, and therefore they also indicated that they were willing to embrace alternative economic livelihood programmes such as agriculture, skills training, and village saving and loan associations, among other activities.

One of the challenges that community members highlighted was the lack of electricity at the heritage centre, which hindered them from undertaking many activities.

Traditional Queen and Executive Director of Liberia Crusaders for Peace, Juli Endee, who was facilitating the meeting, explained that the interactive forum took a bottom-up approach and provided an opportunity for community members to participate instead of just being observers.

She also explained that the engagement provided a platform to communicate with the community and gauge their understanding of banning FGM. "It is about them. They should be the ones to speak about what is good for them," she said.

The Country Representative of UN Women Liberia, Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for Africa, Jaha Dukureh, Deputy Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Alice Johnson Howard, and Chief Zanzan Karwor, among others, attended the engagement meeting.



Community engagement meeting on FGM in Sonkay town, Montserrado County. © UN Women Liberia

JOINT STATEMENT OF SUPPORT BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ON THE BAN ON FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN LIBERIA BY THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHIEFS AND ELDERS OF LIBERIA (NACCEL)

STATEMENT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ON THE BAN ON FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Monrovia

The international community in Liberia welcomes the ban of the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Liberia, as declared by the chairperson of the National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia (NACCEL), Chief Zanzan Karwor, during the commemoration of the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) held in Sonkay Town, Montserrado County, on Monday 6 February 2023.

Chief Zanzan Karwor declared "By the power vested in me, as chairperson of all the traditional chiefs in 15 counties, FGM is banned in this country", and he called on chiefs and elders to share the message around the country.



Community engagement meeting on FGM in Sonkay town, Montserrado County. © UN Women Liberia

International partners also commend the efforts of the Government and people of Liberia, under the leadership of His Excellency President George Manneh Weah, with the invaluable support of the Vice President, Chief Dr. Jewel Howard Taylor, the mobilization and advocacy of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as women's and children's rights organizations and networks and other human rights defenders who have been campaigning over many years to eliminate FGM and gender-based violence in Liberia.

The United Nations, international partners and the Economic Community of West African States have been supporting the Spotlight Initiative and other programmes aimed at eliminating all forms of gender-based violence, including harmful practices such as FGM.

We recall earlier pronouncements by NACCEL and the Liberian Government, including the Ganta Declaration to suspend FGM for one year in 2019 and a further three-year suspension from 2022 to 2025. We welcome this latest call by Chief Zanzan Karwor and NACCEL for a permanent ban of FGM.

The international community commends this declaration to ban FGM in Liberia as an important step in a journey towards the abolition of FGM and other harmful cultural beliefs and practices. As international partners, we will continue to mobilize support for all initiatives taken by the three branches of the Liberian Government, NACCEL and other actors to abolish FGM.

We commend the latest holistic and respectful approach that includes continuous engagement with chiefs, zoes, elders and human rights defenders; provision of alternative livelihood opportunities for zoes; and maintaining traditional rites of passage for girls while doing no harm, through an approach that underlines 'initiation without mutilation/cutting'.

We encourage wider collaborations with men and boys, adolescent girls, and other community and national stakeholders, including those in health, education and other relevant sectors for a multi-level and system-wide approach.

We commend the fact that there are existing laws on which the Government of Liberia can build, including the Children's Law (2011), the Domestic Violence Law (2019) and Chapter 14 of the Penal Code to protect security of the person, as enshrined in Article 11 of the Liberian Constitution. As international partners, we will continue to support ongoing national efforts to pass a law prohibiting FGM as part of our support to the Government of Liberia to domesticate the international legal instruments that it has ratified. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its Optional Protocol; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and its Optional Protocol; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), which requires States to implement legislation against FGM and to establish other measures such as public education, awareness campaigns, protection and provision of necessary health services and psychosocial support to survivors.

JOURNEY TOWARDS ELIMINATION OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN LIBERIA

On 6 February 2023, a landmark proclamation to ban female genital mutilation (FGM), a harmful practice that involves the removal or injury of external female genital organs for non-medical reasons, was made by the chairperson of the National Council of Chiefs and Elders of Liberia (NACCEL), Chief Zanzan Karwor.

