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The logo for the International Institute of Social Studies, featuring the word 'Erasmus' in a stylized, cursive script.

Liberian Women's Quest for Increased Representation
and Participation in Politics

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Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the International Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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Acronyms

AFELL – Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia

ANC – Alternative National Congress

FDA – United States Food and Drug Administration

HoR – House of Representatives

HoS – House of Senate

RWP – Rural Women President

YWCA – Young Women Christian Organization

Appendices

1. Liberian Lawmakers in Session.
2. Graph depicting women representation in the Liberian Legislature from 2005 – 2017.

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I am profoundly grateful to the Almighty God, without whom this opportunity would have been impossible. *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).*

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Though you are not here, but

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Abstract

The end of Liberia's civil war in 2003 brought an unprecedented number of women into politics. However, the number of women elected to both Houses since 2005 has varied and tended to decline overall. This research acknowledges the low representation of women in politics and seeks to understand the reason for this trend. It also discusses their quest for increased women participation. Findings indicate that in addition to patriarchy, resources and traditional beliefs and institutional capacity, women underrepresentation is also owed to lip-service of political parties, inadequate information dissemination, education, and poor follow-up plans. Having more women in politics signals that both men and women should be lawmakers in order to secure a balance of power in political decision-making. The growth, empowerment and development of half Liberia's population, women, depend on it. Having more women elected to political office should not be the only goal. Women lawmakers should struggle for sustained representation that results in positive results for men, women and children. Disappointingly, nepotism and patronage politics continue to abound, even in a country like Liberia that gave Africa its first woman president. This shows how difficult it can be to get rid of old, stubborn norms. An increase of women in politics signifies that norms can be changed and are changing and represents a step toward greater equality. If women are not represented politically, their voices will not be heard, and their interests are less likely to be advanced.

Relevance to Development Studies

Women's under-representation in politics is a current issue. Though some gains have been made through quotas in many African countries such as Rwanda, Uganda, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Senegal, more needs to be desired. Many countries including Liberia have not embraced the quota system, deeming it undemocratic, but quota representation remains germane because women have only just begun the emancipation process. The intersectionality of women with disabilities is relatively new. Their issues are often placed somewhere in 'women in politics'. Discussing them in this study brings to the fore how little they are researched, and their peculiar issues virtually ignored. This research is relevant because it seeks to provide a roadmap for the answers to pertinent questions regarding the political capabilities and development of women. Hopefully, findings from this research will provide positive steps to ensure the socio-political development of women by increasing women representation in politics, not only in Liberia, but globally. Having women in politics is less about having more numbers and more about achieving equality across all spheres of society, to provide for all a right: empowerment.

Keywords

Feminism, gender, women in politics, empowerment, intersectionality, patriarchy.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Before the Liberian civil war, Liberian women had held influential political positions, though on a very low scale. During elections held in 1985, Ruth Sando Perry and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won seats in the Liberian Senate. The latter however, refused to take her seat, citing elections rigging by then dictator Samuel Doe. Perry later became Liberia's and Africa's first woman head of state. She led Liberia to elections following seven years of civil strife, ushering in the government of rebel leader Charles Taylor in 1997 (Lee 2007). Liberia was ruled by settlers until April 12, 1980, when a military coup brought to power the first indigenous leader, Samuel Doe. Ten years later, a rebel incursion aimed at overthrowing Doe plunged the country into 14 years of bloody civil carnage.

Rebels attacked the country from several fronts, plunging the country into turmoil till 2003, when a peace agreement was finally brokered in Accra, Ghana. The 14-year war claimed lives, disabled and displaced approximately 200 thousand people.

The end of civil conflict, however, might not have been possible without the persistence of courageous Liberian women led by Leymah Gbowee who took to the streets, rain or shine, demanding warlords end the bloodshed and violence. Under the banner 'Liberian Women Mass Action for Peace', women put aside religious, ethnic and class differences for several months to pressure warlords to end the conflict. Under normal circumstances, the men would have been the ones to take the lead. But they were left at home to care for children and do household chores while the women put their lives in harm's way, every day.

“Conflicts disrupted traditional gender roles, thus opening opportunities for women and men to reenvision new roles for women, including political ones. Often, women's movements were able to demand increased representation in peace negotiations that generally occurred with the end of the conflict as in the cases of Liberia and Sudan” (Tripp 2013: 22).

Liberian women received worldwide acclaim for this bold step that ended the civil war of more than a decade (*Pray the Devil Back to Hell* 2008). In 2005, the Liberian Legislature recorded an unprecedented 16% (Interparliamentary Union) women representation; Liberia also elected Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first democratically elected woman president into power (Debusscher and de Almargo 2016: 294, Adams 2016: 279). Sirleaf's rise to power ignited hope in Liberian women, who reasoned that finally, women too could become president. Liberian women felt she would understand their issues more than a man could, and that it was time a woman takes the helm of power, which had been run by men since independence (Cooper 2017: 149-158). This culminated in Liberia having two Nobel Peace Prize winners, in 2011. Women then began

ving for positions of public trust, in their political parties and constituencies. Women's contribution to the quest for peace made them aware they have much potential and are capable of venturing into seeking political power and succeeding. Women political participation came to be seen as the medium to foster overall women empowerment. Liberia, however, has witnessed a decline in women lawmakers since the surge in 2005. Today, women representation in the Legislature is 9.70%.

This study focuses on the post-war years 2003 to present, and the concentration is on the underrepresentation of Liberian women in politics. Nonetheless, I dedicate a section to a vulnerable group: women with disabilities in politics. I saw this as pertinent to understanding the challenges being experienced because of the intersectionality of being a woman and disabled. Women with disabilities account for approximately 1.54% (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services 2008) of the population due to the aftermaths of the war. Using a qualitative approach, I bring, in their words, the views of women, the challenges of their underrepresentation and their thoughts and ideas to increase women participation in politics.

This chapter gives the reader a little history and context about Liberia. It gives an overview of the Liberian political landscape, a review of literature, the methodology used, the research problem, questions and risks, challenges and ethical dilemmas. Chapter two discusses issues facing Liberian women in politics. The possibility of affirmative action and male lawmakers' role in passing women-friendly legislations is discussed in the third chapter. I present the findings in the fourth chapter; women brainstorm ideas on increasing women political participation in the fifth chapter. The sixth chapter concludes this research.

1.1 About Liberia and Liberian Women

Liberia is a country on the West Coast of Africa, founded by the American Colonization Society (ACS) for freed slaves from North America in the 1820s. It was a colony of the ACS until July 26, 1847 when freed slaves, known as settlers, declared independence, becoming the first on the African continent to do so (Mongrue 2011: 2-3).

The country covers 43 thousand square miles of land, separated into fifteen counties and 73 electoral districts. It follows the republican style of government. Liberia has a population of 3.476 million people, half of whom are female (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services 2008).

Women have been influential figures throughout Liberia's history. For example, there is Chief Suakoko, a renowned female leader of Liberia's largest ethnic group, the Kpelles. She is remembered for bridging the gap of disunity between the settlers and indigenous people. (Moran 2019:4). Angie Elizabeth

Brooks-Randolph is the only African woman, and second woman from any nation to preside over the UN General Assembly, its 24th Session (1969-1970) (<https://www.un.org/en/>). Today, Jewel Howard-Taylor is Liberia's first female vice president (The Cable 2017).

1.2 The Research Problem

Women empowerment seeks opportunities for women who are otherwise disadvantaged as a result of social structures so that they are at par with their male counterparts. The 1995 Beijing Conference reasoned that women who have been able to ascend to positions of decision-making such as the Legislature, in order to achieve equal representation of women in decision-making, would ensure gender balance and increase women participation in decision-making.

“The Beijing Platform of Action require states to commit, take measures to establish and ensure gender balance in governmental bodies... to increase women representation. In 1995, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) endorsed a 30 percent target of women participation at decision-making levels. Women political participation promotes gender equality by increasing the number of women in the parliament, improves policy outcomes, and promotes the inclusiveness of minority groups in public spheres” (Aseidu et al. 2018: 2).

Women involvement in politics became a topical issue in the mid-1990s (Tripp 2013). This change in political advancement took place mainly in post-conflict countries in Africa. Nonetheless, these conflicts also created the space for women to exert themselves, since it was clear that women and children are the ones that suffer the brunt of conflict.

Women formed peace movements to try to end conflict in their countries. In Liberia, it was the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace which greatly influenced formal peace talks. As conflict declined and eventually ended, and peace negotiations were being made, women activists found spaces to press for the right agenda and increased representation during dialogues. Meanwhile, the international community was mobilizing for women rights globally, including political representation. Countries seeking to secure donor funding had to comply with international treaties (Tripp 2012:5). In 2005, the Liberian Legislature recorded an unprecedented 16% women representation.

Women's presence in the Liberian Legislature appears to be steady but tends to decline overall since 2005. In their article 'Is Liberia's Sirleaf Really Standing Up for Women', Pailey and Williams discuss the alarming rate at which women's political participation has dwindled since the last three elections since 2005 (2017:2). Despite the Constitution providing equal rights to all citizens to partake in politics, women in politics still find themselves in a cycle of disempowerment and violence. The purpose of this research is to explore the intricacies promoting

women underrepresentation in Liberian politics and actions being considered to challenge such barriers.

1.3 Key Concepts and Overview of Liberian Politics

In this section the key concepts are briefly discussed, but more in-depth review of relevant literature can be found in throughout the paper. The key concepts are women in politics, gender, feminism, intersectionality, empowerment, and patriarchy. This section will also provide a general overview of Liberian politics.

1.3.1 Key Concepts

Women in Politics: a Gender Issue?

