

Improving career opportunities for women in Liberia's health workforce

Project fact sheet

The challenge

Investments in a fit-for-purpose productive and motivated health workforce are a key priority for Liberia as the country is recovering from the Ebola outbreak of 2014 and 2015. Between 2010 and 2016, women's share of health workers increased from 38% to 45%. Career choices still tend to follow traditional gender roles: Men are overrepresented in more "technical" (and mostly higher-paying) cadres such as physicians (77%), physician assistants (80%), and medical laboratory technicians (82%), whereas women dominate in the "caring" roles, such as nursing (69%) and midwifery (94%). These gender inequalities are due to educational disparities as well as domestic obligations and social norms that limit women's career choices and professional development.

Women's empowerment in the health workforce contributes to strengthening the performance and resilience of the health system and to wider social development in Liberia:

- As women represent an increasing share of health workers, it is essential to consider female health workers' specific needs in order to improve workforce performance in health service delivery.
- Retention of health workers, particularly in rural areas, is a major challenge for Liberia. Difficult and partly unsafe working and living conditions affect female workers in particular. Measures that make staying in rural areas more attractive for women are key to reducing maldistribution and attrition of the workforce.
- Most higher-paying cadres and positions are still dominated by men. Targeted support for women

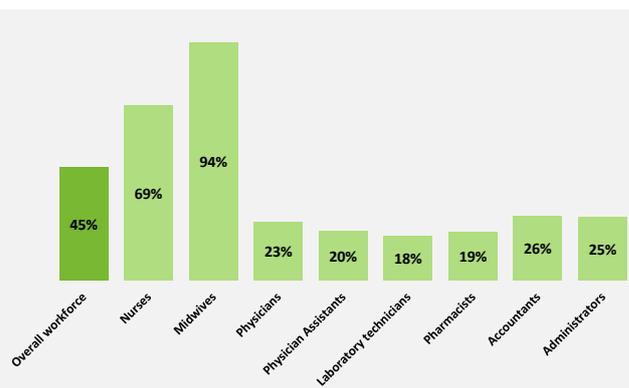
in pre-service education and career development can create more equal income opportunities.

- As a major employer of women in Liberia, the health sector is uniquely positioned to contribute to women's economic empowerment and thereby social justice and national development.

Project name	Employment-oriented support to Women in the Health sector (EWH)
Commissioned by	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Lead executing agency	Ministry of Health, Republic of Liberia
Duration	May 2016 – December 2019
Volume	EUR 3 million

Our approach

The project 'Employment-oriented support to women in the health sector' seeks to improve women's career opportunities in Liberia's health workforce. It is led by Liberia's Ministry of Health (MOH) and the German contribution is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. The project is part of the Liberian-German health programme which was set up in the wake of the Ebola epidemic and aims to strengthen the health system to deliver quality health services for all Liberians and protect them against disease outbreaks.



Left: Female laboratory aide in a health centre in South-East Liberia.

Right: Share of women in Liberia's health workforce (selected cadres)



Left: Female health workers in a health centre in South-East Liberia.

Middle: High school student at one of the career days organised by the project.

Right: Focus area of the project in South-East Liberia.

The project supports women in the different stages of their career to venture into non-traditional cadres and positions.

1. **Career choice:** Career guidance for high school students empowers adolescent girls (and boys) to choose career paths based on their own strengths and according to the demands of the labour market (in the health sector and beyond). This also helps them to transcend gender stereotypes in terms of career choices. During 'girls' days', for instance, female students visit medical laboratories and learn how women, too, can excel in this traditionally 'male' profession. The project also works with the girls' parents and communities given their high influence on young people's career choices.
2. **Pre-service education:** Scholarships enable women to pursue degrees in health professions dominated by men, such as physician assistants or medical laboratory technicians. The recipients also receive career advice and support in finding a job in the public health workforce after graduation. Moreover, the project supports training institutions in making student recruitment, study environments and teaching more female-friendly in order to lower the barriers for women to succeed in higher education.
3. **Career development:** Targeted leadership development measures and scholarships for advanced studies support the career development of women who are already employed as health professionals, including the promotion of more women into higher-paid management positions. Peer-to-peer approaches help women create career networks and give each other mutual support.

4. **Human Resources (HR) systems:** Strengthening the gender-sensitivity in workforce planning, development and management systems in the health sector creates an environment that enables women to go further in their careers. This includes developing gender-sensitive workforce retention strategies or HR data systems as well as trainings and coaching for key Ministry of Health officials.

Across these activity areas, the project combines support to individual women with capacity development for the institutions of the education and health sectors. Apart from national-level support to the Ministries of Health, Education and Gender, the geographical focus of the interventions is on five counties in South-East Liberia, which is the most remote part of the country. In terms of career guidance for young women, the project cooperates with the women's rights NGO "medica mondiale".

Results

As of mid-2018, selected achievements include:

- 4835 high school pupils (including 2100 girls) are targeted through ongoing gender-sensitive career guidance activities in 17 schools across 2 counties.
- 44 women are on local scholarships for entry-level and advanced studies in health professions.
- 490 students, faculty and staff have participated in gender audits at 4 health training institutions.
- 36 MOH officials have been trained on gender-responsiveness in HR.
- 9 actions to promote gender equality have been included in the new MOH HR Policy Action Plan (e.g. systems to address sexual harassment).