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## *Beyond the Glass Ceiling: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's Presidency and the Fight for Women's Political Inclusion in Liberia*

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**Abstract:** Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first female democratically elected head of state, is renowned for her decisive leadership and reviving Liberia's economy and society from the devastations of a protracted civil war. Despite her title as the first female president of Liberia, feminist scholars question her presidency for its impact on gender equality. Through Sirleaf's tenure, there were evident contradictions in her feminist credentials, which sparked debate over her support for gender quotas and the effective representation of women in parliament. Did the election of Sirleaf translate into feminist policies? Did she have enough women in parliament to help push bills to advance gender equality? Was it Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's obligation to support gender quotas, and where does Liberia stand today?

### **The "Iron Lady:" Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**

In 2011, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, along with Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkol Karman, won the Nobel Peace Prize "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work" (Nobel Peace Prize Committee 2011, n.p.). Sirleaf and Gbowee spearheaded efforts to end the Second Liberian Civil War in 2003, and Tawakkol Karman was credited with ending Yemen's authoritarian regime. In an official statement, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee wrote, "We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society" (Nobel Peace Prize Committee 2011, n.p.). The Nobel Committee recognized Sirleaf for her efforts to promote peace and reconciliation in Liberia following years of civil war and conflict.

Sirleaf took office in 2005 and the global community has since referred to her as the "Iron Lady," reflecting her role as a resilient and firm decision-maker, and unwavering commitment to her goals (Miltra 2021, 63). With this nickname, the public associated Sirleaf with masculine leadership traits such as decisiveness, assertiveness, and competence, which starkly contrasted with her other names of "Ma Ellen" and "Old Ma" during her electoral campaigns (Miltra 2021, 62). Aligning a side of herself with the image of motherhood, Sirleaf's presidential campaign framed her as a selfless caretaker and respected figure, an association with much cultural significance in African communities (Miltra 2021, 62).

During her presidency, Sirleaf created positive change for women in Liberia and globally. She promoted female education, amplified women's roles in peace-building efforts, and even established the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development, a flagship program which fosters women's public service leadership through training, mentorship, and coaching (Amujae Initiative 2023). Sirleaf explicitly created economic opportunities for women

in the public sector, aimed to boost women's development, and removed gender segregation in the workplace (Annan 2021). In 2011, Sirleaf created the Educational Reform Act, which rehabilitated the educational sector. The act rebuilt Liberia's infrastructure by constructing buildings in towns that never had schools, training teachers, adopting new curricula, and generating robust education policy plans (Annan 2021). Sirleaf addressed the emergency issue of sexual and gender-based violence, which was especially prevalent during the Liberian civil wars, through the establishment of the Sexual Gender Based Violence Crimes Unit, Court E, in 2008, which exclusively prosecuted cases of sexual violence (Annan 2021). She exemplified her dedication to both women's education and physical protection through the Girl's Education Policy, which implemented bans against harmful and exploitative relations between adults within the educational spheres and their students (Hanson-DeFusco 2024). Sirleaf and her administration took concrete steps to ensure the protection and empowerment of women by creating spaces for their employment, increasing educational attainment, and enacting policies to protect women against violence. There was tremendous support at the national and international level to help Liberia combat gender inequality, which resulted from the many years of instability in the national and engrained patriarchal structures (Hanson-DeFusco 2024).

Despite these efforts, questions remain about the extent of Sirleaf's support for women within her administration and her leadership style. During her campaign, Sirleaf promised to "build a government of inclusion" and vowed to uplift females running for political office (Sirleaf 2009, 18). Yet, scholars accuse Sirleaf of corruption and nepotism, as she appointed three of her sons to strategic positions of power at the expense of equally competent women (Pailey 2014). Critics assert that Sirleaf's governance approach, characterized by a strong emphasis on economic growth and stability, came at the expense of addressing systemic issues that affect women (Clarke and Azango 2017). In the 2009 Montserrado By-County Elections, Sirleaf vehemently opposed the appointment of female senator Geraldine Doe-Sheriff and instead, endorsed male candidate Clemenceau Benoni Urey, thereby promoting her party in order to get closer to a legislative majority, and endorsing a man over woman. Sirleaf's decision sparked debate over her support for gender quotas and effective representation of women in government, a principle that Ellen Sirleaf aimed to incorporate into her presidency.

### **Setting the Scene: Liberia in the Late Twentieth Century**

On July 26, 1847, Liberia achieved full independence, making it Africa's oldest democratic republic. While the American Colonization Society formally founded Liberia as a post for returning enslaved people from the United States in 1822, indigenous Gola and Kissi people inhabited the land from the start of the twelfth century.