Women and their representation in politics have become a topical issue in these contemporary times. Rwanda remains the highest at 61.3% as at February 2019 (Interparliamentary Union, at: www.interparliamentaryunion.org). Women presence in politics a) shapes symbolic representation, exuding competence and strength, b) provides the platform for voices of women to be heard, thus partaking in life-changing decisions normally made by men, and c) portrays some sense of integrity, since women are seen as new to politics and not stained by corruption and clientelism. They are also seen as those that suffered the brunt of conflict often not fuelled by women (Mendelberg & Karpowitz 2016:488-489, Tripp 2013).

The FDA defines gender as a person's self-representation as male or female, or how that person is responded to by social institutions based on the individual's gender presentation (at: <https://www.fda.gov>). This study identifies women as the gender under scrutiny, particularly women in politics, having suffered the brunt of patriarchal and societal norms. As Amadiume (2015) – writing about Nigeria-states, “Economic changes in colonial times undermined women's status and reduced their political role; these patriarchal tendencies exist today, to the detriment of women” (2015:152).

Feminism, Intersectionality and Empowerment

Feminism is the ideology that has the same objective of seeking political, socio-economic, psychosocial and general equality for all persons, irrespective of sex. Towards this end, there have been concerted efforts to counter gender stereotypes and opportunities for women. Different feminists' movements are campaigning for women's rights of various kinds, including the right to women political representation. According to the Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, patriarchy is ‘a social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line broadly’; and ‘control by men of a disproportionately large share of power’. The notion was coined by feminists

and implies a social system whereby men predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property.

Feminist sociologists see patriarchy as a social product and focus attention on how gender roles affect power differentials between men and women. The disempowerment of women is owed largely to this system which has been ongoing for centuries. One example in the Nigerian context, is Ifi Amadiume (2015) who discusses how, in much African social science literature and fiction, feminism is viewed by ordinary African men as a mad and irrational battle cry of women, often inspired by outside (Western) values. Women who dare to acquire more knowledge or seek public positions of trust and thus confront patriarchy, are perceived as feminists because they ‘want to do men’s work’.

Because of its foreign origin, many women, conservatives and activists alike, in Africa and also in Liberia tend to view the notion of feminism with something like nervous suspicion (Amadiume 2015:185). Within feminism, intersectionality theory tried to tackle the question of differences and similarities related specially to race. Intersectionality is a tool to analyze diverse forms of discrimination in which people – men find themselves as a result of, for example, being born in one part of the world, or into a clan, or with disability. As introduced by Kimberly Crenshaw, intersectionality is about how inequalities persist, categories like gender, race and class are best understood as overlapping and mutually constructive rather than isolated and distinct. Cho et al. (2013) argue that power relations between class, gender, race, age and so on define the limits of power relations, often in complex ways given women and men’s varying identities and positions in society (Cho et al. 2013: 803).

Bystydzienski explains empowerment as a process by which persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in development of activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly. In its course people become enabled to govern themselves effectively. This process involves the use of power; power is seen as ‘power to’ or power as competence which is generated and shared by the disenfranchised as they begin to shape the content and structure of their daily existence and so participate in a movement for social change (Bystydzienski 1992:3 as cited in Yuval-Davis 1994: 179).

Patriarchy

Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines patriarchy as ‘a social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line broadly’; and ‘control by men of a disproportionately large share of power’.

It is a social system where men are seen as the dominant figures in roles which exert political, authoritative, and social hierarchical power. Sociologists view patriarchy as how gender roles affect power differentials between men and

women. The disempowerment of women is owed largely to this system which has been ongoing for centuries (Makama 2013:115).

1.3.3 Liberian Political Landscape and Political Parties

Generally, politics in Liberia is pretty much like that practiced in many parts of the world, where a political party vies for the country leadership, promising every good thing literally, maybe except heaven. In modern politics, policymaking is derived primarily from lawmakers¹ in a country's parliament and those granted the authority to do so (Ackermann et al 2011:432, Bardach 2012, Thissen and Walker 2013). Upon acquiring power, it becomes an 'Animal Farm'² setting. According to the Liberian Constitution,

“a political party shall be an association with a membership of not less than five hundred qualified voters in each of the country's fifteen counties, whose activities include canvassing for votes on any public issue or in support of a candidate for electoral post or office” (Republic of Liberia: Liberian Constitution of 1986).

Liberia follows the republican style of governance, similar to the United States of America. The Constitution also gives right to an independent candidate³ to seek political office. A political party must meet the minimum requirements set out by the National Elections Commission (Government of Liberia: National Elections Commission 2017). While the Constitution guarantees freedom of participation in politics irrespective of sex, religion or ethnic background, (Republic of Liberia: Liberian Constitution of 1986), it **does not** [emphasis mine] specifically provide opportunities for vulnerable populations such as women, the disabled and youth. Notably, at least 15 African countries such as Rwanda, Uganda, Senegal, Algeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe have applied some form of electoral gender quota through constitutional arrangement to increase women in parliament (Kang 2018: 77, Bauer 2012: 370). In Article 84 of its 2013 Constitution, Zimbabwe has taken the campaign up a notch by including quota for war veterans (Zimbabwe 2013).

One must register with a political party to be a member, irrespective of sex, religion or ethnic background. By law however, one cannot be a member of more than one political party at a time. Any Liberian has the right to form a political party. There is no laid-down rule stating a period with which one must

¹ People elected to create laws in the interest of the people they serve.

² A story written by George Orwell, about a farmer being driven from his farm by his animals, who felt ill-treated. The story ends with far worse treatment was meted out to animals by animals. It is in my mind a classic story of African politics, where opposition see the worst in their leaders, but do far worse when they ascend to power.

³ A person seeking electoral office with or without his own organization, acting independently of a political party.

be a member of a political party before running for public office (www.necliberia.org).

Liberians have a peculiar way of voting. For presidential positions, votes are cast on party lines. This may be owed to the thought that voters feel more comfortable entrusting the country to an institution, rather than a person, like an independent candidate. However, when it comes to senatorial and representative positions, constituents vote for the individual, irrespective of whether the person is from a political party or is an independent candidate. This does not mean political parties do not play a role in the elections for lawmakers; they do; however, voters' decision when voting lawmakers is not based on the strength or popularity of the political party, but those of the individual candidates representing those parties.

Women representation in politics is pertinent in any democratic society. However, due to several reasons to be discussed later, women find themselves in a cycle of disempowerment. Being denied basic opportunities give rise to their powerlessness to compete with men for social, political, economic and cultural rights. As a result, finding women willing to partake in elections can be difficult. Women in politics has become quite the trend and a standard for stating the level of tolerance and improvements in governance for many countries, especially developing ones such as Liberia. Liberia has a Legislature of 103, 10 of whom are women.

1.4 Literature Review

Much research on women in politics and gender quotas has been carried out. Uganda was the first to introduce the quota system in Africa, followed by Tanzania and Eritrea in 1992 and 1994 respectively. Other African countries followed in the 2000s. (Kang 2018:77). There is less information on politics in Liberia, even less on women in politics in Liberia.

In Liberia traditional and religious patriarchal structures remain entrenched. Because women must care for the home and children, many do not even consider the idea of running for public office, though they meet the qualifications. Running for office without the support of male relatives makes a woman less likely to win elections. Lack of resources to run an effective campaign, such as fundraising, public speaking, media access and money to register with the elections commission, buy campaign materials, travel and host supporters. Many women abandon the campaign when they run out of finances, and their support is often bought by a male contestant (Kellow 2010: 19, 23).

There were several studies on violence against women in politics. In particular, the work of Lena Krook stood out. She reveals in their research that reports of physical attacks, intimidation and harassment aimed at politicians, activists and voters are not new. This is due to the age-old practice of associating

men with the ‘public space’ of politics and the economy, and women with the ‘private space’ of caregiving (Krook 2017: 74, 78-79).

“Women are thus often regarded as interlopers in the “male” space of politics, giving rise to various forms of hostility toward female leaders” (Krook 2017:78).

Culture is also often used as justification to perpetrate violence against women. One culture-based resource is to question the sexual identity or morality of politically active women. Charges that a woman is a bad wife, mother, or daughter may be spread as rumours or posted online, harming not only political prospects but also personal lives (Krook 2017: 79).

The issue of violence against women with disability in politics is one that is not researched much but buried somewhere under ‘violence against women in politics’. Literature about this issue is lacking; though its importance cannot be overemphasized. Price (2018) agrees on several issues regarding people with disabilities in leadership roles. The study concurs that people with disabilities are often excluded from political and social leadership in their countries (Price 2018: 5-6). The essence of good governance is to also allow marginalized groups including people with disabilities to have a say in decisions affecting them (Gitonga 2018:3).

1.5 Research Objectives and Question(s)

1.5.1 Research Objective

The objective of this research is to explore what challenges Liberian women politicians are undergoing, and efforts they are making to address those challenges and reduce their underrepresentation in political decision-making. To explore the barriers to women representation in politics and opportunities to increase women representation, this research discusses -

- the current political atmosphere for women in Liberia;
- three stalled pro-women legislations and relations of power between women lawmakers and their male counterparts in influencing legislations for women; and
- efforts being considered by women to increase women presence in politics.

1.5.2 Research Question(s)

Main research question:

What explains the under-representation and resulting disempowerment of Liberian women in politics?

Sub-questions:

- i. What are the issues facing women, including women with disabilities who dare to enter the Liberian political landscape?
- ii. How has the relationship between women and men lawmakers influenced pro-women legislation?
- iii. What can women do to increase women representation in politics?

Table 2: Liberian Lawmakers in session. (Credit: Liberian Observer daily)



1.6 Methodology

Data for this research paper comprises both primary and secondary data. Primary data comes from Liberian female and male policymakers, women in politics, women constituents, and prominent women of Liberia. Secondary data comes from reliable sources in the field of women's empowerment, as well as conventions, and existing and proposed legislations.

1.6.1 Qualitative Data Collection Process

The data collection process is of a qualitative nature and builds on interviews from a cross section of women, using semi-structured interviews as well as a focus group discussion, along with desk research. A questionnaire was prepared for those that could only be reached by email. The respondents' selection process was by purposive sampling. The research targeted women who have worked or are involved in politics, including differently abled women, and women constituents. A journalist colleague consented and was instrumental in assisting me to contact interviewees and set up interviews.

