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# How the Liberian Women Managed to Succeed, and Thrive, after Fourteen Years of Civil War

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How the Liberian Women Managed to Succeed, and Thrive, After Fourteen Years of Civil War

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Africa Track

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**Abstract**

Although war, and especially civil war, is predominantly viewed in a negative light, in the case of Liberia's successive wars in the decade, local women in Liberia benefitted a great deal upon the conclusion of the wars. While these civil wars, lasting from 1989-2003, brought about significant hardship for everyone living in Liberia, and resulted in a horribly impoverished state, the end of the conflicts did bring about some marked positive outcomes. Upon the end of the wars, Liberian women were, in a sense, given a chance to start over. Throughout the second civil war, the women were able to organize themselves into a powerful force advocating for a peaceful Liberia. By refusing to take a side politically, the women were able to stay out of the direct line of fire from the violent and controlling warlords, while still managing to have a strong presence in society. Because of the strength of their movement during the wars, and in part due to luck that many of the men were displaced from their traditional roles, Liberian women were able to take advantage of employment opportunities that were not previously available to them. Based on how much progress the women were able to make after the wars, overall, the civil wars did truly benefit the Liberian women.

**Introduction**

The discourse surrounding civil war is overall quite negative. Whenever the media or other countries report on a civil war happening somewhere in the world, the casualties, the groups fighting each other, and the economic losses are often what is highlighted for the public to see. Once civil wars are over, the focus is still on the losses of the war and how these losses can be reversed and how the community can rebuild. It is too common for the positive outcomes of civil wars to be overlooked. In the United States, the system of slavery was outlawed after that country's civil war, which gave black people in the south the opportunity to hold public office

and a general sense of hope that their situation would be changing for the better. Similar is the case of women in Liberia. Liberia went through a fourteen-year period of horrific civil war, the brutality of which caught the attention of the international community. Women in Liberia received a significant amount of attention throughout this war due to the widespread rape and violence against women. Though the women had to endure these considerable adversities, they were able to overcome these injustices and ended up creating an extremely successful women's movement during the second civil war. Ultimately, the civil war had positive effects on the role of women in Liberia. Women were able to organize themselves and, through this, realize that they had a strong voice in the matters of their country; that their opinions did matter. After the war, the strength they found through the women's movement led more women to become important members in the government, successful businesswomen, leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and to be highly respected members of their communities.

### **Roadmap**

This thesis begins with a discussion on the sources used and the methods through which the research on the women in Liberia was conducted. The essay then goes on to explain the background information on the two Liberian civil wars and then the subsequent women's movement that emerged out of the second war. This section leads into the reasons why the women's movement was so successful and how the women's movement operated after the wars. Next is the section on post-conflict gains, the main argument portion of the essay, where the thesis statement is proved. It discusses the specific sectors where women were able to prosper after the wars. Following this is an analysis of the trend regarding other countries that have experienced the rise in female politicians after a period of civil unrest, which leads into the sections discussing what President Johnson-Sirleaf and her government have been able to

accomplish for Liberia and Liberian women since 2005. To wrap up all these points and provide the final analysis, there is a conclusion complete with limitations found in the research and suggestions for further exploration. At the end of all of this there is a bibliography section with all the citations used in the research.

### **Literature Review**

Within the academic field of Liberian history, there is a plethora of information available. There are countless articles explaining the timeline of Liberian history, from how it became a country all the way up until the civil wars that recently plagued the country. In terms of the quantity of information on the wars, there is a sufficient amount regarding the specific details of the wars – what led to them, the characteristics of each, who was involved, etc. There are even a good amount of sources available discussing the women’s movement that occurred at the end of the second civil war and continued to operate after the war’s end. After the election of President Johnson-Sirleaf, however, the amount, and quality of information regarding the current state of affairs in Liberia tapered off significantly.

This is not to say that there are no scholars writing about what is presently happening in Liberia, nor does it mean no one is writing about how women are currently operating in society. Rather, there are some African history and women’s studies scholars writing in depth articles on these topics, but that was the main issue, there are only some. This proved to be difficult throughout the writing of this essay because at times, it created an inability to diversify the sources used in the research. The limitations on the discourse on the more recent events occurring in Liberia are likely due to the relative newness of this topic. Many articles and in-depth studies are typically completed after a leader leaves office, or after a long-enough period of time has passed that facilitates a lot of research into the specific events that happened while he or

she was in office. Because President Johnson-Sirleaf is still serving her second term, the work that has been done discussing her time in office and her accomplishments is quite incomplete. This caused a large portion of the research to be reliant on 'news' articles, many of which came in the form of blog posts or short blurbs published by unknown news sources.

Veronika Fuest has proven to be a great researcher and writer on the topic of the success of women in Liberia, and her article, "'This is the Time to get in Front': Changing Roles and Opportunities for Women in Liberia", was used extensively in the research for this essay. She has since written other articles seemingly to expand on the information in this article, but none have been made available online – the succeeding two that were found both say 'forthcoming'. The information provided in Melinda Adams' article, "Liberia's Election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Women's Executive Leadership in Africa" also proved to be extremely useful in helping to prove the argument of this essay. It provided incredibly useful connections of the case of Liberia to other countries in Africa that had also gone through conflicts and then experienced a rise in the amount of female candidates vying for high political offices.

Overall, there was enough information available to write a decently argued essay, but it would have been much more effective had there been a wider variety of reliable sources that discussed women in Liberia after the election of President Johnson-Sirleaf. Unfortunately, a good amount of this research was gathered from only a small amount of secondary sources written by scholars of Liberian history.

### **Statement of Methodology**

After taking classes specializing in Women in Africa and Understanding Historical Change: Africa, where particular attention was paid to the Liberian women's movement, the author was inspired to research this topic further. Secondary sources, as well as articles and

policies drafted by non-governmental organizations were the predominate sources of information used in this essay. The majority of the authors are scholars focused on Africa and African history, and some specialize in Liberian history. Primary sources were utilized when available, including interviews with both President Johnson-Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee. Liberian news articles were also used to provide more up-to-date information, as well as the documentary film centered on the women's movement, "Pray the Devil Back to Hell". These sources were also effective in showcasing the opinions of Liberians surrounding the women's movement and the civil war. The United Nations: Women branch was another source used to provide specific information and evidence of the effectiveness of the policies in place in Liberia in regard to the women's movement and their roles in society since the civil war.

### **Background Information**

In the past 30 years, Liberians have endured two civil wars: 1989-1996, and 1997-2003.<sup>1</sup> Extreme violence, brutal killings, and merciless leaders plagued Liberia for fourteen years. Liberia's second civil war both directly and indirectly created positive change for women in Liberian society, who saw an increase in agency and a greater role in formal political processes post-war. Needless to say, however, the war also had significant negative implications for women and men alike, and resulted in a very unstable and impoverished Liberia.