For more than three decades after Liberian independence, Americo-Liberians, a Liberian ethnic group of African American, Afro-Caribbean, and liberated African Liberians, remained in social and political control of the country. In 1980, Indigenous Liberian Sergeant, Samuel Doe, ended Americo-Liberian rule when he assassinated one of the most influential and affluent politicians at the time, former President William Tolbert. Doe accused Tolbert of corruption, and Doe's supporters believed his presidency fueled tensions between the ruling elite and indigenous Liberians. Shortly after the assassination, Doe assumed power and suspended the constitution. Doe had no formal education, no political or leadership experience, and there were counts that he was illiterate (Dennis 2006). Between 1981 and 1985, there were seven military coups and eleven international attempts to end his authoritarian leadership (Bauer 2009).

Presidential elections took place in 1985, and the National Election Commission (NEC) named Doe victor. However, international observers felt the elections were conducted unfairly and viewed them as fraudulent. At the same time, Charles Taylor, Doe's Head of the General Service Agency, had recently left Doe's government after being accused of embezzlement. As an act of revolt, Taylor banded together with a group of Libyan-trained rebels to form the National Patriotic Front of Liberia. On December 24, 1989, Taylor launched an uprising to overthrow the Doe regime, leading to the First Liberian Civil War, lasting until 1996 (Dennis 2006). During the first war, upwards of 200,000 people died, and millions of others became refugees. West African peacekeeping forces intervened in 1990, but a final peace agreement was not signed until 1996, calling for elections in July 1997 (Scully 2016).

Thirteen political parties entered the 1997 race, including the Unity Party, an organization known for supporting economic liberalism, with moderate views at the center of the political spectrum (Sirleaf 2009). The Unity Party was founded in 1984 and participated in presidential elections for the first time in 1997, nominating Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who soon appeared to be the leading challenger to Taylor. On election day, Taylor won in a landslide, with more than 75% of the vote, followed by Sirleaf, who gained 10%. While 500 international monitoring teams watched the election and commended the process, there were widespread accusations of voter intimidation and manipulation of the electoral process (Lyons 1998). Many Liberians believed Taylor would resort to war if he lost the election, explaining his high levels of support. Even Taylor's campaign slogan was "He killed my ma; he killed my pa; I'll vote for him" (Sirleaf 2009, 137).

Due to the Taylor administration's failure to address the underlying causes of the first civil war, and the continued violation of human rights, economic deprivation, and social inequalities in Liberia, the Second Liberian Civil War broke out in 1999 and lasted until the international community forced Taylor to step down four years later. Taylor agreed to go into exile in Nigeria, and in 2012, the International Criminal Court charged him with 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Peace terms were negotiated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations (UN), with national elections set for 2005 (Kindervater 2013). By the end of Taylor's administration, unemployment reached an all-time high at 15.9%, the country accumulated almost \$3 billion in debt, and literacy rates fell below 32%, destroying civil society during this period of unrest (Bauer 2009).

After 25 years of violence, two horrific civil wars, and coups that had killed more than one-tenth of the population, Liberia epitomized the "African basket case," a term historians use to describe a nation that experiences extreme economic hardship and instability (Cooper 2010, 44). How could the future Liberian president possibly rebuild the country and return it to a democratic state? Moreover, how would citizens be motivated to vote in the 2005 election? One possible solution was the mobilization of women who no longer looked to men to repair their broken country (Bauer 2009).

### **"This Child Will Be Great," Sirleaf's Path of Leadership**

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was born in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, on October 29, 1938. Sirleaf's paternal grandfather was a Gola chief of great ranks, referred to as Jamale the Peacemaker. Sirleaf's father was a lawyer who dreamed of being the first native Liberian Speaker of the House and was well-regarded by Liberian President Tubman, who frequently visited their home (Sirleaf 2009). Surrounded by influential politicians from a young age, Sirleaf was compelled to join the political world. In 1962, Sirleaf left Liberia to study at the University of Wisconsin, joining a new wave of Liberians who looked to the United States as a land of opportunities (Scully 2016). Sirleaf

received an accounting degree, later studied economics at the University of Colorado, and obtained a master's in public administration from Harvard in 1971 (Scully 2016). Sirleaf returned to Liberia just after President Tolbert had taken over office. President Tolbert recruited Sirleaf as Assistant Minister of Finance from 1972 to 1973 and Minister of Finance in 1979, the first female to hold this position (Sirleaf 2009). Through these roles, Sirleaf became an outspoken leader. Despite being a part of Tolbert's administration, she critiqued the government for corporate greed and not addressing economic disparities. Sirleaf continued to work within the Liberian government until the 1980 coup d'état which shook the country and changed its political landscape once again.

Following Samuel Doe's coup against President Tolbert, Doe called Sirleaf to his Executive Mansion, forcing her to disclose information on the government's budget (Sirleaf 2009). Sirleaf was driven back and forth from her home to the mansion and described these trips as "a minor form of torture" (Sirleaf 2009, 108). In her memoir, Sirleaf recounted: "I never knew when [Doe's soldiers] arrived if they had been ordered to take me to the mansion again or to the prison where my former colleagues were awaiting their fate" (Sirleaf 2009, 108). In November of 1980, Sirleaf returned to one of her former jobs at the World Bank in Washington D.C., officially cutting her ties with Doe.

