

GENDER (IN)EQUALITY REVISITED IN LIBERIA FROM A LIBERAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE AND BEYOND (2005 – 2022)

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ABSTRACT

Liberian political landscape has been dominated by male political figures since its independence in 1847. The first elected female president in the country was possible as a result of a post-war election in 2005. However, gender inequality persists in Liberia's public realm, with women continuing to be underrepresented. Women currently make up only 11 percent of the parliament's 103 members. Against this backdrop, this article examines the progress made in addressing gender inequality in the political system of Liberia, focusing on the governments of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Ambassador George Manneh Weah, who was elected as President in 2018, evaluating specific empowerment areas. Thus, two key questions are addressed in this vein: During Madam Sirleaf's administration, what advancements were made in the struggle against gender inequality in Liberia's political system? And are those advances being maintained during the presidency of Ambassador Weah? This research article was conducted using qualitative methodology, which was supplemented with data and information gathered from the United

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Nations Development Index, the Gender Equality Index, the Democracy Index, and Freedom House, as well as relevant scholarly literature.

Keywords: *Sirleaf and Weah's Administrations, Liberia, political system, liberal feminism, gender inequality*

ÖZ

LİBERYA'DA TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET EŞİTSİZLİĞİNE YENİDEN BAKMAK: LİBERAL FEMİNİST PERSPEKTİF VE ÖTESİ (2005 – 2022)

Liberya'nın siyasal alanı, 1847'deki bağımsızlığından bu yana erkek siyasi figürlerin hakimiyetindedir. Liberya'da seçilen ilk kadın cumhurbaşkanı, 2007'deki savaş sonrası seçim sonucunda mümkün olmuştur. Bu duruma rağmen, ülkenin kamusal alanında cinsiyet eşitsizliği halen devam eden bir olgudur. Diğer bir deyişle, kadınlar siyasal alanda yeterince temsil edilmemektedirler. Kadınlar şu anda parlamentonun 103 üyesinin sadece yüzde 11'lik bir oranına denk gelmektedir. Bu çerçevede, bu makale Liberya'nın siyasal sisteminde cinsiyet eşitsizliğine karşı kaydedilen ilerlemeyi incelemekte Başkan Ellen Johnson Sirleaf'in yanı sıra 2018'de başkan olarak seçilen Büyükelçi George Manneh Weah'ın yönetimlerine odaklanarak belirli güçlendirme alanlarını mercek altına almaktadır. Böylece, çalışma iki temel soru ele almaktadır: Madam Sirleaf'in başkanlığı sırasında Liberya'nın siyasal sisteminde toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliğine karşı mücadelede ne gibi ilerlemeler kaydedildi? Peki bu ilerlemeler Büyükelçi Weah'ın başkanlığı sırasında da sürdürülüyor mu? Bu araştırma makalesi, Birleşmiş Milletler Kalkınma Endeksi, Cinsiyet Eşitliği Endeksi, Demokrasi Endeksi ve Freedom House'un yanı sıra ilgili bilimsel literatürden toplanan veri ve bilgilerle desteklenen nitel araştırma yönetimi kullanılarak yürütülmüştür.

Keywords: *Sirleaf and Weah Başkanlıkları, Liberya, siyasal sistem, liberal feminizm, cinsiyet eşitsizliği*

1. Introduction

When discussing sustainable development, the pursuit of gender balance has taken center stage in international relations. In the case of Liberia, there hasn't been a lot of research done on gender inequality. This article aims to address and explore the status of gender equality in the case of Liberia in Africa since 2006 onwards. Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has been the first elected female head of state in Africa entirely. Having said that, what sorts of challenges exist in Liberian endeavour towards gender equality –precisely participation and empowerment of

women –will be addressed and discussed in this work. One of the key contributions of this study is closely intertwined with the fact that liberal feminism or reform-oriented approaches in building attempts towards achieving gender equality are also without challenges. To unravel the impediments in front of gender inequality we need to go beyond liberal feminist approaches.

2. Theoretical Framework

There are theories of International Relations (IR) that provide a more complete picture of gender issues and society. In this way, the greatest explanation for the subject at hand is provided by gender reform feminism, which is linked to the liberal, Marxist, socialist, and post-colonial ideas that have dominated the gender balancing movement since the 1970s. Achieving gender parity in all spheres of society is its aim. The prevalence of imbalance practices—both formal and informal—in the workplace, in the distribution of financial resources, and in the division of labour and family responsibilities has been brought to light by feminist thought. Prior to the 1970s, cultural beliefs placed men in a higher position and denigrated women. Mothering was thought to be a woman's power and responsibility; they were recognized as mothers before, during, and after they were anything else. In this regard, for Judith Lorber,

Gender is now understood to be a social status, a personal identity, and a set of relationships between women and men, and among women and men. *Sex* is no longer seen as a one-way input or basic material for social arrangements, but a complex interplay of genes, hormones, physiology, environment, and behavior, with loop-back effects. *Sexuality* is understood to be socially constructed as well as physiologically based and emotionally expressed (2001, p. 8).

