

## WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONALISM IN POST-CONFLICT LIBERIA

Tanya Ansahta Garnett and Kari Øygaard

### ABSTRACT

Liberia presents a unique case study in the constant evolution of gender roles in post-conflict African States. Seizing upon the social transformation of the post-conflict environment, Liberian women built upon their peacebuilding roles in an attempt to leverage their newly expanded presence in the public sphere into broader professional and political representation. Though women's renewed civic engagement and the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf seemed to solidify women's gains, Liberia remains a largely patriarchal society where women continue to be defined through an essentialist perspective – as wives, mothers, and peacemakers. Instead of fighting against this perception and the patriarchal status quo, women have largely played into this, understanding that it is an entry point by which they can justify their space in the decision-making process. Playing into this essentialism has been fruitful for several women's peacebuilding organizations in the reconstruction era and has afforded them access to financing from international organizations eager to support their own simplified notions of gender mainstreaming. However, the inability of this approach to meaningfully shift the status quo is apparent when analyzing the struggles that professional women continue to face even as they attain an education and attempt to enter political life. This paper argues that while the essentialist approach to increasing women's representation may appear to be an effective strategy initially, it continues to limit meaningful change in gender equality in the long-run. This paper concludes by making recommendations for policymakers and international organizations interested in furthering women's political representation and participation in more meaningful and sustainable ways.

### INTRODUCTION

After 25 years of violent conflict and political suppression had finally come to an end, Liberians elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president in 2005. In international media, Sirleaf, the first elected female president on the continent of Africa, was described as having broken the glass ceiling, paving the way for a new generation of not only Liberians, but women all over the world.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the conflict-ravaged country experienced a

huge influx in international development organizations working not only with peacekeeping projects, but also women's empowerment organizations and capacity building initiatives. Internationally, as well as nationally, expectations of Sirleaf's influence on women's empowerment were great. After serving two terms of six years as president, Sirleaf has now peacefully transferred power to George Weah in January 2018 and the time seems fit to once again investigate gender dynamics in Liberia.

Many argue that women's political participation carries symbolic value for democracy,<sup>2</sup> but in Liberia, it seems that the changes predicted to occur from the symbolic value of Sirleaf's election have yet to manifest politically. This was apparent in the recent election, where there was only one female contender for the presidency. Currently, only two out of 30 senators and nine out of 73 representatives in the House of Representatives are female.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, we argue that although women in some ways gained political mobility during and after the conflict, Liberia continues to be a male-dominated society, and women struggle to gain authority in the public sphere and in their professional fields. Thus, we examine how women constantly navigate their social environment in ways that legitimize their aspirations for prosperity and influence, often by mobilizing essentialist notions of gender. Taking the case of Sirleaf as our vantage point, we examine the multiple strategies that Liberian women utilize for attaining and maintaining authority in the public sphere, paying special attention to how women utilize education and professionalism as tools in the post-conflict reconstruction era to access new levels of leadership.

We will begin by discussing Liberian women's political agency in a historical light, including an account of how war changed women's roles in Liberian society. We will then examine how women mobilize femininity in their education and professional lives and are able to maneuver within the patriarchal structure. While this article highlights women's agency in accessing leadership, it also highlights the challenges they face in achieving gender equality in the professional realm and in leadership roles.

### GENDER ROLES IN LIBERIA

To understand the complex relations between power, authority, and the female gender in the Liberian context, it is important to investigate gender relations in a historical light. In Liberia, patrimonialism has historically played a huge role in power and politics and decision makers in the communities have often been 'big men.'<sup>4</sup> Labor is strictly divided and

following this division women have only wielded relative power in certain sectors, such as the domestic sphere, the marketplace, and in agriculture.<sup>5</sup> Despite these carved out spaces for maneuvering, women in pre-war Liberia have rarely been able to translate the power they held in these sectors into political authority and power.<sup>6</sup>

According to anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo, women's tendency towards subordination to men appears in all societies.<sup>7</sup> She argues that this can be understood through an investigation of the social organization of society, more specifically gender roles in relation to the public and domestic spheres of society.<sup>8</sup> She observes that while women in many places do have power, they are struggling to gain authority. Rosaldo defines power in the Weberian sense, as the ability to gain compliance and authority as the legitimate position from which to exercise power.<sup>9</sup> Women are rarely formally recognized as public authorities as men often dominate the public sphere where the negotiation of authority occurs.<sup>10</sup> In Liberia, this often manifests itself in the way gender as a social category informs and determines specific and limited roles, both in the household and on the labor market.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, this does not signify that women in pre-war Liberia lacked the power to voice their opinions and influence political decision-making processes in their communities. On the contrary, women did have limited, institutionalized means of voicing their opinions and there were women who defied social norms and attained positions of greater authority.<sup>12</sup> Often this happened through two channels: either through indigenous traditions or through colonial legacies in relation to the American Colonization Society (ACS).