Chief Karwor announced the ban of FGM during the commemoration of the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, a day set aside by the United Nations to amplify and direct efforts towards the elimination of the FGM practice. In his own words, Chief Karwor said “by the power vested in me, as chairman of all the traditional chiefs in 15 counties, FGM is banned in this country” and called for traditional chiefs present at the event to take the message to their respective communities. The event was held at the vocational and heritage centre constructed by UN Women with funding from the European Union and United Nations Spotlight Initiative in Sonkay Town, Montserrado County, in Liberia.

In January 2023, traditional leaders in Montserrado County participated in a traditional ceremony where all FGM practitioners in the county put down their tools and returned the permits they were issued by the Government to practise FGM. According to Chief Karwor, similar rituals will be performed in the remaining 10 FGM-practising counties, to ensure that FGM is completely eliminated in the whole country.

FGM is practised, along with other initiation rites for girls and women, within a female secret society called the Sande society, led by female traditional practitioners or zoes. Sande society activities comprise those that initiate young women and girls into adulthood, including FGM.



Traditional Practitioners from Montserrado County.



Chief Zanzan Karwor, NACCEL Chairperson pronounces ban on FGM in Liberia.

The World Health Organization estimates that more than 200 million women and girls have been subjected to FGM in more than 30 countries where it is practised. Reasons for FGM range from extreme gender inequality and the desire to control women’s bodily autonomy to cultural and economic motivations.

Massa Kandakai, Head Zoe (traditional practitioner) for Montserrado County, accepted Chief Karwor’s pronouncement to end FGM. She acknowledged that all traditional practitioners under her leadership had surrendered their tools and were ready for a new lease of life. “Once our chief has ordered us to stop, we accept the ban on FGM and we will not do it,” said Ms. Kandakai.



Development partners attend the FGM Day in Liberia and witness the ban on FGM.

Measures taken towards banning female genital mutilation in Liberia

Several steps have been taken in recent years to eliminate the practice of FGM.

THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE BILL

In its efforts to support the Government of Liberia fulfil its normative mandate in line with global norms and standards for gender equality and women’s empowerment, UN Women supported the drafting of the Domestic Violence Bill in 2014–15. The original draft of the Domestic Violence Act submitted to Plenary in 2017 included an explicit clause on FGM, which defined and prohibited the practice. The FGM clause was summarily removed from the bill and, eventually, so were all references to harmful traditional practices. UN Women thereafter supported the FGM Working Group to develop an anti-FGM bill in 2017–18. However, efforts to pass a stand-alone bill have so far been unsuccessful.

Former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf passed Executive Order No. 92 prohibiting FGM in January 2018, although it expired after one year. This ban was considered ineffective because there were no penalties for violators.

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND UNITED NATIONS SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE

In 2019, the United Nations, the European Union and the Government of Liberia launched the Spotlight Initiative, a global initiative that aims to accelerate the fight to eliminate sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices, such as FGM, against women and girls, and promote women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights. Together with the European Union and United Nations Spotlight Initiative and a long-standing partnership with the Government of Sweden, UN Women has been providing lead support to the Government of Liberia to accelerate efforts to ban FGM.

Several pronouncements were subsequently made by NACCEL in an effort to eliminate FGM in Liberia. On 25 June 2019, NACCEL announced a one-year temporary suspension on all Sande activities, including FGM, through the Ganta Declaration, in which traditional leaders signed a seven-count policy statement prohibiting the practice and created an inventory of traditional groves and a map of traditional practitioners in FGM-practising counties. However, this ban ended in June 2020 with no legal provision in place to stop the practice.

LAUNCH OF AN ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC LIVELIHOOD PROGRAMME

Other interventions undertaken to eliminate FGM included the launch of an alternative economic livelihood programme for traditional practitioners in December 2019. With support from the Spotlight Initiative, UN Women established four vocational and heritage centres in four counties, namely Montserrado, Grand Cape Mount, Lofa and Nimba, to serve as hubs for alternative economic livelihood programmes for former traditional practitioners as part of interventions to eliminate FGM in Liberia. The centres serve as dedicated learning centres for traditional practitioners and young women and girls to acquire new livelihood skills. The centres are also used to promote the sociocultural heritage of traditional communities, including alternative rites of passage that exclude FGM.