Judith Lorber grouped the theories of feminism into three wider categories which exhibit their approaches and political strategies as she calls “with regard to the *gendered social order*” in which one of them is ‘gender reform feminism’ (2001, p. 8). According to Lorber (2001), no national economic data account for the “responsibility of women.” Reform feminism argues that gender inequality is systemic, not personal. These disparities result from women being forced into

low-wage jobs that are undervalued, from their heavy workloads of taking care of the home and children, and from their unequal access to political office. These prejudices are ingrained in social systems on a national and worldwide level. The overall strategy of gender reform feminism is to achieve the gender balance as a means of reforming the imbalance in the gender social structure, which involves achieving parity between women and men in society, their domestic responsibilities, their access to work and business opportunities, their positions of authority, their political power, their education, health care, and their mandate to increase the number of women in government. To achieve equality between genders, “the social order” must be reformed (Acker, 1987, p. 423). The aim of feminism as a political movement is to achieve legal, social and cultural equality between women and men. Gender inequality takes many different forms, depending on the economic structure and social organization of a particular society, as well as the culture of a particular group within that society. Although we speak of gender inequality, it is usually women who are at a disadvantage compared to men in a similar situation. Women are often paid less for the same or comparable work, which reduces their chances of promotion. There is usually an imbalance between the amount of housework and childcare a woman does compared to her husband, even if they both spend the same amount of time doing paid work outside the home. Gender inequality often refers to the fact that women are paid less for jobs like nursing and childcare than males are for jobs like construction and mining. (Lorber, 2010).

3. Feminist theory, gender equality and beyond

The concept of citizenship has not been a part of feminist discussions until the 1990s (Kartal, 2016, p. 60). As the feminists of the first wave of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fought for voting rights. It is hard to believe that these rights were among those once denied to women of all social classes, races, ethnicities, and religions – “the right to vote, own property and capital, borrow money, inherit money, keep money earned, initiate a divorce, retain custody of children, attend college, become a licensed physician, argue in court and sit on a jury. The theory of equality that 19th century feminists relied on in their fight for women's rights stemmed from liberal political philosophy. Therefore, first-wave feminism's goal was to get equal legal rights for women” (Lorber, 2010, p. 2).

Another aspect of the nineteenth-century feminism concentrated on a woman's right to "own" her body and control when and how she got pregnant rather than equal rights for all. In the 20th century, women's authority over legal contraception was a fiercely fought feminist cause, rivalling the battle for suffrage in Western nations. The publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in France in 1949 marked the start of the second wave of the contemporary feminist movement. This comprehensive analysis of women's historical and contemporary situation in the West makes the case that men establish the norms and values and that women are the Other, devoid of the traits that the dominants possess. The performers are men, while the reactors are women. As a result, males are the first sex and women are always the second. According to de Beauvoir, the supremacy of males and the subjugation of women are social constructs rather than biological phenomena: "A woman is not born, but rather becomes; civilization as a whole produces this creature... which is described as feminine" (De Beauvoir, 2011).

It was in the late 1960s that the second wave of feminism became an organised political movement, as young people began to publicly criticise many parts of western culture. Since then, the feminist movement has contributed significantly to social change by drawing attention to the ways in which women continue to face greater social disadvantages than males, by examining the sexual oppressions that women experience, and by putting out suggestions for both legal and political solutions in addition to interpersonal ones (Lorber, 2010). Many feminists focused on advancing women's legal rights, political representation, and access to traditionally male-dominated fields of work and professions during the 1970s and 1980s. Other feminists fought to end sexual harassment and assault of women workers and students, as well as prostitution, pornography, and sexist portrayals of women in the media and other cultural creations. Others concentrated on altering history, language, and knowledge to represent the experiences and contributions of women that had before been marginalised (Lorber 2010).

Lorber further elaborates on feminism's third wave of feminism as a movement of younger generation of feminists in the 1990s, where the notion that male oppression of women is opposed, they follow the curricula in schools as well as a social, economic, and political environment issue that is far less gendered. Instead, they accept men to be feminist campaigners. They believe that women's

agency and female sexuality are forms of power, and that gender equality is the standard (Lorber, 2010).

Given this, Liberal feminism is accepted as one of the early reflections of feminist theory which centred its idea on women's status in society as secondary and attempted to rebuild this unequal balance in the form of "opportunities and segregation" (Wolff, 2007). The liberal feminists as compared to radical feminists, embrace the argument of "economic re-organization and considerable re-distribution of wealth" (Wendell, 1987, p. 66) given the fact that their key political objectives are revolved around equal opportunity. In this regard, Wendell argues that; political commitments of the liberal feminists are to attain both equal and legal rights and opportunity; the enhancement of women's individual acknowledgment and worth, the encouragement of equal education. In achieving these goals, the role of education as "a major tool of social reform" is crucial (1987, p. 66). Contrary to the radical and Marxist feminists, the role and function of the state is not, in fact, considered as a focal point by liberal feminism. For instance, Oldfield argues that "Liberal individualism has a conception of citizenship as statuses, and concern has been expressed that the individual's status as citizen is being undermined in one way or another, principally by governments. Civic republicanism has a conception of citizenship as 'practice', and the concern has been that the opportunities for the practice of citizenship are being eroded, again principally by governments" (1990, p. 177).

