

Women and the Right of Access to Information in Liberia

Executive Summary



COVER PHOTO: Women in Liberia sell dry goods in a local market. Photo: Micky Wiswedel/Shutterstock

THE CARTER CENTER'S Global Access to Information Program

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THE
CARTER CENTER



WOMEN NGOs SECRETARIAT OF LIBERIA



INTRODUCTION

For over 15 years, The Carter Center has served as a leader in advancing passage, implementation, and enforcement of access to information regimes and in raising the international profile of the value of the right to information. Through this work, the Center's Global Access to Information Program has identified a potential inequity facing women in the exercise of the right to information.

Though recent years have witnessed a plethora of research and programming related to voice, participation, and empowerment of women, access to information has been implied rather than explicitly identified as a core ingredient for success. Continuing failure to engage in gender-sensitive policy making, entrenched cultural mores, lack of engagement from women's civil society organizations, information flows that exclude women, illiteracy, household responsibilities, and immobility all have played a role in creating gender asymmetries in the exercise of the right to information.

To test our hypothesis that women are not able to access information at the same rate as men, we developed a study that we have conducted in Liberia and Guatemala and currently are applying in Bangladesh. The study also is designed to identify the main obstacles facing women in accessing information and the types of information most critical to women for economic empowerment. The overall goal of the project is to make the right to information meaningful for women in Liberia.

What Is Access to Information?

Access to information, also called freedom of information, is a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and enjoyed by over 4 billion people in more than 100 countries around the world. Access to information allows the general public to seek and receive information held by governments and often private entities that perform public duties or receive public funds. For governments, an access to information regime helps increase citizen confidence. Decision making becomes more transparent, public administration becomes more efficient and effective as recordkeeping systems are organized and procedures are established, and scarce resources can be applied and utilized properly. Access to information also serves to increase public participation and help citizens in the exercise of other human rights such as education, a clean environment, and health. It can help ensure that social services reach the most disadvantaged people, support social accountability, and promote economic empowerment.

What Significance Does It Hold for Women?

Often the most marginalized populations suffer the greatest from limited access of information. This is particularly true for women. Women frequently face the double burden of generating income and caring for families. A disproportionate number of people living below the poverty line (roughly \$1 USD a day) are women. Economic opportunities for women remain limited. In Africa, 70 percent of agricultural workers are women who focus mostly on subsistence farming and produce 60–80 percent of the food used in household consumption, while men engage in the more lucrative cash crops. Nevertheless, studies indicate that women invest up to 90 percent of their income in their families and communities, while men invest an average of only 30–40 percent. While enrollment of girls in primary education has increased, it is far from universal. There remains an even greater disparity for girls/women in secondary/tertiary education, and the education may not be of the same quality received by boys/men. Further, women are more susceptible to and affected by corruption, which flourishes with greater secrecy. With genuine access to information, women can take advantage of opportunities to transform their lives, families, and communities.

In sum, access to information:

- ◆ Allows women to make more effective decisions, for example, with relation to education, crop production, land ownership, and health care
- ◆ Enables women to know and exercise their full range of rights
- ◆ Helps women to participate more fully in public life
- ◆ Is critical for holding government and service providers accountable and for reducing corruption
- ◆ Bridges gender gaps and helps to shift power
- ◆ Provides opportunities for women's economic empowerment

Freedom of Information in Liberia

Following the signing of the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Liberia has made progress in creating an initial



A woman participates in the 2013 International Right to Know Day high school debate in Grand Bassa County. Photo: Kari Mackey

framework to reverse a century of conflict, poor governance, and widespread suppression of basic freedoms. However, the lack of institutionalized change remains a concern as the country continues to struggle with the challenges of reconstruction, including re-establishment of trust in government, combating corruption, and creating strong institutions. Liberians have asserted that a lack of information exacerbates fear and hinders citizen engagement as well as government efficiency and effectiveness. Recognizing the importance of access to information, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf signed the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act on Sept. 16, 2010, and Liberia became the first country in West Africa and the sixth in Africa to establish a comprehensive right to information law.

Access to information in Liberia refers to the “right of the public to request, receive, review, reproduce, and retain records and documents held by public bodies and private entities performing public functions or receiving public funding.” Under Liberia’s FOI Act, every person has the right to request and receive information, and all public information should be made available upon request or proactively disclosed unless it falls under a clearly defined exemption.

Citizens requesting information do not have to provide a reason for their request or show a legal relation to the

document. Requests can be made in person, via telephone, or electronically, and the requester can state the form in which they want the information provided. Each public authority is required to designate an information officer to receive and coordinate responses to requests for information, as well as provide assistance to members of the public in making requests.

Upon receiving a request for information, the law gives the agency 30 days to provide the information or to issue a denial, with a potential for an extension of time. The law safeguards the right of people who are denied information or are dissatisfied by allowing a request for an internal review, an appeal before the information commissioner, and a request for judicial review.

While Liberia has made great strides in advancing the right of access to information, there remains significant work in order to institutionalize and sustain progress achieved and to assure the benefits of the law are being enjoyed by all. Low capacity, lack of resources, and low awareness among public administration and the general public continue to hamper further advancement.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION BRIDGES GENDER GAPS AND HELPS TO SHIFT POWER.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The Carter Center, in collaboration with the Women’s NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL), conducted an innovative study to identify the cultural, structural, and legal barriers that impede women’s access to critical information and to determine women’s information needs and ideas for overcoming obstacles.

The research design relies on existing secondary data and the collection of primary data through 1) interviews with community leaders, 2) expert opinion interviews, 3) non-participant observation of access to information practices in relevant government ministries/agencies, and 4) accompanying interviews of public servants and the “customers” who enter the public offices.

Local researchers, trained by The Carter Center, conducted assessments in a mix of rural and urban areas in four counties and the capital city of Monrovia. Once data was gathered, a preliminary analysis of the findings was completed and shared with local stakeholders through a validation process in each locale, providing an opportunity for the community to reflect on whether the findings are consistent with their own realities as well as to gather additional qualitative information from the discussion and comments. The validation meetings included stakeholders from government agencies, local experts, and civil society leaders.