Beneficiaries of the alternative economic livelihood program showcase their climate smart agriculture produce. © UN Women Liberia

THREE-YEAR SUSPENSION OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

NACCEL, in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, further suspended Sande society activities, including the practice of FGM, in Liberia for three more years, from 2022 to 2025. The decision was made during the FGM conference held in Gbarnga, Bong County, from 3 to 5 February 2022, in observance of the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation.

More than 150 traditional leaders from 11 FGM-practising counties in Liberia attending the conference unanimously signed a six count policy statement suspending Sande society practices, including FGM, in Liberia, with immediate effect for a period of three years.

Recent campaign against female genital mutilation

To accelerate and intensify efforts to eliminate FGM in Liberia, Jaha Dukureh, international women's rights activist and UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for Africa on ending FGM and child marriage, visited Liberia from 19 to 27 November 2022 at the invitation of UN Women Liberia and held several strategic engagement meetings with high-level government officials, including the Vice President of Liberia, Chief Dr. Jewel Howard Taylor, and government ministers. She also met with various stakeholders, including the UN Country Team, members of the diplomatic community, traditional leaders,

religious leaders, civil society organizations, women's organizations, youth activists and the media, to support the country's efforts to advocate for the elimination of FGM.

Ms. Dukureh is from the Gambia and is a survivor of both FGM and child marriage. Through sharing her life experiences with Liberians, the discussion on ending FGM in Liberia gained significant momentum during and beyond the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE VISIT

MEETING WITH TRADITIONAL LEADERS



Ms. Dukureh met with NACCEL and highlighted the importance of preserving tradition, urging traditional leaders to eliminate only the harmful practices and uphold the positive aspects of their culture.

PUBLIC SCREENINGS OF 'JAHA'S PROMISE'



One of the major highlights of Ms. Dukureh's visit was the screening of the documentary, 'Jaha's Promise', a film about her life and advocacy efforts on eliminating FGM. People from all walks of life and various stakeholders had the opportunity to watch the documentary and to participate in the question-and-answer session that followed.

MEETING WITH THE MEDIA



Ms. Dukureh also had an opportunity to meet the media and address a press conference in Monrovia. She highlighted the important role of the media in ending harmful practices such as FGM through writing human interest stories, carrying out investigative journalism and allowing the average population to get a deeper understanding of what the realities are, what women are facing and what people are going through.

MEETING WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Ms. Dukureh also had the opportunity to meet with members of the diplomatic corps; women's groups; members of the legislature, including the Senate and House of Representatives; the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) and the African Ambassadors in Monrovia who committed to joining the fight to end FGM in Liberia.

LAUNCH OF THE 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE CAMPAIGN



Ms. Dukureh also joined the United Nations team in Liberia and the Government and people of Liberia to commemorate the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence at an event held in Sonkay Town, Montserrado County. She served as the key launcher of the 16 Days campaign.

While launching the 16 Days campaign, Ms. Dukureh pledged to attract partnership support for the construction of seven more heritage centres in Liberia. She urged traditional leaders to support the initiative to eliminate FGM in Liberia because it is harmful to women and girls, advising that "It is important to make sure that these practices are taken away from here and not because someone is giving us something. We have to do it because we believe it is wrong."

"We ask you to stand with us and understand that we are not against our tradition. We are not against our culture. The only thing that we want is, let's continue the initiation without mutilation of girls. When we do that, we can be a model for the rest of the world," she said.



The Vice President of Liberia, Chief Dr. Jewel Howard Taylor, delivered a keynote address and called on NACCEL to engage the legislature and the international community to ensure speedy passage of the anti-FGM bill into law. She also asked Chief Zanzan Karwor to visit all of the counties where FGM is still being practised and ask traditional practitioners to stop the practice.

In response, Chief Zanzan Karwor committed to close all bush schools and stop the practice of FGM in Montserrado County in January 2023.