In the 1990s, issues concerning culture and identity started to examine the concept of citizenship, which led to its inclusion of citizenship in the gender studies. The gendered practices of political citizenship dominate the citizenship of women (Quoted from Brush, 2011, Kartal, 2016, p. 62). Liberal feminism is more easily accepted in the public since it is based on the dominant political and economic ideals of liberalism, or the society in which we live (individual freedom, equal chances, democracy, etc.). Its claims for legal equality are hard to argue against in the modern era; in Western nations, it would be hard to argue against women's access to education or their ability to vote. These are significant wins for liberal feminism that are no longer questioned (Cottais, 2020).

Gender inequality manifests itself in many ways, including the way society is structured (girls in the same social class receive less schooling than males), the economic system, and the customs of any specific group living in that society

(Lorber, 2001, p. 4). Even if we talk about gender inequality, it is a truth that women and girls are frequently at a disadvantage compared to men and boys in identical situations. Liberia is not an exception in this sense; in most rural areas, girls' education is not prioritised, particularly when the family cannot afford to pay for the education of both its girls and boys. In this case, boys' education is given preference, as boys are believed to have greater potential to take on familial responsibilities once they reach the age of majority. Girls, meanwhile, are thought to grow up and marry, thereby joining another family; this makes girls' greatest achievement an appropriate marriage. It is important to note that men can also experience disadvantages because of gender inequality. Most men who serve in the armed forces and engage in direct combat are men. Men are typically assigned to perform hazardous jobs including security, firefighting, law enforcement, and military service in many nations. (Lorber, 2001). "Although in this 21st century, women are enlisting in the police and fire department, and in some countries, they fight in wars, a widespread societal assumption about the gender arrangement is that women's responsibility is to take care of the home" (Reiter, 2012, p. 12).

The nature of politics in general and liberal democracy in particular raises another contextual difficulty regarding the political engagement of men and women: historically, liberal democracy has benefited males more than women. The public-private divide, which has served as the foundation for political regimes ever since, has kept women in the home. This gender disparity can be traced back to ancient Greece. In fact, women had no place in politics, according to philosophers and political scientists like Hegel, Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Locke, and Hobbes, who believed that women were better suited for caring responsibilities as spouses and mothers.

Women were not recognized as national decision-makers in ancient Greece; in turn, women's concerns were side-lined in democratic theories (Sonwalkar, 2003). They were denied the right to vote, and suffragists utilised this paradigm to demand the right to vote until liberal political philosophy of the 19th century advanced the idea of the "free and rational" individual. But according to Rai, the conceptual underpinnings of liberal philosophy are intrinsically gendered in ways that uphold patriarchal norms and disregard the subordination of women in both the politics and society (2000, p. 2). Furthermore, feminist researchers argued that liberal theory's concept of the abstract individual is not wholly gender

neutral and questioned it. They argued that women were restricted to the home sphere since liberal democratic thought was based on the idea that males were political actors (Pateman, 1996). This is the reason why, despite having the ability to vote, women are unable to effectively influence public policy or bring the private sphere under the public domain.

4. Lessons from Liberia

The idea of gender inequity is not new, particularly in traditional African civilization. There are many gaps in the global utilisation of human resources because of gender inequality in this day. For some reason, the situation is somewhat different in other parts of the world because there is an equal opportunity for everyone to demonstrate their skills, regardless of gender representation. From a narrow viewpoint, gender inequality disadvantages women, which may be connected to the percentage of illiterate women in Liberia (Jallah, Larsala, & Baah, 2021). On the one hand, Liberia today is considered as a 'partly free' country and exemplifying in the region where elections are conducted through contestation and are competitive, the violence against women is still one of the critical issues in the country (Freedom House, 2024).

During Liberia's 14-year civil war, it was men's responsibility to fight. The soldiers and commanders of various warring groups were predominantly men and boys. While the men were on the front lines, women were supposed to stay behind and take care of the elderly and young in refugee camps. Despite the diversity of ethnic groups that make up Liberian society, each adhering to unique customs and traditions (Guannu, 1999), gender-based practices persist among them, particularly the notion that women should take care of the home (Gibbs, 1965, p. 208). Many women in Liberia lack the opportunity to reach positions of authority at the national level as a result of these cultural norms and expectations.

For example, the percentage of time that men and women spend on household tasks is stated in the United Nations (UN) report on women in Liberia (Phillips, 1998; Rai, 2000). In addition, in the realm of politics, women's representation in the bicameral legislative system, which consists of the House of Representatives and the House of Senate, is severely disproportionate to that of men in Liberia. As of 2011, the House of Representatives consists of 73 seats and the Senate consists of 30 seats, 2 for each of the 15 political subdivisions. Women

had only 11% of the 103 total seats, according to the UN Report on Women in Liberia (UN Women, 2021). Women are forced to engage in traditional politics, which benefits the majority gender, as a result of their underrepresentation in the national legislature.

5. Key Factors Affecting Gender Balance

Numerous studies have been conducted in the literature that outline the barriers that prevent women from participating in politics in some, if not all, African nations. Those include political violence, party preferences, the illiteracy and employment gaps, empowerment, cultural and traditional norms, and the stereotyping of women. Fear of torture and intimidation is linked to political activity in many African countries. Although it is evident that men are equally impacted by this, women face more barriers to participating in local and national politics. It is common in Liberia. Ben Manbande (2017) asserts that:

Electoral violence, usually committed along tribal and partisan lines, has been commonplace in sub-Saharan Africa, and Liberia has been singled out as a nation where political actors feel entitled to endless impunity while their actions have led to the deaths of many people and the destruction of properties (Jallah et al., 2021, p. 7).

