

*Women and Politics in Africa:
The Case of Liberia*

by

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As with the rest of the world, Africa is embroiled in a debate over the role of women in politics. As elsewhere, the crux of the movement for change focuses on the stranglehold men have historically held over the political realm. The emerging consensus is that, since women now have or are acquiring the skills and education previously only held by men, the age-old practice of relegating them to the periphery of politics is anachronistic. Given the fact that African states are plagued with the crises of underdevelopment, it is especially imperative that the skills and efforts of everyone be mobilized to address these problems. Thus, the traditional practice of marginalizing women is inimical to the interest of the entire society.

Against this background, using Liberia as an illustration, this study will examine the role of women in politics during the pre-civil war period (to 1980) and make projections about the future role of women in the post-war era.

Review of the Literature

In the African context, many believe that colonialism added a new dimension in typical debates about women's role in society because of the impact it had on the marginalization of women. The main argument of much revisionist scholarship is that women played important roles in precolonial politics. Colonialism imported the West modes of subordination of women and undermined traditional bases of women's authority. The continued subjugation of women in postcolonial regimes can thus be regarded as a legacy of imperialism, one that can be jettisoned when a fuller reevaluation of traditional African politics leads to its place.

Barbara J. Callaway, for example, argues that Ghanaian women had prominent positions in society, a pattern of power disrupted by the colonial presence.¹ Martin Chanock asserts that precolonial Malawian women were the political equals of men, and that sometimes they were the pre-eminent power since leadership succession was traced through matrilineage.² Jean-Claude Barbier claims that women could act as sovereign rulers among the Bavek of central Cameroon, when for instance the complexity of succession led three brothers to abandon the throne in favor of their sister.³ Ifi Amadiune argues for parallel power structure where women could take men's places in precolonial Nigerian society.⁴

Liberia presents an illuminating case study of the struggle of women for political power for several reasons. First, it emerged as a state with the coming of settlers from America.⁵ The modern state thus had a distinctive point of origin compared to other African nations, and was influenced from its inception by a western model. Second, it

had an ambivalent relationship with the history of imperialism in Africa: in that it was ruled from its inception by blacks, but under the sponsorship of a paternalistic white "charity organization."⁶ Third, until the mid-twentieth century indigenous Liberians, the majority, were disenfranchised.⁷ This exceptional history will thus illuminate the central issues in revisionist scholarship and feminist arguments about women's political power in Africa.

The Role of Women in Traditional Societies

Liberian society, like other African societies, has long been male dominated. The traditional duties of Liberian women have been taking care of children and doing domestic chores. However, this did not necessarily exclude them from power in other traditional societies.⁸ In fact, women's control over agriculture and over social reproduction gave them major influence over the economic realms of power, as reflected in having their own power associations, like the Sande societies.⁹ In traditional Liberia, however, Sande societies were subordinated to the male Poro societies, which functioned as political governing bodies.¹⁰ The Poro society was exclusively male dominated. It was this body that determined political issues pertinent to the various pre-state political formations (prior to 1822). Issues such as warfare, treaties, welfare, and elections were thus the domain of men in the pre-state societies. The women were deemed to be voiceless on such issues, and there is no strong evidence of women's resistance to male decision-making.¹¹ Thus, women had very little direct input in political matters.

Nevertheless, there were cases in Vai country where women made up a substantial portion of the governing body. Two examples were Queen Sandemani of Njagbaka (1730s) and Madam Tue of Be Sie in Kpe Gbondo of Vai Kone, who ruled the area from the late 1700s to early 1800s. These women governed their respective chiefdoms with dignity and respect, and their roles were not challenged by men or men's societies.¹² But such cases are anomalies. In general, women in the pre-state societies had little direct political influence.¹³

The Evolution of the Role of Women in Politics in the Post-state Era

The coming of the settlers and the creation of the Liberian state did nothing to empower women. Between 1847 to 1944, women had only a marginal role in Liberian politics. They were mostly confined to their traditional domestic roles. The wives of presidents, for instance, entertained guests while their husbands were engaged in politics. During this period no significant women's movement emerged to champion the cause of women in politics.¹⁴

As in many Western societies, however, women's "domestic" sphere could include activity outside the home that called upon moral feeling and nurturing, seen as particularly the domain of women. Women and women's organizations in Liberia during the period 1847-1940 played a key role in the advancement of education and the establishment of churches. These activities were significant in the development of their future political role because it accustomed them to having roles in the public sphere and gradually broke down male opposition. For example, the Jackson's and Evans's schools for girls in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, were established by women's groups. These schools taught religion and sewing among other subjects.¹⁵ Women also established churches that served both as the vehicles for worship and for the creation of a spirit of national unification. Among women active in this field were Doris Irvin, Mrs. M. J. Yates, and Mrs.

