Making a Difference? Assessing the Legacy of Africa's First Elected Woman President

Robtel Neajai Pailey

University of Ottawa
Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS)
& Africa Policy Study Group
Co-Sponsored Panel

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Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: A Presidency of Paradoxes

- CONTEXT MATTERS: Changing landscape of leadership in Liberia
- Accomplishments & failures in policy & practice
- Femocrat whose actions generated both feminist and anti-feminist outcomes

First-hand account

Scholarly analysis

Leadership in Postcolonial Africa

Trends Transformed by Independence

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Chapter 8

Patriarchy, Power Distance, and Female Presidency in Liberia

Robtel Neajai Pailey

Introduction: President…That's Women's Work!

At an International Peace Institute speaker's event in September 2012, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf shared this revealing anecdote about the gradually shifting gender roles in her country: A teacher asked one of her male pupils what he wanted to be when he grew up and he replied, "Vice President." When the teacher prodded the student further, wondering why he opted for the second highest elected office and not the first, the young boy said emphatically: "You want my friends to laugh at me? President…that's women's work!"[1]

Although Liberia only elected its first female head of state in 2005, the young boy's response illustrates how the image and function of the Liberian presidency has undergone a series of reconfigurations through violent contestations in the past three decades. "Founded" in 1847 by repatriated blacks from the United States, Liberia was ruled by settler oligarchs representing the True Whig Party until a 1980 coup led by an indigenous master sergeant in the army, Samuel Kanyon Doe, toppled the one-party government (Dunn 2009). Doe's coup and subsequent ascendancy to the presidency in 1985 was short-lived, spiraling Liberia into a series of counterinsurgencies followed by all-out armed conflict. The first postwar elections in 1997 would bring rebel leader Charles Taylor to the presidency, yet he too was ousted in 2003 leading to a period of asylum in Nigeria

Popular commentary

OPINION / WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Is Liberia's Sirleaf really standing up for women?

by **Robtel Neajai Pailey** & **Korto Reeves Williams**

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PRESIDENT?!!! That's Women's Work!!!

- International Peace Institute 2012 event EJS told narrative about young boy

- 2005-Watershed moment for Liberia and Africa
- EJS defeats 21 male candidates, including George Weah in second round
- Women voted in record numbers
- 2011-EJS wins second mandate to lead Liberia

- EJS follows long lineage of Liberian female leaders

(PRECEDENT already set)

*Ruth Sando Perry, head of transitional government 1996-1997

*Angie Brooks, first African female president of UN General Assembly-1970

- EJS PRESIDENCY based on changing role of women in private and public spheres during & after war

2005-2017
Liberia=poster child for women's empowerment

- 2005 election of first female head of state on the continent of Africa
- 2009 hosted International Women's Colloquium with Finnish President
- 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for advancing the rights of women and girls

BUT

- Steady=women's political leadership does not necessarily guarantee advancements in pro-women policies & practices

General Achievements

- Restructured security institutions (UNMIL drawdown)
- Forged fragile peace (held warlords at bay)
- Debt relief of over $4 billion
- Renegotiated some concession agreements (Firestone & ArcelorMittal)
- Rehabilitated infrastructure (roads, ports, hydro)
- Devolved fiscal authority to counties (CDF)
- 'Look South' policy (secured 'Southern' investors in Nigeria, Libya, China, Malaysia, Brazil)

Women-specific Achievements

- **Political reforms**

*Appointment of female superintendents & Cabinet officials (technocrats)

- **Economic reforms**

*Increased power and visibility of market women=human face of Sirleaf's presidency

*Renovated markets, literacy training, access to capital through bank loans, safe storage, banking facilities, childcare

- **Socio-legal reforms**

*Anti-Rape Law, National Gender Policy, Equal Rights of Customary Law, National Girls Education Policy

*GBV unit in MoGD

*Renovation of Criminal Court E to fast-track gender-based violence cases

General Failures

- Recurring budget shortfalls in second term
- Rampant corruption with impunity (recycled govt. officials)
- Nepotism
- Education outcomes poor (education system a ‘mess’)
- Healthcare system in shambles (Ebola)
- Inequality remains high (salaries)
- TRC recommendations largely ignored
- Extraction of natural resources with little value addition

Women-specific Failures

- Criminal Court E only in capital, Monrovia (no forensic facilities to charge rapists)
  *Rape= could be a bailable offence (Senate October 2017 ruling)

- Despite rhetoric of women's empowerment, representation of women in political leadership=VERY LOW

  *Did not actively support 2010 gender equity in politics act

  *Few women in elected office

  In 2014 elections, only 3/30 women elected to Senate (less than in 2005)

  In 2017 elections, only 10/58 women ran for representative on UP ticket

  In 2017 elections, only one female prez. candidate (won 0.8% of vote) & one VP candidate

  In 2017 elections, only 9 women won House seats out of 162 eligible female candidates (no change since 2011)

  *Few women in appointed cabinet positions at a time (Currently=4/21)

  In first term, Finance, Commerce, Agriculture, Justice, Foreign Affairs, Youth & Sports ministers=accomplished women with international credentials

  NOW=many strategic positions (Education, Commerce, Public Works) occupied by inexperienced and underqualified men

Concluding remarks

- Canadian Feminist Int'l Assistance Policy says inclusive governance=vital pillar of women's empowerment

- EJS=FEMOCRAT <u>not</u> FEMINIST

*Amina Mama's 1995 *African Development* article

Feminism attempts to shatter political glass ceiling while femocracy keeps it intact

*EJS rejects feminism as 'extremism' in 2017 *Guardian* article

- Another female president for Liberia soon? HIGHLY UNLIKELY

"We did not do enough to ensure parity"(EJS in September 2017 CNN interview)

- LESSON LEARNED: Electing female head of state futile if person not committed to feminist agenda (pol. + socio-economic equality)