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Our Mothers Have Spoken: Synthesizing Old and New Forms of Women's Political Authority in Liberia

By Mary Moran¹

Abstract

This paper argues that the 2005 election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to the Liberian presidency is best understood in the historical and cultural context of pre-war authority-bearing positions available to women, rather than as an outcome of the Liberian civil war itself. Against a literature that tends to view "traditional" African societies as hostile to both democracy and women's rights, I contend that gender, conflict, and democracy are inter-twined in more complex relationships. Post-conflict societies such as Liberia are interesting not only as sites of intervention by international organizations seeking to capitalize on the "window of opportunity" available to re-make gender relations, but as places where truly innovative discourses of women's political participation are likely to emerge.

Key Words: Liberia, elections, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Introduction

The editors of this special issue ask us to consider the recent influx of women into highly visible leadership positions, from appointed cabinet ministers to parliamentarians and elected heads of state, in societies around the world that have experienced extreme disruption and violence. In Africa, after nearly three decades in which most of the news was of war, genocide, and state collapse, it is almost impossible not to see a relationship between these two phenomena. To quote from the guidelines of the conference which originated this project, "prolonged processes of democratization, in countries with high levels of violence, may affect gender relations in particular and different ways than relatively peaceful transitions . . . specifically, periods of violence may open up "space" for reconceptualization and renegotiation of gender roles and relations which may result in greater equality for women and similarly disenfranchised groups." The idea that instability and violence can, paradoxically, create a "window of opportunity" for women would seem to be validated nowhere more than in Liberia, a small West African country which after fifteen years of near statelessness, horrific warfare, and warlord terrorism finally succeeded in electing the first female president of an African nation in 2005 and re-electing her in 2011. Cynthia Enloe (1995, 2000, 2004, 2007), Stephen Ellis (2007; also Ellis & van Kessel, 2009), Donna Pankhurst (2002, 2008), Gretchen Bauer (2008; also Bauer & Britton 2006), Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen (2001), Cynthia Cockburn (2002, 2007), Aili Tripp et. al. (2009), Jennie Burnet (2008) and many others have traced

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the relationship between deadly conflict and women's empowerment, noting that countries formerly notorious for violence, like Rwanda and Uganda, now have, if not women presidents, at least the world's highest percentage of women in their national legislatures (for a more detailed review of this literature, see Moran, 2010).

Certainly, no one would claim that war is not transformative of gender roles and ideologies as well as numerous other social hierarchies, including those based on relative age and class. But is there in fact a causal connection between systemic violence and women's empowerment? Does the fact that Liberia experienced a prolonged civil war *explain* the election of Africa's first woman president? Does war *always* lead to the empowerment of women and are the gains made under these conditions always possible to sustain (see Meintjes, Pillay, & Turshen, 2001; Mazurana, Raven-Roberts, & Parpart, 2005 for an extensive review of these questions)? Using the case of Liberia, I will argue that 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. Using the figure of Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as an example, I will argue that her election powerfully fuses two separate discourses of political authority: the "powerful mother" (Van Allan, 2006) of pre-war kinship-based political relations, and the "Iron Lady" or essentially sexless "modern" technocrat. In this account, I focus on what was Johnson Sirleaf's second presidential campaign, which brought her to the presidency in 2006. Her first, unsuccessful run for office against Charles Taylor in 1997 has been analyzed elsewhere (Harris, 1999; Moran, 2006) and her re-election campaign of 2011 (when the question of a woman president as an anomaly had effectively been settled) was framed in a very different set of discourses.

I use the case of Johnson Sirleaf to interrogate two common assumptions about Africa embedded in some of the scholarly literature as well as in much popular journalism and the discourses of humanitarian activism, specifically: 1) that highly unequal and even oppressive gender relations characterized the "traditional culture" of most if not all African societies prior to any particular period of upheaval and violence and, 2) that lack of democratic institutions and values are directly related to both these perceived gender inequities and the conflict which must be resolved by post-war reconstruction and democratic reform. Many externally sponsored programs and interventions are grounded in the belief that women will automatically benefit from Western-style political structures, although it is recognized that they may remain in need of "special accommodations" in order to overcome the deep-seated prejudices and lagging cultural values of their national societies. In the past, most theorists of both liberal democracy and Western feminism tended to believe that ideas of universal rights or equal participation have their origins outside of Africa, and have been introduced only recently and with decidedly mixed results. Thus the *New York Times* story about Johnson Sirleaf's first inauguration was titled "Liberia's Harvard-Trained 'Queen' is Sworn in as Leader" (Jan. 17, 2006), as if it was not clear what was more incongruous, her gender or the fact that she had actually been *elected* to office.

