

Working with gender lenses in Liberia

by Idah Muema

UN Volunteer Idah Muema has an assignment as Gender Officer in Liberia, helping to factor women's issues and concerns into projects and programmes of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). She has previously worked on gender issues – such as preventing violence against women - in refugee camps in the north-east of her home country, Kenya.

Since November 2003, I have been wearing gender lenses for my work. I was the first female UN Volunteer to arrive in the mission - and, coincidentally, also the first member of staff with the Office of the Gender Adviser of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). So I set up the office. Another UNV Sandra Okoed, who stayed until May 2004, joined me two weeks later and we worked together for three months as the only staff members in the Office of the Gender Adviser. Since gender is a cross-cutting issue, my assignment entails working with a variety of mission personnel such the Military, Military Observers, Civilian Police Officers, Human Rights Officers, DDRR Officers, Electoral Officers and Legal/Judicial Officers to ensure that a gender perspective is incorporated into UNMIL policies, procedures and programmes .

One of the most interesting activities in my assignment so far has been participating in the disarmament and demobilization process, during which I assessed to what extent gender issues had been taken into account. I conducted this mission together with a Liberian colleague in two disarmament and demobilization sites located in Tubmanburg, Bomi county in the western part of Liberia and in Ganta, near the Guinea border in the northern part of country. On our way to Tubmanburg, we came across a group of local women wearing white t-shirts and “lappa”, locally produced cloth women wrap around their waists. The women were marching on the main road to Tubmanburg. They carried a banner and sang songs promoting peace. We got out of the car and walked towards them. My colleague introduced us and asked what activity they were participating in. They were currently participating in an awareness campaign on disarmament and demobilization targeting ex-combatants and had devoted their time and energy as volunteers to contribute to the peace process in whichever way they could. I never got to know their names or where they were from but they left me inspired.

The countdown to the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled to take place 11 October 2005 has already begun. Liberian women have joined forces to ensure that more women will be actively involved in the political leadership of the country. Towards the end of 2004, the women organized themselves and marched to the legislature where they presented a petition calling for 30% representation of women in political party selections. With success - the petition is now part of the electoral guidelines.

I had the opportunity of working with women from all walks of life during the Liberian National Women Political Forum in February 2005. The theme of the forum was ‘Women's Participation in the Political Process: Challenges and Opportunities’. Approximately 300 Liberian women from across the country participated in the

conference. The forum created an opportunity for women to organize themselves, articulate their concerns on the political process, strategize on how to fully and actively participate in the political leadership, as well as to design, develop and adopt a guiding manifesto.

In a series of sessions with political parties, women carried out a gender audit and discussed specific steps to get the targeted 30 per cent women selected into party lists. During my tenure in Liberia I have observed that women want to be part of shaping a true democratic society. They work hard to be involved in the political process and are highly conscious of political goals they want to achieve. A resolution adopted by the women in the forum says that Liberian women will only participate in a free and fair electoral process and to support only those political aspirants who pursue women's issues on their agendas.

Liberian women ensure that people are aware of what they have to say. Anyone driving towards central Monrovia from the main road leading to airport, cannot miss a huge billboard at the road junction reading 'War Never Again, Peace Yes!' This is the collective voice of thousands of Liberian women peace activists. Peace and development cannot be sustained without the active and full participation of women in political leadership. The road to peace for Liberian women has not been easy. It has been painful, life-threatening and fearful. As the country moves towards elections, reconstruction and development, one thing is for sure - I shall continue working with my gender lenses on to support Liberian women achieve their vision.

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