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EXISTING FACILITIES FOR THE PROMOTION OF ACTIVE PARTICIPATION
OF WOMEN IN CIVIC, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE IN LIBERIA

(Paper presented by A. Doris Banks Henries)

Existing Facilities for the Promotion of
Active Participation of Women in Civic,
Political and Economic Life in Liberia

A. Doris Banks Henries

I. Health, nutrition and child care

Health

Because the vital interest and perpetuity of the nation depends on a healthy population, the government of Liberia has placed high priority on improvement in health. Before a marriage license can be obtained the contracting parties must have a certificate from a professional medical officer indicating freedom from contagious diseases. Well Baby, Pre Natal and Post Natal clinics care for and administer to the needs of mothers and infants. School children are given health examinations annually before the beginning of classes. They are also given medical treatment without charge.

Nutrition

There is much to be done in this area because of customary eating habits. Rice is the staple food; besides this, cassava, eddoes and other starchy vegetables are widely eaten. The National Public Health Services and the Department of Agriculture are working energetically to improve both diet and eating habits of the people. Women go into the villages to teach women how to prepare food and how to balance the family meals. They are also encouraged to expand the production of food to include greens and other vegetables. Tropical fruits are also used in demonstration work in nutrition classes. The radio and TV are used regularly to give information and instruction in health, nutrition and child care.

Child care

In addition to the above stated activities in health and nutrition women's volunteer organizations play an active role in the care of children. The Red Cross in co-operation with the government operates Well Baby Clinics. The YWCA has special programs for children including recreation and feeding. Under the leadership of Miss Anna Locker, wife of an American Ambassador, there was organized the Antoinette Tubman Child Welfare Foundation to care for underprivileged children. This organization has been active for over fifteen years. It has built a home and obtained the services of competent people to operate the home and the school connected with it. Through the assistance of friends in England several physically handicapped children have been given medical attention and enabled to live normal lives.

Missionary groups have given much help in the care of children. Orphans have been cared for from infancy to maturity. Some have known no other home than the mission.

Private families in Liberia have traditionally raised children of many poor parents who are unable to provide even basic essentials for their offspring.

II. The inter-change of development and the position of women in Africa

Rapid changes in Liberia since World War II have made an amazing impact on the position of women. As a founding member of the United Nations Organization, Liberia signed the charter which, among other things, denounced discrimination against individuals because of sex. The following year, 1964, suffrage was granted to Liberian women and since that time they have gained increasing participation in public life as well as in the work of the church.

The home

Women readily accept their role as mother and wife in the home; but they are happy only to be considered the partners of their husbands rather than their slaves. In order for the family to enjoy the good things of life women work at gainful occupations and share the task of improving and maintaining the home. They prepare themselves intellectually to understand and help solve social problems as well as to entertain their husbands and their colleagues. Under these conditions an increasing number of husbands often consult their wives and seek advice on important matters; this was seldom the case in past years.

The church

Formerly women functioned quietly in insignificant positions in many protestant churches; but this situation has now changed. It is no longer surprising to have women serve as ordained ministers and pastors of churches. The financial support given by women to the church is often greater than that of men. Not only do women lead churches in spiritual worship and service, they construct and maintain beautiful church edifices. They perform marriage and burial rites just as do the men.

The State

In every branch of government women are appointed and employed on various levels ranging from deputy cabinet ministers downward to cleaning women. They have won commendation for their efficiency and dependability. This opens the way for other women to be given positions of trust and responsibility in government. In the absence of cabinet ministers, women deputies have run ministries smoothly and efficiently.

In the foreign service the numbers of women are gradually increasing. From assistants they are being made head of consulates in large cities of foreign countries. They are also sent to foreign conferences as leaders of mixed delegations of men and women.

Community leadership

In national development women are demonstrating remarkable qualities of leadership. They initiate health and educational projects and have constructed a number of buildings for the purpose of providing accommodations for working girls and students, care of the aged and handicapped, care of the mentally ill and the care of orphans and physically handicapped children. These essential social institutions have attracted support from the government.