The use of secondary data rested primarily on its importance, necessity and accessibility. As much as possible, data from locally acquired sources were used. Interviews being semi-structured provided the platform for more ideas and new issues from interviewees and put them at ease. Except for one, all the interviews were conducted on-site, with locations decided only by the interviewees. The data explains how politics is viewed and practiced in the Liberian context, which I discovered during my literature review is not much different from other countries in Africa.

I also paid close attention to my interviewees' facial expression, body language, and other gestures. I kept reminding myself to keep an open mind, bearing in mind that people respond differently to issues, and that each interviewee is peculiar in her/his thoughts and opinions of the same issue.

1.6.2 Positionality

My work as a journalist exposed me to the cultural, socio-economic and educational challenges facing Liberian woman and girls. My engagement first started out as an individual initiative, helping girls and young women involved in prostitution leave the streets and get themselves in other means of livelihood.

Gradually, I went on to volunteering my services for the Women of Liberia, first through the Women NGOs Secretariat, then the Ministry of Gender and Development, working on issues of both women and children. The opportunity to work for the Women of Liberia on the national level came when I was contracted to head the Gender Desk at the Constitution Review Committee⁴. I was mandated to work along with the Women of Liberia and suggest women-specific propositions for referendum.

Hence, my passion for the improved livelihood of women and girls is my inspiration for this research. Politics is especially important in improving the socio-political and economic capabilities of women and girls. Understanding why women politicians are underrepresented may ultimately help guide Liberian women to find amicable methods of increasing women participation and empowering women.

1.7 Risks, Challenges, and Ethical Limitations

As much as care was taken to ensure accuracy and validity of the data and information provided, the possibility of risks, ethical limitations were inevitable.

- Transcription: As much as is humanly possible, I ensured transcription from Liberian Pidgin to Standard English was rightly quoted;

⁴ The Committee was set up to review the current Liberian Constitution of 1986 and suggest propositions for referendum.

- Travel: Bad road condition was an impediment; data collection timing fell within the rainy season when there was very heavy rainfall;
- Interviewees no show or last-minute cancellations: Interviewees were often disappointing, sometimes making me travel hundreds of miles under bad weather, and then not showing up. Of the questionnaires sent to interviewees by email, only one was returned.
- Anonymity: Respondents were specifically asked if they wanted their names mentioned. All of them consented.
- Respondents' permission was requested before being put on record.
- Politically volatile situation: The atmosphere was politically charged. By-elections tension, both verbal and physical between the ruling party and opposition continued till my return to The Hague.
- Respondents were interviewed at venues of their choosing; I observed being in 'familiar' territory put them at ease.

Chapter 2 **Liberian Women in Politics: Key Issues**

2.1 Introduction

Liberians are a resilient people, the women even more so. Liberia had its first female lawmaker, Ellen-Mae Scarborough in the 1950s (<https://www.liberianobserver.com>). Since then, they have been a ‘people of firsts’, such as becoming first female head of state (<https://frontpageafricaonline.com>), president, (Adams 2016: 279) woman of color of the UN General Assembly, (<https://www.un.org/en/>) and president of an African university (<http://www.theperspective.org>).

This chapter captures the views of Liberian women about the country’s political atmosphere. It begins by defending the importance of women in politics, then explains how age-old tradition and patriarchy has impacted women participation in politics. Lack of access to education, information and opportunities, which serve as barriers to increased women participation follows. Women with disabilities in politics, with their peculiar challenges of being women and disabled, are also discussed in this chapter. Lastly, violence against women in politics was brought into this discussion, because I believe a discussion about challenges facing women in politics would be incomplete if this issue was not included. Women gave their perspective of women in politics, how far they have come, their experiences, and how they can increase women participation in politics. They also defend arguments as to why women should be in politics. Currently, there are only 10 women lawmakers out of a total of 103, nine in the House of Representatives, and one in the House of Senate. I start the next section discussing why women in politics.

2.2 Women’s Participation in Politics: A Necessity?

Should women be in politics at all? Women answer my question in the affirmative. Since the early 2000s, Africa has made headway as regards women inclusion in politics, basically through some form of quota system. Rwanda still holds the highest percentage of women in parliament, at 61.3% (Interparliamentary Union) followed by Senegal, Seychelles and South Africa with more than 40%, and Mozambique, Angola, Tanzania and Uganda with over 35% of seats occupied by women (Tripp 2013:2). Below are reasons why women participation in politics is pertinent.

Firstly, all persons are considered equal under the law, both nationally and internationally (1986 Constitution of Liberia, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article I: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights). These laws state that women have the right, regardless of sex, to self-determination,

and the right to partake in politics of their choosing without any interference from government. Secondly, women make up half Liberia's population. Not having women in politics would mean that at least half the citizenry is not represented politically, which is a gross violation of rights. Teecee Boley is Executive Director of New Narratives, a pro-female advocacy group who opines:

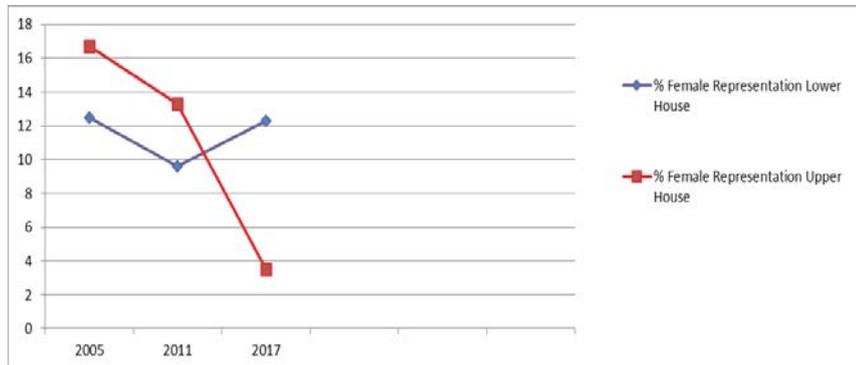
“Women are really underrepresented in politics and there are real socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers to women's equal political participation. This gender gap is undemocratic; it means women are not able to fully exercise their rights, and women's voices are largely absent, making gender-sensitive laws unlikely” (<https://www.liberianobserver.com>).

Kebbeh Monger, National President for the Rural Women Association of Liberia, argues that women make better politicians. She thinks women have been marginalized for a long time. Women have the capacity, they can become leaders, even at the grassroots; leadership is not only in parliament. (K. Monger, National RWP: National Rural Women headquarters, Monrovia, 23 July 2019).

Amanda Clayton (2015) agrees. She opines, having more women politicians create a positive effect on other women, and makes partaking in politics seem more doable. Having a dominant male Legislature, brews a psychological barrier women and girls think they should be the followers rather than the leaders. A governing body that proportionally resembles its electorate appears more democratic. It also motivates other vulnerable groups to engage in the process, and bring new ideas and innovation, because the playing field is viewed as fair and friendly (Clayton 2015:338-339). Thirdly, women can distinctly represent the interests of women and children. Literature has demonstrated that women politicians articulate different policy interests than men. They initiate gender equity policies and family and child friendly legislation, even at times using cross-party women alliances. Liberian women politicians have the Women Legislative Caucus. Women politicians vote differently and believe more in consensus-based legislative styles than their men counterparts (Clayton 2015:340).

Lastly, having women engaged in politics influences other women to get involved also, as they are viewed as potential role models. The presence or absence of women in politics portrays different social and structural outlooks for both men and women, which may be learned in childhood and reinforced in adulthood. Not having women political representatives may send the wrong message to women and girls, that politics is unsuitable for women and is strictly a men's arena. Increased women political participation encourages the thought that women can effectively govern. Exposing young women to women representatives encourages more women participation (Clayton 2015:340). The next section discusses tradition and patriarchy in Liberian politics, and how it has played into underrepresentation of women in politics.

Table 2. Graph depicting Liberian Women Representation from 2005-2017



2.3 Patriarchy and Tradition in Liberian Politics

2.3.1 Patriarchy as Obstacle

Liberia has been a patriarchal society for many decades. The glass ceiling was broken only in 1996 when Ruth Sando Perry became Liberia's and Africa's first woman head of state.

Patriarchy can be explained as a set of social structures in which the man is viewed as the 'dominant' figure in the family, community and society. It is often understood globally by feminists as more than just a term used to describe the order of the day; it is more of a concept used to downplay their dual roles and the feeling of being the 'lesser human'. It is used to exert power and control, to describe power relations between men and women.

"Women's contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also more than half as compared to that of men by virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Yet their participation in formal and informal structures and processes, where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women are made, remains insignificant" (Makama 2013:116).

Men have been the ones calling the shots for women for centuries, in fact. Like Sultana explains, patriarchy is seen as the primary cause for women's subordination and disempowerment, the power relations by which men dominate women, and control a system where women are kept subordinate in many ways. It is thus a tool to help understand women's realities (2012:2).

Patriarchy has been a tool used worldwide to cow women into submission. It is pretty much the same in Liberia, even today. While women's empowerment has to some extent reduced the heavy hand of patriarchy, it still exists and is a hindrance for many women having the desire to advance themselves. It has played a major role in instilling fear in women to speak up and take possession of what is inherently their rights and privileges as human beings. In the

subsection below, I discuss tradition and its impact on women underrepresentation in politics.

2.3.2 Tradition and Its Impact

Tradition is the way of life of a people, their values, norms and culture. Women have been bred to believe that the man is the ultimate decision maker in the home. The home being the nucleus of the society, this school of thought has a ripple effect on patriarchy discussed above. In fact, the two serve as a basis for women underrepresentation not only in politics, but all other spheres.