S. J. Lynch.¹⁶

The churches became important politically. They nurtured communal bonds, removed barriers between classes and ethnic groups, and cultivated sympathy, sisterhood and brotherhood between individuals and communities. To promote the unification of Liberians, the women established a variety of organizations: the Ladies Dorcas Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Baptist Union Sisters, the Ladies Mutual Relief Society, the Ladies Benevolent Practical Society, and the Missionary Native Church Aid Society.¹⁷

The direct participation of women in government as office holders came gradually. The process was initiated during the administration of President William V. S. Tubman (1944-71) when they were appointed to key political positions. For example, Mai Padmore was appointed Special Assistant to the President (today Minister of State for Presidential Affairs); Angie Brooks Randolph was named Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs; and Ellen Sandimani became Commissioner of the City of Monrovia (Mayor). Ellen Mill Scarborough, Marlinda Jackson Parker, and Catherine Cummings (Senator from Nimba) also took seats in the National Legislative.¹⁸

There were several reasons for this shift. First, Tubman was forced to adopt such a policy towards women because of outsider status in relation to the dominant Monrovia faction. Settlers like Tubman from Sinoe, Grand Bassa, and Cape Palmas were considered to be out of the mainstream of power. Despite the fact Tubman had Cape Palmas origins, President Edwin Barclay appointed him as his successor instead of C. L. Samson, favored by the Monrovia faction of the settlers. In order to deal with the resistance to his selection, Tubman formed alliances with other groups that were outside the political process including women and indigenous up-country people.¹⁹

Second, Tubman was also responding to the imperatives of the international liberation struggles in Africa at the time. Women had an important supporting role in those struggles, and, as a result, a major thrust of the liberation platform was the call for the rights of women as an integral part of liberation. Accordingly, Tubman was pressured by his own claim that he was a champion of the national liberation crusade in Africa.²⁰

Third, a group of educated Liberian women, comparing their position to that of their African sisters in the various liberation struggles, began to demand a greater political role. Liberian women were slowly and gradually gaining access to higher education, and with that process came the development of political consciousness.²¹

The new political consciousness was evident in the formation of women's organizations in the country. For example, in the 1950s the Women's Political Organization was established. Women sixteen years of age and over could become members.²² In the 1960s, the Liberian Women's Social and Political Movement was organized by Sarah Simpson George, the wife of one of the more influential representatives from Montserrado County. This movement was later chaired by Doris Banks Henriess, the wife of the Speaker of the House of Representatives. The primary goals of these movements were to elevate women's level of political consciousness and to agitate for their greater representation in the Liberian government.²³

These women, however, were members of the traditional settler ruling elite and did not substantially challenge the status quo. While gaining limited access to the political

process during the Tubman administration, only few women benefitted from political positions the bulk of the Liberian women remained marginalized and men still dominated the political arena. In short, even though Tubman's initiative did represent progress, it did not represent fundamental change.

Under Tubman's successor, William R. Tolbert Jr. (1971-1980) the number of women appointed to political positions increased more dramatically and took on a new character (see table 1). Among the women appointed to political positions during the Tolbert era were Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Minister of Finance; Mai Padmore, Minister of Health (later replaced by Dr. Kate Bryant); Angie Brooks, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court; Emma Shannon Walser, Circuit Court Judge; Ellen Sandimani, Mayor of Monrovia; and Antoinette Brown Sherman, President of the University of Liberia.²⁴

Women political appointees could be loosely classified into two groups during the Tolbert era. On the one hand, there were figures like Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Kate Bryant, who remained part of the status quo. As with women who served in the Tubman regime, their places owed little to activism. On the other hand, Antoinette Brown Sherman and Emma Shannon Walser were representatives of new group of women who supported and represented change. Mary Sherman, for example, gained the respect and admiration of the larger society through her activism. As President of the University of Liberia (UL), she challenged the government to make political and economic reforms. For example, during the April 14, 1979 political crisis, she defended the rights of Liberian citizens to organize successful demonstrations as vehicles for seeking redress of their grievances. Although the focus of the April 14 demonstration was on the government's plan to increase the price of rice, the staple food, nevertheless it was used as an opportunity to protest more than a century of injustices. Early in 1980 she again challenged the Tolbert government when some of her professors were arrested from the classroom and sent to jail. She demanded their immediate release. During her Presidency of UL, it became one of the major centers for the promotion of democracy, at a time when such dissidence in the rest of the country was suppressed. Emma Walser, a Circuit Court Judge, also challenged the legal hegemony of the regime. While it was customary for judges to decide cases based on instructions from the president, Walser gained a reputation for deciding cases strictly on merit and the law.