### **The Two Civil Wars**

The civil wars mainly started due to the warlords, Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor, who, respectively, were in power one after another. These leaders, and their oppressive policies, caused vast amounts of civil unrest throughout Liberia, which resulted in the rise of rebel groups. Samuel Doe brought an abrupt change to the political landscape of Liberia when he staged a

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<sup>1</sup> Okolo, Julius Emeka. *Liberia: The Military Coup and Its Aftermath*. The World Today, Vol. 37, No. 4. April 1981. Pp. 149-157.

military coup in 1980.<sup>2</sup> This coup led to the public execution of former President William Tolbert and thirteen of his aids. After this act, Doe and his People's Redemption Council assumed full control of Liberia.<sup>3</sup> Doe proved to be an ineffective leader; his rule saw rampant corruption in the government, he was unable to manage the economy, and there was "brutal repression of political opponents".<sup>4</sup> Nine years after Doe took over the Liberian government, in 1989, Charles Taylor formed the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and launched an uprising against the government. Taylor and the NPFL invaded Liberia from Cote d'Ivoire in December 1989, and Doe and his regime quickly lost control of the country.<sup>5</sup> By early 1990, a full-on civil war had broken out, centered on the struggle between Doe and Taylor for power and resources. Due to the widespread fighting and the formation of a large number of rebel groups who each controlled different economic resources or different areas of Liberia, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sent in peacekeeping forces in 1990.<sup>6</sup> In this same year, Samuel Doe was executed after Taylor and the NPFL gained control of the capital, Monrovia.<sup>7</sup> After six years of stop-and-go fighting, and multiple attempts from ECOWAS at reaching a ceasefire, there was a pause in the fighting when the elections in 1997 were taking place. These elections provided hope for a democratic, peaceful Liberia, but unfortunately resulted in the election of Taylor, a rebel leader and a warlord.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Liberia Profile: A Chronology of Key Events." *BBC News*. 14 October 2014. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13732188>>.

<sup>3</sup> "Liberia Profile: A Chronology of Key Events"

<sup>4</sup> "Liberia: Conflict Profile." *Insight on Conflict*. Peace Direct. <<http://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/liberia/conflict-profile/>>.

<sup>5</sup> "Liberia: Conflict Profile"

<sup>6</sup> "Liberia Profile: A Chronology of Key Events"

<sup>7</sup> "Liberia Profile." *BBC News*. 14 October 2014. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13729504>>.

<sup>8</sup> "Liberia: Conflict Profile"

The pause in fighting did not last long due to ethnic tensions and Taylor's support of the rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in neighboring Sierra Leone. In 1999, the Liberians for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), another rebel group that was operating out of Guinea, entered Liberia and waged an attack on the northwest town of Voinjama.<sup>9</sup> This attack marked the start of the second civil war. Because of Taylor's support of the RUF in Sierra Leone, the international community placed sanctions on the Liberian government, which considerably weakened the strength of Taylor's administration and his army.<sup>10</sup> Due to these sanctions, Taylor's government was unable to stop the advancement of the LURD forces in Liberia. By 2003, Taylor only had control over one third of Liberia. Once fighting broke out over control of Monrovia, which resulted in the killing of hundreds of people, the United Nations sent in the peacekeeping force of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) in the hopes of bringing about an end to the fighting.<sup>11</sup> Shortly after the arrival of the peacekeepers, and after the start of the peace talks in Accra, Ghana, Taylor fled Liberia and went into exile in Nigeria, where he was eventually arrested for his crimes against humanity in 2006 and sentenced to 50 years of imprisonment in September 2013.<sup>12</sup>

In August 2003, the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed, which brought an end to the second civil war.<sup>13</sup> After the peace agreement was signed, the UN forces in Liberia took part in a period of de-weaponing Liberia. Because of all the different rebel groups, the country was overrun with firearms.<sup>14</sup> The peace agreement also led to the creation of the National Transitional Government (NTG), which with the support of the UNMIL, ruled until the

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<sup>9</sup> "Liberia: Conflict Profile"

<sup>10</sup> "Liberia: Conflict Profile"

<sup>11</sup> "Liberia Profile: A Chronology of Key Events"

<sup>12</sup> "Liberia: Conflict Profile"

<sup>13</sup> "Liberia: Conflict Profile"

<sup>14</sup> "Liberia Profile: A Chronology of Key Events"

democratic elections in 2005. Even though the civil war ended and an interim government was in place, in October 2004, there were riots in Monrovia that left 16 people dead. The UN remained optimistic about maintaining peace throughout Liberia, saying that the riots were led by former combatants.<sup>15</sup> These riots were indeed short-lived, and with the help of the UN peacekeeping forces, Liberia was able to set up a fair national election in 2005.

### **Impacts of the War on Liberian Civilians**

Throughout these civil wars, there was terrible violence taking place in almost all parts of Liberia. This resulted in horrific acts of violence against Liberian civilians and reporters, aid workers, and journalists from Nigeria, Europe and America. Anyone who spoke out against the government, of both Doe and then Taylor, was at risk of being forced into exile, taken hostage, or even killed.<sup>16</sup> Because of how unsafe Liberia became once the fighting broke out, many Liberians chose to flee their homes and seek refuge in a friend or family member's home, or in a neighboring country.<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to prove the actual number of refugees, but official figures estimate that in total, about 1.2 million people were internally displaced and 750,000 were refugees as a result of the civil wars.<sup>18</sup>

The lives of the refugees were hard, but the lives of those who stayed in Liberia were much, much harder. The rebel groups 'recruited' approximately 10,000 child soldiers throughout the wars. These soldiers were mostly young boys under the age of 18, who were forcibly taken from their homes, drugged, and fought as a means to survive.<sup>19</sup> After the first war, there were

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<sup>15</sup> "Liberia Profile: A Chronology of Key Events"

<sup>16</sup> Sesay, Max A. "Civil War and Collective Intervention in Liberia." *Review of African Political Economy* 67 (1996): 35-52. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4006227>>.

<sup>17</sup> "Causes and Consequences." *Forced Migration*. < <http://www.forcedmigration.org/research-resources/expert-guides/liberia/causes-and-consequences>>.

<sup>18</sup> "Causes and Consequences"

<sup>19</sup> "Causes and Consequences"

programs in place to reintegrate these child soldiers back into society, but due to few employment opportunities as a result of the poor economy, many resorted back to violent antics. Unfortunately, with the start of the second civil war, the new rebel groups again sought out male children to serve as soldiers in their armies.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the success of the women's movement near the end of the second civil war, women had a particularly difficult time during the wars in terms of dealing with sexual violence from the males in their communities and the rebel soldiers.<sup>21</sup> Rape of women was all too common during the years of the civil wars, and although many reports claim that up to 75% of women were raped during the conflict, this does not match available evidence.<sup>22</sup> It has been proven that both government officials and rebel soldiers used rape as a form of intimidation over women.<sup>23</sup> In order to keep the women from speaking out against their policies or actions, these groups saw it best to rape these women into submission. Sexual favors were also common in the refugee camps, as women acted as prostitutes in exchange for financial support due to the desperate economic conditions.<sup>24</sup>

Those living, or staying, in Liberia during the time of the civil wars had to go through extremely harsh treatment, but despite these difficult times, the Liberians were able to persevere. The women became an organized force in society and formed a movement that resulted in helping end the fighting. They then used this momentum after the civil wars to break through the

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<sup>20</sup> "Causes and Consequences".

<sup>21</sup> "Causes and Consequences".

