



SPECIAL WOMEN'S ISSUE

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

Annie Grant graduated from an IRC program that helps poor girls and young women in Liberia start their own businesses. Today, she runs a vegetable stand in a busy market. "I make enough money now to send my children to school," she says.

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"I always dreamt of running a business."

Thanks to the IRC, 27-year-old Saywon Tarlesson, left, now owns her own hair salon in Red Light, a Monrovia suburb.



Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

The IRC is helping young women in Liberia learn trades and start businesses.

Story and photos by Peter Biro

It is early morning in Red Light, a blighted suburb of Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. Residents hurry back and forth with sacks of rice and bananas balanced on their heads. Traders are setting up stalls and children play in dusty alleys. A garbage dump smolders in a street lined with simple clay dwellings. In her recently opened hair salon, Saywon Tarlesson, 27, is seeing her first customer of the day.

"I have a line of people waiting to have their hair braided," she says. "I'm very busy."

Just two years ago, Tarlesson's life was radically different. She lived in poverty with her mother and earned less than a dollar a day selling bags of water in Red Light's central market. Food was scarce and existence hand to mouth.

From 1989 to 2003, Liberia endured a civil war that left the country and its economy in ruins. More than a million people were displaced and 250,000 killed. Women and girls were especially victimized, experiencing high levels of rape and sexual violence.

Illiteracy among Liberian women is a

staggering 60 percent; over 42 percent of women have never attended school. Women are largely excluded from productive sectors of the economy—90 percent are employed in low-paying agricultural work. Even with the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female president in Africa and last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner, progress for Liberian women has been painfully slow.

"I always dreamt of running a little business," says Tarlesson. "I used to sit in my local salon and watch the girls work and the customers come and go. I hoped that I could do the same someday, but it seemed impossible."

Now, the IRC has helped Tarlesson realize her dream. Recognizing that improving the economic situation of women is vital for Liberia's development, the IRC has launched an economic empowerment program for poor and disadvantaged girls and women, ages 16 to 27. The program offers intensive special training in business development and life

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"My husband drives a motorcycle taxi and now I also contribute to the family. It feels good."

Christine Jacobs, 23, opened a refreshment stand after she graduated from the IRC's business training course.



"I sell everything from food and drinks to toothpaste."

Laurina Tokpah, 24, was once a beggar in the streets. After completing an IRC-sponsored business course, she is now a successful retailer.



"Sometimes I sing a song to get customers' attention. I'm doing well now."

The IRC helped Joezel Mompleh, 25, a single mother raising three children on her own, establish a business selling fish in the Red Light market.