VISIT TO NIMBA HERITAGE CENTRE

The traditional leaders led by Chief Zanzan Karwor and traditional Queen and Executive Director of Crusaders for Peace, Juli Endee, welcomed Ms. Dukureh and expressed their appreciation for the efforts of the Spotlight Initiative in providing alternative sources of livelihoods for traditional leaders. Traditional practitioners and other community members also had a chance to watch the documentary 'Jaha's Promise'.

Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative, commended the authorities in Nimba for their progress in eliminating FGM and encouraged them to continue the work to benefit women and girls. She challenged Nimba to serve as a model county on FGM eradication.



Ms. Dukureh met with local authorities and traditional leaders from Nimba County in north-eastern Liberia at the newly constructed vocational and heritage centre that was built by UN Women under the European Union and United Nations Spotlight Initiative.

GENERATION EQUALITY



Jaha Dukureh, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for FGM and Child marriage meets with youth activists and celebrities in Liberia to advocate for the elimination of FGM in the country.

INTER-RELIGIOUS COUNCIL OF LIBERIA SUPPORTS NATIONWIDE BAN ON FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION PRACTICES



Religious leaders of the IRCL, including bishops and imams, have unanimously pledged their support to a nationwide ban on FGM in the 11 FGM-practising counties of Liberia. Members of the IRCL indicated that the practice of FGM is neither Christian nor Islamic, but purely a result of an age-old tradition that must be scrapped.

MEETING WITH THE LEGISLATURE



The goal of Ambassador Dukureh's meeting was to rally lawmakers' support for the passage of a law that would outlaw the practice of FGM.

In November 2022, members of the Legislature of Liberia, comprising the Senate and House of Representatives, met with UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for Africa Jaha Dukureh to discuss eradicating FGM in Liberia.

Senator Nyonblee Karnga-Lawrence, a senator from Grand Bassa County and the chair of the women's legislative caucus, disclosed that the 'Domestic Violence Bill' had been debated in the legislature for three years before it was passed in 2019 with the words 'female genital mutilation' removed. She emphasized the importance of educating and spreading awareness among both ordinary people and legislators to more effectively advocate for the swift passage of the 'anti-FGM bill.'

In a previous discussion with Ambassador Dukureh, Deputy House Speaker Councillor J. Fonati Koffa labelled FGM as "violence against women" and said that "No part of Liberian tradition can stand such violence any longer."

MEETING WITH THE PRESIDENT OF LIBERIA



On Sunday 12 February 2023, on her follow-up visit to Liberia, Ms. Dukureh met with the President of Liberia, His Excellency George Manneh Weah, and commended the efforts of the government and traditional leaders to end FGM in Liberia and to embrace the concept of 'initiation without mutilation'.

President Weah lauded Ms. Dukureh's advocacy efforts for ending FGM in Africa. He noted that this is a new era where harmful practices impeding women's and girls' rights should be stopped.

President Weah also noted the critical role of the legislature in outlawing the practice of FGM and emphasized the need for the economic empowerment of former FGM practitioners.

Ms. Dukureh reiterated the United Nation's commitment to working with the Government of Liberia to end FGM.

Comfort Lamptey, UN Women Liberia Country Representative, and some government ministers attended the meeting

THE WAY FORWARD

Although significant progress has been made in eliminating FGM in Liberia, the country remains one of the three countries in the region without a law to criminalize FGM.

There is a need to continue engaging lawmakers, to ensure that the 'anti-FGM bill that is currently before the legislature is passed into law.

There is also a need to cascade the information about the ban to all traditional practitioners and community members in 11 of the 15 FGM-practising counties in Liberia.

[UN Women is supporting efforts of the Government of Liberia to eliminate gender-based violence through the Spotlight Initiative, a global programme that aims to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including harmful practices such as FGM.](#)

UN WOMEN CONDUCTS A TWO-DAY ENGAGEMENT MEETING WITH IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

UN Women conducted a two-day engagement meeting with implementing partners, to reflect on progress made, challenges encountered and lessons learnt, and strategize on accelerating work delivery. The engagement meeting commenced on Tuesday 28 March 2023 and ended on Wednesday 29 March 2023.

