

## Kim Campbell Turns Up in Sierra Leone

By Nadja Drost  
FREETOWN, Sierra Leone

The musty carpet, piles of yellowed papers, and faux-wood panelling make for a very different ministerial quarters than the sort Kim Campbell occupied during her time in politics. But the conversation inside the office of Sierra Leone's minister of gender focuses on an issue familiar during Ms. Campbell's political life: the advancement of women.

Ms. Campbell finds herself in this struggling West African country, recovering from a brutal decade-long war that ended in 2002, as part of the first mission of the African Women's Leadership Project. Joined by Sir Ketumile Masire, former president of Botswana, and Uganda's Dora Byamukama, a member of the East African Legislative Assembly, the delegation spent four days last week visiting Freetown and the northern town of Makeni to encourage women's political leadership.

The project, which receives funding from CIDA, is led by the Club of Madrid, a group of former heads of state—including Bill Clinton—who lend their skills and experience to countries in democratic transition.

The delegation's visit came at a key time: the country is soon to enter a landmark election that many say will determine whether the West African nation is indeed on the road to peace and democracy. It will also reveal the extent to which women are making political inroads in a country where few females hold decision-making positions, a notion that is foreign to many men and women alike here.

Meeting with over 120 leaders from government, political parties, traditional groups and civil society representatives, the delegation tried not only to encourage women to break through the barriers, but to impress upon prominent males the importance of their support.

Few are better positioned than Ms. Campbell to take up the task. As a former Justice and Defence minister and later Canada's first female prime minister, *"I found myself in a lot of places where no woman had been before,"* she says.

Ms. Campbell's tenure as national leader was brief and tumultuous, culminating in a crushing October 1993 defeat at the hands of Jean Chrétien's Liberals not so much for her personally but for the entire record of the two-term government of Brian Mulroney.

However difficult, the path-breaking political experience has allowed the one-time Progressive Conservative politician to continue working on issues close to her, whether it is teaching classes on gender and power at Harvard University, heading the Council of Women World Leaders or playing a key role in the Club of Madrid.

*"It has never been my idea to make a career out of being a former prime minister,"* Ms. Campbell admits. *"But what I've discovered since 1993 is that it means something to a lot of people. So I've found myself over the years doing a lot of things... particularly in places where women are really struggling for the basic first steps for access to the political arena,"* she says during a break in her African itinerary.

*"And to realize that my experience and what I was able to do, and what that represents, can inspire and give them hope is a really wonderful thing, and I get a lot of pleasure out of that."*

In bustling Freetown, Ms. Campbell and the delegation drive by tin-roof shacks, rivers of garbage and streets teeming with hawkers desperately trying to scrape together a living—unsettling evidence of why Sierra Leone placed second-last of 177 countries in the UN Development Index for 2005.

Despite the oppressive heat that can induce lethargy in even the most energetic, the 60-year-old Ms. Campbell is in admirable form, attentively listening to the challenges—financial, social, and cultural—that women face on the tenuous path to greater influence.

Women in Sierra Leone live in poverty more often than men. Constrained by limited access to education, four in five women cannot read. Most of the country is governed by a set of customary laws and beliefs, where traditional chiefs assume the role of local courts and make discretionary decisions that often favour men. When a man dies, for example, his possessions—including his wife—are handed over to his family for re-distribution.

In a country still trying to pick up the pieces after a devastating war, women's advancement competes with pressing day-to-day issues, including high unemployment and scarcity of electricity and running water.

At the same time, the extreme atrocities that women in particular experienced during the war—sexual slavery and gang rape among them—coupled with the important role females play in healing the wounds of conflict, mean discussions about women's issues and participation in society finally are receiving more attention.

Valnora Edwin, director of the Campaign for Good Governance in Freetown, says once-taboo topics are coming into the open. *"Now there's talk about domestic violence, sexual violence, how do we address it, what are the laws in place, and why are the men doing this,"* she says. *"The war depicted everything that was happening, and suddenly everyone was saying 'Wow, is this how we really think of women?' It was like the war was the entry point."*

Legal reform tops the agenda of many women's groups in Sierra Leone. Their persistence may pay off with passage in Parliament of three draft laws related to women's rights. Several organizations want 30 per cent of parliamentary seats to be reserved for women, a policy delegate Dora Byamukama says has reaped dividends in Uganda.

Nemata Eshun-Baiden, co-founder of the Fifty-Fifty Group that aims to increase women's political participation, told Ms. Campbell and other meeting participants a "crisis situation" might unfold in the upcoming election. She fears recent changes to the electoral system pose additional challenges for women, and could see even fewer women in parliament than the current 14 per cent of members—already a lower percentage of female representation than in many African countries.

Though some of Sierra Leone's government ministries and institutions are now headed by women, the fight for equality continues. *"It's the social culture that [believes] women should not lead men or have decision-making positions,"* says Ms. Edwin, *"and when you allow women to attain these positions, they forget how to attend to the man."*

Ms. Campbell says change will take time. She believes many of the barriers that women face in Sierra Leone are universal, noting she's old enough to remember an era when Canadian women faced—and overcame—daunting hurdles.

*"So that gives me hope that the changes will be able to be made here too."*