Following the validations, full data sets and qualitative commentary were analyzed and findings readied for release. As part of the methodology, initial release of the final findings occurred at a multistakeholder meeting, providing the opportunity to discuss the results of the study, jointly consider the problems, and develop potential solutions/recommendations for improvement. The focus of subsequent programming will depend on the priority findings from the study and validation exercises.

Focus Areas

Economic empowerment for women is a critical issue around the world. To target the study and make it more meaningful for participants, much of the study focuses on information for economic empowerment. However, in certain contexts, other issues, such as violence against women, are of equal or overriding importance. Therefore, we allowed for other critical areas to emerge. Within the area of access to information for economic empowerment, we engaged four interconnected themes: education, land, business, and agriculture.

Education	Are women able to access information on education policies and school budgets?
	Are women able to access information on curriculum, staffing, materials, and nutritional programs?
	Are women able to access information about scholarship and educational opportunities?
	Are there vocational training programs available to women?
Land	Are women able to access information on land policy?
	Are women able to access information on their rights to own/inherit land?
	Are women able to access land titles?
Business	Are women able to access information on government procedures for starting a small business?
	Are women able to access policies and procedures for licensing?
	Are women able to access policies and procedures for government-sponsored loans?
	Are women able to access information relevant to the trade/market of interest, such as how many similar businesses exist, taxation, import costs, etc.?
Agriculture	Are women able to access information about pricing for goods?
	Are women able to access information about government-sponsored programs for seeds and fertilizers?
	Are women able to access information about water for irrigation and related water policies?

Selection of Counties for Study

The Carter Center’s methodology called for regional sample diversity. By collecting full data sets within each county and Monrovia, a case study for each region was completed to identify priority issues, allowing for comparison to see if there were unique factors affecting women’s access to information in each area. These regional findings were then aggregated to provide insights into the status of women and the right of access to information at the national level, identifying perceptions and trends across Liberia.

Criteria for determining the counties included regional diversity, rural versus urban, existence of traditional societies, border issues, etc. Based on consultations with WONGOSOL and the Ministry of Gender, Bomi, Grand Gedeh, Lofa, and Nimba were selected as sample counties, in addition to metropolitan Monrovia. The latter was included to provide a base for comparing urban and rural areas and because centralized government agencies are located within the capital city.



Research Questions

The following research questions served as the basis of the study:

1. Do women access critical government information less frequently than men?
2. What are the main obstacles facing women in the exercise of the right to information?
3. What information would be most valuable to women for achieving greater economic empowerment, with particular emphasis on education, land, agriculture, and starting a business?
4. If the identified obstacles are overcome and meaningful information is accessible, would that contribute to increased economic empowerment?

Data Collection

WONGOSOL, with assistance from The Carter Center, was responsible for identifying and supporting 10 local researchers, ensuring data collection, and organizing validations to complete the study. Each county/city research team comprised two researchers responsible for conducting three types of interviews (with community leaders, experts, and agency employees/visitors), making field observations, and transcribing data. The researchers were provided with forms to record interview responses and collect observational data. Data was manually input into an electronic spreadsheet for analysis.

Analysis

Collecting multiple types of data allowed for triangulation during analysis. The outcomes from each source were compared against the other two sources—as well as to secondary data collected—to test reliability of the findings and increase confidence that these findings accurately represent perceptions and sentiment regarding women and access to information.

The Carter Center began the analysis process by identifying emergent themes through a grounded-theory

approach. Quantitative and qualitative data were included from all three data sets to derive preliminary findings for each county. Findings included (a) the perception of respondents on whether women access information at the same rate as men, (b) key barriers identified by respondents to explain differential access, and (c) types of information respondents believed to be the most critical to women’s economic empowerment.

Following preliminary analysis, the research team engaged focus groups in each county to validate the initial findings. This process allowed researchers, participants, and community stakeholders to discuss any limitations and follow-up questions, thereby further contextualizing the findings.

Once the validations were complete, all data sets were reviewed through a quality assurance process to ensure validity and reliability for final analysis. Data sources were then analyzed for existing and re-occurring patterns. Analysts utilized an emic focus in reviewing qualitative content, maintaining the respondent’s point of view as much as possible through direct transcription sensitive to local language and meaning and by examining context provided by researcher observations.



Gender Breakdown

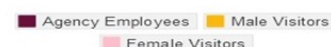
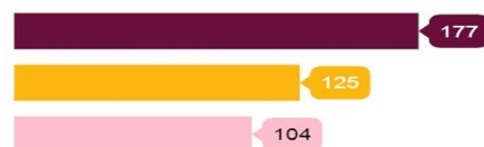
Community Leaders



Experts



Non-Participant Observation



AGGREGATE FINDINGS

Overview of Data Sources

The following represents an overview of the data sources employed in the study.

COMMUNITY LEADERS

- ◆ 75 community leaders were interviewed
- ◆ Community leaders tended to work on a myriad of issues, including:
 - Women's rights
 - Education
 - Agriculture
 - Local participation
 - Starting businesses
 - Land
- ◆ 24 percent of community leaders serve women and 76 percent serve both men and women
- ◆ Community leaders represent organizations/communities ranging from two to 3,000 members
- ◆ 82.7 percent of the groups hold affiliations at local, national, or international levels
- ◆ In total, they claim to represent approximately 18,500 people, with some likely overlap

EXPERTS

- ◆ Individuals having expertise in key development areas were largely men
- ◆ Profession of experts included:
 - 15 percent were academic affiliates or university professors
 - 20 percent represented a nongovernmental organization or the international community
 - 55 percent were higher-level government officials
- ◆ Areas of expertise included:
 - Education
 - Agriculture
 - Land
 - Starting a business

NONPARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS

The following agencies were nonparticipant observation sites in at least one county during the study, and each was visited three times on different days in order to provide a more complete and accurate picture:

Land Commission
Liberia Business Association
Liberia Business Registry
Ministry of Agriculture
Ministry of Commerce and Industry
Ministry of Education
Ministry of Finance
Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection
Ministry of Internal Affairs
Ministry of Labor
Ministry of Land, Mines, and Energy
Ministry of Public Works

