Original Article

The Critical Examination of Challenges Facing the Women's Movement in Africa: A Case Study in Liberia

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical analysis of the obstacles encountered by the women's movement in Africa, focusing on Liberia as a case example. Despite commitments at the global, continental, and regional levels to advance women's rights and gender equality, women across Africa still confront substantial hurdles in attaining equal rights and opportunities. The discussion delves into various feminist theories and conceptual frameworks, such as liberal, cultural, radical, and post-modern perspectives, and assesses the influence of non-violent women's movements in driving social change. Liberia's experience serves as a case study to illustrate both the achievements and ongoing challenges of its women's movement, including the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president and reforms aimed at increasing women's participation in government and security roles. The paper contends that African women's movements face major issues such as violence against women, economic disparities, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms. It concludes with recommendations to advance women's rights and gender equality in Africa, emphasising the importance of investing in women's education and economic empowerment, and addressing the fundamental causes of violence targeting women and girls.

INTRODUCTION

Achieving gender equality and eradicating all types of discrimination against women are core aspects of fundamental human rights. The UN Charter, adopted in 1945, sets four essential principles emphasising these rights and freedoms, affirming that they should be upheld "without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion." Subsequently, in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted, explicitly affirming that women and men are entitled to equal rights and freedoms outlined in the declaration (United Nations, 2014).

In 2000, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325, highlighting those women and children constitute a significant portion of those negatively impacted by armed conflicts (Canadian International Development Agency [CIDA], n.d.). In this context, Kofi Annan emphasised that encouraging women's involvement in peacekeeping and peacebuilding is a crucial investment in peace, as women are often more effective at preventing and resolving conflicts (Shepherd, 2015).

The African Union (AU) has also implemented its own gender policy and protocol to promote women's rights and influence feminist initiatives across the continent (Ahikire, 2014). Within this framework, gender-focused organisations in West Africa, such as ECOWAS, have been established to operate regionally. Notable examples include the West Africa Network for Peace building (WANEP), based in Ghana, and the Women in Peace building Network (WIPNET) (Tavaana Tolerance Project, n.d.).

Women have endured three primary forms of oppression: individual, institutional, and societal or cultural (Pasque & Wimmer, n.d.). By the same token, African women's resistance manifests in diverse ways, including the political and transformative utilisation of cultural traditions, even those embedded with patriarchal elements. Colonial dominance played a significant role in the subjugation of African women, with State-sponsored ideologies imposing specific roles that diminished their agency and redefined their social positions as passive, despite women's efforts and struggles often being active and transformative. Women's resistance is deeply rooted in defending traditional communal spaces and shared identities that have historically supported their livelihoods. In the face of ongoing violence, women challenge the State, traditional authorities, and corporations to assert their rights to political and economic justice. Additionally, changes in production systems have influenced how women organise and mobilise in their struggles (Tsikata & Ossome, 2024).

This article aims to critically analyse the obstacles encountered by the women's movement in Africa, with Liberia serving as a case example. The paper is structured into five parts: the first offers a conceptual and theoretical overview of feminism; the second critically examines non-violent women's movements; the third addresses the broader challenges faced by women's movements across Africa; the fourth specifically investigates these challenges within the context of Liberia; and the final section presents concluding recommendations.

THE CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSION ON FEMINISM

Theories of Feminism

It has been claimed that feminism is a highly impactful movement of the modern era, with its influence visible in every aspect of social, political, and cultural life worldwide. Indeed, feminism has become an integral and recognisable part of our cultural landscape (Gamble, 2006). During the

1980s and 1990s, feminist theories developed to challenge existing social structures and hierarchies. It is also noted that feminism is both a political philosophy and a set of practices aimed at liberating women from various forms of oppression and discrimination (Gaidzanaw, 2013).

Feminism is an evolving concept shaped by diverse ideas and viewpoints over time. It tackles important political, social, economic, and legal challenges. Fundamentally, feminism aims to eliminate gender-based discrimination, address the feminisation of poverty, and confront issues such as early marriage and childbirth. It advocates for women's rights and strives for their full participation in society. A feminist is an individual dedicated to promoting gender equality, equal economic opportunities, religious tolerance, and political freedom. In essence, feminist theory provides a sociological perspective that analyses the roles and positions of women and men within society, with the ultimate goal of enhancing women's well-being, emancipation, and liberation (Aina-Pelemo & Adeboye, 2021).

