

Seize the Day: Gender Politics in Liberia's Transition to Peace and Democracy

by

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*Dedicated to the people of Liberia*

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## ABSTRACT

Liberia is a highly impoverished nation that is recovering from decades of political and economic instability and civil strife. Despite the fact that Liberia has incredibly low levels of female representation in its legislative assemblies, the Government under President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has created a number of potentially transformative institutional reforms to advance the rights and status of Liberian women. This case study investigates these developments and explains why politically active women in Liberia have been able to make significant gains during the country's transition to peace and democracy. This research involved fieldwork in Monrovia over three months, and utilized a variety of methods including ethnographic fieldwork, content analysis, and some interviews with gender activists and policymakers. It explains historical conditions, examines gender-related policy frames and public discourses around women's rights, and traces political processes that have led to gender-sensitive institutional reforms. This thesis applies several key concepts developed by the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State to explore the extent to which the emergent theory of state feminism might be applicable to countries outside of the West. Although the findings in this thesis are preliminary, this thesis argues that Liberia is a feminist state, insofar as both the gender ministry and the Sirleaf Administration are allied with feminist and women's movement actors outside the state, and that they grant these actors access to policymaking fora. Moreover, policy content appears to reflect many of the goals identified by women's movement actors (and to a lesser extent, feminist movement actors). However, given the significant lack of state capacity, and given the degree to which the Liberian state has been penetrated by regional and international financial institutions and the United Nations system, it is extremely difficult to determine the drivers of ostensibly state-led gender equity initiatives in the country. Furthermore, Liberian women's advocates appear to lobby *both* the state and international "partners" to respond to their gender-based demands. Because multi-level governance is the norm in areas where the capacity of the state is severely circumscribed, this research introduces the concept of "supra-state feminism" to demonstrate the major limitation of state feminist theory in Liberia. This notion of feminist policy transfer in areas of limited statehood adds to the comparative literature on engendering political transitions in sub-Saharan Africa. This thesis also lays the groundwork for research on Liberian women's advocates' post-transition losses.

*Keywords:* Liberia, sub-Saharan Africa, women, government policy, political activism, gender, state feminism, women's movements, democratization, post-conflict reconstruction, policy transfer

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED**

<b>AFELL</b>	Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia
<b>BPfA</b>	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>COPPWIL</b>	Coalition of Political Party Women in Liberia
<b>CPA</b>	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
<b>CBO</b>	Community-based organization
<b>DDRR</b>	Demobilization, Disarmament, Rehabilitation, Reintegration
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>EPAG</b>	Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women
<b>FAWE</b>	Forum for African Women Educationalists
<b>FGM/C</b>	Female genital mutilation/cutting
<b>GAD</b>	Gender and Development
<b>GoL</b>	Government of Liberia
<b>GRC</b>	Governance Reform Commission
<b>HI</b>	Historical institutionalism
<b>HIPC</b>	Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative
<b>IDP</b>	Internally displaced person
<b>IFI</b>	International financial institution
<b>iPRSP</b>	Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>INGO</b>	International nongovernmental organization
<b>IPU</b>	Inter-Parliamentary Union
<b>JP-GEWEE</b>	Joint Programme on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment
<b>KAF</b>	Konrad Adenauer Foundation
<b>LACC</b>	Liberian Anti-Corruption Commission
<b>LNAP</b>	Liberia's National Action Plan on Security Council Resolution 1325
<b>LTI</b>	Liberian Transition Initiative
<b>LURD</b>	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
<b>LWI</b>	Liberian Women's Initiative
<b>MARWOPNET</b>	Mano River Women's Peacebuilding Network
<b>MDGs</b>	Millennium Development Goals



<b>MODEL</b>	Movement for a Democratic Liberia
<b>MoGD</b>	Ministry of Gender and Development
<b>NAP-GBV</b>	National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence
<b>NEC</b>	National Elections Commission
<b>NGF</b>	National Gender Forum
<b>NGP</b>	National Gender Policy
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>NRWP</b>	National Rural Women's Program
<b>NTGL</b>	National Transitional Government of Liberia
<b>NTLA</b>	National Transitional Legislative Assembly of Liberia
<b>PRS</b>	Poverty Reduction Strategy
<b>PRSP</b>	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
<b>RNGS</b>	Research Network on Gender Politics and the State
<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual and gender-based violence
<b>SIGI</b>	Social Institutions Gender Index
<b>TRC</b>	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
<b>UNDAF</b>	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
<b>UNIFEM</b>	United Nations Development Fund for Women
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Program
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNMIL</b>	United Nations Mission in Liberia
<b>UNMIL-OGA</b>	UNMIL's Office of the Gender Advisor
<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>UNSCR 1325</b>	United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325
<b>UN Women</b>	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>WACC</b>	Women and Children Affairs Coordination Unit
<b>WANEP</b>	West African Network for Peacebuilding
<b>WB</b>	World Bank
<b>WID</b>	Women in Development
<b>WIPNET</b>	Women in Liberia Peacebuilding Network
<b>WLC</b>	Women's Legislative Caucus
<b>WONGOSOL</b>	Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia
<b>WPA</b>	Women's policy agency
<b>ZODWOCA</b>	Zorzor District Women Care

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### *1.1 The Puzzle*

This thesis developed around a puzzle. The first piece of that puzzle concerns women and political power. Women, by and large, have little of it and political institutions have proven incredibly resistant to change. Women in democracies everywhere continue to be underrepresented in public institutions and have restricted access to national planning and policymaking fora. With a few notable exceptions, women make up, on average, approximately 20% of national parliaments (IPU, 2013). Despite the proliferation of women's movements throughout the world in the last half century, and in spite of the fact that gender equality and women's empowerment has been promoted in development for over four decades, governments and mainstream development institutions continue to have deeply gendered structures.<sup>1</sup> Though many have been tinkered with, they have not been transformed. These institutions are typically dominated by men and male perspectives, and given that women's, and in particular, feminists' perspectives seldom influence the design and implementation of economic and public policy, gender inequality continues to be reproduced (Goetz, 1997).<sup>2</sup> Women's interests tend to be approached as technical issues (e.g., part of a formula for poverty reduction); coopted for political gain (e.g., to secure "the women's vote"); present at the rhetorical level but otherwise ignored; and/or limited to "projects for women" or women's bureaux that often perpetuate gender stereotypes (Goetz, 1997). Because political institutions tend to have a male bias, gender scholars are likely to take notice

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<sup>1</sup> Gender is understood here as the social construction of masculinity and femininity, or what it means to be male or female in a given society in terms of attributes, roles, and opportunities associated with each sex. Gender relations refer to the relationship between women and men and girls and boys, especially in terms of their relative power as a group. I used "gender politics" in the title of this thesis to denote women's struggles to achieve greater political rights, relevance, and representation. "Gender" is not simply a substitute for "women"; I want to emphasize the relational aspect of gender, whereby progressive women struggle with conservative men (and women) to challenge the status quo and advance the status of women.

<sup>2</sup> Though interpretations of feminism vary, this research used a working definition similar to McBride Stetson and Mazur's (1995): "An ideology, policy, organization, or activity is feminist to the extent that it has the purpose of improving the status of women as a group and undermining patterns of gender hierarchy" (p.16). See section 3.4 on state feminism and section 4.1 for more on how "feminism" and "feminist" were operationalized for this research.

when a country makes major strides towards redressing gender inequities and improving the status of women.

The second piece of the puzzle concerns Liberia. Liberia is a small, West African country recovering from over two decades of political upheaval and civil war. On the Human Development Index combining income, health, and educational attainment indicators, Liberia ranks 174 out of 186 countries (UNDP, 2012a). About 85% of the population lives on less than \$1.25 a day. Life is hard, and generally speaking, it is hardest on women. The Gender Inequality Index, which is a measure based on reproductive health, employment, education, and parliamentary representation, Liberia is 0.658, making it 143rd out of 148 countries with data (UNDP, 2012b). And on the 2009 Social Institutions and Gender Index,<sup>3</sup> which examines discriminatory social practices and institutions, Liberia ranked 87 out of 102 (SIGI, 2012). Disproportionately clustered in agricultural and informal sectors, women receive low wages and are vulnerable to exploitation (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services [LISGIS], 2008). Illiteracy rates among women are high—roughly twice that of men—which is not surprising given a long history of gender disparity in education. Roughly half of Liberian women become pregnant by the age of 18 and maternal mortality is among the highest in the world (LISGIS, 2008). Women and girls are also more susceptible to food insecurity and malnutrition and young girls are particularly vulnerable to gender based violence, sexual exploitation and HIV/AIDS. Harmful traditional practices such as female circumcision are still prevalent in some parts of the country. Sexual violence was systematically perpetrated against a significant number of Liberian women throughout the war. Rape and sexual violence remain an ongoing problem. In fact, violence against women has increased since the end of the war in 2003.

In the final years of the war, thousands of Liberian “women in white” struggled for peace and justice through marches, sit-ins, international advocacy, and even sex strikes to induce men’s support. Still, only a small group of female delegates were present at the ceasefire negotiations, and women were largely absent in the National Transitional

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<sup>3</sup> Launched by the OECD Development Centre in 2009, SIGI is a new measure of the root causes of gender inequality. Rather than using gender disparities in employment and education, SIGI “instead captures discriminatory social institutions, such as early marriage, discriminatory inheritance practices, violence against women, son preference, and restricted access to public space and restricted access to land and credit” (<http://genderindex.org/content/team>). Liberia is ranked 62 out of 86 on the 2012 SIGI.

Government of Liberia. Organized women were unsuccessful in their efforts to secure a minimum 30% of women included on party lists prior to the 2005 election. After the 2005 election, women made up only 12.5% of the House and 16.7% of the Senate—and after the 2011 election, just 11% and 13.3%, respectively. In spite of these setbacks, in 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf—an intrepid figure in Liberian politics—became Liberia’s President and Africa’s first democratically elected female head of state. Although the “window” for gains appears to be closing, the Liberian government under President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has made considerable progress in the area of women’s rights and gender equality. Since 2005, the Ministry of Gender and Development (MoGD) has seen its powers and authority increase significantly. The President has appointed women as Ministers of Justice, Finance, and Commerce and Industry—posts typically held by men—and she is herself the head of the National Gender Forum (NGF), the policy advisory body on gender issues. Even though women’s representation in the legislature has remained very low, several important legal and political reforms have been established to protect and empower girls and women. Enacted in 2009, the National Gender Policy (NGP) aims to incorporate women’s perspectives in the national development process; empower women and girls for sustainable and equitable development; and create and strengthen gender responsive structures, processes and mechanisms to be more inclusive of women so that resources and benefits might be allocated more equitably among women and men (MoGD, 2009a). Moreover, laws have been passed to grant women land and inheritance rights and curb sexual and gender-based violence. Security sector reform has included increasing the numbers of women in law enforcement, as well as establishing a policing unit for the protection of women and children and a specialized court to try rape and sexual assault cases. Liberia was also one of the first countries to establish a National Action Plan on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 (on women, peace, and security). In addition, several development programs, such as Sirleaf Market Women’s Fund, the National Rural Women’s Program, and the Joint Program on Women’s Economic Empowerment, have begun to make a significant difference in the lives of many Liberian women.

So why has Liberia, one of the poorest and most “underdeveloped” countries in Africa, with very low numbers of women in government, seen some of the most visible

advances for women's rights and political representation on the sub-Continent? Is Liberia, as one scholar has suggested, a "pioneering feminist state" (Fuest, 2008)? Following McBride Stetson and Mazur (1995, p. 2), this thesis asks: (1) What are the types of state structures formally responsible for promoting women's position and rights in Liberia? (2) To what extent do state agencies achieve feminist goals within the social, political, and historical context of Liberia? (3) What political and social factors have produced state structures prone to pursuing effective state feminist action in Liberia?

This research uncovers evidence to suggest that the theory of state feminism at least *partly* explains the Liberian case. State feminist theory emerged out of the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS), which operated from the early 1990s to 2010. This group of scholars formulated a rather comprehensive methodology to study late 20th century women's movements and government responses in post-industrial democracies.<sup>4</sup> In particular, they documented and explained instances of state feminism, variously defined as "the advocacy of women's movement demands inside the state" (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 4), and "the activities of government structures that are formally charged with furthering women's status and rights" which are "effective in helping women as a group and undermining patterns of gender-based inequities in society" (McBride Stetson & Mazur, 1995, pp. 1-2). The theory of state feminism explains the pivotal role of alliances between women's policy agencies and women's movement activists in opening up politics in Western democracies to descriptive (or numerical) and substantive representation of women. However, the concept has also been applied to a few developing world contexts (e.g., Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet, 2002; Viterna & Fallon, 2008), and RNGS scholars have expressed an interest in exploring state feminism's applicability to non-Western, developing countries (Mazur & McBride, 2011; RNGS, 2012). Liberia is an important test case because the concurrent processes of peace-making and democratization mean that Liberia is a reconfiguring state, and as two pioneers of feminist state theory argue, "Such a widespread change in institutions has the potential of turning the state into an activist on behalf of feminist goals, embedding gender issues in national policy agendas and giving advocates for the advancement of

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<sup>4</sup> This thesis draws on insights from the RNGS framework, particularly McBride Stetson & Mazur (1995), and McBride & Mazur (2010). It also includes scholars outside of this network who have extended feminist state theory to developing world contexts (see Chapter 2).

women permanent access to arenas of power” (McBride Stetson & Mazur, 1995, p. 1). Moreover, the President has herself demonstrated significant political commitment to gender equality at the highest level of government. She is not simply a woman *present* at the top; as a woman who actively pursues gender equality and women’s empowerment, she brings not just a “feminine presence” but a “feminist activism” to politics (Goetz & Hassim, 2003, p. 5).

However, state feminism provides only a partial explanation for gender equity innovations in Liberia since the end of the war. This thesis thus hypothesizes about what I have called “supra-state feminism,” whereby international agencies, particularly within the UN system, form alliances with women’s policy agencies and women’s movement actors to achieve policy change that reflects both women’s movement goals and international norms and “best practices.” The war devastated the capacity of the state and—highly indebted and poor—Liberia is “an area of limited statehood” (Risse, 2011), in which international authorities not only provide discursive and material support for greater political inclusion and advances in women’s rights, but also help craft and implement national policies and action plans. In this context, non-state actors (domestic, regional, and transnational) and the UN system have *supplanted the state in many areas, transferring norms of gender equality and co-governing the polity*.

## ***1.2 Rationale***

I chose to focus on Liberia because of its potential theoretical significance, as I believed that it was likely to extend emerging theory on women and political power (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989, on building theories from case study research). Current academic literature does not adequately explain why and how substantive gender-related institutional reforms have occurred in Liberia. Although a few articles address the impacts of the conflict and of women’s peace activism, their emphasis is on society-based actors and not on their interactions with policy, government structures, or women in the government and bureaucracy. Additionally, the more recent gender-related institutional and policy innovations have not yet received scholarly attention. This research seeks to address these gaps by tracing the political processes that led to these and other gender-equity reforms. Moreover, President Sirleaf is not simply a woman present at the top, but

a woman who actively pursues gender equality and women's empowerment. Given that Liberia has a female president who is a strong promoter of women's rights and gender equality, this research contributes to our understanding of the conditions under which greater female representation in the top tiers of government might actually make government more inclusive of and responsive to women.

The literature offers several theories that might explain the occurrence of dramatic political reforms aimed at improving the status of women in so-called developing countries. Inglehart and Norris (2003) find that socio-economic development and "modernization" are positively correlated with favourable attitudes towards gender equality. They argue that industrialization leads to decreased birth rates, an increase in female literacy and education, and an increase in women's participation in representational government. In the post-industrial phase, women's social status rises as more women obtain management and leadership positions and greater political influence. Central to their argument is that intergenerational transformations occur over time, as younger generations hold more egalitarian views. Thus, Inglehart and Norris consider coming to value gender equality as part of a wider trend towards secularization and liberalization in Western societies. There are several problems with this framework, and perhaps for obvious reasons, it cannot be usefully applied to the Liberian case. Liberia is neither industrializing nor "traditional" in the rather atypical sense presented by Inglehart and Norris. Cultural factors, which the authors argue are the most relevant, do not explain the impressive level of women's representation in Rwanda, for example, and they are unlikely to be *the* major driving force behind women's gains in Liberia. Furthermore, "critical mass theory" holds that there is a direct link between the numbers of women in legislative assemblies and the passage of women-friendly policy outcomes (see, for example, Dahlerup, 2006). Proponents argue that when women comprise a significant minority of legislators (typically identified as a 30% threshold), they are better positioned to get women's concerns on the agenda and get male colleagues to support and approve policy change that addresses those concerns.<sup>5</sup> This thesis has already noted the low

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<sup>5</sup> The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action set a target reserving 30% of seats in national parliaments for women. This was meant as a first step, though it does seem a rather arbitrary number and today more and more women's groups are calling for gender parity. In fact, several gender activists and scholars challenge this theory, noting the important distinction between numerical and substantive



numbers of women legislators in Liberia. Thus, neither of these explanations applies in the Liberian case, making it all the more compelling.

### ***1.3 The Chapters that Follow***

This case study investigates why politically active women in Liberia have been able to make such significant gains during the country's transition to peace and democracy. Using a feminist institutionalist framework, it traces political processes that have led to women friendly institutional reforms. It explains historical conditions, identifies key actors and power structures, and discusses gender-related policy frames and public discourses around women's rights and women in politics. The research involved fieldwork in Monrovia over three months, and utilized a variety of methods including coding and frequency counts of local news media, content analysis, and a few elite interviews with gender activists and policymakers. To determine the conditions under which gender equality outcomes have occurred in Liberia, and to assess the political effectiveness of feminists during the Liberian transition to peace and democracy, this thesis sequentially examines three brief but critical phases of the transition: the Second Liberian Civil War (1999-2003), the National Transitional Government of Liberia and the 2005 general election (2003-2005), and the immediate "post-transition" period under President of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2006-2012).

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature and synthesizes the major findings from work on women's representational gains and political transitions (primarily) in sub-Saharan African countries. Most of the literature reviewed in this chapter deals with democratization as opposed to conflict, peace, and post-conflict reconstruction. This is partly because this literature reflects feminist institutionalism, partly because I want to draw primarily on sub-Saharan contexts, and partly because the women and war literature is still largely prescriptive and narrowly focused on engendering the security sector. Thus, it does little to address the main problematic of this thesis—how women, particularly feminist women, might attain more power and influence within and through central governing institutions. Given the comparative nature of this study, the literature

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representation (e.g., Childs & Krook, 2008; 2009). This is discussed further in the Discussion section. The point here is simply that the Liberian case cannot be explained by critical mass theory.

review informed my research design and analysis in important ways. Similarities and differences between Liberia and the cases in the literature review are highlighted throughout this thesis.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the theoretical framework and methodology, respectively. The theoretical framework is rooted in comparative politics, and is perhaps best described as feminist historical institutionalism, drawing heavily on the theoretical constructs of “critical junctures,” “state feminism,” and (more so from international relations) “governance in areas of limited statehood.” The methodology chapter begins by discussing feminist ideology (as it is understood in this thesis) and justifies the use of the term in an African context. It then identifies important aspects of feminist methodology and epistemology, and describes the data collection and analysis methods utilized in the current study. Chapter 5 situates contemporary Liberia by providing some historical background on the country and on gender hierarchies in Liberian culture and society. The chapter then turns to Liberian women’s peace activism and discusses the role of women’s groups in bringing about peace and democratization in Liberia. Finally, it explores whether activists’ struggle for peace and Liberian women’s activities during the war placed them in an advantageous position from which to negotiate their gender-based demands and challenge their historical exclusion at the war’s end.

Chapter 6 presents the key findings of this thesis. It describes gender politics in Liberia’s transition to peace and democracy, particularly since 2003. It identifies many of the gender-based demands women’s organizations were able to incorporate into the reconstructed political process in Liberia. The chapter introduces the policy issues in which Liberian women advocates have sought to influence most often. These include property and inheritance rights, protection from rape and gender-based violence, education and job training—and in particular—greater political representation. This chapter explains how women mobilized as aspirants and voters in the 2005 elections and talks briefly about the election of President Sirleaf and the relatively poor showing of other female candidates. Following that, it explores what the Sirleaf Administration and its international partners have been doing to address Liberian women’s gender-specific needs and to challenge gender hierarchies in Liberia. The chapter also describes public

controversies involving prominent women as well as backlash and opposition to the women's empowerment movement.

The analysis and implications of the research are included in Chapters 7 and 8. These final chapters examine whether and to what extent Liberia might be characterized as a feminist state according to the RNGS framework and the empirical work discussed in the literature review. Chapter 7 introduces the state structures responsible for the promotion of women's rights and status in Liberia and explores the extent to which these structures advance feminist and/or women's movement goals. The chapter identifies three main factors to explain state feminist action in Liberia: a critical juncture, critical consciousness, and critical actors. This thesis finds that "critical actors" includes UN agencies and other influential transnational organizations. Given the degree to which capacity is limited within the Liberian state, these actors have significant influence over national policies and programs. The proposed concept, "supra-state feminism" builds on theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 3. Finally, Chapter 8 takes stock of the existing obstacles to women's advancement in Liberia. Deep divisions among women's movement actors and organizations, the failure to persuasively frame their issues, and the absence of a critical mass of women in the Liberian legislature have hindered the implementation of existing institutional reforms and prevented the passage of additional, more far-reaching reforms. The conclusion thus looks towards more in-depth research in Liberia and proposes a number of avenues for scholarly inquiry.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

What are the conditions or causal mechanisms that allow women activists to influence national political decision-making? The purpose of this literature review is to identify those factors that have contributed to “success” in key areas affecting women, such as domestic violence legislation, inheritance rights, gender mainstreaming, and national machineries for women. This chapter addresses why and how politically active women (in sub-Saharan Africa and other developing countries) have made significant representational gains “despite gender inequality, patriarchal social relations, and historically male-dominated politics” (Bauer & Britton, 2006, p. 2). The first section synthesizes the existing literature into six critical variables: (1) A major rupture in the political system (2) A gender equity lobby and legacy of women’s activism and leadership (3) Alignment of feminist frames with transitional ideologies or developmental visions (4) Domestic networks and strategic alliances that include influential male allies (5) Affirmative action and institutionalized access to the state, and (6) Transnational feminism, donor funds, and international norms. The comparative and single case studies reviewed here include some combination (usually three or four) of these variables. The synthesis of these materials thus allowed me to identify a wider range of potential causal mechanisms to explain the gender equity lobby’s successes and failures in Liberia.

### ***2.1 A Map of Relevant Work***

Latin America and Eastern Europe dominate the literature on gendered transitions, but many of the patterns outlined below are drawn from African contexts. Comparing women’s political gains in Chile and Nigeria, Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2002) identify factors that facilitate state feminism and enhance women’s citizenship. From their cross-case analysis of South Africa, Argentina, Ghana, and El Salvador, Viterna and Fallon (2008) develop a framework for explaining why more or less gender-equitable states emerge from democratic transitions. A number of authors have tackled sub-Saharan African women’s activism in transitions to peace and democracy in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Tripp, Casimiro, Kwesiga, and Mungwa (2009) co-author *African Women’s Movements: Transforming Political Landscapes*,

which focuses on Cameroon, Mozambique, and Uganda, and draws lessons from the broader regional context. Uganda (Goetz, 1998; Tamale, 1999; Tripp, 2001) and South Africa (Britton, 2005, 2006; Goetz, 1998; Hassim, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Meintjes, 2003; Seidman, 1999; Waylen, 2007) receive the most attention in the literature. Rwanda (Burnet, 2008; Longman, 2006; Uwineza & Noël Brown, 2011), Mozambique (Disney, 2006), and Namibia (Bauer, 2004, 2006; Hubbard & Solomon, 1995) also offer some positive examples of women's advances. Geisler (2004) has published an excellent comparative study on women's achievements and defeats in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana and South Africa, with examples from Mozambique, Tanzania, and Kenya. In West Africa, recent work has been published on women's movements and Ghana's democratic transition (Fallon, 2008), and on women's collective action in Sierra Leone (Steady, 2006), but these are more descriptive in nature, focusing on women's organizations and movements more than engendering the transition.<sup>6</sup>

Despite women-friendly reforms, resistance and other implementation constraints may prevent many women from experiencing meaningful changes in their daily lives. Indeed, much of the literature on women's mobilizations, democratization, and political representation focuses on how political institutions demobilize, disadvantage, and discriminate against women. Thus, women's gains in Africa represent hard fought political battles, and the works cited here pay much more attention to these than I am able to at this time. Some of the work discussed here analyzes the immediate transition period, but much of it examines gender in transitions as part of a longer political trajectory, where opportunities are lost as patriarchal structures and authoritarianism are reconstituted during consolidation. It is my contention that without exception, these polities are still male dominated. For example, in Rwanda, although women make up 56% of the parliament and 38.5% in the senate, women's rights are largely restricted under a regime that refuses to recognize human rights generally (Longman, 2006). In most African states, little has changed since Parpart and Staudt's (1989) pivotal collection, *Women and the State in Africa*. With few exceptions—Liberia being the most

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<sup>6</sup> Recent work on women and women's movements in Liberia deal primarily with women's agency during the war, the characteristics and dynamics of the women's peace movement, and the historic election of President Sirleaf. The items that are most relevant to this research (Fuest, 2008; 2009; Moran 2012) are used in the analyses chapters that follow.

notable case thus far<sup>7</sup>—women are not central to state power in Africa.<sup>8</sup> Given women’s historical exclusion from state power, under what conditions can gender-positive reforms become possible?

## ***2.2 Conditions and Causal Mechanisms that Explain Reforms***

### **2.2.1 A major rupture in the political system**

While wars undoubtedly bring horrific losses, advances in women’s rights have been most far-reaching in post conflict states because of the degree to which prolonged conflict disrupts gender relations and provides opportunities for those relations to be reshaped (Bauer & Britton, 2006; Burnet, 2008; Meintjes, Pillay, & Turshen, 2002; Rai, 2003). Tripp et al. (2009) explain that the most female-friendly African countries are those where major civil conflict provided “opportunities to rewrite ‘the rules’ of the political order” (p. 6). They note that although democracy shapes the policymaking process, nondemocracies were just as likely to adopt progressive legislation, suggesting that democratization is not as influential as a “major rupture” in the political system (pp. 11-12). For instance, Rwanda stands today as “an inspiring illustration of women effecting a positive transition in the post-conflict setting and leading the country’s evolution from a time of trauma into an era marked by socio-economic and political gains” (Uwineza & Noël Brown, 2011, p. 140).

Several authors suggest that the timing of the end of conflict is crucial for strategic action, as the process of rewriting those rules is generally more inclusive, and organized women have significant resources and leverage due to their active role in peace and constitutional negotiations and the support they receive from international and regional organizations (Meintjes et al., 2002; Tripp et al., 2009). Women also have an advantage when traditional political actors, whether political parties or particular members of the political elite, are banned from political competition, and their demands are not subordinated to other struggles such as liberation (Okeke-Ihejirka & Franceschet,

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<sup>7</sup> Another exception is Joyce Banda, who was appointed President of Malawi after the death of President Bingu wa Mutharika in April, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Parpart and Staudt (1989) wrote: “For all the variations in states—weak or strong, more or less autonomous—one constant is that women are *never* central to state power” (p. 5, emphasis in original).

2002). At the same time that conflict weakens opponents, it affords women greater legitimacy since they “are often perceived as outsiders to politics and therefore untainted by corruption, patronage, and the factors that may have led to conflict” (Tripp et al., 2009, p. 158). This—albeit temporary—access may yield significant benefits for women, where other conditions are present. In the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda, for example, more than any other type of local organization, women’s organizations had the greatest political space to advocate for their rights because the government typically viewed them as apolitical (Burnet, 2008, p. 375).

The political economy of war mobilizes women and men in particular ways (Meintjes, 2002); women tend to take on non-traditional labour and management roles, and often become heads of households. Thus, faced with dire circumstances some women are able to “transform their lives in terms of their image of themselves, their behaviour towards men and towards their elders, and their ability to live independently” (Meintjes et al., 2002, p. 7). The expanded roles and responsibilities that women take on during conflicts can also have a positive impact on women’s empowerment, as women involved in peace or liberation struggles come to see themselves as agents of change. Bop (2002) explains that during the war in Uganda, citizen consciousness among women grew as large numbers of women pushed the boundaries between public and political space. Women who take up arms, women who struggle for peace and women who become the providers for their families may come to see themselves as decision-makers and agents of change (Bop, 2002). Although Bop attributes the Ugandan women’s movement success to a combination of strategies aimed at the national level and included lobbying, consciousness-raising, and an appeal to international authorities, she argues that consciousness was a critical variable in strengthening the resolve of women to participate in decision-making (p. 23).

Meintjes et al., (2002) point out that some refugee camps may provide “opportunities for innovation” (p. 16). They explain that the collective experience of living in the camps is potentially transformative where it provides models of women’s leadership and builds a community of women with an awareness that they will be better able to maintain and expand their gains if they work together (2002). Class and other divisions can be temporarily transcended during political transitions, creating a “rare

moment of solidarity” (Salo, 2010, p. 29). In South Africa, this was made possible by the emergence (or perhaps cultivation) of a cross-cutting critical gender consciousness at a time when “old patriarchal alliances were being unbundled and new alignments created” (p. 29). Similarly, Namibia’s independence came at a time “when gender issues were ‘at a high peak’” because of Namibian women’s contributions “as armed combatants, ‘radical mothers,’ community activists inside Namibia, university and vocational students trained abroad, and the backbone of exile camps in neighbouring Angola” (Bauer, 2006, p. 97). Solidarity among diverse women may also grow out of women’s joint activities to generate income or provide psycho-social support services during the conflict (Bop, 2002). Women may also unite as collective actors for peace, seeking assistance and protection from international authorities, building regional networks, and using the media to put pressure on various authorities (Meintjes et al., 2002). They therefore learn how to organize political campaigns that involve awareness-raising and advocacy.

### 2.2.2 A gender equity lobby and legacy of women’s activism and leadership

It is widely noted that a strong and relatively autonomous feminist movement is a critical variable in women achieving and sustaining greater political inclusion. Since women are not a constituency in electoral politics, women’s advocates need to build a broad-based coalition committed to gender equality to act as constituency in order to have significant political leverage (Hassim, 2003b; Viterna & Fallon, 2008). Although largely excluded from patronage networks and formal power, women in many African countries have tended to have longer legacies of creating and sustaining informal and local associations for religious activities, rotating credit and savings, self-help, and other community-based initiatives. For this reason, Tripp (2003) argues, they have been better able to maneuver political openings created by liberalizing regimes than men.