More recently, however, there has been an extensive critique of humanitarian and legal reform projects directed at imposing "human rights" programs without regard to local gender ideologies (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Merry, 2006; Hodgson, 2011; Basu, 2010; Abramowitz 2009; Abramowitz and Moran, forthcoming). In spite of these academic

interventions, on-the-ground programs by multi-lateral and non-governmental organizations remain guided by the assumption that democratic rights for women are a new and challenging idea for most Africans.

Theoretical Considerations

Many scholars, including African and African American feminists have warned against the assumption that European gender categories can be easily or appropriately mapped onto realities elsewhere (Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997; Mikell, 1997; McClaurin, 2001). While social scientists recognize the theoretical term "gender" to include cultural constructions and enactments of both masculinity and femininity, it is widely recognized that in practice the word is used as a synonym for "women." The almost ubiquitous "gender empowerment workshops" promoted by international NGOs in post-conflict societies are explicitly *not* intended to empower men (whose "over empowerment" may be seen as the cause of conflict, to begin with). New ministries and cabinet-level appointments in Gender and Development likewise direct their programs largely if not exclusively toward women. As African critics of Western feminism have pointed out, such elisions reflect essentialized, homogenizing constructions of "men" and "women" as stable, universal categories that are embedded in European worldviews (Oyewumi, 1997; Van Allen, 2001).

A more nuanced reading of gender in African societies could include the possibility that some women may routinely hold authority over some men, even if the same *person* may be subject to male authority in another context. Gender in Africa is neither absent nor unrecognized, but it may also not drastically mark other social roles, including leadership positions, in such a way that women serving in those roles are seen as inherently anomalous (Oyewumi, 1997:8). Many theorists of masculine violence, likewise, have assumed that wartime militarization simply builds on or amplifies the "natural" expectations about male aggression in the pre-war society. A real re-figuring of the relationship between conflict, gender, and democratization must include consideration of how new forms of masculinity, as well as femininity, emerge during war time and in the post-war moment (Moran, 1995; forthcoming).

Similarly, a number of authors are beginning to follow the lead of such African political theorists as Claude Ake (2000) in questioning the insistent characterization of indigenous African governance systems as inherently autocratic, opaque, and 'patrimonial' (Pitcher, Moran & Johnston, 2009). I have argued elsewhere that a case can be made for indigenous democratic institutions at both local and regional levels in Liberia, and that these meet a minimal definition of democracy as "multiple means of direct participation in decision-making for people in a range of unequal social positions" (Moran, 2006:101).

While Western notions of representational democracy privilege the equivalence of persons expressed in the individual vote, I argue that indigenous communities in southeastern Liberia have a system which "deliberately allocates *different* and decidedly unequal forms of voice and redress to structural subordinates," (2006: 44), who include women and young people of both genders. While women and young men were certainly not seen as "equal" to male elders in the pre-war period, as collectivities they had institutionalized means of making their feelings and opinions known and of checking the power of those who held authority over them. These means could include strikes,

boycotts, and the legitimate resort to violence, both physical and supernatural. Thus, rather than being the polar opposite of democracy, as it is constructed in Western theory, violence is understood in these communities as an integral part of political contestation and one of the ways in which the democratic ideals are enacted. If we define democracy as “a state of affairs in which people are empowered politically, economically, socially, and culturally” (Wonkeryor, Forbes, Guseh & Kieh, 2000:15), the question of functional equality becomes irrelevant. In Liberia’s pre-war past, an individual woman might have had to join with others to stage a “walk out” in her community (Moran, 1989) or she may have resorted to the covert violence of witchcraft, but she was never seen as inherently powerless.

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that gender, violence, and democracy are related to each other in more complex ways than may be immediately apparent. Uncovering these relationships in any local context depends on pushing the analysis beyond the period of upheaval to consider sources of democratic ideals and legitimate authority that may have been present *before* the descent into chaos. While many journalists and scholars have interpreted the election of Liberia’s Johnson Sirleaf as a watershed event, made possible only at the cost of fifteen years of civil war, I will argue that the presidency of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf can be understood in light of existing models of female authority grounded in both indigenous kinship and local political institutions. Furthermore, Liberia has a significant national history of prominent women leaders who provided earlier models of female authority at the level of the state. Finally, the election outcome was also a product of the transformations in women’s organizational capacities that occurred during the war.