Feminism comprises diverse perspectives, including Marxist, Liberal, neoliberal, and legal feminism. Liberal feminism focuses on ensuring equal rights and responsibilities between men and women and strives to eliminate gender disparities. Marxist feminism argues that true freedom can only be achieved by dismantling both patriarchy and capitalism, viewing these systems as interconnected sources of oppression. Neoliberal feminism emphasises empowerment, especially for those seeking new opportunities, and adopts a moderate approach to addressing gender inequality, which is considered progressive in places like Nigeria. Legal feminism examines issues of sameness, equality, and difference, exploring how legal frameworks can facilitate meaningful social change. The legal profession actively supports feminism and the inclusion of women, partly because the law has played a role in granting women formal equality,

assuming, for the moment, that such equality exists (Cain & Smart, 2002).

Feminist legal theory functions as both a conceptual framework and an intellectual resource for exploring and debating issues of equality. It emerged from efforts to reform the law and continues to play a significant role in practical implementation as well as in wider societal conversations. This connection is inevitable, as the theoretical and practical aspects of this field of law are deeply intertwined (Bowman & Schneider, 1998).

Among the various branches of feminism, there are different schools of thought, including Marxist, Liberal, Neoliberal, and Legal feminism. Liberal feminism aims for gender equality by promoting equal rights and responsibilities for men and women, actively working to reduce gender gaps. Marxist feminists contend that true liberation requires a more revolutionary approach, calling for the overthrow of both patriarchal and capitalist structures, which they see as fundamentally oppressive. Neoliberal feminism emphasises individual empowerment, especially for those seeking to pursue personal opportunities (Aina-Pelemo & Adeboye, 2021).

This viewpoint is described as a non-disruptive cultural approach to womanhood and the interconnectedness of gender inequality, seen as a progressive advancement in nations such as Nigeria. Legal feminism explores ideas of sameness, equality, difference, and the capacity of law to drive meaningful social change, with the legal profession playing an active role in promoting feminism and increasing women's participation (Ibid).

Feminism is a widespread movement initiated by women from various backgrounds aimed at eliminating all forms of oppression by men that exist within a patriarchal society. It consistently opposes all types of discrimination against women. The

movement involves efforts to understand and define gender roles and advocates for incorporating women's interests into social structures. Feminism seeks to explain the roots of gender inequality and is fundamentally a political effort to achieve gender equality across all areas of society. Supporters of feminism promote equal rights and freedoms for both women and men. Consequently, feminism encompasses a diverse array of social theories, political initiatives, and moral philosophies, often with differing or opposing viewpoints. Its primary focus is on addressing social, political, and economic inequalities faced by women. Feminism aims to analyse women's oppression, identify its causes and effects, and develop strategies to eliminate societal disparities. Its objectives include ensuring equality, dignity, rights, emancipation, and empowerment for women, and fostering movements advocating for equality, justice, and freedom. Ultimately, feminism seeks to transform the socio-economic, political, and security frameworks of society to increase women's participation in public life (Mohajan, 2022; Ferguson, 2017; Shulika, 2022).

This participation and involvement should be comprehensive and directed in a systematic and scientific manner to engage women in governance, peace-building initiatives, human rights promotion, and the combating of violence against women, which are all ongoing and significant subjects in global debates (Goyol, 2019). Feminist theory is founded on three core principles. It asserts that women have valuable contributions across all aspects of life. Additionally, it emphasises that due to systemic oppression, women have been hindered from reaching their full potential, gaining rightful recognition, or actively participating in society. Lastly, feminist scholarship goes beyond mere critique; it actively seeks societal change and progress (Pasque & Wimmer, n.d.). Historically, feminism is often categorised into three waves: the first wave spanning the 19th to early 20th century, the second wave from the 1960s to the 1980s, and

the third wave beginning in the early 1990s (Bisong & Ekanem, 2014), as explained in more detail below.

