

IfP local workshops on women's peacebuilding priorities in Liberia

Tubmanville, Kpayah District (18 June 2008) and Bilibokree, Jauhzon District (19 June 2008) in Sinoe county, Liberia

Two dialogue workshops were held under the IfP gender cluster in South East Liberia on 18-19 June 2008 by International Alert in collaboration with its local partner organizations: Media Women Centre for Democracy and Development (MEWOCEDE), Foundation for International Dignity (FIND) and Southeastern Women's Development Association (SEWODA). The purpose of the meetings was to raise and discuss barriers to women's full participation in decision-making and to understand men and women's priorities better in order to inform the development of a Liberian National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. The IfP dialogues were part of a longer process of consultation lead by International Alert, which reached 20 rural communities across five counties in the South East of the country.

The workshops used an interactive methodology and involved equal numbers of men and women from all age groups, with about 35 participants in each event. The process was designed not only to elicit people's ideas, but also to stimulate a continuing debate among local opinion leaders. A drama performed by a Liberian drama group started off the event by exploring issues related to women's participation, using a great deal of humour designed to entertain but also to confront people with the problems faced by women and girls. The drama used an interactive methodology where spectators were asked to take part and suggest solutions for the problems that the play tackled. After the drama, men and women participants were split into separate groups which then discussed the issues raised by the performance. Finally, the two groups were brought together and the same topics were discussed and potential ways forward were identified.

Based on the discussions, four categories of barriers to women's political participation as well as the causes behind gender-based violence can be identified:

First, traditional practices underline a lot of the obstacles to equal participation. Arranged marriages and dowry make marriage simply an economic institution where women often see themselves as slaves with little rights. Participants also referred to the Bible as a justification for men's superior status in family and society. Second, socio-economic conditions, particularly poverty and lack of educational opportunities, make women's participation difficult and make them vulnerable to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation. Third, perceptions and norms legitimize unequal power relations in the home and in society. Violence in different forms, whether between husband and wife or mother and child, is seen as inevitable and often justifiable by both the perpetrators and victims. Finally, the role of the state or public services is very marginal in the lives of the participants. Solutions for the problems identified were generally found in families and individuals, and only on occasion was issues such as problems with the judicial system mentioned by the participants.

Alert will take these and other ideas from the consultations and use them in advocacy with the government as it prepares to develop a National Action Plan for the implementation of SCR 1325. It is clear that the plan will need to go beyond mere government action: there's an important role for NGOs, churches, mosques and other influential groups in changing the way Liberians view men, women, children and the relationships between them.