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, Dara Kay and Green, Amelia Hoover. "Dueling Incentives: Sexual Violence in Liberia and the Politics of Human Rights Advocacy." *Journal of Peace Research*. 30 May 2012. <<http://jpr.sagepub.com.avoserv.library.fordham.edu/content/49/3/445.full.pdf+html>>.

<sup>23</sup> "Causes and Consequences"

<sup>24</sup> "Causes and Consequences"

barriers that had previously been set for them and become involved in sectors of the public and private spheres that they had not been able to prior to the wars.

### **The Rise of the Women's Movement**

Though the civil wars were awful for both women and Liberia as a whole, there was one positive thing to be taken away from the second one; it gave rise to a new form of social movement in Liberia. While rebel groups fighting both each other and the oppressive government characterized the first and second civil wars, peace activists and those tired of the fighting rose to the foreground during the second war. Though there had been attempts at peaceful resistance led by journalists and students during the first war, many of these opposition leaders were found out by the national government and subsequently threatened, tortured or even killed.<sup>25</sup> During the second civil war, however, the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace (WLMAP) campaign was created, proving to be the sole most important movement against the war, one that played a major role in bringing the war to an end.<sup>26</sup>

In 2001, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) established the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), which only had the support of four Liberian women at its inception.<sup>27</sup> However, as the war raged on, and President Charles Taylor and his army were widening their control of Liberia, WIPNET gained more and more support amongst the women in Liberia. Liberian women experienced a great deal of hardship during the wars: they and their daughters were often raped by the male combatants, they had to watch their sons be taken away and turned into child soldiers, and some women were abducted and forced to marry the rebels.

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<sup>25</sup> Press, Robert M. *Candles in the Wind: Resisting Repression in Liberia (1979-2003)*. Africa Today, Vol. 55, No. 3. Spring 2009. Pp. 3-22.

<sup>26</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*. N.p.: E-Collaborative for Civic Education, 2014. *Tavaana.org*. Web. 27 Sept. 2014.

<sup>27</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

Once WIPNET started spreading its goals and objectives around Liberia, the women began taking notice.<sup>28</sup>

WIPNET identified four main challenges it saw as preventing the peace and conflict resolution process from really taking hold in Liberia. The first issue they found was the “gap between the participation of men and women in the peacemaking process”. Second, due to the lack of the women’s presence in the discussions, the needs of women were not being met in the proposals for conflict resolution and reconstruction. The third problem was that there were some women who were involved in the peacekeeping process, but they were not taken seriously. Fourthly, in order to bring about peace, it was necessary for the women to become more educated on peace-making theories and skills.<sup>29</sup> WIPNET asserted that if these challenges were addressed and the women were able to find a place to organize, then the movement could be extremely successful. Liberian women tackled each of these challenges, but went against the wishes of WIPNET when it came to finding a leader for their campaign. WIPNET advised against electing a formal leader, but those involved in the movement decided to do so anyway, and elected Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian social worker.<sup>30</sup>

Because Gbowee was very active in the Lutheran Church, this became the main way in which women were recruited to join the campaign. Gbowee formed the Christian Women’s Peace Initiative, and would speak to the women of congregations, urging them to unite against President Taylor’s regime and the violent rebels. One of the main reasons that this movement was so successful was that Gbowee and the other leaders did not just limit their members to Christian women. After hearing what the Christian Women’s Peace Initiative was seeking to do,

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<sup>28</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

<sup>29</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

<sup>30</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

Asatu Bah Kenneth, a woman who served as a police officer since 1973 and then as the president of the Liberia Female Law Enforcement Association, wanted to assist Gbowee and her organization.<sup>31</sup> Kenneth created the Liberian Muslim Women's Organization and began recruiting Muslim women to join Gbowee's campaign.<sup>32</sup> Despite their different religious backgrounds, these women became a united force due to their shared experiences as mothers, daughters, sisters and aunts. The group did not just provide the women with a means to protest the violence, it also provided them with a support system that seemed to have been lost during the many years of war. Once the Muslim and Christian women came together to work towards a peaceful Liberia, the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement officially began.<sup>33</sup>

In March 2003, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), a rebel group trying to take down Taylor and his dictatorship, gained control of about two-thirds of the Liberian countryside.<sup>34</sup> Alongside this action, Taylor began to lose power, yet the violence continued. The women realized that it was necessary for them to spread their platform even further; their peace campaign needed more support. They decided to focus on Liberian religious authorities, so they brought their message to bishops and church clergy members in hopes that they would put further pressure on Taylor's government.<sup>35</sup> They then located the imams, Muslim religious leaders, who had power over the warlords and held meetings with them after the Friday prayers to have discussions about their peaceful resistance movement. Further utilizing the religious community, the Catholic radio station Radio Veritas began broadcasting the group's

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<sup>31</sup> Reticker, Gini, dir. *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*. Prod. Abigail Disney. 2008. Film

<sup>32</sup> Gil, Lucie. "The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace: Women Can Make the Difference." *Cultural Diplomacy in Africa*. N.p., 23 Mar. 2013. Web. 27 Sept. 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Gil, Lucie

<sup>34</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

<sup>35</sup> Reticker, Gini, dir. *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*. Prod. Abigail Disney. 2008. Film

peaceful protests.<sup>36</sup> This media exposure enabled people throughout Liberia, and in the surrounding countries, to learn about what the women were doing and further widened the support of their group.

Sit-ins were the main form of protest engaged in by the WLMAP. The women would often go to a local fish market, carry a banner that read, “the women of Liberia want peace! now!” clothed in all white with no make-up or jewelry on, and stay there for an entire day at a time, passing the time through singing and praying.<sup>37</sup> Some days, they would set themselves up on a soccer field that was on the way to President Taylor’s office, ensuring that the president himself saw their protest. As the women kept participating in the sit-ins, the group grew to include thousands of Liberian women from all over the country, some working in the markets, some who had been displaced from the war, others working with NGOs promoting women’s rights, all sharing the same goal: a peaceful Liberia.<sup>38</sup>

On April 23, 2003, after more than a week spent taking trips to Parliament to speak with President Taylor, he granted the women a meeting, which over 2,000 of the group members attended. The women congregated at the Presidential mansion and pled their case for peace in Liberia. “At first, Taylor refused to meet with the rebel factions. He ignored the women’s plea for peace”.<sup>39</sup> Since President Taylor would not listen to the women, they went to the United States embassy and told their story to the international press.<sup>40</sup> These steps that the women took brought a higher amount of pressure to the situation and caused Taylor to agree to participate in

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<sup>36</sup> *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*

<sup>37</sup> Gbowee, Leymah. *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War*. N.p.: Perseus, 2011. Print.