It is undeniable that during the war, there was a veritable explosion of highly visible women’s organizations in Liberia, particularly related to the peace movement. In some instances, these movements were spectacularly successful and made significant contributions to ending the conflict (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004; Moran & Pitcher, 2004; Fuest, 2009). Many women came to prominence in the peace movement, including Leymah Gbowee, who was recognized along with Johnson Sirleaf with the Nobel Peace Prize in October of 2011. Although Gbowee and many others were assisted by the training and financial assistance provided by the international “gender workshop industry” (Fuest, 2010), I argue that it is important to understand pre-war gender constructions as also providing space for women’s organizing and leadership. Ironically, some post-war interventions may have had the effect of “hardening” or institutionalizing a more limited range of gender identities than were available in pre-war Liberia.

Drawing on Judith Van Allen’s analysis of the strategic deployment of images of “powerful motherhood” among women activists in Botswana (2006), I argue that Johnson Sirleaf has successfully synthesized the authority-bearing role of female elder with the claims to gender neutrality embedded in Western notions of liberal democracy. In this she is but the latest example in a long line of Liberian women leaders at multiple levels, from local and indigenous to elites to national office-holders. The election of Johnson Sirleaf, therefore, should not be understood as an anomalous outcome of the civil war but as the “historical climax of a process rooted in the history of Liberian women” (Fuest, 2010).

The Liberian Conflict

The origins of the Liberian state lie, unlike those of most other African countries, in the repatriation or “back to Africa” movements of the nineteenth century. Although often represented as having been “founded by freed American slaves,” Liberia was in fact the project of a private benevolent association made up of prominent white Americans who were concerned with the problem of “free people of color” in the early years of the republic. Representing a strange and uneasy alliance of slave owners, religiously motivated abolitionists, and merchants interested in the “legitimate” African trade, the American Colonization Society (ACS) landed its first group of African American colonists on the West African coast in 1822. The majority of the settlers had been born free, many had significant European ancestry, and all were looking for a place in which they could be free of the onerous restrictions placed on free Blacks in most states. These “Black Christian Republicans” as Burrowes calls them (1989, 2004) and their descendants never numbered more than 3-5% of the Liberian population, the rest being made up of the roughly sixteen different ethno-linguistic groups indigenous to that part of the Upper Guinea coast.

When the settlers declared independence in 1847, Liberia became the first independent republic in Africa, and the second black-ruled republic in the world (after Haiti). The period from independence to 1980, when the first republic was overthrown by a military coup, is frequently characterized as one of oligarchic control by the descendants of the American settlers over the indigenous majority; the so-called “Black Colonialism” thesis (Ellis, 2007). Recent scholarship has shown however that, rather than maintaining a strictly separate social hierarchy, the national elite was in fact composed of both indigenous and repatriate elements. As documented in an exhaustive study by Burrowes, “from 1847 to 1902, Liberia held national elections approximately 44 times, with two-year term limits. . . . Until the turn of the century, a republican ideal of small, decentralized government was preserved, with regular elections, short tenures in public offices, checks between the branches of government, and some degree of responsiveness by governors to the pressures from the governed” (2004:264). In other words, the Liberian state did not *require* fifteen years of devastating civil war at the end of the twentieth century to achieve at least the outward forms of constitutional democracy. Burrowes attributes many of the “neopatrimonial” features of the post World War II period not to “indigenous” African Big Man or War Lord institutions, but to Cold War clientelism. In the shifting international power dynamics of decolonization, Liberia emerged as a key American ally; an oasis of anti-communism and openness to foreign investment in a region surrounded by quasi-Marxist and nationalist post-colonial states like Guinea and Ghana.