As the elections of 1985 approached, Sirleaf knew it was time to form a political party to challenge Doe's military dictatorship. Sirleaf felt compelled to serve her country and saw no other choice but to travel back to Monrovia, where she became one of the founding members of the Liberian Action Party, which later merged with the Liberia Unification Party to form the Unity Party, Sirleaf's primary coalition (Sirleaf 2009). Serving as an active voice within the party, Sirleaf gave a speech on Doe's corruption and the need to foster democracy. However, soon after, Doe charged her with sedition, and she found herself in prison (Scully 2016). Sirleaf stated, "Doe acts like a village chief. What the big chief wants he gets. There is no accountability" (Harden 1986, n.p.).

For 12 years following Doe's election in 1985, Sirleaf found herself in political exile in Kenya and the United States, yet held senior positions at multinational corporations, including Citibank, and later became the director for the African Bureau of the UN Development Program and Senior Loans Officer at the World Bank. These positions allowed Sirleaf to continue her political leadership, working alongside stakeholders in international finance and development (Scully 2016). Meanwhile, in Liberia, Taylor had assumed power, and the civil war waged on.

In 1997, preparing for the Presidential Elections in Liberia, Taylor's political opponents asked Sirleaf to run against him, claiming that no one could challenge Taylor as effectively as she could, due to her experience, outspoken personality, and unwavering commitment to democracy (Sirleaf 2009). Sirleaf decided to run under the Unity Party (UP), yet she recognized the many critical advantages Taylor would have in the election, especially the large amount of funds he had accumulated by looting the country along with his control over newspapers and radio stations (Sirleaf 2009). Sirleaf campaigned with the slogan "Vote for a Change," traveling across the country to rally support for Liberian peace (Scully 2016, 62). When the Liberia National Elections Commission announced that Taylor had won the election, Sirleaf did not challenge the votes, as she did not want to cause further conflict (Sirleaf 2009). During the Second Liberian Civil War in 1999, which erupted due to the misrule of Taylor and underlying stress between social groups, Sirleaf mobilized peace-negotiating forces and helped put international pressure on Taylor to step down. In 2003, Gyude Bryant, the chairman of Liberia's interim government, asked Sirleaf to lead the Governance Reform Commission. In this role, Sirleaf devised a new government structure built

on efficiency, transparency, and accountability (Sirleaf 2009). Working in this post, Sirleaf garnished support leading up to the next round of presidential elections.

### **2005 Election: A Forever Change**

The October 11, 2005, elections are the most important elections of our lifetime. In them, you will make a choice about a brighter future for our children and for our country. You will make a choice between hope and fear. You will make a choice between ending the sufferings of our people and worsening their living conditions. You will make a choice between good governance, leadership and transparency, and business as usual. You will make a choice to restore, or not to restore, our country's dignity. (Sirleaf 2009, 257)

Society was ready for a change. Years of civil war destroyed the Liberian economy and public infrastructure, and thousands of families and communities were learning how to cope with displacement and loss. Throughout the Liberian civil wars, women lobbied to participate in peace talks and organized public meetings, petitions, and marches and even served as intermediaries between Taylor and Liberian rebel leaders (Bekoe and Parajon 2007). Liberian women acted as agents, operating as the heads of their households while their husbands were at war. When ECOWAS and the UN negotiated peace in 2003, women surrounded the meeting venue and refused to let government officials leave until a formal peace treaty had been written and signed (Boyle 2012). Women became powerful within their local communities, and their role in the peace process during the civil war helped accustom them to using their power more publicly (Bauer 2009). While women actively engaged as grassroots activists, they faced continuous neglect and exclusion from formal high-level political processes; consequently, women saw no choice but to put “one of their own” at the top in the 2005 Elections (Bauer 2009, 208). Due to the level of agency and leadership gained by Liberian women, it was time for the nation to promote women into high seats in government (Bauer 2009).

The two front runners for the 2005 Election were Ellen Johnson Sirleaf from the Unity Party and George Weah from the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC). The CDC referred to Weah as a “Cinderella story” (Bauer 2009, 197). Born and raised in Montserrado County, Weah became a world-class European soccer star. His stardom resulted in the media's ignorance of the other compelling campaign story—the potential for Africa to have its first elected female head of state. On October 11, none of the 22 candidates gained the 50% of the vote needed to declare a winner. Weah won the majority vote with 28.3%, and Sirleaf was second with 19.8% (Carter Center 2005). Thus, a runoff occurred on November 8, where Sirleaf emerged as the victorious leader, gaining 59.4% of the vote and the title of the first democratically elected female head of an African state (Carter Center 2005). The turnout of literate female voters in the runoff was 69.9%, representing a forceful coalition that backed Sirleaf's candidacy (Bauer 2009). Hearing news of her victory, Sirleaf shared, “Receiving the certificate during that moment, I felt a nearly overwhelming sense of pride in, and gratitude for the thousands of Liberians who had supported me, especially the women” (Sirleaf 2009, 173).