Information and communication technologies—the advent of the Internet, e-mail, and particularly cell phones in the late 1990s made information available to activists and policymakers, and significantly increased communications among disparate groups (Bauer, 2006; Tripp, 2003). Of course, this had an extraordinary impact on the ability of groups to network and build political support for various campaigns. Tripp (2003) also notes that in Uganda, media attention to women’s issues provided a positive counter-



narrative to sexist and disparaging portrayals, and that coverage of the activities of women activists and their organizations had a positive feedback effect on women's movements.

Bauer and Britton (2006) explain that conflicts and liberation struggles in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1980s also emboldened female activists who then "inserted themselves into the processes of crafting new constitutions and drafting new laws" and fought for the introduction of quotas and other mechanisms for equal political representation (p. 11). They also note that prolonged conflicts apparently produced "a cadre of capable women willing and able to run for political office" (p. 11). In Namibia, women in exile during the liberation struggle were able to take advantage of educational opportunities and strengthen their autonomy (Bauer, 2004). Indeed, all of the once-exiled parliamentarians interviewed by Bauer (2004) confirmed that advanced degrees, English and public speaking skills, and increased confidence made the exile experience a transformative one, "leading in many cases to their involvement in formal politics" (p. 500). Seidman (1999) explains that when students and exiled South Africans returned and took up leadership positions within anti-apartheid organizations, they had "a new vocabulary of feminist theory" and began "challenging earlier assumptions about the role of women in the democratic struggle and about the nature of women's political aspirations" (p. 295). Viterna and Fallon (2008) likewise argue that women who challenged traditional gender roles during war or revolution are likely to spearhead feminist struggles in the new regime. These women represent a large pool of experienced activists and potential candidates, and they are part of an established network that includes both national and international political allies.

The institutional culture in many African countries has changed with the presence and successes of women leaders, and as ideas about the nature of formal politics change, women's political participation is increasingly legitimized, creating "a positive environment for the active recruitment, advancement, and mentoring of younger women" (Bauer & Britton, 2006, p. 19). Uwineza and Noël Brown (2011) argue that when the Rwandan government "sought to include women in the postgenocide political processes, Rwandan women rose to the challenge and increased their capacities as leaders, thus successfully distancing themselves from their traditional 'minor' status" (p. 140).

Moreover, Longman (2006) notes that women in the Rwandan parliament “actively campaigned for the election of more women” with impressive results, winning a significant portion of seats even in areas without quotas (p. 139). Longman (2006) states that the significant growth of women’s representation in the Rwandan parliament has been primarily driven by two things: first, Rwandan women’s substantial participation in civil society, which prepares them well for a political career; and second, Rwandan women’s groups “[active promotion of] the legitimacy and importance of women holding office” (p. 139). For instance, Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe (a national umbrella organization for women’s groups in Rwanda) has supported women’s candidacy for office as well as public education programs leading up to elections. It should also be noted that because of women’s expanded roles and responsibilities in military and political struggles, women in some sub-Saharan countries became a visible constituency, and political parties began to incorporate women’s issues into their agendas (Bauer, 2004; Bauer & Britton, 2006). While in some cases, political parties simply paid lip service to women’s concerns, in others such promises gave women activists and politicians an opening to demand accountability, forcing parties to uphold their commitments.

Viterna and Fallon (2008) argue that the emergence of more women-friendly states depends on a legacy of women’s activism that justifies feminist claims. They note that South African women were able to aggressively demand their inclusion in the negotiations using confrontational strategies that were part of their repertoire prior to the transition. They also point out that the strategy of coalition-building that existed in the anti-apartheid struggle continued into the democratic period. According to Kemp, Madlala, Moodley, and Salo (1995), gains in SA “were made possible by the fluidity and dynamism of the period and the emergence of a new South African feminism that consistently intersected race and class with gender” (p. 159). Black women were thus able to build constituencies and coalitions such as the Rural Women’s Movement and the Women’s National Coalition, which significantly heightened the prominence of women’s concerns. Burnet (2008) identifies Pro-Femmes in Rwanda as a key player and coordinator of women’s organizations in the transition period. She explains that this multi-ethnic organization took on “ambitious development and advocacy initiatives” that

included peacebuilding, socio-economic development, and inheritance rights (p. 374). Hassim (2006) suggests that creating a single autonomous organization in South Africa (the Women's National Coalition) provided a relatively autonomous strategic and organizational vehicle that female activists used to articulate their claims. Since influential members of the Coalition were also African National Congress<sup>9</sup> members, they were able to decisively influence the negotiations. In sum, when women are perceived as politically credible, the gender equity lobby is much better positioned to achieve its goals (Goetz, 2003).

### 2.2.3 Alignment of feminist frames with transitional ideologies or developmental visions

Meintjes et al. (2002) argue that in order for new gender relations to be incorporated, women must first imagine and internalize changes in their roles and then develop conscious strategies to remake the rules. Hassim (2006) writes that “a critical factor in shaping whether women’s movements aim to transform society is the existence of feminism as a distinct ideology within the movement, emphasizing the mobilization of women in order to transform the power relations of gender” (p. 174). Similarly, Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2002) find that progressive women’s social movements are a driving factor in creating more feminist states, and explain that their effectiveness depends on whether they can skillfully appropriate gender discourses or existing gender ideologies during democratization (see section 3.4). Clearly there is a need to change public (especially male) opinion alongside legal frameworks. Locating sympathetic male allies and “winning hearts and minds” is absolutely crucial. As Goetz (2003) explains:

In the end, women’s access, presence and influence in decision-making forums is shaped by public constructions of women’s rights as citizens. If women are not seen as making a contribution to society and the economy of equivalent importance to men, they will not be seen as having equivalent rights to pronounce upon the way public monies are spent, the way laws are framed, and the way standards of accountability are set. (p. 72)

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<sup>9</sup> The African National Congress has been the ruling party in South Africa since that country’s first non-racial democratic elections in 1994. The ANC represented the main opposition to the Afrikaner government and played a major role in the transition from apartheid to democracy.

Women's advocates may be able to use existing gender ideologies to strengthen their political claims. According to Burnet (2008), one of the reasons for the passage of the Inheritance Law in Rwanda is that "female lobbyists couched their advocacy to male audiences in terms of family-oriented, 'motherist' politics by appealing to the men's sense of justice for their own mothers' and daughters' rights" (p. 377). However, appeals to traditional gender ideologies can backfire, as men and other opponents may use those same ideologies to justify women's exclusion from politics and decision-making. In Chile's early democratic period in the late 1980s and early 1990s, women activists and feminists within the state were able to use the state to try to improve women's active participation in politics, society, and the economy by framing women as legitimate "public" actors (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet, 2002). However, in Nigeria, women's associations worked within traditional boundaries as state processes reinforced the perception of women as primarily wives and mothers; this Women in Development (WID) discourse viewed women as necessary contributors to development, but not as equal partners with men (2002).<sup>10</sup> The feminist movement in Namibia began in the late 1980s, when the women's coalition, Namibia Women's Voice, began to organize around both practical and strategic gender needs (Geisler, 2004; Hubbard & Soloman, 1995).<sup>11</sup> While the activities of the group were related to their roles as mothers and caregivers, they led to decision-making, educational experiences, and empowerment, and began to challenge oppressive gender relations within the liberation struggle. Thus, "women must be able to connect their individual experiences of marginalization or deprivation to broader social or political processes and to formulate collective demands for change" (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet, 2002, p. 454). Whether they will be able to do so will depend largely on social divisions in the polity, the degree of economic crises, and the historical legacies of women's activism (2002).

Viterna and Fallon (2008) likewise argue that there must be an alignment between the transitional ideology (e.g., building a just and equitable nation) and feminist frames

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<sup>10</sup> See section 3.4 on the main differences between WID and GAD (Gender and Development).

<sup>11</sup> See section 3.4 on the distinction between practical gender needs and strategic gender interests. In short, women's practical needs are those immediate, daily needs relative to their resources and responsibilities *as women*, whereas women's strategic interests are those longer term, political goals derived from women's subordinate status relative to men. They involve challenges to existing gender hierarchies and the promotion of women's rights and status.

that explicitly challenge women's subordination (e.g., a true democracy does not exclude half the population). Thus, appropriating a political discourse of democracy and citizenship can bolster women activists' claims. Many independence struggles in Africa have historically embraced a Marxist-Leninist ideology, raising consciousness about class and by extension race- and gender-based inequalities. Although women's liberation has often been subsumed by the larger liberation struggle, transitional periods frequently provided opportunities for activist women to challenge the hypocrisy of "equality for some" in the new state, connecting their demands for gender equality to previous demands for racial equality (Viterna & Fallon, 2008, p. 682; see also Meintjes, 2002; Seidman, 1999). During South Africa's transition out of apartheid, political parties—including the ANC which campaigned on a platform of structural transformation—failed to address women's citizenship, allowing the Women's Coalition "to effectively exploit this credibility gap to question the terms on which the new democracy was being negotiated" (Hassim, 2006, p. 159). The feminist movement and the Women's Charter in South Africa recognized the role of the state in women's subordination and sought to change the structure of the state. Seidman (1999) explains that because the "democratic transition process was gendered... [with] a women's movement explicitly committed to a feminist vision of democratization," the movement was "able to include a gendered understanding of citizenship in the construction of new democratic institutions" (p. 302). Similarly, Hassim (2006) asserts that a rights-based discourse was produced by a transition process that depended on consensus and provided women activists with the space to "extend feminist conceptions of democracy" (pp. 159-60). Thus, women activists changed public perceptions of women as "mothers of the nation" to "rights-bearing citizens" (Hassim, 2006, Chapter 5). Hassim explains that in constitutional debates about democracy, liberal notions of equality were incongruous with the ANC's socialist base. In this context, feminist ideology "provided the glue that held together a diversity of claims" (p. 160). Thus, a broad understanding of citizenship "offered a more enabling framework [than nationalism] because the rights-based discourses that accompanied it allowed for the use of feminist mobilizing language of women's power and autonomy" (p. 161).

#### 2.2.4 Domestic networks and alliances that include influential male allies

Women's advocacy groups building networks and forging alliances with politicians and other civil society actors is also a recognized condition for success (Basu, 2010; Bauer & Britton, 2006). Steady (2006) explains that the Women's Forum in Sierra Leone saw networking as a key strategy to build solidarity among diverse groups and strengthen their position as a lobby for peace and development. Because women's wings of political parties were members of the Forum, they were able to get women's issues onto political party platforms. Disney (2006) states that although more formal networks and structures are needed, effective collaboration between women's groups and women in the state has been a major driver of legal reforms in Mozambique. These women have strong connections and move back and forth between state agencies and non-state organizations. Calling attention to the success of gender mainstreaming initiatives in Mozambique, Tripp et al. (2009) credit the "productive synergies that have been produced by combining the resources, skills, and input of women's organizations, academics, and government officials" (p. 194). Bauer (2006) also credits the emergence of a synergy among women activists and MPs for women-friendly policy change in Namibia. Similarly, Meintjes (2002) contends that in South Africa, gender equity and equality policy originated with "well-placed individual feminists in parliament, in partnership with lobbies and organizations in civil society" (p. 75). Meintjes argues that such collaboration was path-shaping because it set a precedent for a new relationship between the state and society-based groups, and it successfully challenged social attitudes towards women's capacity for governance, decision-making, and dispensing justice.

In Rwanda, Pro-Femmes collaborated with the restructured Ministry of Gender to spearhead the advocacy work for the Inheritance Law, which addressed a broad range of women's legal rights such as rights to seek paid employment, own and inherit property, and open bank accounts independently (Burnet, 2008). The enactment of the controversial law in 1999 has been credited to the Forum of Women Parliamentarians, who "worked together closely in formulating policy, crafting the text of the bill, and lobbying decision makers in other ministries and within the inner circle of the [ruling party]" (p. 377). Burnet points to prominent women in the ruling party who championed the bill, and to women activists who "had gained enough experience to know how to

manipulate the state, even a repressive state, to achieve a common goal” (p. 377). Again, the timing was also crucial. In 1998, the Rwandan government was still technically a Government of National Unity that included members of other political parties and a predominantly Hutu opposition party and represented diverse interests and perspectives. Although women comprised less than 25% of the parliamentarians, women’s solidarity on the issue allowed women to lobby members of these different parties to build broad support among decision makers in government at the time (Burnet, 2008). Importantly, Longman (2006) acknowledges that despite increasingly authoritarian practices within the Rwandan Patriotic Front, its leaders have continuously championed women’s rights and “have demonstrated considerable commitment to the expansion of female representation, not only appointing women to top government posts but also establishing policies that promote the representation of women at all levels of government” (p. 139). Without this type of political will from the top of the hierarchy it is unlikely that Rwandan women would have made the strides they have.

Writing from a feminist historical institutionalist perspective (see sections 3.1-2), Waylen (2007) traces the complex causal relationship between democratic transitions and positive gender outcomes in the South African case. She argues that in addition to women’s mobilization (itself dependent on resources, framing, and political opportunities), the success of South African feminists depended on a favourable political opportunity structure created by the form of the transition process and the willingness of the (largely ANC) opposition to incorporate gender concerns. A third critical factor for Waylen was the unique ability of a “triple alliance” of academics, politicians, and (many feminist) activists that constituted the WNC to strategically advocate gender concerns during a critical juncture in the transition. Taken together, organized women were able to get gender issues in the interim constitution and on the policy agenda, laying the foundation for later advances towards gender equality. Waylen notes that while the women’s movement lost momentum in the post-transition period, the triple alliance “together with ‘sympathetic insiders’ within government and parliament were initially able to capitalize on the substantive gains that had already been achieved” (p. 525).

### 2.2.5 Affirmative action and institutionalized access to the state

Clearly the quality of the democracy, or as Viterna and Fallon (2008) state, the “completeness” of the transition, will have implications for whether women get any closer to enjoying substantive citizenship rights. They argue that in addition to questioning and discrediting pre-transition political ideologies, the emergence of more gender-equitable states depends on whether vestiges of the old regime remain and on whether the transition provides concrete opportunities to reconstruct governing institutions and rewrite laws and constitutions. According to Bauer and Britton (2006), African women have made much greater advances during the 1980s and 1990s transitions to democracy than they did in earlier transitions to national political independence because of the introduction of multiparty politics, since organized women were able to successfully lobby parties to include quotas and other instruments to increase women’s representation. They also state that (in addition to women’s pressure groups and the support of political parties) strengthening women’s representation and participation in politics depends on the combined effects of electoral systems (proportional representation systems are said to be more favourable to women than plurality-majority systems), gender-based quotas (reserved seats, party-based quotas), and the use of “zebra lists” (that alternate between male and female candidates). A number of authors argue that quotas and reserved seats to achieve a “critical mass” of women representatives can act as a foundation for gender equality reforms *where other mechanisms are present*.

However, there is much debate about pursuing numerical representation. In *No Shortcuts to Power*, Goetz and Hassim (2003) use the case studies of Uganda and South Africa to explore the political and institutional conditions that have facilitated representational gains. They examine the roles of political parties, patronage networks and presidential support for female candidates; the role of women’s movements in developing policy platforms and supporting women politicians; and institutional changes that have increased access to politics and policymaking. Although quota systems and other institutional mechanisms may provide opportunities for women’s participation and influence, they argue, too much emphasis has been placed on achieving a critical mass of women office holders. The authors successfully reframe the issue of women’s presence in public institutions in terms of “women’s political effectiveness,” and investigate



“conditions for moving beyond a ‘descriptive’ or simply numerical representation to a more substantive one: *from a feminine presence to feminist activism in politics*” (p. 5; emphasis added).

Rai (2003) argues that in order for gender equality to be made integral to democratization, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women must be part of the process from the start. She argues that if, as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) proposes, there is indeed a need for improved consultation between women’s NGOs, women’s machineries, and other state policy-making agencies, then the promotion of gender equality hinges on *access* to government. Likewise, Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2002) indicate that the outcome of state feminism depends on whether women with feminist agendas are able to access women’s policy machineries; if the state is to effectively promote women’s rights, it must have institutionalized channels through which society-based feminists can access policymaking fora. Meintjes’ (2003) case study on the passage of domestic violence legislation in South Africa suggests that in order for gender policies to be effectively incorporated within the state, society-based women’s groups must be politically mobilized and women politicians must have support networks amongst themselves and within the bureaucracy to pursue their goals within the state. It is also necessary that these alliances employ a normative framework or democratic discourse that encompasses gender relations (see section 2.2.3). Meintjes emphasizes that these are not sufficient conditions; they will only succeed if civil society actors “have the knowledge and skills to engage in highly complex processes of intervention and negotiation with appropriate state apparatuses... [in which] key individuals in leadership positions [are] committed to and champion the issue” (p. 141). She also emphasizes that influential female leaders must be able to develop strategic alliances with influential male politicians for reforms to succeed.

## 2.2.6 Transnational feminism, donor funds, and international norms

The African Union and regional inter-governmental organizations such as the Southern African Development Community and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as well as regional bodies like *ABANTU for development*, the Association of African Women for Research and Development, and the African Feminist

Forum have played important roles in promoting gender equality within African States (Ampofo et al., 2008; Tripp et al., 2009). Transnational feminism and the global trend towards gender equality in the 1990s likewise bolstered domestic struggles. Although Botswana has been a multiparty democracy since independence in 1965, women did not have significant political influence until the general election held in 1994 (Geisler, 2004). In the case of Botswana, there was no significant rupture in the country, but the largest women's organization, *Emang Basadi* (Stand Up, Women), began to educate women voters, support women candidates, and lobby for greater representation and for their concerns to be included in party manifestos. Geisler (2004) explains that, inspired by the successes of the WNC and the Women's Charter in neighbouring South Africa, *Emang Basadi* and a broad-based coalition of women's groups held consultations and drafted the Women's Manifesto to stake their political claims.<sup>12</sup> Bauer (2006) also points to political learning in the region, noting that the women drafting the Namibian Women's Manifesto "were well aware" of the Botswana Women's Manifesto published in 1994.<sup>13</sup> The Namibian Women Manifesto Network began under the coordination and leadership of Sister Namibia, a feminist organization in Windhoek (Bauer, 2004). After a series of workshops, the Manifesto was launched in September 1999 and the Network in September 2000. At the same time, the Network embarked on its 50/50 campaign, which aimed for gender parity in governing institutions. 50/50 campaigns have also emerged in Sierra Leone and South Africa since the mid-1990s, with the African Union adopting the Gender Parity Principle in 2002, but these have not yet received much attention in the academic literature. To my knowledge, there has not been a cross-national comparison of countries with either 50/50 movements and/or women's manifestos.

A number of scholars have pointed to the influence of international bodies and to the UN conferences on women, where African women have been highly active participants (Bauer & Britton, 2006; Geisler, 2004). Basu (2010) writes that the increased growth and access to transnational advocacy networks, particularly the UN conferences since 1985, as the "most productive global influence on women's movements" (p. 8).

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<sup>12</sup> Perhaps is it no coincidence that the Fifth African Regional Conference on Women, which produced the African Platform for Action, was held in the same year.

<sup>13</sup> Ghana also has a Women's Manifesto Coalition, which published the Ghana Women's Manifesto in 2004 (see Fallon, 2008). Liberian women also published a Women's Manifesto in 2005 (see section 6.3).

National machineries for the advancement of women were initially conceived at the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975 and have since been honed by world conferences on women in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995), as well as in subsequent sessions of the Division for the Advancement of Women and the Commission on the Status of Women. The BPfA reiterated the significant role that national machineries play in promoting equality between women and men, gender mainstreaming, and monitoring the implementation of the BPfA and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Underpinning each of the areas for targeted action was the principle that women must be represented and involved in the decision-making of all plans, policies, and programs (United Nations, 1995).

Links to transnational feminism and international norms and pressure provide discursive and material support for women's advocacy organizations engaged with the state (Tripp et al., 2009; Viterna & Fallon, 2008). Tripp (2003) notes that "the Beijing conference legitimized key elements of feminist discourse in African NGOs, parties, states, international development agencies and other fora" (p. 239; see also Alvarez 1990; Seidman, 1999). These conferences also facilitated political learning, whereby women's organizations and activists learned from each other's strategies and successes and returned home to form coalitions within their own countries. In South Africa, Argentina, Ghana, and El Salvador, "the process of sharing ideas across borders was viewed by the activists as a central and positive component of the struggle for re-gendering masculine states" (Viterna & Fallon, 2008, p. 684). In Namibia, Beijing "energized" Namibian delegates to review laws and work towards developing new strategies and interventions within the country (Bauer, 2004, p. 495). In Rwanda too, the global women's movement "provided inspiration and technical knowledge to Rwandan women," who "returned energized" from "their discussions with... 'third world' feminists" at international conferences (Burnet, 2008, p. 375). Likewise, in Sierra Leone, the activities of the Women's Forum "intensified," after Beijing; they spearheaded the anti-war movement, mobilized women voters, and organized national women's conferences to prepare for the elections in 1996 (Steady, 2006, p. 44).

Conversely, Viterna and Fallon (2009) note that links to the international community can also be demobilizing since local organizations might become donor driven and depoliticized, reducing their local legitimacy. This might be especially true in the African context, where opponents of women's rights may attempt to discredit claims for gender equality and women's empowerment as part of Western imperialism. However, "ideological linkages with the international community enhance feminist transformations with democracy, especially when local women can frame transnational feminist goals as logical extensions of their past localized activism" (Viterna & Fallon, 2008, p. 684). Critically, the literature is starting to recognize the significant contributions that African women have made to transnational feminism in many areas: violence against women; women, peace, and conflict; women's political representation; and in addressing the unique challenges confronting the girl child (Steady, 2006; Tripp et al., 2009). This would suggest that it is becoming easier to frame the BPfA's "critical areas of concern" and various other international declarations as inclusive of African women's concerns.

Gender positive change is most likely to be sustained where resources are targeted towards reforming and implementing women-friendly policy and legislation (Tripp et al., 2009). Since the early 1990s, donor objectives have often included women's rights advocacy and political inclusion, where they were previously focused on activities related to economic development and women's welfare or reproductive roles. As donor funds became more readily available, African women's organizations were increasingly able to reduce their dependency on the state and sever ties with patronage networks (Tripp, 2003; Tripp et al., 2009). According to Tripp (2003), as donor funds have been increasingly targeted towards providing education for women and girls, "a larger pool of capable women who were in a position to lead organizations emerged, especially at the national level" (p. 239). Donors have also increasingly supported female political aspirants. In Rwanda, as in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and other countries that have experienced war and conflict since the 1990s, women's organizations have benefitted considerably from aid targeting women and children in war-torn societies. Burnet (2008) explains that although women's organizations in Rwanda in the 1990s should be seen as internally-driven, international development agencies have supported their work in vital ways. Burnet explains that the US Agency for International Development (USAID) directed millions of

dollars in emergency funds through Women in Transition, an experimental program that provided relatively small grants to women's organizations throughout the country. Moreover, Oxfam and other international NGOs (INGOs) developed and supported gender sensitization throughout government, while the Women Waging Peace network and the Hunt Alternatives Fund conducted leadership training for female elected officials (p. 374).<sup>14</sup>

### ***2.3 Applications to the Liberian Case***

This literature raises many questions that can be usefully applied to the Liberian case. For example, this thesis explores how and to what extent Liberian conflicts and crises have disrupted gender hierarchies, altered gender roles and responsibilities, and offered opportunities for Liberian women's advocates to insert gender-based demands into the reconstructed political process. If the post-war period truly is too late for patriarchal gender relations to be transformed (Meintjes et al., 2002), then I must determine the extent to which Liberian women were present, active, and influential in the initial transition period. This research also investigates whether there is a growing gender and/or feminist consciousness in Liberia, and evaluates the effectiveness of newly-crafted transitional and gender ideologies. Furthermore, it asks questions about the role of Liberia's national women's machinery and the role of international organizations in advancing women's rights and status in Liberia. Since access to policymaking fora and alliances among feminist and women's movement actors and women's policy agencies appear to have a significant causal role in gender-positive reforms, this is a central line of inquiry in the current research. Theories of state feminism, discussed in the next chapter, ask and address many of the same questions, though applicability to non-Western contexts has seldom been explored.

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<sup>14</sup> The Women Waging Peace Network and the Hunt Alternatives Fund are specifically mentioned here because they have been doing much of the same work in Liberia. Both of these are part of the Institute for Inclusive Security, which "supports policymakers by providing expert advice grounded in research that demonstrates women's contributions to peacebuilding" and "[strengthens] women leaders through targeted training and mentoring, helping them to build coalitions, and connecting them to policymakers" (<http://www.inclusivesecurity.org/about-us/>).

## ***2.4 Lacunae in the Literature***

Several authors provide explanatory frameworks that speak directly to my question. For instance, Tripp et al. (2009) find that in countries that made significant advances in women's rights, there was a strong and relatively autonomous women's movement; changing international norms and pressure on states to recognize those norms; conflict or major crisis that opened political space for women activists to make claims and negotiate the transition; and resources targeted towards reforming and implementing women-friendly policy and legislation. Of these, they find women's mobilization to be the crucial variable driving gender sensitive policies in sub-Saharan Africa over the last two decades. However, little attention is paid to ideological factors, and transforming the way women's roles and agency are conceptualized by the public is necessary if gains are to be consolidated. Activists must undertake an ideological project; strategically framing changes in law and policy, educating people and raising consciousness to build widespread support for (gender) justice and equity. Bauer and Britton (2006) also overlook discursive factors and the role of international agencies, while Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2002) disregard the role of international actors and norms that might affect the outcome of state feminism. On the other hand, Viterna and Fallon (2008) privilege discursive strategies and framing to the exclusion of state structures and politically credible women and sympathetic men within and with access to the state. These and other explanatory frameworks, such as those of Meintjes (2003), Goetz (2003), Hassim (2006), and Waylen (2007) outlined above, offer essential insights but are still limited in their application to the Liberian case. Although organized women in Rwanda and Uganda have received the support of Presidents Kagame and Museveni, respectively, *none* of the countries studied have had a female president who has continuously demonstrated her support for gender equity issues. Moreover, most of the national legislatures in the countries discussed here all have upwards of 30% women representatives—much higher than Liberia's 17% between 2005 and 2011. For more than a decade, Liberian women activists and politicians have struggled unsuccessfully for a legislative quota. Although Liberia experienced a major political rupture, women's

groups were not represented at the ceasefire negotiations or in the National Transitional Government.

Critically, the literature talks about the role of international organizations in two ways. First, they provide financial and technical support to local women's organizations and second, they use monetary incentives or moral force to pressure governments to adopt certain reforms or uphold international obligations. They are never described as *drafters* of national policies—at least not within the realm of women's rights. This thesis will thus address another significant gap in the literature, which treats transnational feminism and UN conferences on women as potentially transformative—but does not mention “failed,” “failing,” or “collapsed” states, or as introduced in the following chapter, *governance in areas of limited statehood*. An analysis of the Liberian case should thus provide some novel insights, thereby building on and refining existing theory. Perhaps the limits of state feminist theory in Liberia should have been obvious. Nonetheless, many scholars of gender politics and the state in sub-Saharan Africa appear to have missed the extraordinary roles that international agencies, and particularly the UN system, play in areas of limited statehood.

## CHAPTER 3 THEORY AND KEY CONCEPTS

The theoretical framework applied in this thesis combines theoretical constructs from several approaches, which reflects the necessary mix of inductive and deductive analysis. Key concepts introduced and operationalized in this chapter include: institutions; critical juncture; national women's machinery or women's policy agency; state feminism; feminist insider; WID and GAD; practical gender needs and strategic gender interests; framing; gender mainstreaming; and policy diffusion. This chapter begins with a brief introduction to feminist (historical) institutionalism, followed by a lengthier discussion of the emergent theory of state feminism, the primary theoretical lens applied in this thesis. The chapter concludes with the final element of the framework, revealed through fieldwork in Liberia, which is the theory of governance in areas of limited statehood. This thesis argues that because Liberia is an area of limited statehood, state feminist theory is not easily applied.

### ***3.1 Historical Institutionalism: An Overview***

Historical institutionalism (HI) is best described as an approach to the study of political phenomena that is concerned with middle range theorizing to explain how political struggles are mediated by the institutional environment and how the interaction of micro- and macro-level variables in political processes influence political outcomes (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992). Importantly, the institutional context or policy environment shapes patterns of political interactions but does not determine the outcomes of political struggles (1992). Since individuals and groups have overlapping and sometimes contradictory interests, the process through which interests or policy problems are articulated, conflicts develop, coalitions are formed, events unfold, and institutions are reconfigured is integral to historical institutional analysis (1992). According to Immergut (1998), “new” historical institutionalists perceive causality as varied—as complex “clusters” of variables as opposed to isolated independent variables—and abandon prediction or universal causal models in favour of historical contingency. They also reject the notion of a singular, predictable (Western instrumentalist) rationality that motivates behaviour (Immergut, 1998). Political scientists Pierson and Skocpol (2002) identify



three central characteristics of contemporary historical institutionalists: (1) They address substantive real-world puzzles or outcomes (2) they take history seriously in their explanations by paying close attention to how events unfold and institutions endure, evolve, and transform over time, and (3) they analyze contexts and configurations of variables to hypothesize about the combined effects of institutions, actors, and political processes (p. 3). Comparative historical institutionalism systematically compares causal variables and illuminates cross-national patterns (Waylen, 2011). Given our increasingly globalized world, some HI scholars are increasingly analyzing the international context and the ways in which it shapes, supports, and constrains political agency in national politics (Waylen, 2011).

Within this approach, institutions are defined as formal and informal rules, practices and procedures that structure political behaviour and (power) relationships among various actors in the political economy. Institutions have been famously defined as “the rules of the game in a society” (North, 1990, p. 3). They are the “legacy of concrete historical processes” and are sustained by political and social contexts (Thelan, 1999, p. 342). Institutional change is largely thought of as incremental, though much of the HI literature “[postulates] a dual model of institutional development characterized by relatively long periods of path-dependent institutional stability and reproduction that are punctuated occasionally by brief phases of institutional flux—referred to as critical junctures—during which more dramatic change is possible” (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 341). These critical junctures might also be called formative events, and may be a war, a natural disaster, an economic crisis, and/or some combination of these or other factors that offer opportunities for groups, movements, and/or policy entrepreneurs to shape institutions more than they could under “ordinary” circumstances.<sup>15</sup> It is a fundamental assumption of this research that Liberia is (or perhaps, *was*) at a critical juncture for institutionalizing gender equity interests.

