

# Challenging tradition in Liberia



**Raising Her Voice has made significant advances in Liberia, in spite of a state and civil society weakened by civil war. Both the government and traditional leaders are engaging with the project; a strong media coalition has been established; and a greater number of women are taking on leadership roles. Women's lobbying resulted in Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the President of Liberia, speaking out against female genital mutilation, helping to break the taboo around this harmful cultural practice.**

## Background

Liberia is recovering from a long civil war which damaged its economy and infrastructure, and took a heavy toll on its people. Women experience discrimination in all areas of life, and are under-represented at every level of government. The country operates a dual legal system, which gives credence to some harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM). Women are denied access to chieftainships, limiting their right to participate fully in local governance.

There are, however, positive signs for gender equality in Liberia. Women have already demonstrated their potential for leadership and decision-making: during the conflict they became heads of household and breadwinners, and have since played an important role in peace-building and political life. In 2005, following the first post-war elections, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became Africa's first elected female head of state. In 2008, Liberia ratified the African Women's Rights Protocol, although awareness of the Protocol, and the government's capacity to implement it, remain low.

***"This workshop has made me and many women aware of our rights and able to speak out on issues that have been obstacles to us."***

Jenneh Seakel, participant in a Raising Her Voice community workshop

## Objectives

Oxfam is working with Women of Liberia Peace Network (WOLPNET) and Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL) in seven counties of Liberia to secure domestication and implementation of the Protocol, and to build popular pressure to end harmful cultural practices against women. Strategies include:

- Identifying and counteracting discriminatory policies and practices which result in the exclusion of women from participation in local and national decision-making processes.
- Raising awareness of, and conducting training on, the Protocol. Partners hold community meetings which include both traditional leaders and government representatives.
- Lobbying for the eradication of harmful cultural practices, sexual harassment, family abandonment and other forms of discrimination against women.
- Continuous engagement with legislators and government ministries for the domestication and implementation of the Protocol.
- A review of the Protocol, the Constitution, and key national legal documents, in order to make policy recommendations.



## Achievements

### A growing commitment to domestication of the Protocol

During early project activities it became clear that many government officials had not even heard of the Protocol but a series of discussions about domestication and implementation have yielded positive results. The Ministry of Gender and Development is showing greater commitment, for example, it has formally launched the Liberian Women's Manifesto, a document written jointly by the Ministry, UNIFEM and women's organisations to set out the key policy changes and service demands needed to promote women's rights in Liberia. The Traditional Council of Liberia has committed to creating a Protocol Desk Office to collaborate with the government in promoting domestication.

Meanwhile, the Women's Caucus – a cross-party group of female politicians - co-operated to develop a draft Women's Bill. Although initially rejected, subsequent civil society engagement to strengthen the draft text and secure widespread media, political and public support, should ensure its safe passage through Parliament in future.

### More women aware of their rights

A coalition of civil society organisations was established to take joint actions to promote women's rights and raise awareness of the Protocol. More than 2,000 people have participated in awareness-raising workshops which have brought together women and youth groups with traditional leaders, government officials and community organisations. A greater number of women activists at community level are taking on leadership roles, participating in decision-making processes and calling for women's rights to be respected. Oxfam partner WONGOSOL has started working with the National Elections Commission to involve more women in politics, including building skills to participate in the 2011 elections.

### Changing views on traditional practices

In 2010, the President of Liberia made a statement on the eradication of female genital mutilation – the first time a leader has spoken out against this issue. More women are reporting cases of harmful traditional practices and speaking out against rights violations. In

one instance, women marched to their local county court to demonstrate in support of a young girl who had been raped, forcing the judge to take action. Most recently, a case of forced FGM was successfully prosecuted. The defendant was found guilty after a 2-year process - the judge's closing statements referred directly to Protocol articles on FGM.

### A strong media coalition established

Media practitioners from nine organisations have joined forces to raise awareness of the Protocol. Radio programmes have enabled poor women to learn about their rights, participate in discussions on women's issues, and communicate directly with government officials through talk shows and panel discussions.

### Engagement of women law-makers

A workshop with female law-makers has increased their awareness of the Protocol. The law-makers are helping to translate the Protocol into the Liberian context (with its dual legal system) so that rural women understand what it means for them and how they can help to implement it. An analysis of the Protocol and the Constitution, and other legal documents, has begun. Raising Her Voice partners are currently engaged in a review of rape legislation.

## Lessons

- Establishing networks at the grassroots level and enabling them to make decisions from the outset of the project is a good recipe for ownership and sustainability.
- It has been important to nurture the government's participation in project planning and implementation in order to sustain the project after funding ends. There is also a need to support government efforts to implement activities that contribute to achieving objectives.
- Working with national partners has proved extremely effective in extending the reach and impact of Raising Her Voice in Liberia. In particular, the project has recognised the extent to which the role of religion is critical in achieving women's rights.

Liberia is one of seven countries under the Raising Her Voice Pan-African Programme promoting the acceleration of the African Women's Rights Protocol.

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Raising Her Voice is a five-year programme which promotes the rights and capacity of poor women to engage effectively in governance at all levels. This is to be achieved through enabling their voices to be heard and increasing their influence, and by making institutions more accountable to women.

Working through local partners in 17 countries, Raising Her Voice has significant funding from DFID and is co-ordinated by Oxfam GB.