But, what about the indigenous polities under which the majority of Liberians lived through the end of the first republic in 1980? Although highly variable by region, most incorporated significant checks on the abuse of power that could be deployed by chiefs and other elites, even when these local leaders were backed by the coercive power of the national government. Parallel systems of politico-ritual authority for men and women, at least in the southeastern region of the country, required broad consultation and allowed for rapid response to actions that were perceived as illegitimate. For example, in Glebo communities of the southeast, an insult on the part of a chief to the effect that some women were not properly looking after their children could result in the entire female

population of the town simply leaving, en mass, to take up residence elsewhere. Men who were left to farm, cook, and carry water for themselves soon prevailed upon the chief to make peace with the women, wooing them back with heartfelt apologies and "many cows" (for a sacrifice and feast in their honor) (Moran, 1989). Patrilineal descent, while clearly favoring men in inheritance and requiring married women to live virilocally, also gave women significant rights and authority as sisters and mothers (if not as wives) and encouraged the adult women in each town to band together as mutually supportive resident aliens. Collective measures like strikes and boycotts were seen as legitimate, institutionalized ways for women to make their voices heard and defend their interests. In the Kwa-language speaking regions, war could not be declared without the assent of the adult women through their elected leader (Moran, 1989, 1990, 2006).

The northwest Mande-speaking region seems to have been considerably more stratified, with more overtly patriarchal gender relations and a system of ranked lineages, which was reflected in the women's "secret" initiatory society, Sande. Women from dominant lineages were able to use their positions to control the labor and marriage prospects of junior dependents, both male and female (Bledsoe 1980, 1984). At the most intimate level of daily life, young men and boys were subject to the authority of both their mothers and the female elders of their patrilineages; their father's sisters and paternal aunts. Although the official patriarchy could be summed up in such statements as "men are always older than women," which ideologically ranked gender over age as a basis for the assignment of rank, 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. Both gerontocratic and patriarchal principles of authority came under threat during the years of war and their meanings in the post-conflict period remain far from clear.

In 1980, the first Liberian republic came to an end with a military coup led by young enlisted men of indigenous background, ostensibly to "liberate" the oppressed masses from 147 years of settler rule. In the foreign policy context of the Reagan administration, coup leader Samuel Doe replaced his settler predecessor as a reliable American ally and was rewarded with a massive package of American military aid (the second largest such program after Israel). This military hardware would later be turned on the Liberian people, as Doe tried to protect himself from other ambitious young Master Sergeants trying to follow his own example. After reluctantly consenting to elections in 1985, Doe declared himself the president with 51% of the vote in spite of widespread evidence of fraud and intimidation of voters. The US State Department declared the election acceptably "free and fair by African standards," noting the fact that Doe claimed to have won by *only* 51% rather than 99% was evidence of "progress."

Outrage at this blatant flouting of democratic principles, rather than their lack, opened the door to further violence, beginning in late 1989 and leading to Doe's death at the hands of anti-government forces in 1990. The intervention of a multinational force from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) prevented the war from ending with a quick victory for the main instigator, Charles Taylor, and for the next six years the conflict dragged on. Numerous armed factions, representing various ethnic and regional blocks, divided the country into a patchwork of rival territories controlled by competing warlords. Struggles over resources, including diamonds and timber, extended the conflict, since leaders were able to gain access to weapons as well as personal wealth

by selling off valuable commodities harvested by terrorized local labor. By the time an internationally brokered settlement and formal elections were held in 1997, as many as two hundred and fifty thousand people were dead (out of a pre-war population of about 3 million), more than half the population was displaced, and most of the country's infrastructure was destroyed.

The collapse of the Liberian state set off region-wide conflict as Taylor exported his war to neighboring Sierra Leone and attempted to do the same in Guinea. After signing and violating a series of peace agreements, Taylor gained electoral legitimacy in a rushed and deeply flawed election in 1997. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, his closest competitor in the poll, came in a distant second. Elsewhere, I have offered an analysis of how Taylor was able to trade on his reputation as a ruthless warlord (Moran, 2006:101-23, see also Harris, 1999) to win the election, which was once again validated by outside observers as "free and fair." Needless to say, it was the fear that Taylor, like Jonas Savimbe in Angola, would simply plunge the country back into war if the election did not go his way, rather than gender, which accounts for Johnson Sirleaf's loss in her first run for the presidency. Lack of follow-through by the international community (including the UN and ECOWAS) allowed Taylor to convert his armed faction into the national army and security apparatus and essentially continue the warlordism and profiteering from the nation's natural resources he had perfected during the conflict. By early 2000, new armed factions had taken shape to contest Taylor's government and the war had begun again. Only in 2003, with two rebel movements closing in on the capital and under indictment by the international war crimes court in Sierra Leone, was Taylor convinced to step down and go into exile in Nigeria. He was eventually extradited to The Hague to stand trial for war crimes and in 2012 became the first former head of state to be convicted under new international laws against the violation of human rights. An interim government led by civilian businessman Guyde Bryant was succeeded by the elected Sirleaf administration in January of 2006.