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<sup>15</sup> This is more suitable to my case than “political opportunity structure” in social movement theory, which also examines exogenous factors that drive or restrict mobilization, shape claims and strategies, and increase or decrease the likelihood of movement success. Though undoubtedly useful (I began with it, in fact), it was somewhat limiting because it is more movement-focused and concerned with the characteristics and dynamics of the movement more so than the interaction context. Although this theory typically considers opportunities within the political system and among elites, I also wanted to focus on wider discourses (of democratization and development, in particular) and the wider context of social and economic changes, as well as on actual policies and reforms that occur.

### ***3.2 Feminist Institutionalism: An Emerging Framework***

HI appears to intersect with feminist methodology in important ways, but since “mainstream” historical institutionalism has largely neglected gender and women, this research builds on and from the growing body of “feminist institutionalism” that focuses on gendered structures and feminist agency in and around the state (MacKay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010). In the 1980s, feminist scholars challenged the notion that the state unequivocally oppressed women, and conducted empirical work that showed women’s movement activism produced tangible changes in state structures. Some called those women’s advocates “inside” the state, “femocrats” (Chappell, 2000, 2002; Franzway, Connell, & Court, 1989). Other work has focused on the gendered operation and effects of organizations, political parties, electoral systems, bureaucracies, and regime change—especially through democratic transitions (Acker, 1990, 1992; Alvarez, 1990; Baldez, 2003; Beckwith, 2000, 2005, 2007; Franceschet, 2001; Waylen, 1994, 2011). Feminist scholars have thus been concerned with how shifting loci of state power (e.g., during decentralization) influences patterns of state-movement interaction and, in particular, creates strategic openings that women’s movements can exploit to influence the course of the transition (Banaszak, Beckwith, & Rucht, 2003). Much of this scholarship is concerned with women’s access to political institutions and with women’s influence on public policy and national decision making (Goetz, 2003; Lovenduski, 2005; Mazur, 2002; McBride Stetson & Mazur, 1995; Rai, 2003). Given the feminist orientation towards transformation, feminist political scientists are often concerned with institutional reform strategies and substantive policy change (MacKay et al., 2010).<sup>16</sup>

An important theoretical assumption of this research is that *gender difference is a product of institutions*. As Goetz (1997) states, gender relations are a constitutive element of institutions, which have a tendency to reproduce gender hierarchies since “gendered preference systems...are embedded in the norms, structures and practices of institutions” (p. 5). Governing institutions are predominantly gendered in the sense that they are gender-blind and/or gender-biased (Goetz, 2003). Gender inequities exist in the

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<sup>16</sup> The empirical and theoretical work that informs this study also discusses women’s political losses in post-transition contexts, but this is not dealt with here except to suggest areas for future research. The scope of the thesis is limited to explaining institutional evolution and change leading to women’s political gains in Liberia.

distribution of resources and power, and in the re/production of ideologies that justify and legitimate these inequities. According to MacKay et al. (2010), feminist research on institutions has demonstrated that:

While constructions of masculinity and femininity are both present in political institutions, the masculine ideal underpins institutional structures, practices and norms, shaping ‘ways of valuing things, ways of behaving and ways of being’... as well as constraining the expression and articulation of marginalized perspectives. With a few exceptions, women are most commonly associated with feminine traits, and are thereby disadvantaged in the power play over which ideas matter and who accumulates institutional resources. (pp. 581-582)

To be sure, the state does not always embody a singular male interest to the exclusion of female interests, but the structure and function of institutions most certainly reproduce and legitimize male bias. Given such a reality, it is all the more puzzling when feminist aims are achieved through the state. Understanding how patriarchal institutions are re-gendered to be more inclusive of women is the central problematic addressed in this thesis.

Waylen (2011) proposes a feminist historical institutionalist approach to studying transitions to democracy, in order to explain differential gendered outcomes in terms of women’s numerical representation in legislative assemblies and their substantive representation, whereby women’s interests are translated into policy and reflected in political processes. Within both the transition and post-transition period, Waylen advocates for an examination of the actors, forms of women’s organizing, and structures that constrain action. She also indicates that the post-transition period must be studied to identify emergent outcomes and path dependent processes. In her cross-case analysis of eight transitional democracies in the later 1980s and early 1990s, Waylen identifies several causal mechanisms that might produce gender positive change (pp.156-157). First, women must be mobilized around particular women’s issues. Second, there must be key women—especially feminists—advocating change within political parties, legislatures, and governments. Third, these women must build alliances with other influential actors. And fourth, issues must be framed strategically with relevance to the salient features of the political climate at the time. Moreover, in the post-conflict period, the policy environment will have to be relatively open, which is more likely if new constitutions were forged during the transition and if a gender-sensitive government is

elected. Waylen also notes that positive outcomes depend on the openness of transition processes and political institutions, such as political parties, which will have varying degrees of male bias. Gains hinge on progressive women's access to political arenas, and may be more likely when women activists simultaneously target electoral, bureaucratic, constitutional, and/or legal reforms. Women activists are also more or less successful depending on the policy issue—domestic violence legislation, for instance, may be more easily achieved than abortion rights or legislative quotas. Waylen's (2011) framework clearly overlaps with the literature review (Chapter 2) and the RNGS framework (section 3.4) outlined below.

### ***3.3 The Nature of "The State"***

This thesis largely accepts that the state should neither be viewed as a neutral nor as wholly captured, but as a reflection of cross-cutting social relations (Franzway, et al., 1989). Thus, the state is not a monolithic, unitary, rational actor with a dominant interest, but differentiated with contradictory and often conflicting interests (Connell, 1990; Franzway et al., 1989; Parpart & Staudt, 1989). In short, the state is perhaps best described as a dynamic process, rather than an entity. It is not something that "exists" outside of society as *the* locus of power, but as *part of a network of power relations*. For these reasons interaction between the state and social forces should be viewed as "tactically complex," employing both opposition and negotiation (Franzway et al., 1989, p. 37). This understanding of the state is applicable to post-colonial, Third World<sup>17</sup> states since it leaves ample room for particular processes and power relations to be empirically defined (see Rai, 1996).

Conceiving of the state as *process* reminds us that the patriarchal or masculine state is not about having male/masculine "traits" but strategic action to protect and reconstitute male power and privilege. Characterizing the state as male, however, does not necessarily pit feminists against the state (Connell, 1990). Disaggregating the state allows us to see its differential impacts on women and on policy domains of interest to

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<sup>17</sup> "Third World feminists" have reified this term for its heuristic value (e.g., Mohanty, 2003). Though I sometimes use "developing countries" and others use "Global South" I do not find that either of those capture the colonial legacy that created these countries.

women. Parts of the state apparatus can therefore be used by women who seek to challenge gender hierarchies through the state. Rather than pursue an ontological “knowing” of what the state *is*, feminist scholars—including those in the RNGS—have turned towards examining the records of governments cross-nationally, to better understand what patterns of politics spur government action to promote women’s interests, rights, and status (McBride & Mazur, 2010).

National women’s machinery, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, or women’s policy agencies (WPAs) refer to the office, agency, or other structure established by government to advance women’s social status. The BPfA states that national machineries are “the central policy-coordinating unit inside government,” with their main task being “to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender-equality perspective in all policy areas” (para. 201).<sup>18</sup> They take a wide variety of forms and vary with respect to their location, functions, powers, capacity, resources, and effectiveness (Lovenduski, 2005; Rai, 2003). In order to judge their effectiveness in substantively enhancing women’s representation, the researcher must investigate policy-making processes and the extent to which these processes include women in decision-making and incorporate feminist goals into public policy. WPAs may or may not provide women with access to the state: “often set up in name only, formal women’s policy structures may not actually achieve state feminist goals” (McBride Stetson & Mazur, 1995, p. 3). Many of the explanations for the ineffectiveness of WPAs are linked to the lack of central government commitment or capacity. Even though most African governments are chronically under-resourced, spending decisions and the location of women’s machineries within other ministries involved in social welfare or community development typically reflect the low priority and resistance to women’s concerns (Rai, 2003). Tripp et al. (2009) also point out that although sometimes leaders of WPAs are advocates for women’s rights, they are appointees with multiple allegiances. Some are femocrats, or feminist insiders, connected to the women’s movement, but others are simply bureaucrats with little knowledge of or commitment to women’s issues. They note that “[h]ow aggressively a national machinery pursues gender issues depends a great deal on the inclinations of the top leadership” (p. 179). Although by 2006, 36 sub-Saharan

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<sup>18</sup> For a definition of gender mainstreaming, see section 3.5.

African countries had gender ministries, they “have rarely been at the forefront of changes in the status of women” (Tripp et al., 2009, p. 61).

Given that the state is differentiated and contradictory, the feminist state does not occlude masculinist state structures. Since the state does not exist as a coherent whole, to say that a state is “feminist” is not to say that the state *in its entirety* is committed to advancing women’s rights. This appears to be the case even where state feminism has been documented (McBride Stetson & Mazur, 1995). Thus, the feminist state should not be understood as an inversion of the patriarchal state. As Alvarez (1990) discovered in the Brazilian case, the state is neither “the ultimate mechanism of male social control” nor “the ultimate vehicle for gender-based social change” (p. 273). Instead, she writes:

[U]nder different political regimes and at distinct historical conjunctures, the state is potentially a mechanism either for social change or social control in women’s lives. . . . An engaged feminist political theory and political science would help chart the path toward change by examining the varied historical and cross-cultural experiences of feminist attempts to influence state policy “in the meantime,” while patriarchal practices and assumptions remain embedded in the structures and policies of socialist and capitalist states. (p. 273)

### **3.4 State and “Supra-State” Feminism**

McBride Stetson and Mazur (1995) explain that for a policy, activity, or organization to be feminist, it must have “the purpose of improving the status of women as a group and undermining patterns of gender hierarchy” (p. 16). To determine whether a state is feminist, they suggest categorizing the WPA’s activities and investigating:

1. State capacity: To what extent does women’s policy machinery influence feminist policy?
2. State-society relations: To what extent does women’s policy machinery develop opportunities for society-based actors—feminists and women’s advocacy organizations—to have access to the policy process? (p. 14)

The primary focus of the RNGS research was on the interactions of women’s movements and state agencies, or the “movement-agency nexus,” and on the outcomes of these interactions (McBride & Mazur, 2010, x). RNGS scholars derived a typological theory of state feminism to explain when, how, and why WPAs act as “effective partners for women’s movements and their actors in gaining access to state policy-making arenas and influencing policy outcomes” (p. 1). My thesis does not apply their typologies, but

uses some of their key concepts and tests some of their propositions.<sup>19</sup> Although RNGS has focused on Western countries, the focus and framework appear to be relevant and adaptable to non-Western contexts. In fact, in 2011 at the World Women's Conference in Ottawa, two of the principal investigators (Amy Mazur and Dorothy McBride) organized a workshop on the applicability to cases in diverse contexts. Of particular concern was whether concepts such as representation, feminism, women's movement, state, and state feminism travel well, if at all. As Chapter 2 shows, the movement-agency nexus and gender equality policy outcomes have been explored in a number of Third World contexts. Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2002) investigate state feminism in Chilean and Nigerian democratic transitions and argue that "[s]tate feminism is facilitated when women with feminist aims have some access to women's policy machineries" and that "the way that access to political institutions is structured is a crucial factor in promoting a women's rights agenda" (pp. 456-6). In a similar vein, Viterna and Fallon (2008) explain that to determine "whether a state has become more 'women-friendly' with democratization," one must study changes in institutional foundations (constitutions, laws, etc.) enacted since democratization; the organizational structures to address gender inequality; and the electoral/political system for granting power. For a state to become "more feminist," they note, "its institutional foundations must explicitly take into account, and work to remedy, women's subordination in the larger society" (p. 673).

In the RNGS capstone book, McBride and Mazur (2010) differentiate two types of state feminism. First, "Movement State Feminism" is used to describe cases where "the agencies and the state respond to movement activism by promoting ideas, actions, and demands based on gender consciousness, women's solidarity, and the cause of women" (p. 5). The second and more radical, "Transformative State Feminism occurs when these ideas, actions, and demands are explicitly feminist—that is, recognize patriarchy and gender-based hierarchy and seek to promote gender equality—thus having the potential to transform gender relations" (p. 5).<sup>20</sup> This is an important distinction as it

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<sup>19</sup> The scope of my research did not allow me to explore the RNGS typologies in the Liberian case, though these offer several excellent lines of inquiry for future research.

<sup>20</sup> In this thesis I used the lower case "movement state feminism," "transformative feminism," and "feminist insider." I have taken some liberties with the latter term. Whereas McBride and Mazur (2010) use Feminist Insider to refer to a particular type of WPA, this thesis uses the term feminist insider to describe an elected official, political appointee, or bureaucrat who is personally or ideologically allied with feminist

is clearly sensitive to the fact that women's movements are not necessarily feminist (see section 4.1), and as McBride and Mazur (2010) point out, "Virtually none of the scholarship on state feminism has considered to what extent state action pertaining to women relates to or can be identified with the ideology of feminism" (p. 123).

Conversely, gender activists and scholars in international development studies *have long considered* the extent to which development programs targeting and involving women can be identified with feminism. They have typically distinguished approaches towards women and development as either WID or GAD, and have discussed "women's interests" in terms of "practical" and "strategic." A WID approach seeks to integrate women and women's issues into development plans and practice, with particular emphasis on what women can *do for development*, particularly in terms of their contribution to economic growth. The WID paradigm also tends to integrate women into development programs as an extension of their welfare and production roles (Moser, 1993; Razavi & Miller, 1995). WID approaches have been criticized for failing to interrogate the role of gender relations in women's marginalization (Razavi & Miller, 1995). For instance, WID proponents acknowledge women's lack of resources but interpret this in terms of women's exclusion from formal markets and limited access to resources. GAD approaches challenge such assumptions and proposed that power imbalances among men and women are at the root of the problem (Razavi & Miller, 1995). GAD therefore focuses more so "strategic" issues that are more likely to reflect feminist goals and ideologies. Whereas practical gender needs are "those which are manifest in everyday life as a result of the asymmetrical gender division of resources and responsibilities," strategic gender interests "are a product of the underlying structural inequalities which give rise to these needs" (Kabeer, 2000, p. 27; see also Molyneux, 1998; Moser, 1993).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, women's strategic interests are derived from women's position within the gendered division of labour and involve "claims to transform social relations in order to enhance women's position and secure a more lasting re-positioning of women within the gender order and within society at large" (Molyneux, 1998, p. 232).

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and/or women's movement actors outside the state and who is involved in gender-specific state and/or government action.

<sup>21</sup> Again, there is some debate over the meaning and utility of these concepts, and in impoverished areas, differentiating practical from strategic interests is difficult at best.



Strategic women's interests are inherently political and are meant to transform women's disadvantageous position in society (Molyneux, 1998). It is this category of interests that are consonant with feminist ideology (see 4.1). This thesis considers the role of both international development agencies (especially UN agencies) and the role of state agencies in promoting ideas, taking actions, and making demands that reflect gender consciousness and/or feminist ideology. WID programs are likely to address many women's movement goals in Third World countries, but it is unlikely that they will reflect feminist movement goals. For these reasons, both conceptual "pairs"—movement state feminism/WID and transformative state feminism/GAD are used in this thesis (see section 7.3).

Primarily applying the analytical framework outlined by McBride (Stetson) and Mazur (1995; 2010), this thesis will *begin to* describe the process that led to the establishment and reform of the MoGD and NGF; describe the activities of these institutions; analyze the role of these institutions in policy design and implementation; identify the policy domains where they have the most influence; and analyze patterns of state feminist interaction. This requires the researcher to examine how the machinery is related to women's NGOs, and specifically, whether and how it strengthens or provides resources to women's networks and feminists outside the state and whether and how it facilitates women's access to policymaking fora (see pp. 16-18).

In both the RINGS design and the literature reviewed above, scholars appreciate that government action and inaction often depends on the effectiveness of frames. Framing policy issues essentially involves a battle over ideas; diagnosing the problem and offering the "right" prognosis (solution or strategy) is central to policy-making processes. Indeed, issue frames will largely determine who will be the influential and inconsequential actors in a policy subsystem (McBride & Mazur, 2010; Stone, 1989; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Recall that Okeke-Ihejirika and Franceschet (2002) also argue that the outcome of state feminism is related to the strategies and discourses available to organized women during transitions to democracy, and Viterna and Fallon (2008) emphasize the importance of tailoring feminist frames to align with transitional ideologies (see 2.2.3 and 4.3.4).

### ***3.5 Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood***

Although feminist theory of the state has long eschewed the “ideal type” of modern statehood, governance discourse still largely accepts the model (Risse, 2011). Areas of “limited statehood” have existed historically under colonialism, and exist in various forms today. In extreme manifestations, areas of limited statehood are those “failed” or “failing states” in conflict zones (Risse, 2011). Such areas lack “domestic sovereignty” (Krasner, 1999 as cited in Risse, 2011, p. 2); they do not have a monopoly over the use of force and *do not have sufficient capacity to implement and enforce central directives*. As Risse (2011) notes, that domestic sovereignty is lacking “is fairly obvious in colonial governance as well as in modern ‘protectorates’ where international and transnational actors provide governance services ranging from security to public authority...*But it is also the case in many other weak states that the international community co-governs through the provision of collective goods and services*” (p. 3; emphasis added). In such areas, the norm is “multi-level governance,” which connects local, national, regional, and global levels, and involves a variety of actors—including states, international organizations, business, and community-based organizations (Risse, 2011). Governance thus entails negotiations, competition, confrontation, and bargaining among these actors rather than hierarchical “command and control” modes of political steering (pp. 2-3). Risse explains that international statebuilding presupposes the modern Western state as the model and is built on an underlying belief in modernization theory. Thus, the standard “governance package,” Risse argues, “consisting of an effective government, the rule of law, human rights, democracy, market economy, and some degree of social welfare...constitutes a world cultural script” (p. 8).<sup>22</sup>

The theory of governance in areas of limited statehood (Risse, 2011) offers significant insight into gender politics in Liberia, as I argue that “women’s human rights,” “women in development,” and “gender mainstreaming,” are also a part of this governance package. Support for this assumption can be found in the comparative politics and international relations literature. Policy transfer is defined as a process through which “knowledge about how policies, administrative arrangements, institutions

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<sup>22</sup> See also Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez (1997)

and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting” (Dolowitz & Marsh 2000, p. 5). In this thesis, I assume that principles like “gender sensitivity” constitutes what Stone (2004) calls “soft” policy transfer, and norm diffusion in particular (p. 545). Gender mainstreaming, which the BPfA prioritized as a vital mechanism for achieving gender equality, is another excellent example of policy transfer. According to True and Mintrom (2001), gender mainstreaming is (or was intended as) a “radical strategy” that goes beyond typical government action to create specific policies for women to an “ongoing process by which public policies that are known to have a large impact on society, from macroeconomic to housing policy, are devised by taking into account the specific interests and values of both men and women” (p. 33).<sup>23</sup> True and Mintrom argue that a transnational network of non-state actors and the UN have been the main drivers of the diffusion of gender mainstreaming. They emphasize that since 1975, and particularly since the so-called “third wave” of democratization in the 1990s, no other “state-level bureaucratic innovation” has spread so far, so rapidly (p. 30). The authors argue that the diffusion of gender mainstreaming represents a “normative transformation of the state system” (pp. 30-31) and that “transnational networks...have been decisive in the adoption of gender mainstreaming institutions by a myriad of states” (p. 38). Critically, they note that this “explains how comparatively weak states or states with discriminatory and/or conservative cultures may come to adopt gender-mainstreaming institutions” (p. 38). Similar to the concept of critical junctures, they discuss “period effects,” noting that gender mainstreaming institutions correlate with the “wave” of democratization that began in the 1990s, thus providing statistical evidence that major political transitions provide opportunities for feminists to influence the institutional make-up of new democracies. True and Mintrom also point out that the more substantive the democracy, the more likely it is to adopt gender mainstreaming institutions. Countries are also more likely to adopt a gender mainstreaming institution when women, particularly those in ministerial positions, have a powerful role or position

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<sup>23</sup> As many feminists have pointed out, mainstreaming has become far less radical in practice. See Ní, Haynes, and Cahn (2011) for an insightful discussion of the much more useful concept of “gender centrality.”

in government, and when there are relatively equal numbers of men and women with formal education.

The abovementioned article is the only one that I have encountered to merge feminist innovation within the state and theories of limited statehood. Case studies on female friendly reforms (including gender mainstreaming) in sub-Saharan Africa tend to downplay the role of policy diffusion (Chapter 2), and (with the noted exception of True & Mintrom, 2001) institutional advances for women's rights and other forms of "soft" policy transfer are largely absent from the literature on governance in areas of limited statehood. Moreover, both True and Mintrom and the abovementioned case studies conceive of the NGO as *the primary agent of change*, carrying the ideas from the global women's movement at UN women's conferences back to their respective states, where they lobby for government action that reflects those goals. The trouble with this assertion is that *the UN system is not seen as an agent but rather a forum for other non-governmental entities*. What about state representatives that participate in these forums? And what about the role of UN agencies as actors promulgating gender sensitive reform in areas of limited statehood? In order to get a more holistic picture of causal mechanisms in the Liberian case, theories on state feminism and engendering political transitions must be integrated with those on policy transfer/diffusion, and limited statehood.

### ***3.6 Chapter Summary***

The interdisciplinary nature of this research must be noted—insights from feminist sociology, philosophy, political science, and international development have informed the thesis in important ways. I borrow liberally from new sociological institutionalism<sup>24</sup> and its attention to the role of ideas—norms and culture—in institutional formation and change, but draw most heavily on feminist historical institutionalism in comparative politics. This thesis follows the general trend in the social sciences away from the false structure-agency dichotomy towards combining structural, agent-based, and discursive explanations. This chapter discussed the analytical tools applied in this thesis. It began with historical institutionalism, which because of its

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<sup>24</sup> Indeed, given the cultural or constructivist 'turn,' historical and sociological institutionalists share much in common.

gender blindness had to be supplemented by feminist institutionalism, an emerging framework. Although the state is made up of institutions and the nature of the state can be inferred from the HI literature, it was necessary to have a more explicit understanding of the state in order to theorize about state feminism and limited statehood. This notion of feminist policy transfer in areas of limited statehood adds to the comparative literature on engendering political transitions in sub-Saharan Africa. The following chapter discusses the feminist methodology and data collection methods utilized in this research.

## CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

### ***4.1 Feminism(s) and Other Abstractions***

Women around the world are diverse and live in diverse contexts; there is no homogenous, universal category of “women” just as there is no agreed-upon definition of “feminism”—a contested term to say the least. This thesis uses the working definition of feminism/feminist action based primarily on Offen’s (1988) influential work. Such a definition allows us to integrate the theoretical basis of the word with the practical realities of feminists in diverse contexts. As Offen (1988) explains, the definition of feminism “should reflect the cumulative knowledge we have acquired about the historical development of the critique of and program for sociopolitical change in the status of women in a variety of cultures” (p. 120). Tracing the evolution of feminism as an ideology, Offen shows that feminism is not, in fact, a Western construct, but that it “incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and possesses an international scope” (p. 150). Moreover, while feminism “is necessarily pro-woman...it does not follow that it must be anti-man” since many women’s rights advocates have been and continue to be men (p. 151). Offen (1998) thus outlines three criteria for determining whether a person is feminist: 1) they recognize women’s situated knowledge, acknowledging women’s publicly stated needs and values with regard to their subordinate status (2) they are aware, uncomfortable, and/or frustrated with systemic discrimination of women as a group in a given society; and 3) they struggle to end gender injustice by trying to transform patriarchal ideas, institutions, and practices (p. 152). It is also important to note that feminist movements are a category of women’s movements and can be distinguished from the latter by their goals and ideas (Beckwith, 2000, 2007). In this thesis, feminist movements and feminist actors are identified using the above criteria. This work is primarily concerned with those women who used the spaces available during the Liberian civil conflicts and its transition to democracy to *organize as women in order to challenge gender hierarchies, particularly through the state*. This was one of the ways that I was able to narrow the scope of the thesis, as well as identify relevant frames and influential society- and state-based women’s advocates.

In the past, African women with feminist aims would likely be quick to reject the term “feminist,” viewing it as something associated with White, Western women. This belief persists today, and because of an anti-feminist, conservative backlash, “feminism” is still often regarded as something of a dirty word. However, within many African scholar/activist circles, the term is being reclaimed (see, for example, the Preamble of the African Feminist Forum’s *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists*, 2010). While some argue that feminism in Africa is a fairly new phenomenon, others are offended by the idea that feminism is externally-derived. For example, the authors of the abovementioned Charter assert that they draw inspiration from their feminist ancestors who have largely written out of history and state “that it is a profound insult to claim that feminism was imported into Africa from the West” (p. 8; see also, Mama, 2004). Nevertheless, in this thesis when I refer to feminist groups or feminists in Liberia generally, I tend to use either “women’s advocates” or “women’s empowerment movement” because most women’s advocates would not claim the name, “feminist.” What they are doing is, in principle, feminist as it is described in this section, which is why I feel reasonably comfortable applying the terms “feminist state” and “feminist insider” in this thesis.

Adomako Ampofo, Beoku-Betts & Osirim (2008) argue that transnational and Black feminism recognize multiple and complex identities and provide tools for researching African women’s agency in the social, political, and economic transformations in Africa and the Diaspora. “Intersectionality” points to multiple and variable identities and captures the idea that gender intersects with age, race, class, religion, health, sexual orientation, etc. (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991). In other words, racism, patriarchy, class, imperialism, and other types of inequality and discrimination structure the positions of diverse women and create substantively different experiences. This is in line with Offen’s (1988) claim that while the feminist vision “appeals to solidarity among women to combat their common subordination,” it must “also accommodate their actual range of diversity and differing needs” (p. 157). Intersectionality facilitates a better understanding of privilege and oppression, and a more nuanced gender analysis of theories, policies, and programs. In Liberia, “rural women,” “market women,” “young women,” “old women,” “Muslim women,” “Christian women,” “disabled women,”

“women living with HIV/AIDS,” “Country women” and “Civilized women” (referring to “indigenous” Liberians and “Americo-Liberians” respectively). There are 16 distinct ethnic groups that make up the indigenous population of Liberia. There are also 15 counties in Liberia; in the National Rural Women’s Program, rural women might be more likely to identify with their county first, as “Sinoe rural women,” for example. Again, this research is thus sensitive to the fact that there is no category of women—different women experience different degrees of privilege and oppression (as do men). In terms of national and international interventions this is also significant because these interventions target particular groups who are perceived as having different needs (such as “market women” and “rural women”), as being more vulnerable, or as having a particular interest in a given program.

#### ***4.2 Feminist Methodology and Epistemology***

There is no distinct feminist method but feminist research must employ a methodology consistent with feminist epistemology (Harding, 1987). Such a methodology values women as legitimate knowing subjects; appreciates the specificity of context and rich descriptions of social, economic, political, cultural, and historical factors; builds collaborative, reciprocal relationships where participants share in the benefits of the research; and includes women’s diverse experiences and perspectives (Harding, 1991). Feminist research puts women’s lives at the center of its focus and is concerned with power, authority, ethics, and reflexivity during the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Feminists share a commitment to social justice; in addition to addressing power asymmetry within the research process, feminist research is characterized by a commitment to action and change (Reinharz, 1992). Feminist research typically uses a wide variety of research methods, but because I had no initial contacts in Liberia and the context was unfamiliar, it was not feasible for me to conduct focus groups and multiple, in depth interviews. In the three months I spent in Liberia I conducted ethnographic fieldwork and observation using field notes and some interviews. This research began as qualitative but as the research evolved mixed methods appeared as a pragmatic and useful way to answer my research questions. By coding Liberian news



media for themes and conducting frequency counts, I was “able to illuminate previously unexamined or misunderstood experiences” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 197).

### ***4.3 Data Collection and Analysis***

The initial phase of the research focused on gathering and analyzing existing literature on women’s representational gains during political transitions. This research largely omits the family and market in order to hone in on the features of politics and the bureaucracy that either threaten or strengthen gender equality (Goetz, 2003). The literature review focuses on contemporary African women’s movements and African women in formal politics and policymaking fora, primarily since the so-called “third wave” of democratization in the 1990s. Although I had some idea of potentially important variables (e.g., strategic alliances, movement resources, and effective frames) and key concepts (such as “critical juncture,” “state feminism,” and “critical mass”), as much as possible I focused on the particular dynamics in Liberia in order to ground the research in the empirical evidence uncovered within this particular case (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989). The conditions under which women’s movements and WPAs are likely to be effective in achieving gender equality outcomes is used as a basis to compare and contrast my findings with those of other studies discussed in the literature review (Creswell, 2009). Identifying and explaining the differences among the cases allowed me to sharpen the theoretical constructs deployed.

#### **4.3.1 Grounded theory and process tracing**

In a historical institutionalist approach, processes of continuity and change are meant to be discovered empirically through case study research using the method of process tracing. This involves connecting temporal and sequential events within a case to help explain a particular phenomenon (George & Bennett, 2005). Using this technique, the researcher analyzes evidence “on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case” (p. 147).<sup>25</sup> Process tracing uses a mix

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<sup>25</sup> George & Bennett (2005) “define causal mechanisms as ultimately unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents with causal capacities operate, but only in specific contexts

of induction—identifying mechanisms within the case that explain it and may be tested elsewhere—and deduction—testing whether a hypothesized mechanism will be activated within a given case—so that it not only provides a narrative, historical explanation, but an analytical explanation that can be used to test and refine theories (George & Bennett, 2005).

#### 4.3.2 Ethnographic fieldwork

I spent upwards of 25 hours a week at an INGO in Monrovia, attended the Fourth Annual Rural Women's Conference in Buchanan, helped facilitate a leadership skills training for market women in Monrovia, and visited the MoGD several times. In addition to carrying out my research, I spent time working on training curricula for staff and member groups of the INGO. Fieldwork in Monrovia allowed me to observe women's behaviour as an expression of their social context; put women's activities and ideas at the center of the analysis; and document the lives of women as full and active members of their social worlds (Reinharz, 1992). I recorded information about daily interaction between men and women, as well as interaction between women from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Importantly, I also tried to map the interaction context, that is, identify those agencies, organizations, and individuals that share goals and work together to advance women's rights and further gender equality.

#### 4.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

Although there is a need for flexibility and variation in data collection techniques to suit the context and participants, feminists prefer the practice of open ended, semi-structured interviewing (DeVault & Gross, 2007). Key respondents were selected through snowball sampling as the research process unfolded since I was interested in interviewing people who have experienced the same phenomena and since observing how contacts lead to others may reveal how structures and influential groups are linked (Sayer, 2010). However, because of the short-term nature of development/humanitarian interventions and the high turnover of personnel, identifying and locating individuals involved in

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or conditions, to transfer energy, information, or matter to other entities. In so doing, the causal agent changes the affected entity's characteristics, capacities, or propensities in ways that persist until subsequent causal mechanisms act upon it" (p. 137).

political processes during the transition period was a challenge. I conducted interviews with two current staff members of the national machinery, with a representative of a prominent women's NGO whose advocacy is directed at the national level, and with a female journalist who reports primarily on women's issues. I used semi-structured interviews to ensure that critical areas were covered, while also providing the space for participants to raise issues and ideas that are important to them (Willis, 2006). Recorded audio was transcribed and shared with participants.