### **Policies and Promises: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's Gender Agenda**

Liberia's political and social landscape at the time Sirleaf entered office demanded that she transform the country into a more participatory democracy where women and girls would participate as fully enfranchised citizens and essential societal actors (Southard 2017). Sirleaf



inherited a “devastated country” where women faced challenges in accessing political participation, economic opportunities, and experienced physical violence (Sirleaf 2019, n.p.). In her inauguration speech, Sirleaf recognized women's role in her political ascent and noted that she could not have won the election without their widespread and enthusiastic support:

... during the period of our elections, Liberian women were galvanized—and demonstrated unmatched passion, enthusiasm, and support for my candidacy. They stood with me; they defended me; they prayed for me. The same can be said for the women throughout Africa. I want to, here and now, gratefully acknowledge the powerful voice of women of all walks of life whose votes significantly contributed to my victory. My Administration shall thus endeavor to give Liberian women prominence in all affairs of our country. My Administration shall empower Liberian women in all areas of our national life. (Sirleaf 2009, 271)

Sirleaf highlighted two main policy goals surrounding gender equity: to provide women and girls with an education and to protect them from sexual assault. In Sirleaf's view, if women were educated and free from sexual control, they could access the resources needed to speak out against the patrilineal practices of local and global communities and achieve gender equality (Southard 2017). Sirleaf announced that she would aim to have the majority of administrative positions under her presidency held by women in order to send a “signal to everybody that the women were in charge of the major institutions” (Sirleaf 2019, n.p.). While Sirleaf acknowledged the pressing need for female equality, she had to prioritize rebuilding Liberian civil society and infrastructure by alleviating debt, addressing the HIV pandemic, and bringing peace to Liberia. More broadly, Sirleaf shared her visions for the Unity Party, emphasizing economic growth and stability, “We believe in a small, competent government that will promote democracy, private enterprise, and the empowerment of people through the exercise of choice and participation” (Sirleaf 2009, 112). Sirleaf had many challenges ahead, yet she pledged to give women their long-awaited seat at the decision-making table in “all areas of our [their] national life” (Sirleaf 2009, 271). How would Sirleaf fulfill her promises to women while supporting her party's values in rebuilding Liberia?

### **The History of Gender Quotas Globally and in Liberia**

The implementation of gender quotas in electoral processes is a pivotal strategy to address the pervasive underrepresentation of women in political institutions worldwide. Equal gender representation in elected institutions is essential to establishing the credibility and legitimacy of national and local governments as democratic processes require the participation of all citizens. Hence, the lack of female representation threatens political equality (Boyle 2012). UN Women research from 2024 has shown that when women are equally represented in the national government, more investment is directed to health, education, and social welfare. Additionally, according to UN Liberia Resident Coordinator Niels Scott, having more women in leadership is linked to stability and peace which is especially influential for nations with a history of conflict, such as Liberia (Scott, Lamptey, and Rodriques 2022). Gender equality and women's participation remain a critical development issue in many countries worldwide. While democratic systems provide legal grounds for equality of opportunity, meaning all citizens can participate in government, this differs from equality of result because opportunity does not translate to equal gender representation (Maloutas 2006). Thus, feminists critique the gender-neutral characteristics

of democracy and advocate for laws and legislation that directly promote the equality of results, such as gender quotas (Arneil 1999).

Gender quotas are numerical targets that specify the number or percentage of women that must be included in a candidate list or the number of seats to be allocated to women in the legislature and aim to reverse discrimination in law and practice to level the playing field in politics (Drude Dahlerup et al. 2014). Between 1995 and 2021, more than 130 countries modified their constitution, electoral law, or party rules to specify a threshold of women to be selected to a political party, and women's global political representation jumped from 11% to 21% (Nayar 2021).

The Liberian Government incorporated a voluntary gender quota for each political party into the electoral process for the first time in 2005, the same year Sirleaf was elected president. Under the Guidelines Relating to the Registration of Political Parties and Independent Candidates, the National Election Commission (NEC) of Liberia called on each party to ensure that 30% of candidate slots were reserved for women. However, only 14% of the total candidates were women, and not a single political party achieved the benchmark set by the NEC (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2005). More so, only 17% of female candidates in the Senate and 12.5% in the House succeeded in winning seats in government (Carter Center 2005). As the gender quota was voluntary and unenforced, it had virtually no impact on female representation in the Liberian Parliament. Hence, politicians needed to adjust the pre-existing law or promote a new policy to ensure equal representation and female empowerment in government.

