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# LIBERIA: A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES

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## SUMMARY

Between 1990 and 2003, Liberia experienced cyclical periods of brutal violence and short lived fragile peace, characterised by power and resource hungry warlords, recruitment of child soldiers, indiscriminate killings, and widespread and systematic perpetration of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) with an estimated 75 per cent of women and girls experiencing rape and/or sexual abuse (OHCHR 2016: 5). The culmination of efforts that led to Liberian peace process in 2003 and the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was driven by the mobilisation and activism of grassroots women and women’s movement. The peace process involved women’s participation as negotiators, observers, and signatories, and the women’s movement held powerful protests outside of formal negotiations to effectively lobby and pressure politicians and warring parties to bring about peace. The CPA led to the election of the first female leader in Africa, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who promoted legislation addressing violence against women (VAW), women’s inheritance rights and removing gender discrimination from national laws. Despite these efforts, Liberian women continue to confront many everyday challenges including SGBV, poverty, illiteracy and limited access to sexual and reproductive health services.

## STRENGTH OF GENDER PROVISIONS

*The Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement 2003*

	0 None	1 Weakest	2	3	4	5 Strongest
Human Rights	✓					
Development	✓					
Post-Conflict Issues					✓	
Violence Against Women	✓					
Participation				✓		
General	✓					

## WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION: KEY CONSTRAINTS AND ENABLERS

### CONSTRAINTS

1. Poverty and economic inequality
2. Violence against women: SGBV, poor access to sexual and reproductive health services
3. The Ebola epidemic

### ENABLERS

1. Strong women’s movement and civil society presence
2. Election of a female President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
3. Gender policy and legislation (The National Gender Policy, Liberia’s National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325)



Strong women's groups mobilised during the peace process to offer a visible presence and agitate for peace - holding candlelight vigils, protests and dialogue.

## BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

Liberia was originally settled in 1820 by former slaves from America under the auspices of the American Colonization Society (ACS) who advocated for the repatriation of slaves to Africa. The Republic of Liberia was declared as independent in 1847, however there were tensions with the local indigenous population who did not support the 'Americo-Liberians' or the ACS. Americo-Liberians came to dominate political, economic and social life of the country, though they were the minority, never exceeding 5 per cent of the population. It was not until former military General Samuel Doe violently took over the government that the first indigenous government was installed. However, the historic dominance of the Americo-Liberian people over the indigenous people, and the politicisation of ethnicity more generally, would contribute to the violence that characterised Liberia's recent history (Tripp and Grossman 2012: 13-14).

From 1990 to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2003, Liberia experienced cyclical periods of brutal violence and short lived periods of fragile peace (Nilsson and Kovacs 2005). The First Liberian Civil War broke out in 1989, when warlord Charles Taylor and his rebel army, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), violently rebelled against former military dictator General Samuel Doe. The First Liberian Civil War concluded with the Abuja Peace Accord signed in 1996. This led to Taylor winning the 1997 presidential elections.

Conflict broke out again in 1999 with the establishment of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). LURD sought to remove Taylor from power given his authoritarian rule; his involvement in financing the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in the Sierra Leonean conflict; UN sanctions imposed on trade of Liberian diamonds, weapons, and Taylor and his family; and the increasing isolation of Liberia politically and economically (Nilsson and Kovacs 2005: 400). The Second Civil War was characterised by power and resource hungry warlords, the recruitment of child soldiers, and widespread and systematic perpetration of SGBV. During the conflict, another rebel faction

emerged, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), and violence escalated with Taylor losing ground throughout the countryside and both rebel groups nearing the capital of Monrovia. Negotiations were agreed upon and held in Accra, Ghana, facilitated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and mediated by former Nigerian President, General Abubakar (Hayner 2007).

All factions attended the talks, however on the first day negotiations were scheduled to begin, the chief prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone unsealed and delivered the indictment to the Ghanaian government for Taylor's arrest. Due to the Ghanaian's government assurance of all factions' safety and security, Taylor returned to Liberia that day. The government, LURD and MODEL were the key actors, especially during ceasefire negotiations without the involvement of civil society or any political parties. However, for the remainder of the peace process, international actors, political parties and Liberian civil society played a critical role in ensuring the peace process continued.

Eighteen political parties were represented at the talks and organised themselves into two groups: a 'group of eight' that were independent; and a 'group of nine' who were aligned with Taylor in addition to Taylor's party, the National Patriotic Party (Heyner 2007:12-13). What seemed to be just another round of peace negotiations resulted in 76 days of discussions between the different actors. The escalation of the violence in Liberia, particularly Monrovia, and intensifying pressure from women activists and the international community eventually led to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and paved the way for the formation of the Transitional Government and elections (Tripp and Grossman 2012: 14).

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PEACE PROCESS

Before the negotiations began, the grassroots Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) launched the highly-publicised Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement (2002-2005) that demanded peace and negotiations between Charles Taylor and the rebel groups. One thousand women from WIPNET and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps near Monrovia marched to City Hall, to express their frustration to Charles Taylor and they demanded a ceasefire, peace process and an international peacekeeping force. Taylor agreed to attend the talks with the rebel groups, LURD and MODEL in Accra, Ghana (Tripp 2015: 161-162).