#### 4.3.4 Content analysis

A wide variety of cultural materials can serve as texts that reveal and shape social norms (Reinharz & Kulick, 2007). I analyzed different media for the re/production of patriarchy and other biases—such as gender stereotypes that restrict women's autonomy and limit their opportunities and self-development (Reinharz, 1992). Conversely, I was interested in alternative gender discourses that challenge the status quo and attempt to expand women's autonomy, opportunities, and self-development. Since I am interested in government communication strategies to gain public (especially male) support for gender equity policy, I also analyzed policy documents, briefings, and press releases. I sought to identify existing transitional and gender ideologies in Liberia and explored how new ideologies have been crafted.

One way to investigate whether and to what extent a state is receptive to feminist organizations is to identify movement goals and investigate whether these goals are reflected in policy changes (McBride Stetson & Mazur, 1995; McBride & Mazur, 2010; Viterna & Fallon, 2008). I also compared the content of GoL policy to women's movement demands (particularly those identified in the Liberian Women's Manifesto). As the RNGS framework explains, the fit between women's movement actors' frames with those of other actors in the policy subsystem is an important element in determining the openness of the policy environment and whether an alliance between women's movement actors and WPAs exists. I therefore paid close attention to the frames used by movement actors and representatives of women's policy agencies, as well as those utilized by anti-movement actors, found primarily in Liberian news media. An issue frame (also referred to as a policy frame herein) is the meaning attributed to a particular

policy issue by the actors in a particular policy subsystem or debate (Sauer, 2010).<sup>26</sup> For instance, in Liberia, female genital mutilation/cutting is typically framed as a health issue.<sup>27</sup> According to this frame, the practice should end because of the risk it poses to the girl or woman's health and safety. A microframe, on the other hand, "is the position that specific actors [individuals and organizations], both inside and outside of the state...seek to insert into the issue frame to change the definition of the issue and policy content" (Sauer, 2010, p. 194).<sup>28</sup> Building on the above example, some Liberian women activists frame FGM/C as an infringement on women's rights and bodily integrity (a feminist microframe). Anti-movement actors—those individuals and organizations that oppose feminist and women's movement goals—have used the microframe of Western imperialism. They argue that FGM/C is an important part of Liberian culture and tradition and it must be protected from Westerners seeking to impose their values on Liberians.

Archival research also appears to be an indispensable tool of HI scholars since they can reveal what led to particular decisions and "can help break down the image of the organization as a monolithic entity and reveal the divisions and contested notions that lie at the heart of institutions" (Jennings, 2006, p. 249). However, many historic documents have not been preserved (particularly because of the war). I did have some access to archival material that contained information about women's activism and participation in local, regional, and international conferences, including the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing. These were the Evelyn Townsend Diggs Papers, made available to me through the Indiana University Liberian Collection. These items offered

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<sup>26</sup> Sauer (2010) is an RNGS scholar.

<sup>27</sup> The preferred, culturally sensitive, term is now "female genital cutting," but this term is seldom used in the Liberian news media. It is my position that not all tradition or culture is inherently good and worthy of preserving. Though it is not the place for a lengthy discussion of the im/morality of FGM/C, it is my belief that the practice is intended to control women's sexuality and infringes on a woman's right to bodily integrity. In addition to being an undoubtedly painful and risky procedure, the removal of the clitoris will likely prevent a woman from reaching orgasm in her life, and is thus an extreme manifestation of women's sexual disempowerment. I chose to use the abbreviation FGM/C because it effectively captures the two dominant issue frames in the debate.

<sup>28</sup> It was not always easy to distinguish microframes from issue frames. If the GoL responded to a policy issue by creating a policy, then the content of that policy should reveal the dominant issue frame in a particular debate. However, competing issue frames that were part of the policy debate in the issue definition and agenda setting phases of the policy cycle are far less apparent. For this reason, frames presented by feminist, women's, and anti-movement actors are typically considered microframes, except in cases where these frames match the policy content (which indicates they were successful in becoming issue frames).

some important insight into the longer-term institutional evolution of women's machinery and "earlier" attempts (1990s) by women's advocates to influence issue frames and policy content.

The articles in this sample were published by Monrovia newspapers, *The Analyst*, *The News*, *The Inquirer*, the *Liberian Observer*, and in more recent years, *The Informer*, *The New Dawn*, *Front Page Africa*, *Heritage*, and *New Democrat*. The government-owned newspaper, *The New Liberian*, was not included in my sample. Most of the articles were found through allAfrica.com using some variation of the search terms "Liberia," "women," "rights," "gender equality" or "equity." I read the articles for content and chose to exclude news items about women's peace activism unless the article included references to women's rights and political inclusion. I included all available articles about women's activists and their political goals, women's conferences, workshops, and gender politics. All of the articles were printed and arranged in chronological order so they could be systematically analyzed and categorized. 242 articles are included in the sample (see graphics in Chapter 5).<sup>29</sup> GoL press releases announcing events (such as women's conferences) and institutional reforms (such as gender sensitive policies) were not included in the sample because they would distort the results. Although there is some overlap in content, I was able to identify the main thrust of each article and place them in the following categories.

- "Improving the status of women" – These articles were about struggling against discrimination and challenging Liberian women's traditional status. I also included articles that talked about harmful traditional practices such as polygamy, early marriage, and FGM/C.
- "Training and education for women and girls" – These articles were primarily concerned with the empowerment of women and girls through job training and education. I did not include leadership and/or political training in this category.
- "Women's political participation and representation" – These articles were all about including more women in decision making and included training in political skills such as leadership, campaigning, and advocacy.

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<sup>29</sup> Additional articles published in regional and transnational publications provided supplemental information about relevant actors and events. These sometimes included interviews with prominent Liberian women.

- “Women’s legal and human rights” – These articles focused on women’s inheritance and property rights, and FGM/C if discussed in a legal context. Laws and interventions to protect against SGBV and rape have been excluded from this category, as they appeared to warrant their own.
- “Protection from rape and SGBV” – This category included articles about legal reforms and access to justice for victims/survivors, as well as awareness-raising and education campaigns.
- “Women’s vital role in peace, security, reconstruction and economic recovery” – These articles justify women’s empowerment and advances in women’s rights primarily as an instrument for achieving other goals.
- “Institutional development and reforms for the advancement of women” – Included here are news articles about gender sensitive policies and programs, security sector reform, GoL, and non-governmental development programs such as the Sirleaf Market Women’s Fund.
- “Anti-movement or controversy” – The final category consists of articles that portray opponents’ objections to women’s rights or women’s affirmative action, and those that address a scandal or controversy involving prominent women and women’s groups.

There were a number of advantages to using the Liberian news media.

Conducting frequency counts over time allowed me to see a sharp increase in the number of women-friendly news items during the initial transition period, followed by a rapid decline, and then a steady increase of news items that were discriminatory and cast women as a group in a negative light. It also allowed me to see which policy issues or women’s movement goals were im/perceptible in the media over the 12-year period. These articles were also very revealing as they conveyed social norms, gender-based stereotypes and biases, public controversies, and rhetorical strategies of women’s movement and anti-movement actors. The articles shed light on who some of the influential actors are/were and on their views on particular issues.

Freedom of the press in Liberia significantly declined under the Doe and Taylor regimes, and by 2002, only two independent daily newspapers, *The Inquirer* and *The News*, were operating in Liberia. After the war, the number of independent newspapers multiplied, though circulation has been limited to in and around Monrovia (International

Media Support, 2007).<sup>30</sup> Notwithstanding restrictions on the media during the war and concerns about censorship in the post-war context, most of the panelists in a recent media study “agreed that the plurality of news sources provides a solid platform for diversity and choice, and limits the state capacity to restrict, restrain, or unduly regulate the media (IREX, 2009, p. 174). Thus, most of the evidence I uncovered suggests that the Liberian mass media is quite diverse, independent, and inclined to report a broad range of viewpoints on key issues of the day, including gender relations. Therefore, it does constitute a relatively useful and robust marker of discursive and political trends concerning attitudes toward gender issues and relations. Future research should include multiple interviews and focus groups to more accurately gauge public opinions.

Reports produced by development and advocacy organizations (gray literature) were also analyzed for insight into how political processes unfolded. Because UNIFEM (now UN Women) and other international agencies have been involved with strengthening women’s participation in politics (e.g., promoting democracy through civic education and training women for leadership or public office), I also considered the roles that they play in Liberian gender politics and the impact that they have had on institutional changes in Liberia. UN Women, UNMIL and its Office of the Gender Advisor, and other UN agencies appear to be major drivers of change—and in fact, much more influential than I had initially supposed. Macro-economic policy documents, including Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework were also analyzed with interesting results.

#### ***4.4 Chapter Summary***

This chapter began by operationalizing the “feminism.” This thesis differentiates between women’s movement actors and organizations and feminist actors and organizations. The two are mainly differentiated by their goals and the frames that they employ. The distinction between practical and strategic gender interests aided in the identification of those individuals and organizations in Liberia that have a feminist

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<sup>30</sup> Using the Liberian news media had some additional limitations. There was a tendency for reporters to discuss “the women of Liberia” without specific reference to which women they were referring. There are also significant grammatical and mechanical errors in the text that could possibly obscure the meaning. I considered contextual clues where the meaning was unclear and did not include ambiguous quotations in the analysis.

ideology and feminist aims. It likewise helped to determine what, if any, type of feminist state (movement or transformative) Liberia might be characterized as. As can be expected with projects this size, my research questions and design changed and evolved over the course of the research. This study began with an interest in recent developments of Liberia, as Sirleaf's Presidency and the Liberian Women's Mass Action for Peace seemed to offer a unique opportunity for women's advocates in the country, as well as a unique opportunity to build on the comparative work being done on gender politics and the state in sub-Saharan Africa. An extensive survey of the literature identified several patterns of movement-state interaction that were likely to result in women-friendly reforms. The research approach was thus partly deductive, since I had conceptual models in mind prior to conducting fieldwork. However, after spending three months in Liberia, some theories were abandoned and new ones were discovered using grounded theorizing. Ethnographic research was carried out over three months in and around Monrovia, but it was difficult to find key informants who had been in Liberia and been involved in policymaking in the initial years of the transition. Given that it takes time to forge relationships and to be trusted enough to gain access to such individuals, I could not rely on interviews as my main source of data. Studying policy documents, gray literature, and news media became my primary method of data collection. These texts were analyzed for various types of discursive frames, feminist and women's movement goals, and drivers of gender-sensitive reforms. Policy content was analyzed to determine whether it reflected women's and/or feminist movement frames and goals. Chapter 6 combines these sources to provide a narrative of gender politics in Liberia's transition to peace and democracy. Beforehand, Chapter 5 identifies some of the factors that have shaped contemporary Liberia. In particular, the chapter discusses gender relations since the country's founding, and examines whether Liberian women's experiences and collective action during the war years has provided opportunities for women to challenge their historical exclusion and successfully negotiate their gender-based demands.



## CHAPTER 5 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### *5.1 Situating Contemporary Liberia*

Liberia is the only African country with a history of “black colonialism” (Ellis, 2001). The colony of Liberia was founded in 1821 by the American Colonial Society, which sought to address the growing “problem” of freed and free-born Blacks in America. The repatriates declared independence in 1847 and modeled the country’s constitution and flag on the US (Dunn, Beyan, & Burrowes, 2001). Americo-Liberians formed an alliance with Africans freed from US-bound slave ships (“Congos”) and dominated the political economy of Liberia for over 150 years (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2009). They succeeded in doing so through most notably through the Grand Lodge of Freemasons and True Whig Party, the latter of which was the “Americo-Liberians’ ultimate source of wealth, status and employment” (TRC, 2009, p. 9). The country was effectively a one-party state until the 1980 military coup. Although the Americo-Liberians have only ever made up 3 to 5% of the population (Moran, 2012), they have generally monopolized political power and restricted indigenous peoples’ rights throughout Liberia’s history. Of course, given their relatively small numbers, indigenous people have also comprised part of the elite, ruling class (Moran, 2012).

Despite Liberia’s nominal independence, the country remained heavily dependent on—and in many ways under the control of—the US and its corporate interests, particularly the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. Because its productive industries were foreign-owned, there was little revenue for the Government of Liberia, which by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had become the largest domestic employer (Dunn et al., 2001). As the country sunk deeper into debt, Liberia’s creditors forced the Government to restructure its debt through a series of high interest loans, with property and resource rights as collateral (Dunn et al., 2001). This led to the historic one million acre land concession to Firestone. In the 1930s and 40s, forced labour at Firestone led to state censure by the League of Nations and to increasing resistance against—and repression by—the state. After coming to power in 1944, President William Tubman attempted to address social unrest through a policy of indigenous assimilation into “mainstream” Liberian society

(Dunn et al., 2001). He also fully supported the West in the Cold War and pursued an “open door” policy to encourage foreign investment. Although indigenous Liberians were extended the franchise under Tubman, eligibility depended on a restrictive property clause, which prevented the majority of Liberians from voting. Liberia enjoyed a brief period of prosperity under Tubman, which continued after his death in 1971. Under President Tolbert (1971-80), Liberia saw greater investments in education, health, and employment, but his progressive reforms were too radical for the traditional ruling elite, and not radical enough for the growing indigenous technocratic class (Dunn et al., 2001). Following dramatic increases in the price of Liberia’s staple food, the indigenous peoples’ frustration culminated in the “Rice Riots” in April, 1979. Then, in April 1980, President Tolbert and 13 high level officials were assassinated on a beach in Monrovia following a military coup led by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe. Soon after the coup, “hundreds of civil servants fled into exile, depriving the government of a significant pool of bureaucratic skills, traditions, and information” (Dunn et al., 2001, p. 8). Political repression, poverty, and armed conflict would mark the decades ahead.

Many Liberians initially supported Doe because he was the first indigenous leader, and he promised to open up the democratic process to indigenous peoples. But Doe’s rule would foster ethnic tension, as he and his ethnically Krahn cronies used their newfound political power and military might to settle old scores and persecute other ethnic groups within the country. In the context of the Cold War, Doe was propped up by the American government even as his regime became increasingly corrupt and repressive. Moran (2012) notes that Doe was perceived by the Reagan Administration “as a reliable American ally and was rewarded with a massive package of American military aid” (p. 56). According to Dunn et al. (2001), US aid to Liberia under Doe amounted to more than “all of the previous civilian governments combined. American aid, which had never exceeded \$20 million per annum prior to 1980, topped \$91 million in 1985, with military aid increasing from \$1.4 million to \$14 million annually” (p. 8). With such unfettered support, Doe rigged the 1985 elections, leading to an attempted coup, and four years later, the beginning of the First Liberian Civil War.

As America turned its attention away from Liberia at the end of the Cold War, Charles Taylor and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia invaded from Cote d’Ivoire on

Christmas Eve, 1989. Soon after, a splinter group under the leadership of (now senator) Prince Johnson captured, tortured, and executed Doe in September 1990. In the years that followed, fighting intensified among rebel factions. Taylor famously backed rebels in neighbouring Sierra Leone, trading arms for diamonds and fuelling the civil war there. A peace deal was brokered in 1996 and the country was ruled by a transitional government until 1997, when Taylor was elected president by a significant margin over Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. The election has been widely regarded as a fear mongering campaign by Taylor and a less-than-fair election (Moran, 2012). Unsurprisingly, the peace did not last long. Taylor “essentially continue[d] the warlordism and profiteering from the nation’s natural resources he had perfected during the [First Liberian Civil War]” (Moran, 2012, p. 57). The Second Liberian Civil War began in 1999 when anti-government fighting erupted in northern Liberia. With support from Guinea, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) quickly spread to other parts of the country, and in early 2003, a second rebel group, the Ivorian-backed Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) emerged in the south. With the two rebel groups encroaching on the capital of Monrovia and the International Criminal Court issuing an indictment for war crimes in Sierra Leone, Taylor fled to Nigeria and was eventually extradited to The Hague for trial. The 2003 ceasefire negotiations brokered by ECOWAS and the UN established the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) to govern the country for two years. In October, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) put nearly 16,500 military personnel, observers, and police officers on the ground. At the time it was the largest peacekeeping operation in the world. In the end, the conflict killed nearly 300,000 and displaced more than half of Liberia’s roughly 3.5 million people. The country’s infrastructure was decimated, its economy devastated, and its external debt stood at approximately \$3 billion (NTGL, World Bank, & IMF, 2004).

## ***5.2 Gender Relations in Historical Perspective***

Having some understanding of gender relations in Liberia is important because, as Moran (2012) argues, “the profound transformations in gender ideologies that emerge from any post-conflict situation must be seen as grounded in *both* pre-war social institutions and forms of authority as well as in the new opportunity structures

characterizing both the wartime and post-war contexts” (p. 52; see also section 2.2.2). Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the historical information that we have about Liberian women’s lives and experiences was written after the fact. For instance, the Truth and Reconciliation Report (TRC, 2009) states that the repatriates brought with them the notion of domesticity, which meant “civilized” women were to be responsible for taking care of the home and children, without much authority outside of the household (TRC, 2009). Engaging in activities such as farming, trading, or collecting water would threaten the status of these women. In some respects, indigenous women may have had more power, as they were largely responsible for agriculture and their labour was seen as valuable (TRC, 2009). However, given Liberia’s great regional diversity (with at least 15 distinct ethno-linguistic groups), women in Liberia surely had quite different experiences.

The region is historically known for being both gerontocratic (ruled by elders) and patriarchal (Fuest, 2008). Moran (2012) points out that “the official patriarchy could be summed up in such statements as ‘men are always older than women,’ which ideologically ranked gender over age...in practice the opposite was often true. Elderly people of both genders were respected for their experience and wisdom and feared for their presumed ability to inflict supernatural harm or withdraw spiritual protection” (p.56). Fuest (2008, 2009) suggests that while women were still largely silent in public arenas, in some areas they were never viewed as inferior but instead complementary to men. Thus, in spite of these hierarchies, sometimes women had “space for socio-political maneuvering” (Fuest, 2008, p. 206, 2009, p.123).

To illustrate a pattern of women’s activism in Liberia and the West African region, Moran (1989) draws mainly on a case of Grebo women (from southeastern Liberia) who protested a new national tax. Believing that the tax would be unjust and overly burdensome on women, Grebo women organized a mass march to express their grievances to national officials in the capital. Moran explains that, although ultimately unsuccessful in stopping the tax, the women felt that they achieved something because “they had registered their complaint with the government, all together, and *as women*” (p. 448; emphasis in original). In another example, Grebo women joined together and abandoned their town to protest a chief’s accusation of witchcraft against childless women. After leaving the men to “fend for themselves....The women were eventually

wooded back by the chastised chief with apologies and ‘many cows’” (p. 449). This and other forms of collective action such as strikes and boycotts were legitimate, institutionalized means through which women could express their interests and demand accountability (Moran, 2012).

Liberia’s so-called “secret societies,” called *Poro* for male and *Sande* for female, are found in some central and north-western provinces. Because of this dual sex political system, women’s agency and activism has been historically separate from men (Moran, 1989, 2012). Moran (1989) argues that in Liberia (and West Africa more broadly), women and men are culturally constructed “as radically different kinds of beings” (p. 444). For this reason, Moran argues, men are poorly suited to represent women and vice-versa, which accounts for the existence of dual governance structures. However, the male hierarchy still had privilege over the female hierarchy, “with men at least claiming and in many cases exercising legal, ritual, and physical dominance over women” (Moran, 1989, p. 455). Moreover, inheritance was patrilineal and marriage patrilocal, and in some areas, women and children were accumulated and controlled by the husband and the husband’s family (Bledsoe, 1980).<sup>31</sup>

Whatever gender hierarchies did or did not exist in pre-colonial times, patriarchy is undoubtedly a feature of Liberia’s present political culture. Despite the notable achievements of a few individual women, national politics has always been a man’s game. Although it may be argued that colonialism uprooted traditional forms of governance and implanted single-sex structures that systematically excluded women (Moran, 1989), these “modern” governance structures still exist alongside “traditional” ones. This creates a dual legal system, where customary law and practice often override statutory provisions to protect women and girls and elevate their status.

One attempt to reconcile these contradictions is the *Act to Govern the Devolution of Estates and Establish Rights of Inheritance for Spouses of Both Statutory and Customary Marriages*, or colloquially, the Inheritance Law, which grants customary

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<sup>31</sup> Moran (2012) states that the narrative of “women as property” was not one she had heard prior to the war years and suggests that this discourse is a foreign import. What is clear, I think, is that wives were in some sense property since a dowry was paid, and as Moran herself says, even if a woman held authority as a mother, she would still be under the authority of her husband (p. 61). She also uses a quote that includes the sentence: “‘A mother is someone to be taken seriously; a wife is someone who takes orders’” (as cited in Moran, 2012, p. 85)—though she curiously ignores the second phrase.

wives and widows the same rights as statutory wives and widows (Republic of Liberia, 2003). The Act addresses issues beyond inheritance, setting the minimum marriage age at 16, prohibiting arranged marriage and the forceful collection of dowry from a woman and her family, and granting wives the right to own and control property independent of their husbands. It also grants custodial rights to the surviving spouse; prohibits compulsory re-marriage to a member of the deceased husband's family; and entitles widows to one-third of their late-husbands property, with the remainder to be divided among the children.<sup>32</sup> The Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL) appears to have been highly effective in its advocacy role, and in preparing the draft that was initially presented to the Interim Legislature in 1996 (Liberian Daily News Bulletin, 1999, July 30), and again to the 51<sup>st</sup> Legislature in 1998 (Onesimus, 2001, August 17). Notwithstanding the passage of the Act, many rural women (many of whom are in customary marriages) are often unaware of the laws contained within the Act and/or have limited access to legal representation and the judicial system.

The National Federation of Liberian Women's Organizations was established by the national legislature in 1962, but the Federation was comprised largely of wives and relatives of the ruling elite, including the President's wife Antoinette Tubman, and Ellen Mills-Scarborough, the first woman elected representative in Liberia (*An Act to Incorporate*, 1962). At least one Liberian scholar-activist argues that the Women Social and Political Movement was a part of Tubman's patronage network, which was used to build support among rural/indigenous women (Williams, 2008). The Federation itself does not appear to have had a radical agenda that sought to transform unequal power relations. It placed high priority on moral/religious education, cultural exchange, and the "general welfare" of people in Liberia. It was thus concerned largely with WID activities, such as adult literacy, health and sanitation, income generation skills, and homes for "wayward girls" (*Report of Liberian women NGO activities*, n.d.). Nevertheless, the Federation was banned in the 1980s under the Doe regime for being "too political"—likely because some of its leaders were relatives of executed or exiled government officials (African Women and Peace Support Group [AWPSG], 2004, p. 17; *Report of*

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<sup>32</sup> The Act does not forbid polygamy. Widows do not enjoy full inheritance rights since a widow (or multiple widows) are only entitled to one-third of the property.

*Liberian women NGO activities*, n.d.). The idea of a national coordinating body was revived in the early 1990s under the leadership of Thelma Sawyer and Evelyn Diggs-Townsend,<sup>33</sup> but since most of the Federation's documents had been lost or destroyed, the women eventually decided to organize as the National Women Commission of Liberia.<sup>34</sup> Apparently a large Liberian delegation attended the 1994 Beijing preparatory conference in Dakar and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (AWPSG, 2004, p. 16), but few details about the delegates and their experiences are known.<sup>35</sup>

### **5.3 The National Women's Machinery**

There is limited information available on the development of gender equality mechanisms in Liberia. The country's Beijing+5 Country Report on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (Republic of Liberia, 1999) states that between 1995 and 1999, several structures were created at the national level: The National Gender Forum (NGF), gender desk officers in 14 line ministries and agencies (now commonly referred to "gender focal points"), the National Women's NGO Secretariat (WONGOSOL), and the UN Gender Theme Group. The Women and Children Affairs Coordination Unit (WACCU), a women's desk located at the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs, was established in 1994 and consisted of two professionals and three administrative support staff members. The report notes that the "low profile and ad hoc nature of these mechanisms" combined with a lack of resources hampers their effectiveness, and that "the proliferation of women organizations has given rise to instances of unhealthy gender

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<sup>33</sup> Thelma Sawyer is a social worker and wife of academic and former Interim President of the Government of National Unity in Liberia, Amos Sawyer. Evelyn Diggs Townsend was at one time Chair of the National Federation of Liberian Women's Organizations, Commissioner for Girls and Women's Education, Senator, and before her death, member of the Governance Reform Commission. Her husband, Edison Reginald Townsend, served under the Tubman Administration and was Minister of State for Presidential Affairs to President Tolbert from 1971-80. Townsend was among those executed in the 1980 coup.

<sup>34</sup> It is not clear when the Federation ceased to exist and National Women's Commission "took over". Senator Townsend was still ostensibly representing the Federation at meetings in 1999. The Federation does not appear to be active today though NAWOCOL does. WONGOSOL, the umbrella organization for women's NGOs in Liberia, appears as the most visible coordinating body alongside the MoGD.

<sup>35</sup> Townsend indicates that the National Federation of Liberian Women's Organizations made important contributions to World Women's Conferences in Mexico, Nairobi, and Beijing but she does not discuss the details (*Proposal for empowerment projects*, n.d.). Liberian representatives gave statements at the plenary meeting in Beijing on 11 September, and at a session on women and armed conflict the following day (United Nations, 1995). Future research on this topic is warranted.

rivalry and duplication of efforts” (Republic of Liberia, 1999, p. 2; see also Republic of Liberia, 2004). To mitigate such issues, the GoL and UNDP established WONGOSOL to build a coalition of women’s organizations (Republic of Liberia, 1999). WONGOSOL organized a number of workshops in the late 1990s and several women’s leadership forums. At one such forum in August 1999, Amelia Ward (then Minister of State for Economic Affairs), Senator Evelyn Diggs Townsend, Ophelia Hoff-Saytumah (Mayor of Monrovia 2001-2009), and Tonieh Wiles (gender activist) formed a panel on strategies to effectively mainstream gender issues into national development plans (Wesseh, 1999, July 19). Gender mainstreaming had thus appeared on the national agenda by the late 1990s.

The Beijing+5 report states that the National Reconstruction Plan (1998-2000) was the first time that the GoL had “articulated its commitment to engendering the development process” (Republic of Liberia, 1999, p. 2). The framework and strategy for the implementation of the BPfA was therefore integrated into the National Reconstruction Plan—with gender equality being treated as a cross-cutting issue across seven program areas. Moreover, the report talks about the GoL’s plans to design a national gender policy that would include data on women’s relative position to men in several areas, institutional capacity to integrate gender into development plans, and existing gender-related government and non-governmental policy and programs (p. 5). It further explains that the UNDP/UNIFEM Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Project would provide strategic direction; help provide a framework and training for gender analysis in conflict/post-conflict contexts; and promote gender mainstreaming and policy development to support women’s empowerment and capacity building (p. 5). The report mentions two related projects: Strengthening Capacities of Coordinating and National Machineries (LIR/99/A/01/31) and Institution-Building for Women’s Empowerment (LIR/99/W01), both of which were intended to enable “the upgrading and institutionalization of the WACC Unit at cabinet level with the leverage and clout and resources to chart and guide efforts at ensuring gender equality and women’s empowerment” as outlined in section 201(a) of the BPfA (p. 8). The first stated action regarding the BPfA’s eighth critical area of concern (institutional mechanisms for the



advancement of women) is to successfully lobby for the WACC Unit to be upgraded to a ministry between August 1, 1999 and January 31, 2000.<sup>36</sup>

In April, 2001, the Taylor Government established the MoGD, and named former Foreign Minister Dorothy Musuleng Cooper its first minister. The MoGD, though still greatly lacking capacity, began to expand its influence in 2003, after Chairman Bryant appointed Vabah Gayflor as Gender Minister. Bryant reportedly wanted a “neutral expert,” (male civil servant, personal communication, December 18, 2013) and chose Gayflor—a woman with experience in the women’s movement and a master’s degree in gender and development—to lead the Ministry. Soon after UNMIL began operations, its Human Rights and Protection Unit and its Gender Unit began strengthening the institutional capacity of the MoGD through staff trainings on gender-sensitive programs in Monrovia and in the MoGD’s county offices (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2004a). UNMIL’s Gender Unit also became heavily involved in increasing public awareness of significant gender issues throughout Liberia (UNSC, 2004a). In addition, the NTGL, UN, and World Bank collaboratively developed a framework for the restoration of peace and the reconstruction of the country following 14 years of war (NTGL, UN, & WB, 2004). The framework, or Joint Needs Assessment, provides an assessment of government institutions and agencies, and presents a strategic plan to build their capacities. In particular, it aims to establish a fully functioning MoGD capable of mainstreaming gender in all line ministries and agencies (p. 47). Although the Results Focused Transitional Framework (Annex A of the Joint Needs Assessment) lacks gender specific targets and indicators, it also mentions SGBV sensitization, building capacity of civil society organizations including women’s organizations, strengthening the Ministry of Justice reinstating gender focal points within line ministries.

#### ***5.4 Liberian Women during the War Years***

Women took on myriad activities and roles during the war; they took up arms, did brick making and laying, trading and business, prostitution or “loving business,” and collective action (Fuest, 2008). During the war, women took on the responsibility of

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<sup>36</sup> The report also lists the actors responsible as the WACC Unit, UNDP, and UNIFEM. As will be discussed at the end of this chapter and elsewhere in the thesis, it is important to note the centrality of UNDP and UNIFEM in the development of Liberia’s national machinery.

providing food for the family since husbands were unemployed and their mobility was severely restricted (female journalist, personal communication, January 9, 2013). Many Liberian women tell the story of becoming the breadwinners for their family. Children, they said, used to run out into the yard at the end of the work day shouting “Papa na come! [Daddy’s home!]” to celebrate their father coming home with food and goodies; since the war, “Mama na come!” (personal communication, 2012-2013). Fuest (2008) explains that profound changes in women’s roles occurred due to the length of the war and the scope of the devastation and displacement. During the conflict, women could use their gender to gain access to places men could not and shifting gender roles allowed women to move into men-only physical and political spaces. Fuest notes that market women were able to fill the gaps left by Mandingo and Lebanese traders who fled ethnic violence, and networks and networking skills also played a critical role in the success of women entrepreneurs (Fuest, 2008).