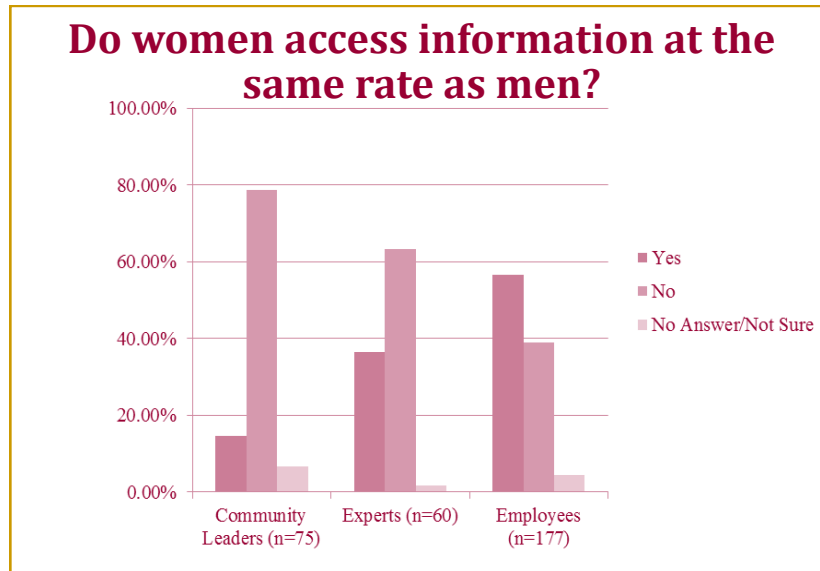
Women and men visiting the agencies were present for a variety of reasons, ranging from seeking information, lodging formal complaints, following up on pending cases, or fulfilling personal reasons.



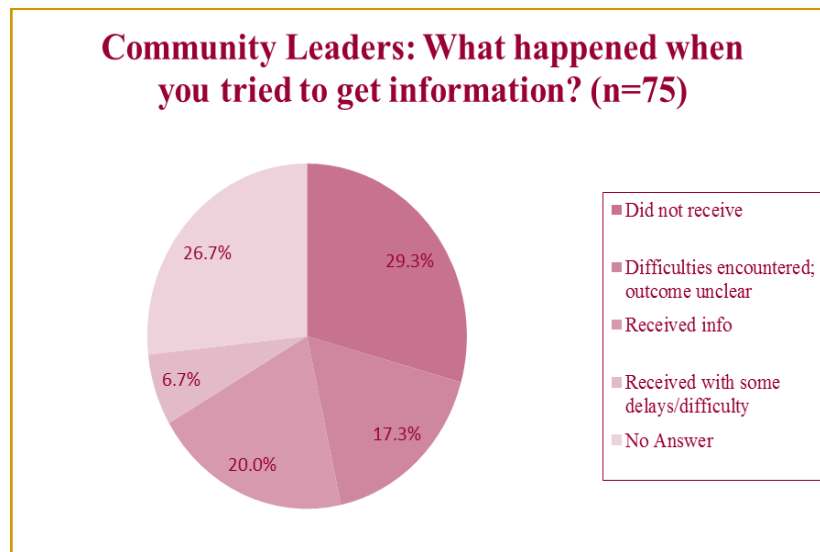
Liberian women march for their right of access to information. Photo: Alphonsus Zeon

Inequities in Access to Information

All three respondent groups within the sample were asked whether women access information at the same rate as men. The findings from community leaders and expert interviews overwhelmingly indicate the perception that women **do not** access information as easily or as frequently as do men.



When asked to recall an experience when they had attempted to access government-held information, 54.7 percent of community leaders (mostly women) reported delays, difficulties, or never receiving information requested. When asked to think of a time when they needed information but did not try to attain it, 44.9 percent of community leaders said they did not trust the system or thought the process was too difficult to complete; 18.4 percent felt that even if they gained information it would not affect change; and 14.3 percent did not know where to go or how to ask for information.



THE FINDINGS OVERWHELMINGLY INDICATE THE PERCEPTION THAT WOMEN DO NOT ACCESS INFORMATION AS EASILY OR AS FREQUENTLY AS DO MEN.

Cultural and Structural Barriers

When asked to rank the top barriers facing women in the exercise of their right to information, community leaders across all five regions most frequently identified the following:

1. Illiteracy
2. Fear of asking
3. Not knowing where to go/how to ask
4. Time (i.e., childcare, housework, and being “too busy”)
5. Mobility and distance to the public office

Experts were asked to describe the impact of the continued inaccessibility of government-held information for women. The majority of expert responses fell into three categories:

- ◆ 60 percent said that women will be deprived opportunities and gender inequalities will be perpetuated.
- ◆ 58.3 percent mentioned that overall development will be stultified and Liberian society will suffer.
- ◆ A few experts indicated that violence against women would continue.

When experts were asked if overcoming identified obstacles and making information accessible would contribute to increased economic empowerment for women, 98.3 percent responded affirmatively.

Qualitative data indicated that many of the barriers to women accessing critical information are interrelated. One community leader explained, “Men also caused women to not be educated by keeping women in the back taking care of children.” This leader’s sentiment describes the impact of multiple vectors of oppression, including culturally influenced gender norms, lack of education, and the burden of domestic duties on women’s empowerment.

Terms such as “weak minded,” “inferior,” and “uninterested” were prevalent throughout qualitative responses from men—including from government officials—in all five regions of the study as a means of explaining differential access to information for women. However, response context and researcher notes suggest



A woman speaks at a Carter Center-sponsored community meeting. Photo: Pewee Flomoku

that often these terms might speak to capacity and not necessarily to inherent traits of women. Moreover, women interviewed belied this male perception by consistently noting the importance of information for their advancement and often described with precision the exact information they wanted.