### **The 2009 Montserrado County By-Election: A Moment to Support Women in Politics**

President Sirleaf had to rebuild Liberia's governing structure from the ground up; she had an opportunity to implement new, effective, and enforceable gender quotas which could serve as a mechanism to fulfill her promises of giving women prominence in the political sphere.

Following the death of female Senator Hannah Brent from the CDC on August 3, 2009, a by-election was set to be held in Montserrado County, Liberia's most populous political subdivision (Liberia; Senator Hannah Brent is Dead 2009). The election was set for November 10 of the same year to determine who should fulfill her position as senator representing the county. After Brent's death, eight women occupied the House, and four women held positions in the Senate compared to 56 and 25 men, respectively (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2005).

Around this time, the Women's Legislative Caucus of Liberia, comprising 12 lawmakers from both the House and the Senate, and the United Nations Development Fund for Women, was attempting to rally support for their Gender Equity in Politics Act. The caucus had plans to propose the act to the Liberian legislative floor in 2010. The bill *mandated* that women occupy at least 30% of national elected offices and leadership positions in political parties and provided a special incentive funding system created by the government. This fund was only made available to political parties that meet the minimum requirements (Goitom 2010). The Women's Legislative Caucus' reasoning for promoting the bill was simple: when parties put more women on their list, more women win. Women's groups viewed the by-election as the perfect opportunity to gain momentum for this bill, show their support for female political representation, and advance the election of women to high positions in the Liberian government (Goitom 2010). On November 10, none of the 10 candidates gained the majority vote needed to secure their spot in the by-election. Thus, there was a runoff between the top two candidates, Clemenceau Benoni Urey and Geraldine Doe-Sheriff, set to occur on November 14.

Doe-Sheriff was born in Maryland, Liberia, and was known for her activism at university and her position as the former captain of Liberia's female national soccer team. The main pillars of Doe-Sheriff's campaign were transparency, health, youth empowerment, and gender equality. She campaigned under the Congress for Democratic Change, the same party as late Senator Brent (Geraldine Doe-Sheriff 2009). Doe-Sheriff expressed that “to advance the women empowerment agenda requires situating more qualified women in strategic government positions from where they can continue to expand the reach of women's societal influence” (Geraldine Doe-Sheriff 2009, 7). Therefore, a vote for Doe-Sheriff was a vote for women’s equality. The other candidate running was Unity Party Candidate Clemenceau Benoni Urey, a nationalist, businessman, distinguished sports administrator, and Liberia's wealthiest man in 2014 (Urey 2009). Urey’s platform pledged to advocate for improving the quality of life for all citizens of Montserrado, emphasizing boosting infrastructure, health care accessibility, and legislation to support small and medium-sized Liberian businesses (Urey 2009). In 2000, the UN sanctioned Urey for his alleged role in arms procurement under the Charles Taylor administration, though he denied any illegal acquisition, stating the UN investigated the matter for years and “found no magnitude” (Editorial Board Front Page Africa 2022, n.p.). The 2009 election was not the first time Urey had run for a political position. In fact, he lost the 2005 Senatorial Election, gaining only 15 votes, to Hannah Brent, the woman whom he now hoped to replace (Dodoo and Binda 2009). What would make this election different?

### **A Presidential Play: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s Strategic Support**

In early October 2009, President Sirleaf marched from Monrovia City Hall to the Antoinette Tubman Stadium, joining thousands of partisans during Urey's campaign launch (Wolokolie 2009). The march was Sirleaf's first public endorsement of Urey, showing outward support for his candidacy to replace Senator Brent in the 2009 by-election. The President beamed with a smile and told the packed stadium that Clemenceau Urey is the kind of leader Liberians, in particular residents of Montserrado County, need (Daygbor 2009). Sirleaf later volunteered to chair the Female Supporters of Mr. Urey for the Montserrado Senatorial Campaign, appearing at a kickball derby to promote Urey's dedication to youth and sports. The kickball tournament, with Sirleaf as the main attraction, followed Urey's donation of US\$750 worth of sporting equipment to two populated schools in Monrovia (Urey Donates Sporting Equipment to Schools 2009). Sirleaf was the face Urey needed to legitimize his campaign from a businessman toying with the idea of politics to a credible leader who would work to alleviate poverty in Liberia.

The 2009 election for a new senatorial seat within Montserrado County carried a high profile due to the popularity of the individual candidates, the desire of women's groups to elect a female, and future stakes for all political parties with the 2011 Presidential Elections in sight, where Sirleaf was running for re-election. Moreover, at the time, Liberia had a relatively weak legislature as Sirleaf’s Unity Party lacked a parliamentary majority, making it challenging for Sirleaf to harness legislative support for her policies. Consequently, Sirleaf was committed to boost her party’s share of seats in the House and Senate (Adams 2017).