In her opening remarks, **Comfort Lamptey**, UN Women Liberia Country Representative, acknowledged the support of the implementing partners in fulfilling the mandate of UN Women, saying "Our partners are our frontline actors who translate our mandate into practice. They are the visible face of what UN Women is doing to support women and girls in Liberia. We will collectively strategize how we will continue to work together to promote gender equality and women empowerment and accelerate delivery of our work priorities."

She highlighted that 2023 is an important year for Liberia. She urged all partners to mainstream a social cohesion and violence prevention approach and ensure that all work carries the message of peaceful elections, so that Liberia remains united and strong at the end of the process.

She also encouraged all participants to network and build synergies, so that linkages are formed and the work done is aligned.

Ms. Lamptey also commended funding partners, including the Embassies of Ireland and Sweden, the European Union, the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund and the Orange Foundation, for the financial support.

The Deputy Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Honourable Alice Johnson Howard, emphasized the importance of the meeting in helping to take stock of the work done. She urged all participants to learn from the experience-sharing session and use that learning to improve their work.

Dwede Tarpeh, Programme Officer for Gender and Human Security at the Embassy of Sweden, reiterated the commitment of the Government of Liberia to continuing to work with UN Women and partners to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in Liberia.



Partners engagement meeting. © UN Women Liberia

UNITED NATIONS GENDER THEME GROUP COMMITS TO GREATER ALIGNMENT OF PROGRAMMES TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY IN LIBERIA

On Thursday 6 April 2023, gender focal persons from United Nations agencies in Liberia ended a two-day Gender Theme Group (GTG) retreat at the Farmington Hotel in Margibi County with a commitment to step up efforts and activities to support gender equality programmes for the advancement of national development.

The Acting Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Honourable Alice Johnson Howard, was in attendance throughout the duration of the retreat, a reflection of the strong commitment to a partnership between the Government of Liberia and the United Nations system to work jointly to advance gender equality.

The main goals of the retreat were to assess what the United Nations GTG had accomplished in 2022, to identify challenges and to earmark important priorities for 2023 based on what had been learnt from 2022 and prevailing global realities. Several relevant development plans, including the government's national development plan (Pro-Poor Agenda for Development and Prosperity), the National Gender Policy and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), were taken into consideration during the retreat, to create a more effective and robust road map for GTG.

Addressing the forum, **Ms. Christine N. Umutoni**, the United Nations Resident Coordinator, underlined the importance of effectively placing gender in development outcomes within the context of GTG work, because gender catapults everything. She said: "As the UN, we should make sure that gender is well positioned in the larger plans of Liberia's development." She also asserted that gender mainstreaming is about both women and men, and that women's empowerment cannot occur without gender equality, which can be attained only with the help of individuals who are aware of the gender journey.

For her part, UN Women Liberia Country Representative **Ms. Comfort Lamptey** said that GTG was an important functional platform within the United Nations Liberia family, as "GTG advises the UN Country Team (UNCT) on how the UN can work on gender priorities in the country." Ms. Lamptey said that GTG was well positioned to also advise the UNCT about supporting the government in the implementation of its gender-sensitive development priorities.

Participants at the retreat underscored the importance of frequent collaboration, consultations and interactions with the government, civil society organizations and the private sector, as well as advocating for increased resource mobilization for GTG, incorporating additional human rights principles and improving the alignment of GTG priorities with current United Nations and government development plans. These steps, they said, are necessary to support inclusive, results-based gender programming in Liberia.

Participants also highlighted that the retreat gave them a better understanding of gender issues at all stages of development in Liberia. Although there is a lot going on in Liberia's counties, it is difficult to communicate a joint, cohesive outcome because of the lack of effective results-driven reporting. According to **Ms. Kou Baawo**, National Facilitator, UN Nutrition at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "there is a need to strengthen grassroots capacity, increase advocacy, and improve coordination and reporting of GTG, involving the contribution of women to development nationally."

The Government of Liberia noted that unity of purpose in programming was pivotal to the government's gender goal. Honourable Alice Johnson Howard in her remarks urged the United Nations to enhance GTG collaboration with the government for increased development results: "Synchronizing our activities helps us achieve best results, accountability and transparency for improved service delivery and good governance."