Priority Information for Women’s Economic Empowerment

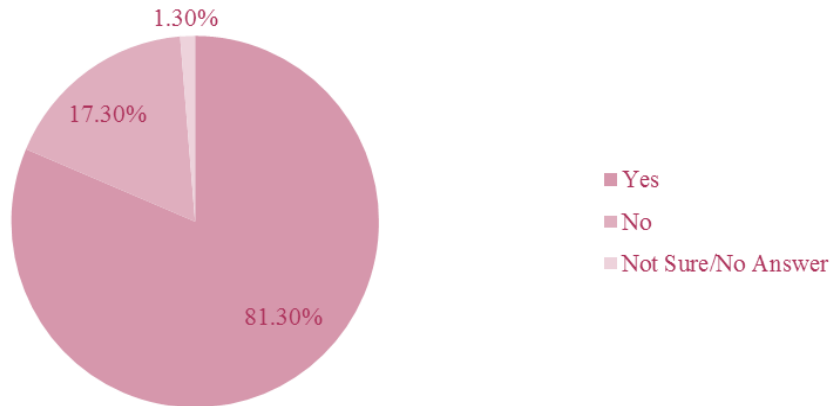
The majority of community leaders indicated that national (81.3 percent) and local (80 percent) government holds information that women need to better their lives. According to community leaders, the information most valuable to women for achieving greater economic empowerment relates to education, loans and business management, and land and property ownership. Notably, community leaders also identified these types of information as the most difficult for women to access.

Experts also were asked to comment on priority types of information, with the results often heavily influenced by their area of expertise. When asked to comment on the most important types of information for women’s economic empowerment, almost all identified information from their own field as the most important for women.

WHEN EXPERTS WERE ASKED IF OVERCOMING IDENTIFIED OBSTACLES AND MAKING INFORMATION ACCESSIBLE WOULD CONTRIBUTE TO INCREASED ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN, 98.3 PERCENT RESPONDED AFFIRMATIVELY.

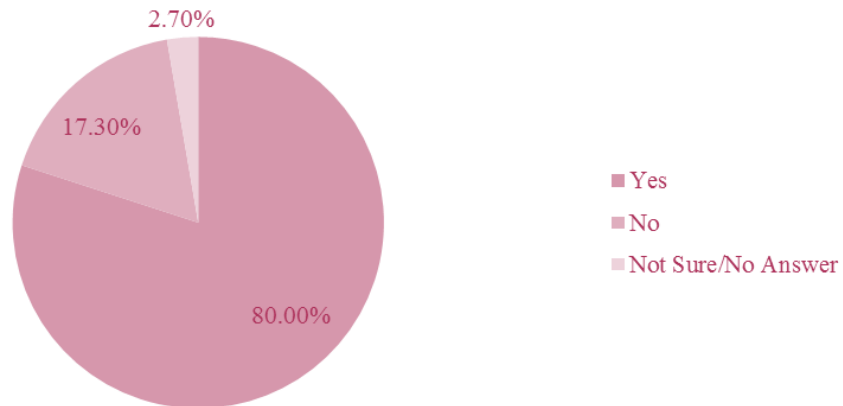
Do you think that the national government holds information women need to better their lives?

Community Leaders (n=75)



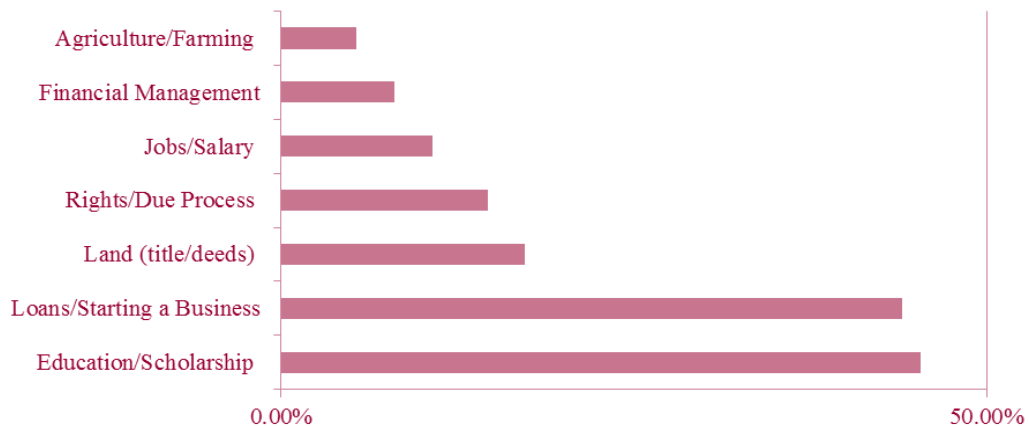
Do you think that the local government holds information women need to better their lives?

Community Leaders (n=75)



What information would be most valuable to women for achieving greater economic betterment?

Community Leaders (n=75)



Awareness of Rights

Community leaders were asked to comment on women’s awareness of their socioeconomic rights within each region. According to their responses, women are **very aware** of their rights:

- ◆ To be able to join groups or associations (60 percent)
- ◆ To go to court if any rights are violated (48 percent)
- ◆ To education (45.3 percent)
- ◆ To work, under good working conditions/reasonable working hours (45.3 percent)

Community leaders indicated that women are **somewhat aware** of their rights:

- ◆ To information (58.7 percent)
- ◆ To be treated equally with all others (free from discrimination) (56 percent)
- ◆ To be free from violence (domestic, violence against women, etc.) (53.3 percent)

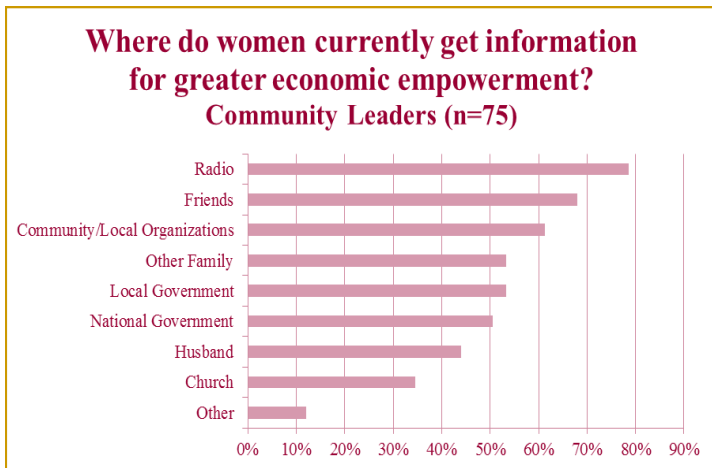
It is important to note that when asked about knowledge of rights, the distribution of responses related to “somewhat aware” was quite even across all rights. At least 40 percent of all community leaders indicated that women were somewhat aware of each of the eight rights (as listed above and including the right to own property).