The perception of politics being a ‘man’s world’ has led to women’s hesitance to venture into politics. Aided by the age-old norm of the man having to consent to every move the woman makes also contributed to the low representation of women in politics. Says Roseline Toweh, “Consent from your husband is a must” (R. Toweh: YWCA headquarters, Congo Town, 13 July 2019).

When a woman makes her intentions known to the constituency, the voters want to know if she is married, if she has children, by how many men, etc. If she is, she will be received cordially; if not, her reception may not be so cordial, if at all. Justice Gloria Scott concurred. “Voters want to know if a woman politician is married and has children by the same father. Those questions do not get asked to the men.” (G. Scott: personal interview, LAG School of Law, Monrovia, 20 July 2019). When this issue was discussed with Ellen Attoh-Wreh, she smiled sadly, recalling her experience. Often, voters’ decisions are made immediately upon hearing women candidates’ responses. “I think I was not asked about marriage and children because my husband introduced me” (E. Attoh-Wreh: HoR, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 25 July 2019).

George Mulbah is a former representative, who was a lawmaker when the 30% Parity Bill was first introduced on the floor. When asked his view on opinions that the number of women in parliament has much to do with tradition, he responded,

“Well that is based on the judgment of the voters. As a matter of fact, Liberians accepted a woman as president. Today there are women in parliament, in other branches of government. If they are talking about numbers, well, a hundred miles begin with the first step” (George Mulbah: Paynesville City, 29 July 2019).

He makes a point here. While women’s number in the Legislature is low, it is higher than pre-war years. After the war years, women became more visible in political parties. Today, few women are seen in more important positions of trust in political parties, such as the Executive Committee, the highest decision-making body in any party. The next section flows from this one and discusses lack of access to information and opportunities for women.

2.4 Education, Information and Opportunities

Another issue hindering women entry into politics is the lack of access to information. Many women do not have the basic information needed to be able to venture into politics. An added disadvantage is the fact that they are less likely to be educated. Lack of education in turn leads to a lack of opportunities.

Women being those least likely to have educational or economic opportunities, may find themselves not being a favourite of the voters because they have neither the opportunities nor the finances to gain voters' interests. Long running social structures have limited educational opportunities for women. Though not a requirement, being literate boosts one's quest for political office. Tim Kellow (2010) concurs: "Nonetheless, women's lack of independent wealth and political skills continue to act as major impediments to progress" (2010: 6). Mombaydo Herrod is a woman politician; she partook in elections in 2017.

"Women have the least access to education, by extension, the least likely to access job opportunities. How many women can access available jobs without compromising some of their morals? Men are more likely to give opportunities to men for free, but women will have to give something in return. It is a barrier to women. Opportunities give one economic empowerment; which women often don't have" (M. Herrod: LAG School of Law, University of Liberia, Monrovia, 10 July 2019).

According to Herrod, women do not have access to basic information about how to even convince their partners to allow them to partake in politics. When they have consent, though, they do not know what to do next, how to engage the process, getting registered, meeting with constituents, engaging in debates, campaign strategies, and the like. They do not understand the political system, or even how government works. Women neither understand their rights nor how to claim them.

After lack of access to information and opportunities, I shift the focus to an often-marginalized group of women in politics: women with disabilities. I choose to dedicate a section to these women, first because of their courage to dare take what is rightfully theirs in the first place, and second, because of the marginalization they face, with other women politicians, political parties, and their constituents.

2.5 Women with Disabilities in Politics

2.5.1 Why Women with Disabilities?

Many women in Liberia with disabilities today became disabled, not from birth or health defects, but from scars of war. I thought to dedicate a section to women with disabilities because their peculiar issues are often not discussed. A

disabled woman who enters politics faces new and ongoing challenges, which are often ignored and buried when discussing ‘women in politics’.

Women with disabilities are the best champions and key actors to implement change in the constituencies. They experience low self-esteem brought about by economic and psychosocial dependence, which creates vulnerability stemming from their unique intersectional identity. Until the voices of women with disabilities are heard, until they can begin leading the change of perception of negative attitudes and beliefs about disability, their situation may only be aggravated (Humanity 2018:5).

Like everybody else, people with disabilities also have rights. These rights include, among others, the right to universal suffrage, the right to stand in elections and effectively hold public office, the right to accessible elections, and the right of participation of persons with disabilities in political and social life (OHCHR 2011:7-13, UNCRPD). The African Union (2016) has adopted a protocol on the rights of persons with disabilities, which aims at addressing exclusion, harmful practices and discrimination against persons with disabilities. (African Union 2016).

Many voters in Liberia are ignorant about the basic rights of people living with disabilities. Women with disabilities have equal rights to political participation, including representing voters. This section serves to give a voice to these brave women who have dared to demand what is rightfully theirs: representation.

Liberia has ratified all conventions and protocols that favour the rights of persons with disabilities. In 2005, the National Commission on Disabilities was established with the task to handle the general welfare and education of persons with disabilities (Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism). This, however, is a blanket mandate, and does not specifically provide coverage for women in politics. The Liberia National Gender Policy (2009) dedicates **only** (emphasis mine) one paragraph to persons with disabilities, which states that “persons with disabilities face discrimination in all spheres of life, while women with disabilities suffer double discrimination” (Ministry of Gender 2009). I wonder though, how the issue of ‘women with disabilities landed at the end of the statement in a ‘national gender policy’. Frankly, it sounded to me like an afterthought. Like Anderson Gitonga (2018) emphasizes, people with disabilities cannot be left out of the political process.

“A key reason for having a democratic form of governance is that marginalized communities (including persons with disabilities) felt that they continued to be excluded under the system of the central government. It is envisioned representation of persons with disabilities in all these levels of governance processes leads to the exercise of their right to representation” (Gitonga 2018:1).

In Liberia, women living with disabilities were reported to make up 1.54% of the population, according to the latest National Population and Housing Census of 2008 (Liberia Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services 2008). This may well be an under-estimate as many forms of disability are not visible. Their numbers however small, should not preclude them from partaking in politics if they so wish. I would argue that in a sense all Liberians who lived through the war are disabled in some way, if not physical, mental, psychological or other. As a result of the country's civil war, many civilians, especially women, fled into exile in neighbouring Sierra Leone. They too found themselves maimed by rebels and civil defence Kamajor⁵ fighters. Women who resisted rape were maimed for daring to resist; some were gangraped. Others were taken as 'war wives' or house slaves (Name withheld⁶: personal interview, Monrovia, Liberia, July 2019). Some disabilities have resulted from untreated illnesses during war and displacement, including polio⁷, and others.

For all persons to enjoy good governance, there must be a system where all people feel a part of the process. It is a right, not a privilege. Central government must ensure equality of persons at all levels. Liberia, understanding the need for persons with disabilities to be part of the decision-making process, proffered in a quota bill that persons underrepresented in the Legislature are given seats to reduce the huge gap in representation. The bill proffers 3 seats for the disabled, with at least one of them being a woman. This is discussed further in the next chapter.

2.5.2 Intersectional Challenges Facing Women with Disabilities

Intersectionality is basically about the multiple forms of discrimination, such as disability, race, class, and gender. In this section, I concentrate on the intersectionality of gender, politics, disability, and its resulting marginalization of disabled women in politics. It is perceived in Liberia that women with disabilities should not even dare to venture into the public space, much less desire representing a group of people. Usually, policymakers do not spot the intersectional dimensions facing women with disabilities. Governments must realize that women with disabilities have different issues from abled women. Coincidentally, the Liberian Legislature has no ramp or elevator to facilitate movement of disabled people.

Research in the area of women with disabilities and leadership is also relatively new. Lack of resources available to government results in a gap between policy formulation and implementation. Women have difficulty accessing schooling job opportunities, and actively participating in society. While there are documents proposing improved opportunities, there is little evidence

⁵ Sierra Leonean civilian defence fighters led by the late Inga Norman.

⁶ Name withheld (the decision mine) because interviewee was a victim.

⁷ Polio, short for poliomyelitis, or infantile paralysis, is an infectious disease caused by the poliovirus.

to show whether these interventions have made impacts, if any (Jolley et al. 2017: 3). “No documents were identified that described the impact of any intervention on the participation of people with disabilities in political processes” (Virendrakumar et al. 2018: 533). Reasons for low representation of women with disabilities in politics are many; however, Sackey (2015) found these as cross-cutting:

“(1) stigmatisation and negative social perception regarding the capabilities of people with disabilities; (2) lack of resources, including financial and logistical support, required for effective campaigning; (3) accessibility challenges relating to the built environment, communication and information access; and (4) educational background of people with disabilities” (Sackey, 2015: 366).

A report by Women Enabled International, it was stated that “women with disabilities experience unique discrimination resulting from the intersection between their gender and disability and are at a higher risk of facing multiple forms of discrimination” (WEI, 2016: 17). A literature review conducted in five West African countries including Liberia revealed that having limited resources and limited knowledge impede government’s ability to adequately provide for the disabled, thus leaving them marginalized and vulnerable (Jolley et al. 2017: 3).

What is the political atmosphere like for women with disabilities in politics? I spoke to two women with disabilities in politics, who contested in the last elections of 2017. The first is Agnes Effiong, who contested in District 1, Margibi County. She moves around in a wheelchair.

“For us women with disabilities, we are sometimes downplayed, because one’s disability cannot allow her to participate in other activities. Marginalization also exists within political parties and among women. Sometimes when there are international trips, women do not want me travelling with them because they don’t want to carry the burden of pushing me around” (A. Effiong: Margibi County, 9 July 2019).

“Women are vulnerable; a woman with disability is more vulnerable”. Daintowon Payebaye, when asked about her take on women in politics, and what it is like being a woman with disabilities in politics, she said disability tying in with the dependency syndrome made people marvel at how brave she is. Voters are appalled that they would even dare to come out so far in the limelight, given their disability. It is thought they should stay at home and be thankful for whatever ‘leftovers’ is thrown at them (D. Payebaye: Ashmun Street, Monrovia, 10 July 2019).