Women's groups, including individual female supporters from the Unity Party, opposed Sirleaf's choice and overwhelmingly voted for Doe-Sheriff to be senator (Sonpon and Morris 2012). Sirleaf's decision created controversy as feminists believed Sirleaf should have used her influential position to show support for the Gender Equity in Politics Act. From the perspective of the Women's Legislative Caucus, Sirleaf's endorsement of male candidate Urey was an indirect snub of the proposed gender quota (Sonpon and Morris 2012).



On November 1, at the Montserrado County Senatorial By-Election Candidate debate, a member of the audience asked Urey whether the Unity Party was buying voter registration cards. This question alluded to a rumor that Sirleaf had claimed “money will win” the November elections and recent news that the Unity Party was distributing rice to potential voters to gain their support (Binda 2009b, 3). Urey denied that the Unity Party had been involved in vote buying and claimed that the distribution of rice to voters was part of his “campaign resources” stating that “the rice and money I usually give to voters are resources and not items to buy votes” (Binda 2009b, 3). Voters continued to raise qualms about the true commitment of politicians to their constituents, especially during a by-election that fell close to the 2011 Presidential Elections. Sirleaf’s Unity Party was putting all efforts forward to ensure an opposition candidate, in this case, Doe-Sheriff, would not win the election, or else the party would have to double its efforts to retain power in 2011 (Sieh 2009).

To encourage mass participation in the by-election, President Sirleaf declared both November 10 and 14 a national holiday, requiring all government offices, businesses, houses, and marketplaces to be closed from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and calling on residents of Montserrado to go to the polls (Binda 2009a). Anticipation brewed in Liberia as the election commission counted votes. Rodney Sieh, publisher for *FrontPage Africa*, shared that Sirleaf’s legacy was on the line as a victory for the Unity Party would translate into a victory for her, solidifying her candidacy for 2011, but “a defeat will definitely cause her to rethink her position” (Sieh 2009, n.p.). Sieh shared that the Sirleaf administration pulled all stops to ensure a victory, “Make no mistake, this election is very, very important. That is why the ruling party is spending a lot of money to make sure that they come out victorious. In fact, there’s been lots of talk of voting malpractices around the country” (Sieh 2009, n.p.). Despite allegations of bribery and corruption, Sirleaf and Urey did not back down. Together, they continued to campaign, compelling citizens to vote for Clemenceau Benoni Urey, the Unity Party, and, indirectly, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf on election day.

### **The Aftermath**

On November 27, the NEC named Doe-Sheriff as a senator with 56% of the total vote, while Urey obtained 44% (Toe 2009). Doe-Sheriff remarked that the election results were an “indictment of the policies of President Sirleaf,” claiming that because of her election, Liberia won as a nation, as the people resounded their wishes that they wanted a change and new leadership (Toe 2009, n.p.). Doe-Sheriff attributed her win to the collaboration among oppositional political parties and that Sirleaf’s Unity Party defeat was due to the government’s failure to prosecute officials accused of corruption, hinting at bribe allegations made during the election (Butty 2009).

The Montserrado By-Election Results led the Unity Party and Sirleaf to adopt a new strategy to increase their political power before the 2011 Presidential Elections. Just as Sirleaf worked to publicly endorse Urey in the by-election, she used her presidential position to support his candidacy in other political offices. While Urey lost hope in entering the Liberia legislature in the November elections, Sirleaf appointed him to acting Mayor of Careysburg, coincidentally a city in Montserrado County. Politicians, including Charles Brumskine of the opposition Liberty Party, accused President Sirleaf of using the patronage system to carve her way for re-election, stating, “What has President Sirleaf done? She now appoints her friends and members of her party as city mayors” (Liberian Opposition Leader Says Some President Sirleaf Appointments Violate Constitution 2009).

Sirleaf remained quiet after the 2009 election, particularly regarding the proposed Gender Equity in Politics Act, and never publicly addressed outward support for the bill. In June 2011,

after Liberian senators, including Geraldine Doe-Sheriff, submitted the drafted bill, male legislators defeated the act on the grounds that it violated the country's constitution, which enabled all Liberian citizens to have equal opportunities for work and employment, regardless of their gender or religion (AJWS Staff 2024). Saydee Monboe, Executive Director for the Center for Trauma and Counseling and Conflict, an organization promoted through Liberia's Peace and Reconciliation Program, expressed to the female senators who submitted the bill that their efforts were "anti-democratic and expose their weakness to their male counterparts in the National Legislature and the larger Liberian society" (The Analyst 2010, n.p.). Additionally, he called on the women to abandon their "fruitless venture" and focus on laws that will better the Liberian people (The Analyst 2010, n.p.).

In the days before the 2011 October Presidential Election, Sirleaf's opponent, Winston Tubman of the CDC party, called on his supporters to boycott on the basis of fraud, stating, "We will never reward fraud and abused of power and will never grant legitimacy to a corrupt political process" (Liberia Election 2011, n.p.). On election day, his supporters clashed with Liberian police officers and only 37.4% of eligible voters casted a ballot. As there was no rival candidate for incumbent President Sirleaf, she won 90.8% of the vote. Nevertheless, independent election observers found no concrete evidence of serious irregularities, the Carter Center ruled the election was fair and free, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was renamed President (Schmall 2011).