Women in the region have traditionally been able to gain power in communities through women's secret societies and through supernaturalism. Anthropologists Mariane Ferme and Chris Coulter both write of 'big women' in Sierra Leone who have gained social mobility and prestige by being perceived as having special powers rooted in the knowledge of secrets.<sup>13</sup> They argue that big women occupy an ambiguous space because of their independence and power, which is often related to fear of the occult or the invisible because women's authority is associated with the ability to keep secrets and knowledge of occult practices.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Mary Moran writes that in Liberia, older women hold political power in communities through secret societies, but also in their positions as mothers where they have more authority than the younger members of the community.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, when Liberia was established by the ACS in 1822, the settlers based their new political institutions on a hierarchy that placed settlers on top and indigenous Liberians at the bottom of political power.<sup>16</sup>

The settlers, having been in North America, saw themselves as being more knowledgeable than indigenous Liberians, establishing a social hierarchy based on color, religious practices, education, and western-ness.<sup>17</sup> This opened an avenue for some women to gain power from an early age, as the ACS preferred that American-Liberian women hold power over educated indigenous males.<sup>18</sup> However, in the recent past, women of indigenous descent have also been able to benefit from elite education to gain positions of power and prestige.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these avenues for gaining political influence and authority, the majority of women were primarily confined to female responsibilities and spheres such as the market and the home, and largely considered inferior to men.<sup>20</sup> Although Liberian society remains patriarchal and lacks women in the political sphere, since the war, there has been a dramatic increase in women's political participation at the polls – and of course in Sirleaf's successful campaign to become president. This change in women's possibilities of maneuvering the sociopolitical landscape was augmented during the war.<sup>21</sup> However, the underlying patterns enabling these transformations were the already paved paths for mobility mentioned above. Anthropologist Veronica Fuest argues that the Liberian civil wars changed the social and economic life of many Liberian families, as well as the roles of women, as many women were left (both during the war and after) with the responsibilities traditionally occupied by men.<sup>22</sup>

#### WOMEN AND RECONSTRUCTION

The public-private distinction contends that women have been confined to the private space as mothers and as wives, and as a result, they have been unable to participate in the public sphere, which remains the man's domain. Inability to participate in the public sphere results in women's inactivity in important public decisions that affect their lives. Although this distinction also contends that women do have a sphere of influence within their realm, this influence often does not permeate public decision-making.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, separate spheres are inherently unequal because accepting gender as a legitimate basis for any role allocation or social life organization validates inequality.<sup>24</sup>

Women all over the world have been known to participate in conflicts, independence, and peace movements.<sup>25</sup> They are often viewed as non-political and non-threatening, which has given them room to mobilize political movements during conflicts.<sup>26</sup> This also allowed them greater physical mobility during conflict, as in Liberia where market women

were granted permission to cross enemy lines to sell market goods.<sup>27</sup> Empirical evidence gathered in Liberia during the early stages of post-war reconstruction found that during the violent conflict, men seen out of their homes were often conscripted into various factions or killed on suspicion of being a soldier or rebel of a different faction, so men who refused to take up arms became restricted to the private sphere. As a result, women often braved the war zone in search of food and water, often risking sexual violence or becoming 'soldier wives.' Thus, many women were forced into the public sphere out of dire necessity during the violent conflict.<sup>28</sup>

Women's experiences of the war, including their active roles in peacebuilding, can be seen as leading to a sort of wartime empowerment. Although women are often portrayed as victims of war and crisis,<sup>29</sup> the complex reality of war often entails much more for women. War is a violent rupture with the existing social order. According to Christian Lund, ruptures "are 'open moments' when opportunities and risks multiply, when the scope of outcomes widens, and when new structural scaffolding is erected."<sup>30</sup> In Liberia, the wars did represent open moments for some women, whose roles in the public sphere were radically changed. In this way, war was a transformative factor in changing women's perspectives about their abilities. Many scholars argue that this form of engagement outside the domestic sphere has allowed for women to enter slowly into the political and public spheres.<sup>31</sup> Women who find their social roles changed are often unable or unwilling to return to the social structures that existed prior to the conflict. Women, who become pushed into the public sphere, often have little desire to become less vocal in the political and social discourses that affect their lives. As a result, the societal transformations that take place during violent conflict can have lasting effects on post-conflict gender roles.<sup>32</sup>