In her experience working with Liberian women’s organizations in the mid-1990s, Mikell (1995) writes that women were successful in building solidarity across class and ethnic lines because their shared experiences and suffering seemed to soften historical cleavages and radicalize many of the women. She explains that in 1994 Monrovia was protected by ECOWAS and the UN, making it possible for women to establish shelters and skill training programs and projects. She recalls that as women in different groups aired their grievances, they expressed the same thing: “Until the government makes an explicit commitment to the enforcement of basic human rights for women, our existing legal rights are irrelevant because men know that they do not need to respect them” (p. 414). Referring to this early period of women’s organizing, Mikell points out that the Liberian Women’s Initiative (LWI), Concerned Women of Liberia, and other politically active Liberian women in the early nineties were already hoping to create a national women’s agenda and to be participants in elections and constitutional review. Mikell observed that a “new feminist consensus” was developing around politics (p. 407).

Although women’s wartime activity and strategies were incredibly diverse, women were most visible as activists for peace and reconciliation (Moran & Pitcher, 2004). Indeed, Liberian women fought hard to get seats at negotiation tables for more

than a decade. Women's organizations mobilized throughout the country's 14-year civil war, building broad-based coalitions that extended well beyond Liberia's borders and transcended religious and ethnic cleavages. Mary Brownell, one of the founders of the LWI stated that the women felt compelled to act because the men "were the ones who brought about the war" (as cited in AWPSG, 2004, p. 17). She also expressed that although women were "the weaker sex," together they "could make an impact on the Liberian society and international community" (p. 17). The women's groups called a mass meeting in February, 1994, bringing together Liberian women from a wide range of backgrounds and associations. When the women observed the initial effects of their peace activism, they realized the possibility of increasing their influence, which "was the major impetus to develop collaborative action with other civil society groups" (AWPSG, 2004, p. 16).

Failing to gain an invitation to the Accra Clarification Conference in 1994, the women's delegation raised funds and went to Accra, where they were denied entrance to the conference. Undeterred, they continued to lobby delegates to have their voices heard. On the second day they were granted official observer status, and on the third, official participant status (AWPSG, 2004). Emboldened by this achievement, LWI and the coalition of women's organizations, together with Minister of Planning Amelia Ward and special assistant Ruth Ceasar, produced a position statement on the conflict and its effect on women (AWPSG, 2004). Although they had gained a certain amount of legitimacy at the Accra Conference, the women's delegation was not invited to the 1995 ECOWAS mediation summit in Abuja, which made Ghanaian President Jerry Rawlings call for the women to participate all the more unexpected (AWPSG, 2004). Theresa Leigh Sherman of the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) presented their position and recommendations. The fifth recommendation addressed women's citizenship and participation:

We hereby reiterate our demand that the women of Liberia be included in all discussions on matters concerning the state and welfare of the people. Our lack of representation in the ongoing peace process is equivalent to the denial of one of our fundamental rights: the right to be seen, be heard, and be counted. This [denial] also deprives the country [of] access to the opinion of 51 percent of its human resources in solving the problems, which affect our lives as a people. (Leigh-Sherman as cited in AWPSG, 2004, pp. 26-27)

LWI continued to be active in peace advocacy in the early 2000s, although the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) became the most visible women's organization in what would come to be known as the Liberian Women's Mass Action for Peace. While working as a trauma counsellor for a Lutheran Church trauma healing program, Leymah Gbowee was among those approached by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) (Gbowee, 2009). According to Gbowee, "WANEP was actively seeking to involve women in its work" (p. 101). Gbowee mentions attending several conferences with WANEP members Sam Doe, Tornolah Varpilah, and Thelma Ekiyor, a Nigerian lawyer, who told Gbowee about her idea to start a peacebuilding network for women. Ekiyor was able to secure a grant from WANEP to start WIPNET, and she selected Gbowee to be the coordinator for the Liberian chapter. Gbowee recalls that this decision angered older, elite Liberian women with a longer history in the women's peace movement. Etweda "Sugars" Cooper was one of Gbowee's few supporters among LWI members (Gbowee, 2009). Gbowee describes Cooper as "fiercely feminist [and] the most radical of the LWI women" (p. 115). She explains that "Sugars was a member of WIPNET's inner circle, but our relationship with the other older women was hard from the day Thelma chose me, an unknown, to run our chapter. No one else from LWI or MARWOPNET came to our actions, though they were always invited. The class tensions were pronounced. They were the educated elite; we were the indigenous poor" (p. 144). She reveals that when the older women's groups were invited to a "peace festival" they brought chairs which they then placed in front of the women who were seated on the ground as part of their active protest. The grassroots women were angered by this, and the elite women were asked to move their chairs to the back. According to Gbowee, they never attended another WIPNET event.

As the fighting intensified, WIPNET women pursued a strategy of inclusiveness, making a concerted effort to embrace diversity and overcome religious, ethnic and socioeconomic cleavages. In 2002, Gbowee and a group of Christian women started the Christian Women's Peace Initiative, which inspired Asatu Ben Keneth, another core member of WIPNET, to start the Muslim Women Initiative and work in concert with the Christian Women's Initiative (Gbowee, 2009). These women began their advocacy by applying pressure to religious leaders, and as the war reached Monrovia, they decided to

hold sit-ins at the Sinkor airfield across from the fish market (a strategic location as it was visible from Taylor's residence). In April 2003, the Women in White campaign officially began. Thousands of women, many of whom were internally displaced persons (IDPs) donned white and protested as women, as sisters, and importantly, as mothers responsible for the protection of their children and the nation.

As war escalated and threatened to destabilize more and more of the region, the international community called for peace talks, but Taylor and the warring factions refused to meet. On Friday April 11, 2003, over 1000 women (many WIPNET) marched to City Hall with a position statement on the Liberian crisis and a three-point program that called for an immediate ceasefire, dialogue among opposing parties, and an international monitoring force (AWPSG, 2004; Gbowee, 2009). On April 23, Taylor gave the women an audience at the executive mansion and agreed to attend the peace talks. Soon after, a group of women (including Cooper and Ben Keneth) went to Freetown to try and convince the warlords meeting there to join Taylor at the negotiations in Accra. Begging them as and on behalf of their mothers and sisters, they agreed to go (Gbowee, 2009). The Women's Mass Action immediately began to raise funds to send an unofficial delegation to lobby and mobilize refugee women in Ghana. Around the same time, women leaders in Monrovia were involved in consultations and strategic planning, and May 28<sup>th</sup> the Coalition of Women of Political Parties in Liberia (COPPWIL) called for an immediate ceasefire and an international contingent that would remain in Liberia for a minimum of three years (AWPSG, 2004). MARWOPNET also sent a delegation of eight to Accra (led by Ruth Sando Perry and Theresa Leigh-Sherman) for the June peace talks.

During the peace talks in June 2003, Taylor was indicted for war crimes by the Special Court for Sierra Leone. However, he was not arrested, and flew back to Monrovia. As talks continued without him, war broke out in the capital, and in the weeks that followed, the women in Ghana continued to apply pressure to the delegates languishing in relative luxury at the hotels in Accra (Gbowee, 2009). A tentative ceasefire agreement between Taylor's forces, LURD, and MODEL on June 17<sup>th</sup> was followed by more intense fighting in the capital. Increasingly distressed by the reports of death and chaos back home, and the lack of progress at the talks, the women decided to barricade the delegates in their conference room. When the men tried to have them

removed, they threatened to disrobe, a tactic which has been historically effective because of the belief that a person who saw his mother's body naked (particularly when she did it intentionally) would be cursed (Gbowee, 2009).

On August 15<sup>th</sup>, representatives of 45 Liberian women's groups who were attending or protesting at the peace talks in Ghana convened a strategic planning meeting at the Golden Tulip Hotel in Accra.<sup>37</sup> The women produced the Golden Tulip Declaration, which recalled UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325),<sup>38</sup> and stated that Liberian women would work toward "the inclusion of women within all existing and proposed institutions including all components of the current and incoming Liberian Government...and within all structures to lead the post-conflict peace-building process" (Golden Tulip, 2003, Preamble). On 18 August 2003, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed. MARWOPNET was one of the signatories, but only as a witness to the agreement that divvied up ministerial posts and other positions to members of the warring factions. The CPA calls for "gender balance," and states that women should be included on the Governance Reform Commission (GRC), National Elections Commission (NEC), and in all elected and non-elected appointments in the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL). However:

Regrettably, only seven of over a hundred women who participated in the talks were permitted to vote for the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Transitional Government, and references to inclusion of women and gender equity in the CPA were limited and brief.... It was no surprise that the otherwise notable initiative of the women of Liberia was relegated to virtually passive observance in the usual effort to exclude women and frustrate their aspirations and rights of participation in the political mainstream. (Doe-Anderson, 2005, para. 2)

International peacekeepers entered Liberia in early August, and later that month, the transitional government was approved, with a Liberian businessman, Charles Gyude Bryant, at its head. Organized women continued their activities and vowed to monitor the

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<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, other than Chairperson of the meeting Ruth Sando Perry, it is not clear which groups participated in the women's strategic planning meeting in Accra.

<sup>38</sup> Enacted in 2000, SCR 1325 recalls the BPfA's commitment to women's increased representation and full participation in decision-making fora at all levels of governance; recognizes women's unique roles in preventing and resolving conflicts and building peace and seeks to increase their participation in such processes; resolves to mainstream a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations; and presses for national, regional, and international institutional arrangements to guarantee women's full and equal participation (United Nations, 2003). SCR 1325 also recognizes women's and girls' special needs in conflict and post-conflict contexts, and requires protection against gender and sexual based violence and prosecution of offenders.

activities of the NTGL, which was of course comprised of many of the perpetrators of the violence. When the UNMIL disarmament process was disrupted by violence soon after it began in December 2003, the women were able to help calm frustrations and assist the process (Gbowee, 2009). A group of committed women also remained on the airfield, for two and a half years, until Sirleaf was declared President and the Mass Action officially ended.

## ***5.5 Discussion and Conclusion***

This chapter began by providing some historical context for Liberia. Liberia's settler oligarchy, dependence on the US, position in Cold War politics, and prolonged civil wars help set the stage for this case study. Section 5.2 calls attention to the great diversity in Liberian women's power and authority relative to Liberian men and to each other. Reverence to elders in Liberian culture may help explain why (in addition to class-based and rural/urban cleavages) age or generational cleavages appear especially pronounced among activist and political women in Liberia. Moreover, dual sex governance structures have traditionally afforded some women political power and authority, but particularly over other women. How these structures shape political culture and participation warrants further research. If, for instance, men are seen as poorly suited to represent women and vice-versa, women may be especially unlikely to participate in a de facto single-sex political structure dominated by men. In addition, the duality of the legal system (customary vs. statutory) is problematic for both the passage and implementation of gender equity reforms through the state. This is discussed in greater detail in section 7.1.2, as is the tension between "traditional" and "modern" authorities as a barrier to women-friendly reforms. Future research ought to explore these issues in significantly greater depth.

Although elite women and "statutory wives" have long enjoyed certain legal and democratic rights relative to indigenous women and "customary wives," women's political representation appears to have been largely symbolic, with only a few women participating in national politics. Moreover, initial research indicates that there was not a widespread, semi-autonomous women's movement in Liberia prior to the 1990s. The consciousness-raising experiences of Liberian women during the war appear to have

given rise to more radical, feminist politics. In the early 1990s, women's organizations focused primarily on relief work and advocacy, but in the mid-nineties, they "moved to direct political activism" (AWPSG, 2004, p. 16). However, WIPNET's strategy to divorce their demands for peace from "politics," and not explicitly link their practical gender needs (for peace and security) to their strategic interests of political voice may have been disadvantageous in the long term, since this position did not define a role for women outside of making and keeping peace. Interestingly, Gbowee (2009) mentions that General Abdulsalami Abubakar, who mediated the 2003 peace talks, told her and other demonstrators protesting outside that they should be at the table with MARWOPNET, and that he had designated three spaces for them. She provides two explanations for refusing the seats; they did not want to exacerbate tensions with MARWOPNET and they wanted to represent their Liberian sisters (a large network of rural, grassroots women) in protest. Gbowee notes that MARWOPNET members were pleased with their decision and agreed to share information with the WIPNET/Mass Action protesters outside. She states that "for the first time, [they] had unity" (p. 156). Thus, MARWOPNET was the only women's group that had any kind of formal role in the ceasefire negotiations. In addition to their elite, urban base, MARWOPNET's nominal inclusion in the ceasefire negotiations may also be due to the fact that they have demonstrated a relatively long-standing commitment to greater political inclusion (see section 5.3).

The Golden Tulip Declaration most certainly linked practical and strategic interests and called not only for participation in peace processes, but also for *50% of the positions in the transitional government*. It appears that AFELL was able to successfully lobby drafters of the CPA to include the call for "gender balance" in the text; however, according to AFELL founding member Lois Bruthus (2003), the female lawyers endeavor to include "50/50" in the text was unsuccessful (Bruthus, 2003). Bruthus notes that the omission of the proportion and the absence of specific roles for women in the GRC, NEC, and NTLA, would "again give rise to women's marginalization" (p. 7).

Similar to the findings in 2.2.1, prolonged crises and conflicts in Liberia appear to have had important implications for women's confidence in their abilities to protect and provide for themselves and their families, to effect change through collective action, and



to demand greater voice and influence in national politics. At the wars' end, Liberian women were "not prepared to go back to 'business as usual'" and "sought to maintain the roles they had assumed and the skills they had gained in working for peace" (AWPSG, 2004, p. 40). Critically, they "sought a peace that included gender justice and equality" (p. 41). At the time, Etweda Cooper of LWI stated that going forward, the women's challenge would be "to ensure that real empowerment of women is on the national agenda" (as cited in AWPSG, 2004, p. 56). Their attempts to do so are covered in the following chapter, which describes some of the events, activities, policy debates, and gender equality outcomes in Liberia, particularly since the end of the war in 2003. It focuses on the actions taken by the GoL, Liberian women's advocates, and by regional and international organizations towards women's empowerment, gender equity/equality, and towards women's political representation.

## CHAPTER 6 GENDER POLITICS IN LIBERIA'S POLITICAL TRANSITION

This chapter begins with my findings from the coding and frequency counts of Monrovia news media between 2000 and 2012. It proceeds to discuss the most salient gendered policy debate in Liberia during this period—women's political participation and representation. Relevant issues are traced (to the extent that the available data allows) from the time that they appear as a public policy problem on the national agenda until they are addressed by government and/or intergovernmental action (see McBride Stetson & Mazur, 2010). In the case of political representation—and affirmative action in particular—the debate currently rages on. During the initial transition period in particular (2003-5), women's advocates in Liberia mobilized to seize the opportunities made available by the transition to peace and democracy. This chapter provides information on the activities of the MoGD, activities and demands of women's movement organizations, as well as those of international agencies and authorities. It covers the 2005 election cycle and the election of President Sirleaf, and Liberian women's gender-based goals and gains since 2006. The chapter concludes by discussing anti-movement actors and their arguments against affirmative action and other strategic issues identified by Liberian women in and outside of the state.

### ***6.1 Seizing the Day: The "Women's Empowerment Movement"***

Since identifying whether a state is feminist according to the RNGS framework depends on whether gender equity outcomes reflect women's movement goals, I have attempted to identify the policy issues that women's advocates have tried to get on the national agenda (see 4.3.4). Again, drawing on Offen's (1998) conceptualization of feminism, I searched for lobbying and activism around issues or ideas related to eliminating gender-based discrimination and improving women's rights and status. I also looked for issues associated with feminist actors in the national context (see also Mazur, 2002). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to attend to each of the identified policy debates, so I chose to focus on Liberian women's struggle for greater political participation and representation.

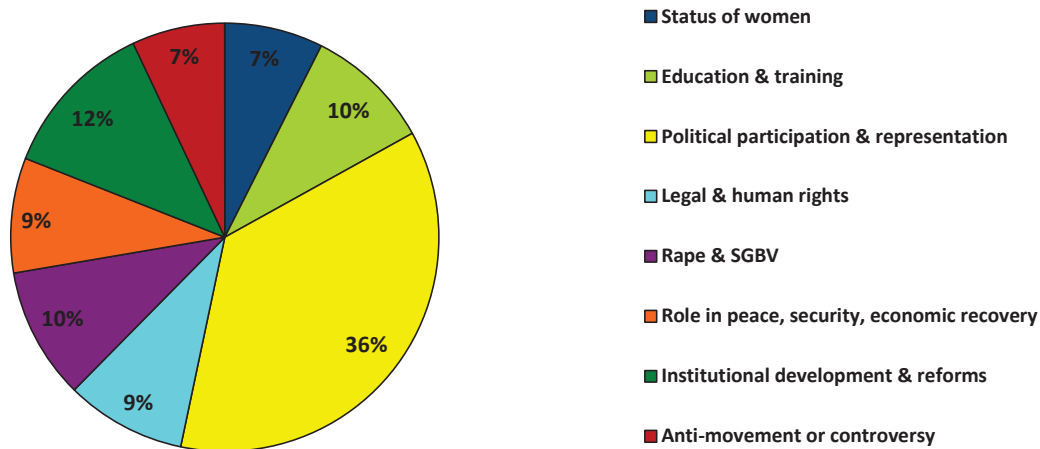


Figure 1. Depicts categories of women-focused content in Monrovia news media between 2000 and 2012 (n = 242).

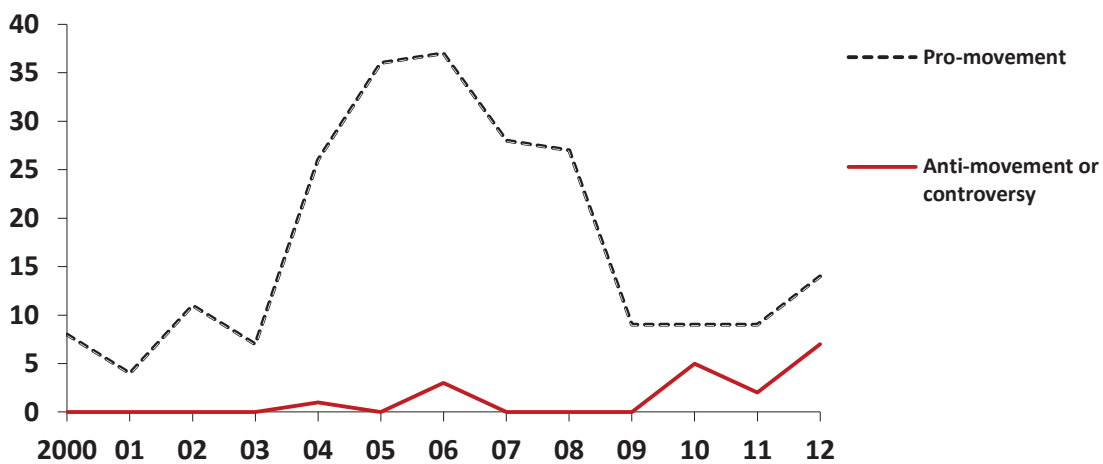


Figure 2. Shows the numbers of Monrovia news items that portrayed women and gender equality/equity positively compared to those that portrayed women and gender equality/equity negatively between 2000 and 2012 (n = 242).

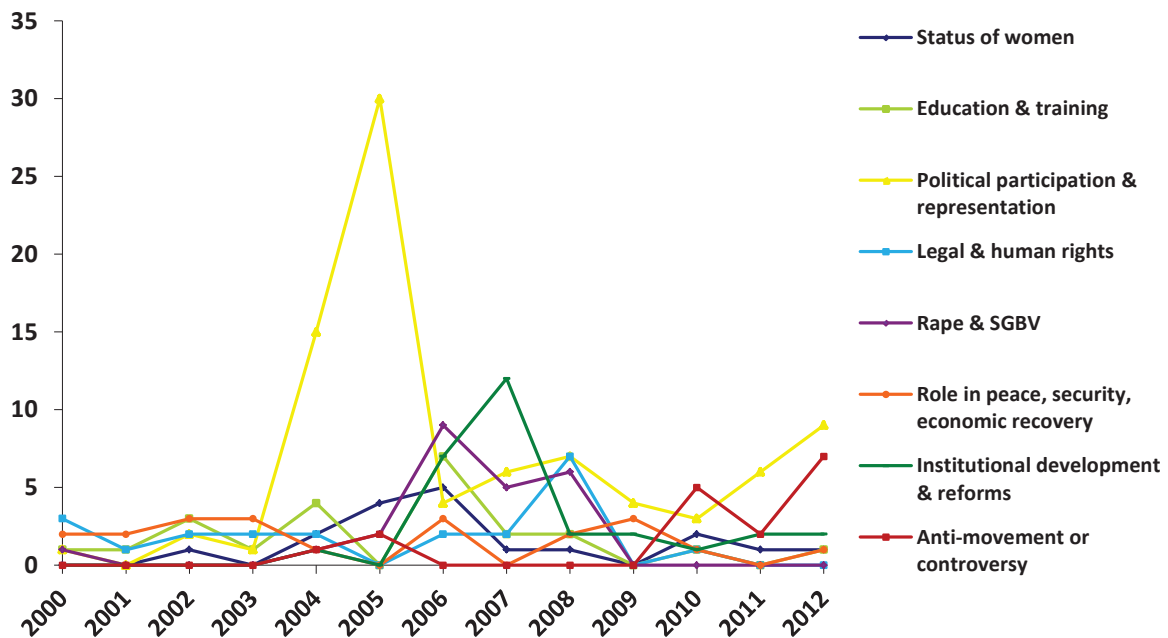


Figure 3. Depicts coverage of women’s rights and issues in Monrovia news media between 2000 and 2012 (n = 242).

## 6.2 Women’s Political Inclusion

As the figures above show, greater political inclusion has been the most salient goal of the women’s empowerment movement. Discussing Liberia, Bauer (2011) states that “Once peace was established [women’s] organizations focused their attention on Liberian women’s political representation, lobbying to have gender quotas included in new electoral laws” (p. 98). My research shows that political women and women’s groups were advocating to get political representation and gender mainstreaming on the national agenda as early as 1994, and that these efforts began to gain traction in the year 2000. In this research, the earliest mention of a representative quota in the news media came from Etweda Cooper, then Secretary General of LWI, who pointed out that only 5% of the government were women and announced that LWI was campaigning for women to occupy a minimum 30% of influential public offices by 2003 (Nelson, 2000, August 31). Although it is apparent that these efforts intensified during the initial transition period

and leading up to the 2005 elections, there has been a small group of Liberian women with a decades-long legacy of struggling for enhanced political participation.

Although Mikell (1995) mentioned that Liberian women were hoping to create a national women's agenda in the early 1990s, this goal was seemingly derailed by the exigencies of the war. In the immediate transition period, Liberian women appeared poised to resume this effort. The first National Women's Conference (May 10-14, 2004) was organized through the MoGD and sponsored by various UN agencies and USAID's Liberia Transition Initiative (LTI). Its roughly 250 participants were made up of diverse women representing various NGOs, professional associations, religious groups, women politicians, traditional leaders, and IDPs (Tapson, 2004, May 6). Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was also in attendance. The objectives of the Conference were to revive WONGOSOL, and set a national agenda and framework for women's participation (Tapson, 2004, May 6). Women at the conference identified reasons for their political and economic exclusion and developed a framework for women's full participation in decision-making. The Unification Day Declaration that followed included 28 recommendations. It also reaffirmed the women's goal for a 30% quota for women in all elected and appointed public positions (Tapson, 2004, May 17). In addition, they called for electoral forms and processes to be gender sensitive and for sensitization campaigns to inform women on their right to vote. They also made an appeal for their practical needs to be addressed, specifically through training programs so that women could compete in more profitable sectors.

As a result of such efforts, the Draft Electoral Reform Bill submitted to the legislature contained a provision to allot women 30% of parliamentary seats. UNMIL's Gender Unit assisted the MoGD in drafting the provision included in the bill (UNSC, 2004c). However, in December 2004 the NTLA adopted the Electoral Reform Bill *without adopting affirmative action for women and without referencing gender*. In an article entitled, "NTLA Misleads Women Groups – Gender Minister Expresses Frustrations," Minister Gayflor stated, "Unfortunately, the critical role of gender, although superficially acknowledged by the CPA was left to be interpreted as a matter of appeasement or propitiation" (as cited in Daygbor, 2004, December 23, para. 4). Gayflor further challenged the superficiality of existing commitments to gender in the Joint Needs

Assessment, appealed to international law, and used a rights-based, feminist discourse to critique the exclusion of affirmative action for women from the Electoral Reform Bill, stating:

...the difficulties of engendering the entire transitional process, as envisioned in the results focused transitional framework can be further demonstrated by the recent passage of the Electoral Reform Bill in exclusion of an affirmative action for women which could be in consonance with resolution 1325....[A]ll of us need to refill our arsenals in order to be prepared for... flagrant violations against fundamental human rights, which included depriving women access to opportunities, resources and power. (paras. 6-8)

To help get women “out of the background” and into more decision-making positions, in February 2005, under the leadership of Ruth Caesar, legislator and former Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Planning, several women’s groups formed a coalition called the Liberia Women National Political Forum (LWNPF) (“Women Want Greater Role,” 2004, February 4). The theme of the first Forum was “Women’s Participation in the Political Process: Challenges and Opportunities” (Maeda, 2005, May). The purpose of the Forum was to educate participants on political party platforms, discuss how to select the best candidates, create a list of potential women candidates running in the 2005 presidential and legislative elections, and develop a National Women’s Manifesto (Wrokpoh, 2005, February 23). One of the founders of Sierra Leone’s 50/50 movement addressed the Forum, stating that a “government that is exclusively or predominately made up of men cannot claim to be a government for the people, of the people and by the people” (Eshun-Baidan as cited in “More Women, Better Politics,” 2005, February 24, para. 4). This event too was attended by a cross section of women in government, CBOs, political parties, county representatives, and women from displacement camps. According to an UNMIL Focus article, the idea for the Forum “was born out of consultations with UNMIL’s Office of the Gender Advisor, which is also providing technical and material support to the year-long campaign to enhance women’s political rights” (Maeda, 2005, May, p. 11)

In an effort to formalize their positions, the LWNPF published the Liberian Women’s Manifesto (born out of the first National Women’s Conference) in 2005. The Manifesto includes statements from Gender Minister Vabah Gayflor, Amelia Ward (then Chairperson of WONGOSOL), and Ruth Ceasar (then Chairperson of the Women

National Political Forum’s Steering Committee). In the Foreword, Minister Gayflor recalls international instruments (BPfA, CEDAW, SCR1325) and domestic law (the Constitution and CPA), and states that the Manifesto “establishes a firm basis for gender mainstreaming in planning and launching a holistic post-conflict reconstruction in Liberia” (p. 2). Ruth Ceasar asserts that the document “sets the agenda of women’s active participation in politics, political process and every area of decision-making” (p. 4). For her part, Amelia Ward talks about achieving “women’s full emancipation” (p. 3). The Manifesto presents ten critical areas of concern: (1) women in peace and conflict (2) women human rights and the law (3) women and democracy (4) women and poverty (5) women and the economy (6) women education and training (7) women’s sexual and reproductive health rights (8) women and the environment (9) women and the media, and (10) women with special needs (which includes physically challenges, elderly women, widows, single and adolescent mothers, and the girl child).<sup>39</sup> Explicitly, it seeks to redress women’s low participation and representation in political processes, decision-making, and national development; women’s low economic status and poverty; women’s poor health, particularly sexual and reproductive health; women’s illiteracy and lack of training and education; the particular problems faced by women in conflict and war situations, namely SGBV; and prevailing harmful and discriminatory social practices that prevent women from accessing resources and services, particularly for those women with special needs and those who suffer SGBV (pp. 9-10). The overarching goal of the Manifesto is to ensure the “Government of Liberia prioritizes the concerns and interests of women, children and all other marginalized groups in policy development and implementation” (p. 10). The Manifesto specifically points to the need for gender-sensitive policies and budgets, and states that “a national gender policy to facilitate gender mainstreaming is still required” (p. 8).

Leading up to the 2005 elections, there was a drastic increase in efforts to build the requisite skills for women’s effective political participation. Because political parties were identified as a problem, women’s groups began to offer and seek training for

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<sup>39</sup> Compare these to the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in the BPfA: (1) Women and Poverty (2) Education and Training of Women (3) Women and Health (4) Violence Against Women (5) Women and Armed Conflict (6) Women and the Economy (7) Women in Power and Decision-Making (8) Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women (9) Human Rights of Women (10) Women and the Media (11) Women and the Environment (12) The Girl Child (United Nations, 1995)

advocacy and political participation, including campaigning, mobilization, networking, and leadership skills (“Women Can Win,” 2005, June 30). Between March and August 2005, COPPWIL (supported by USAID/LTI) held a series of workshops called “Breaking the Barriers and Empowering Women for Effective Political Parties Participation” (Karnaga, 2005, March 30). As part of the European Commission-funded project, “Support to the Legislative Assembly in Liberia,” implemented by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF), COPPWIL and KAF similarly conducted a series of workshops between June and August 2005. According to the Mission Report (Scheu, 2005), the program had four main objectives: training to identify and abolish obstacles to women’s leadership; training to build women’s self-confidence to stand for office; training to build support among constituencies; and training to identify poor electoral outcomes and strategies to be successful in future elections (p. 2). A three-day conference on gender awareness and gender equality in Liberian politics was held in Gbarnga, Bong County in June 2005, and workshops were held in Bong and Bomi counties in August. A significant outcome of the Gbarnga conference was the identification of the main barriers to women’s political participation and decision-making. The workshop report reveals frustrations with existing political structures and deep divisions among women:

- Lack of focus on qualitative leadership even among women themselves;
- Lack of financial resources;
- Growing waves of opportunism in society;
- Lack of self-awareness and self-realization among women;
- Growing levels of envy, disunity and hatred among women;
- Absence of potential women politicians from women-focused meetings and initiatives;
- The level of deceptions, hypocrisy, lies, intolerance and existing gaps between urban women and rural women;
- Failure of women to seek memberships in existing political parties;
- The disproportionately limited number of women in policy- and decision-making positions;
- Defeat of the 30% Affirmative Action Bill by the overwhelmingly male-dominated [NTLA]. (KAF, 2005a, p.7)<sup>40</sup>

In addition to the above interventions, the LTI and Development Education Network of Liberia held a “training of trainers” women’s leadership workshop in July

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<sup>40</sup> Having identified these obstacles, the participants wrote and agreed to the Gbarnga Declaration, which includes 14 resolutions intended to address the abovementioned obstacles (see KAF, 2005b).