As is often the case for abled women, education is even more an issue for disabled women. As Virendrakumar (2018) states, “Other factors, which often correlate with disability, such as low educational levels, further undermine participation and inclusion” (Virendrakumar 2018: 533).

Daintowon holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Liberia. She fondly credits her mother for that success, saying it would have been impossible without her. Her mother never gave up, amidst calls from friends and relatives to be 'satisfied' with the high school education her daughter had received (D. Payebayee: Ashmun Street, Monrovia, 10 July 2019).

Women with disability also suffer subtle forms of violence, verbal, psychological, emotional and others. Daintowon tells her experience.

“On the campaign trail, there were people who asked me why I wanted to be a representative since I am a cripple. I told them to find something else to say, I have heard that many times. What else is new? When I am alone, I feel sad; but I put all that behind me because I must present myself as someone with the capacity to deliver, and as a role model” (D. Payebayee: Ashmun Street, Monrovia 10 July 2019).

On average, it is agreed that education plays a crucial role in political socialization and strategy, which are critical for political engagement. Though not a requirement, women having some form of education are likely to perform better as politicians. Educational systems and structures often do not include persons with disabilities; hence, their opportunities and abilities to successfully engage in public decision-making are hindered (Sackey 2015:375). What women with disabilities experience is indeed violence. The next section discusses violence against women in politics.

2.6 Violence against Women in Politics

In her article titled 'Fighting Violence Against Women in Politics, the Limits of Legal Reform', Saskia Brechenmacher (2017) highlights the violence women of Latin America undergo, and the limits to efforts of reform being spread in some Latin American countries. In summary, she wrote that resistance has always been there for women desiring public office as a right to equal participation. While efforts to put measures put into place by some countries to ensure equal participation have been met with resistance, more women have nonetheless been encouraged to seek public office (Brechenmacher 2017).

Saskia cites still existing patriarchal norms as barriers to women's political participation, often violently resisting change. While it is true that all politicians face threats of violence, those of women are unique because they are attacked because they are 'women', not men. Some are threatened with rape, physical and verbal assault, or even accused of immoral conduct as a woman. Some of the harassment they suffer also comes from their families, communities, political parties, and even other women (Brechenmacher 2017).

Tim Kellow (2010), in his paper on elections and violence in West Africa, focusing on Liberia and Sierra Leone, also cites cultural and traditional norms,

which have limited opportunities for women, leaving them with a lack of skills, which yield little or no opportunities, formally and informally. These patriarchal practices bully women into traditional roles, fearing rejection from families if they dare to enter politics. Women who try to enter political parties face discrimination from the already male-dominated political space. Though they publicly support women, very little is done to support women in their political parties (Kellow 2010:2).

Cyber-violence has become a new trend in politics. The ability to reach thousands, sometimes more by a single click can have far-reaching positive and/or negative consequences. Nyabola (2018) in her book 'Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics', discusses The Internet and its role in transforming Kenyan politics. She talks about the collision between politics and technology, how technology has shifted power dynamics, and how technology can 'make or break' a person in a matter of seconds (Nyabola 2018). While it is used by some to get their opinions articulated and amplified to bring about positive change, others use it to vilify women venturing into a somewhat already unfamiliar territory: politics. The Internet can be used to denigrate women, men also; but using it to malign people already facing discrimination as a result of their identity as women makes cyber-violence against them even more pronounced. Like Nyabola (2018) stated, "The situation may change every day, but the underlying theme in the conversation is not conflict; it is agency" (Nyabola 2018:215).

In Liberia, violence against women has become a phenomenon, pretty much like the stories in Latin America and neighboring Sierra Leone. Some women were vilified on broadcast media, another had a photo of a candidate in the nude go viral on social media. Still another had her computer sales and repairs shop broken into and her property destroyed. Others had their posters destroyed.

"Some may argue that violence happened to other people; but if it is done to people who cannot respond, like women, that makes it a barrier to political participation, violence against a marginalized group: women" (M. Herrod: LAG School of Law, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 10 July 2019).

There are also institutional factors hindering women's participation in politics in Liberia. Primary among them is the National Elections Commission, which creates limited possibilities for women candidates. Registration fees are often high; women can hardly afford it. In other places, women enter politics by starting at the local, lower administrative level; in Liberia, there are no local elections. Positions are appointed; and often given to men. (Lipasti 2019: 18-19).

Another is the political parties. Roseline Toweh laments that only men are standard bearers and vice standard bearers of political parties. She even brings in the issue of resources as a form of violence against women during primaries

and conventions of political parties. Women are downplayed because they lack the resources to compete with the men. “In fact, they make convention fees so high that very few women can afford to pay. This is elections violence” (R. Toweh: YWCA headquarters, Congo Town, 13 July 2019).

Efforts to impede women’s political participation is not new. Women are viewed as intruders in the ‘male’ space of politics, which creates hostility to women leaders. Evidence gathered show that women politicians have challenges not experienced by their male counterparts, prompted both by men and women opponents of women’s participation. Opponents may sabotage women’s political campaigns, and become targets for bullying, ridicule, rape, or even murder threats. These should be serious threats to democracy, rather than being dismissed as ‘politics as usual’ (Krook 2017:74-75).

The terms differ, but violence against women highlights three main elements: a) aggressive acts aimed solely or largely at women in politics, b) because they are women, often using gendered means of attack, and c) aimed at discouraging participation to ‘preserve’ traditional gender roles and undermine democratic institutions. ‘Violence’ is used by researchers and activists as an umbrella concept to draw attention to physical, emotional, psychological, economic, symbolic violent acts meted against women in politics, as well as acts of physical coercion (Krook 2017:78).

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter delved in-depth into why there is women underrepresentation in politics. I argue why women participation in politics cannot be overemphasized. Women make up at least half the world’s population. Not having them in politics would mean not having half of the world fully represented to address issues concerning them. Liberia is the embodiment of this analogy. I went on to discuss patriarchy and tradition in politics. Patriarchy and tradition were also cited in areas other than Africa, such as Latin America, as a main reason why women are underrepresented in politics. Women have been intimidated into continuing with traditional roles and made to believe politics is for men only. Men often fight back because they think women want to take their place. If only they would realize that women participation in politics is for the greater good of men and women alike, their attitude would perhaps be more welcoming.

Lack of access to information and opportunities for women also serve as a barrier to women in politics. Many of them do not have basic education, and therefore lack the skills needed to create opportunities for them and their families. Women with disabilities face more vulnerability in politics. They face marginalization from other women, political parties and voters, who think they should not even consider aspiring for what is inherently their right. Finally, the chapter ends with violence against women. It explains the physical, mental, verbal and cyber violence being meted out to women, their families, supporters

and properties during elections. Efforts to control violence against women during elections by countries are often impeded by male dominated parliaments.

The next chapter discusses the prospects of affirmative action for Liberian politics. It bases the discussion on three Liberian bills currently stalled at the Legislature. It goes further to discuss the relationship between men and women lawmakers, and what women and men think of such relationship.

Chapter 3 Affirmative Action and Lawmakers' Rapport

3.1 Introduction

As stated throughout this paper, the proportion of female to male representatives is appallingly low. Male and female lawmakers assert they relate to one another as colleagues. But whether this relationship feeds into women-friendly improved laws for women remains to be seen. This chapter begins with a discussion on three stalled bills, then delves further into this male/female lawmaker relationship. The chapter uses interviews and literature to discuss how both women and men in the Legislature brainstorm together, or not, to influence legislation in favor of women.

3.2 Three Stalled Bills

3.2.1 The Affirmative Action Bill

The **Affirmative Action for Equitable Participation and Representation (Act of 2016)** bill requests an additional twenty-one seats in the House of Representatives, fifteen for women, and three each for the physically challenged and youth. There are currently seventy-three seats. Of the six seats for the physically challenged and youth, at least two should be women. This bill raised some controversy within the Court of Public Opinion⁸. While some thought the idea would ensure more women representation, others thought it was insensitive and one-sided, in favor of only one-half of the population. Besides, the extra lawmakers may be unable to make any impact at all, since even those that go through the process and get elected are cowed and intimidated into submission by their male counterparts. If the men bully those that entered the House on equal terms, imagine what happens to those that got seats on 'silver platters'. Justice Scott cited one instance in open session. "You can't monopolize this entire Senate, Gloria. Unity Party (has) got only four seats here. Sit down and shut up, let other people talk too" (G. Scott: LAG School of Law, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 20 July 2019).

3.2.2 30% Gender Equity Bill

The '**Gender Equity in Politics (Act of 2010) to Increase Participation and Representation of Women in the Political Process**' bill requests that political parties should 'endeavor to ensure' that no one gender has less than 30% and

⁸ Simply put, it is the beliefs and judgment of most people. It uses the news media and the public to influence public support for one side or the other.

more than 70% on any candidate listing presented to the National Elections Commission.

The catch is the phrase ‘endeavor to ensure’. Asking political parties to ‘endeavor to ensure’ really does not obligate them to adhere to the law. It simply implies, ‘try to do it; but it is okay if you can’t’, or rather, ‘won’t’. The language used exerts little pressure on political parties to act in favor of the underrepresented gender. I think it should be rewritten in a stronger tone, mandating them to ensure the quota representation. It should also recommend punitive action for would-be violators, such as rejection of the candidates’ listing, naming and shaming, and even fines.

3.2.3 Political Equity Incentive Bill

The ‘**Act to Provide for Equitable Participation and Representation of All Persons in Governance and Political Process**’ (**Political Equity Incentive Fund**) bill requests that government sets up a pool fund to assist political parties that implement the 30/70 quota. The idea is that political parties will be encouraged to include women if they know there is going to be some sort of financial or material benefit. The danger though in passing such a bill is that political parties may very likely only include women as placeholders only because they want to receive the benefit. Besides, women are hardly on executive committees, the highest decision-making bodies in political parties. Therefore, decisions as to how the benefit will be expended become solely those of one gender: men. A review and passage of this law, with tougher mandates, can be carried out to reduce the chances of women being used only as bait for the benefits.