Unfortunately, Sirleaf's win did not come with a victory for female politicians and women's political representation, as the percentage of women in the National Legislature dropped from 14% to 11.8%, the number of women in the Senate decreased from five to four, and the number of women in the House of Representatives dropped from nine to eight (Kumalo and Kujeke 2017). Though President Sirleaf won re-election, in total, 33 female lawmakers lost their seats, indicating a deteriorating state of female political representation in Liberia (Kumalo and Kujeke 2017). Once again, women's groups and the Liberian Women's Legislative Caucus were at square one.

### **2012: Sirleaf Demands Gender Equality in Parliament**

On June 27, 2012, in the William R. Tolbert Joint Assembly Hall in the Capitol Building, President Sirleaf urged female legislators to enact policies that would put women in political positions. According to Sirleaf, Liberia had failed to uphold international norms when other African states, such as South Africa, Uganda, Mozambique, and Senegal, had enacted gender quota bills. According to Sirleaf, "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" (Sonpon and Morris 2012, 10). In a daring tone, the Liberian leader told the Legislative Women Caucus to lobby "one-to-one" with their male counterparts for a new bill to be enacted into law to increase women's participation in the government (Sonpon and Morris 2012, 10). Sirleaf's strong opinion towards a new gender law appeared to be a "somersault" from her earlier reservations about the proposed legislation (Sonpon and Morris 2012, 10).

Now, having Sirleaf's support and hearing her demands, Liberia's male and female senators alike listened. Members of the government drafted 1b to Section 4.5 of the 1986 Liberian Elections Law stating, "A political party or coalition in its submission to the commission, of its list of candidates for an election *should endeavor to ensure* that the governing body and its list of candidates has no less than 30% of its members from each gender" (Authority Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014, 4). On September 17, 2014, almost five years after the 2009 by-election, both legislators approved the bill, after Sirleaf guaranteed its passage into law. While the Women's

Liberian Caucus and feminists in the country saw the bill's enactment as a win, questions remained on the enforceability of the act and whether it would produce real change in the election system. The new election law added the phrase “endeavor to ensure” but failed to define what constituted endeavoring to ensure, nor did it implement any accountability mechanism (Authority Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014, 4).

### **The Distinction Between Feminism and Femocracy**

In 2022, Liberia was ranked 161 of 166 countries on the Gender Inequality Index, a metric of gender inequality using the dimensions of reproductive health, empowerment, and the labor market. Moreso, Liberia was placed at 163 out of 185 countries on the rankings of the percentage of women in national parliaments, and as of 2022, women hold only 11% of seats in parliament (UN Women 2020). Despite its recognition for becoming the first African country to elect a woman to the country's highest office, in the same year, Liberia ranked fourth to last in the continent for its proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (Galal 2024). It is unmistakably evident that Liberia lacks women's political representation.

As referenced in “Seize the Day: Gender Politics in Liberia's Transition to Peace and Democracy,” there is a global assumption that a positive relationship exists between women occupying leadership positions and fundamental changes in structures promoting gender equity. Opponents of gender equity point to the presence of one or two women leaders as evidence that women are not being marginalized (Kindervater 2013). Liberia's low ranking on the Gender Inequality Index and lack of female representation in politics shows that the following 1996 assessment, almost three decades old, still holds true:

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. (Kindervater 2013, 121)

Despite efforts to empower Liberian women, Sirleaf's presidency has, in some ways, entrenched patriarchal norms. In a 2017 interview with *The Guardian* author Afua Hirsch, Sirleaf shared that she does not see herself as a feminist, referring to it as “extremism” and dismissing the very movement that supported her presidency in 2005 (Hirsch 2017, n.p.).

Rather than promoting extreme feminism, Sirleaf's presidency can be observed as an example of femocracy. Nigerian-British author Amina Mama notes that, in postcolonial development in African gender politics, there is a distinction between feminism and femocracy. Mama defines feminism as “the popular struggle of African women for their liberation from the various forms of oppression they endure,” which is counterpoised to femocracy:

anti-democratic female power struggle which claims to exist for the advancement of ordinary women, but is unable to do so because it is dominated by a small clique of women who advance the interests of a small female elite, resulting in the long-term consequence of undermining women's interests by upholding the patriarchal status quo. (Mama 1995, 41)

While feminism shatters the political glass ceiling, femocracy keeps it intact. During her campaign, Sirleaf vowed to incorporate women into Liberia's post-war recovery by appointing females to her cabinet and administration. In her first and second tenures, Sirleaf appointed only six women to head cabinet-level ministries and agencies out of 19 seats. Scholars believed these appointments were purely cosmetic and a form of tokenism that did not indicate a fundamental shift from the past (Pailey 2014). Although Sirleaf hired female technocrats for executive positions in the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, other “strategic” posts in the Ministry of Finance, Public Works, and Commerce were led by inexperienced and underqualified men (Pailey and Williams 2017, n.p.).