Despite their ability to social gain mobility during conflicts, in post-conflict societies women's political agendas are often neglected.<sup>33</sup> According to Historian Christine Doran, women are often not given a public voice after the end of conflict, they are left out of the decision-making processes as soon as the fighting is over, as was the case in India and Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Nadine Puechguirbal argues that in many cases it takes the pressure of the international community to secure women's participation in peace talks, and the inclusion of their concerns and priorities.<sup>35</sup>

#### BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY: THE ESSENTIALIST APPROACH

In Liberia, the women's peace movement very actively rallied for peace through various means; protests, sit-ins, appealing to the wives of

warring factions, and even a sex strike. In these efforts, women actively positioned themselves as mothers, daughters, and wives who were tired of war, insecurity, and wanted to protect their families – especially by appealing to the young male fighters as their sons.<sup>36</sup> When these efforts proved fruitful and peace came to Liberia in 2003, women then refocused their peace work on civic education, rallying women to register to vote.<sup>37</sup> Once the war was over, women shifted their attention to politics because it was intrinsically related to sustaining the peace.

The election of Sirleaf in Liberia is, therefore, an interesting vantage point for exploring how women's social mobility changes during conflict because it represents a shift in the political gender balance.<sup>38</sup> The rupture of war enabled some women to gain authority in different spheres from which they had traditionally been excluded and with the election of Sirleaf as president, women transcended the private sphere and gained more authority in the public spheres.<sup>39</sup> The election of a female president reflected perceptions that women were more effective actors for peace than men, as men were seen as more violent than women in the aftermath of the conflict and women were widely involved in the peace movement.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Sirleaf's victory seems to be the result of increased female turnout at the polls; an estimated 48.5% of the voters were women in the 2011 elections.<sup>41</sup> Overwhelmingly, they voted for Ellen Johnson Sirleaf because they believed that female leadership was necessary for sustainable peace. The ability of women to translate wartime empowerment into a peace movement and consequently into voter and civic engagement has established the Liberian women's peace movement as a unique case study for transferring the momentum of women's peace work into the post-conflict reconstruction agenda.<sup>42</sup>

The proliferation of women's organizations reveals the spectrum of women's agency in the peace process and contradicts the essentialist perspective that women are helpless victims when faced with violence or conflict. Furthermore, these organizations serve a crucial purpose in channeling the post-conflict influx of international funding to women leaders for the purpose of grassroots peacebuilding activities. Such case studies of women's experiences demonstrate the gains that some women make during post-conflict restructuring. Women's organizations also demonstrate the tactics that Liberian women employed to ensure that their cause was visible and well-funded.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, the war increased economic and social mobility and independence for some women. However, while women's increased mobility might have been enabled by the rupture of conflict, Liberia continues to be a male-dominated society, and women

struggle to gain authority in the public sphere and in the professional field. Consequently, women must constantly maneuver their social environment in a way that legitimizes their aspirations for prosperity and influence.

Throughout the Liberian peace movement, Liberian women played into an essentialist understanding of their roles because they understood its effectiveness in opening spaces for them in the public sphere. These essentialist perspectives of gender roles were also echoed in Sirleaf's presidential campaign. By stressing her motherhood, she appeared as a peacemaker, negotiator and as the loving, caring person the country needed for a sustainable reconstruction process. As anthropologist Conerly Casey found, mothers in the public sphere are often portrayed as bearers of all morality, which resonates with the portrayal of Sirleaf as the antithesis to war and conflict.<sup>44</sup> In Liberia, Sirleaf is still called 'Ma Ellen,' indicating her representation as the embodiment of the country's mother. However, these perceived 'soft' characteristics were balanced with masculine notions of strength and determination, and Sirleaf was portrayed as an 'iron lady;' for example, a common slogan was "Ellen is our man."<sup>45</sup> Through the balancing of these essentialist characteristics, Sirleaf and the women leading her government gained space in the public sphere. Similarly, Liberian women have utilized essentialist notions of their gender to gain space.