The overriding factor that accounted for the phenomenal increase in the number of women public office holder was that the Liberian political landscape had changed dramatically by the time Tolbert ascended to the presidency. The transformation resulted from several developments. First, there was the emergence of the first grassroots women's interest groups calling for respect for women's rights as part of the process of democratization.²⁵ Second, there was a significant increase of the number of women who had attained higher education. These women had a major role in the push for women's rights, agitating for equal representation and participation in the political process. Third, even outside the activist women's groups, change had taken place. A new generation of politically conscious women had arisen. This group included students at UL, Cuttington University College (CUC), and the various high schools as well as a few professionals. The central thrust of this new generation was to challenge the traditional domination of the political scene by Liberian men. Although these women largely lacked

formal organization and structure, they shared a common belief in the rights of women in politics as well as in other areas.²⁶ Fourth, Liberian women were also influenced by currents in international feminism. For example, in some African countries, notably Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, women were agitating for their rights--especially equal employment opportunities and higher salaries. Similarly, in the United States and the countries of Western Europe, the women's movement became a major agent of change. They were challenging the male-dominated power structure that relegated women to a peripheral role. These trends consequently shaped a new level of political consciousness for Liberian women who were challenging the dominant view that politics is a man's game.²⁷ Fifth, the struggle for women's rights was helped by the fact that progressive Liberian men began to develop the awareness that they had an interest in opposing the subjugation of women. They supported women's rights as part of the broader struggle for democracy and saw women as potential allies in the broader crusade for change.²⁸

After more than a century and a quarter of settler hegemony, Samuel K. Doe took power through a military coup in 1980, becoming the first non-settler to govern Liberia. By 1980, Liberian women had already established a foothold in the political process. Thus Doe's regime was compelled to give women a role in the Liberian political process. Under Doe, several women were appointed to important government positions. For example, Sandolo Belle became Minister of Health, McCloid Darpoh was selected Minister of Commerce as well as head of the newly created Ministry of Transportation, and Aletha Johnson was chosen Managing Director of the Liberian Petroleum Refinery Company (LPRC).²⁹ Many of these women, however, were perceived as pawns and opportunists rather than as qualified persons by some critics of Doe's authoritarian regime, particularly lay people. Although these women had the requisite training and credentials, the fact that they were perceived by members of the society as Doe's concubines overshadowed their qualifications.³⁰

On the other hand, women like Mary Sherman and young women influenced by her example, especially on various high school and college campuses continued to challenge the power structure. In 1984, Mary Sherman challenged Doe when he arrested Amos Sawyer, George Kieh, and three others on charges of treason. This led to her dismissal as President of UL.³¹

Women and Politics in the Post-Civil war Era: Some Projections

Based on the historical discussion on women's participation in Liberian politics, what does the future hold for them? Any future must await the resolution of the civil war in Liberia, which complicates and restricts all social development in the country. But several general predictions can be made. First, with the increasing number of educated and professional women, always at the core of agitation for women's rights, the future looks bright for social change. For example, women involved in some of the Liberian-based civic and political organizations have been pushing those organizations to give a greater role to women as well as to promote the principle of equality of the sexes.

Second, progressive Liberian men are being forced, as a consequence of the pressure from women, to match their political rhetoric with actions in support of women's rights.

A rethinking of cultural values that have historically (both precolonial and colonial

but especially post-settler) reduced women to a subordinate role in society should be undertaken. Such change, in time, will benefit not only elite women, but also the daily lives and the social conditions of all.

These projections are based on the impact the civil war has had on cultural values. For example, the fact that women were combatants for the various warring factions challenged the stereotyped view that they are weaker than men. This phenomenon should help shape the views of men, by propelling them to allow women to have a greater role in the new political process.

Similarly, the civil war has occasioned a rethinking of the relationship between democratic rights--including those for women--and cultural values. That is, based on various discussions with an assortment of Liberian males, there is the emerging realization on their part that the building of a new democratic society must include giving women equal rights and opportunities.

Conclusion

We can see two major contradictory patterns in the political involvement of women in Liberia in recent decades. On the one hand, the tradition established by Tubman of recruiting women for political positions on the basis of the needs of the power structure was continued by his successors, including Doe. Women who gained positions in this way have proven unlikely to challenge the status quo, or even to work for the cause of other women.

On the other hand, recent decades have seen the emergence of more politically conscious activists for women's rights (especially within the educational system). These women, combining a conscious feminism with a wider challenge to the political status quo, have demanded political change, including the provision of greater participation for women.

The role of education is particularly key in this process. Many Liberian women by the 1960s had attained a quality education as a prerequisite to governmental participation. Some traveled to the United States and Europe for their higher education. While abroad, they were exposed to and influenced by feminist ideas. Returning home, they implemented these ideas for practical purposes, demanding equal status and representation in the Liberian government. Educated Liberian women organized grassroots movements promoting the rights of women. Some became educators in prominent Liberian institutions and helped raised the level of political consciousness among students. Others served in government, setting an example for others to follow.