Political Parties' Preferences for Gender. Political parties are the most practical mechanism for electing persons to public office in a number of African nations, primarily in West Africa. The political engagement and representation of women in election processes are undermined by the institutional beliefs and policies of these organisations. Political parties designate candidates for both local and national elections; these candidates garner support from the public, contribute a sizeable portion of the parties' overall financial commitment, and develop policies related to government (Iknowpolitics, 2019). Liberia's political parties are not unique in this regard. It is challenging for political parties to nominate women for elected office due to the disparity in economic power between men and women as well as societal views about women's roles. Instead, all parties must carefully select candidates who are well-liked by the public and who have the necessary influence to lead. Numerous female candidates faced intimidation and threats

during the 2017 presidential and congressional elections. At their campaign event, some were forcibly removed from the stage, and their billboards were demolished. According to reports, certain political party officials even intimidated Ms. MacDella Cooper, a female presidential candidate running on their platform (NDI, 2016).

In Liberia, there were twenty-five political parties as of 2018, just two of which had female leaders. Since many women have little interest in politics, the political elites have fewer women to choose from when nominating them. Women have disadvantages in election processes due to these beliefs and the political strategies of the parties, and their unequal involvement in decision-making processes impedes the achievement of gender parity in society and the achievement of sustainable development goals by 2030.

Employment Gap between Men and Women. Family characteristics have a major impact on employment for both men and women, but women are disproportionately affected, according to Kay Lehman Schlozman, Nancy Burns, and Sidney Verba (2001) in their study titled "A Multistage Model of Gender, Employment, and Political Participation." For example, a woman's capacity to work full-time is more likely to be impacted by marriage and having preschool-aged children than by her spouse. Men and women use somewhat different pathways to enter the economy and eventually land a full-time job. Since volunteering is one of the safer routes to take, more men than women end up in formal employment.

When it comes to fulfilling familial responsibilities, men typically continue working in families where both parents are present, while women take on unpaid caregiving duties at home (Schlozman et al., 1999). Alternatively, these obligations may force men to pursue full-time work while women take on part-time work. It is implied that women are less likely than males to work full-time and that they seek out different kinds of employment. As a result, women who do enter the economy typically hold lower-level positions.

According to demographic figures, there is a significant gender employment gap in Liberia between men and women working in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the civil service. According to the research, there is a greater disparity in the employment rates of men and women, accounting for both

formal and informal labour. In this regard, the Republic of Liberia's Gender Ministry Report from January 2009 states:

Women are disproportionately clustered in the least productive sectors with 90% employed in the informal sector or in agriculture, compared to 75% of working men. Men are more than three times more likely to be employed by the civil service, NGOs, international organizations, or public corporations. The manufacturing sector hires men at a rate of 2 men for every 1 woman. In mining and panning, more than 9 men are hired to every 1 woman. In forestry, the ratio of men to women is 4 to 1 and in the services sector, it is 3 to 2, men to women respectively. Only in agriculture and fisheries are men and women employed on an equal basis (MoGD, 2009, p. 23).

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), state corporations, and Liberia's civil service agencies employ women three times less frequently than do men (CWIQ, 2007). Put otherwise, the working class in Liberia is made up of three times as many men as women. Specifically, the proportion of men in the working class is 25.5 percent, while the proportion of women in the working class is much lower at 8.0 percent. It can be observed that somewhat less than half of Liberians in the working class work unpaid in the household, on farms or in other agricultural fields, or in unofficial economic sectors. Of those working as unpaid family carers, women make up 56% of the workforce, while males make up 34%. Significantly, 74% of all women employed in Liberia are “informal labourers, and 41% of women with university education work informally, compared to 24% of men with university education” (CFR, 2024). This clearly demonstrates the significant job gap that exists in Liberia between men and women. Until these issues are resolved, women and girls will continue to face significant impediments to political involvement and to be underrepresented in politics.

Education/literacy. Numerous studies in the literature have confirmed that the great majority of rural constituencies in a normal African state are typically blamed for being inaccessible, lacking in pertinent services, and having inadequate education. Because of this, the residents of these rural regions have few, if any, prospects for actual empowerment. This has also increased the rate of illiteracy and decreased the opportunity for personal growth that could lead to

assuming leadership positions in political activity. These factors negatively impact men and women's political potential, but they erect greater obstacles for women. Because their societies are more receptive to their struggles for power, men have more alternatives for robust responses. The Gender, Children and Social Protection Ministry of Liberia (2009) reports that the literacy rate for men in rural communities is 60 percent, while it is 86 percent for men in urban communities. For women, this is a startlingly low rate of 26 percent compared to 61 percent for women in urban communities. Additionally, there are significant gender differences in secondary school attendance, particularly for high school in both rural and urban areas. The gender difference in high school attendance is less pronounced in urban areas than it is in rural ones, but there are still more boys than girls enrolled. In rural communities, the net attendance per ratio for girls is as low as 6%, and for boys it is 13%. In metropolitan communities, girls make up between 29 and 32 percent of the total number of attendees among boys (Demographic Survey, 2007).