<sup>38</sup> Gbowee, Leymah

<sup>39</sup> Maphosa, Sylvester B., DeLuca, Laura, Keasley, Alphonse. *Building Peace from Within*. Africa Institute of South Africa, 2014. Print. Pg. 46

<sup>40</sup> Maphosa, Sylvester B.

the peace talks with the rebels in Accra, Ghana.<sup>41</sup> Despite the success that the women were finally able to achieve with the President, they still faced the difficult task of persuading the rebels to attend the peace talks as well. The women travelled to Sierra Leone, where some lined the streets outside the rebels' hotel and the others sat directly in front of the hotel, refusing to move until they were granted a meeting with the rebel leaders.<sup>42</sup> Finally, they were allowed to speak to the rebels, and they did so through tears, which helped to convince the rebels that the women were not indeed working for President Taylor and did just genuinely want peace in Liberia. At the end of the meeting, the rebels too agreed to attend the peace talks.<sup>43</sup>

Though the women were successful in persuading President Taylor and the rebel leaders to attend the peace talks, they did not want their efforts to stop there; they wanted to be a strong presence at the peace talks alongside the two warring groups. The women came together and raised enough money to send a group of women to Accra so they could attend the talks.<sup>44</sup> On June 4, 2003, the peace talks began, and soon afterward, the International Criminal Court indicted President Taylor for crimes against humanity. This caused him to flee to Liberia in order to avoid arrest.<sup>45</sup> Despite President Taylor's exit, the women at the peace talks decided to stay where they were, on the lawn outside of the peace building.<sup>46</sup> Upon Taylor's return to Liberia, a full-scale war broke out in the Liberian capital of Monrovia, even though the peace talks were still ongoing.<sup>47</sup> The members of the group who were still in Liberia continued their sit-ins and peaceful protests, while the women in Ghana requested that more women join them to strengthen

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<sup>41</sup> Maphosa, Sylvester B.

<sup>42</sup> Navarro, Kylin. "Liberian Women Act to End Civil War, 2003." *Global Nonviolent Action Database*. N.p., 22 Oct. 2010. Web. 27 Sept. 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Gil, Lucie

<sup>44</sup> Navarro, Kylin

<sup>45</sup> Gil, Lucie

<sup>46</sup> Navarro, Kylin

<sup>47</sup> Navarro, Kylin

their force at the peace talks.<sup>48</sup> The women in Accra decided it was time to take a greater form of action due to the wide scale violence that was breaking out in Liberia, so they got as close as they could to the building that was housing the peace talks, linked arms, and refused to move or let any of the delegates out of the building until they reached a peace agreement.<sup>49</sup> The security guards attempted to arrest the women, but once Gbowee threatened to remove her clothes, which would greatly shame the men, the guards allowed the women to stay put outside the building.<sup>50</sup> The Ghanaian President, John Kufour, who was acting as the mediator of the peace talks, then agreed to meet with the women and hear their plea for peace in hopes that it would end the women's sit-in.<sup>51</sup> The women agreed, but stated that they would return to their spots outside of the building if the meeting did not satisfy them.<sup>52</sup> The meeting went well, and three weeks later, on August 11, President Taylor officially resigned, and on August 18, a peace agreement was signed.<sup>53</sup> Taylor was then exiled to Nigeria, a transitional government was put in place with the goal of holding democratic elections in the near future, and United Nations Peacekeeping forces were ordered to Monrovia.<sup>54</sup> Once the peacekeeping forces arrived, the women continued their work toward a peaceful Liberia. In many cases, the women were more successful than the UN peacekeepers because of their already established presence in the communities.<sup>55</sup> The ex-combatants were more likely to give up their weapons to the women because the members of the communities were familiar with them, and thus there was a greater trust in the women.<sup>56</sup> Because

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<sup>48</sup> Navarro, Kylin

<sup>49</sup> *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*

<sup>50</sup> Navarro, Kylin

<sup>51</sup> Navarro, Kylin

<sup>52</sup> *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*

<sup>53</sup> *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*

<sup>54</sup> Navarro, Kylin

<sup>55</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

<sup>56</sup> *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*

the women assisted the peacekeepers in the disarmament and reconstruction efforts, they really reinforced their role in bringing about peace in Liberia, and proved how much authority they had amongst the Liberian people. This greatly helped in the next stage of rebuilding Liberia after the war, when the women were essential in increasing the participation of women in politics.<sup>57</sup>

Despite there being so many failed attempts at protests against the government and the rebel leaders in Liberia before the women's movement took hold, the WLMAP managed to not only get their voices heard throughout Liberia, but also to be extremely successful in achieving what they set out to do: to bring about a ceasefire and a subsequent peaceful Liberia.

### **The Recipe for Success of the Women's Movement**

One of the main reasons the women's movement was more successful than the others before it is that the women did not take a side politically. They decided to stay out of politics completely and just campaign for peace. The protests prior to the women's movement that resulted in violence were direct attacks on President Taylor's regime or the rebel groups, which were both made up of extremely violent actors. This caused journalists, student groups, and human rights advocates to be threatened violently by these groups, and then after the protesters did not back down, they were either tortured or murdered.<sup>58</sup> The women were not engaging in direct attacks on either group, so the groups largely ignored their protests; that is until the women staged the sit-ins directly in front of the President's mansion and the rebels' hotel. When the women did manage to communicate directly with the groups, the women "actively embraced and organized around their identity as women. They continually referred to their status as sisters, mothers, and wives - all acceptable and valued female roles in Liberian society - in order to

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<sup>57</sup> Navarro, Kylin

<sup>58</sup> Press, Robert

emphasize a peaceful and nonthreatening stereotype of women”.<sup>59</sup> Their leader, Leymah Gbowee, asserted that the women reminded the policy-makers of their mothers and how much their mothers cared for them, which resulted in the women gaining a certain amount of access to the rebel leaders and President Taylor’s government.<sup>60</sup>

Yet another reason the women’s movement achieved the success it did was because Gbowee did not limit it to just including Christian women. Gbowee has said that she called upon “every able-bodied women, regardless of her religion, social status or ethnic group”.<sup>61</sup> The movement expanded to including Muslim women as well, proving to the rest of Liberia that Christians and Muslims could unite and work together. This caused women of all different ethnic backgrounds to join the movement. Gbowee decided to speak about the power of nonviolence and prayer, which really struck a chord with the Muslim women. Once this shared belief came to the forefront, the movement was able to become even stronger than the leaders at WIPNET ever thought it could.<sup>62</sup> The Muslim network was essential in pressuring and contacting the rebel leaders, for the imams had connections to the warlords that the Christian women otherwise would not have had.<sup>63</sup>

The final reason that the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace had such great success was that the women who took part in the sit-ins also took part in a sex strike in their homes.<sup>64</sup> This was done in the hope that through holding out on their husbands, the men would support the women’s movement. Gbowee has admitted that the strike had “little or no practical effect”, but it

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<sup>59</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

<sup>60</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

<sup>61</sup> “Interview with Leymah Gbowee.” 25 Years Leading Change. Women’s Refugee Commission. <http://www.25yearsleadingchange.org/2014-voices-of-courage-awards-luncheon/94-interview-with-leymah-gbowee>.

<sup>62</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

<sup>63</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

<sup>64</sup> “Interview with Leymah Gbowee”.

was successful in the sense that it got the women a great deal of media attention.<sup>65</sup> People around Liberia started talking about the sex strike, and it even got some men thinking and talking about the movement. As Gbowee states, “[The] strategy helped the good men because it gave them a reason to take action”.<sup>66</sup> The women withheld sex from their husbands to get attention, and once their husbands realized what they were doing, they listened when the women told them “we need you to take a stand”.<sup>67</sup>

In all, the women’s movement that took place at the end of Liberia’s second civil war proved to be extremely effective in bringing about a ceasefire in Liberia. Though the women cannot be credited with ending the war themselves, they played a very large role in ending the fighting. Before the women’s movement began, President Taylor stated that he “that he would never negotiate with rebels, and would fight until the last soldier died rather than give up sovereignty to international peacekeepers”.<sup>68</sup> For Taylor to say this, and then change his stance after being convinced by the women’s movement, rather than an international peacekeeping force, was a massive accomplishment for the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace campaign. Because of the success the women had in bringing about the disarmament, they had a good amount of power going into the subsequent elections.

