

Ship Report

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Photos: Debra Bell, Mercy Ships International

Project empowers Liberian women

It's Wednesday morning in Cheesemanburg, an area in Liberia's Bomi County. More than 20 women from different neighborhoods are gathered in the town of Quenyendee, inside the palava hut – the central gathering place in an African village, the place where the important discussions happen.

On this day, the discussion begins with the problems and needs of their eight communities. But it doesn't end there: the women are examining the roots of the issues and working to determine practical solutions.

They're doing all this as part of the Mercy Ships Women's Project, headed up by Vita Jankauskaite and Myra Maessen. The Cheesemanburg class, which began in early March, is one of four Women's Project courses held on a weekly basis. Since the arrival of the Mercy Ship in Liberia six months ago, Maessen and Jankauskaite have worked with more than 125 women from 20 different Bomi County villages.

The classes focus on empowering women to take initiative in their communities and to take more control of their lives. Through discussions as well as having the women plan and implement a small-business project, the co-leaders hope change will come about. *"We make them see*

what they can do.... We want to help them get out of this way of thinking: I can't do anything, I'm just a woman, I'm inferior," says Jankauskaite.

It is undeniable these rural communities face a wide range of issues and challenges: malaria and other sicknesses, unsafe drinking water, and lack of resources to name a few. Many villages are located far from the main route into town. During the months of the rainy season, some villagers are completely cut off from other areas. *"Sometimes two weeks, sometimes a month, we can't go nowhere,"* stated Maima Seh, the chairlady for the surrounding group of villages, a member of the Cheesemanburg class.

But the Women's Project aims to help them think through what they can do to address this problem and the others that their communities are faced with.

"You do see change," Maessen notes. *"It's more subtle than you'd think. You want miraculous signs from heaven and all these great things, but that's not going to happen.... We're only part of the whole process, God's plan for their lives."*

Jankauskaite adds, *"It may seem like a drop in the ocean, but that's what the ocean is made of."*

