



WOMEN NGO SECRETARIAT OF LIBERIA



WOMEN AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN LIBERIA RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

July 10, 2014

The Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism, and the Ministry of Gender and Development, in collaboration with the Women's NGO Secretariat and the Carter Center's Access to Information project in Liberia organized a joint stakeholder meeting. On July 10, 2014, 47 government representatives, traditional community leaders, and civil society champions working to advance transparency, accountability, freedom of information, and women's right met to discuss the findings of the recent Carter Center study "Women and the Right of Access to Information in Liberia." Participants engaged in constructive dialogue related to inequities that women face in exercising the right to information, the primary obstacles, and potential solutions.

Main Consensus Points from Discussion

1. Access to information is a fundamental human right, contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Liberian Constitution, and the Freedom of Information law of 2010. As such, all people should have the same ability to exercise the right to information.
2. Consensus was reached that women in Liberia, including those in urban areas, do **not** access information at the same rate as men and that this is a critical problem which must be addressed, particularly if women are to receive information that could lead to greater economic empowerment.
3. There was agreement that the obstacles identified in the "Women and Access to Information in Liberia" report, namely illiteracy; lack of awareness of where and how to access information; fear; and insufficient time and mobility are indeed primary impediments to women exercising the right to information in Liberia.
4. The barriers facing women are interconnected, with identified solutions having the potential to address more than one of the obstacles.
5. To overcome the challenges, government and civil society must work in sustained and concerted partnership.

Recommendations for Stakeholders:

Following a plenary discussion, participants divided into working groups to consider the primary obstacles facing women and to develop a series of recommendations and potential actions steps. **The following represent the consensus agreement of participants on proposed action steps to advance the right of access to information for women in Liberia.**

The Government of Liberia should:

1. Establish an Inter-Ministerial Committee, with the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism and the Ministry of Gender and Development taking a lead role in promoting access to information for women especially for economic empowerment; reviewing relevant policies; and making recommendations on how to effectively assure women may access public information and be engaged in decision-making, including prioritizing women's engagement in government-sponsored meetings.
2. Assure that customer service training with a focus on gender sensitization is provided or undertaken for all ministries and agencies, particularly for public officials who set and oversee policy and deal directly with the public.
3. Proactively publish as much information as possible, and at a minimum all information mandated by the Liberian Freedom of Information Law. Proactive publication will allow women to access information without the need for a specific request to government. Information required to be disclosed proactively and other major decisions and policies of the Government should be disseminated and aired in local languages.
4. Ensure widespread and targeted dissemination of information to women, particularly proactively disclosed information and information that is critical for women's economic empowerment. Dissemination efforts could include:
 - a. Simplified versions and pictorials/posters of the key information
 - b. Support and subsidy for community radio stations and the Liberian Broadcasting System to share information
 - c. Use of information communication technologies, such as text messages
 - d. Placement of information in the community where women will have easiest access, such as in locations where women congregate and in schools for children to share at home.
5. Provide support for women requesters, including the development of an "Information Requester Hotline," and the decentralization of the Independent Information Commission.

Civil Society Organizations should:

1. Provide more awareness and sensitization of the value of the right to information and mechanisms for accessing information through networking and engagement with local women's organizations, traditional leaders, and the existing freedom of information community.
2. Advocate for access to information for women, with women's organizations taking the lead and helping to build advocacy skills and capacity of these groups and the women they represent.
3. Survey what specific information/documents women in the community need, with emphasis on information for economic empowerment themes, including education, land/property, and starting a business as identified in the "Women and Access to Information in Liberia" report as priority, and assist women in making requests and accessing information. Identify local champions to share information with women in the community, for example at local meetings and other places where women congregate.

4. Establish a civil society-managed hotline for women to call with questions about accessing information, assuring that the operators of the hotline have received appropriate gender sensitization training.
5. Consider creating an “ATI Defenders” network or seek to include the right of access to information in existing human right defenders networks, in order to provide support and protection for any women threatened for seeking information or fearful to make requests. Additionally, thought should be given to developing legal aid mechanisms for women who are denied information.

Stakeholders jointly should:

1. Embark on a large awareness raising campaign on women’s right of access to information. The campaign might include:
 - a. Use of national and local influential voices, such as respected political actors, social activists, sports and entertainment figures, traditional leaders, etc., to encourage women to access public information and to seek men’s support
 - b. Community radio to increase the reach of the awareness campaign
 - c. Development of jingles, slogans, and dramatizations for radio and community meetings
 - d. Messages that reinforce why giving information to women is good for both men and women
 - e. Use of local languages
2. Establish a Stakeholder Committee, including key Government ministries and agencies and civil society organizations, to encourage shared commitments, reflect on continuing challenges facing women, and develop joint activities to promote women’s right of access to information.
3. Develop monitoring systems to determine whether efforts to increase women’s access to information are bearing fruit and to gauge the intensity and ongoing affect of the identified challenges facing women.

The participants of the meeting on women and access to information in Liberia committed themselves to promoting equitable access of information for all Liberians. The proposed recommendations serve as a potential plan of action to further assure a meaningful right to information for the women of Liberia.

July 10, 2014
Monrovia, Liberia