

**Remarks of Dr. Nemata Eshun-Baiden
50/50 Group
National Democratic Institute – Madeleine K. Albright
Grant**

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On May 7, 2000, I joined a group of Sierra Leonean women determined to bring an end to the civil war that was ravaging our country. We demonstrated for peace at the residence of the late rebel leader, Corporal Foday Sankoh. This move set the stage for Foday Sankoh's arrest. This move eventually contributed to the end of the war.

Soon after, I was stunned that, even though peace had been achieved through the blood, sweat, tears, and suffering of both the women and men of Sierra Leone, women were relegated to the back seat. The new

democratically elected government was left to the men, to manage any way they saw fit. It was business as usual.

But I felt that inasmuch as we women constitute 52% of the population and sacrificed for peace, we should be able to work side by side with our men to manage that peace, and rebuild our country. In November 2000, at the end of a workshop organized by Rajiv Benda and Abator Thomas of the British Council, and supported by Marina Narnor of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and facilitated by Lesley Abdela and Joe Hall and Honorine Muyoyeta of NDI, I set up the 50/50 Group. Our goal: to develop mechanisms for more women to have a voice in parliament and public affairs and in the decisions that affect their localities, and lives.

When I founded the 50/50 Group, I really did not know what I was letting myself in for. I thought it would be just a nice little women's club that would meet periodically to talk about politics, and how women were always relegated to the background.

Little did I know that there were hoards of committed and dedicated Sierra Leonean women who were just waiting for a chance to air their views and channel their energies for change. Before long, we were organizing demonstrations, holding meetings, seminars, and training programs, preparing training materials, going on radio and TV, and in the process, learning new things and meeting new challenges.

The greatest challenge came from the men. Since ours is an African society, the traditionalists felt the women were out to challenge their authority. In Africa, women are not the traditional breadwinners. But I'll never forget the women who told me that their husbands were now telling them that since women were clamouring for "fifty percent in everything," they as wives should begin to contribute fifty percent toward the housekeeping, toward the children's school fees, etc. We were vilified, misquoted, and generally misunderstood.

It was a difficult time for us, yet it was also exhilarating. We were getting people's attention, and with time, we were able to get the men to see that we were not out to undermine their authority, but to work with them,

and walk by their side, to enable them to do better than they were doing as politicians and decision-makers.

That's how our slogan came about: "More Women, Better Politics! Better Politics, More Women!"

Now, I want to make clear that this idea, and the Zipper System that advocates one man, one woman in representation, is not a fashion or a whim. We are a post-Colonial African society, which means a patriarchal society, a society in which divisions of tribe and religion are rife, in which cronyism and corruption, often backed by violence, are often the norm. And we are a nation that only recently emerged from a dreadful time. Looking at other African nations still locked in conflict, the possibility that bloodshed and chaos could return haunts us.

So for us, democracy is not just a matter of elections and parties and political discourse, important as those things are. Democracy for us is part of our healing process. Democracy is part of our our rebuilding process.

It is right that the 50/50 Group should play a role: Women are indeed 52% of Sierra Leone. But it is the women who bore the brunt of the war, the loss of our loved ones, the loss of our homes, the hunger and the fear. It was our children who were maimed or stolen from us and forced into combat by the rebels.

So we have earned – more than earned – the right to advocate for a different system... one that mandates a fully equal role for women and men. Because we know this is

the best defense against a return to the past, the best defense for our country and our society – and our families.

The status of women is the classic marker of development. Our health, our education, our opportunities, our empowerment. In Sierra Leone, it is also the marker of stability, the one sure sign that a new kind of system is being established, in which the concerns of women, no less than the concerns of men, shape decisions and chart a new path. This is an absolute truth.

So we are grateful for your recognition, and your support, as exemplified by NDI's continuing commitment to our work. This grant will advance our work and our

nation. Thank you, Secretary Albright. Surely, this is not only a vote of confidence, but also a vote of faith and hope. We women will surely win.

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