2005, after which the attendees announced that they were seeking a partnership with the NEC to deliver voters' civic education preceding the 2005 elections ("Women Seek Partnership," 2005, July 12). According to an UNMIL progress report, UNMIL's Office of the Gender Advisor (OGA)<sup>41</sup> was also working with "relevant partners and stakeholders...to ensure fair and genuine representation of women in the electoral process" (UNSC, 2005a, p. 12). Their activities included gender sensitivity training for political parties and leadership workshops for female aspirants. Notwithstanding such efforts, and despite the fact that NEC Chairperson Francis Johnson Morris was able to issue a non-binding guideline encouraging political parties contesting the election to include 30% women on their candidate lists, just 14 % of the candidates appearing on the final party and independent candidate lists were women (NEC, 2005). None of the parties met the 30% goal.

### **6.3 Electing "Ma Ellen"**

In the first phase to mobilize female voters, the UNDP, UNIFEM, MoGD, and NEC partnered to enlist women's organizations to mobilize women's vote. 200 WIPNET volunteers participated in the campaign to encourage voter registration, and in two weeks, women's registration soared—from 24 to over 50%. At the beginning of the voter drive, one article reported that WIPNET "called on Liberians, especially women (women of substance and those who mean well for Liberia) to actively get involved in the process by registering and encouraging others" ("Poor Voters' Registration," 2005, May 6, para. 2). Executive member of WIPNET, Madam Damuwalie is quoted as saying that many people were not registering because "the UN already knows who they will put in the chair" (as cited in para. 7). Interestingly, but unsurprisingly in light of the previous quote, the article does not mention UNIFEM, which according to UNIFEM's (2006) own publication, *Beyond Numbers*, was a catalyst in the campaign to mobilize the women's vote. UNIFEM organized a forum to mobilize women candidates, used existing women's networks and free UN radio, and offered leadership training, as well as advocacy, public speaking, and financial support. UNIFEM also "incorporated gender awareness into the

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<sup>41</sup> Formerly "Gender Unit"

training manual for the National Elections Commission’s civic and voter education material” (p. 9). The UNMIL-OGA was also working on the campaign to increase women’s participation in the electoral process (UNSC, 2005b), recruiting women as observers, staff, and polling agents, and incorporating a gender perspective into voter handbooks (UNSC, 2005c). Both UNIFEM and the UNMIL-OGA supported the MoGD in its nationwide campaign to inform and mobilize female voters (UNSC, 2005c). The second phase of the voter registration effort was the September 27<sup>th</sup> launch of the MoGD and its UN partners’ voter mobilization campaign to ensure a big turnout of female voters called “Wake Up Early to Vote” (UNIFEM, 2006; “Gender Ministry Launches,” 2005, September 27; “Gender Ministry Wants,” 2005, September 27). WIPNET was again at the forefront of this campaign.

In October, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf qualified for the run-off with 19.8 % of the vote, and in November she won the run-off with 59.4 % (NEC, 2005). As there is no gender-disaggregated data indicating how women actually voted in 2005, we have to rely on anecdotal evidence that significant numbers of female voters cast their ballots for Sirleaf. Efforts to mobilize women to vote are likely to have played a key role in Sirleaf’s victory. During the voter registration period in 2005 (April 15 – May 21), the initial turnout for women was very low at around 24%, but come election day, more women than men had registered to vote. The following excerpt was taken from a *Liberian Observer* editorial entitled, “Our Resounding Vote”:

Maryou, Nyenoh, Azanu, Laeh, Moso, Musu, Nyenogbao, Nenee [all meaning “woman” in various Liberian dialects], you dih weh oh!!! Ma, you did well!!  
Lemme teh you what you did!  
More women than men were registered to vote.  
Your sister Leymah [Gbowee] brought the registration forms to you.  
You took your baby and went to vote.  
You got up early, ‘round 1 in the morning to go stand on line in order to put the right person in office, whom you believe can bring about a better Liberia better than it used to be.  
Yes, ma, you helped your sister hold the baby while she voted.  
You went to find food for the baby while she held your spot in line.  
Musu, you told your baby, “We goin’ vote!”  
And she said, “Voe!” back to you in baby talk.  
Women of Liberia, Tenk you, oh! Tenk you!

By voting, you said, “We are going to have a say in who gets elected to lead in this land of OURS, who we believe will work together with us, and listen to our sound advice for the making of a stronger nation.” (Best, 2005, paras. 1-11)

In fact, in her memoir, Sirleaf (2009) recalls that after the first round of elections, while Weah’s camp went after the defeated candidates, “we remobilized our secret weapon—the women of Liberia—and sent them out campaigning. These indomitable women were the real force behind this election, the fuel on which we ran.... They held rallies and distributed T-shirts. They walked and danced and marched. More than anything, it was the women of Liberia who turned this election, for me and for themselves” (p. 264). Again, anecdotal evidence suggests that “Liberian women turned out in their numbers and in every imaginable condition to vote...pregnant, nursing, handicapped, baby-on-the-back, hungry and tired. Women left their markets and other businesses because this decision was worth losing...a day’s wages...money for a day’s meal” (Bradford, 2005, October 26, para. 1). One reporter describes the Red Light Market, which is typically a flurry of activity, as “empty in the morning, and it stayed that way all day and all night” (para. 3). Regardless of which way women voted, their participation in this, likely Liberia’s first genuinely free and fair election, is quite remarkable.

Given the apparent divisions and distrust amongst women in the abovementioned KAF workshop report (and of course, given the diversity amongst women generally), it is to be expected that Liberian women were also divided in their support of Sirleaf. However, politically active women appear to have reached something of a consensus on Sirleaf after a rather scandalous event at the MoGD. On October 26<sup>th</sup>, *The Analyst* accused the Gender Ministry and Gender Minister Gayflor of participating in partisan politics and campaigning on behalf of Sirleaf and the Unity Party (“Gender Ministry Turns UP’s Campaign,” 2005, October 26). Former Planning Minister and Liberty Party Vice Presidential candidate, Amelia Ward, is reported to have walked out “after she had vented her outrage over attempts by Gayflor and other schemers of the meeting to lure her into a [Sirleaf] campaign rally...under the guise of women consultative meeting” (para. 11). One women’s organization spokesperson described the meeting as “criminal” and called for Chairman Bryant to “relieve the Gender Minister of her position” (paras.

14-16). The following day, *The Analyst* published a story on women's reaction to their story ("Liberian Women React," 2005, October 27). In this article, the reporter refers to a press release issued by an unnamed women's group. The release indicated that the meeting involved strategizing for the run-off elections and that the discord among women leaders reported by *The Analyst* did not take place, charging that the article was "politically biased and misrepresented and distorted the reality of the well meaning purpose of Liberian women coming together for a common cause" (para. 5). The release also stated that the MoGD was regularly used as a venue for women's conferences and workshops. In any case, LWI officially endorsed Sirleaf's candidacy (Fahngon, 2005, October 27; Horace, 2005, October 27), and other prominent women and women's groups followed suit, prompting one reporter to remark that since the announcement of the run-off for the presidential election, diverse women have been "putting aside what many term as the women's 'self-centered' style of life and reaching out to other women in order to galvanize more support and votes for the Unity Party Standard-bearer, Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf" (Horace, 2005, October 27, para. 7).

Thus, although Sirleaf claimed the victory it clearly was not only because she was a woman who capitalized on women's support. If that were the case, would not 50% of the electorate have voted in more than 5/30 women senators and 8/64 representatives? Of the 30 member Senate, just five women (16.7%) won seats; of the 64-member House of Representatives, just eight (12.5%) won seats, meaning only 14 of 110 women candidates were successful (NEC, 2005). Moran (2012) argues that Sirleaf's 2005 election campaign effectively fused two distinct images of female political authority, the indigenous, kinship-based, "powerful mother" and the androgynous, technocratic "Iron Lady" (p. 52). Widely referred to as "Ma Ellen," Sirleaf continuously recalled her record of standing up to former Presidents Doe and Taylor and assured voters that her government would be committed to development, which she described as a huge task—one "not for beginners [...or] people who are learning on the job. It's for people who have the experience, who know what has been done in other countries" (as cited in "Affirmative Action," 2005, para. 25). Indeed, the women's registration and voting drive combined with Sirleaf's charisma and her campaign strategy most likely secured her victory.

## ***6.4 Liberian Women's Goals and Gains Since 2006***

After Sirleaf was elected, UN agencies were quick to declare their moral and monetary support. One UNIFEM press release declared that it, and the UN system more broadly were responding “to the priorities identified by the women’s strategic action plan” (UNIFEM, 2006, January 23). Over the first few months of 2006, UNMIL’s OGA began to provide training to the MoGD and various local organizations in gender mainstreaming, women’s rights, and in the elimination of SGBV (UNSC, 2006a, pp. 11-12). The UNMIL-OGA also reportedly worked to support the re-launch of WONGOSOL (UNSC, 2006a). Given that a democratically elected female head of state was unprecedented in Africa, Sirleaf’s Presidency has brought significant international attention to Liberia—and with that attention, a deluge of INGOs—particularly in the years immediately following her election in 2005. During this period, countless trainings and workshops on women in governance, gender analysis, and mainstreaming were taking place (presumably only a fraction of these were actually reported on). For instance, Hunt Alternatives and the Institute for Inclusive Security conducted leadership trainings, which called for, among other things, an increase of women in the security sector (“Rape Cases,” 2006, December 13; see also Borteh, 2007, October 18). Moreover, the NEC, MoGD, and UNMIL’s OGA organized workshops on such topics as, “Enhancing Women Participation in Electoral Processes” (Dennis, 2007, May, 26). Many regional forums were also held in Monrovia during this period. For instance, “Changing Africa’s Political Culture through Women’s Political Participation” was aimed at building transnational networks to support the advancement of women (“President Sirleaf Urges,” 2007, April 23). Similarly, the ECOWAS Gender Development Centre delivered several training programs aimed at reducing gender disparities and building institutional capacity for gender mainstreaming (Saulwas, 2007, October 3; “Ecowas Women,” 2007, October 5). It is noteworthy that the President frequently attends these events, and the MoGD appears as both a planner and participant leadership trainings reaching hundreds (and by extension, thousands) of women throughout the country.

UNMIL has also worked closely with WONGOSOL and other relevant organizations “to ensure laws and policies that have been put in place for the protection and promotion of women and girls’ rights are effectively observed in the country”

(Swaray, 2007, June 11). The UNMIL-OGA helped guide the TRC process through gender sensitization and outreach to women and girls, and brought CEDAW committee members to Liberia to conduct a consultation, during which time President Sirleaf pledged that her Government would implement CEDAW (UNSC, 2006b). UNMIL also assisted the GoL and local women's organizations to develop Liberia's National Action Plan on GBV. Moreover, through its membership in "various committees and working groups," UNMIL has also provided "technical, logistical and financial support for the implementation of a national action plan in the areas of the rule of law, the protection of the rights of women and girls and the promotion of women in decision-making areas" (UNSC, 2007, p. 12).

As the GoL worked towards debt reduction and debt cancellation and began to normalize its relations with the IMF, the country began the process to participate in the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. This involves developing a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which includes an assessment of poverty in the country and "describes the macroeconomic, structural, and social policies and programs that a country will pursue over several years to promote growth and reduce poverty, as well as external financing needs and the associated sources of financing" (IMF, 2013a).<sup>42</sup> PRSPs are also meant to incorporate the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), of which MDG3 is to promote gender equality and empower women. As the GoL began to develop its interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (iPRSP) in September 2006, some women's advocates saw the iPRSP as "a strategic opportunity to demonstrate the Liberian Government's commitment to gender equity and women empowerment" (Dennis, 2006, September 14, para. 4). 50 stakeholders engaged through the MoGD and UNIFEM met to discuss gender issues in the iPRSP. According to one report, the "UNIFEM poverty reduction workshop further underscored the need to mainstream gender equality and women's empowerment in the iPRSP" (para. 4; see also Republic of Liberia, 2007). In July 2007, the MoGD and UNDP embarked on a joint project that involved a number of women's organizations and was aimed at promoting women's

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<sup>42</sup> There is currently some debate over whether PRSPs impose a particular set of policy prescriptions (particularly trade liberalization and privatization) on a nation-state. The official rhetoric is that they are prepared "through a participatory process involving domestic stakeholders and external development partners, including the IMF and the World Bank" (IMF, 2013a). The degree to which they actually are participatory and reflect national priorities is a point of contention.

participation in political and peace processes (“UNDP, Gender Ministry,” 2007, July 19). *The Analyst* reported that this project, which “supports the national women empowerment agenda” and was “spearheaded” by President Sirleaf, would “contribute to the government efforts as reflected in the [iPRSP]” (paras. 5-6). The 2008 PRSP in particular (the *Lift Liberia* PRSP) is frequently invoked by women’s advocates and representatives to justify government action that promotes women’s interests. The following excerpt from Section 8.2.4 of the 2008 PRSP appears in the National Gender Policy and several other policy documents:

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. To assure equal opportunities and participation in management and decision-making at all levels of society, women’s and men’s different experiences, needs, concerns, vulnerabilities, capacities, visions and contributions must be systematically taken into account in the reconstruction of Liberia. The Government is developing a gender policy and an implementation strategy, including the creation of a national gender forum, to guide it and other stakeholders on gender initiatives. (Republic of Liberia, 2008, p. 88)

Efforts towards affirmative action for women in politics continued throughout this period and, in 2007, Sirleaf launched the Women’s Legislative Caucus. At the inauguration, Chairwoman Alomiza Ennos-Barr announced that the Women’s Caucus would challenge male dominance of the political system and ensure the 30% quota for women in parliament would be passed by the 52<sup>nd</sup> Legislature (Sayon, 2007, July 17). Following a two-day forum at the MoGD (organized by the International Republican Institute and funded by USAID), Barr talked about the need to resist women’s marginalization in decision-making processes and she and other participants, including Foreign Minister Obubanke King Akerele, reiterated the need for enhanced women’s participation and the 30% quota (“Women Want Part,” 2008, February, 21). In July 2008, COPPWIL launched the “Women in Political Participation Assistance Fund” to support female candidates in future elections (Fahngon, 23 July, 2008). At the time, Director Marayah Fyneah stated that her organization was continuing to strive for the 30% quota, noting that “what men can do, the women are more capable of doing” (as cited in Fahngon, 2008, August 7, para. 4). Although most of the women’s advocates who appear in the news media cite 30%, some argue that this is insufficient and that it will restrict

women's advancement in the future (as cited in Borteh, 2008, March 11). Instead, these advocates argue, women should seek and attain 50% participation "in every sphere of our society" (para. 5).

The 2008 National Women's Conference (organized by UN agencies and the MoGD) was held to discuss efforts to formalize the women's national action plan and develop a national strategy to implement SCR 1325 (UNSC, 2008). In her address to participants, Minister Gayflor noted that although women in Liberia have made strides, they are confronted by many of the same issues identified at the first National Women's Conference in 2004 (para. 12). The five-day conference resulted in a resolution that called for (1) improved access to financial training, savings and loans services, and agricultural extension (2) educational opportunities and professional development (3) institutional reforms to strengthen gender responsiveness in the security sector (4) training on environmental protections and natural resource management (5) leadership training programs (6) gender sensitive human resource policies to promote gender equality in public institutions (7) legal reforms including land reform with a land tenure system, and a review of the juvenile court system (8) mainstreaming gender in development and reconstruction programs and policies, and (9) policies to promote leadership among girls ("Women Want," 2008, May 12).

The International Colloquium on Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security also brought significant knowledge, resources, and institutional reform to Liberia. The idea for the Colloquium followed Sirleaf's electoral victory 2006 (Yates, 2007, October 30). Gender Minister Gayflor announced the launch in Monrovia, and the following week, attended the initial planning meeting in Finland convened by the European Vice Chair, hosted by the Finnish Ambassador, and attended by a number of foreign dignitaries, the majority of whom represented European countries (Europe External Policy Advisors, 2007). Sirleaf and Finnish President, H.E. Tarja Halonen, co-sponsored the multi-phased International Colloquium in Liberia, which included a second preparatory work meeting in Monrovia, January 2008, and culminated in the Colloquium itself, also in Monrovia, in March 2009 (Europe External Policy Advisors, 2007). Amongst the Colloquium's goals were supporting the implementation of UNSCR 1325; meeting MDG3; promoting women's



economic empowerment; and empowering women “to be more effective leaders by linking them with their peers from around the world and sharing best practices” (International Colloquium, 2009). One outcome of the Colloquium has been the establishment of the Angie Brooks International Center, which has the responsibility of implementing post-Colloquium activities and the mandate to promote women’s empowerment and leadership development. Liberia’s National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (LNAP) was also announced at the Colloquium. It was reportedly drafted by the MoGD, UNMIL-OGA, and the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (“Liberia: Country Launches,” 2009, March 8). Each of the LNAP’s four pillars (1) Protection, (2) Prevention, (3) Participation and Empowerment, and (4) Promotion contain a set of strategic issues. Women’s organizations have a significant role to play under the fourth pillar of the LNAP, which requires the GoL to:

- Promote the involvement of women’s groups in the implementation of the NAP and advocate for increased access to resources for both the government and women’s groups.
- Promote the participation of girls in conflict prevention, early warning, peace security issues and post conflict recovery issues through education and training.
- Enhance the technical and institutional capacities of governmental and civil society actors, including women’s groups to effectively implement the NAP.
- Promote the full involvement of governmental and civil society actors, including women’s groups in the monitoring and evaluation of the NAP. (Republic of Liberia, 2009a, p. 13)

In 2010, the LNAP Secretariat and Steering Committee began working on establishing a Civil Society Monitoring Observatory. The Observatory is comprised of 17 member groups. One outcome of the 1325 Observatory has been the Civil Society Monitoring Report (Luppino & Webbe, 2011). Those who played a significant role in the research project include WONGOSOL, WIPNET, Voice of the Voiceless, and the Liberia Women Media Action Committee.

A number of UN joint programs that address women’s movement goals have also been established. Of particular relevance is the Joint Program on Gender Equality and Women’s Economic Empowerment (JP-GEWEE), for which the MoGD is the lead

Ministry (Republic of Liberia, 2009b).<sup>43</sup> JP-GEWEE is intended to promote MDG3 and support Pillar 2 (Economic Revitalization) and 3 (Governance and the Rule of Law) of the *Lift Liberia* PRS. JP-GEWEE has three main components: supporting gender-sensitive policy and institutional development; developing the capacity of the MoGD and other ministries and agencies responsible for gender-sensitive policies and development programs; and increasing women's earning potential by removing barriers to girls' secondary education and vocational training, supporting women's literacy and business skills and improving women's access to microfinance (Republic of Liberia, 2009b; see also, Toe, 2009, May 7). The following year, the President launched the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women Project (EPAG) to support, among other things, the development of entrepreneurial skills among women aged 16-27. Initiated in 2008, the project is supported by the GoL/MoGD, the World Bank, Nike Foundation, and the Danish Government. The President has also reportedly said that it will make an important contribution to the country's PRS ("Economic Empowerment," 2010, March 30).

Rural women have been a population visible in the media and targeted for government and international interventions. Zorzor District Women Care (ZODWOCA, under Agnes Kortimai) has been a visible advocate for rural women's rights. ZODWOCA has continued to run workshops and advocate for women's legal and human rights and leadership promotion ("ZODWOCA Challenges," 2007, June 29; "Rural Women Urged," 2008, June 16; "Women's Participation," 2009, April 27). The National Rural Women's Program (NRWP) held its first National Rural Women's Conference in December 2008).<sup>44</sup> With the organizational support of Women's Campaign International (WCI) and funding from USAID, the MoGD organized the conference, which allowed the newly-elected leaders and rural women's group leaders to meet and prioritize grassroots women's development issues, organize a centralized leadership structure, develop its constitution, and elect its leaders (WCI, USAID, & MoGD, 2009). The

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<sup>43</sup> The Joint Programme on Prevention and Response to Sexual and Gender-based Violence as also had important institutional implications, including the establishment of Criminal Court E (known locally as the "Rape Court," which is designated to dealing with SGBV offenses.

<sup>44</sup> The National Rural Women's Programme existed in some form in 2004, as an UNMIL Mission Report (2004d) discusses providing technical support to the Ministry for Rural Development to support rural women through the program.

strategic issues identified at the conference were expanding women's rights and leadership, combating GBV, investments in agriculture and "a national development agenda with a role for rural women" (p. 8). Sirleaf spoke at the opening session, stating "if women cannot be empowered by this government, which government will do so?" ("Conference for Rural Women," 2008, December 9, para. 2). Women's rights, including inheritance and rape laws were also among the topics discussed. At the second annual Conference in December 2009, Sirleaf launched the National Gender Policy, describing it as integral to the "Lift Liberia" PRS ("President Sirleaf Launches," 2009, December 17; see MoGD, 2009a). The third conference in 2010 was held under the theme, "Enhancing Grassroots Women Participation in Decision Making at All Levels." Objectives included leadership trainings, an assessment of the NRWP and recommendations for the advancement of rural women (MoGD, 2011).<sup>45</sup> The fourth conference, organized by the MoGD and WCI/USAID and sponsored by UN Women was held in December 2012 under the theme, "Empower Rural Women, End Poverty." Although the NRWP provides hundreds of rural women's groups with agricultural extension and other services, it is also of great political import. The NRWP is a vast network of women that has effectively acted as a constituency supporting Sirleaf—a constituency that she has had to work to maintain. The rural women's movement in Liberia may in fact be much more unified than women in the capital, and they have continually seen the benefits of being able to "speak with one voice" (female representative of a women's advocacy group, personal communication, 2013).

The period that covers Sirleaf's first term in office (2006-2011) can be characterized as a time of vigorous reforms and opportunity for women in Liberia. Although activist and women and feminist insiders have been unable to secure significant representation in Liberia's elected assemblies, Liberian women were represented in substantive terms over this period, as both government and international development agencies responded to a number of the demands identified in the Liberian Women's Manifesto and through the various national conferences. Unfortunately, significant divisions in the women's movement become increasingly apparent leading up to the 2011 general elections.

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<sup>45</sup> A national conference was not held in 2011 because of the national elections that year.

## ***6.5 The 2011 Legislative and Presidential Elections***

Leadership and capacity building trainings for female aspirants leading up to the 2011 legislative and presidential elections did not garner much media attention. UN Focus magazine covered a conference, “Gender Equality in Liberian Politics,” organized through the Gender Office at the NEC, UNDP, International IDEA, and UNMIL (Osmani, 2011a). Moreover, NEC, International Alert, and the UNDP Elections Project trained over 440 female aspirants from all of Liberia’s 15 counties in a series of three-day leadership trainings in June and July (Osmani, 2011b). Although 1,793,584 people were registered to vote and about 49% of those were women (NEC, 2011), there is insufficient evidence to suggest that significant action was taken to mobilize female voters during the 2011 electoral cycle.

President Sirleaf won the first round of voting held on October 11 with 43.9%, followed by Cllr. Winston Tubman with nearly 32.7% (NEC, 2011). Shortly before the first round, President Sirleaf was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize alongside fellow Liberian Leymah Gbowee. This led Tubman, Sirleaf’s greatest competition in the race, to claim that the Prize was part of an international conspiracy to get Sirleaf re-elected (“Sirleaf Does Not Deserve,” 2011, October 8). Despite a significantly lower voter turnout (down to 38.6% from 71.6%), Sirleaf was re-elected with 90.3% of the vote following the November run-offs. Female candidates fared worse in this election than they did in 2005, securing only 8/73 or 10.96% of the seats in the House and only 4/30 or 13.33% (only 1 of 15 senate seats being contested in 2011 was won by a woman) (IPU, 2011). One outgoing female senator, Maryland Senator Gloria Musu Scott noted that her age likely did not appeal to young voters concerned primarily with immediate needs and those candidates that seek to address those needs when campaigning (“Opening Up,” 2011, December 11). She also stated that the institutional structure is unsupportive of women candidates, noting that “political parties did not really take women seriously,” and failed to support female candidates (as cited in Williams, 2011, November 23, para. 6). Senator Jewel Howard-Taylor indicated that female voters did not support female candidates, in large part because they “were more concerned about inconsequential issues like whether a female candidate fixed her hair properly or wore the latest fashion, how she could not afford a better car, or why she was not married” (para. 12). Taylor also

explains that men see the legislature “as their domain.... And they think that women should be content with the presidency, so the issue of women empowerment should now be slowed down” (para. 26). Explaining the effect of low numbers of women in the legislature, Scott explains:

I personally put a legislation forth to protect women who are cohabitating and earning incomes and having children and acquiring properties to protect their property right and to protect the legal status of children born in that situation. The men laughed at it and then they threw it out, the senate; we were only five women in the senate; they threw it out!... The next thing about increasing the participation of women in the legislature, they threw it out on International Women’s Day because we don’t have the numbers, that’s the reality with the legislature, you need the numbers. (as cited in “Opening Up,” 2011, December 11, p. 2)

## **6.6 Backlash and Controversies**

Other than the controversy over the MoGD’s perceived role in Sirleaf’s 2005 Presidential campaign, there were no significant rifts in the women’s empowerment movement that gained media attention until January 2010. An audit of the MoGD released in 2011 “exposed gross mismanagement and corruption, with many projects designed or funded for rural women either non-existent or uncompleted” (“Raw Deal, 2011, May 4, para. 1). In the first article addressing the issue, the *New Democrat* reports that “[k]ey women influential in and out of the Government are [at] each other’s throats” demanding that Minister Gayflor resign because the Liberian Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) investigation “found her guilty of theft, exploitation and abuse of power” (“Women Fall Apart,” 2010, January 7). Apparently leading the charge was Cllr. Pearl Brown Bull, Unity Party and AFELL member. LACC Chairperson, Cllr. Francis Johnson Morris was also criticized for neither requiring \$22,000 in restitution nor recommending criminal prosecution. Cllr. Morris had stated that the action was not criminal and GoL Director of Cabinet Medina Wesseh explained that the Minister was following Civil Service Agency procedure when she deducted money from employee’s salaries and benefits (“Women Fall Apart,” 2010, January 7). Following the release of the report, a group of women staged a protest at Capitol Hill, warning President Sirleaf that she would lose their votes if she failed to dismiss the Minister (“Women Warn Ellen,” 2010, January 13). In June, the Coalition of Civil Society Women of Liberia held a demonstration and presented a petition to Minister Gayflor demanding answers to

questions about the MoGD's mandate and management of funds; what the MoGD was actually doing for women in Liberia; and why the MoGD appeared to support some groups and not others (Kamara, 2010, June 4). In response to the audit, one reporter states that "[i]t is no longer the bigot[ed] men determined to keep women down. It is women against women, and the facts make this so evident" ("Country Women's' Bondage," 2011, May 9, para. 4).

Tellingly, when the *Gender Equity in Politics Act 2010* was introduced to the House in May, the bill was described in the press as a bill intended "to allot, free of sweat" 30% of the legislative seats to women ("Women's 'Selfish Bill,'" 2010, June 7, para. 2). *The Analyst* article suggested that the bill is a waste of time and energy, "draconian" (para. 4), "anti-democratic," "insignificant to the country's democratization process" (para. 8), and "only intended to expose their weakness to their male counterparts in the National Legislature and larger Liberian society" (para. 6). The main critic of the bill in this story states that the notion that women need a law to ensure their representation is absurd since men did not need a law to ensure theirs. The main opponent cited also warns that if the bill passes, all kinds of identity-based groups will make claims to ensure their representation in parliament. Moreover, female lawmakers should concern themselves instead with the "high level of prostitution and other negative deportments" among Liberian girls (para. 12). In the end, the bill was defeated on the grounds that it violated the country's constitution, but it is pretty clear that this was not the real reason for its defeat.

The following year, in August, 2011, a group of women organized a demonstration on Capitol Hill to pressure lawmakers to pass the re-drafted *Gender Equity in Politics Act*, sponsored by Senator Clarice Jah. At the demonstration, Senator Isaac Nyenabo reportedly told the women, "Leave and come back January. We have other important bills to pass, so let the women come back in January," ("Our Bill," 2011, August 13, p. 1). The *Act for Equal Participation and Representation in Governance and Political Process* was seconded and sent to committee but the 52<sup>nd</sup> Legislature ended its session at month's end without passing the Act. With the general election being held in October, 2011, the women would have to come back in January, 2012, as Senator Nyenabo directed. This version of the bill stated that political party candidates and

elected legislators must not be dominated by more than 70% of either gender, in a weak attempt to try and reframe the issue. It also included a provision for a gender equity fund which would require the government to allot funds in the budget to help parties meet the 30% threshold. Interestingly, a witness to the demonstration delivers a common response to women seeking greater representation: “You have the presidency. What more do you want?” (as cited in “Our Bill,” 2011, August 13, p. 3).

In June 2012, President Sirleaf broke her relative silence on the Women’s Caucus’ efforts to pass a gender equity in politics bill, and “challenged female legislators” to re-introduce the bill, reportedly telling them “to lobby ‘one-to-one’ with their male counterparts for the bill to be enacted into law” (“Ellen Revives,” 2012, June 29, para. 2). The article suggests that Sirleaf did not come out in support of the bill during a 2009 senatorial by-election, as she supported a male candidate contesting for the vacant position, “vehemently” criticizing the position of the bills’ proponents (para. 5). Reportedly, the “move created divisions among... women groups including other prominent females in the country” (para. 7). Now supporting the bill, the President reportedly referred to other sub-Saharan countries where similar bills have been passed. According to a GoL press release, women comprise 31% of ministerial portfolios, 29% of Deputy Minister positions, 25% of Assistant Minister posts, and 28% of key government agencies (“Women’s Participation,” 2012, July 27). Sirleaf is quoted as saying, “[s]upporting women’s public roles and increasing the number of women in leadership positions is critical to ensure that Liberia becomes a vibrant, inclusive and effective democracy” (para. 11).

Another noteworthy development of late is the resignation of Leymah Gbowee from her position as Head of Liberia’s Peace and Reconciliation Commission in October 2012. On BBC’s Focus on Africa radio program, she explained that although President Sirleaf had criticized past Liberian governments for infringing on people’s rights and for nepotism, she herself has appointed her sons to powerful positions (Gbowee, 2012, October 8). In August, Sirleaf’s son Charles was temporarily suspended as Deputy Governor of the Central Bank for not declaring his assets (he later declared them and was reinstated). Her son Fumba is head of the National Security Agency (though he held this position prior to Sirleaf coming to power), and her son Robert is her senior economic

advisor and the Chair of the National Oil Company of Liberia. Gbowee emphasized that her comments were not personal, but that she could no longer support the Sirleaf Administration in good conscience (Gbowee, 2012, October 8). In addition to accusations of nepotism, Gbowee stated that Sirleaf had not done enough to combat poverty and corruption. Women in Liberia have been divided over Gbowee's statements—many condemn her and remain supportive of Sirleaf (personal communication, 2012-2013; see also “Crack in Feminist,” 2012, October 16; “Gbowee's Critique,” 2012, October 22). For her part, Sirleaf has said that given the level of incompetence and corruption in the country, it is sometimes necessary to place those you have a personal relationship with in positions of trust. She has also suggested that her sons' positions cannot be characterized as nepotism since they have the necessary qualifications and competence (as cited in “I'll Not Fire,” 2012, November 14, paras. 10-11).