Conclusion

The excellent performance of women in national development is rapidly changing the position of women in Liberia. The barriers based on sex are disappearing as qualified women are called into important government, professional and international councils to give advice, guidance and direction in the solution of national and international problems.

III. Education and training opportunities for women

Liberian women, like those in other developing countries, are outnumbered scholastically by men. However, since World War II we have been making commendable progress to close the gap between the sexes. This has been made possible by liberal and enlightened leadership.

Rural conditions

Although certain tribal customs still operate against the education of women, they are gradually giving way to more advanced ideas. The Sande or so-called "Bush Schools" have modified their curriculum to include some modern instruction in handicrafts. Furthermore, girls are not detained in them for such prolonged periods that they cannot take advantage of modern education. The short term in tribal schools allows adequate time for girls to learn something about their cultural background and traditions; then they return to the regular school and pursue studies as far as they are inclined. Some of the girls complete college.

Girls in rural areas enjoy opportunities to attend school in co-educational public institutions. Few of them continue in school beyond the elementary level. Some of the reasons are (a) early marriage (b) distance from home to secondary school (c) lack of interest in academic school program (d) lack of finance to attend a boarding school or to buy textbooks.

Aware that the education of women and girls is of vital importance to national development, the government of Liberia is actively pursuing plans to eliminate barriers to the education of girls. Secondary schools are being constructed at central locations to make second level education available to pupils completing first level studies. Scholarships are provided for girls to attend boarding schools. The curriculum is being revised to include more suitable textbooks and vocational education. By these means it is hoped that more girls will continue in school and meet requirements for secondary and higher education. If this goal is realized, the economy will be strengthened by satisfying manpower needs for national development.

The Adult Education Program includes Community Development and provides for training in home-making and agriculture.

Urban conditions

As usual, education and training for women in urban areas are better than is the case in rural communities. Girls enter school earlier and remain longer than do their counterparts in the villages. This, of course, means that there are more business and professional women in cities and towns than in villages. In spite of more advantages enjoyed in urban areas girls are still outnumbered by boys two to one in elementary schools and four to one in secondary schools and colleges. The 1962 census gives the following comparison of literates by sex who were attending schools that year:

Table I

Total population: Literate and attending school

	Total No.	%	Male No.	%	Female No.	%
Total population counted	1,016,443	100.0	353,154	49.5	364,145	50.5
No. of literate persons aged 10 years and over	63,953	8.9	47,406	13.4	16,547	4.5
No. of persons attending school						
6-11 age group	28,160	20.6	17,701	25.1	10,459	16.3
12 - 17 age group	26,567	29.9	19,243	24.6	7,324	17.6

	Total No.	%	Male No.	%	Female No.	%
18 - 24 age group	11,988	9.6	10,034	19.2	1,954	2.7
25 + age group	6,275	1.3	5,360	2.3	915	0.4
Total 6 years and over	72,990	8.9	52,338	12.9	20,652	5.0

This discouraging picture has changed considerably since that time, though not rapidly enough. The increase of female enrolment in the three levels of education is shown in the following tables for the years 1964-1968:

Table II

Enrolment of females in elementary education
1964-1968

Year	Total	No.	Female %	Annual increase
1964	78,539	22,866	29.1	-
1965	83,571	23,721	27.3	3.7
1966	110,252	33,184	30.1	39.9
1967	108,031	33,171	30.7	0.0
1968*	111,900	33,081	29.6	29.6