Liberal Feminism: The First Wave of the Women's Movement

Liberal feminism first emerged between the 17th and 18th centuries in the Western countries to educate women with liberal ideas, and later expanded in the rest of the world. Finally, in the 19th century, feminists extended the arguments in favour of equal rights for women under the law to own property and to vote. Liberal feminism is the most widely accepted social and political philosophy among feminists. It has arisen as a theoretical background to nurture the feminism movements. It is a main branch of contemporary feminism that tries to establish gender equality in the society. Liberalism is a political and economic principle that stresses individual independence, equality of opportunity, and the protection of individual rights. It supports the rule of law, civil and human rights, secularism, democracy, freedom of speech, press, religion, and property. It encourages the development of freedoms, particularly in the political and economic spheres. It is a "feminist theory that believes gender inequality is created by lowering access for women and girls to civil rights and allocation of social resources such as education and employment" (Mohajan, 2022).

Radical Feminism: Second Wave of Feminist Movement

Radical feminism represents an intense evolution and extreme branch of liberal feminism that emerged in the 20th century. It opposes patriarchal oppression and the mistreatment of women, aiming to prevent a male-dominated society. This perspective concentrates on the dominance of men and the privileges embedded within social structures, advocating for women to organise independently as distinct social entities. Its foundation rests on two core principles: first, that

women possess inherent positive value; and second, that they are systematically oppressed everywhere due to patriarchal systems (Rowland & Klein, 2013).

This form of feminism identifies patriarchy and sexism as the primary causes of women's oppression. It recognises women as a distinct political group because of their biological roles. Radical feminists view society as fundamentally patriarchal, with men as the ruling class and women as the subordinate class. They also hold the belief that women are not merely equal to men but are morally superior, and that patriarchy could be replaced by matriarchy. Their goal is to radically transform women's lives and society through disruptive actions. They see men as adversaries of women and often regard marriage as a hegemonic institution used to exploit women (Mohajan, 2022; Thornham, 2004). Within this framework, two distinct approaches are identified:

Socialist-Marxist Feminism: One Version of Radical Feminism

Socialist feminism is a dynamic intellectual and political movement that has emerged and faded over time. It originated in the late 1960s as a creative synthesis of debates about the roots of women's oppression. Influenced by Marxism, socialist feminism developed partly in response to liberal feminism, but it does not advocate for the complete abolition of patriarchy within social relationships. While Marxism is often limited by its focus on class analysis, which socialist feminists see as neglecting gender, socialist feminism views women as being exploited through a dual system of capitalism and patriarchy. It rejects radical feminism's idea that patriarchy alone is the primary cause of gender inequality, and it also challenges the Marxist perspective that class struggle is the sole driver of historical and economic change (Mohajan, 2022; Lykke, 2022).

The goal of socialist feminism is to analyse how a fair distribution of resources can reveal the connections between gender and class. It aims to address the historical exploitation of women by examining both economic and gender-based oppressions, emphasising that oppression is not rooted in a single system but arises from a complex interplay of systems related to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, social class, and nationality. These intersecting systems create new forms of oppression and privilege (Dworkin, 2007; Armstrong & Armstrong, 1983 (cited in Mohajan, 2022); Lykke, 2022).

To end women's oppression, dismantling the capitalist system is seen as essential. Socialist feminism distinguishes itself from Marxist feminism by asserting that women's liberation requires tackling both economic issues and cultural factors that sustain their subjugation. It stresses that achieving gender equality in socio-economic and political spheres, along with challenging patriarchal societal norms, is vital for true liberation (Bisong & Ekanem, 2014; Chandrika, 2019).

Eco-Feminism: An Alternative Perspective within Radical Feminism

The oppression of women is interconnected with the domination of nature, and each reinforces the other. In the late 20th century, ecofeminism emerged as part of the movement advocating for women's empowerment and environmental sustainability. It is characterised as "the feminist stance most explicitly concerned with environmental degradation." Ecofeminism tends to be more spiritual than political or theoretical, comprising two main elements: ecology and femininity. It posits that women have an innate connection to and appreciation for nature and opposes both the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment under patriarchal systems (Mohajan, 2022).