### **Leading Up to the 2005 Election: Voter Registration Campaign**

The women in Liberia used the momentum they had from ending the fighting to be a driving force in the presidential elections of 2005. After the women’s networks saw that Liberian women had not previously been involved in the election procedures, the members of the

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<sup>65</sup> “Interview with Leymah Gbowee”.

<sup>66</sup> “Interview with Leymah Gbowee”.

<sup>67</sup> “Interview with Leymah Gbowee”.

<sup>68</sup> *How The Women of Liberia Fought for Peace And Won*

women's movement made it their mission to recruit more female voters.<sup>69</sup> To get more women to become registered voters, women involved in WIPNET "travelled door to door, village to village, to meet and talk with women from all walks of life about the power of the voting process".<sup>70</sup> In the last five days before the election, upon realizing that there were still many women who were not registered voters, WIPNET became much more serious about getting women involved.<sup>71</sup> They noticed that the market women, who make up a large portion of the women in Liberia, were not planning to vote.<sup>72</sup> To combat this issue, 200 women operating with WIPNET worked with the market women and provided transportation, childcare, and supervision of the market stalls so that the women would feel comfortable leaving them to register to vote.<sup>73</sup> This last effort was extremely effective, for at the end of the five days, more than 7,400 women had registered to vote.<sup>74</sup> Due to a high number of women voters, and the proof that the women's movement was a strong force throughout Liberia, in the 2005 election, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected after winning 59.4% of the vote, defeating Liberian professional soccer player George Weah and becoming the first female president in Africa.<sup>75</sup>

## **Post-Conflict Gains**

### **Economic Opportunities**

The civil war changed a great deal about the lives of women in Liberia. These women soon found that they had more opportunities to succeed in sectors from which they were

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<sup>69</sup> Bekoe, Dorina, and Christina Parajon. "Women's Role in Liberia's Reconstruction." *United States Institute for Peace*. United States Congress, 1 May 2007. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.usip.org/publications/women-s-role-in-liberia-s-reconstruction>>.

<sup>70</sup> Maphosa, Sylvester B.

<sup>71</sup> Bekoe and Parajon

<sup>72</sup> Bekoe and Parajon

<sup>73</sup> Bekoe and Parajon

<sup>74</sup> Bekoe and Parajon

<sup>75</sup> Sims, Bryan M. *Women in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Women's Civic and Political Participation in Liberia*. Pretoria: Idasa, 2012. Print.

previously barred. A majority of men were not present in their homes during the war, as they were either acting as soldiers or were forced to flee Liberia; the women thus became the heads of the household. The women were now the breadwinners of their families, and did not want to see this newfound independence diminish after the war was over.<sup>76</sup> Many men were either killed in the fighting, or had fled and were not coming back. These unfortunate circumstances brought women into new and untraditional roles, roles that gave them the independence they were seeking upon the end of the civil war. They worked the traditionally male jobs of making bricks, building and roofing houses, and clearing farms, taking them on to ensure the survival of their families.<sup>77</sup>

### **Women in the Business World**

Another field where women found success was in the market, where women sold hand made goods and their crops. Due to their need to trade with other vendors and markets, often those that were found in other areas of Liberia, the women were allowed to go where the soldiers could not.<sup>78</sup> They were able to cross the fighting lines when no one else could, which enabled them to share valuable information.<sup>79</sup> Even if they were not necessarily working as double agents during the war, they were able to access information and to come into contact with people that they would otherwise have not been able to. This permission to travel also enabled the women to buy food and bring it back to provide for the citizens who were depending on them throughout the war.<sup>80</sup> Because of the important role of these market women, during his regime, Charles

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<sup>76</sup> Fuest, Veronika. "'This is the Time to get in Front!': Changing Roles and Opportunities for Women in Liberia." *African Affairs* 107.427 (2008): 201-24. Print.

<sup>77</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>78</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>79</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>80</sup> "Liberia's President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf Launches Sirleaf Market Women's Fund Video." Sirleaf Market Women's Fund.

Taylor supported the women. He made sure that they were operating effectively due to the need for supplies in the areas controlled by the rebels. Taylor even gave the women a truck to transport their goods, which allowed to the women to go even further from their own markets and share information and exchange goods with those who were outside of their usual trading group.<sup>81</sup>

During the period of the second civil war, the importance of female networking came to the forefront. Not only would the women share information while they were buying and selling each other's products, but they would also share necessary skills. This was significant because it led to the spread of businesswomen. What started out as a spreading of skills and information amongst the market women transformed into women starting businesses and then reporting back to her family and friends about how the business was working out.<sup>82</sup> When the women shared their stories of success to each other, they were also encouraging other women to become involved in the business too, which resulted in a rise in the number of women who were involved in business.<sup>83</sup>

### **Women's Non-Governmental Organizations**

Since the end of the civil war, there has been a rise in women's organizations in the country. The Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia, "an organ for coordinating the activities of women organizations", has a network of 104 organizations that are committed to ending violence against women and achieving gender equality in Liberia.<sup>84</sup> The high number of NGOs tailored to advocating for the needs of women is due in part to the interest of Liberian women and also to

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[http://www.africa.com/blog/liberia8217s\\_president\\_ellen\\_johnson\\_sirleaf\\_launches\\_sirleaf\\_market\\_women8217s\\_fund\\_video/](http://www.africa.com/blog/liberia8217s_president_ellen_johnson_sirleaf_launches_sirleaf_market_women8217s_fund_video/)

<sup>81</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>82</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>83</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>84</sup> Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia. <http://wongosol.org/>

the conditions set by aid agencies in Liberia that give funding to ‘community-based organizations.’<sup>85</sup> The goals of these organizations are varied to ensure that they are helping a wide variety of women. They range from increasing agriculture production, supporting traditional skills training, medical care, and trading, to peace activism and political advocacy.<sup>86</sup> In the southeastern part of Liberia, the women involved in NGOs focus on collective action to bring about political structures for women that are parallel to that of the men and to gain the power to be able to check the decisions of the male-dominated political organizations.<sup>87</sup> The women who are involved in peace-building NGOs are easily recognizable in Liberia and in the neighboring countries because of the white tee shirts and head wraps that the members wear.<sup>88</sup> This is a continuation of the outfits worn during the civil war when the women staged the sit-ins in the markets.

The women who were involved in these protests against the fighting were very important right at the end of the war. After a period of conflict, or as a way to end a war, a peace agreement is typically signed. This was the case in Liberia, but the agreement reached in Liberia was a little different than in other nations. While many peace agreements exclude women and leaders typically view women as victims after a time of war and thus think they are incapable of participating in negotiations, the Liberian women – as noted - played a big part in the Accra peace talks.<sup>89</sup> Accordingly, the 2003 Peace Agreement “contains some gender relevant policies” stating that “women should be included in the Governance Reform Commission and that members of the National Transitional Legislative Assembly should come *inter alia* from women

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<sup>85</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>86</sup> Women’s NGO Secretariat of Liberia

<sup>87</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>88</sup> Women’s NGO Secretariat of Liberia

<sup>89</sup> “Pray the Devil Back to Hell”

organizations”.<sup>90</sup> Due to the WLMAP’s relentless involvement in the opposition to the fighting, and the visibility they created for themselves, they afforded the entire female population of Liberia with some rights in the 2003 Peace Agreement.