When asked about rights of which women are **not at all aware**, the community leaders indicated the following:

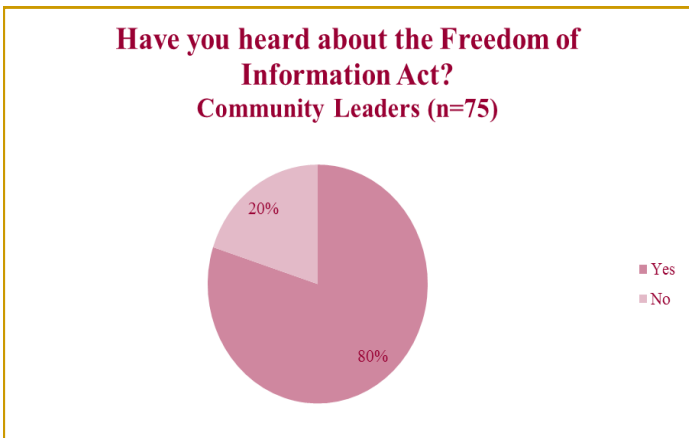
- ◆ Right to own property (18.7 percent)
- ◆ Right to go to court if any rights are violated (12 percent)
- ◆ Right to work, under good working conditions/reasonable working hours (10.7 percent)

While 68 percent of the community leaders said that women are either not or only somewhat aware of the right to information, 80 percent noted that they themselves had heard of the FOI Act.

When asked where women currently get their information, community leaders most often noted radio, friends, and community/local organizations. For the “other” category, the community leaders noted community forums, youth centers, or town hall meetings.



Town hall meetings increasingly allow women and youth to participate in the decisions of community life. Photo: Johnny Ndebe

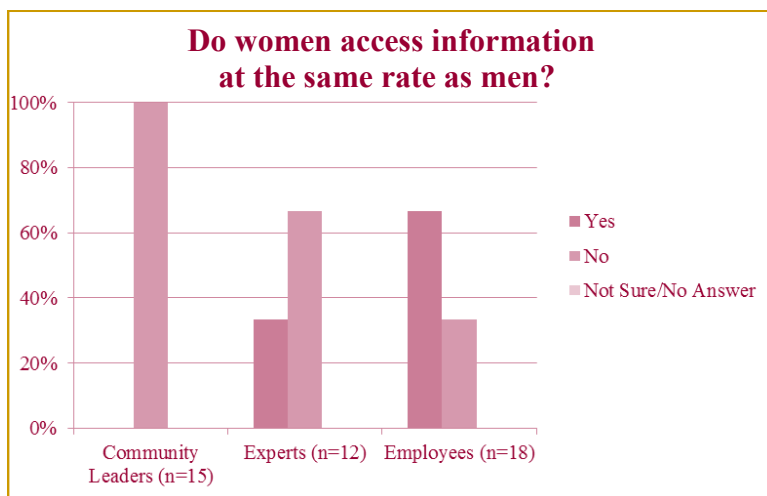


BOMI COUNTY

All community leaders (100 percent) and the majority of experts (66.7 percent) agreed that women **do not** access information at the same rate as men. Nonparticipant observation indicated that women visit the agencies only slightly less often than men; however, men reported gaining access to requested information with little to no difficulty 83.3 percent of the time, compared to 30 percent of women. A slight majority of employees (66.7 percent) felt women and men access information at the same rate, noting that visitors are treated equally regardless of gender. Interestingly, 66.7 percent of employees who identified barriers to women's access to information cited women's disinterest, yet validation participants disagreed, declaring that women are very interested but restricted by cultural mores. In the validation, 57 participants (30 women, 27 men) expressed general agreement that it is more difficult for women to access information, stating that men are more likely to hold key positions and women avoid public offices due to fear of being negatively branded.

Fear of asking, distance to public office/mobility, and money for copies were the key barriers to women's access to information identified by study participants. Validation confirmed these barriers but also highlighted cultural perceptions as significant obstacles. For example, tribalism and nepotism were provided as examples of cultural barriers facing women in the exercise of the right of access to information.

Interviews with community leaders indicated that the most important information for women's economic empowerment relate to land, education, and business. This was confirmed in the validation exercise. Additionally, information on the rights of women and county development and social development funds were mentioned as important for promoting economic empowerment.



What information would be most valuable to women for achieving greater economic betterment?

1. Land
2. Education
3. Business
4. County development
5. Social development funds

Primary Obstacles to Women's Access to Information



1. Fear of asking
2. Distance to public offices/mobility
3. Money for copies

Women are least aware of their rights to:

1. Access to information
2. Be free from violence
3. Own property

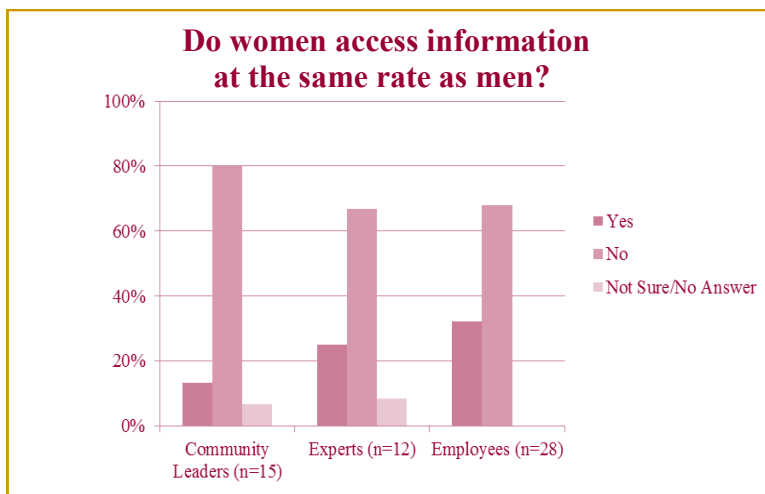
GRAND GEDEH COUNTY

The majority of community leaders (80 percent), experts (66.7 percent), and employees at observation sites (67.9 percent) said that women **do not** access information at the same rate as men, with validation participants in agreement. At public agencies under observation, men were roughly 2.5 times more likely to enter the agency than women, and women were 11 percent more likely to experience difficulties/delays in accessing information. About 55 percent of female visitors interviewed reported difficulty/delay, and most community leaders (66 percent) cited similar problems.