Cultural Feminism

As radical feminism waned, cultural feminism gained prominence. After many social change movements of the 1960s were dissolved or co-opted, some individuals grew disillusioned about the prospects for broad societal transformation. As a result, they shifted their focus from radical activism toward creating alternative models, aiming to reduce engagement with mainstream society when direct change seemed unattainable. This shift toward developing alternatives was accompanied by reasons for stepping back from larger social reform efforts. A core belief in cultural feminism is that women are inherently "kinder and gentler." Additionally, some cultural feminists argue that even if sex differences are not purely biological, they are so deeply ingrained that they cannot be changed (Bisong & Ekanem, 2014; Mohajan, 2022).

Post-Modernism: The Third Wave

Because of the inherently fluid nature of postmodernism, it is difficult to precisely define and categorise postmodern feminist legal theory. Postmodernism dismisses absolute truths and universal meanings, leading feminist legal approaches influenced by this perspective to avoid rigid definitions of feminism, law, and theory. Instead, they favour interpretations that are adaptable and continuously evolving. This perspective means that any effort to characterise postmodern feminist legal theory is context-dependent and may be met with scepticism. Its reluctance to adhere to fixed categories renders it the most elusive among feminist legal schools. Fundamentally, it rejects foundational concepts, resulting in constantly shifting boundaries (Rosenbury, 2016).

This viewpoint disregards the overarching dominance of patriarchal systems and challenges traditional feminist hierarchies, instead embracing diversity, multiple truths, roles, and realities (Pasque & Wimmer, n.d.). It aims to promote tangible political and legal conditions that enhance women's ability to oppose prevailing gender narratives. The focus is on encouraging resistance to dominant gender stereotypes as they are experienced in everyday life, rather than in purely theoretical terms. Rather than universally celebrating all differences among women, this perspective endorses only those differences that are suitable within a reimagined, restructured society (Eichner, 2001).

Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

This theory was introduced within the context of social inequality research in Australian high schools, offering empirical evidence of multiple-layered hierarchies. It suggests that men who benefit from patriarchy without necessarily exhibiting strong masculine dominance are considered complicit in masculinity. The theory argues that hegemonic masculinity does not solely rely on violence, although it can be reinforced through force and dominance. Instead, it is constructed through cultural norms, institutions, and persuasive practices, emphasising that gender relations are historically interconnected. Hegemonic masculinities are therefore subject to historical change. Ultimately, the theory recognises that struggles for hegemonic dominance can lead to shifts, with traditional forms of masculinity potentially replaced by newer versions [feminist perspectives] (Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005).

Although each of the previously mentioned theories and approaches faces criticism, they all share common ground in challenging the oppressive patriarchal system and its control over women. For instance, liberal and cultural viewpoints advocate for reforms and societal changes that enable women to demonstrate their abilities within the existing framework. According to these perspectives, one way to counteract such domination is through activism and women-led campaigns (Shepherd, 2015), as was notably seen in Liberia. After assuming power, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf worked to

increase women's participation in the national government and introduced reforms in security agencies, including setting a 20 percent quota for female police officers in 2006 (Justino et al., 2012).

Specifically, the concept of hegemonic masculinities suggests that gender relations are open to transformation through ongoing struggles. It posits that traditional forms of masculinity can be challenged and potentially replaced by new ones via these efforts. This idea is exemplified in Liberia, where women engaged in peaceful protests and successfully brought an end to the civil war and oppressive regime. Following these events, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president in 2005, symbolising the emergence of new forms of masculinity and replacing the previous, more traditional masculine norms (Connell & Messerschmitt, 2005).

As will be elaborated in the case study section, the peaceful women's movement in Liberia aligns with the theories mentioned, highlighting its significance. Overall, Liberia's non-violent women's movement stands out as a significant achievement and could serve as an inspiring example for other African countries and beyond, demonstrating how women's issues can be addressed through non-violent means (Shepherd, 2015).

THE Critical Exploration of Non-violent Women's Movement

The Global Perspective

The connections between nonviolent movements and women's roles generally stem from issues related to women's rights, such as suffrage campaigns, civil rights initiatives, and events like slut walks a term describing international protests against sexual assault and victim-blaming attitudes within rape culture. Women activists have historically organised and spearheaded numerous movements across the globe to advocate for their rights and freedoms (Principe, 2017).