Women as Authority Figures: Powerful Mothers

Throughout the conflict, men and women filled highly public, visible roles both as combatants and civilian leaders. There were women's units among all the armed factions, although estimates of the number of women fighters range from 2 to 5% of the total (Utas, 2003: 209). Some women gained notoriety as fierce warriors, but men dominated the leadership of the various armed movements. Civilian women were highly visible in the peace movement, which gained significant international attention. On the surface, Johnson Sirleaf's election seems to represent the repudiation of a "male" politics of war in favor of "female" expertise in rebuilding and reconciliation and some of her 2005 campaign discourses definitely emphasized this dichotomy. But do Western understandings of the categories "men" and "women" make sense in this context?

Nigerian sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi has argued that social identity in West Africa must be understood as highly situational; "social positions of people shifted constantly in relation to those with whom they were interacting; consequently, social identity was relational and could not be essentialized. In many European societies, in contrast, males and females have gender identities deriving from the elaboration of anatomic types; therefore, men and women are essentialized. These essential gender identities attach to all social engagements no matter how far from the issues of

reproduction such undertakings may be, . . . to the extent that professional lexicons contain phrases such as “woman pilot,” “woman president,” and “professor emerita,” as if whatever these women do in these occupations is different from what men do in the same professions” (1997:xiii).

Some of Johnson Sirleaf's 2005 campaign slogans and self representations seem to refer to essentialist images, particularly when she defined herself as a mother and grandmother. But again, is maternal imagery in this context to be understood as it is in the West? New analyses by Judith Van Allen, whose pioneering work on dual-sex gender systems defined the early study of African women (1972, 1976), suggest that it may not. Van Allen, like Oyewumi, notes that European notions of liberal democracy emphasize a “universal” model of citizenship and national leadership which claims to be gender-neutral but in practice assumes the unmarked category of “leader” or “president” will be filled by a male unless specified otherwise. This presents a problem for women politicians in the West, since they must appear to “transcend” their traditional gender assignment to prove that they can perform “as men” in public life. African gender concepts, in contrast, offer the possibility of an “embodied citizenship” drawing on kinship identities, like mother and grandmother (2006:2). These claims are usually greeted skeptically by Western feminists, who understand maternalist roles as limited to nurturance and caring. “But the discourse of powerful mothers that runs through African history is missing from these analyses of “motherist” politics, as are the ways in which African women have deployed powerful links between the fertility of women and the fertility of the land to assert their own interests against colonial authorities. That is, African constructions of women as “mothers” have been sources of power for women to use to protect their own interests as women as well as to protect their children” (2006:3).

American women politicians, on the other hand, are more often faced with defending their self-identity as adequate mothers when they launch a bid for elective office; “there is little positive discourse of *powerful* mothers available to American women . . . a “powerful mother” more usually calls up a Freudian image of a castrating mother, hardly what a women candidate wants voters to think about” (2006:4). Conversely, it is widely documented that the definition of “good mother” in most parts of Africa is grounded in the notion of being an economic provider. Gracia Clark has observed that Asante women who stay at home with their children instead of working to support them are considered bad and lazy (1999, 2001). Van Allen asserts that when the tradition of powerful, economically successful mothers “is combined with appeals to women's rights based on feminist appropriations of liberal democratic traditions, then women can enter male-gendered political space as “equal rights powerful mothers” - as citizens, activists, and leaders - and potentially transform their societies. This is not an argument about women acting from their material positions as mothers, nor an argument that employs an essentialist construction of ‘women’ as ‘mothers.’ It is an argument about political strategy; about what activists can take from the available discourse that has emotive power, and reformulate and deploy that discourse for political effectiveness” (2006:4-5).