Community leaders and experts noted illiteracy and not knowing where to go/how to ask for information as key barriers to women’s access to information. While “disinterest” was a theme among employee responses regarding barriers, explanations were more evenly distributed: 28.6 percent of employees indicated that women were unaware of how to get critical information, 28.6 percent said women were “lazy,” “weak,” or had an “inferiority complex,” and 25 percent indicated the agency provides information to women and men equally.

Competing explanations for women’s potential “disinterest” were promoted during the validation, such as historical disenfranchisement of women from political processes and being relegated to domestic roles. Women contended that underlying, fundamental challenges—rather than apathy—impeded their information access. Validation participants also explained that while the law may not discriminate against women’s access to information, a lack of resources and skills and cultural barriers make the law difficult to use. The prevalence of male elders and traditional leaders making decisions and discouraging women’s participation was a common narrative.

Information regarding business and loans—as well as education—were noted as the most important types of information for women’s economic empowerment. Validation participants also specified that women need to be made aware of their rights and encouraged to get involved in decision-making processes.



What information would be most valuable to women for achieving greater economic betterment?

1. Business and loans
2. Education
3. General rights

Women are least aware of their rights to:

1. Be treated equally
2. Access to information
3. Own property

Primary Obstacles to Women’s Access to Information



1. Illiteracy
2. Not knowing where to go/how to ask
3. Disenfranchisement

LOFA COUNTY

Community leader responses were equivocal: 40 percent responded that women do not access information at the same rate as men, 40 percent said they do, and 20 percent were unsure. About 53.4 percent of community leaders reported delays/difficulties and/or not obtaining information when trying to access government-held information. When asked about a time when they did not seek information they wanted, community leaders cited nonsupport from other organizations as a primary factor.

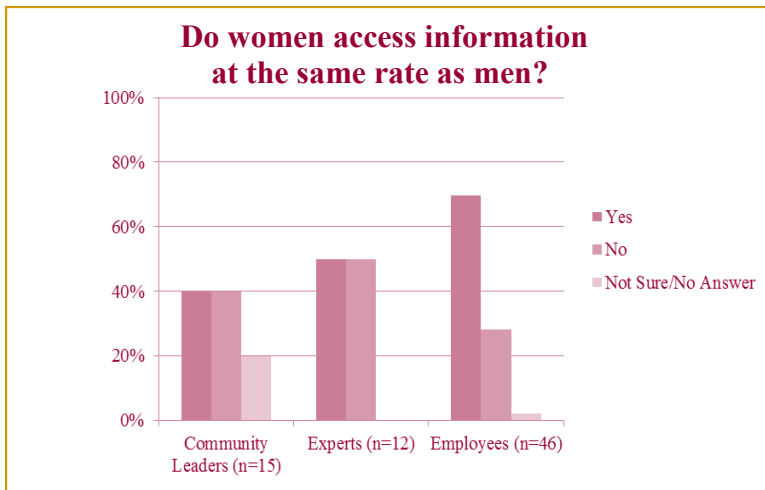
At public agencies under observation, most employees (78.3 percent) agreed that women came to their agencies as often as men, and 69.6 percent believed women and men access information at the same rate. Interviews with visitors resulted in seemingly comparable success rates in accessing information for men (52.4 percent) and women (57.9 percent). Of those interviewed, women (21.1 percent) were only somewhat more likely than men (15.8 percent) to report difficulty or delay.

The findings in Lofa were markedly more positive than those from other counties. However, validation partici-

pants stated that the findings **did not** reflect on-the-ground realities, generally agreeing that women **do not** access information at the same rate as men and noting that women are restricted by cultural mores, deprived of education, and held back by gender-based stereotypes.

The barriers most often cited by community leaders were: information not seen as important for women, illiteracy, and not knowing where to go/how to ask for information. Validation participants noted that women were interested in information, but various obstacles inhibited their ability to exercise their right to information. Participants cited the large technology gender gap, lack of participation in public discussions, and lack of awareness of the right to information.

Information around education, business management and loans, and jobs was cited as most important for increasing economic opportunities for women. Validation participants agreed but expanded the scope to include skills training, agriculture, and ways to exercise rights through formal and traditional justice systems.



Primary Obstacles to Women's Access to Information



1. Information not seen as important for women
2. Illiteracy
3. Not knowing where to go/how to ask for information

What information would be most valuable to women for achieving greater economic betterment?

1. Education
2. Business management and loans
3. Jobs

Women are least aware of their rights to:

1. Access to information
2. Own property
3. Be free from violence

NIMBA COUNTY

A strong majority of community leaders (93.3 percent) believe that women **do not** access information at the same rate as men. Men were about three times more likely than women to enter the agencies observed. Employees were evenly divided on whether women access information at the same rate (45.6 percent said “no,” 45.6 percent said “yes”). Validation participations agreed that it is more difficult for women to access information than men. Specifically, men reported gaining access to requested information 15.9 percent more often than women. Female interviewees (46.9 percent) reported difficulties, delay, or not receiving information, while only 18.6 percent of male visitors reported similar difficulties.

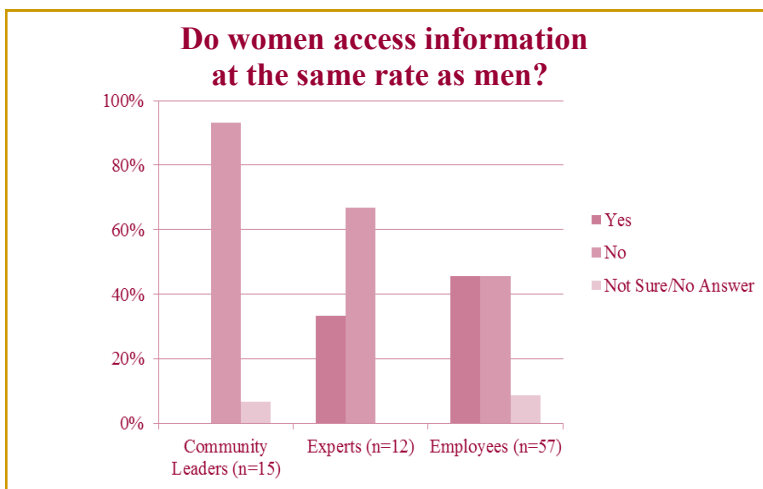
The Nimba research team—one female and one male—reported gender-based challenges in employing the study. The female researcher received gender-based insults from ministry staff, and on several occasions the researchers were barred from entry or were denied interviews with staff.