During fieldwork, in meetings with the Women of Liberia Constitutional Review Task Force, I learned that the Senate had passed the Affirmative Action bill after reducing it by two-thirds. This means five seats for women and one each for the disabled and youth. If this happens, a disabled woman is not likely to be given that single seat. The bill still awaits concurrence from the HoR. The other two bills have been put on the floor for discussion at least twice but have not received concurrence from either the HoR or HoS.

3.2.4 Affirmative Action: Workable Solution or Tokenism?

Affirmative action is normally viewed as an inclusive policy seeking to bridge gaps of socio-economic and political opportunities suffered by vulnerable groups. So far, it is hard to say whether affirmative action has been a success. Pundits argue it serves as a form of discrimination against those excluded, while at the same time sacrificing capability and efficiency for political expediency (Sackey 2015: 376-377).

While it has worked in some countries, affirmation action continues to elude vulnerable groups in Liberia. As discussed above, a proposed bill seeks 21 seats

in the Legislature, fifteen for women and three each for the disabled and youth. Passage of this bill provides surety of at least one seat for a disabled woman.⁹ It remains to be seen however, whether affirmative action would resolve this issue of women underrepresentation in politics, disabled or not.

Gender quota implementation has its criticisms. Critics claim it leads to electorates believing that only women can represent women. Known as ‘quota women’, it is perceived that women elected under this arrangement do not bring much to the table since their election is not ‘democratic’. Critics argue that women should be voted to political office based only on merit. They also argue that sustaining such an arrangement would be difficult, if not unconstitutional (Connor 2008: 204, Clayton 2015:362). Women lawmakers and activists must put up a united front in order to achieve sustained representation and attention for women’s issues. The following section discusses women and men’s thoughts about men lawmakers’ support for women.

3.3 Men: Working for or against Women?

This section dwells on the voices of women. It tells their thoughts about men’s support for them as women in politics. Whether men work in favor of or against women is controversial. The men say they seek women’s interests; the women have dissenting views. I begin with women not in active politics.

3.3.1 Women not in Politics

Women not actively involved in national politics also had their take on women representation and support for women. Coincidentally, both women cited in this subsection have different responses to whether men lawmakers work in favour of or against female lawmakers. They both agree though, that having women in leadership is imperative.

Robtel Pailey comes down hard on both the men and women, more so on women in the echelons of power. She accuses the men of intimidating the women, and the women of not doing much to tout the feminist agenda. She cites the actions of the previous and current Liberian administrations.

“It appears that women do not wield much power and influence in the Legislature. I have not come across any women in the House or Senate who tout an empowerment or feminist agenda. For instance, when the gender and equity bill debate was raging, women members of the Legislature were undermined and cowed into submission. That EJS¹⁰ did not explicitly support

⁹ During fieldwork, in meetings with the Women of Liberia Constitutional Review Task Force, I learned that the Senate had passed this third bill after reducing it by two-thirds. This means five seats for women and one each for the disabled and youth. If this happens, a disabled woman is not likely to be given that single seat. The bill still awaits concurrence from the HoR.

¹⁰ Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia and Africa’s first democratically elected woman president.

their cause was particularly emblematic of her lip service to women's empowerment. Weah, on the other hand, calls himself a 'feminist-in-chief' but does next to nothing to challenge patriarchy. Weah has established a very hierarchical executive primarily controlled by men. Overall, in EJS' 12-year term and Weah's short-lived presidency, the rhetoric of empowerment has not matched the reality" (R. Pailey: questionnaire by email).

Roseline Toweh is a civil society activist. She thinks men do not work in favor of women, and more women representation will lead to the passage of more women-friendly bills. "If there are more women, there won't be need for men's votes, especially for issues like these" (R. Toweh: YWCA headquarters, Congo Town, 13 July 2019).

Mendelberg & Karpowitz (2016) support Toweh's argument for more women in the Legislature. More women develop inclusive, cooperative interaction. When there are more women, the likelihood of being negatively interrupted while speaking shall be less; hence, women will be more confident to speak their minds. "Men as well as women may be affected to the norm of agreeable interaction in groups with many women, and conversely, by the opposite norm in groups with few women" (Mendelberg & Karpowitz 2016:490). Also, when there are more women, self-confidence increases. Women tend to feel more 'in control' and more confident. When women's self-confidence is boosted, they are more likely to give opinions and make suggestions. When men are in the majority, women tend to think they are outnumbered, and so are unable to proffer worthy contributions. In summary, the more women, the more these women might speak up and carry influence (Mendelberg & Karpowitz 2016:490).

The proponents of women political participation has all the best interests of women at heart. However, whether more women yield more passage of women-friendly bills remains to be seen. In fact, research has proven that having more women in parliament does not necessarily leads to the passage of more bills in favor of women. As stated by Carroll, more women in the Legislature diminishes the likelihood that individual female legislators will act on behalf of women as a group. (Carroll as cited in Childs and Krook 2008). In other words, the less women are, the more likely they are to present a united front. Having more women may result in women siding with their political parties.

"However, recent research shows that on one hand women can make a difference even when they have a small minority, and on the other hand a greater number of elected women diminishes the likeness of women legislators to pass law favoring women" (Childs and Krook as cited in Aseidu et al. 2018:731).

Also, Aseidu et al. (2018) in their article 'The Effect of Women's Representation in Parliament and the Passing of Gender Sensitive Policies' concur with this assertion. While they agree with Toweh that including women in politics challenges the social structures that have put behind their needs and

interests for so long, they disagree that more women lawmakers translate into more legislations for women. Finally, Bauer (2012) argues that as women's descriptive representation increases in sub-Saharan Africa, the political gender gap decreases-not because men's engagement falls, but because women's engagement rises (Bauer 2012:379). Next are the views of former and current women lawmakers.

3.3.2 Former and Current Women Lawmakers

This subsection carries the voices of two women lawmakers, former and current. First is Gloria Scott, Former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, of Liberia, Former Senator, Maryland County and Chairperson of the Constitution Review Committee. The relationships between her and male counterparts were different for the Judiciary and the Senate. In the Judiciary, the men were more receptive. In the Senate, it was quite the opposite. She saw that her colleague senators wanted total submission.

“The way I conducted myself sent a message to girls and women, that this is how you carry yourself when you are a politician. I could not submit to my male colleagues; not only for my own self-esteem, but I also would have been setting the wrong example for other women aspirants (G. Scott: LAG School of Law, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 20 July 2019).

Rosanna Schack is current lawmaker for District One, Rivercess County. I began by asking how her counterpart lawmakers viewed her. She also weighed in with her male opponents and voters. She had already been exposed to the male voters; they had worked together for a long time with their wives and daughters. They knew her track record; so, they trusted her enough to vote her into office. Her male counterparts saw her as a strong contender.

I have a very good relationship with my male counterparts. I learned that to push the women's agenda, you must include men at all levels. In fact, they were receptive in passing the Domestic Violence Act a few days ago (R. Schack: HoR, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 23 July 2019).

Rosanna Schack had contested in the senatorial race in 2014 and lost. However, she realized she was overwhelmingly supported in some constituencies. She decided to run for representative in the 2017 elections and won. The next subsection is dedicated to women in politics.

3.3.3 Women in Politics

This subsection brings the voices of women currently in politics, women who ran for elections and lost, and those preparing for the challenge in 2020 and 2023. I begin with disabled women in politics.

Agnes Effiong is a physically challenged politician. She gives her view on male/female relationship, and male support for women. She thinks the

relationship is cordial; they disagree but are united in their platform. On support for women though, she said,

I would think, not really. Most of the time, both men and women are running for positions of trust. Because men are more financially potent, you find that they even mobilize other women to discredit the female contestant (A. Effiong: Margibi County, 9 July 2019).

Daintowon Domah Payebayee is another politician with a physical disability. Within her party, the ANC, the relationship is cordial. The ANC sees more of one's potential than disability. Supporting women in politics is a challenge because of traditional and cultural variables. "Women are encouraged to contest. Nobody was told not to run because she is a woman" (D. Payebayee: Ashmun Street, Monrovia, 10 July 2019).

Mombayo Herrod is an advocate for women. She partook in the 2017 elections in Grand Bassa County. She thinks they saw her as a strong person, because of her capacity, and because she was aware of the power dynamics. She stressed the importance of access to information. She ensured she was present for every debate, to prove that she was not afraid; so, her opponents knew she was a contender in the process. But it all comes to societal norms. The society is rural and patriarchal. Women being elected is a problem in some areas. "The voters knew I was a good candidate, but I was a woman" (M. Herrod: LAG School of Law, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 10 July 2019).

Ma Kebbeh Monger is National President, Rural Women Association. When asked how she relates to her male counterparts, she said the rural men are their fathers, husbands and sons. The men used to be decision-makers; today, women are commissioners, paramount chiefs, development superintendents and so on. They strategize by inviting the men and youths to their meetings. When they understood that the whole idea of empowering women was to support them, they began supporting their women. Now they allow their women to come to the meetings (K. Monger: Rural Women headquarters, Monrovia, 23 July 2019).

All these women are preparing for upcoming elections in 2020 and 2023. This subsection gave their views on how they relate to their male counterparts and constituents. Let's hear from the men.

3.3.4 Former and Current Men Lawmakers

Solomon George is serving his second six-year term at the Legislature as a representative of District 7, Montserrado County. He was kind enough to give us some of his time on a session day, a normally busy day for lawmakers. He described the relationship between him and his female counterparts as 'very cordial'. He sees them as his mothers, wives, sisters, and aunties. (S. George: HoR, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 18 July 2019). On whether he agreed that low representation defeats the struggles for women issues, he responded,

“No, I do not think numbers have been the problem. The women make you do things you don’t want to. We take our women’s issues very seriously. We all lobby for them; those issues are always workable. We have differences but we agree in the end. The women have lobbying power, they should use that to their advantage” (S. George: HoR, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 18 July 2019).