In early 2013, another highly public scandal involving high-profile women in Monrovia erupted. In short, after Montserrado County Superintendent Grace Kpaan was accused of misappropriating public funds, after which the House of Representatives tried to issue a detention order for Kpaan. Because that the House had no authority to neither lay charges nor enforce the law, Acting Mayor Mary Broh mobilized a large group of women to prevent the detention of Kpaan. Broh has been a controversial figure in Monrovia, lauded for her effectiveness by some and loathed by others (e.g., “Celebrating the Fall,” 2013, February 28). Both Broh and Kpaan resigned shortly after being suspended from their posts by President Sirleaf. Whatever the facts of this case, the “Broh-Kpaan Saga” (2013, March 8) has given opponents of gender equality, and in particular, of the gender equity in politics bill that is expected to be soon reintroduced to the 53<sup>rd</sup> Legislature (Parker, 2013, May 29). A recent article in *The News* states that the Deputy Speaker of the House, had said that “there is no women inequality in contemporary Liberia” and that “the women are fighting for dominance,” which is evident in the actions of the women who “obstructed the House's sentence” (“Broh-Kpaan Saga,” 2013, March 8, para. 5). The article also mentions a Grand Kru Senator, who suggested that the scandal may prevent the passage of an affirmative action bill for women.



## ***6.7 Chapter Summary***

This chapter is largely descriptive and includes a lot of detail about the activities, aspirations, and achievements of political and organized women in Liberia since the end of the war. The full import of these observations may not be realized in the current thesis and will have to be taken up in future research. Though discussed more fully in the final chapters, women's mobilizations in the initial transition period were primarily geared towards ensuring that their concerns would be included in the national agenda. To be sure, Liberian women faced some major disappointments in this period—notably the formation of a NTLA that largely excluded women and the rejection of the 30% provision in the Electoral Reform Bill. However, women's participation in the 2005 election and Sirleaf's subsequent victory are undoubtedly historic events.

Although it is not always easy to tell where ideas and initiatives originated, in the end, community-based organizations, international development agencies and NGOs, the MoGD, and President Sirleaf herself most frequently appear as partners working in concert to advance women's rights and elevate their status. Liberian women representing various state agencies, women's NGOs, and development organizations certainly attend many of the same conferences, trainings, and workshops. In this context, women's advocates appear to span boundaries; those few women in political and bureaucratic positions tend to also be affiliated with the women's movement and/or movement organizations, and over the years, women in Monrovia have moved from their positions in civil society organizations to state agencies and vice-versa. Moreover, women's movement actors make demands on both the state and on international development organizations, and development organizations promote the involvement of women's movement organizations in the state. The final chapters in this thesis discuss the Liberian case with reference to the RNGS framework and the propositions revealed through the literature review.

## CHAPTER 7 LIBERIA: A FEMINIST STATE?

This chapter seeks to answer the question, to what extent can elements of the Liberian state be understood as “feminist,” as conceived by the state feminism approach? It begins by discussing the state structures that are formally responsible for promoting women’s status and rights in Liberia. Next, it discusses the extent to which these structures have actually achieved feminist goals. It identifies those social and political factors that have produced institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women in Liberia, and concludes by introducing the concept of “supra-state feminism,” which attempts to respond to the RINGS question, “does research on state feminism travel?” (Mazur & McBride, 2011).

### ***7.1 Gender Equality Mechanisms in Liberia***

Largely because of the war and the high numbers of technocrats that joined the Diaspora, little is known about the lobbying activities and political processes leading up to the establishment of the national women’s machinery in Liberia. Following the creation of both the African Platform for Action at the Fifth African Regional Conference on Women in 1994, and the BPFA at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the timing of the establishment of the first national women’s machinery would indicate that policy transfer occurred. According to the GoL report, the National Gender Forum and WONGOSOL were both established in 1998, but from my research, it does not appear that they were very active, and given both the pressing needs of the day and the repressive nature of the Taylor government, this is not very surprising. Although additional research is required, the national women’s machinery appears to have originated with UNIFEM and the UNDP; however there are few additional clues as to the lobbying efforts of Liberian women and women’s groups.<sup>46</sup> While AFELL and other political women are likely to have played important advocacy roles in the establishment of the MoGD, it seems likely that the GoL under Taylor established the ministry “to get buy in from the international community” (male civil servant, personal communication,

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<sup>46</sup>Evelyn Diggs Townsend corresponded with then Youth and Sports Minister Conmany Wesseh about establishing a coordinating body for women’s affairs in 1994 (Wesseh, 1994), but *how*, exactly, the machinery was established is unclear.

18 December, 2012). It is entirely plausible that Taylor's main motivation was to gain favour with international donors, lenders, and/or investors at a time when Liberia was widely perceived as a pariah state. This type of "gesture politics" (Kwesiga, 2003) is frequently cited as an explanation for the establishment of national women's machineries in sub-Saharan Africa (Geisler, 2004; Tripp et al., 2009). The low profile of WACCU in the Ministry of Planning reflects the low profile of women's issues at the time, and given the level of crisis and incapacity in the state when the MoGD was established, it too was likely of little consequence until 2004-5. Thus, at this time, policy diffusion appears as the most likely explanation for the adoption of gender equality mechanisms in Liberia prior to 2005.

Today, Liberia has a number of gender equality mechanisms. First, the MoGD and the National Gender Forum (NGF) are the national machinery for promoting gender equality and women's advancement in Liberia. The MoGD is located within the Executive Branch of the GoL, and as such, its head is a Cabinet Minister who attends cabinet meetings and has direct access to the President. Its mandate is to advise Government on women and children's issues; coordinate efforts towards gender mainstreaming; ensure that women's perspectives are included in policy, legislation, and budgets; report on the effects of policies and programs on women and children; and make recommendations on ways to advance the status of women so they can be equal partners with men (MoGD, 2009a, p. 32). The NGF is the policy advisory body on gender issues; it is chaired by the President of Liberia and comprised of the heads of government ministries and agencies, leaders of the House and Senate, heads of UN agencies and universities, and chairs of legislative gender committees. The operational arm of the NGF is the Secretariat, which is located at the MoGD. The Secretariat has gender focal points, who are persons responsible for gender mainstreaming at various sector ministries and agencies. Task forces are comprised of representatives of UN agencies, national and international NGOs, traditional leaders (Zoes), and a number of faith- and community-based groups.

The National Gender Policy is another important mechanism for gender equality. Section 1.2 of the NGP outlines its rationale. First, the promotion of gender equality is an international best practice for poverty reduction, health promotion, and improved

efficiency. More than a human rights issue, the Policy states, gender equality is a mechanism for sustainable development. Second, the Policy acts both as an implementation guide and accountability mechanism for eliminating gender-based discrimination, mainstreaming gender, and ensuring that gender-related commitments in national development plans are met. Third, the Policy supports Liberia's PRSP (mentioned 11 times in the non-abridged document) and reinforces the leading role of the MoGD in coordinating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the NGP, as well as relevant international conventions and areas of the PRS. The Policy's overall objective is "to serve as a framework and guideline in mainstreaming gender and empowering women and vulnerable groups in the national development processes" and "create and strengthen gender responsive structures, processes and mechanisms for development in which both women and men participate equally, have access to, and benefit from all the country's resources" (p. 13).<sup>47</sup> United Nations agencies including the UNDP, UNMIL-OGA, UNIFEM, and UNFPA provided financial and technical support for the development of the National Gender Policy and the Strategic Results Framework (MoGD, 2009a). Various ministries, agencies, networks, and NGOs (including AFELL, FAWE, and WONGOSOL) were consulted on the Policy, and an international consultant, Dr. Akinyi Nzioki, and national consultant, Etweda Cooper, led the drafting team which included three bureaucrats from the MoGD.<sup>48</sup> It is significant that Cooper has become an advisor to the President as well as the national consultant leading the NGP drafting team; she might be considered a feminist insider, as she has been an influential women's advocate with direct access to the policy process.

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<sup>47</sup> Section 4.1 contains specific objectives across 19 policy priority areas: 1) Gender Mainstreaming and Coordination of Partners' Activities/International Partnership for Development; 2) Economic Empowerment 3) Agriculture, Water Resources and Access to Land; 4) Employment; 5) Gender Budgeting; 6) Human Rights and Gender Based Violence; 7) Vulnerable Groups – The Girl Child, Youth, PWD, PLWHA, the Elderly; 8) Political Participation and Decision Making Positions for Women; 9) Health and Reproductive Rights; 10) Peace and National Security; 11) Media, Information, and Communication; 12) Research and Sex Disaggregated Data; 13) Monitoring and Evaluation; 14) Access to Justice; 15) Education and Training; 16) Environment and Natural Resources; 17) Infrastructure and basic services 18) Culture, Family and Socialisation; 19. Trade, Commerce and Industry (p. 35).

<sup>48</sup> Director for Policy, A Ndebehwolie Borlay, Senior Policy Coordinator, Andrew G. Tehmeh, and Chief of Section of Policy Division, Harrison Cole.

## ***7.2 State Agencies Achieving Feminist Goals?***

Political and activist women in Liberia have engaged in a number of activities, including advocacy and awareness-raising, to improve the status of women and redress gender-based inequities in education, in the economy, in the law, and in politics. After over five years of advocacy, the legislature passed the Inheritance Laws in 2003. The legislature also amended the Penal Code in 2005, after which the GoL established the “Rape Court” in 2008. The Ministry of Education enacted the National Policy on Girls’ Education in 2006, at least five years after national and regional advocates called for “uplifting” Liberian girls. And the MoGD instituted the National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence in 2006, followed by the LNAP and the NGP in 2009. These and the many national development programs for market women, rural women farmers, and women entrepreneurs are administered by the MoGD, WONGOSOL, AFELL, UN agencies, UNMIL-OGA, and the many transnational organizations mentioned throughout this thesis. The national policies and programs targeting women and girls reflect the goals outlined in the Liberian Women’s Manifesto, but they also reflect the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in the BPfA. Although the NGP was completed in 2009, the skeleton of the policy had already been drafted ten years earlier (Republic of Liberia, 1999).

Most of the challenges listed in the MoGD annual reports (MoGD, 2010, 2011, 2012) are related to capacity; inadequate finances and dependence on donor funds, poor monitoring of resources, staff shortages and inadequate technical skills among staff. Gender focal points in particular lack both capacity and support to work on gender mainstreaming in their respective institutions. Logistical issues, including insufficient office supplies, computers, and access to the internet, are also cited as serious constraints. Such issues are exacerbated in the county offices of the MoGD. The Secretariat of the LNAP also lacks capacity to coordinate and monitor the LNAP’s implementation. Similarly, UNMIL Mission Reports point to a dearth of government capacity and accountability to gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment mechanisms. Simply put, the mandate and activities of the MoGD could not be carried out without the UNDP, UNIFEM and other partners. Although the MoGD works with partners on EPAG, JP-GEWEE, the LNAP, the National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence, the National Rural Women’s Program, the Building Women Entrepreneurship Program and

the President's special initiative for the Sirleaf Women's Market Fund, in and around the capital, *the MoGD is a highly active, visible presence*; it is in fact the "face" of these initiatives. According to former Gender Minister Gayflor (2011):

When I took over, gender was not a household word in this country. Women didn't know they had this ministry and that it had been in existence for two to three years. Now, the women stand out and beat their chests knowing that they have a ministry. A testimony to this is the female president that we have. For the first time in the history of this country, women came out as voters and as candidates. This led to the election of the president we have today (p. 37).

State agencies have been most effective in achieving goals that are more practical or immediate in nature. It is worth noting that of the five RNGS issues studied over the course of the project—abortion, prostitution, job training, political representation, and "hot issue" areas (which were not explicitly gendered but had gendered implications)—only two, job training and political representation, were found to be issues of concern to feminist and women's movement actors in Liberia. RNGS used policy debates as their units of analysis across issue areas and nation-states and found that policy domains were a better indicator of state feminist success and failure than country patterns. This also appears true of Liberia; laws and policies dealing more directly with women's practical gender needs, for example, those pertaining to rape and SGBV, education, and economic empowerment did not appear to face much opposition and passed with relative ease. Critically, these types of ostensibly "apolitical" issues are those that receive the most international support and donor funding. On the other hand, the issue of a quota for women's legislative representation—which poses a more direct challenge to male dominance of the national agenda—has been the most contentious of all movement goals. Moreover, this issue has received little state and international support. Although UN agencies, intergovernmental organizations, and bilateral partners (e.g., USAID) seemed committed to increase the numbers of qualified women to run for office and to mobilize female voters in 2005, this initial commitment appears to have waned as the memories of war begin to fade.

International development organizations, in particular, are perhaps disproportionately focused on SGBV (see, for example, UNMIL's Mission Reports). Granted, rape and violence against women is endemic in the country, but efforts to

address these problems have not involved much discussion or disruption of the root causes. Obviously, because of the fact that so many people in Liberia are still lacking access to basic services, it is much easier to justify reforms that can be understood in terms of their contribution to the country's development. Thus, it is much more difficult to find support for issues such as women's increased political representation, which appear to have far less tangible benefits. Nevertheless, greater access to education, literacy programs, protection and prosecution for SGBV, agricultural skills training, and inheritance and property rights are things that Liberian women have been asking for. Some women's groups frame these as development issues; some frame them as strategic women's issues, and some do both. Unsurprisingly, those that are framed as development issues receive greater state and international support.

It must be stressed that given the social, political, and historical context of Liberia, we cannot think about feminist goals as being "achieved." Though several important first steps have been taken and legal, policy, and development frameworks exist, these have not translated into a widespread and tangible improvement in the status of women as group. Weak implementation of these mechanisms, as well as lack of awareness and enforcement in the Liberian hinterland means the few benefits are limited to the capital. The duality of the legal system (statutory and customary) makes it extremely difficult to implement reforms since the state competes with traditional councils and institutions for authority. Both the TRC's gender committee (TRC, 2009) and the CEDAW Committee at the 44<sup>th</sup> Session (CEDAW, 2009ab) indicate that this situation clearly impedes Liberian women's access to justice and their ability to claim their rights.<sup>49</sup> *The Revised Rules and Regulations Governing the Hinterland of Liberia* still discriminates against women and much of the population remains unaware of the laws and policies, and enforcement mechanisms are largely non-existent in the rural areas. CEDAW has been ratified but not incorporated into Liberian law and there is no

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<sup>49</sup> In 2008, the GoL (through the MoGD) submitted its State Party Report on the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Combined initial, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth periodic report of Liberia). In August 2009, at the 901<sup>st</sup> and 902<sup>nd</sup> meetings of the CEDAW Committee's 44<sup>th</sup> session, Liberian delegates, led by Gender Minister Vabah Gayflor, fielded questions from Committee members about Liberia's progress towards CEDAW's Agreed Conclusions. The summary report of this meeting is the document cited CEDAW, 2009a. At the close of the 44<sup>th</sup> session, the Committee responded to both the State Party Report and oral presentations and responses at the 901<sup>st</sup> and 902<sup>nd</sup> meetings. These concluding observations are contained in CEDAW, 2009b.

definition of discrimination in the Constitution or legal principle of equality between the sexes in Liberia (CEDAW, 2009b). Women continue to lack rights to property and there is currently no law against domestic violence. Rape and sexual violence continues to be a serious threat to women and girls in spite of the Penal Code amendments and stricter penalties for perpetrators (United Nations, 2009). Of course, many rapes go unreported because of both shame and social pressure, and there is a tendency for victims to settle out of court, often because the level of poverty causes parents to accept financial compensation (United Nations, 2009). Inadequately trained law enforcement, poor health services, and issues related to access to justice result in charges not being filed, dismissals, and acquittals (United Nations, 2009). State agencies are working to remediate some of these issues through the implementation of the NAP-GBV.

The CEDAW Committee also expressed its deep concern about “the persistence of harmful traditional practices, patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles, responsibilities and identities of women and men in all spheres of life” and its regret “that no sustained and systematic action has been taken by the State party to modify or eliminate such harmful traditional practices, patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes” (CEDAW, 2009b, p. 5-6).<sup>50</sup> The CEDAW Committee was also extremely troubled about female genital cutting and was critical that the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued permits to FGM/C practitioners, as this was seen as supportive of the practice (p. 6). Until recently, ending the practice has found little support from Liberia’s government. Part of the reason that it has been so problematic is politics—the *Sande* have extensive social networks and are a powerful political constituency in the country. The Berry Peal case and the Azango whistle blowing incident were the first times that I encountered the issue of FGM/C discussed in the Liberian news media as an issue that Liberian women

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<sup>50</sup> In 2010, a woman named Ruth Berry Peal got into an argument with two women from the Gola ethnic group, in which FGM/C is common practice. The women reported the argument to their chief, who subsequently ordered that Berry Peal (who is not Gola) be taken into the “bush” and cut. In spite of receiving numerous threats, Berry Peal filed a lawsuit against the women who forcibly mutilated her. The two women were found guilty in July 2011 of kidnapping, felonious restraint, and theft. For reporting on the story as well as on her own experience with FGM/C, journalist Mae Azango fled Liberia in fear for her life. The Berry Peal case was upheld by Liberia’s Supreme Court in January 2013, but her attackers have remained free in spite of being sentenced to three years in prison (Boley, 2013, June 4) Julia Duncan-Cassell, the current Minister of the MoGD, has begun speaking out against FGM/C, and President Sirleaf recently declared February 6th a working public holiday for “Intensifying Global Efforts for The Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation” (“Sirleaf Declares,” 2013, February 4).



were condemning (AFELL, WOLPNET, and WONGOSOL have supported Berry Peal throughout her ordeal). Prior to this, the practice was defended as tradition and framed as an issue of concern to Westerners, who sought to impose their values on Liberians. In November 2011, the Government took some initial steps towards curbing the practice, but it has not yet criminalized it nor invested significantly in educating the public about the dangers (and injustice) of the practice (Boley, 2013, June 3).

Gender activists have long sought to be included in national reconciliation and peacebuilding processes. The LNAP is an important yet initial step. Recommendations by the LNAP Civil Society Monitoring Group (Luppino & Webbe, 2011) suggest that the GoL and state agencies must intensify efforts “to identify and mentor qualified women for appointed positions in national and local leadership” and, alongside its international partners, build the capacity of local female chiefs and other leaders to monitor and support economic and agricultural programs for rural women (p. 132). Moreover, the GoL must evaluate the progress of all of its gender-sensitive reforms and “rededicate themselves to the implementation of the National Gender Policy, as well as all other gender-related policies including the National Gender Based Violence Plan of Action” (p. 132). The Group also calls on the security sector to meet and exceed its 20% affirmative action goal and on the legislature and Law Reform Commission to incorporate rape and inheritance legislation into the Penal Code, and to attend to the issue of age of consent. The final set of recommendations deals with women and the media; the Group calls on the GoL, the Press Union of Liberia, local universities, and other relevant stakeholders to design gender-sensitive professional development programs for editors and managers; to support mentorship and scholarship opportunities to female journalists; and develop a code of conduct “to address sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence in the media” (p. 132).

Interestingly, the election of President Sirleaf may represent a feminist goal. A number of Liberian women likely voted for Ellen because she was “one of their kind,” and they saw a vote for her as an expression of their desire to challenge women’s political exclusion and undermine male privilege. Through their organizations and their many national forums since 2004, Liberian women have called on the MoGD and the UN to provide training to support their political agenda. The MoGD (with UNIFEM and other

international partners) was a frequent sponsor of these events and almost always had staff and leaders in attendance. When the NTLA excluded the affirmative action provision from the Electoral Reform Bill, Minister Gayflor was an outspoken critic. It is interesting to note that under each critical area of concern, the Manifesto not only makes a range of demands on the GoL, but also on NGOs, CBOs, international agencies and the UN system (pp. 12-28). In fact, one of the commendations that the GoL received following the recent CEDAW meetings was its “regular cooperation and partnership with non-governmental organizations and community based women’s organizations in the country, which assist the State party in its efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women” (CEDAW, 2009b. p. 3). Although the MoGD is sometimes criticized for using grassroots women to achieve certain political goals<sup>51</sup> (personal communication, 2012-2013), evidence also suggests that these women make claims on the MoGD, not to mention international organizations, reflecting the fact that women’s organizations have become somewhat savvy consumers of development assistance. Of course the impetus for certain actions remains unclear. Whether a particular idea (such as educating and registering female voters) originated with grassroots women’s organizations, state agencies, or international donors, we can perhaps never know—the idea may have occurred to people at all of these “levels.” Presumably, WIPNET and the Gender Ministry clearly had much greater legitimacy in the minds of Liberians, since the role of UNIFEM was scarcely mentioned in the local news media during this time (despite UNIFEM’s own report stating that *it* was the catalyst in the campaign to mobilize women’s vote). Regardless, they all worked together in the voter registration drive and “Women Wake Up Early to Vote” campaigns, and they seem to have achieved their goals. As Gayflor (2011) notes:

My ministry was recognised as the ministry that made the election successful as far as the participation of women was concerned. Old ladies were coming here and telling me, “Minister, I only need to move from point A to point B. Pay my way and I will walk for 15 hours to make sure that the women vote for a female candidate.” They will come to me and say, “Oh Madam, we are on our feet, and we just wanted you to know that we are running the campaign.” So I will just give them something small to go and buy water to drink. We were always there to

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<sup>51</sup> On a number of occasions I heard that elite women have a history of mobilizing grassroots women do the “dirty work” of collective action; that is, it is always they who have to endure the harsh conditions (hot sun, torrential rains, etc.).

encourage them. We worked with them and did everything to have what we have today. (p. 37).

Thus, the MoGD helped women in small but important ways—perhaps even overstepping into partisan territory. The poor showing of other female aspirants, however, calls into question the efficacy of domestic and international interventions to promote women’s representation in national politics. The low level of women’s participation, particular after the 2011 elections, is a serious cause for concern. Commenting on this, the CEDAW Committee (2009b) again expressed its frustration over the GoL’s “lack of concrete steps to address the underlying causes, including prevailing social and cultural attitudes” (p. 8). Although the NGP contains a commitment to gender budgeting, promising 30% of the national budget towards gender mainstreaming, these funds have not materialized.<sup>52</sup> In 2012, UN Women (formerly UNIFEM) criticized the GoL for not complying to make its national budget gender sensitive, and launched the Coalition for Gender Responsive Budgeting in Liberia (Johnson, 2012, April 19; “GoL Budget,” 2012, May 16).

Despite the presence of a few women in powerful positions, women’s legislative representation remains incredibly low. At present, three bills to achieve affirmative action for women in politics have died in the House. Liberia currently ranks 110<sup>th</sup> in terms of its percentage of women in national parliament (IPU, 2012). After the 2011 general election, 8 of 73 or 11% of the House of Representatives and 4 of 30 seats or 13.3% of the Senate seats are occupied by women (IPU, 2012). As noted previously, this is in fact lower than the 2005 elections, in which women in these bodies made up 12.5% and 16.7%, respectively (IPU, 2010).

### ***7.3 Critical Juncture, Critical Consciousness, and Critical Actors***

Fuest (2008) writes that “the specific historical and present-day conditions in Liberia may combine to facilitate more profound changes in women’s opportunities and enhance the potential of institutionalizing ‘female gains’” (p. 223). I find that there are

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<sup>52</sup> I can only speculate about this figure. This seems like an extraordinarily high number; however, this is what is stated in the NGP (p. 10). It is possible that they are including monies for the programmatic aspects of the policy to be carried out (e.g., so that the Ministry of Agriculture might provide agricultural extension services to women producers, for instance).

three main variables to explain women-friendly and feminist reforms in Liberia: a critical juncture, critical consciousness, and critical actors. As discussed in Chapter 5, although the war placed terrible burdens on many Liberian women, the war also radicalized many women and emboldened them to take a greater role in the country's political processes. The war also caused a major rupture in Liberia's political culture, which has been identified as a significant opportunity for achieving gender equality outcomes (Chapter 2). Figure 2 shows a drastic rise and fall of pro-women news media between 2003 and 2009, which suggests that Liberia follows the trend frequently identified by the gendered transitions literature; that is, a brief window of opportunity for advancing the status of women, followed by a backlash and retrenchment of patriarchal values. Although there were few articles that disparaged women as a group prior to 2009, since then, these articles have appeared far more frequently. Liberian women's role in the struggle for peace seems to have given them space to challenge their political exclusion and the skills to negotiate their gender-based demands.

Moreover, the consciousness raising experiences of Liberian women have created a shared identity and sense of purpose regarding the space created by the war (Fuest, 2009). Perhaps the narrative that "men started the war" is most ubiquitous, but this discourse also includes shared experiences of rape; caregivers and peace-brokering mothers; success as "breadwinners"; and legitimate political actors deserving of power and human rights (Fuest, 2009, pp. 126-127). As mentioned in section 5.3, as women organized and began sharing their pain and frustrations, or "shedding the weight," they became increasingly aware of the inability of traditional systems and modern laws to respond to their concerns. Although they were hesitant to claim the word "feminism," they were "more willing to seek legal change, promote gender equity, and to label their persistent grievances as 'human rights' ones... and...more willing to work for the eradication of discrimination against women in customary norms, modern law, and social conventions" (Mikell, 1995, p. 411). One of my respondents recalled:

First, [the women's movement] was like "we're here"—just the sense that women were equally human beings...that they too can participate, that they too can be part of society. That was the most important thing. Now, we are talking about representation. Now...we are talking about having equal opportunities in government. So...the feminist movement in Liberia has come a long way. We even see young girls who are brave enough to stand up and say, "I want to be a

representative,” “I want to be a clan chief, a town chief”. (female journalist, personal communication, January 9, 2013)

One author writes that Liberia’s large class of educated, professional women, its history of grassroots activism, and its legacy of influential women who have sought and won prominent political posts makes it “one of the best situated to promote women into positions of high level, formal power” (J. Bauer, 2009, p. 207). Other scholars have also noted the significance of powerful and/or prominent women leaders in traditional and contemporary Liberian society, notably Ruth Perry, head of the 1996 transitional government, and Angie Brooks, Liberian diplomat and first African female to become President of the 24<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly (Fuest, 2009; Moran, 2012). At the beginning of the war there was a relatively large group of educated professional women in Liberia who were able to seize political positions open to them because of the war (Ellis, 1999; Moran & Pitcher, 2004; Fuest, 2008, 2009). Moreover, “highly educated women technocrats were asked to join the Taylor and Bryant governments to enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of Western aid sponsors and many accepted in the hopes of furthering the cause of reconciliation” (Moran, 2012, p. 59). For instance, former Gender (now Labour) Minister Gayflor is a gender specialist and trainee of Akina Mama Wa Africa, a pan-African feminist network that is dedicated to training women leaders to influence policy and decision-making.

Several authors have provided compelling explanations of why Sirleaf was victorious in the 2005 elections (Adams, 2008; J. Bauer, 2009; Moran, 2012; Sawyer, 2008; Thomas & Adams, 2010). Sawyer (2008) explains that the “2005 elections were held at a critical historical juncture” since it was the first time that Liberia was not under the rule of a warlord, dictator, or settler oligarchy (p. 177). He also suggests that her candidacy gave rise to the feminist movement’s electoral strategy to pressure political parties to include women candidates in 50% of government positions, encouraged by the NEC which recommended political parties initiate a 30% minimum of women on their candidate lists. Sawyer argues that although women’s organizations did not officially endorse Sirleaf, “support for her candidacy was an unspoken objective of the [women’s empowerment movement],” a movement Sawyer views as “a potentially powerful force

in future Liberian politics” (p. 188).<sup>53</sup> Sirleaf (2009) herself has called the Liberian women her “secret weapon” in the 2005 elections (p. 264). Moran (2012) convincingly argues that Sirleaf’s election “can be understood in light of existing models of female authority grounded in both indigenous kinship and local political institutions” (p. 54). She also notes that “the election outcome was also a product of the transformations in women’s organizational capacities that occurred during the war” (p. 54). Although all women certainly did not support Sirleaf, Sawyer notes, “Liberian women and women everywhere are basking in Sirleaf’s success and it is anticipated that her government will promote women’s empowerment policies and programs, thereby firmly establishing women’s issues on the national agenda for the foreseeable future” (p. 198). Sirleaf has promised “the women of Liberia” as much. For example, in her inauguration speech:

My Administration shall...endeavor to give Liberian women prominence in all affairs of our country. [It] shall empower Liberian women in all areas of our national life. We will support and increase the writ of laws that restore their dignities and deal drastically with crimes that dehumanize them. We will enforce without fear or favour the law against rape recently passed by the [NTLA]. We shall encourage families to educate all children, particularly the girl child. We shall also try to provide economic programs that enable Liberian women to assume their proper place in our economic revitalization process. (Johnson Sirleaf, 2009, pp. 271-272)

Because of the visibility of the women’s peace movement, external funding has been widely available and “relief and development agencies eagerly assist existing women’s organizations” (Moran & Pitcher, 2004, p.515). The proliferation of women’s organizations is partly explained by the increase in availability of donor funds (see, for example, Fuest, 2009). Funding agencies have provided symbolic and material resources that included civic education, leadership training, human rights and other workshops, as well as funding for media programs such as *Voices of Women*, a weekly radio program that discusses women’s concerns and aims to involve rural women in national debates (Fuest, 2009). Liberian Women’s Democracy Radio, the only women-run and women-focused radio station in the country not only works to raise awareness about women’s issues and gender inequality, it also is involved in training more women to become

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<sup>53</sup> It is not clear from the data I collected that there was a 50-50 “movement.” I have not seen this term used anywhere else but in Sawyer’s article. The only time I have encountered this term is with reference to the leader of Sierra Leone’s 50-50 movement, who addressed Liberian women’s groups several times. For this reason, I have referred to this as the “women’s empowerment movement.”

journalists. The US-based National Endowment for Democracy has also been involved with skills-building to strengthen advocacy and encourage political participation, while the MOGD, WONGOSOL, and AFELL, among others, disseminate information and educate the population on laws and policies that protect the rights of women and girls.