As Van Allen notes for Botswana, “a mother is a powerful female role, not a subservient one . . . A mother has authority not only over children, but over her adult sons as well as her daughters and daughters-in-law . . . A mother is someone to be taken seriously; a wife is someone who takes orders” (2006:9). This statement is equally true in

Liberia, where the authority of mothers and senior female kin was cited repeatedly in over eighty interviews I conducted in 2006 with men who had avoided violence during the war. "My mother wouldn't let me" emerged as one of the most common explanations for why young men chose *not* to fight. Many of my informants attributed their survival during the war years to the patronage and protection of older female kin, who hid them at home, kept them off the streets when armed factions were known to be recruiting, or ransomed them from the factions when they were forcibly taken. One informant who told me he had wanted to go along with his friends from school who were lured by the opportunities for looting but, "you can't disobey your mother." Another young man's grandmother threatened to disown him from the family if he joined the fighters. Such statements echo those of the faction leaders and warlords who responded to talks called by the women's peace movement in the 1990's saying, "when your mother calls you, you must show up" (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004:28). A US-based website supporting Johnson Sirleaf's primary opponent in the 2005 election, international soccer star George Weah, consoled his partisans after the loss with the headline "Our Mothers Have Spoken."

Liberia's women peace activists explained their success in bringing the combatants to the peace table as due not to their naturalized or essentialized role as childbearers, but to their experience as household diplomats with the recognized authority to settle the disputes of their children (2004: 88, 93). Liberian women, particularly educated women, recorded the highest turnout rate in the 2005 election and voted overwhelmingly for Johnson Sirleaf (Bauer, 2008:1). In doing so, they enacted not only their right to vote as Liberian citizens but their right as *women* to validate the legitimacy of their leader. These rights could not be questioned under any invocation of "tradition."

In addition to the recognized legitimate authority of female elders in the context of family and kinship, Liberia has had a long history of prominent women in positions of national visibility. Some scholars have suggested that this history is explained by the preference of the ruling settler class for promoting women of their own group in national political roles, rather than risk opening the field to men of indigenous ethnicities (Fuest, 2008:8). In addition to producing the first elected female head of state in Africa, Liberia can also claim the first woman president of an African national university, as well as significant numbers of women holding ministerial positions, judgeships and other positions of power, both elected and appointed, since at least the 1960s (Moran and Pitcher, 2004). Johnson Sirleaf had herself been named as the first female Minister of Finance in the government of William Tolbert, Liberia's last president before the 1980 coup. Throughout the 2005 campaign, she repeatedly emphasized both her distinguished résumé, including a degree in public policy from Harvard, as well as the fact that she is the mother of four sons and the grandmother of eight.

Under Taylor's regime, a number of prominent female officers in his armed faction were rewarded with county superintendent positions (the equivalent of a state governor) or with positions in his cabinet (Ellis, 2007). Other 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. But the most visible public roles women held during long years of war were as grassroots peace activists. Drawing on a wide range of organizational connections from Christian prayer groups to market vendors supply

networks, women were able to mobilize large crowds for street demonstrations in major cities. They demanded admission to international conferences to which only the (male) leaders of the armed factions had been invited (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004). Women's peace-making and relief efforts were notable for both their number and their ability to work across class and ethnic divisions (Moran & Pitcher, 2004; African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004). Elite, professional women's groups in Monrovia worked closely with market women's associations across the country in an effort to bring food into the city during the many times when it was cut off from rural supply lines by rebel forces. Christian groups collaborated with their Muslim counterparts. Drawing on pre-war roles as "mediators, interceders, and negotiators" and "makers of rules for the family" (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004:7), women threw themselves into lobbying everyone from young boys with guns to neighboring heads of state. The common uniform of pre-war Christian prayer bands, white clothing and head ties, became the visible symbol of women acting in these roles. As the war was reaching its last crisis in the spring and summer of 2003, thousands of women in white, in Monrovia and elsewhere in the country, took to the streets to demand an end to the random violence. They occupied the parking lot of the national capitol so that legislators could not park their cars. They took over the runways of the airport and disrupted military flights (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004:46-7). To draw international attention, they laid the bodies of dead family members at the gates of the U.S. Embassy. Even as rockets were whistling over their heads and battles raged around them, crowds of women in white were visible in every news photo documenting the Liberian civil war (for an extended example, see "In the Mud, Liberia's Gentlest Rebels Pray for Peace" *New York Times*, July 1, 2003; see also the 2008 film by Abigail Disney, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*). It was for her leadership in the latter phases of the peace movement that Leymah Gbowee was recognized, along with Johnson Sirleaf, with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