The origins of feminism, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, marked the height of the first wave of the feminist movement, as women began to organise and advocate for social, civil, and political rights. A significant shift occurred in the 1970s when, both within and outside India, some individuals adopted more radical approaches to the women's movement (Sen, 2000). The 1980s and 1990s also saw the rise of feminist theories that challenge prevailing social structures and hierarchies. These theories aim to deconstruct the interconnected systems of power and privilege that enable male dominance over women. Additionally, women's awareness of power dynamics has led to the development of non-violent resistance techniques and civil disobedience as means of activism (Principe, 2017).

The African Perspective

Feminism in Africa has been a complex and often debated topic, marked by a variety of approaches. Unlike Western feminism, African feminism encompasses a wide range of diverse experiences and starting points. Its roots are shaped by the influence of Western dominance and its legacy within African cultures, which are often centred on heterosexual norms and address everyday issues such as economic survival, cultural identity, power, and equality (Ahikire, 2014). Additionally, African feminism is not antagonistic towards men; rather, it challenges them to acknowledge the specific forms of women's subjugation that differ from the broader oppression faced by all Africans (Mekgwe, 2008).

The rise of international platforms dedicated to women's and gender issues has also played a role in elevating African feminist concerns on the global stage, both within and beyond Africa. Organisations such as the United Nations and the African Union have helped create connections between African women's movements, feminists, and activists worldwide. Furthermore, the growth of multi-party political systems has broadened the political

opportunities available to feminists across the continent. New communication technologies, such as email, the internet, and cellular phones, have also helped build local, regional, and international networks linked to transnational organisations (Gaidzanaw, 2013).

Ogundipe Leslie (cited in Mekgwe, 2008) describes African feminism as a viable alternative to Western feminism, emphasising social equality with men in Africa. This scholar's model is particularly attractive as it implies an effort to redress the current economic inequalities between men and women on the continent (Ibid). In a contrasting statement, the commitment of Africa to feminism is articulated as follows: "Feminism is a luxury for the West and not for African women; we need a gender consultant who is practical and not abstract" (Ahikire, 2014, p. 17).

Women have also explicitly recognised their commitment to embracing multiple and diverse identities, stating, "We are African women; we live here in Africa, and even when we live elsewhere, our focus remains on the lives of African women on the continent. Our feminist identity is not conditional or uncertain. We are Feminists. End of story" (Ibid, p. 7). During the 1990s, African women became prominent contenders for political leadership in predominantly male-dominated arenas in countries such as Kenya and Liberia, where women competed fiercely for the presidency in the late 1990s elections (Nzomo, 2002).

CHALLENGES FACING THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN AFRICA

The UN High-Level Panel on the post-2015 agenda emphasises that inequality is among the most significant threats the world currently faces. Specifically, gender inequality exacerbates disparities, placing an additional burden on women (Win, 2016). Issues such as violence against women—stemming from economic disparities, societal acceptance of physical violence, limited

female autonomy, male dominance in household decisions, and legal barriers to divorce—have become central concerns for women's rights advocates (Njogu & Mazrui, 2006).

It is also argued that all feminist movements seek societal, economic, political, or cultural reforms to lessen and ultimately eliminate discrimination against women. Despite these efforts, a persistent gender gap remains in societal inequality between men and women (Freedman, 2001). In Africa, various policy documents have been established to advance gender equality. However, significant challenges persist in turning these policies into concrete actions. Examples include the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, and regional frameworks like the ECOWAS Gender Policy. Despite their existence, these commitments have yet to be effectively implemented on the ground (Alaga, 2010).

The severe violence associated with armed conflicts in Africa over the past twenty years has highlighted the brutal treatment of women and brought attention to their suffering. Conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have pushed the issue of gender inequality to the forefront of international concern. As a result, various actors from different sectors united to begin formulating specific actions and measures to address these issues (Olonisakin, 2016).

Additionally, postmodernism and globalisation pose further challenges to addressing gender injustice and contribute to ongoing identity crises across Africa. Maduabuchi Dukor points out that postcolonial legacies and modern developments have added complexities that hinder feminist progress on the continent (Casimir, 2013). Overall, women in Africa face oppression at individual, institutional, and societal or cultural levels (Pasque & Wimmer, n.d.). Consequently, women's groups and organisations

advocating for gender equality, especially within security and peace initiatives, are increasingly emphasising the importance of women's participation in peace and security efforts through active activism (Olonisakin, 2016).

CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF CHALLENGES FACING THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN AFRICA: THE CASE STUDY IN LIBERIA

Common Concerns Motivating Women into Non-violent Movements

Between 1989 and 1996, and again from 1999 to 2003, Liberia underwent two civil wars that caused at least one-third of the pre-war population to become internally displaced and led to the deaths of nearly 200,000 people. The ongoing violence was especially harsh on women and children. During these periods, frequent displacement, shortages of food and clean water, violent assaults, and psychological trauma were widespread (Shepherd, 2015; Justino et al., 2012).

Faced with these challenges, women organised a peaceful campaign for peace, coming together under the rallying cry "take the destiny of this tiny nation into our own hands" (Tavaana Tolerance Project, n.d.). It was this shared sense of responsibility and common goal that enabled Liberian women to unite in advocating for and ultimately securing peace in their country (Kieh, 2013). In this effort, Leymah Gbowee, a key organiser based in Monrovia and a mother of six, mobilised women to form the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace (WLMAP), leading nonviolent initiatives throughout the conflict. She later represented women as a delegate to Ghana in June 2003 when peace negotiations were scheduled to take place in Accra (Principe, 2017).

Gbowee played a crucial role in ending the conflict in 2003 by uniting Christian and Muslim women in a peaceful movement to oppose Liberia's civil war.

She stated, "In the past, we were silent, but after being killed, raped, dehumanized, and infected with diseases…war has taught us that the future lies in saying NO to violence and YES to peace!" (Tavaana Tolerance Project, n.d.).

Gbowee also organised an Inter-Religious Coalition of Christian and Muslim women. Under her leadership, thousands of women participated in nonviolent protests, calling for reconciliation and high-level peace negotiations, while also emerging as a political force against their government's violence. In 2003, the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace successfully pressured President Taylor to attend peace talks in Ghana and engage in negotiations (Shepherd, 2015).

Liberian women viewed the conflict as a chance to raise their voices and take action. Their significant efforts and active participation in the peace process led to Charles Taylor's exile, the conclusion of the war, and the gradual rise of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Africa's first female head of state in Liberia (Ibid). Rooted in their shared conviction in nonviolence and prayer, the Women Mass Action for Peace campaign quickly gained support from religious groups both within Liberia and internationally, including the Church World Service, a faith-based humanitarian organisation, and the Lutheran World Federation. Their prominent roles within local communities often made them more effective than the UN peacekeeping forces (Tavaana Tolerance Project, n.d.).

In 2011, Leymah Gbowee, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and Tawakkol Karman from Yemen received the Nobel Peace Prize for their leadership in the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement, which played a crucial role in ending the Second Liberian Civil War. They were honoured for their peaceful advocacy for safety and women's rights to actively participate in peace processes. Women's leadership in Liberia, spanning from community activism to the presidency, was vital in

securing national reforms based on rights and in electing President Johnson Sirleaf. The efforts of Leymah Gbowee and the Women of Liberia demonstrate a clear connection between female empowerment and a nation's political and social progress (Shepherd, 2015).

The Strategies/Tactics Employed for the Movement

Naked Female Form (Taboo)

Liberian women drew upon the longstanding cultural tradition of using the naked female form or taboos to protest. By referencing this centuries-old practice, they peacefully advocated for change, similar to the sex strike depicted in Lysistrata. The threat of women intentionally exposing their nudity ultimately pressured both government officials and rebel leaders to negotiate, leading to a peace agreement in 2003 that brought an end to the Second Liberian Civil War (Principe, 2017).

Networks

Networks were instrumental in facilitating the non-violent movement in Liberia. For instance, the West Africa Network for Peace Building (WANEP), a regional peace organisation based in Ghana, expressed increasing concern about the condition of women in Liberia. In response, WANEP established the Women in Peace Building Network (WIPNET) in 2001. Leveraging women's numerical strength and their capacity to mobilise around critical issues, WIPNET operated across several West African nations, focusing on mediation efforts, empowering rural and marginalised women, and opposing community violence (Tavaana Tolerance Project, n.d.). WIPNET continued to put pressure on both the Liberian government and rebel groups during peace negotiations held in Accra, Ghana.