### **Changes in Education**

After the WLMAP showed how involved women can be in important matters of the country, women throughout the country began to change their attitudes about what women and girls could achieve. One of the sectors they changed their opinions on was education. Families began to change their priorities and focus more on making sure their daughters received an education.<sup>91</sup> Because of this, the percentage of girls in schools went up from around 30% before the war to 42% in primary schools, and to 41% at the secondary school level.<sup>92</sup> The teaching styles have also seen a change due to initiatives set forth by the Liberian government.<sup>93</sup> To attract more girls to attend schools, the Ministry of Education is focusing on “the construction of girls-friendly schools, mentoring programs for girls, community-managed child care centers, awareness and outreach programs and teacher training that emphasizes female teacher training”.<sup>94</sup> As a result of more girls and women receiving quality education, there are more job opportunities available to them upon completion of their education; the job market has expanded for women in the development and peace-building sector.<sup>95</sup>

### **Female Politicians**

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<sup>90</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>91</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>92</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>93</sup> Gayflor, Vabah Kazaku. “Reviewing and Appraising the Beijing Platform for Action: “The Liberian Scenario – Lifting Liberia.”” *54<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women*. 2010.

[http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing15/general\\_discussion/LIBERIA.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing15/general_discussion/LIBERIA.pdf)

<sup>94</sup> Gayflor, Vabah Kazaku

<sup>95</sup> Fuest, Veronika

Women have also become more involved in politics because of the furthering of their education and the involvement of the women's movement during the civil war. This power has directly transferred into women having more legitimate political power and has furthered their political participation at the national and local levels.<sup>96</sup> In the rural areas of Liberia, where traditions are more commonly upheld, women were not typically involved in the happenings of their village, but post-civil war, women began breaking through these rigid traditional structures and participated in local elder's assemblies.<sup>97</sup> In the counties of Bong, Maryland and Nimba, women were elected to local government positions, serving as paramount chiefs, city mayors and clan chiefs; all positions previously only held by males.<sup>98</sup>

In the national government, Liberia has been extremely progressive in terms of electing females to high positions of power. In 1996, Ruth S. Perry was elected to serve as chairwomen to the Council of State, which governed Liberia for a year before the election of Charles Taylor. When Perry took this role, it made her the first-ever African head of state.<sup>99</sup> Women were also much more present in the government post-civil war, when in 2005, 15 of the ministerial posts were held by women, compared to only three during Samuel Doe's regime.<sup>100</sup> The women's movement also saw a great success in the government when Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected President of Liberia in 2005.

### **Trends Regarding Female Politicians in Post-Conflict African Countries**

Women's rising to high positions of political power in Liberia does not make it an isolated case. Though women's advancement is often seen in accordance with the economic rise

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<sup>96</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>97</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>98</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>99</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>100</sup> Fuest, Veronika

of a country, the idea of females exercising their power has been seen as a common trend amongst many different post-conflict governments in Africa.<sup>101</sup> Despite the misconceptions that the continent of Africa is very behind the rest of the world in terms of basically everything, numerous countries within Africa have shown that they can compete with the rest of the world. Women in Africa now hold 17% of legislative seats, which matches the global average.<sup>102</sup> In Rwanda, a country that suffered a mass genocide in 1994, women hold 64% of legislative seats.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, in South Africa, Mozambique, Burundi and Tanzania, which are all countries that have suffered civil unrest in recent history, over 30% of the seats in the legislature are held by women.<sup>104</sup> There has been a great deal of research done about the high amount of women in the legislative branch throughout Africa, but not much time has been spent looking into women serving in the executive branch. The election of President Johnson-Sirleaf was very important for this reason. It shows that women can run for the presidential position and be elected, and it brought attention to the strides African women are making in the executive branch.<sup>105</sup>

Since the 1990s, women have been making gains in the executive branch of government throughout the African continent. “Women hold an average of just over four ministerial posts in African governments... Women’s representation in cabinets ranges from one in Comoros, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan to high of 12 in South Africa”, and “Since 1992, seven women have held the position of vice president or deputy president in six countries (Djibouti, Uganda, Gambia,

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<sup>101</sup> Adams, Melinda. "Liberia's Election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Women's Executive Leadership in Africa." *Politics and Gender* 4.3 (2008): 475-89. Print.

<sup>102</sup> Adams, Melinda

<sup>103</sup> Hunt, Swanee and Heaton, Laura. “Women in Post-Genocide Rwanda Have Helped Heal Their Country.” *National Geographic*. 2014.  
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/04/140404-rwanda-genocide-parliament-kigali-rwandan-patriotic-front-world-women-education/>

<sup>104</sup> Adams, Melinda

<sup>105</sup> Adams, Melinda

Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Burundi)”.<sup>106</sup> All of these statistics are important and show that women are using their power to take part in the decision-making processes of their countries, but it is even more important to note that women are running for the presidency in many African countries as well.

This position is especially noteworthy because it is one where the election of a candidate is based on the votes of the population of that country, not on the appointment of whoever is already in power. Between the eleven year period of 1997-2007, “23 different women ran in 19 different contests in 14 different states in Africa”, and “out of these 14 states, five have experienced widespread conflict in the past two decades (Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Congo-Kinshasa)”.<sup>107</sup> This further shows that female representation in the public, and especially the political, sphere is much higher in post-conflict societies. In 2006, research done by African scholars Aili Tripp, Dior Konaté and Colleen Lowe-Moma found that “of the 12 African countries with the highest rates of female representation in parliament, eight (Angola, Mozambique, South Africa, Uganda, Rwanda, Eritrea, Burundi, and Namibia) have undergone liberation wars or civil conflict in recent years.”<sup>108</sup> As stated earlier, the driving forces behind female campaigns are the roles they took on during the times of conflict. They acted as heads of the household, and some even became part of the armies, rebel forces, or liberation movements.<sup>109</sup> After the conflict ended, the women used the leadership and organizational skills they learned during the wars “to shape the laws and institutions of post-conflict states”.<sup>110</sup> These women did not want to go back to their old roles and see the men make all the decisions about

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<sup>106</sup> Adams, Melinda

<sup>107</sup> Adams, Melinda

<sup>108</sup> Adams, Melinda

<sup>109</sup> Adams, Melinda

<sup>110</sup> Adams, Melinda

the well being of their countries. The women wanted to use their independence and power and become part of the government so they could have control. This was also made possible because conflict often breaks down the social fabric of society, which in turn can break down the patriarchal structures.<sup>111</sup>