A 2009 report from the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection (2009) states that 64.7% of the country's population is literate, with 78.1 percent living in urban areas and 21.9 percent in rural areas. In the meantime, men outnumbered women in terms of literacy rates: whereas 77.0 percent of men are literate, only 54% of women are. Women's political engagement is also severely hampered by the literacy problem.

Role of Traditional and Cultural Norms. In Liberia, customs and cultural norms have a big influence on whether women participate in politics. According to George (2019), customs and traditions that have an impact on the social structure all have an impact on women's capacity to participate in politics, both in rural constituencies and the national polity, as well as their potential to rise to prominence and become electable within the national polity. The patriarchal family structure that permeates society is the root of the difficulties that women encounter in these countries. Under this arrangement, men have the exclusive authority to decide what to do and take charge of the household. Particularly in the rural areas, these kinds of traditional ideas and cultural approaches—particularly about women's responsibilities and standing in society—remain unwavering (Sadie, 2005).

The responsibilities that traditional members of society play, and the division of labour are still determined by gender. Women are confined to and placed in household responsibilities (Kangas et al., 2015). Consequently, women's formal political engagement remains impeded by the prevailing conception of the female gender identity, which is primarily domestic and caregiving in character.

6. Administrations' Achievements from 2006 to 2022

Appointed Positions: As president, out of 21 ministries, Madam Sirleaf appointed women to head six: Finance, Commerce, Justice, Youth and Sports, Gender Children and Social Protection, and Ministry of the Interior. Then, several women were appointed by Madam Sirleaf as junior ministers of the government. For instance, there were 318 Directors in total at the Civil Service Institutions. After Madame Sirleaf's appointments, 52 of them were women. Also, Madam Sirleaf continued this commitment by appointing two women judges to the five-judge bench of the Supreme Court of Liberia. Liberia has 15 political subdivisions, each being represented to the president as a "superintendent." President Sirleaf appointed women to five of the 15 superintendent positions (Knights, 2014). In addition, six of the 22 Liberian ambassadors she appointed to serve in various allied countries were women.

On the other hand, addressing the participants during the international conference for women known as the 'Sheroes Forum', held in Liberia in 2018, President Weah expressed his commitment to women's empowerment and referred to himself as a 'feminist in chief'. President Weah recalled to Liberian women and other international women on this opportunity that when she was contesting for the presidency, she chose a woman, Madam Jewel Howard Taylor, as her vice-presidential candidate. Besides, he appointed numerous women to senior government positions, and took a series of actions to emphasize his support for the cause of women's advancement (The Executive Mansion, 2018).

President Weah appointed women as heads of several ministries including Health and Social Welfare, Gender, Children and Social Protection, Commerce, Public Works and Agriculture. The number of women ministers in the cabinet was five out of 19 (UN Women, 2021). Likewise, Weah nominated a number of women, including the directors of the National Fisheries Authority

and the Liberia Free Port, as deputy ministers and directors of various ministries and agencies, respectively. Under his leadership, out of the 318 directors of civil service institutions in Liberia, 40 were women. In 2018, immediately after he became president, Weah completed three appointments to the Supreme Court of Liberia: two men, and one woman who serves as the chief justice. The total number of women at the Supreme Court remains two. From among the 15 political subdivisions, President Weah appointed three women superintendents. In addition, President Weah appointed 24 ambassadors and charge affairs (diplomatic agents), eight of whom are women, to represent Liberia in allied countries around the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Education: The Liberian Education Trust (LET) was established within the first year of President Sirleaf's administration to meet the needs of Liberian women with regards to education. It is fair to say that this is an exceptionally active group. It has built more than 50 schools, recruited more than 500 teachers and trained women through intensive programmes. It also provided scholarships to about 5,000 women and girls enrolled in formal education and literacy initiatives. Equally important, as of three years after its launch, LET reportedly had reached every county through its buildings, literacy, and scholarship programs (Knights, 2015). In this context, the rating of writing and reading of females ages 15 and above is imperative to examine. Prior to 2005, female literacy rate was around 20 percent. It raised to 27 percent in 2007, while this rate reached to 34 percent in 2017; meanwhile, according to World Bank statistics, education expenditure at the time accounted for 6.5 percent of the Liberian national budget, while military expenditure accounted for only 0.7 percent. Considering that the funds allocated to education are higher than the funds allocated to the military, it would be a fair claim to say that the Sirleaf administration gave high priority to human development.

Since President Weah took office in 2018, promoting education of girls has been one of his most significant achievements. There has been incremental improvement in female education. Before 2018, the literacy rate of females ages 15 and above was 27 percent; as of 2018 the rate stood at 34.1 percent. When national education and military expenditures for 2020 and 2021 under President Weah are compared, we observe the following figures: education expenditures

accounted for 13.7 percent of the national budget in 2020 and 6.9 percent in 2021, while military expenditures were measured at 0.9 percent in 2020 and 1 percent in 2021. Thus, a commitment to human capacity development, including education for women, is evident within the Weah administration. That being said, in spite of this incremental progress, much still needs to be done to address the large gender gap in the education sector due to the underrepresentation of women. Liberia ranks 178th out of 191 countries and territories in this area. “low human development category” (HDI, 2022).