The women activists may not, on their own, have brought peace to Liberia (Moran & Pitcher, 2004), but they were successful in forging a "collective identity politics" capable of attracting significant support and funding from outside sources (Fuest, 2008:24). These powerful outside agents, including multilateral organizations like the United Nations as well as the numerous NGOs, may have overlooked internal divisions within the movement, based on class, ethnicity, religion and generation, in their willingness to reinforce familiar assumptions about women's "natural" peacemaking abilities (Fuest, 2008:25-26). In the post-war period, these divisions have again risen to the surface as numerous organizations compete for the steadily declining funds allocated to Liberia's reconstruction.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, known as the "Iron Lady" of Liberian politics, is adept at combining and deploying these multiple forms of political authority. She has relied on the creative combination of gender imagery to communicate her political message. During her presidential campaigns, in both 1997 and 2005, she emphasized her toughness and courage in "standing up" to Charles Taylor and before him, to Samuel Doe (who twice imprisoned her for speaking out against corruption in his government in the 80's). One of her campaign slogans, painted on signs and worn on buttons by her supporters in 2005 read, "Ellen, she's our man" (*Washington Post*, October 5, 2005). Yet she appealed directly to women, who make up the majority of registered voters in Liberia, with

references to her market vendor grandmothers as well as her children and grandchildren. Frequently wearing the white clothing associated with women's activism during the war, she reminded voters that she too had been a participant in the peace movement. In published interviews, she framed herself in terms similar to those laid out by Oyeronke Oyewumi, "I don't face any particular problems as a woman president because I have been a professional for a long time. I keep telling people: I am a technocrat who happens to be a woman. I earned my professional credibility a long time ago in a male-dominated world. . . . I get support from women. They are my main constituency. But I don't run a woman government. I run a government of people" (IRIN news interview, June 29, 2006). In such statements, Johnson Sirleaf seems to reflect Van Allen's analysis of women's strategies in Botswana with regard to the "powerful mother" motif in African politics; "it embeds in the political discourse a concept of a 'good mother' connected to the exercise of power, a concept that women politicians can activate and manipulate for their own purposes" (2006:8).

In my interviews with male non-combatants a few months after Johnson Sirleaf's inauguration, I asked for their opinion of the election and the new president. These men, who ranged from university students to security guards and unemployed drivers, almost never mentioned Johnson Sirleaf's gender. In the few cases where it did come up, it was seen as a positive asset. Although not all of them had voted for her, their lack of support was due to their affection for her opponent (soccer star George Weah), not because she was a woman. Van Allen has noted that, just as American women must negotiate the gender-neutral ideal of Western political legitimacy, African women face a similar dilemma. Although a mother may be powerful and hold authority over her sons, that same woman may also be a wife, subject to the authority of her husband. Women seeking public office assert their right to hold authority over unrelated males, which does profoundly challenge patriarchal values. Although Johnson Sirleaf makes frequent mention of her sons, her husband, who she divorced many years ago, is never referenced. She has never re-married, following the strategy of many women in the pre-war years to maximize their economic and political advantage by avoiding conjugal authority (Fuest, 2008; Bledsoe, 1980; Moran, 1990).

In rural areas during the 2005 campaign, some men reportedly expressed reservations about a female presidential candidate with no husband to "take care of her." If Johnson Sirleaf had been married, her husband's right to command her obedience might have been seen as in conflict with her constitutional responsibilities. Her age and status as a grandmother in her sixties seems to have been sufficient however, to mute concerns about her lack of a spouse. It was certainly not unusual, even in rural pre-war Liberia, for a female elder to be unmarried due to death or divorce, and to serve as the head of her household with authority over junior kin. Johnson Sirleaf skillfully wove together these many strands of authority grounded in age, experience, and family relations to make her case for election.

So how is the first woman president in Africa understood, symbolically, by the citizens who elected her? Early in her first term, on call-in talk radio shows in Monrovia, in the newspapers, and in private conversations, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was most commonly referred to as "Ma Ellen" or simply "The Old Ma." This is a widely used term for women in positions of authority, usually within the context of family and kinship but also in professional settings. To call someone an "Old Ma" may communicate either

affection or distaste, but it always implies respect. It is an acknowledgement of hierarchy that can override actual age differences; a relatively young, educated woman may be the “Old Ma” to chronologically older co-workers if she holds higher rank in the workplace. The term does not necessarily imply a long-term relationship, as when I heard myself referred to in this way by my hired driver in 2006 as he talked on his cell phone (“I’m taking the Old Ma home now. I’ll call you later”). With one six-year term completed and a new one just beginning, it is clear that public support for Johnson Sirleaf has been eroded by frustrations with the slow pace of post-war recovery and charges of political corruption and cronyism. She narrowly won a second term in the 2011 election, in spite of the announcement of her Nobel Peace Prize only a few days before the poll. A “love-hate” relationship with one’s mother, of course, is familiar across many times and cultures, but her right to assert her authority is not subject to question.