There are typically transitional governments that come into power upon the ending of the war. This creates a space for women's movements to make appeals to the new government when they are creating new constitutions and political institutions to include gender-equal provisions.<sup>112</sup> Yet another way women get involved in politics post-conflict is that during these wars, the leader is often overthrown or assassinated. This leaves space for any new candidate to come to power in the previous leader's place, including female candidates.<sup>113</sup> Through both of these avenues, the female candidates also often receive assistance from the international community. The international actors do not always directly support female candidates, but the community's policies are almost always in support of promoting women's rights in the hopes of creating a gender-equal society. In 2000, the United Nations Development Programme created eight Millennium Development Goals, one of which seeks to "promote gender equality and women's rights".<sup>114</sup> In this same year, 189 countries met at the United Nations and agreed to work towards achieving these goals by 2015.<sup>115</sup> Because of how many countries agreed to these goals, when one becomes involved in the affairs of another country, their policies are going to be based on the eight goals. In Liberia specifically, the UN, UN Women, and China are some of the actors who have played a part in the country's development post-civil wars. The Beijing

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<sup>111</sup> Adams, Melinda

<sup>112</sup> Adams, Melinda

<sup>113</sup> Adams, Melinda

<sup>114</sup> "The Millennium Development Goals: Eight Goals for 2015." *United Nations Development Programme*. <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/mdgoverview.html>

<sup>115</sup> "The Millennium Development Goals: Eight Goals for 2015"

Platform for Action has been working alongside the UN and its agencies, and one of its main goals is to promote gender equality and women's political participation.<sup>116</sup> These actors can too see how female politicians directly impact the peacefulness and development of a country, especially after a civil conflict. For this reason, and to support the Millennium Development Goals, the international community will continue to advocate for women's rights in the countries within the United Nations.

### **President Johnson-Sirleaf**

As shown by the previous sections, women have clearly become empowered in many post-conflict societies, in particular in Liberia, but it is important to see whether or not female leaders result directly in advances for the positions of women in society. To determine this in the case of Liberia, this paper undertakes an analysis of President Johnson-Sirleaf's policies in her first and second terms.

Ultimately, upon the election of President Johnson-Sirleaf, the number of women ministers decreased to five, but women were still represented well, as 15 and 16 serve as Deputy Ministers and Assistant Ministers respectively.<sup>117</sup> President Johnson-Sirleaf is currently in her second term as President, and it is evident that the Liberian government is in favor of affirmative action. This government has provided economic and political opportunities to women and they have protected women's rights.<sup>118</sup> In 2006, programs were set up by the government to empower women, as well. Women have also been encouraged, in accordance with international peace-building guidelines, to participate in the security sector by joining the military or the police.<sup>119</sup>

### **Johnson-Sirleaf's Presidency**

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<sup>116</sup> Gayflor, Vabah Kazaku

<sup>117</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>118</sup> Fuest, Veronika

<sup>119</sup> Fuest, Veronika

When President Johnson-Sirleaf was elected, she made it clear that her main focus was going to be on reversing the high levels of corruption that were prevalent throughout Liberia.<sup>120</sup> Corruption was not just evident in the political sphere, but in the private sector as well. As a way to directly combat this corruption, she immediately appointed women to hold six of the top positions in her 22-person cabinet.<sup>121</sup> The women head the Finance, Commerce, Justice, Agriculture, Sports and Gender ministries.<sup>122</sup> President Johnson-Sirleaf has said, “Women are more committed. They work harder. They’re honest, and the experience justifies it... In every time and every place I’ve worked, wherever there has been a scandal, wherever there has been indication of impropriety, it’s always been men”.<sup>123</sup> She also believes that men, overall, are more inclined to participate in corrupt activities, and she explained her reasoning by stating, “In an African context, men have too much of an extended family. They have too many obligations outside their families and homes, so the demands on them are harder and more intense... Men have more than one wife; they have their concubines. We have polygamy here, not polyandry”.<sup>124</sup> She has also made it clear that because of these reasons, she thinks that women are overall better leaders and if she could find enough women who are qualified to hold governmental positions while at the same time not disrupting political balances, she would appoint women to lead each of the ministries, not just a quarter of them.<sup>125</sup> She was not able to do this, but it is still important to note that there are more women holding positions in the government than ever before.

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<sup>120</sup> Carvajal, Doreen. "The Nation Full of Strong Women." *New York Times* [New York] 5 Mar. 2010: n. pag. Print.

<sup>121</sup> Carvajal, Doreen

<sup>122</sup> Carvajal, Doreen

<sup>123</sup> Carvajal, Doreen

<sup>124</sup> Carvajal, Doreen

<sup>125</sup> Carvajal, Doreen

Despite the relatively high number of females involved in politics in Liberia, the rights of women were not one of the main focuses of President Johnson-Sirleaf's first term. After 14 years of civil war, Liberia had become one of the poorest countries in the world.<sup>126</sup> It lacked infrastructure, there was no public electricity after the grid was destroyed in the wars, and the agricultural sector needed a great deal of help after the fields were neglected for so many years during the wars.<sup>127</sup> President Johnson-Sirleaf was responsible for rebuilding a country, and doing so had to be her main focus throughout her first term. During this term, Liberia saw an increase in the amount of schools, school enrollment went up, the access to health care was improved, and roads and buildings were rebuilt.<sup>128</sup> One of the reasons why she was successful in rebuilding Liberia was that she sought help from the international community.<sup>129</sup> She has received aid from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, to the tune of \$4.6 billion to go toward helping to alleviate the vast amount of debt Liberia has amassed as a cause of the war.<sup>130</sup> She has also obtained a \$20 million-plus loan program from Robert Johnson, an African-American entrepreneur and the founder of Black Entertainment Television, to help Liberian businesses.<sup>131</sup> Johnson-Sirleaf has said that these forms of relief have been the most important achievements of her presidency, but it is difficult to know whether or not Liberia will be worse off in the future depending on what the constraints of these loans will be.<sup>132</sup>

After President Johnson-Sirleaf spent the majority of her first term focusing on rebuilding Liberia, nearing the end of her first term and into her second, which began in 2012, she could

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<sup>126</sup> Hayes, Stephen. "How Africa's First Female President Led Her Country Back from the Brink." *U.S. News* 20 May 2013: n. pag. Print.

<sup>127</sup> Hayes, Stephen.

<sup>128</sup> Sims, Bryan M.

<sup>129</sup> Bergner, Daniel.

<sup>130</sup> Bergner, Daniel.

<sup>131</sup> Bergner, Daniel.

<sup>132</sup> Bergner, Daniel

devote more time to policies that would bring about a more equal Liberia. To do so, the government created three policies: the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), the National Action Plan for the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (LNAP), and the National Gender Policy (NGP).<sup>133</sup>

The PRS, which was implemented in 2008, is not necessarily specific to gender equality, but it is viewed as a foundation to attaining equity within society through the application of gender-sensitive macro and microeconomic strategies. The government wants to work together with development partners, civil society and the private sector to tackle four ‘pillars’ that “seek to set the conditions for inclusive and sustainable economic growth: peace and security, economic revitalization, governance and rule of law, and infrastructure and basic services”.<sup>134</sup> Since this policy was implemented, there have been advancements toward gender equality. Now every governmental agency has gender awareness modules incorporated into their training programs. There is also a greater availability of health care to pregnant women, and the maternal death rates have fallen since the PRS was put in place. Lastly, the enrollment of females in education programs has increased.<sup>135</sup> In 2013, after the successes of the policy became evident, the World Bank approved funding for the long-term strategy. This funding came in the form of a \$10 million credit to Liberia.<sup>136</sup> Along with the original four pillars, the strategy has the aim of “transforming Liberia into a more prosperous and inclusive society...through increasing transparency and accountability throughout the government to reduce corruption; expand the economy by resolving land tenure issues and providing credit to farmers; and improving the

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<sup>133</sup> Sims, Bryan M.