Illiteracy, lack of education, and cultural norms were identified by community leaders and experts as some of

the largest barriers facing women’s access to information. Experts also identified awareness of rights and inferiority complex/shyness as obstacles. Community leaders noted that men withhold information or prevent women from seeking opportunities and that cultural norms dictate women’s relegation to domestic roles. While also citing culture/traditional practices as the main challenge, public servants also “blamed” women, indicating that they are too lazy/weak or suffer from an inferiority complex that inhibits request-making.

Community leaders identified information relating to business and loans, education and scholarships, and awareness of rights as most important for women’s economic empowerment.

Validation participants ranked the various types of key information for economic empowerment slightly differently than the community leaders interviewed, stating that education was most critical, as education brings awareness of how to manage a business and knowledge related to acquisition of land and property rights.



What information would be most valuable to women for achieving greater economic betterment?

1. Business and loans
2. Education and scholarships
3. Awareness of rights

Women are least aware of their rights to:

1. Work
2. Own property
3. Access to information

Primary Obstacles to Women’s Access to Information



1. Illiteracy
2. Lack of education
3. Cultural norms
4. Awareness of rights
5. Inferiority complex/fear

CITY OF MONROVIA

Community leaders (80 percent) and experts (66.7 percent) believe that women **do not** access information at the same rate as men. While 75 percent of public officials interviewed felt that women and men access information equally and 67.9 percent indicate they come into the office equally, direct observation showed that men were twice as likely to enter agencies.

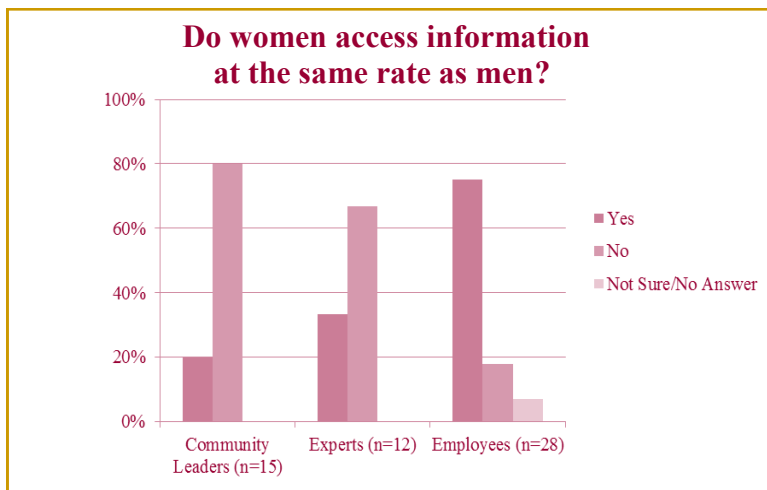
At observation sites, men (33.3 percent) and women (34.8 percent) received information or noted positive experiences at roughly the same low rate; however, unlike other locales, men were 7 percent more likely than women to report difficulties/delays. Sixty percent of community leaders, the majority being women, reported difficulty/delay or inaccessibility when trying to access information.

Even in urban Monrovia, 80 percent of community leaders identified illiteracy as a large barrier to women's access to information. Lack of confidence, fear of asking, unsupportive family members, distance to public offices, and not knowing where/how to ask for information also were noted as obstacles. While most employees believed

women face few or no barriers within the agencies, around 20 percent noted external barriers to women's information access, including culture, domestic responsibilities, system mistrust, and "inferiority complex." Experts (mainly men) also established discriminatory views toward women, with 41.7 percent noting women were shy, weak, or had an "inferiority complex." Interestingly, all experts believe women's increased access to information would lead to economic empowerment.

During the validation exercise, several male government participants believed women's disinterest, laziness, or general lack of skills formed barriers to their access to information. However, many other attendees argued that cultural barriers and gender roles, including domestic responsibilities and exclusion from decision-making processes, played the most significant role in deterring women from a meaningful right of access to information.

Information regarding business and loans, education and scholarships, and land/deeds, were noted as most important for women's economic empowerment.



What information would be most valuable to women for achieving greater economic betterment?

1. Business and loans
2. Education and scholarships
3. Land and deeds

Primary Obstacles to Women's Access to Information



1. Illiteracy
2. Culture
3. Lack of confidence/fear
4. Distance to public offices
5. Not knowing where to go/how to ask

Women are least aware of their rights to:

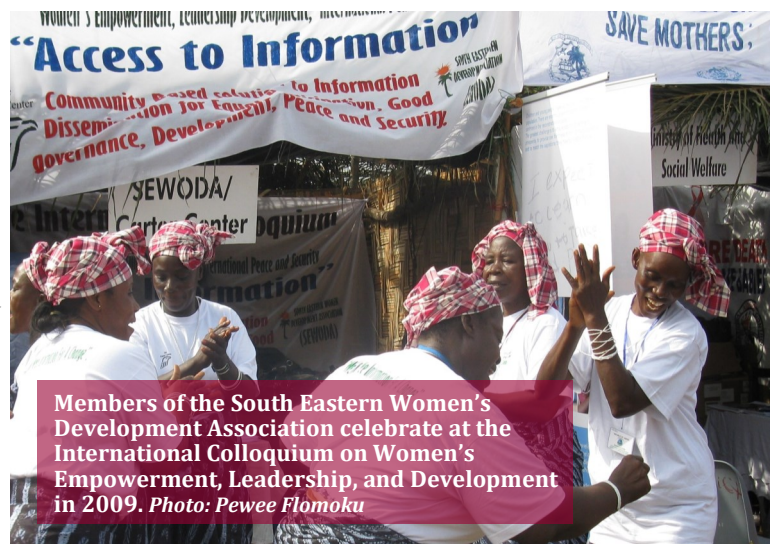
1. Own land
2. Access to information
3. Work under good conditions

KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ The interviews and observational data collected illustrate both differential access—that women are not accessing information at the same rate as men—and numerous barriers facing women in accessing government-held information in Liberia.
- ◆ Though public employees were more likely to say women access information at the same rate as men, observational data illustrated that women experienced challenges or delays at public agencies more often than their male counterparts.
- ◆ The theory that women are simply “disinterested” in accessing information was clearly disputed by qualitative data as well as in the validation activities. Instead barriers to access, including fear of reprisal, lack of time and mobility, and deeply-rooted cultural norms, have made women less likely to seek information overall.
- ◆ While the majority of respondents indicate that women will face more barriers and challenges than men in attempting to access information, data also shows that a multitude of barriers facing women are encountered before even getting to the agency or government office. These barriers also may help explain why men were twice as likely to be observed entering public agencies as compared to women.
 - ◇ Illiteracy and lack of education prevent women from reading key documents that may contribute to their knowledge of programs, resources, and rights and may propagate fear/less confidence in exercising the right to information.
 - ◇ Cultural norms and mores continue to disenfranchise women from public spaces and decision-making roles.
 - ◇ Lack of time (as women are expected to take primary responsibility for most domestic tasks) and mobility serve as significant challenges to women seeking information in public agencies.
 - ◇ Fear of retaliation or negative branding by male peers for entering a public agency plays a major role in keeping women from accessing information that could lead to increased economic empowerment.
 - ◇ Unfamiliarity with the system for requests—not knowing how and where to seek information—prevents women from going to designated agencies where information might be made available.
- ◆ Multiple sources confirmed that access to information on education and scholarship are most important for increasing women’s economic empowerment, while also noting lack of education and illiteracy as principal barriers to women in accessing information. Paradoxically, information related to education also was cited as some of the most difficult information for women to obtain.
- ◆ More than 70 percent of the community leaders indicated that women are not at all or only somewhat informed about the right to own property. Yet, information about land and property was consistently cited as very valuable for women’s increased economic empowerment.
- ◆ Data also confirmed that information relating to starting and managing a business—as well as gaining access to loans for business purposes—are priorities for women’s economic empowerment. In rural areas, access to this type of information is particularly difficult to procure, as banking institutions often are not present and awareness of related government programs/policies appears to be rather low for women.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY AND CONSIDERATIONS

- ◆ The methodology design, including lack of randomized sampling, largely resulted in perception-based findings to demonstrate the hypothesis that inequities exist and to highlight trends related to women's access to information.
- ◆ Nonparticipant observation sites were selected to provide illustrative examples of interactions that take place within agencies representing key economic empowerment areas (agriculture, land, starting a business, and education). Due to variations in agency structures, the number of employees working on any given day, and other external factors, more interviews may have occurred at certain agencies, compared to other agencies in the sample. As these observation sites were selected by local research teams, each county had a different selection of agencies, potentially biasing some of the findings.
- ◆ Employees at nonparticipant observation sites were asked to comment only on access to information within the context of their agency or office. Therefore, employees may not have considered barriers to women's access to information that occur outside of the agency's walls. Had the question been formulated to generate speculation about external barriers, it is possible employees might have been less likely to answer that women access information at the same rate as men. However, in spite of the question's limited scope, many employees mentioned cultural and structural barriers, perhaps confirming the magnitude of these extant obstacles.
- ◆ All data collection occurred in the field with limited supervision from The Carter Center. Once researchers were fully trained on the methodology and best research practices by Carter Center staff and the final interview and nonparticipant observation sites had been approved, researchers independently implemented the methodology in their counties of origin. As such, variation in the application of the methodology may have occurred. When these variances were identified, The Carter Center attempted to mitigate their impact when possible.
- ◆ In both Monrovia and Bomi county, implementation of the methodology was incongruent for nonparticipant observations. In order to complete the data sets, local research teams collected additional data prior to analysis to ensure that the final data for both regions were reliable. As such, several observations took place in May 2014. While the qualitative data did not reveal substantial deviations from data collected January–March, it is possible that contextual shifts took place with relation to each agency, its practices, or employee understanding of the study's purpose.
- ◆ Some questions, while broad enough to capture diverse responses and priorities, might have benefited from a more narrow scope. For example, a number of questions may have been interpreted differently. Moreover, it appears that for some questions, particularly those related to specific issues for economic empowerment, researchers used “prompts” to help the community leader's comprehension. This may have led to some bias in the responses.
- ◆ In some cases, the study would have benefited from researchers asking additional probing questions. This was most evident in responses related to women's fear, weakness, and inferiority. It was only through reviewing all of the qualitative narratives that we were able to better understand the potential meaning behind these comments.



Members of the South Eastern Women's Development Association celebrate at the International Colloquium on Women's Empowerment, Leadership, and Development in 2009. Photo: Pewee Flomoku

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs, and Tourism and the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection—in collaboration with WONGOSOL and The Carter Center—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 rights met to discuss the findings of this study. Participants engaged in constructive dialogue related to inequities that women face in exercising the right to information, 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 that 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 full “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 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. **These recommendations 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, Children, and Social Protection taking a leading role in promoting access to information for women especially for economic empowerment, review of relevant policies, and 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. At a minimum, publish all information mandated by the Liberian Freedom of Information law. Proactive publication will allow women to access information without making 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 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 easy access, such as in locations where women congregate and in schools where children can share the information 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 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. 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 "access to information 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, give thought 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, to encourage women to access public information and to seek men's support of their efforts
 - b. Use of community radio to increase the reach of the awareness campaign
 - c. Development of jingles, slogans, and dramatizations for radio and community meetings
 - d. Development of 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 effect 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.

For additional information, contact:

Alphonsus Zeon

Senior Project Coordinator

The Carter Center

Liberia Access to Information Project

Monrovia, Liberia

Phone: +231 (0) 88652-2619

Email:

alphonsus.zeon@cartercenterliberia.org

Laura Neuman

Director

Global Access to Information Program

The Carter Center

One Copenhill

453 Freedom Parkway

Atlanta, GA 30307

Phone: +1-404-420-5146

Email: laura.neuman@cartercenter.org

www.cartercenter.org/accesstoinformation

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