Nevertheless, it must also be recognized that appointment of women to governmental positions reflected the personal interests of those in power. An obvious pattern back to the Tubman era, this tendency became more prevalent during Doe's regime. Many of the women appointed during this time reflected Doe's sexual interest in them. This damaged the cause of women, since society did not see them as qualified. Although some of these women were in fact qualified for their posts, their social connection with rulers led society to downplay their educational qualifications. In power, such women seldom proved aggressive advocates of substantial change in the gender dynamics of Liberian society and politics. Such patterns of appointment must change before women can have a more solidly established role in Liberian politics.

The Liberian case can be used to illuminate the historical and contemporary situation of women in Africa precisely because of its historical distinctiveness--and because of how little difference that distinctiveness has made. Revisionist historians have blamed colonialism for the subjugation of women, and they credited liberation movements with creating new roles for women. Liberia never experienced full-fledged colonialism, however dependent it may have been on Western paternalism, cultural models, and financing. For that reason, it also never experienced, either, a full national liberation struggle, much as Samuel Doe may have wanted to declare his seizure of power to be seen as such. The pattern of subordination of women in Liberia nevertheless replicates that across much of Africa: women's power in traditional society being grounded in their domestic role and restricted in character; even that power being lost through the course of the creation of the nation state; and gains being made for women in both society and politics only in the latter half of the twentieth century, resulting from the combination of education, labor and politic activism, and the influence of Western feminism.

Since, in Liberia, colonialism cannot be blamed for the erosion of traditional power for women, perhaps historians should look to the more general processes of state formation and development for clues to that loss of power. Since no liberation movement freed Liberian women, perhaps it is rather in the further stages of development or in the global arena that we should look for explanations for advances by women in recent decades.

NOTES

1. Barbara J. Callaway, "Women in Ghana," in Women in the World, ed. Lynn B. Inglitzin and Ruth Ross, (Santa Barbara, Calif: Clio Books, 1976), 189-201.
2. Martin Chanock, "Making Customary Law: Men, Women, and Courts in Colonial Northern Rhodesia," in African Women and the Law, ed. Margret Jean Hay and Marcia Wrights, (Boston: Boston University African Studies Center, 1982), 53-67.
3. Jean-Claude Barbier, "Mimbo, reine d'Asem," in Femmes du Cameroun, ed. Jean-Claude Barbier, (Bondy and Paris: Orstom-Kathala, 1985), 133-50.
4. Ifi Amadiune, Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), 13.
5. J. Gus Liebenow, Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 5.
6. Harry Johnston, Liberia (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1906), 46.
7. Liebenow, Liberia: Evolution of Privilege, 73-74.
8. Traditional here refers to the pre-settler state.

9. Clyde J. Mitchell, "The Woman's Place in African Advancement," Optima 9 (September 1859): 124-31. The phrase, "social reproduction" here means the role of women in reproducing the social order through their functions as nurturers and early educators of children.
10. Kenneth Little, "The Poro Society As an Arbiter of Culture," African Studies 7(March 1948):1-15.
11. The Tribes of the Western Province (Monrovia: Bureau of Folkways Interior Department, 1955),7.
12. Tribes of Western Province,8-10.
13. Tribes of the Western Province,86.
14. Mary Antoinette G. Brown, "Education and National Development in Liberia, 1800-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University 1967), 25-40.
15. Tenneh J. Hoff, "The Role of Women in National Development in Liberia, 1800-1900 (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1989), 88.
16. Hoff, "The Role of Women," 76.
17. Hoff, "The Role of Women," 77-79.
18. Martin Lowenkopf, Politics in Liberia (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1976),178.
19. J. Gus Liebenow, Liberia: The Quest for Democracy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 63-64.
20. Hannah B. Jones, "The Struggle for Political and Cultural Unification in Liberia" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1962), 24-56.
21. William S. Hoff, "The Role of the University in Liberia in National Development, 1960-1980" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1987), 36-47.
22. Joseph S. Guannu, An Introduction to Liberian Government (Smithtown, New York: b Exposition Press, 1982),57.
23. Guannu, An Introduction to Liberian, 57-58; Liebenow, Liberia: The Evolution, 128.
24. Liebenow, Liberia: The Quest for Democracy, 217.
25. Brown, "Education and National Development," 45-56.
26. Lawrence Marinelli, The New Liberia (New York: Praeger, 1976),50.
27. Jacqueline Jones, "My Mother Was Much of a Woman, Black Women, Work and Family Under Slavery," Feminist Studies 8 (Summer): 235-69.
28. Lawrence, The New Liberia, 46.
29. The Daily Observer, 17 March, 1982; Liebenow, Liberia: The Quest, 217-228.

30. It was the general assumption of the Liberian population that Doe had affairs with women he appointed to positions. Some claimed to have seen him visiting these women frequently at night.

31. Liebenow, Liberia: The Quest, 307.