In accordance with the data provided by UNESCO, the literacy rate of the country stands at 48.3 percent in 2022. In rural areas, ratio for the adult literacy is 34 percent - 48.4 percent and 24.1 percent for male and female respectively (Global Giving, 2023).

7. Women’s Empowerment and Challenges in Liberia

The Sirleaf administration has undertaken an intervention to strengthen young girls, especially with the necessary skills that will enable them to be economically stable, make healthy choices and protect themselves from sexual abuse. In line with this purpose, The Liberian Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection initiated the Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) project in 2009. The main objective of this project was to increase the employment and income of 2.500 young Liberian women by offering training in livelihood and life skills, and easing their transition to productive work:

Smooth the path of adolescent girls to productive employment through job skills training and business development services. The training will focus on technical skills, as well as the integration of life skills training to address some of the crucial barriers to the development of adolescent girls in Liberia. A program as such is beneficial to the Liberian adolescent girls as they will learn skill that would transcend the conventional female’s skills like sewing and cooking (Adoho et al., 2014).

As a result of EPAG, the employment rate for women increased from 47 percent to 60 percent in 2011 (Knights, 2015). In addition, positive improvements were found in a number of empowerment indicators. The most important of these

indicators are financial availability, self-esteem and concerns about the present and future. During Sirleaf's Presidency, UN reports assert that Liberia has taken steps to fulfil the recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women which is set up for monitoring the compliance with the Convention of all types of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Liberian government signed the Convention on October, 1998. As of 2009, in a report provided by the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Liberian Minister of Gender and Development, Vabah Gayflor stated that; "the Government was working to create a more equal and non-discriminatory society, economy and State by making gender mainstreaming a priority in the country's development We are in the process of writing a new history for our nation's women and girls" (Reliefweb, 2009). The Committee experts recognized the Liberian government is committed to women's empowerment, however, "urged that more be done to meet the challenges head on. One expert noted that 44 per cent of Liberian women over the age of 20 had experienced violence in their lifetime and 22 per cent of Liberian women overall had experienced violence in the past year" (Reliefweb, 2009).

In most cases, Weah administration has remained committed to women's empowerment and has made significant efforts to eradicate gender discrimination and ensure equal access to economic empowerment. His administration brought an end to a contentious issue for Liberians concerning land ownership. Since the end of the civil war, Liberian government has granted concession companies access to indigenous lands. Following four years of robust discussions on the Land Rights Act, President Weah signed it into law in September 2018. With this new land law, individuals could obtain ownership of their indigenous lands by providing the authorities with evidence such as oral testimony, maps and documented agreements with neighbours. Customary land was not accessible to women prior to the passage of the Land Act. In the communities they married into, they were often viewed as outsiders and thus were not allowed to participate in land decisions. Since the enactment of the Act, many rural women have taken advantage of this provision to obtain land and thus achieve economic independence. As a result, their socio-economic status has improved and they are now participating in local decision-making processes related to the management of land, as well as other natural resources.

UN Women in Liberia, through the Government of Liberia with the support of the Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) unit, organised a capacity building programme for women in 2019, focusing on agriculture and providing access to agricultural tools and high quality seeds for investment, benefiting 576 women and 60 men. This was to guarantee that they had enough funds to invest in their own Village Savings and Credit Associations and to run their own agricultural enterprises (VSLAs). A VSLA is a self-sustaining and self-managed organization of 20 to 30 women in a targeted community that can borrow money. Additionally, over 50 rural women between the ages of 25 and 58 from 15 counties in Liberia now have the necessary knowledge and skills to prepare, package and market rice and cassava. This is the successful outcome of a technical workshop on building value chains for rice and cassava, organised with the support of UN Women's regional office in Dakar. These women, who have now acquired new knowledge and skills, are actively engaged as local trainers for other rural women. 500 young women and girls were subjected to a 9-month training programme. The main focus of these trainings was on reading and numeracy skills, which will also benefit the development of company formation and financial management skills. Other programmes were also available. For example, 200 young women also participated in vocational skills training, including cosmetology and tailoring, not to mention sexual and reproductive health training, including menstrual hygiene management. Rural women farmers trading in agricultural products in south-eastern Liberia have established 16 new VSLA groups comprising a total of 420 rural women entrepreneurs. These are in line with international commitments such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the aforementioned CEDAW and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but also with national priorities set out in the Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (2019-2023), the National Gender Policy, the Women's Economic Empowerment Unit's work to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. During Weah's Presidency, the country also initiated the global campaign "16 Days of Activism to Eliminate Violence Against Women" in the centre of Monrovia (UN Liberia, 2018).

a. Women's Participation in Elections (2005–2016)

A series of recommendations of the National Electoral Commission on the registration of political parties and independent candidates were applied in the 2005 elections with the aim of increasing women's participation and representation in the political process. The recommendations indicated that political parties should nominate no less than 30 percent of either gender for public elected offices and its governing council; yet, the electoral law did not contain this quota and the NEC did not use penalties for those who failed to comply with the requirement. Consequently, of the 21 political parties that participated in the elections, only the Liberian Labour Party (LPL) was able to pass the 30 percent threshold. In the 2005 elections, the percentages of women candidates in the three most prominent political parties were as follows: Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) 21.7 percent, Unity Party 8.8 percent and Freedom Party 22 percent. In total, 109 out of 802 candidates in 2005 were women, or about 14 percent. The 2005 elections were very important in the sense that they were the elections with the highest proportion of women. 14 percent of candidates elected to the 64-member House of Representatives were women; 17 percent of the 30-seat Senate were women (UNDP, 2021). This election also brought the first woman president and 14 women out of a total of 105 elected officials, including 13 women in the legislature.

