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July 8–10, 2008

La-Palm Royal Beach Hotel • Accra, Ghana



Market Women Raise Funds in New York

allAfrica.com

NEWS

5 June 2008

Posted to the web 5 June 2008

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Monrovia

A group of newly-painted red and yellow buildings lines United Nations Drive in Monrovia, Liberia's capital city. The buildings provide shelter for dozens of market women who spend their days selling produce and other goods.

Less than year ago the structures were barely standing and offered no shelter for women who wanted to do business. Women sold on the street in all weather.

Now a group of Liberian market women is visiting New York to lobby donors to build more shelters across the country. They traveled to the United States to attend a fund-raising ceremony to support the [Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Market Women's Fund's Adopt a Market](#) campaign.

The Sirleaf Market Women's Fund was organized shortly after the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman to become president of an African country. President Sirleaf says women, many of whom earn their livings selling goods in Liberia's markets, played a key role in getting her elected.

The goal of the Adopt a Market campaign is to bolster the country's economy and empower market women and their families by building or reconstructing at least 10 more markets in the first year and up to 50 markets over the next four years, according to a statement from the African Women's Development Fund.

Liberian market women make up a large chunk of the country's economy, operating small and medium scale businesses, where they sell perishable goods like peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers and onions. During the war, "Liberian market women not only fed the nation they also prayed, protested and politicked for peace," according to the African Women's Development Fund statement.

"The market women have been selling their goods in the sun and in the rain. But since the reconstruction of a few market so far, one can see the enthusiasm in the faces of the women and the happiness they express at what they see as an improvement in their lives," said Sekou Konneh, executive director of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund, in an interview with AllAfrica.

According to Konneh, market women have been working in deplorable conditions, selling their goods in "mud and water." They lose income because of the time and money they spend on illnesses caused by working in such unhealthy environments, Konneh said.

The Sirleaf Market Women's Fund has already completed some work outside of Monrovia. In John's Town in northern Liberia, women had no market structure, Konneh said, so the group provided one.

The fund provides for market women in three key areas, Konneh said: improving or providing infrastructure, helping adults to learn to read, and a micro credit loan program. Another proposed project would supply playground equipment and child-care facilities near markets for working mothers.

President Sirleaf, herself the granddaughter of a market woman, presided over the fund raiser in New York with actress Cicely Tyson, former President of Ireland Mary Robinson and the 2004 Nobel Peace laureate Wangari Maathai. Robinson and Maathai, both longtime activists for women's rights, are honorary co-chairs of the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund's International Advisory Committee.

Acting president of the Liberian Marketing Association, Lusu Sloan, and Massa Coulsi, a food seller from Monrovia, traveled to New York to represent Liberian market women. Their trip is funded by the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

"My fellow marketers are extremely happy now that they can sit under modern buildings unlike before, when they were seated in slums," Sloan told AllAfrica.

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The 46-year-old mother of two comes from a line of market women. "I began selling alongside my mother in the late [19]60s and 70s. I actually started my own business in 1981 up to present... [selling] perishable goods."

"I have never been to the [United] States before, and this has been many people's dream. Now that I am going there I am extremely happy" she said.

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