One outcome of the war has been the contrasting gender ideologies, “men make war” and “women make peace.” Particularly in the Liberian Women’s Mass Action for Peace and during the initial transition period, such ideologies were frequently propagated as a justification for women’s political inclusion. In an editorial published in the year 2000, the author refers to a MARWOPNET march, stating that “the women were playing their traditional role as mothers...in seeking peace, stability and prosperity for their children and the future” (“Commending the Women’s Move”, 2000, September 25, para. 4). The editorial also advances gender ideologies like “women are sincere and honest voices of peace that must be listened to” (para. 8), contrasted with, “[u]nlike most men, who would concoct, manipulate and clandestinely plan wars, just to gain power and wealth, women are primarily concerned about the peace and stability of their societies” (para. 9). In this discourse, women are the “voices of reason” (para. 10). Liberian women are seen as responsible for healing; they are described as “mothers [needed] to help stop Liberia from crying” (“Naymote Rural Women,” 2004, September 3, para. 15). In those early days of the transition, ideas about the inability of men to seek peace and development may have found support among many Liberians, providing a source of legitimacy for those few women who stood for office. For instance, Sirleaf is reported as saying that except for war and crushing poverty, men failed to achieve anything in 14 years of rule (as cited in Karnga, 2004, September 22). Sirleaf spoke of the meaningful changes that would accompany women’s leadership, stating that “women will make the difference... Liberians will become self-reliant and self-sufficient. Where there will be equity and equal opportunities to every Liberian regardless of backgrounds” (para. 5). However, she was also careful not to alienate the men: “Men are going to work with us, men are going to help us make history” (Sirleaf as cited in “Girl Power,” 2005, October 7, para. 12). In a *Daily Observer* interview, Sirleaf supports affirmative action and tries to build support among (male) opponents. She indicates that under her leadership, women would work with men: “There is no gender war. I mean we’re not coming in to say

because the women have been disadvantaged overtime, therefore, women are coming to rule to the exclusion of men—that would be foolish” (“Affirmative Action,” 2005, June 24, para. 3).

Minister Gayflor has justified advancing women’s rights and status by drawing on transitional ideology and democratic discourse, stating that the women’s electoral law will not only help women achieve their goal of full participation in the electoral process, it “will also significantly contribute to a new, cohesive, unified, democratic and vibrant society” (as cited in Dukuly, 2004, September 20, para. 8). Likewise, President Sirleaf has said, “If Liberia is to be a vibrant, inclusive and effective democracy, supporting women’s public roles and increasing the number of women in leadership positions is crucial” (as cited in “Liberian Women Struggle,” 2012, November 30, para. 1). NEC Chairperson Frances Johnson Morris has also appealed to democratic values; “the under-representation of women in elections would weaken the popular legitimacy of their future government; their society will only be truly represented if women can participate both as voters and candidates” (Mills, 26 October, 2004, para. 5). Developmental visions have also emphasized the vital role of women. For example, former Chair of the NEC, Frances Johnson-Morris stated, “this country cannot develop if we continue to keep women in the backseat” (Wrokpoh, 2005, June 23, para. 9). Morris also appeals to international norms and authorities, particularly MDG3, and perhaps appropriates some development discourse, as she attempts to justify the quota system by citing the need to “develop an enabling environment in which women can exercise their political rights” (“Future Govt Will be Weak,” 2004, October, 27, para. 7).

#### ***7.4 Supra-State Feminism***

Fuest (2008) notes that, “While I do not deny Liberian women’s agency in demanding and struggling for women’s rights and gender equity, one has to recognize that *international models have been transferred to Liberia from a variety of sources.* (p. 19, emphasis added). Perhaps the limits of state feminist theory in Liberia should have been obvious. Nonetheless, many scholars of gender politics and the state in sub-Saharan Africa appear to have missed the extraordinary roles that international agencies, and particularly the UN system, play in areas of limited statehood.



While conducting fieldwork in Liberia, I realized that conceptualizing the state as “weak” was problematic because it fails to capture “governance” as it is practiced in a country like Liberia. Andersen (2010) makes a compelling argument that the scope and scale of the statebuilding intervention in Liberia makes it difficult to identify lines of responsibility and accountability.<sup>54</sup> In some cases, international actors are supporting government reforms and in other cases they are supplanting the state; “the situation is neither entirely imposed on the state, nor entirely voluntary” (p. 130). Like Andersen, I would argue that this is not about juxtaposing “national ownership” and “foreign control” (p. 130), but rather about explaining what type of state emerges in post-conflict, transitional contexts. It is worth noting that statebuilding interventions also work to promote liberal norms and values, even if this is not the stated purpose. Andersen coins the term “tacit trusteeship” to capture the notion that these interventions are characterized by “implicit – and mainly unspoken – elements of international authority,” and that “the level of intrusiveness can be quite high even though the footprint is supposed to be light” (p.132). That international actors wield considerable power over the transitional or limited state is obfuscated by a discourse of “partnership,” “capacity building,” and “national ownership” (Andersen, 2010, p. 134). This tacit trusteeship, or what this thesis describes as governance in areas of limited statehood (see 3.5), has important implications for recent advances in women’s rights in Liberia.

CEDAW, the BPfA, UNSCR 1325, and MDG3 often recalled in Liberia’s government documents and programs, and Liberia has already established and is implementing its National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325. Arguably though, the above-mentioned international covenants are largely symbolic; a country can easily ratify CEDAW without taking any concrete actions towards eliminating discrimination against women. For this reason, I argue that while these as normative frameworks may inform or justify particular government actions, they are unlikely to drive these actions because they contain few incentives—rewards for compliance are largely symbolic (e.g., acceptance into the international “community”)—and noncompliance carries few negative consequences. It is also necessary to consider that by 2003, the Liberian state had virtually collapsed and owed billions of (odious) debt to international creditors. The

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<sup>54</sup> See also Ferguson and Gupta (2002) on “transnational governmentality”

IMF, World Bank, and African Development Bank had ceased lending due to a large arrears and continuing non-payment of loans. In fact, the IMF (Liberia's largest creditor) did not lend to Liberia from 1984 until 2008 (IMF, 2013b).<sup>55</sup> Given that the debt burden exceeded the Liberia's GDP many times over, it became imperative that the UN and the IFIs manage the crisis, restructure Liberia's debt, and preside over the peace and reconstruction of the country. The state in Liberia was limited to such a degree that international development agencies, debt holders, and peacekeepers had to step in to manage virtually all aspects of Liberia's political economy. It is in part because of this that I chose to use the term "supra-state feminism" as opposed to "transnational advocacy network."<sup>56</sup> Although supra-state feminism involves networks that include actors at various levels of governance, I am not convinced that "at the core" of these relationships is exchange of information (cf. Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 89). Particularly in cases where donors and lenders require states to adopt women-friendly mechanisms, supra-state feminism is not about "socializing" states to want certain things (cf. Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 90).

It may be that the feminist researcher's emphasis on women as subjects and agents may partly explain why we tend to downplay the causal role of international norms—and in areas of limited statehood—international *imperatives*. PRSPs and the role of IFIs in developing countries is a controversial topic, but this thesis does not address the validity or efficacy of PRSPs. The argument here is that in Liberia, the PRSP (and to a lesser extent, the United Nations Development Assistance Framework) carries much more authority in Liberia's governing institutions than the MDGs or any other international agreement that concerns gender because they are part of a contractual obligation. Both the UN system and IFIs clearly accept that gender equality has positive

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<sup>55</sup> During the "decision point" phase (2006-8) of the HIPC Initiative in Liberia, the country received debt relief from the IMF, but "normal relations" did not resume until the approval of its 2008 PRSP (IMF, 2013b).

<sup>56</sup> According to Keck and Sikkink (1999), "A transnational advocacy network includes those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services" (p. 89). They explain that major actors in these networks can include "(1) *international and domestic NGOs, research and advocacy organizations*; (2) *local social movements*; (3) foundations; (4) the media; (5) churches, trade unions, consumer organizations, intellectuals; (6) *parts of regional and international intergovernmental organizations*; (7) *parts of the executive and/or parliamentary branches of governments*" (pp. 91-92; emphasis added).

outcomes on poverty reduction and they expect the GoL to produce “deliverables.” The MoGD’s Annual Reports (MoGD, 2010, 2011, 2012) are all organized to address the four pillars of the PRS. The introduction to the 2010 Annual Report says that the MoGD “continued to use the [PRS] as the structure on which various interventions were built. Thus, this report also serves as a tool for assessing progress towards the PRS deliverables” (p. 3). Liberia’s macro-economic policy framework may help to explain why the Sirleaf administration has been able to pass many significant reforms with so few females in the legislative assemblies. This assumption is supported by theories on policy transfer and norm diffusion (section 3.5). This is a key proposition that needs to be tested in future research on state/supra-state feminism in Liberia.

President Sirleaf is also uniquely placed to use the state to address Liberian women’s issues. Her past positions in the Liberian Government and her international experiences with Citibank, the World Bank, and the UNDP have allowed her to make many friendships and strategic alliances with philanthropists and foreign dignitaries. For instance, the Nike Foundation, World Bank and Goldman Sachs’ initiative to provide skills training to 1500 Liberian women is reportedly “the outcome of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf’s meeting with authorities of the organizations on the United States” (Fahngon, 2008, September 30, para. 4). It may be that Sirleaf is able to call on her international colleagues and friends to support gender equality mechanisms in Liberia. It may not be a coincidence that the abovementioned Liberian Education Initiative is funded by billionaire George Soros, whom President Sirleaf discusses her friendship with in her memoir (Johnson Sirleaf, 2009). The International Women’s Colloquium Chairperson Elisabeth Rehn, Finland’s Minister of State has had (at the very least) a professional relationship with Sirleaf, as in the early 2000s the two conducted an independent assessment on the impact of armed conflict on women and women’s role in peacebuilding for UNIFEM. Though the Sirleaf Market Women’s Fund is not the President’s NGO, it nevertheless exists because of her, and it has been effective in undermining gender-based inequities in Liberia. Future research might further explore the extent to which Sirleaf has been able to use her personal connections to improve the lives and status of women in Liberia.

This concept of supra-state feminism makes a key contribution to theories of state feminism and articulates a prudent response to the question of whether theories of state feminism travel. Because the RNGS framework was developed through work in post-industrial democracies, it made sense that it would focus on the movement-agency nexus. However, in Liberia and in other countries penetrated by international development agencies, it is *more useful to look at the movement-agency-development nexus*. Fortunately, we already have some appropriate tools for doing this. In the field of development studies, movement state feminism may be understood as alliances and actions that achieve practical gender needs through the state (e.g., domestic violence legislation), while transformative state feminism denotes alliances and actions that achieve strategic gender interests through the state (e.g., gender budgeting). Future research looks towards honing this concept and perhaps developing a typology that might be used to identify or differentiate state and supra-state feminism, and supra-state feminism from transnational advocacy networks.

Keck and Sikkink's (1999) influential work likens transnational advocacy networks to an international social movement with actions targeted towards those operating at regional and international "levels." They explain that these networks "often reach beyond policy change to advocate and instigate changes in the institutional and principled bases of international actions. When they succeed, they are an important part of an explanation for changes in world politics." (p. 89). Perhaps it when the transnational feminist network *succeeds* in influencing the passage of feminist or women-friendly policy in a nation state, it can be called supra-state feminism. These and several other conceptual and theoretical questions should be addressed in future research. For instance: Should the gender units and offices within various UN agencies in Liberia be considered actors in the global women's movement or would they be considered femocrats at the international level? International "gender experts" or "gender specialists" are neither necessarily feminist nor activist, so what, if any, role do they play in women-friendly policy outcomes in Liberia or other areas of limited statehood? These and other questions raised throughout provide the groundwork for a number of potential research projects on women and the state in Liberia.

The present study only begins to examine the women-focused policy debates that have appeared on the national agenda during Liberia's transition to peace and democracy. For instance, the 2003 Inheritance Laws; the 2005 National Policy on Girls' Education (both of which appeared on the national political scene at least ten years prior); the 2005 Rape law; the 2009 National Action Plan on SCR1325; and the 2009 National Gender Policy, to name a few. Of course, the issue of women's political representation in Liberia is far from resolved. Though Sirleaf has appointed close to 30% women to government posts, enhancing women's representation appears to be the most intractable issue area. The discussion and conclusion that follows discusses limitations of the current study and points towards future research on Liberia.

## CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Liberia has experienced some combination of movement state feminism and supra-state feminism, but the extent to which transformative state feminism has occurred in Liberia remains to be seen. Although there is an emerging gender consciousness among women's movement actors, there does not appear to be a feminist consciousness, and thus, it is not clear whether a feminist *movement* exists in Liberia today. This chapter discusses what I found to be the most significant barriers to expanding women's political influence in Liberia today. As this research has shown, there is some deep distrust and resentment among women's movement actors and organizations in Liberia. This chapter explores divisions among women, failures to effectively frame and communicate movement messages, and the absence of a critical mass of women in Liberia's elected assemblies. The thesis concludes with a summary of its major findings, and reiterates why the current period is such a critical one for women in Liberia's historical development.

### ***8.1 A Movement Divided***

Because of Liberia's colonial legacy, "country" women have never had the same life chances as Liberia's "civilized" women. Moreover, ethno-linguistic groups that once lived relatively harmoniously have been divided through political patronage and cronyism, particularly since the Doe years. Several scholars note the solidarity among diverse women that emerged as a result of their shared experiences in the war years (Mikell, 1995; Fuest, 2008, 2009; Sawyer, 2008). My research suggests that this solidarity may have been exaggerated (e.g., Gbowee, 2009). The most significant divisions within the women's movement appear to be along class and generational lines. WIPNET appears to be led by younger, less established women and comprised largely of grassroots women. MARWOPNET and LWI, on the other hand, were led by more elite, established, professional Liberian women. It is interesting to note that female activists, politicians, and bureaucrats in the 1990s appear to deliberately claim their democratic and human rights (i.e., their strategic interests), whereas the later Mass Action for Peace did not want to be perceived as having an interest in "politics" per se, so as to focus on their

primary goal which was, of course, peace. In addition to class divisions weakening the movement, Williams (2008) notes that the generational divide is a significant impediment to women's progress in Liberia. This was made clear in Chapter 5 of this thesis as well. Leymah Gbowee explains a similar problem: "One thing we've seen in post-war Liberia is serious competition amongst women. It is not helpful in terms of making more gains. They feel they no longer need to collaborate to get there" (as cited in Fleshman, 2010, April 26).

## ***8.2 Failure to Communicate a Clear and Compelling Message***

Women who were quoted in Liberian news media at the start of the transition utilized feminist frames more so than those quoted in later articles. Minister Gayflor talked frequently about women's rights being abused and violated, and called for solidarity among women to fight discrimination and subjugation, arguing the way to do this is through active participation in politics (as cited in "Gender Minister Abhors," 2004, September 7). It was common to see references to male-dominated politics, women's marginalization from decision-making processes, and to women's political emancipation. For instance, "men dominate the political leadership...[and women] are often ostracized by their male counterparts due to the perception that politics is a 'man's game'" ("KAF Back Women," 2005, June 16, para. 2). However, nuanced understandings of male privilege are seriously lacking in Liberia today.

While Liberian women do have important historical legacies as legitimate economic and political actors, it seems that many of the negative or restrictive stereotypes about women in Liberia have remained intact (or have at least resurfaced as part of the backlash). As an example:

Before in most indigenes Liberian society, women were not permitted to be part of the rural leadership, you know. Until now there is only one woman who is known as part of the rural leadership...except Suakoko, can we find any other woman who was powerful enough? And even when people talk about Suakoko, there is this myth that she had a male organ and a female organ. It's only because they want to prove that Suakoko was not this woman—that she had masculine qualities. But the truth is she was a woman and she was powerful. And because she was powerful she had to be associated with male characteristics. (women's advocate, personal communication, January 15, 2013)

The above quotation contains an almost universal truth—powerful women everywhere are almost always associated with male characteristics. During the 2005 election campaign, a popular slogan among Sirleaf supporters was, “Ellen is our man!” Sirleaf is also called Liberia’s Iron Lady, a term that has been applied to nearly every woman leader who has shown strong will and strength since Thatcher, as these are characteristics unexpected of the female gender.

The terms “feminist” and “feminism” are much maligned and misunderstood in Liberia. For example, “the women’s movement in Liberia was not feminist; it was not feminist in that they were seeking the welfare of every human being. They were seeking peace for everybody. Not only women. Now the feminist movement is only concerned with the welfare of women and they want betterment for women only. Whereas when people talk about gender they talk about men and women—about equality between the sexes. But the feminist movement is that extreme movement that wants to see women up there [above men]” (female journalist, personal communication, January 9, 2013). Kortu Williams (2008), a self-proclaimed Liberian feminist argues that women’s movements and organizations in Liberia lack a strong ideological foundation. An outcome of the war on women, Williams argues, was a “reinforced women social action response,” leading women’s organizations to organize around multiple issues simultaneously (p. 24). Williams was involved in the PRS consultations and Country Development Agenda processes, among other trainings, workshops and forums (Int’l Colloquium on Leadership, 2007). Williams (2008) notes the absence of a women’s rights perspective in the PRSP and argues that women in Liberia “do not challenge patriarchy or other systems and structures that facilitate the violation of their rights” (p. 32). She provides one example of a PRS meeting where some of the women “criticized the need for women-only consultations and affirmative action bids” (p. 32). Moreover, domestic stakeholders lacked an appreciation of the structural inequalities that led to a process where external actors were so heavily involved with their national development plans. This lack of a feminist ideology was also identified as a major impediment to the Government’s gender equality mechanism (CEDAW, 2009b).

Liberian’s use and interpretation of the word “empowerment” also appears problematic, as is almost exclusively discussed as something given or bestowed on



women, and it is almost always limited to economic empowerment. One leader of a local women's development organization walked me through her community, gesturing to women along the way: "See, look how these girls have empowered themselves—they are selling charcoal....And look at these women plaiting hair—see how they've empowered themselves" (female head of a local NGO, personal communication, 2012). Another example is found in such statements as, the UNDP "empowered AFELL" by giving/loaning the organization a 4x4 ("UNDP Empowers," 2006, May 24). Gender, gender equity, and gender equality also appear to be misunderstood and poorly communicated to those populations and groups with whom advocates are seeking support. For instance, one participant talked about what happened "when this women empowerment thing came to Liberia" (local women's advocate, personal communication, January 11, 2013). She explained that it caused a lot of discord in families because many women interpreted it to mean only that husbands should be responsible for half of the household chores. But as the literature on women's political gains in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates, a transitional ideology grounded in feminist philosophy and consciousness-raising is vital for ensuring long term gains.

Williams (2008) expresses an idea that resonates with feminists everywhere—the fear of claiming the word, of claiming their rights, keeps women from thinking an acting radically to transform the status quo. Thus, would-be feminists "operate as donor-driven enterprises or technocrats" (p. 35). Patriarchy cannot be successfully challenged if women's movements and organizations do not acknowledge its existence. Notwithstanding, Williams notes the significance of the Liberian women's movement's visibility, as it has allowed Liberian women to enter public/political fora. Still, women leaders have failed to present categorical political positions to champion women's rights. Interestingly, Williams points out that more radical demands have actually been tempered under Sirleaf because women do not want to be viewed "as challenging 'their own'" (Snowe as cited in Williams, 2008, p. 38). Although I cannot agree that there was *no* "vision to transform the peace activism into political activism," it does appear that the symbolic nature of Sirleaf's presidency has rendered women's rights activism unnecessary in the minds of some (Pajibo, as cited in Williams, 2008, p. 39).

My reading of Liberian news media revealed clear contradictions vis-à-vis gender relations; women's advocates would try to emphasize women's equality with men, and shortly thereafter, state that women can, as a matter of fact, do *better* than men. For instance, Chair of the NEC, Frances Johnson-Morris stated "this country cannot develop if we continue to keep women in the backseat. We are all the same and *as a matter of fact, women are better managers and more honest than men*" (as cited in Wrokpoh, 2005, June 23, para. 9; emphasis added). In one of the earliest articles analyzed, Etweda Cooper is quoted as saying reconciliation and reconstruction "cannot be achieved without the full participation of women who are *true advocates* of peace and democracy" (as cited in Nelson, 2000, August 31, para. 7; emphasis added). An anecdote expressed to me supports these notions:

There is this story that my mother told me...Her grandmother was a wise woman and her grandfather was an important chief (my mother is an indigenous Liberian). When men came to him and he did not have an answer, he would...suspend the meeting until tomorrow. What he would do is to go back to his wife and ask her for her opinion. In that way, he would go back and present himself as an important chief, a powerful chief. Meanwhile the answer came from his wife. These were things that were happening in Liberia all along. But because Liberia is a masculine society—a male dominated society—we found that women would actually play a back role, but in essence *they were the ones with the ideas*. (female journalist, personal communication, January 9, 2013)

In another article, a male representative of DEN-L implies that women are somehow *naturally stronger leaders than men* ("Gender Minister Abhors," 2004, September 7, para. 9). Although women should see men as "partners" and "not enemies" (as cited in Wantu, 2005, August 2, para. 6), Harper City Mayor Regina Sampson intimated that women can become successful managers and leaders within the state and that they can do "much better than men" (para. 5). Likewise, one interviewee recalled that even those women with privileges "had to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that they were better than the men" (female journalist, personal communication, January 9, 2013). Such beliefs, that women can and should "do better" than men, may seriously encumber the women's empowerment movement in Liberia. Firstly, to present women *as a group* as being better leaders, more peace-loving, more honest, and more inventive discriminates against men. Secondly, it is an adversarial position that may provoke men rather than recruit them. And thirdly, it sets women up for failure because the standard is

not for women to perform *as well as* men, but to perform *better than men*. If and when the performance of individual women in positions of authority falls below this standard, opponents use that as a justification to deny *all* women positions of authority. For example, anti-movement actors used the recent Broh-Kpaan incident (see section 6.7) as a justification for refusing to pass the affirmative action bill in the House.

### ***8.3 Absence of a Critical Mass***

My research suggests that the presence of a few powerful women in Liberia may actually be more of a hindrance than a help to the gender equity lobby. For instance, one University of Liberia representative reportedly stated that women were not being sidelined in Liberia and offers as evidence the fact that Ruth Perry was head of the Council of State between 1996 and 1997 (as cited in Dukuly, 2004, September 20). Indeed, opponents frequently use the presence of one or two women leaders as evidence that Liberian women are not being marginalized—after all, the President is a woman! In one article, the President is quoted as saying, “We remain optimistic that these winds of change will blow and that the marginalization of women will be a history” (as cited in Sayon, 2006, September 29). However, the headline of this article reads, “‘My Election Has Ended Women Marginalization’ – Ellen.” Ironically, Sirleaf’s Presidency may also have the significant unintended consequence of weakening the women’s movement in Liberia. As one women’s advocate states, “women engagement of development issues has lost momentum because Liberia has a female president. Women have not arrived. We should use her presidency as leverage, and not rest on our laurels” (Cerue Garlo, as cited in Williams, 2008, p. 33). Evidence suggests that this assessment, more than a decade old, is still true today:

The long, hard and bitter struggles of women to fully participate in decision making has yielded very little for the Liberian women. The inclusion of a few women in decision-making positions has helped to build the illusion that women have the opportunity to be equally represented when, in fact, it is purely cosmetic...A large number of women are highly qualified [and] educationally and emotionally equipped to hold positions at the highest level of decision-making; yet their drawback is that they are women. (*Report of Liberian women NGO activities*, n.d., circa 1996)

Feminist advocacy should certainly not be focused narrowly on increasing women's numerical representation. However, as Gloria Musu Scott (see section 6.6) said, without the numbers, it will be nearly impossible to pass legislation to protect women and promote gender equality.

## ***8.4 Conclusion***

Liberia is an important case study to add to the emerging literature on transitions, gender politics and the state in Africa because the country is still in the immediate post-transition period, and many of the conditions for transforming gender relations appear to be present. This research used a comparative method to test hypotheses derived from the RNGS framework and the literature review contained in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Tracing processes of political change, this thesis identified the actors, ideas, and institutions that have produced state structures that appear amenable to feminist political action in Liberia. This thesis attempts to build on the work produced by the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State, which documents and explains instances of state feminism—cases where women's policy agencies have formed alliances with women's movement actors to bring movement actors into decision making systems and to achieve policy change in favour of women's movement goals. Liberia's Gender Ministry and Gender Forum are the primary institutional mechanisms to achieve gender equality in Liberia, and they do appear to give certain feminist and women's movement actors access to the state. The executive branch has consistently demonstrated political commitment to women's rights, and promoted gender sensitization campaigns in all levels of government. As elsewhere on the sub-continent, regional networks and international commitments to increase women's participation in decision-making (e.g., Beijing Platform for Action) and peacebuilding (especially SCR 1325, 2000) create an “enabling environment” for women's rights advocates.

The Liberian case highlights, however, that a critical and neglected factor is what I have termed supra-state feminism. Liberia is an area of limited statehood where international authorities, particularly UN agencies co-govern the country and transfer institutional models and mechanisms that are intended to undermine gender-based hierarchies and advance the status of women. This research therefore revealed why the

theory of state feminism is not easily applied since it is nearly impossible to disentangle “local” movement goals from transnational feminist movement goals.

The RNGS framework has been and was only ever intended to be applied to the Western World. For these reasons, this thesis tests the conclusions or key insights of the state feminism project to see whether the politics of state feminism can be usefully applied to Liberia—a country with a very different temporal, political, socio-economic, and cultural context (see McBride & Mazur, 2010, *xi*). Given the high levels of domestic sovereignty in post-industrial states, it is not surprising that the RNGS design did not pay particular attention to the “activities and influences beyond the state” (McBride & Mazur, 2010, p. 17). Researchers were asked to collect data about the ways that women’s advocates interacted with transnational advocacy networks, but did not consider how these networks may have affected policy debates. In Liberia, the influence of international development organizations (i.e., INGOs) and inter-governmental organizations (i.e., UN agencies and international financial institutions) is somewhat overwhelming. I expected to find that these entities were influential political actors but did not expect to find the level of penetration that currently exists.

President Sirleaf’s strategic connections add another nuance to the idea of “supra-state feminism” and reveal the impossibility of firmly demarcating the “boundaries” of the state. What makes doing this even more difficult is that African women have always been vital participants at the World Conferences on Women and in various other international and transnational contexts. That the ten critical areas of concern in the Liberian Women’s Manifesto and the ten critical areas of concern in the BPfA significantly overlap does not indicate that international models have been transposed on Liberian women’s advocates. As Geisler (2004) notes: “The reason why African women chose to pursue the resolutions of the UN Decade so rigorously and with such success, would indicate that the main messages, namely the demands for women’s greater role in national decision-making and political power-sharing, reflected their aspirations” (p. 14).

In addition to the theoretical contributions of this thesis, I would also suggest that it has important practical implications, as it points to the necessity of building solidarity, crafting an effective communications strategy to cultivate male support, and supporting the passage of affirmative action for women in Liberian politics. In Liberia, the demand

for greater representation in national politics is by far the most salient goal of the women's empowerment movement; however, national and international interventions are more often targeted towards practical gender needs. Although the MoGD, local women's organizations, UN agencies, and INGOs were engaged in a flurry of activity to encourage and support women's political participation and representation between 2003 and 2005, after the first elections, these types of interventions no longer appeared as a priority for state and supra-state agencies. Since reversals of women's political gains in the post transition period are well established, these efforts must be sustained beyond the return to multi-party elections.

#### 8.4.1 Limitations and future research

This research was exploratory and, rather than rigorously apply the RNGS framework, it investigated most-similar cases and explored the application of the framework's key concepts in the Liberian case. The evidence to suggest that the MoGD and women's movement alliances actually work to achieve the abovementioned outcomes is largely circumstantial. Matching issue frames, temporality (i.e., government action that appears to be in response to movement claims), and shared political spaces and experiences of Liberian women who seek to influence law- and policy-making processes is indicative of correlation as opposed to causation. McBride and Mazur (2010) set out eleven propositions (pp. 13-16) that ought to be modified and tested in the Liberia. This research was not able to do so because these propositions require mapping all the actors in the policy sub-system, particularly women's movement actors and women's policy agencies. I had neither the time nor the connections to be able to do so. Access to policymakers and political arenas is required to study problem definition, agenda setting, and policy formation processes.

Scholars of gender politics and political transitions explain that women's rights advocates might be able achieve major gains during conditions of conflict or political upheaval, when new constitutions are being written and new governments are being formed. In fact, at the time of writing, the Liberian Constitution is under review, and the process is expected to continue through 2014. Because the transition period is still unfolding in Liberia, this thesis can only raise questions and generate hypotheses with

regard to this period. This case study is intended to form the basis of a larger work on post-transition reversals of women's gains. This thesis does contain what I believe to be powerful explanations, but further research is needed to verify its claims and hone its theoretical constructs. A significant limitation of this research is that I was not able to open the political "black box" to see the decision-making and planning processes inside these institutions—particularly the NGF. Future research will provide more time and greater opportunities to make connections with gatekeepers and gain access to these fora and to those individuals who set the agenda and make the policy.

Although I sometimes discuss Liberia in terms of its "post-transition" period (i.e., after the transition to a democratically-elected government), Liberia is still a country in transition. In December 2012, President Sirleaf launched Vision 2030, the country's long-term political and economic agenda, and the National Reconciliation Road Map and the Agenda for Transformation, which is the country's new poverty reduction strategy (UNSC, 2013). As the UNMIL drawdown begins and the end of Sirleaf's second term comes into view there is a lot of uncertainty about the future of the country. In a hopeful development for women in Liberia, five years after Sirleaf promised constitutional reform that protects women ("Ellen Pledges," 2007, January 24), the first significant consultative forum of the Constitution Review Committee began in Monrovia ("Constitutional Review," 2012, October 4). The CRC is made up of six prominent Liberians including two women—former Planning Minister Amelia Ward, and former Senator and Chief Justice Gloria Scott (cited above), who is the Chairperson of the CRC. Scott is undoubtedly a women's advocate who has been appointed by Sirleaf to a key position within the state. At the time of writing, Liberia's 1986 Constitution is being reviewed through debates and dialogues among members of the legislature, judiciary, and executive, political parties, and civil society organizations ("Constitution Review," 2013, February 28). Interactive public forums will also be taking place throughout the country through 2014. Cllr. Scott has continually urged Liberian women to get involved in the process (e.g., Gaye, 2013, April, 11), and in April, Liberian women organized a two-day consultative forum in Monrovia under the banner, "Seizing the Moment for Constitutional Reform" ("Ellen Urges CRC," 2013, April 11). Scott has also poignantly stated: "This is our last chance. The men are only waiting for Ellen...to step down. After

that everything will go back to normal again” (as cited in “Last Chance,” 2013, June 12). Future research will focus on the challenges to and prospective reversals of feminist gains in Liberia, and how, or whether, they can be countered.



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