Liberia's peace process had strong women's participation and inclusion, engaging in several formal

and informal tracks. Women's organisations held protests and demonstrations to pressure negotiators to sign the peace deal. For example, women blocked the doors of negotiation rooms and threatened to strip naked in front of the male delegates - one of the most powerful forms of protest in West Africa - if negotiations did not reach a positive outcome (Tripp et al 2009: 207; Paffenholz 2016).

As Leymah Gbowee (2017), Nobel Peace winner and a founding member of WIPNET describes:

*'Liberians were exhausted, many were traumatized. The economy was in ruins and the Liberians who had the means to do so had long since fled the country. Liberia's tyrannical president, Charles Taylor, was resisting regional political pressure to negotiate peace. Cue Liberia's women, a group of Christian and Muslim women, came together under the banner of a movement that became known as the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. We moved from praying and singing to holding daily non-violent demonstrations and sit-ins in defiance of Charles Taylor. We even held a 'sex strike', withholding sex from husbands and bringing greater media attention to the organization's efforts.'*

WIPNET continued to mobilise with hundreds of women from a Liberian refugee camp in Ghana arriving daily at the hotel where the talks were being held. They were a visible presence and agitated for peace holding candlelight vigils, protests and direct dialogue with negotiators. Furthermore, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) mediator appointed the Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET) as a delegate to the negotiations and were eventually a signatory of the CPA. Mano River Women Peace Network's delegates saw themselves as representatives of women and collaborated with women engaging outside of the negotiating room (Tripp 2015:162). Additionally, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who became President of Liberia in 2006, was a representative of her party and a forceful negotiator for peace. She also collaborated with the women's groups and kept them informed of the proceedings. Additionally, other women's organisations such as Association of Female Lawyers and Refugee Women attended the talks as observers.

On 15 August 2003, three days before the CPA was signed, 45 women's groups who were attending the peace talks created a charter at the Golden Tulip Hotel, calling for greater representation and participation of women in the post-conflict phase and drew on UNSCR1325 (Tripp 2015: 164). Women and women's organisations continued to mobilise in the post-agreement phase, leading mass-awareness campaigns to encourage nation-wide voter registration, particularly to encourage women's participation in the first elections. This grassroots campaign led to the election of Africa's first female head of state —Ellen Johnson Sirleaf—in 2006 (Bauer 2009). As Gbowee (2017) describes:

*'It is not a perfect peace, but it has held — and even paved the way for Liberia to elect its first woman president, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson. We did all this through sheer will and determination.'*

Liberia's Comprehensive Peace Agreement is relatively strong in its gender provisions, highlighting the severe impacts of the conflict on women. It calls for the National Transitional Government of Liberia (TNGL) to provide particular attention to vulnerable groups and war victims (women, children, the elderly and disabled) in formulating the national rehabilitation, reconstruction and development of Liberia. Apart from this, the CPA is primarily aimed at advancing women's participation in ensuring the inclusion of women and civil society organisations in the TNGL. This includes appointments in the National Election Commission, TNGL political appointments, and the judiciary. Moreover it highlights the Ministry of Gender and Development as a cabinet portfolio.

The links drawn between gender equality, peace and socio-economic justice have been reiterated within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) final report, the so-called roadmap to lasting peace, with a whole chapter dedicated to women's experiences in conflict as well as women's group's recommendations. The TRC was a gender-sensitive process that had wide participation of women including civil society and women's groups (TRC 2009).

In addition to the post-conflict phase, the Ebola epidemic that began in 2014 has had huge ramifications for Liberia, and especially Liberian women due to their roles as caregivers that puts them at greater risk of infection (CEDAW 2015 para 39). Women's roles as caretakers, health personnel, farmers and small traders were affected. Many traditional mourning rituals and practices are performed by women increasing their risk of infection (UNDG 2015: iii). Women's reproductive health was put at risk with the closure of health facilities, where women were giving birth in streets and homes, sometimes without any medical help, increasing an already high maternal mortality rate (Wongosl 2015: 7). Economic gains that had been made in the post-conflict period were hugely impacted with many women being pushed out of business due to the closure of markets as part of strategies to reduce transmission of the virus. Their savings plummeted, with many women being unable to pay back loans that they had borrowed to expand their businesses (UN Women 2016). There are no specific programs reported to CEDAW in 2015 that provide post-Ebola care to women and girls who survived the epidemic (CEDAW 201, para 39).

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## WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

Gender stereotypes in Liberia ascribe women as 'help mates' and incapable of leadership, grounding their positions in the public sphere as secondary to men's (Wongosl 2015: 16). Thus, the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was a great victory for gender equality in Liberia (Kellow 2010: 11; Ford 2011). Nevertheless, the election of a female president masked the fact that only 13 women were elected in 2003 and this number dropped to 8 in 2011 with women occupying less than 11 per cent in the legislature (IPU 2016; Pailey and Williams 2017).