The 2009 Montserrado By-Election exemplified how scholars view Sirleaf as a femocrat instead of a feminist. Sirleaf's endorsement of Urey and initial reticence of the gender equity bill reflected the fact that increasing the number of women in elected office represented a threat to traditional male-dominated political structures (Pailey 2014). Sirleaf supported Urey to secure her political base for the 2011 election and consolidate power for the Unity Party, yet undermined her broader goal stated in her inauguration speech to increase female representation in government. In a 2015 interview, Senator Geraldine Doe-Sheriff stated that President Sirleaf did not take critical steps to empower women and highlight their participation in the national government, saying, “I believe lots of doors are closed when it comes to moving up the political ladder for the presidency because we did not see much of a push from her. We did not see that momentum—that interest of women participation” (Daybor 2015, n.p.). Even Sirleaf's fellow Nobel Laureate, Gbowee, agreed with Doe-Sheriff's remarks, “In terms of delivering a women's agenda, we really didn't see that” (Ford 2018, n.p.). Gbowee and Doe-Sheriff's statements emphasize the question of Sirleaf's responsibility as a female leader to advance women's rights.

### **Conclusion: The Ceiling Must Shatter**

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was the first woman to be elected president in any African country. Carrying this title, Sirleaf is hailed as a feminist icon. She entered office in 2006, embarking on an incredibly difficult journey to reconstruct Liberia after more than a decade of civil war. She repaired a country whose entire infrastructure was damaged with an illiterate population, poor justice system, and a lack of public service buildings. Sirleaf kept her promises regarding women's empowerment through education reform and strong action against sexual violence. In 2011, she passed an Education Reform Act that added gender equality initiatives such as the recruitment of more female teachers, and increased scholarships. Additionally, in 2008, she organized a Ministry of Gender and Development and established Criminal Court E, which handles gender-based violence cases. Despite significant progress through these reforms, Sirleaf fell short of her aim in terms of the political representation of women. In the case of the 2009 Montserrado County election between Senator Doe-Sheriff and Benoni Urey, the President deliberately chose to uplift her party and ensure her re-election rather than fulfilling her claim to empower and endorse women to roles in public office. This decision underscored the tension between her political strategy to strengthen her party's position and her broader promises to empower women in Liberia's political sphere. Sirleaf's ascension to the presidency was monumental and inspiring for other African nations and the world, but did not transform the Liberian political structure to ensure equal participation. Sirleaf expressed a commitment to adopt policies that empower women and increase their political participation yet, her administration failed to pass long-standing gender equity legislation. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's administration, while revolutionary in *symbolizing* progress of

women, ultimately upheld the patriarchal status quo by prioritizing political expediency over gender equity. Rather than dismantling systemic barriers, Sirleaf exemplified femocracy—a consolidation of power by a select elite that failed to translate into meaningful change for Liberian women.

When Ellen Johnson Sirleaf spoke to the roaring crowd following the announcement of her victory in 2005, she saw the opportunities for Liberian women to follow in her footsteps, “We have shattered the glass ceiling theory, and I hope women will seize the moment to become active in civil and political affairs here at home and abroad!” (Associated Press 2005, n.p.). With Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president, the Liberian glass ceiling cracked, but did it shatter?

### **Epilogue: Where Liberia Stands Today and the 2023 Elections**

The 2023 Liberian elections demonstrate the consequences of Sirleaf’s lack of momentum regarding the interest of women’s political participation. In the lead-up to the elections, both houses of Liberia’s legislature passed a gender quota similar to that of the 2014 National Election Law, but the 2023 bill had an enforcement mechanism, *mandating* that political parties’ candidate lists for election should have at least 30% of each gender and allocated annual budgets that would be used to invest in programs, projects, and activities to encourage women to engage in politics. However, George Weah, President of Liberia in 2023, vetoed the bill, which has since yet to pass (The Observer Staff Editor 2023).

Regardless of the outcome of the 2023 bill, ensuring women’s empowerment requires more than adopting a quota system. While quotas are a successful mechanism to increase women’s representation, they are not sufficient to counteract all the disadvantages and challenges women face (Boyle 2012). Foremost, social and cultural impediments in Liberia and globally that prevent women from accessing an education, developing a career, obtaining gainful employment, and even holding a seat in office must be addressed. According to Madam Victoria Torlo Koiquah, a senatorial candidate in the 2023 Liberian elections, a gender quota is only one step, and more needs to be done, “It’s not just about getting the quota. We had 159 women going in the race, but only eight won. We need to not only support women but also support them financially and give them all the other support they need to achieve success” (Bondo 2023, n.p.). Without structural changes, women in Liberia and globally will continue to face barriers in their efforts to hold a seat at the political table.



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