This is one of the ways in which Liberian women have been able to maneuver within a largely patriarchal system. Although this essentialist approach has opened some limited space for women in leadership positions, it also leads to the continued restriction of how women are defined in public discourse. Furthermore, it attempts to create space for women in leadership within the patriarchal system, without challenging the inherent inequalities within that very system that make it even necessary to justify women's participation.<sup>46</sup> This is important because patriarchy and structural inequalities hamper women's broader peacebuilding contributions and hence, the effectiveness and sustainability of the peacebuilding process.<sup>47</sup>

#### ASPIRING FOR INFLUENCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EDUCATED

There was a common phrase that became popular after the 2005 election referring to women "being up." This slogan gave the impression that Sirleaf's election and the increasing role of women in politics and government had improved women's status in society. Sirleaf's election was seen as an opportunity for women as a whole to lead the country. Parallels arose frequently between Sirleaf and other successful women, which equated her success with the success of all Liberian women, revealing that women's

participation in politics carries enormous symbolic value.<sup>48</sup> However, as Moola reminds us, a few women with political power doesn't necessarily translate into positive change for women's overall socio-political status.<sup>49</sup>

This was apparent when women's rights advocate, Maryeadeh,<sup>50</sup> ran for a seat in the House of Representatives in the 2017 election. During the campaign, she depended on the presence of either her husband or her father to campaign in the rural district where she was running. She explained that without their explicit endorsement, she would not have the authority to speak in the villages she visited. This endorsement, however, had been difficult to gain, as her father, who is a known pastor in Liberia strongly opposed women contending in politics, because women, in his opinion ought to stay at home. Fortunately for Maryeadeh, after years of negotiating with her father, and finally convincing him that running without his endorsement would be an embarrassment to him, she succeeded in gaining his acceptance and his participation in the campaign. In return, she had to attend more of his church meetings and promise to stay married to her husband whom she wished to separate from. However, on election night the voters in her district elected the sitting male representative.

The Sirleaf case is a spectacular example of factors that affect the everyday lives of aspiring professional women in Liberia. The education system and job market are loaded with examples of women who are constantly bargaining with the patriarchy to ameliorate their positions within their desired fields. The struggle of professional women exemplifies how women must act within patriarchal structures and limitations in order to gain authority in the public sphere. Instead of challenging the patriarchal structure they, to a large degree, reproduce the structural status quo – also seen in the political landscape today. Upon becoming the first elected female president on the continent of Africa, enhancing girls' opportunities for similar success was on the Sirleaf agenda.<sup>51</sup> She therefore, targeted the educational system as one avenue that could enable more girls to aspire for and achieve social mobility. This increased focus on education, combined with the massive effort by INGOs on bridging the educational gap in Liberia, made available a new avenue for women to realize their aspirations for mobility.

Since the arrival of the settlers to Liberia in the 19th Century, getting a Western education has been a primary channel for both women and men to advance their social and economic status in society.<sup>52</sup> While initially the preserve of the settlers, in the recent past, receiving an elite education became a way for women of indigenous descent to gain positions of power,<sup>53</sup> and thus economic independence. In Sirleaf's case, her Harvard education

was highlighted throughout her election campaigns as her educational background made her appear as not only knowledgeable and wise but also as part of the modern elite and an international-oriented politician.

Globally, education is often seen as a path to gaining a skill set to advance one's social status and economic condition, and in development, education is regarded as a pathway to combating poverty.<sup>54</sup> In post-conflict countries, education is furthermore seen as a stabilizing factor that is important in demobilization and disarmament processes.<sup>55</sup> In Liberia, rebuilding the education sector was seen by the post-war government as one of the most important initiatives, and education was, and remains, a hotly debated topic in the political discussions, especially around elections.<sup>56</sup> This is related to an understanding that unemployed youth pose a threat to society, as this demographic was perceived to have played a crucial role during the conflict.<sup>57</sup> Though intensified in post-conflict periods, seeing education as a method of nation-building and improving the individuals' social status is not new, and it has become a part of a larger global discourse on modernity.<sup>58</sup> However, in Liberia, it was made even more relevant in the post-war climate, which was highlighted by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's political focus on the importance of education.<sup>59</sup>

Although education can be a channel for upward social mobility, it is not an isolated guarantee for social mobility, but must be seen in relation to other factors such as family structures, socio-economic status and social positioning.<sup>60</sup> For many women in Liberia, this is very much the challenge. Although the education system in Liberia has become more accessible, the expense of school uniforms is prohibitive, and there remains a problematic education gender gap among the youth in terms of literacy and school enrollment.<sup>61</sup> However, the ability to enter and pay for an education is not a guarantee that a woman will experience increased political authority and social mobility, and women constantly must maneuver within patriarchal constraints. These constraints become manifest as women's schooling at university is not only about learning their subjects but also are about learning how to behave and dress correctly.<sup>62</sup> Women are expected to look professional, but not intimidating, beautiful and well-groomed, but not sexy. Discussing power-dressing, sociologist Joanna Entwistle argues that dressing as a 'career woman' is a way for women entering into male-dominated jobs to manage their bodies to create an image of authority.<sup>63</sup> She illustrates how women have to balance being seen as sexy with being seen as feminine in order to be respected by their colleagues.<sup>64</sup>