Only at the ministerial level has Liberia achieve 30 per cent participation of women in public leadership positions (Wongosl 2015: 21). In the October 2017 elections, only 16 per cent (163 out of 1,026) of approved candidates were women, including one running for president in a crowded field of over 20 men. This represents only a marginal increase since 2005 and 2011, when women accounted for 14 per cent (110 out of 762) and 11 per cent (104 out of 909) of candidates respectively (Pailey and Williams 2017). Women currently constitute 10 per cent of the Senate (3 of 30 seats) and 9.86 per cent of the House of Representatives (7 out of 73 seats) (IPU 2018). Within the judicial system, 2 out of 5 Supreme Court Justices are women, and in the Legislature, the number of women in elected positions dropped from 14 per cent in 2005 to 9 per cent in 2015 (Wongosl 2015: 21).

The Election Law was amended to ensure de facto equality between women and men is ensured and that candidates lists fielded by political parties should contain a minimum of 30 per cent of each gender (CEDAW 2015, para 19). However, there are no enforcement mechanisms such as sanctions for not adhering to the quotas. For instance, in spite of this measure, in 2015 women's participation in the leadership of political parties was extremely low at only 8.6 per cent of the total of 23 chairpersons of political parties (Wongosl 2015: 21). Women continue to face obstacles that prevent their full participation in decision-making processes, especially in local governance (CEDAW 2015 para 41) and although the government of Liberia has expressed its commitment to gender equality, women's

political representation has not advanced dramatically under a female president (Pailey and Williams 2017). On a national level, Liberia has a national gender machinery, the Ministry of Gender and Development, and implements several national policies including the National Gender Policy and Liberia's National Action Plan on UNSCR1325 which have made significant progress towards gender equality and enhancing women's position in development and participation in nation-building. The Ministry of Gender was established in 2001, however it has and continues to be underfunded. For instance, in 2014 the ministry only received 1.4 per cent of the budget (Wongosl 2015).

## WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

Liberia's economy collapsed during the conflict, but Liberia has significant natural resources with one of the highest rates of Foreign Direct Investment in the world. 70 per cent of the population is engaged in agriculture with small farms cultivating food crops (Tripp and Grossman 2012: 16). Almost half the population live in urban areas with 882,000 living in Monrovia alone—a consequence of the war—and unemployment remaining high (Tripp and Grossman 2012: 16). Informal employment is higher for women than men, at 72 per cent and 47.4 per cent respectively (ILO 2013:15). Dominated by agriculture and informal work, Liberian women have high rates of illiteracy, lack formal education, skills-training for employment and entrepreneurial skills. This exacerbates economic inequality that is reinforced by divisions of class, religion and ethnicity, contributing to the unrecognition and lack of compensation for women's labour and place in the economy.

Losses of property from the civil war, including homes, farms and tools, have left women facing higher risks of malnutrition, income and food insecurity, very often with no means to provide a sustainable livelihood for themselves and their families. The government has improved microcredit lending to women and improved market place infrastructure (Tripp and Grossman 2012: 17). However, poverty in Liberia remains widespread where more than 84 per cent of the population live below the poverty line of 1.25 USD a day (UNDP 2013) and overall, 15 per cent of urban households are considered very poor compared with 74 per cent in rural areas (Wongosl 2015: 20). In the employment sector, women continue to experience occupational segregation and are concentrated in low-paid jobs in the informal economy (CEDAW 2015 para 37). Communal land for cultivation is generally given out by male elders who prefer men, and many women are hindered in accessing land (Tripp and Grossman 2012: 41).

# WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

Although women's activism was critical in bringing about peace, a once vibrant and unified movement seems disjointed with parts of it co-opted by the government and international donors rather than being an independent voice (Debusscher and de Almagro 2016: 312). For instance, tensions exist on the basis of age and generational differences for example, between WIPNET and MARWOPNET; there are class issues between elite 'civilised' women and uneducated, poor (rural) women; and there is increased competition over donor funding (Debusscher and de Almagro 2016: 302-303). The connections between the women's movements as a peace movement has hindered the politicisation of women's issues. As Debausscher and de Almagro (2016: 311) state, the political opportunity structure has maintained,

*'the Liberian women's movement... [as] a crisis movement, unable to escape its limiting peacemaker label, and with little experience in other areas. This has rendered it unable to develop into a broader, coherent and professionalized movement capable of producing all-round results.'*

Nevertheless, since 2008 Liberian women have participated in ground breaking participatory dialogues aimed at peace and social transformation. One such process was under the aegis of the Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (Wongosol), an umbrella organisation. Building on the experiences of the Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation peace process, which had reached many women but failed to reach many areas outside of Freetown, Liberian women decided to initiate an innovative way of including women's voices in the final TRC report (Pillay, Speare and Scully 2010). Wongosol was also a leading organization in the development of the Liberian NAP (Gizelis and Joseph 2016). The Association of Female Lawyers and the National Bar Association are also attempting to decentralize the court system to facilitate accessibility to women and girls, where women's access to justice is often hampered by geographical location and alleged corruption within the judiciary (CEDAW 2015, para 15).

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