* Estimated

Table III

Enrolment of females in secondary education, 1964-1968

Year	General		%F	Vocational		%F	Teacher-training		%F	All		
	Total	Female		Total	Female		Total	Female		Total	Female	%F
1964	5,977	1,586	26.5	631	125	19.8	225	15	6.7	6,833	1,726	25.3
1965	8,406	2,104	25.0	840	181	21.5	307	21	6.8	9,553	2,306	24.1
1966	10,267	2,383	23.2	992	192	19.4	286	22	7.7	11,545	2,598	22.5
1967	11,551	2,695	23.3	889	205	23.1	377	56	14.9	12,817	2,956	23.1
1968	12,371 [#]	2,759 [#]	22.3	870	193	22.2	398	40	10.1	13,639	2,992	21.9

Estimated

Table IV

Enrolment of females in higher education by
field of study and graduates, 1964-1968

Field of study	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	Increase 1964-1968
Liberal Arts and Science total	317	405	442	608	737	132%
Female	76	95	112	134	168	352%
% female	24.0	23.5	25.3	22.0	22.8	23.5 AV
Agri. & Forestry total	83	71	97	130	129	55%
Female	2	1	1	2	-	-
% female	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	-	0.1 AV
Education total	143	167	194	174	185	29%
Female	33	37	41	45	38	15%
% female	23.1	22.2	21.1	25.9	20.5	22.6 AV
Law total	31	37	50	40	31	-
Female	3	4	7	4	3	-
% female	9.7	10.8	14.0	10.0	9.7	10.8 AV
Nursing total	4	7	14	23	22	450%
Female	4	7	13	16	17	325%
% female	100.0	100.0	92.9	69.6	77.3	88.0 AV
Total degree program	578	685	797	975	1,104	91.0%
Female	118	144	174	201	226	91.5%
% female	20.4	21.0	21.8	20.6	20.5	21.8 AV
Others +	10	4	64	122	188	88%
Female	5	1	8	20	29	48%
% female	50.0	25.0	12.5	16.4	15.4	23.9 AV

+ Others include special students as well as those in the Extra Mural Program and Business School (a 2-year course) of the University of Liberia.

Attractions in the city lure women and girls to such an extent that grave moral and social problems arise. In most cases they are unskilled and have no means of finding employment. The Department of Education has developed an adult education program in which women and girls have an opportunity to learn vocations and household management. Scholarships are given to students from each of the nine counties of the country and a few are also obtained from private sources. Some of the women who complete the required training find employment in homes, restaurants, hotels and various institutions; others develop their own business. The number of women who are enrolled in government classes is far too small. It then becomes the task of voluntary organizations to supplement the existing training program.

Recently, UNICEF has offered to give some financial support to non-governmental organizations which conduct programs in adult education. As a result, some volunteer women's groups have begun recruiting essential personnel and students to conduct classes in vocational training in literacy, child care and nutrition. The problem with this latter segment of women is to convince them of the necessity for such knowledge and to arrange a way for them to acquire it without losing money in their business. Women's volunteer organizations conduct classes in literacy, first aid, social work, domestic science and training of the blind.

Women and girls in Liberia are free to enjoy equal privileges with men and boys in all public educational institutions. Whatever barriers exist are caused chiefly by customs or a lack of finance. Foreign and local scholarships also are offered to boys and girls on the same terms and conditions. As women and girls understand the advantages of education, more and more of them are seizing opportunities that are available to raise their status and standard of living. In 1965 girls enrolled in elementary school represented 27% of the total; this increased to 30% in 1968.

Educational status of women

Before World War II very few women in Liberia held college degrees or were active professionally. In 1944 the only professional college graduate women in Liberia were one lawyer, one dentist and about ten educators. Three teachers had Master's degrees in education. For the past twenty-five years numerous women and girls have eagerly seized opportunities for academic advancement and earned bachelors, masters and doctorate degrees. Today, Liberian women share generously government and non-government local and foreign scholarships. Annually, scores of women complete college requirements and receive degrees in various fields of specialization including Education, Law, Medicine, Economics, Agriculture, Finance, Business and International Relations. Some energetic women have raised families and returned to complete college requirements for degrees; others attend school at the same time as their children and graduate with them. The desire for education increases as opportunities for employment and higher living standards increase.