A special call was made to build stronger synergies between GTG and other United Nations working groups, including the UN Communications Group, the UN Monitoring and Evaluation Group and the UN Human Resources Group.

GTG activities are funded by the Embassy of Sweden in Liberia, as part of overall efforts to mainstream gender priorities in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), in support of the Government of Liberia's development agenda.



Group discussion for members of the Gender Theme Group.
© UN Women Liberia

WOMEN MARK INTERNATIONAL DAY OF RURAL WOMEN WITH CALL FOR 'VALUE ADDITION' TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Thousands of rural women celebrated the 2022 International Day of Rural Women (IDRW) around the country, with the main commemorative activities taking place in Liberia's port city of Buchanan, Grand Bassa County, with a call to add quality to rural women's empowerment.

Each year, 15 October is the day set aside by the United Nations for the celebration of IDRW, to honour and recognize rural women the world over for their invaluable contributions to humanity and rural development.

Rural women have for many years formed the backbone of the country, contributing immensely to food production, peacebuilding, the family and other key sectors. According to Liberia's 2008 poverty reduction strategy report, quoted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "... women produce some 60 percent of agricultural products, carry out 80 percent of trading activities in rural areas and play a vital role in linking rural and urban markets through their informal networks."

The event was celebrated under the global theme 'Rural Women Cultivating Good Food for ALL', with the national theme being 'Developing Rural Women's Capacity in Food Security for All'. The objective of the event in Buchanan was for rural women to highlight the numerous prevailing inequalities and other empowerment challenges they face, and seek stronger partnerships for food production assistance, and to perform the official launch the Rural Girls Foundation, which aims to mould young rural women into productive, respectable women who are tipped to replace the present genre of rural women leaders in due course.

According to the women, stories about gender equality, equity and the empowerment of rural women abound all around them, but real milestone achievements and success stories are difficult to find. During the event, Kebbeh Monger, President of the National Rural Women Structure of Liberia, said that it is high time for government actors "to open a bigger corridor of quality support for rural women" in tandem with civil society organizations (CSOs) and other partners.

Addressing the indoor programme, Ms. Monger made a clarion scream for a change in the old order of working with rural women. She asked "We are calling on our partners and the government to add value to rural women's empowerment mainly through agriculture. Even when we produce the crops like rice, cassava, plantain, peanuts and beans we don't have machines to process, we don't have buyers, so how will lives of rural women change?" According to Ms. Monger, value addition to crops is an innovative way of putting money in the purses of rural women.



Celebration of International Rural Women's Day 2022 © UN Women Liberia

She said that rural women were tired of hearing the old song of empowerment without the tangible results: "So every day they speak of women empowerment. As for me I don't see anything in Liberia that's changing our lives. I am tired, my people." She then specifically appealed to the Government of Liberia to ensure that women can own land in the 15 counties to enhance productivity. She added "So you all need to empower us with processing machines, land, good roads and market access. Rural women who are not educated can learn how to operate agromachines to improve our lives."

Responding on behalf of the government was the Deputy Gender Minister for Research Planning and Policy and Acting Minister at the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Honourable Hassan Karneh, who pledged the government's unflinching support to the rural women of Liberia. Honourable Karneh stressed that "Rural women are key to development and to achieving our sustainable development goals. We must enhance the capacity of rural women, improve their access to credit and finance, better VSLA [village savings and loan associations], improve market opportunities, support literacy activities for young women and enhance their capacity to participate in local governance."

At the same event, Ms. Monger launched the Rural Girls Foundation "to help our young girls and women in the counties to have the opportunity to succeed us when our tenures are over." She said that the Rural Girls Foundation would cater for smallholder food security, literacy and other in-demand skills that young rural women or girls need to prepare them for assuming the leadership roles beginning in their locales. She asked UN Women and partners to support the initiative.

One other highlight of the observance of IDRW 2022 was the showcasing of several success stories in food security, literacy and small-scale business ventures. Women came forward and narrated their arduous roads to success over the years, applauding the National Rural Women Structure for standing by them while at the same time encouraging other women to persevere. One speaker spoke of being able, unlike in the past, to pay for children's tuition and medical costs and provide for other household needs.