Figure 1: Percentage of Women's Political Participation in 2005 Election

Location	Total Number	Men	Women	Percentage of Women
President	22	20	2	9%
Vice-President	22	21	1	4.5%
Senate	215	194	21	9.7%
Representatives	543	458	85	15.6%
Candidates	802	693	109	13.5%
Elected officials	105	91	14	13%
Registered Voters	1,352,720	676,340	676,360	50%

Source: NEC Voter Registration Statistics, 2005.

When it comes to the 2011 elections, women made up 49 percent of the total electorate and there was one woman as a presidential candidate. Of the 860 candidates who registered and applied for parliamentary, presidential and vice-presidential seats, 158 were women. As observed in the 2011 elections, this apparent under-representation of women is a natural consequence of the gender quota regulation, which was agreed upon but had serious problems in its implementation. During this election, nine women were elected at the legislature, including one elected during the representative by-elections in 2015. In these elections, five of the incumbent women representatives were re-elected and three new women representatives were elected. In the Senate, there was a highly competitive race for 15 seats, but only one-woman candidate was elected. In the new legislature, the number of woman representatives was eight, and two senators, indicating that the proportion of women lawmakers decreased from 16 percent in 2006 to less than 10 percent in 2012, and 11 percent from 2014 to 2017.

Figure 2: Percentage of Women’s Political Participation in the 2011 Elections

Location	Total Number	Men	Women	Percentage of Women
President	16	15	1	6%
Vice-President	16	15	1	6%
Senate	248	238	10	4%
Representatives	580	450	130	22%
Candidates	860	702	158	18.3%
Elected officials	90	82	8	9%
Register. Voters	1,798,930	920,448	878,482	49%

Source: NEC Voter’s Registration Statistics, 2011.

b. Women Participations in Elections (2017–2022)

In 2014, the new electoral law was amended to include the expression “endeavour to ensure”. Nevertheless, there was no precise and thorough explanation of what this phrase meant, nor was there any accountability for it (Elections Law, 2014). During the 2017 Representative and Presidential elections, only one of the 24 registered political parties or coalitions complied with the recommended 30 percent gender quota in the candidate lists, and the Liberia Restoration Party had the only female presidential candidate. When the candidate lists of the three largest parties and the coalition formed are analysed, a very striking finding emerges. The lists of these actors are not even close to fulfilling the proposed gender quota: The Coalition for Democratic Change had 11.5 percent of the gender quota, the Unity Party 17 percent and the Freedom Party 10 percent (UNDP, 2020). During the presidential and representative elections in 2017, women remained fully engaged, as in the 2011 general elections, constituting 49 percent of the total eligible voters, yet 16 percent of candidates. Regardless of this deep commitment to the political process, the number of representatives remained the same at nine women and 64 men, while the number of senators remained the same at two women and 28 men, bringing the total number of women deputies to 12.3 per cent. In 2021, this percentage dropped and is now below 11 per cent. The total number of women elected is therefore 10, with two more women in the Senate.

Figure 3: Percentage of Women’s Political Participation in 2017 Election

Location	Total Number	Men	Women	Percentage of Women
President	20	19	1	5%
Vice-President	20	14	6	30%
Senate	NA			
Representatives	984	828	156	15.8%
Candidates	1024	861	163	16%
Elected officials	705	696	10	1.4%
Register. Voters	2,183,683	1,120,950	1,062,733	49%

Source: NEC Voter’s Registration Statistics, 2017.

c. Policies to Enhance Gender Equality

Article 5 of the Organic Law of Liberia sets requirements for national unity in a single polity. As a result, laws are enacted to enable and encourage the participation of all citizens in the political system. This establishes the legal framework for policies that address inequalities. In this regard, one of the notable policies under Madam Sirleaf was the participation of the Liberian government, women's NGOs and civil society groups, religious groups, youth and community-based organizations, public and commercial institutions in the multidimensional strategy group that formulated the National Gender Policy (NGP) in 2009. This strategy, which demands an interdisciplinary effort and approach, is a gender policy that is vital to the continued stability of Liberia. Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection Vabah K. Gayflor explained the importance of the NGP and the role it plays in Liberia's growth and stability:

The Government of Liberia is strongly committed to gender equality as a means of maintaining peace, reducing poverty, enhancing justice, and

promoting development in the country. It is the furtherance of this commitment, that a National Gender Policy was developed in 2009 through a wide consultative process with inputs from various stakeholders. The policy recommends that gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting should be adopted as a development approach and shall inform the economic reform agenda, medium and long-term development planning, value reorientation, social transformation, and other development initiatives of government (MoGD, 2009, p. 9).

