

Committee: Commission on the Status of Women

Country: Republic of Liberia

Topic Area A: Women and Personal Status Laws

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Ever since the first proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Republic of Liberia has made a wide variety of efforts to empower women rights not only domestically but also throughout the continent of Africa. The promotion of gender equality and the advocacy of empowering women has brought Liberia the prestigious MDGs Goal 3 Award in 2010[1].

During the past decade, women activists in the Republic of Liberia have been largely engaged in rebuilding war-torn societies and restoring post-war laws and policies. In 2006, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected as the first female head of state in Africa [2], bringing increasing pressure on the further establishment of a comprehensive personal status law system for women. Among other member states of Africa, the Republic of Liberia has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) without any reservations [3]. Further actions has been taken including the enactment of the 2008 Gender and Sexually Based Violence Act[4] which aims to provide a specialized court to trial cases of sexual violence against women.

In the current state, the Republic of Liberia is operating on a dual system of law. While the civil law is based on Anglo-American ideals, the customary law is based on customs and unwritten tribal practices. Therefore, the operation of the customary law system has brought women inequalities while living in tribal and rural areas. In most cases, customary law is the default except when it conflicts with the constitution, leading to the consequence that in practices, customary laws conflicting with the constitution generally go unchecked by the statutory system [5]. Henceforth, the customary law regards women as property of their husbands, because of this, most women living in rural areas rarely have a role in family decisions [6]. On the other side of the spectrum, the government led by President Ellen Sirleaf have made great effort ensuring gender equality under the existing legal framework. In comparison with other African member states, women in the Republic of Liberia are able to inherit land or property, take out bank loans and have custody over children. The further modification of the civil law empowers women with the same legal rights as men does, as all women in Liberia have had the right to vote since 1945 [7], the Republic of Liberia is generally recognized as the first state in Africa of doing so. However, despite the substantial efforts made by the government, gender equalities still exist in respects of marriages laws. Though polygamous unions are unlawful under the Liberian civil code, such marriages are common and perfectly permissible under the Liberia's customary law. In accordance with research reports [8], polygamous marriages make up about one-third of all Liberian marriages, allowing Liberian males to have up to 4 wives [9]. On that account, the customary law restricts a married women's rights to inherit property from her spouse. Thence, the Republic of Liberia is willing to take further actions under the guidance of the committee to alleviate the deep seeded influence of unequal traditions towards women. However, the cultural reluctant and conservative forces offsets the impact of personal status laws against gender inequality. As the previous attempt of implementing the redrafted civil law has already provoked the conservative forces domestically. Thereupon, the government has no other means but to slowly alter the rooted customary law system.

To conclude on the issue of establishing a comprehensive system of the personal status laws for women, the Republic of Liberia is in full support while traditional opposing forces among the country lies the obstacle ahead. Thus, the Republic of Liberia would be looking forward to see further concrete and effective solutions over conservative forces.

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Topic Area B: Women and Access to Education

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The Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [1] clearly points out that ‘everyone has the right to education’. As women and their access to education are brought under the spotlight of the international community by the Beijing Declaration of Platform and Action [2], it is undoubtedly of utmost importance to provide every woman with education rights when realizing the Sustainable Development Goal 4 and 5 [3] globally in the coming future.

Domestically, the Republic of Liberia has fully realized the significance of implementing primary education. Since the election of 2006, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has worked to promote school enrollment throughout the country, and research statistics reflects the rewarding achievements of the law acts related to education. In 2012, primary school enrollment in urban areas has reached a record high of 63.7% for girls while in rural areas it was 33.1% for girls compared to 44.9% for boys [4].

On the basis of fully realizing the current situation of the country, the government sees the fact that boys are obviously favored over girls to go to school. In most cases the extended family will fund the education for boys but rarely girls. In accordance with Amartya Sen’s theory of Special Opportunity Inequality [5], education opportunities are less for girls than for boys in both primary and secondary education. The customary reason towards the inequality is mainly due to the widely existing stereotype of typical families believing that an educated women will take her education to her husband’s family thereby resulting in a loss towards the girl’s family. However, regardless of the family’s financial situation, the child’s education is usually steered towards the gender specific occupation, as boys are taught sciences and mathematics, girls are taught nursing and teaching [6].

Analyzing the social fact of relatively low education access for women, the main contributor is the lack of infrastructure of schools in the Republic of Liberia. A 2006 Census [7] from the Liberian Ministry of Education showed that one fifths of schools in the Republic of Liberia had been destroyed during the 2003 Civil Wars. Hence, many of the left schools were without water and restrooms, along with 60% of the teachers in lack of formal qualifications and being paid at salaries lower than \$300 per year.

However, let alone the current obstacles that lies ahead, the government of the Republic of Liberia has pushed forward certain acts including the new Education Reform Act for women signed in 2011[8] by President John Sirleaf. Meanwhile, it is globally recognized that in less-developed African states, literacy and education in general is very much connected to women’s capability of forming social relationships on the basis of gender equality with males as well as achieving the paramount social good of self-respect. Moreover, high literacy rates is strongly connected with other forms of gender equality as a whole.

Thus, in comparison with the establishment of a comprehensive personal law system for women, the efforts required to provide all women with accessible sources of education is much greater in the amount. Upon that, gender inequalities are in regard with status, region, cultures and many other various aspects, while the improvement of each part will make a difference to current women status not only in the Republic of Liberia but also by and large the whole Africa continent. From the perspective of the Liberian government, further construction of educational facilities as well as supplementary protective measures and acts will resoundingly change the current education status for women.

In all, the government of the Republic of Liberia looks forward to continue the current stride towards better education conditions for women. Thereby, the Republic of Liberia fully supports the Committee’s effort and remains actively participated in the current matter.

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