

LIBERIA EDUCATION TRUST ADULT LITERACY PROGRAM IMPACTS LIBERIAN MARKET WOMEN

By the Office of the Press Secretary to the President

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Every undertaken initiative has its own set goals which sometimes take a while to realize. But for the Liberia Education Trust, it was not too long to begin feeling its impact as education has become one of the signature issues which has captivated the passion of Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Her commitment to education, especially the education of Liberian girls and women, is understandably unwavering, to say the least. The brainchild of the Liberia Education Trust makes no apologies for the spotlight she has brought to bear on girls' education. Women, the President maintains, have been neglected for too long in our society in a nearly all aspects of life. It is indeed a fact, that only a few male chauvinists would dare challenge.

But the President's commitment to education and the education of women could also be rooted in her upbringing and background, growing up as a child, being nurtured by two grand parents both of whom could not read nor write. Summing up what drives her passion for education, the President paid homage to two of her grand parents, one from Bomi and the other from Sinoe.

"If as Christians we all believe that when you die you don't really die but go somewhere else as we all hope, then I think today my two grand mothers somewhere in Heaven would be smiling, because they both did not know how to read and write...and I know they are smiling and saying what was not available to them in their lives is now available to you," The President told participants at a Program last Friday at the University of Liberia, to showcase the progress by women, particularly market women in their desire not only to learn how to read and write, but to acquire other skills hitherto left exclusive to men.

“We all want to be carpenters, we want to build, we want to be electricians, we want to manage our own business,” a participant of a Liberia Education Trust 6-months program was telling Program Implementers.



A partial view of the adult-education participants.

“The women are thinking big-time,” remarked a male attendant at the program.

Thinking big-time is in our view an understatement. The women have tasted the first few fruits of education and are not content with only reading and writing skills. They are looking beyond the horizon and seeing a bigger picture ahead.

“Some day, I want to attend the University of Liberia,” remarked Musu Sannoh as she demonstrated her skill, in full view of a seemingly impressed audience. So excited was the experience that one participant it seemed, could not stop cataloging the impact of the LET sponsored training program.

Hawa Bona: “We learn about how to keep our areas clean... We learn how to make gardens using the right fertilizers; We also learn about the big sickness called AIDS, and family planning... I can now spell my name; I can even spell my husband name,” and that drew cheers of appreciation and laughter from the audience.

Testimonials by the women could not have been possible two years ago. Such opportunities were only an illusion. And they were all anxious not to let the opportunity pass without acknowledging those who made it possible. But more significantly, the women asked for more time in the program. “They say we the women are UP, and we want to remain UP... we want to be able to do just what men can do,” as LET’s chief architect, President Sirleaf nodded in agreement with the women’s urge for advancement.

They thanked the President, LET’s Executive Director, Dr. Evelyn Kandakai as well as all those who worked to make the program a success, as Dr. Kandakai also added her voice in applauding the role of Implementing Partners “who once they applied to carry out these programs were given a set, bare bones budget... LET is grateful to its Implementing Partners, who have maximized the use of the funds to make this program a successful one,” she emphasized.

Re-echoing the women’s gratitude, the President also acknowledged the role played by

individuals and institutions, mostly in the United States of America, “who want to reach out to each and every one of you and give you an opportunity, and so they have put up their personal money to be able to support the program.” The Liberian leader was quick to point out the private-driven nature of the Liberia Education Trust: “this program doesn’t come from government budget and doesn’t come from government money.”

Leadership is all about making a difference in the lives of people who one serves. To all intents and purposes, this should be the penultimate aim and objective. However, there is often a flagrant disconnect between the element of what is as against what ought to be. When President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf conceived the idea to begin a program to empower young Liberian girls and women acquire quality education, little did she know the impact would have been so profound in so short a time. Through her ingenuity and with the help of philanthropists of international repute, the Liberian leader launched what she affectionately calls the ‘50-500-5000 program’. It was a seemingly ambitious program from the start as it sought to build 50 schools, train 500 teachers and provide 5000 scholarships for Liberian girls over a three year period.



Just a little over a year since its official launch in August 2007, LET has awarded more than one-thousand scholarships, exceeding the initial one-thousand one-hundred, and reaching ten of the fifteen countries. Of the 50-schools, 18 are already being done in phase-one, with a probability of a few being ready for academic 2007/2008. LET in so short a time continues to record more success stories. There’s no telling in the next few years how much impact the program would have made in the life of a girl or a mother, who a few years ago may never have dreamed of such a golden opportunity; the opportunity not only to read and right, but to expand ones capacity into other areas of learning for the greater good of not only oneself but the greater society at large in dire need of skilled manpower.