The NGP aims to promote gender-sensitive systems so that both women and men can take part in the public sphere and benefit equally from development initiatives (Knights, 2015). This policy shows the willingness of Sirleaf's administration to embrace gender equality. Her administration made some progress in closing the gender gap in political participation, such as with the electoral law. In March 2013, The Liberian Senate overwhelmingly agreed to ratify the Electoral Reform Legislation of 2011 contained in Section 4.5 (1A): *“In submitting to the Commission, a list of candidates for elective office, a political party or coalition should endeavor to ensure that the governing body and its list of candidates should have no less than 30 percent of its members from each gender.”* The reason for this policy as explained under (1B) of the electoral law, *“Is to support the move to gender equity in the representation of both genders in the governance of political parties and in the list of candidates they present for every election”* (Elections Law, 2014). Several national policies have been implemented by the Sirleaf administration to deal with various aspects of Liberian women's political participation and underrepresentation.

In 2018, during President Weah's administration, another very important development occurred. On this year, the National Gender Policy (NGP), which mandates the promotion of gender equality at all levels of government, approved the policy and legislation for action on women's political participation. Furthermore, it is the first pillar of the national government's agenda under the theme Pro-Poor for Prosperity and Development (PAPD): *Power to the People* is to increase the number of women who participate in politics at the national and municipal levels in order to meet the target of 30 percent by 2023. Another important policy achievement, the importance of which should not be overlooked and should be emphasized accordingly, occurred in 1986. The 1986 Electoral Law

was amended to require 30% representation of both men and women on the executive boards of all political parties and coalitions in Liberia. Nonetheless, implementation and penalizing those who do not comply with the 30 percent gender quota has been unsuccessful.

The House of Representatives enacted a modified version of Section 4.5 in February 2022, during Weah's administration, outlining the procedures for enforcement and punishment: “*the National Elections Commission can reject candidate listings that do not meet the 30% quota.*” This development has left all political parties and coalitions operating within Liberia's political system with no choice but to comply with the electoral law, which is committed to reducing the inequality gap between men and women.

A variety of regional and global legal frameworks have been accepted by Liberia in order to advance women's political and civil rights both locally and nationally. These include the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women – The Maputo Protocol. In order to fulfil Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality, which fosters equality and socio-economic development, in 2019, the Liberian national legislature introduced a draft domestic violence law that aims to protect vulnerable persons and also provides for corrective measures for perpetrators who violate the law. The Liberian government also established a sex offenders' registry and allocated \$2 million in 2020 (UNPRESS, 2020).

8. Conclusion

Presidents Sirleaf and Weah have had different administrative agendas during their administrations. This is mainly due to the different needs of Liberians during their terms in office. Yet, when it comes to gender equality and the empowerment of Liberian women, it must be said that the two leaders share similarities. Madame Sirleaf was certainly more vocal in her support for women's rights. However, throughout her administration, she has not achieved any results that would suggest that she has prioritized gender-centered policies more than President Weah. Both Presidents have performed equally well in putting gender-centered policies first and taking institutional measures to close the enormous

gender divide. Both leaders stayed in office and demonstrated a continued commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. This is mainly because there is a clear recognition that much more needs to be done to address gender inequalities in Liberia's political system if the country is to have sustainable development.

Yet, the findings of this research illustrate that state institutions in Liberia remain largely male-dominated. According to the Human Development Index (2022), Liberia is ranked 178th out of 191 nations worldwide for gender disparity, and 163rd out of 185 countries for having more women in parliament (UNDP, 2022). Women hold only 11 percent of the 103 seats in the Liberian National Legislature as of 2021. These statistics show that women and girls are underrepresented, given that they make up 47.3 percent of the country's population according to the 2008 census. Women aged 20-24 who were married or in a relationship before the age of 18 constitute 35.9 percent of the female population. It is important to acknowledge that this has a significant impact on women's employment in Liberia as well as their ability to participate equally in politics. Marriage and having children impose more commitments and responsibilities on women than on men. Women are more likely to engage in unpaid care and domestic work. As of 2021, 6.7 percent of the time spent by women and girls aged 15 years and over corresponds to 2.6 percent of the time spent by men. The World Bank Development Index emphasize that the employment rate of women is 47.4 percent, making their financial strength and influence on the public sphere low compared to men.

Additionally, this study revealed that women's participation in schooling is minimal. The literacy rates indicate that the proportion of women to men who can read and write, and can understand common daily activities from ages 15 and above is just 34 percent. However, this rate among men is 63 percent. These are the factors that hinder women's equal political participation in Liberia's national governance. To succeed in closing the gender inequality gap in Liberia's political system, these key obstacles must be fully tackled.

Liberal feminism contributed significantly to the advancement of feminism, particularly first-wave feminism, but as it assimilated into society's norms, it progressively lost its appeal. Despite the fact that, many feminist theories focused on advancing women's legal rights, political representation, and

access to traditionally male-dominated fields of work during the 1970s and 1980s, addressing and unpacking the impediments in achieving gender equality in the case of Liberia necessitates an intersectional understanding as well as the role of state and the socio-economic disparity that women are embedded. Through aiming to create unity and inspire the masses, liberal feminist action was meant to become innocuous and unquestioning. Its foundation in individualistic, neo-liberal principles also hinders the theorization of women's oppression as collective, systematic, and structural (Cottais, 2020).

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