Several CSOs and national and international organizations attending the event, including UN Women, also congratulated the rural women and urged them to continue the path of inclusion and development. The UN Women Liberia Programme Coordinator, Ms. Ghoma Karloweah, expressed UN Women's happiness to hear of the expansion of the National Rural Women Structure to include younger women, saying "When rural women speak, great things happen. To see that President Kebbeh Monger and her team are ready to incorporate young women through the launch of the Rural Girls Foundation is commendable."

“WOMEN WORKING IN TECHNICAL FIELDS NEED TO CONTINUE IMPROVING THEMSELVES” – SOPHIA SMITH, UN WOMEN INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGY ASSISTANT

Meet Sophia Youwidi Smith, Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) Assistant for UN Women Liberia and the only woman in the ICT working group of the United Nations in Liberia.

Growing up, Ms. Smith aspired to be a bank teller. Seeing bank tellers serving her every time she went to the bank to pay school fees made her aspire to become one of them. Her mind was set on becoming a bank teller such that, when she was in the 11th grade and was asked to join her schoolmates for a career guidance fair, she felt that there was no need to attend the session because she already knew the career path she wanted to follow:

I told our instructor I already know what I want to do. I will just go and listen, but I am not changing my mind.

Ms. Smith explained that *“During the career guidance fair, a female ICT facilitator explained that as an ICT specialist, you could do graphic design, do video editing, be a hardware technician and be a system or network administrator. She told us that the ICT field is so vast, and you can work in any sector, including the bank, hospital, NGO [non-governmental organization], government or church. That caught my attention. I immediately changed my mind and decided to pursue ICT.”*

After high school, Ms. Smith enrolled in a Bachelor of ICT degree programme at the Starz College of Science and Technology in Monrovia, becoming one of five women in a class of more than 40 men. Ms. Smith put a lot of effort into her studies, and in 2017 she graduated and attained the highest marks in her class.

Before joining the United Nations in Liberia, **Ms. Smith** worked for other organizations where she faced some challenges due to resistance from colleagues who doubted her capabilities: *“Some people were not accepting me as an ICT assistant. They felt that a woman could not provide better ICT services than a man.”*



Sophia Smith, UN Women Liberia ICT Assistant.

© UN Liberia

Ms. Smith recalled an incident when she was asked to fix a network problem at one office and a colleague did not allow her to touch a computer device despite assurance that she could fix the problem. Rather, the colleague questioned why she had been sent to fix the problem.

From her experience, Ms. Smith learnt that women working in technical fields need to continue improving themselves, proving that they are competent and can perform in the same way as or even better than men. **Ms. Smith** explained *“One way to build people’s confidence is to solve their problems. If someone’s printer is not working and you fix the problem, it helps to build trust.”*

Ms. Smith has not encountered any problems working with men because her counterparts accept her easily and they treat her like an equal. Her wish is to see more women join technical fields like ICT:

“I feel so happy when I see female electricians, but I don’t feel happy when I go somewhere and I am the only female ICT technician or when I go for a job interview and I am the only female. I have started to encourage young women in my community and at church to join ICT and technology fields. If women are involved in innovations and technology, the approach will be different because they are always willing to do more.”

Ms. Smith believes that women and girls should use technology because it will open their eyes:

“Technology can change anyone’s life. If a person does not know anything about technology, they are limited. Technology opens your eyes, and you learn new things. You get new ideas and even meet new people without meeting them in person.”

Her ambition is to be part of a team that will craft Liberia’s cyber law. She also wishes to once again meet the woman who facilitated the career guidance session on ICT so that she can tell her that she changed her life.

As we celebrate Liberian Women’s Month under the global theme ‘DigitAll: Innovation and technology for gender equality’ and national theme ‘Innovating with technology to promote gender equality’, we celebrate women like Ms. Smith who have ventured into male-dominated fields and are using technology to promote gender equality. We call on all stakeholders to invest in digital technologies and empower women.



UN Women Liberia Country Office
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