The 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement was among the first peace accords to incorporate gender-specific provisions, including provisions for women's participation in government sectors. Their roles in demobilisation, disarmament, integration, reconciliation, dialogue efforts, and promoting democracy played a crucial part in maintaining peace in Liberia. WIPNET offered Liberian women avenues to influence the peace-building process (Kieh, 2013).

Additionally, by leveraging these networks, the movement organised prayer and worship gatherings that included both Christian and Muslim women in Monrovia, which eventually evolved into a political activism movement advocating for peace. These resilient women worked collectively to end the conflict and restore stability, while also ensuring that democratic elections took place in the country (Shepherd, 2015). Many participants from the Liberian Women's Initiative and the Mano River Union Peace Networks also engaged with religious organisations in Liberia, contributing their advocacy skills to the broader movement (Kieh, 2013).

Media

The Mass Action for Peace initiative aimed to quickly disseminate their message to combatants, expanding their outreach and gaining the support of Liberia's religious leaders. Although Liberian media had limited reach, the Catholic Church-owned Veritas radio station broadcast messages emphasising women's peaceful protests. Consequently, WIPNET and its Mass Action for Peace movement received increased recognition and were prominently featured in both national and international news outlets. This media coverage boosted the frequency and scale of their activism (Tavaana Tolerance Project, n.d.).

Banners and Sensitisation Slogans

Women participating in the peaceful movement displayed banners bearing messages such as "The women of Liberia want peace now" and even organised a "sex strike." Their strategy to appeal to women across all backgrounds, regardless of

religion, ethnicity, or social class—was innovative in Liberia. This inclusive approach allowed WIPNET to mobilise large numbers of women, including Liberian refugee women in Ghana, helping to sustain pressure during peace negotiations (Ibid).

Dressing

In 2011, women peacefully demonstrated by wearing white to demand an end to the political stalemate and rising security concerns in the country, expressing their commitment to "never again" (Ibid). Likewise, on April 11, 2003, WIPNET submitted a petition at Monrovia City Hall to cease the ongoing war, rallying in a bustling market area through prayer, dancing, chanting, and singing. These women maintained a daily presence at the protest site for over a year, attracting international media coverage and pressuring Charles Taylor to engage with them. During these protests, Muslim and Christian women united in prayer, all donning white headscarves and shirts as symbols of peace (Kieh, 2013).

Religion

By adopting faith-based strategies for peace, women made significant progress across individual, relational, and national levels of healing and reconciliation. Religion served a dual purpose, offering tangible assistance while also acting as a driving force for forgiveness and renewal. The women of Liberia demonstrated that faith has the potential to inspire and restore communities more effectively than numerous other approaches (Ouellet, 2013).

In June 2002, Leymah Gbowee, who led the women's organisation at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia, and Comfort Freeman, head of the National Lutheran Church Women in Liberia, collaborated to establish the Liberian chapter of WIPNET. By December of that year, more than 3,000 Muslim women had joined the movement,

united by their dedication to their children, faith, and the power of prayer to achieve peace (Kieh, 2013). Gbowee and the WIPNET women exemplified the peaceful society they envisioned, giving voice to both women and men across Christian and Muslim communities. In her Nobel speech, Gbowee highlighted that the Mass Action for Peace was only the beginning of efforts to build a better Liberia and a more just world (Tavaana Tolerance Project, n.d.).

The Contribution of the Movement

Currently, Liberia's women's movement serves as a model for women and communities around the world. In the 2005 presidential election, Liberia elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Africa's first female president, which greatly increased women's representation in political roles. This milestone also led to improved protections for women, including the passage of laws that amended national rape legislation (Shepherd, 2015).

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's administration has taken steps to combat violence against women by passing laws, implementing policies, and establishing institutions focused on women's issues. Key accomplishments include integrating gender and women's rights into all national development plans, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS); passing legislation on rape and inheritance rights that ensure women's access to property and inheritance after widowhood; developing policies related to sexual and reproductive health; creating a civil service code to promote a respectful work environment; and launching initiatives to address sexual and gender-based violence. Additionally, proposals for policies mandating 20% and 30% representation of women in the security sector, governance, political parties, and other institutions are currently awaiting parliamentary approval (Alaga, 2010).

