

THE SIRLEAF MARKET WOMEN'S FUND

FOSTERING SOCIAL CHANGE FROM THE GROUND UP

by Preeti Mangala Shekar

“The granddaughter of market women” is how Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf describes herself. And a loyal granddaughter President Sirleaf is, as shown by her explicit acknowledgement of the enormous role market women played in her rise to leadership in Liberia. “The market women are my true constituency,” remarked President Sirleaf in her address to Global Fund supporters at the recent gala.

In Liberia, about 37,000 women are market women or literally, women “making market,” as Liberians say in common parlance. They are the women who run many of the daily markets in Liberia. In the countryside, they are women farmers who sell their surplus. In the city, they are typically professional traders who buy wholesale and sell produce and other food items that they have bought from other small farmers, also mostly women.

Market women walk through the city or village carrying a heavy load of produce or sit for several hours every day in open-air market stalls or on the ground. Over the years, as Liberia was witness to violent conflict that tore its civil society apart, market women played a stabilizing role in sustaining local communities and contributing to the national economy. Market women possess remarkable skills that help them endure, resist and even reverse extreme hardship, as demonstrated when they joined forces across religious lines and forged peace – a peace that paved the way for Johnson Sirleaf’s election.

Most market women both work and look after their children in conditions that are unsanitary and jeopardize their health. It’s also extremely difficult for them to do more than eke out a living. To address these challenges, Her Excellency is backing an initiative called the

Sirleaf Market Women’s Fund. While the SMWF will provide steady and formal credit for financing women’s businesses, it will do much more. SMWF envisions and plans to help market women go beyond being traders to eventually becoming owners of sustainable, prosperous businesses. Their plan includes the construction of safe storage spaces, health and sanitary facilities, and day care centers that educate the children. The SMWF will offer training in health care, literacy, communications technology and small business practices.

An impressive array of state and non-state actors support the SMWF’s initiative – including Mary Robinson, former UN Human Rights Commissioner and President of Ireland, and Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and founder of the Green Belt Movement.

In her remarks, Amina Mama also highlighted the Global Fund’s commitment in the next five years to raise \$12 million for women in conflict and post-conflict areas. As part of fulfilling this commitment, the Global Fund will contribute \$50,000 towards the SMWF. We are excited to participate in this initiative that holistically addresses the welfare of market women who have successfully resisted years of conflict in Liberia and are today its true peacekeepers. You can learn more about how to support market women at www.smwf.org.



LIBERIA

LIBERIAN PRESIDENT
ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF

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Caroline Tibbois
PBS Festival

Pray the Devil Back to Hell

Made by Global Fund Board member Abby Disney, this film tells the extraordinary story of a small band of Muslim and Christian women who, armed with their sheer courage and convictions, came together in the midst of a bloody civil war, challenged the warlords, and brought peace to a conflict-torn Liberia. www.praythediavilbacktohell.com.



Caroline PBS

Iron Ladies of Liberia

The film is a behind the scenes view of the groundbreaking administration in Liberia during its first year, as it works to prevent a post-conflict nation from regressing to civil war under severe national debt, corruption and a conflict-impacted national security. It follows numerous leaders in the Sirleaf administration like Beatrice Munah Sieh, the newly appointed national police chief; Dr. Antoinette Sayeh, the minister of finance; and ultimately Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. www.pbs.org/independentlens/ironladies.

“When the global economy crashes, market women are still doing business and feeding their people.”

Amina Mama, Global Fund Board Chair,
in her remarks at the GFW 20th anniversary gala