Representative George made a salient point. “The women have lobbying power; they should use that to their advantage”. I cannot agree more. While it is true that their number is small, it is not immaterial. Their votes are always needed for other bills, especially when there is an impasse among the men. They should use that lobbying power to get their issues across.

George Mulbah is a former representative of Bong County, Central Liberia. He was a lawmaker when the 30% Gender Equity bill was introduced. He says he related quite well with his female counterparts and supported them in passing Acts such as the Children’s Act and Domestic Violence¹¹ bill. On affirmative action though, he said,

“We differed on the 30% allocation; we thought it was an encroachment on the democratic process. I differed because I thought if the women wanted 30%, they should go through the process instead of having it handed to them on a silver platter. Some of the demands women make tend to restrict the rights of men. We will fight back if we think we are being strangled” (G. Mulbah: Paynesville City, 29 July 2019).

Robtel Pailey argues that women who espouse radical ideas about a woman’s place in the private and public spheres are rarely taken seriously in mainstream politics. “Men lawmakers must understand that Liberia’s patriarchal norms hurt them as much as they do the women/girls in their lives” (Pailey 2019: interview by emailed questionnaire). Today, many countries allow women to participate in politics. Nevertheless, the way people perceive gender roles still remain a barrier for women aspiring to positions of national political leadership (Koster 2019:4).

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter centred on women relationship with their male counterparts, and how the relationship plays into influencing legislation for women. It begins by discussing three draft legislations currently at the Legislature. The first proposes 21 quota seats for women, the disabled and youth, all underrepresented populations; the second proposes that political parties endeavour to ensure at least 30% of their candidates’ listing should be women; and, the third proposes a pool fund where parties complying with the 30% allocation receive some compensation from government.

¹¹ That bill was not passed till July 2019, after the Female Genital Mutilation component was removed.

The following sub-section discussed the relations between men and women politicians, and how their relationship feeds into pro-women legislations. In summary, women generally think they relate cordially with the men; but it has to do with being aware, and the way they carry themselves as women. The final subsection brought men's views on women representation. They declare support for women and have supported some bills but disagree with others, such as the three bills discussed previously.

Women in politics should be able to occupy the same number of seats in proportion to the populations they represent. This, however, is not the case; many barriers hinder their rightful ascendancy to equal representation. Gender quotas may be controversial; however, they are a necessary means to bridge the gender gap. The next chapter presents the findings of this research.

Chapter 4: Key Findings

4.1 Introduction

My study revealed several reasons hindering women increased participation in politics. Knowing that patriarchy inevitably feeds into the lack of resources and grounded traditional beliefs, I attempt to discuss these as a unit, before proceeding to the other findings. The research also revealed the role of political parties, role of women, inadequate information dissemination, and post-elections inactions as reasons for women underrepresentation in politics.

4.2 Patriarchy, Resources, Grounded Traditional Beliefs

Women tend to give more votes to men because they think men have the resources to solve all their problems. Patriarchal norms have cast men in the role of the provider and women in the role of the caregiver. Therefore, they think politics is a man's thing. Rita W. Karr is Grand Gedeh County Rural Women President. "It is the fact. No woman has ever become a lawmaker from my county" (R. Karr: Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County, 19 July 2019). Having followed that culture for decades, it is not easy to change perception overnight. This is especially true for indigenous men. An indigenous woman is not likely to participate in politics if her partner does not consent.

Former Chief Justice Scott thinks patriarchy will not disappear overnight. She agrees with activist Mombaydo Herrod that it is a process, not an event. "Because of societal norms and conditioning of children growing up to become men over the centuries, it will take time for patriarchy to fade away" (M. Herrod: LAG School of Law, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 10 July 2019).

Activist Toweh thinks men want to remain in control to continue using their patriarchal backing to turn women against one another. She cited an instance. During an awareness campaign for a female candidate in a county, a male candidate who was also the current representative had his girlfriend (lover) as his campaign manager. He created confusion among them; he also had the resources.

"The men use division for women to not cooperate with one another. He won because he used 'cash violence'¹² to divide the women" (R. Toweh: YWCA headquarters, Congo Town, 13 July 2019).

Women often do not have the resources to compete with their male counterparts. Many women have to play the dual role of caregiver and provider.

¹² A local parlance, which implies the exchange of money for favors, in this case, votes.

She must also fund an often-expensive political campaign. If she must make a choice, she is not likely to choose the campaign.

“We do not have enough money to support our campaigns. So, if a woman has to choose between her children’s school fees and the campaign, she will not choose the campaign. She is a mother first” (K. Monger: National RWP, Rural Women headquarters, Monrovia, 23 July 2019).

“Many women in African countries live in extreme poverty; there are simply no funds available to run a successful campaign” (Conner 2008:206). All these stated above feed into the lack of opportunities such as education for women, which inadvertently leads to disempowerment.

4.3 Role of Political Parties and Women

4.3.1 Political Parties: Increasing women’s participation?

Aligning with political parties is still relatively new for women, since politics has long been known as a men’s arena. Political parties also appear not to make much effort to educate the populace about their platforms and opportunities for vulnerable groups. Few political parties make any effort to encourage and support women participation. Hence, women are basically ‘on their own’. In the public space, they give the impression they support women political participation. Women often join a political party with the thought that voters sympathizing with the party may be inclined to vote for them. This, however, is often not the case. Hardly any literature could be found on what political parties are doing to encourage more female representation in the Legislature. Therefore, I can only bring the women’s views and my thoughts.

In order to gain sympathy from voters, political parties give the impression of supporting women, since women empowerment has become a topical issue. Many of them do not have women in their hierarchical structures. “If there are women, they are very few; so, their contribution to decisions may not be taken seriously by an already led ‘boys’ club” (M. Sayon: Chief Clerk, HoR, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 16 July 2019).

From the conversations, I discovered a few political parties pay the registration fees at the National Elections Commission for their women candidates. While this is commendable, a bunch of steps have been missed. There are other hurdles over which a woman must leap before she can get to the stage of being endorsed by her party. Marilyn Jarwoh agrees. She also thinks what men say and do differ greatly; the result of which is often very few women getting elected. While during interviews the women generally say, the relationship is cordial in previous interviews, the cordiality usually does not translate into more women getting elected. It may only extend to nice conversations and little else (M. Jarwoh, Gbarnga, Bong County, 8 July 2019). Like Deddeh Keemu, RWP Lofa County stated,

“Within my political party, there were challenges of supporting the candidate. If you campaign on the party ticket, you must print your campaign materials with the standard bearer’s photo and the party name and logo attached. At the end of the day, the party does not even assist you with a dime” (D. Keemu: Voinjama, Lofa County, 21 July 2019).

The politician above laments the fact that campaign materials are expensive. It is also a form of campaigning for the party; hence, it is only fair that the party contributes to the costs.

4.3.2 Women Suppressing Women: The Queen Bee Syndrome¹³?

Women not supporting other women repeatedly came up as a reason for women underrepresentation. Women think other women already in leadership have little interest in mentoring other women to ascend to positions of trust. Politics is no different. Women think women politicians are doing little to ensure they are empowered to ascend to politics. This is known as the queen bee syndrome, where successful women do not want women to also succeed, and do little, if anything, to help other women excel. This has been discussed in several settings as a reason why more women are not getting elected.

Women politicians are expected to be role models, so that their leadership can positively influence other young women and girls aspire for leadership positions. and higher education. It is thought that young women will become more politically engaged, as politics becomes an arena that may be open to them (Clayton 2015:340). The ‘queen bee’ is commonly constructed as a bee who stings anyone that threatens her power. During the focus group discussion, the women argued that the lawmakers are not carrying out their duties as role models. They even think the women are acting out of selfishness. They think the female lawmakers harbor thoughts of insecurity, not wanting competition from younger women.

“Just telling your story about how you achieved success can move another person. The female lawmakers are marginalizing us. Maybe they have their own fear of empowering others; they may not want competition”. (Focus group discussion)¹⁴.

However, studies have shown that this perceived ‘selfish’ attitude of women towards other women is as a result of their environment. Women have overcome insurmountable odds to match their male counterparts. This may have led to their expressing behaviours similar to those of men. Because women have been

¹³It describes a woman in a position of authority who views or treats subordinates more critically if they are female. Alternately, a queen bee is described as one who has succeeded in her career but refuses to help other women do the same.

¹⁴ Focus group discussants: Leemu Gbodeo, Eunice Joboe, Rebecca Kollie, Alice Acquoi, and Rebecca Kollie, Ganta, Nimba County, 22 July 2019.

treated unfairly because of their gender, it is a strong foundation for legitimizing the disadvantages of women at the workplace. What is most harmful is that the behavior of queen bees may legitimize the current gender inequality. They may agree with stereotypes about women, deny the illegitimacy of lower outcomes for women as a group, or not support (or even oppose) actions to address gender inequality (Derks et al 2016: 458).

“stereotyping of women rather than differential work commitment emerges as a plausible reason that women have more difficulty than men to be successful in an academic career and—because of their own precarious position—women are more likely than men to engage in gender stereotyping” (Sobczak 2018: 54).

Women expect that women politicians will at the very least be role models and guide them into politics and other leadership roles. However, this is often not the case. I must say that women politicians can be judged more harshly than men. It is ‘acceptable’ for a male politician to tell lies, not a female politician.

4.4 Institutional capacity

People tend not to support their candidates or political parties. For the political parties, the weight is left on the shoulders of the standard bearer; for the candidates, they are mostly on their own. As a result, those spending the money, especially for the parties, call the shots. A change of this culture may greatly improve Liberia’s political landscape.