Finally, the women-led non-violent movement in Liberia is viewed as a significant step toward

achieving lasting peace and addressing the underlying causes of structural violence within the nation. As noted by Schirch and Sewak (cited in Ouellet, 2013), this change has the potential to foster positive peace, characterised by social justice, gender equality, economic fairness, and ecological sustainability, focusing on strengthening human connections.

The Existing Challenges Not Yet Resolved in Liberia

Although notable advancements have been made, challenges continue to exist. A primary obstacle is the widespread lack of awareness about Security Council Resolution 1325 among government agencies, NGOs, and the general population. Furthermore, there is a considerable difficulty in incorporating peace education into public school curricula. Women residing in rural regions also face inadequate access to social services (Webbe & Luppino, 2011).

Although some progress has been made, Liberia continues to face significant gender disparities that negatively impact women's well-being. Factors such as poverty and institutional obstacles diminish women's decision-making authority and access to resources. Women encounter difficulties in education, healthcare, and employment due to limited economic opportunities and assets like land. These challenges are intensified by widespread poverty, insufficient access to services, and a predominantly informal economy. Additionally, women's disempowerment is linked to a lack of resources and assets, which hampers their ability to invest in their health and education. Overall, women remain systematically disadvantaged in comparison to men, which prevents their full participation in and benefit from Liberia's development. This situation persists despite ongoing efforts to promote gender equality (Cunningham et al., 2023).

Despite Liberia's democratic transition in 2005, which led to the election of Africa's first female head of state, women in Liberia continue to face considerable challenges in participating in political activities. While some progress has been made, women remain underrepresented as leaders within political parties, civil society, elected positions, and government roles (Nichols, 2018). Their political representation is still mainly concentrated at the top levels, which is linked to high rates of sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation, and abuse. Although Liberia's overall GDP has grown, the improvement in the living conditions of rural women remains limited (Webbe & Luppino, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, under the leadership of Leymah Gbowee, directed the peaceful women's movement that helped bring an end to the Second Civil War in Liberia from 1999 to 2003. Motivated by shared worries, these women organised themselves with backing from various religious groups, including Muslims and Christians, as well as regional networks like ECOWAS. Consequently, the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace rapidly gained backing from religious communities and organisations across the globe, crossing cultural and national boundaries.

The campaign utilised various essential tactics and strategies, such as leveraging the taboo of the naked female form, forming networks, collaborating with religious organisations, adopting distinctive attire, displaying banners, and engaging in media outreach. These efforts effectively pressured President Taylor and his rebel warlords to participate in peace negotiations, culminating in an agreement in Ghana in 2003. After the successful, peaceful, and democratic elections in 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was inaugurated as Liberia's President, becoming the first woman to hold such a position in Africa. Her leadership opened doors for addressing gender issues within political systems and legal frameworks

by implementing laws aimed at rectifying past injustices and dismantling patriarchal structures.

Nonetheless, significant challenges persist that demand immediate action from all stakeholders in Liberia to secure a sustainable, peaceful future and effective post-conflict recovery. In summary, Liberia's non-violent women's movement demonstrates the vital link between women's involvement in political and social arenas and serves as a powerful symbol of peace-building initiatives. Furthermore, the Liberia Mass Action for Peace, led by Gbowee, successfully fulfilled its goal of promoting non-violent activism and garnered recognition at local, regional, continental, and international levels, ultimately earning Gbowee the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize.

Although the non-violent women's movement in Liberia, alongside other stakeholders, successfully achieved its objectives, additional measures are recommended to sustain and advance progress. Firstly, to address ongoing issues of both structural and physical violence against women, increased political commitment and concrete actions are necessary to dismantle oppressive systems. Secondly, human rights advocates and civic organisations should promote and share the successful strategies of Liberia's non-violent women's movement with other African countries and regional economic communities to facilitate broader adoption. Lastly, organisations such as IGAD, African regional economic communities, and the African Union should draw lessons from Liberia's non-violent women's movement to improve women's status across the continent. Additionally, further research should be conducted within Liberia to gain more detailed insights and improve women's lives, ultimately contributing to the empowerment of African society as a whole.

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