<sup>134</sup> Sims, Bryan M.

<sup>135</sup> Sims, Bryan M.

<sup>136</sup> “World Bank Funds Liberia’s Long-Term Poverty Reduction Strategy.” *World Bank*. 2013. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/06/26/world-bank-funds-liberia-long-term-poverty-reduction-strategy>

access to and the quality of education”.<sup>137</sup> These new aims do not explicitly call for reform in terms of gender equality, but there are hints at it through stating the need for a more inclusive society and calling for changes in sectors where women will also benefit – education and agriculture.

The LNAP was launched in March 2009, and seeks to “promote human rights and security for women and girls; develop and institutionalise economic, social and security policies to facilitate participation at all levels of society; and to strengthen coordination and coherence of gender mainstreaming”.<sup>138</sup> This resolution is significant because it was created after a rigorous effort to ensure that women were part of the drafting process.<sup>139</sup> This process included meetings with “a broad range of civil society actors, including women’s organizations, media, private microcredit institutions, interfaith institutions, donors and rural women”.<sup>140</sup> The drafting of the resolution was done in this way to ensure that the authors understood how the women were operating in society and that the needs of the women would be met. After a four year consultative process, the LNAP led to the creation of the National Gender Policy of 2010, which has been referred to as “the most significant achievement of [the Liberian] government since 2008”.<sup>141</sup> This policy advocates for mainstreaming gender into institutional frameworks and guidelines, promoting women’s rights alongside human rights, and endorsing equal access to political and economic resources.<sup>142</sup> It also references the national development goals of Liberia, and seeks to further be able to pursue these goals through “utilizing the potential of women and

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<sup>137</sup> “World Bank Funds Liberia’s Long-Term Poverty Reduction Strategy”

<sup>138</sup> Sims, Bryan M.

<sup>139</sup> “National Action Plans – Liberia.” *PeaceWomen*. 2014.

<http://www.peacewomen.org/naps/country/africa/liberia>

<sup>140</sup> “National Action Plans – Liberia”

<sup>141</sup> Gayflor, Vabah Kazaku

<sup>142</sup> Sims, Bryan M.

men, girls and boys”.<sup>143</sup> This wording is significant in that it mentions both sexes. In achieving gender equality, it is very important to focus on both females and males, as the Liberian government has done with the wording of this National Gender Policy.

While the government is creating policies to benefit the whole of Liberia, they are also making sure to not forget about the rural women, who make up about 60% of females in Liberia. These women are at more of a disadvantage than those living in the cities because it is more difficult for them to travel from village to village.<sup>144</sup> The roads are still not in great condition after the wars, and the rural women are more affected by the post-war poverty that is still plaguing much of Liberia. The Ministry of Gender and Development created the National Rural Women Program in 2008 (NRWP), which has resulted in an increase in the availability of farming supplies, an improvement in the lives of over 1,000 women through the creation of the Cross-Border Trade Association, and the establishment of 15 Village Saving Loans Associations in five of the 15 counties.<sup>145</sup> The main goal of this program is to get the rural women better acquainted with the national economy, for the government sees economic empowerment as a way to directly increase these women’s personal well-being as well as that of society as a whole, who will greatly benefit from their contributions.<sup>146</sup>

The rural women have been empowered in ways other than the positive implications from the NRWP. After six women were appointed to hold six of the top ministry positions during President Johnson-Sirleaf’s first term, women all over Liberia took notice. Although there is

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<sup>143</sup> Gayflor, Vabah Kazaku

<sup>144</sup> Duncan-Cassell, Julia. “The Empowerment of Rural Women and Their Role in Poverty and Hunger Eradication, Development Challenges and the Way Forward.” *Government of Liberia*. 2012. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw56/general-discussions/member-states/Liberia.pdf>

<sup>145</sup> Duncan-Cassell, Julia

<sup>146</sup> Duncan-Cassell, Julia

somewhat of a divide between rural and urban women, the women in Liberia have been inspired to act in ways outside their norm because they have seen women rising to powerful positions in the government. Liberian women have historically not had the power to be extremely involved in the happenings of the local governments, but because they have seen women rise to high ranks in the national government, they have been inspired to be more assertive about their needs.<sup>147</sup> This assertiveness has brought women together to advocate for key issues, which has in turn attracted attention from governmental officials, who then passed legislation in favor of the women's concerns.<sup>148</sup> An example of this is the Women's Legislative Caucus of Liberia, which has passed important legislation regarding HIV and AIDS, medical and dental associations, pharmaceuticals, and the children's law.<sup>149</sup> The passage of these laws is significant because they are far-reaching; they do not just affect the rural or urban women, they affect everyone throughout Liberia.

### **Conclusion**

Though the overall perception of civil wars is that they only result in negative outcomes, in the case of Liberia, there was a positive result to be taken away from the 14-year period of civil war; it gave rise to a women's movement that continued to operate and bring about successful opportunities for women throughout the country. Because of their shared distaste for the violence during wartime, women from different religious backgrounds were able to come together and engage in nonviolent protests to bring peace to Liberia. This women's movement, along with the newfound freedoms they had in their homes and communities, gave the women a sense of power and independence they had not previously experienced. After the end of the war,

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<sup>147</sup> Sims, Bryan M.

<sup>148</sup> Sims, Bryan M.

<sup>149</sup> Sims, Bryan M.

the women were able to continue to exercise their agency in economic, educational, and political fields. A female president was elected in Liberia, setting an example for the rest of the female population that they were not confined to their traditional roles. The election of a female to a high position within the executive branch of government is not an occurrence isolated to Liberia. There is a trend throughout Africa where after a period of conflict, there is a high amount of female political candidates, as well as a high number of females elected to government positions. This has proved to be the case in Liberia, South Africa, Rwanda, and Uganda just to name a few. Females holding important government positions have also proven to be incredibly important because it ensures that women's voices will be heard and the government will meet their needs. Due to the females breaking up the typically male-dominated political landscape, policies and government reforms are more likely to be inclusive of women's rights and address their concerns.

Thus far, there has been only a small amount of research done focusing on how Liberian women fared after the civil wars, and even less seeking to prove that they have thrived since the end of the conflict. For that reason, this paper offers a new perspective that many scholars have not yet considered. Much of the information that is available on the subject of Liberian women either focuses solely on their role in the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement, or it only focuses on how brutally they were treated throughout the civil wars. Along this same accord, the majority of the discourse that focuses on the role of the men when the women's movement was taking place only discusses their role as soldiers and how violent this made them. There were no sources discussing how the men felt about the women's movement or the women deviating from their traditional roles. This information would have been quite helpful to include throughout this essay so that it did not come across as being completely biased toward

supporting the women and forgetting about the men. Hopefully, after President Johnson-Sirleaf is done with her current term, more research will be done that focuses more on the role of the men and women together rather than confining them to completely separate articles that are arguing entirely different points.

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