Problems in education and training of women

In spite of the opportunities open to women for education and training there are many problems which serve as barriers to acceptance of openings. Among these are the following:

1. Inadequate parental guidance and care;
2. Early pregnancies of unmarried girls;

Before completing elementary school some girls drop out because of pregnancy. Sometimes these girls are supported by the man involved and sometimes it is the responsibility of the girl's family. Such girls need training in vocational education in order to earn an honest living; but many are not interested in attending classes; they drift from man to man.

3. Because of the inclination to consider manual labor as degrading, some women and girls will not attend classes to learn to be good cooks or servants; they want office work which they are unprepared to do efficiently;
4. Some wives of high government officials who need education to assist their husbands, family and country will not attend classes because they fear being ridiculed by others.

Means of solving problems

1. In order to cope with inadequate parental guidance and care the National Federation of Liberian Women has initiated plans for a Girls Village. Here girls will be trained in vocations in addition to basic academic work so that they may earn an honest living and be contributing citizens. Meanwhile, this organization is providing scholarships for a number of girls to attend boarding schools;
2. By interesting and constructive recreational and community development programs the YWCA hopes to attract more girls to constructive activities and reduce the propensity to place too much emphasis on sex. Sex education for adolescents and adults is being considered as a regular part of the YWCA program;
3. The matter of educating the public to regard any type of honest work as dignified requires many years of public education using all media of communication. Also the example of leaders who should engage in manual labor periodically will help to change the attitude of the masses toward work.

IV. Employment opportunities for women

In Liberia there are many types of employment open to women. In fact, the range is great from the unskilled to the highly professional level.

Among the unskilled women by far the majority in rural areas are farmers; while in urban communities are found numerous market women. This latter group often keep their babies and pre-school children at the market all day. This points up the need for day nursery schools and kindergartens. A few women are baby nurses; however, most of these need training in child care and nutrition. Some semi-skilled women work as nurses aids and helpers in hospitals.

Skilled women engage in a variety of jobs including beauticians, typists, dressmakers and milliners. More sophisticated para medical technicians are increasing in number with the development and expansion of health facilities. Government offices and business concerns employ many women as secretaries, interpreters and translators, filing clerks, receptionists and telephone operators. In radio and television women work as announcers and program directors.

The numbers of professional women are swelling the quantity of high level manpower. The greatest number of women is in education. They work in elementary, secondary and higher education as teachers, principals, professors and deans of colleges as well as in other administrative posts. Women are also employed as medical doctors, dentists, agriculturalists, counsellors at law, accountants and institutional administrators.

The liberal administration of President William V. S. Tubman has provided opportunities for women to be employed in high government positions. They hold elective and appointive posts. Women are in the legislative branch of government as members of the House of Representatives and Senate; in the judicial branch as Assistant Attorney General and in the executive branch as assistant to cabinet ministers and as legal advisers. They are also employed as mayors and chiefs. In foreign and diplomatic service women work as First and Second Secretaries, Consuls and Counsuls-General. Police women are effectively doing their share in the protection of inhabitants and law enforcement.

As more women are trained and educated they will expand their areas of employment; for the greatest handicap to employment is a lack of preparation. Generally, women receive equal salary with men for equal work. Married women are given maternity leave with pay.

V. Contributions of women to the development effort

In the development effort of Liberia women have made worthwhile contributions in a number of essential areas. The three programs stressed by the administration of President Tubman have been education, health and agriculture. In these women have been deeply involved.

Education

Besides taking advantage of scholarship privileges offered by the government women have raised money to pay for the education of worthy girls and boys. They have established schools to accommodate some pupils who found no opening in government schools. As good teachers and professors they have inspired young people to prepare themselves to make a better contribution to national development and have also participated in adult education and community development.