Empirical material from fieldwork at the University of Liberia revealed that the female students regulate each other to ensure they all keep

the proper front, one that will induce authority and one that is neither too feminine nor too sexy. Rhinestones, colorful hair, and blue dress suits do not compose this dress code and threatens the consensus of the women and the impression they as a collective want to portray, so they keep each other in check.<sup>65</sup> This underscores that their bodies represent the socio-sexual power relations in which they are embedded.<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, some women's choices are constrained by their families who expect to influence women's choice of education and careers. Enrolling in university is a decision that will affect the family's economics, both due to school-related expenses and due to the opportunity cost of not working full-time. Additionally, educated women have been perceived as posing a threat to male authority in both familial relations and in the public sphere.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, some women experience difficulty convincing their husbands and fathers to allow them to pursue an education.

In general, many professional women seek acceptance from their communities when enrolling at the university. For example, they would frame their decision to become lawyers in relation to 'saving' the country, restoring law and order and helping the community to achieve justice, instead of articulating raw ambition.<sup>68</sup> By stressing their aspirations to rebuild Liberia and care for their communities, professional women draw on the same gender stereotypes that Sirleaf utilized during her campaign, when underscoring the peaceful and caring characteristics of women, as opposed to the violent and brutal stereotypes of men. In these ways, women maneuver the constraints of patriarchy to not appear as threatening to the social order. They position themselves within essentialist notions of women as caretakers and not in the pursuit of power and influence to maneuver within the patriarchal system. These bargains with patriarchy reveal an ability to seek out potential avenues and pools of possibility, while these narrow paths for realizing their aspirations ultimately serve to reproduce gender stereotypes rather than challenge them.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

While civil conflict created openings for social transformation in Liberia, women's entry into the public sphere, both within the professional and political realms remains difficult due to the patriarchal nature of Liberian society. Women's participation and political representation are still contingent upon their adherence to the essentialist paradigm that restricts them to being seen primarily as wives, mothers and caretakers. While this may have been an effective strategy in the initial phases of

the peacebuilding process, as seen by the relative success of women's organizations, women continue to face many challenges, as exemplified by the professional women discussed in this paper.

This paper has highlighted the important role that the international community can play in advancing gender equality in post-conflict contexts like Liberia. The power of the international community in determining which peacebuilding approaches and economic models are employed can have a huge impact on sustainable peace.<sup>69</sup> Particularly in the support, financial and otherwise, provided to women's organizations attempting to participate in peacebuilding and decision-making processes. This analysis has demonstrated how women's participation is limited by their inability to challenge the patriarchal status quo, wherein women are still perceived primarily as mothers and wives and have to constantly bargain with these perceptions in order to participate at all.

Part of the reason why these approaches remain unchallenged by international actors who fund many women's organizations and other peacebuilding activities is that their own internal structures remain patriarchal. As a result, there is a tendency to underestimate the importance of gender and the ways in which gender inequalities impact the effectiveness of interventions they are intended to support, as well as the strategic agency that women employ in their own peacebuilding models,<sup>70</sup> often rendering international interventions locally irrelevant.<sup>71</sup> Gender tends to be seen as trivial or secondary to "real" issues in the post-conflict environment, a perspective which further highlights the patriarchy inherent in many international organizations.<sup>72</sup>

In order to better support gender equality efforts, policymakers and international organizations must at least recognize the gender biases within their organizational structures and consequently their approaches to gender equality. There must be an internal examination of the preconceived notions around gender that typically go unchecked and how these notions reduce the space for locally contextualized understandings that would greatly improve programs and interventions. This could begin by integrating sufficient time and resources into program design and planning for thorough gender analyses and assessments. This would reduce the oversimplification of post-conflict contexts and the gendered realities that women and men face. This would also maximize the impact of resources by identifying and building upon women's existing networks and peacebuilding efforts.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, gender analyses could lead to a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of gender that could improve the effectiveness of interventions by better tailoring interventions to local

dynamics, also reducing unintended consequences in fragile post-conflict contexts.

*Tanya Ansahta Garnett is an Adjunct Professor at the Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida School of International Studies, University of Liberia.*

*Kari Øygard is a social anthropologist at DIGNITY – Danish Institute against Torture, Copenhagen, Denmark.*

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