Conclusions

As president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has literally become the Old Ma to the nation-state of Liberia. This may not be exactly what the position entails in the democratic theory of the West, but it provides an authoritative yet familiar form of political legitimacy that Liberia so desperately needed in the context of post-war reconstruction. The continuing problem, as Van Allen points out, is that not all mothers are equal. Is it possible to employ a “dual embodied citizenship and leadership” at this strategic moment while keeping in view the goal of moving beyond a “dualistic and heteronormative construction” of powerful motherhood (2006: 11)? Is it possible, as Van Allen asks, to retain the power of the universality of citizenship but recognize the particularity of gender as it is locally understood (2006: 11)? Some critics of both Johnson Sirleaf and the leadership of the women's peace movement, now transformed into a dizzying variety of registered NGOs, have emphasized the class origins of Liberia's cadre of female leaders (Fuest, 2008:19). Literate, English-speaking women who gained organizational experience and international contacts during the war years make perfect partners for the many multilateral and bi-lateral “gender consultants” deployed by post-war reconstruction programs. Some have questioned how well such “local experts” represent the ordinary women of Liberia, and if their new visibility is not just a new form of the old class politics. “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” (Fuest, 2008:19; see also 9amowitz & Moran, forthcoming). Fuest notes that aid policies have shifted in recent years to a “commitment to transform societies as a whole,” presumably to inoculate them against further conflicts that will require international intervention.

Gender ideologies that are seen as “traditional” or incompatible with democratic reform are obvious targets for such social transformation. In practice, these attempts have taken the form of “training the trainer” programs to disseminate the discourse of “women’s rights” throughout rural communities. Gender empowerment, understood explicitly as women’s empowerment, has become a theme in the national media, visible in everything from billboards and radio broadcasts to local theatre productions. “The Liberian trainers are committed to their tasks, are embedded in extensive social networks themselves, and thus serve as multipliers of international discourses outside of their job frameworks” (Fuest, 2008:20; see also Abramowitz, 2009).

In the process, an assertion about pre-war gender asymmetry has become all but canonical. While on a fact-finding visit with an American NGO in 2008, I was told repeatedly that “women are considered property” in Liberia, a formulation I had never heard in the pre-war years. What was truly striking was that this was asserted by everyone from government ministers, to female university students, to local human rights activists. While the violence of the war years undoubtedly fell disproportionately on women, this is now being explained as a consequence of pre-war gender relations. It is clear that international discourses about “traditional African patriarchy,” backed by the material and symbolic resources distributed by external actors, have taken root in the “post-war moment” (Abramowitz & Moran, forthcoming).

In this paper, I have argued that if Liberian women and men are to truly transform their society in the aftermath of catastrophic violence, they will need more than reductionist, essentialized versions of their own history imported from elsewhere. The creative synthesis pioneered by their new president provides one model, but others will undoubtedly emerge. Particularly needed are new discourses of masculinity, which can disrupt the construction of men as inherently violent. Many Liberian men took no part in the fighting, yet the disarmament and reintegration programs of the international community literally do not recognize their existence (Moran, forthcoming). If Johnson Sirleaf’s election is understood only as an alternative to a naturalized male incapacity for peaceful governance, both the innovative aspects of her candidacy and the possibility of future male leaders are obscured. Just as Johnson Sirleaf has successfully melded indigenous models of female authority with those embedded in a liberal human rights discourse, alternative forms of masculinity and masculine authority may yet emerge from Liberia’s post-war situation.

While the Liberian experience may not prove a model for what can be expected in all post-conflict situations, researchers elsewhere should keep in mind that not all “traditional” forms of gender asymmetry are inherently inimical to democratic reform. Some may, indeed, contain legitimate, authoritative political roles for women that can be grafted onto new forms of national citizenship. Women and men in all times and places have questioned and struggled against the social hierarchies in which they find themselves embedded, and war and outside intervention are not the only engines of social change. Post-conflict nations like Liberia are seen as fruitful sites for research on the relationship between conflict, gender, and democracy precisely because they are likely to generate innovative re-combinations of old and new forms of activism. External observers, however, must be able to recognize these innovations for what they are, rather than imposing their own dichotomous expectations, if our theoretical understandings are to be enhanced.

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