Women have worked successfully at developing an appreciation of the national heritage. They have organized and trained dancing and singing groups. Tribal music has been compiled and scored for choral groups. They encourage the manufacture and sale of arts and crafts.

Women have produced more literature than men. Among the works published are histories, biographies, folklore, civics, social studies books and poetry. Women work with men in the field of journalism.

Women's volunteer organizations participate in the educational effort by being involved in literacy and vocational education. Classes are conducted for dropouts, overage girls and for illiterate women.

Health

In the field of health women have been prepared to serve as medical workers of many kinds and more are entering these areas each year. Women have established nurse training schools and institutions to care for neglected and orphan children.

Women work in villages teaching mothers how to care for their families. They have classes and demonstrations in child care, nutrition, first aid, home nursing and other health measures.

Women's volunteer organizations are also active in teaching first aid, nutrition and child care. They also are active in promoting sports, physical education and other recreational activities. One important area which needs attention is that of sex education.

Agriculture

The government is aware of the importance of having a healthy, well-fed, citizenry to achieve the goals in national development. Intensive efforts have been exerted to produce enough of the required types of food for feeding the nation. Experimental farms and extension agents have provided assistance to farmers in the improvement of production. Seeds and tools have been made available. Women farmers have been benefitted by assistance to rural producers.

In executing the Operation Production policy women have actively engaged in expanding farms, developing restaurants, purchasing shares in companies and developing handicrafts.

Professions

With the increase of opportunities for education and employment women are expanding and increasing the supply of high level manpower. Hundreds of them have graduated from local and foreign institutions of higher education and are now working along with men as professional workers in education, health, agriculture, banking and finance, legal practice, economics and government. As a result the cost of services is reduced as the number of high-salaried expatriate employees is decreased.

Expansion of economy

As the earning power increases and more women enter the working force there is investment in the economy by a growing number of women. Women farmers produce and sell crops and with the proceeds buy stocks in companies, establish businesses and construct houses. Other women workers also invest in the economy. Using local dyes women produce attractive designs on cloth which is used by other women to share in the construction of garments worn by both sexes. Some women work at handicrafts and sell the finished product to nationals as well as to expatriates. Clothing stores, pharmacies and food stores are owned and operated by qualified women. As property owners women pay taxes which provide essential funds for development.

VI. Legal status of women

Employment

Although there is no legal barrier to Liberian women in any type of employment, custom and tradition have operated to keep men in certain positions of public trust. Very few women have considered architecture or engineering as a profession for their sex. Other types of work which have not attracted women include mechanical trades, plumbing, building construction and mining, radio and electrical jobs. In government there have not been any president, vice president, cabinet ministers, supreme court justice nor circuit judge. There are women members of the National Legislature and assistant cabinet ministers.

Family

Women as well as men who are contracting a marriage are required prior to marriage to obtain a certificate for a medical clearance from infectious diseases. Most women in Liberia select the male of their choice, although there are some villages where older members of the family choose life partners for their daughters.

If a divorce is obtained, the father has responsibility for the offspring and, as such, may take them to his home or place them under the care of a person selected by him. Usually, no alimony is given after a divorce has been awarded. There is no law to compel a man to support his divorced wife.

In case of death of a husband, one-third of his possessions legally belong to his wife during her natural life. This law is enforced and protects widows. Maternity leave with pay is provided for working women by law.

Suffrage

Only since World War II have Liberian women gained the right of suffrage. They vote and are eligible for elective positions. Women are active in politics and hold offices in their party. In the State Legislature to which all members are elected there are three women in the House of Representatives and one woman in the Senate. Several women's political organizations work energetically for their party.

Courts

As property owners women may sue and be sued.

Labor

Women benefit under laws mutually in the interest of both sexes. The labor law prescribes minimum wages and daily hours of work. Every employer is liable for cost of medical care if a person is injured in the course of his employment. If the injury is permanent and totally incapacitates the person, the employer is required to pay such employee three years of wages that he was earning at the time of injury.