

# Understanding the Differences, Acting on the Commonalities

SEARCH FOR  
COMMON GROUND  
IN LIBERIA

## Liberia Update

Special Report: Engaging Rural Women



Women leaders in Bopolu, discuss the key themes of the LNAP in a town hall meeting.

Search for Common Ground's most recent work in Liberia has focused on the political and social inclusion of women in a post-conflict environment, emphasising participation in decision-making forums at the community and county levels. This effort comes at a time when progress on women's issues has become a major priority for the Liberian government, as can be evidenced by the important steps taken by the Government of Liberia and the Ministry of Gender and Development. In recognition of these priorities, Liberia hosted the International Women's Colloquium (IWC) this past March as a joint initiative of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Finnish President Tarja Halonen.

At the IWC, the Government of Liberia launched the Liberia National Action Plan (LNAP), which outlines the government's vision in ensuring peace and security for women. This plan focuses on the protection and prevention of gender based violence, as well as the importance of women's participation in community development. While these core principles guide the plan's intent, the document's complex language can obfuscate the meaning behind such an initiative to a wider audience of Liberian citizens, and particularly the rural women it is intended to serve. Identifying this critical gap in understanding, SFCG committed its strategic communication expertise to supporting the LNAP initiative. As a well-known and credible force in media development and outreach in Liberia, SFCG developed a comprehensive strategy to provide information about the IWC and LNAP to women, primarily in rural communities, while also generating local discussions on the specific issues that are most relevant to them.

With support from the Canadian and Irish Governments, SFCG applied a range of media and outreach tools to engage rural women in preparations for the IWC as well as in follow-up to its recommendations and the LNAP launch. SFCG's media production studio, Talking Drum Studio (TDS) developed innovative radio programming to support the movement for women's empowerment in Liberia, using feature programmes, talk shows, jingles, and public service announcements. In total, about 920 minutes of programming was broadcast, including 420 minutes in the lead-up to the IWC and over 500 minutes in the three months following.

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In addition to producing its own independent radio programming, SFCG also strengthened the capacity of local radio stations to develop programmes relevant to the LNAP specifically and women’s participation and protection generally. SFCG conducted a three-day training forum for fifteen partner radio stations, exploring elements of the LNAP document and how stations can accurately and appropriately communicate these themes to their target audiences. The workshop included numerous practical exercises, which resulted in the production of skits, dramas, talk shows, jingles and other programming in plain Liberian English that is now being played across fifteen counties.

Along with radio programming, SFCG convened five town hall meetings in different counties. In these meetings in two women who attended the colloquium as representatives of their communities shared feedback on the event, including the issues discussed, and how they felt to take part in an international event on women’s development. The audience comprised a cross section of community authorities including women’s and men’s group representatives, local government officials, youth group students and religious leaders. Following the presentations, the audience discussed different ways that men and women can work together to support implementation of the LNAP in their community.

Focus groups held following town hall meetings revealed that the number one issue holding women’s progress back was their lack of education. The discussions led to constructive ideas about new ways women can fight cultural and social barriers, and continue to develop as equal members of their communities. As expressed by a participant from Gbarpolu, “when women are empowered, they are able to not only help their families but the community at large.”

## Results of SFCG’s Engagement Campaign

SFCG’s project succeeded in creating forums for discussion on critical issues among women who are frequently excluded from consultations and decision-making in their communities. Whereas one participant stated that normally she is too embarrassed to go to community meetings because she does not feel capable of taking part in the discussions, SFCG’s project provided a safe, open platform for women to comfortably speak about their views, concerns, and interests for themselves and their families. The project helped ensure that the high-level IWC reflected the concerns of ordinary women who are most affected by the gaps in the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.



**Men can be both barriers and partners to women’s inclusion. SFCG’s action engaged men directly in problem-solving to support women’s involvement in decision-making.**

## Town Hall Participant Quotes

Attendees in town hall meetings discussed the many issues holding women’s progress back, including lack of education, cultural barriers and poor leadership. Here are some examples of what they had to say:

*Regarding the Issue of Poor Leadership:*

“Women are not aware of things going on at the county and district level, and we need to get involved.”

- Young Woman from Gbarnga

“Usually when people (men) want to get in power, they come to women and make promises, but when they get in power, they turn their back to us. So we want to try to put more women in leadership positions now.”

- Participant in Cape Mount

*Regarding Lack of Education for Women:*

“We were made to believe that it was not important to send women to school, but now we know the truth so we want our children to learn.”

- Elderly participant in Cape Mount

Following the IWC, the second round of town hall meetings and radio programming helped women recognise the roles that they could play within their communities to address the priorities in the LNAP, and thus change their own lives. They talked about the importance of their associations, and how they could work together to mobilise women in their communities (or another sentence from the post-IWC forums). They also raised specific issues that they face as challenges, like limited education opportunities and access to land, property and inheritance. Women cited the land and property issue as a critical problem that has immense implications on their growth and development, yet it is greatly under-reported by the media. These findings will inform SFCG’s continuing work to support women’s participation and inclusion in Liberia.

To capture the results of its efforts on this issue, SFCG conducted a survey in six counties to measure changes in knowledge and attitudes around the targeted themes of women's rights, the IWC, the LNAP and the work done by the Liberian Ministry of Gender and Development overall. Results showcased the important impact of the campaign's programming, with key statistics as follows:

- 82% of people surveyed were aware of the International Women's Colloquium;
- 52% of the people aware of the Colloquium cited the radio as their source of information on the event, followed by 14% who cited SFCG's town hall meetings as how they learned about the event;
- Nearly 71% of respondents were aware of the work of the Ministry of Gender and Development; and
- 59% of respondents were aware of the LNAP, with 46% of those aware citing radio as their source of information.

The positive results demonstrated by these statistics are not the only indications of the project's success in Liberia. In programmes produced by TDS following the IWC, several male participants said they were inspired to change their negative attitudes towards women in every aspect. They recommended that the LNAP be used in primary schools as a way of teaching young people the need to respect the rights of women. Furthermore, some women who participated in the programmes expressed their intentions to prepare themselves for up-coming leadership elections in the country, as they now see themselves equally responsible and capable of steering the affairs of their communities.

## Common Ground Blog Feature: Voices from the Field

Staff and volunteers are sharing stories about their experiences with conflict transformation and peace building in SFCG's Africa programmes. Check out their entries at SFCG's redesigned Common Ground Blog at:

<http://sfcg.wordpress.com/category/voices-from-the-field/>

## Canadian Governor General Engages Women's Movement in Liberia

One of the many distinguished guests at the International Women's Colloquium held in Liberia this March was the Canadian Governor General, Excellency Michaëlle Jean. During her visit her Excellency spoke of the importance of educating women, and supported the efforts made by the Liberian government in the fight for women's rights. With the Canadian Government providing funding for SFCG's work, Governor Jean visited the project, meeting with representatives from rural women's organisations who had participated in the town hall meetings. She engaged with the project participants on the objectives and themes discussed, hearing their perspectives on the topics being addressed in the high-level IWC. In her speech, Her Excellency acknowledged the "incredibly courageous women of Liberia" and noted the important steps being taken to address their rights, stating that "when you exclude women, you fail."



Canadian Governor General Michaëlle Jean, meets with Martha Kargan of the Bassa Women's Development Association.

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