Institutional capacity as a result, is hindered. NEC is responsible for ensuring a political party has institutional capacity (www.necliberia.org). One, or a few persons footing the bills inevitably decides the fate of the party and its members. Herrod argues; it is about one person giving massive support and exerting much control over decision- making. If he does not favor women, many women may not run on that party ticket. If he supports everyone on the ticket, he will have the final say (M. Herrod: LAG School of Law, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, 10 July 2019). Deddeh even added that during the primaries, men who are not full-fledged members of the political party but have financial resources to give the party will often throw the women out” (D. Keemu, Voinjama, Lofa County, 21 July 2019).

4.5 Information and Knowledge

Women politicians are not armed with the information they need to be able to run for positions of trust. They lack communication skills, strategies and other skills to help them navigate the process. Women also do not have the right information regarding responsibilities of their lawmakers. Information is not available, especially in the country’s different vernaculars and ‘pidgin English’. In the words of Marilyn Jarwoh, “Lack of information is one of our key gaps” (M. Jarwoh: Gbarnga, Bong County, 8 July 2018). The timing of information dissemination too plays a major role in ensuring whether the women have

received and understood the information. In the rural areas, women go to their farms early morning and return late evening. If information meant for them is disseminated during the day (e.g. via radio), it becomes a waste of time and resources; obviously, it has not been received by the intended audience: women.

The intersectionality of social structures such as gender, culture and tradition has contributed in large part to the marginalization of women. This has in turn made for little or no educational opportunities. Therefore, many women have little or no levels of education, which no doubt is a boost to one's quest for political office, as they have little qualification and skills to effectively perform. Literacy is fast becoming essential for Liberian politics; though it is not a requirement under Liberian law. Many women still lack a basic understanding of how government and their political system works. Therefore, they are unaware of their rights and responsibilities. Not knowing their rights means they are unable to claim them. Elections provide many opportunities to women to be able to claim their rights; but these rights are often not claimed because of the lack of knowledge. Women may think politics is only for literate women. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Women may not even be aware that they have the right to partake in politics, and that it is not only a men's thing, but 'everybody's thing. This lack of knowledge supports the view that politics is 'dirty', and no place for a woman. Sometimes, women are aware that it is their right to vote. However, religion may preclude them from exercising that right. They may have to go up against hostile male relatives. They are more likely to forgo their right than go up against husbands or fathers.

4.6 Post-Elections Inaction by Women Candidates

Some women also have the habit of waiting till elections time before aligning with a political party. Waiting till the last minute does more harm than good. Like Daintowon stated, it is often the norm that during post-elections, women who ran on the party tickets are hardly seen around anymore. They go to their constituencies or other places but stay away from the party. These women will hardly be seen until the next elections. Then they turn out to run on party tickets. This is wrong and must be discouraged. "Constructively engaging with the party post-elections makes it easy to blend in during elections" (D. Payebayee: Ashmun Street, Monrovia, 10 July 2019).

Daintowon opines that being around during post-elections period gives a woman the exposure she needs in her political party and helps her understand the party's ideology so that she can hers in line with the party's ideals without having to worry about campaign pressure. It is not prudent to wait six months to elections before aligning oneself with a political party; this puts a woman at the disadvantage. The party is not likely to choose such women over another person that has been around since post-elections, regardless of sex. The post-

elections period provides an opportunity to strategize and endear oneself to the voters without campaign pressures.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the findings revealed from the research. In summary, patriarchy, resources and traditional norms, lackadaisical attitude of political parties towards women's political aspirations, lack of access to education and information, feedback mechanisms, and post-elections inactions were found to be the reasons for women low representation in politics.

Backed by literature, these reasons found for women underrepresentation in politics inevitably feeds into overall disempowerment for women not only in Liberia, but also many parts of the world. The next chapter discusses proposals proffered by women to ensure more women visibility in politics.

Chapter 5: Increasing Women Visibility in Politics

5.1 Introduction

As evident from the many war stories told by survivors, Liberian women are credited in part for bringing the 14-year civil war to an end. That journey heralded the end of and beginning of a new era. The fight for women rights began on a whole new level after 2003. However, it was being fought on several different fronts, political representation, security, peace, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and children, to name a few. This might have led to some stalemate in yielding results. It dawned on women that representation in politics is crucial to the overall growth and development of any country. From the very traditional system, where the word of the man always prevailed, there is a slow but sure revolution, where women are becoming more and more involved in politics, from the grassroots upwards. Mrs. Sirleaf's rise to the presidency has confirmed that women can rise to the highest position of trust. During my fieldwork, I talked to several women, women in leadership, women in politics, ordinary young women, and current and former lawmakers. I gauged their views on women underrepresentation in politics and what needs to be done to change the dynamics.

5.2 Women Changing the Political Landscape

Women in Liberia have come so far in their quest for increased political policymaking. Although not without some flaws, women are making inroads into the political landscape. Several efforts have been made to train women in politics, such as communication and fundraising strategies. From what I observed, the minds of women, especially rural women are more open to getting involved in politics. As the country moves toward midterm senatorial elections in 2020, women are seen making the decision to take the challenge. 15 seats are up for grabs. There is a lot of momentum among women, with them having consultative talks with both men and women ahead of next year's elections. If they keep up this pace, more women are likely to win seats in the Senate. Below, they proffer suggestions on the best way to increase women visibility on the political landscape.

5.2.1 Perception Change

For decades, women and men alike have been taught that politics is a man's domain. This ideology stems from decades of patriarchy and entrenched traditional norms. Therefore, women perceive they should not go into politics. Men and boys perceive their wives and mothers should not venture into politics.

Vivian Doe-Neal is president of AFELL. She thinks people must change the way they think, for things to change in favor of women. Perception need to be changed nationally. Even women feel only men should be in leadership. “The cultural belief that only men should lead has to be changed. But it is a process, not an event” (V. Doe-Neal: AFELL offices, Lynch Street, Monrovia, 9 July 2019).

AFELL has led the process of drafting bills and providing public awareness on those bills throughout the country. Doe-Neal’s assertion of perception change stems from AFELL’s experiences from across the country. She thinks if people’s minds are transformed, they become more receptive to issues of women in politics.

5.2.2 Self-Empowerment Pool Fund

Resources, financial and human, have come up time and again during fieldwork as one main reason why women lag in politics. They simply do not have the financial resources and opportunities needed to compete with the men, who most times have the deeper pocket. Women tend to spend what little resources they have on their children and family. So, if she must make a choice, she is not likely to choose the campaign.

Another means the men apply is using money to create a dichotomy between women, so that they are undecided as to whether to support their struggling woman candidate or the man candidate, for whom money is a non-issue. Like Agnes Effiong said earlier, the men even use money to bring enmity among women, applying the ‘divide and rule’ concept.

“If we have a pool fund where every woman and ‘he for she’¹⁵ can pay a small amount into that account every month, we will have enough money to register women by 2023. It is about collaboration. That is why we are advocating for a pool fund to be able to assist women through these kinds of challenges” (R. Karr: Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County, 19 July 2019).

Women recommend the setting up of a pool fund, where people can make contributions to support women in politics will go a long way in reducing the financial burden. Even if the fund is used only to register candidates at the Elections Commission, the women can divert the registration fees¹⁶ put aside to register themselves to their campaigns.

5.2.3 Women Declaration of Support for Women

There is a saying in Africa, ‘you scratch my back; I scratch yours’. The Liberian national anthem says, ‘in union strong, success is sure’. Simply, they both emphasize the importance of unity. People can achieve the ‘unachievable’ if they

¹⁵Men in support of women and women’s issues.

¹⁶ Representative (\$550), Senator (\$750), Vice President (\$1,500), President (\$2,500) were charged for 2017 elections. Fees vary over time.

come together with one voice and look out for one another. Sometimes, women tend to bicker among one another. While the men are often blamed for using women disunity as a purposive form of dividing women, women too have the capacity to think; they should learn to ‘see through’ those devices used by men. “Women need to give encouragement and support to a fellow woman running for office, instead of bringing her down. Let us not allow the men to divide us” (A. Effiong: Margibi County, 9 July 2019). Deddeh Keemu is RWP for Lofa County, the country’s third populous county. She calls her women supporters her ‘backbone’ and hails them.

“From the women in my district I got support. The women are still my support base, even now. Even though I lost the race, I gained popularity. Every time I want to give up, they encourage me saying, ‘Ma, we are behind you’”¹⁷. (D. Keemu: Voinjama, Lofa County, 21 July 2019).

Nonetheless, women have come to realize there is much that can be done if they support one another. They have come to learn that when women came together as a unit to challenge power structures, they are unlikely to fail. Women declaration of support for women is crucial to women in politics. Just knowing one woman supports another in her quest for public office does wonders for the candidate’s self-confidence.

5.2.4 Increased Awareness and Information Dissemination

Information dissemination and awareness is crucial in any endeavour. The women think this has been a major hindrance to women not becoming more visible in politics. Those that dare to enter the political arena do not have the requisite information needed to be able to make an impression on the people she desires to lead. She may join a political party; but because the men think it is a boy’s club, they may withhold pertinent information from her. Therefore, she goes out there, not having the slightest idea what to do or say.

“Women need to create awareness where other women can join forces to advocate for our own rights. For us to be involved in decisions affecting us, from the home to the national level, we need to be informed. We need to help women understand the political landscape so that we move from one level to another.” (M. Jarwoh: Gbarnga, Bong County, 8 July 2019).

Marilyn Jarwoh is chairperson of Bong County Civil Society Organization. She thinks once women are armed with the right information, they will be bold enough to make the crucial decision to put themselves forth for public office. Women must set up mechanisms that will enable them to educate one another, through informal and formal forums and trainings. When women understand their rights and acquire skills in constituency engagement, they are better placed

¹⁷ Liberian Pidgin English meaning, ‘You have our full support’.

to convince voters why they are the right people for the job (M. Jarwoh: Gbarnga, Bong County, 8 July 2019).

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter ends with a summary of the suggestions put forth by women on ways to increase women participation in politics. Women believe they have potential to contribute to national development. They know they must brave the storm, break the barriers and address issues affecting women, and that their participation at the decision-making table remain very key to advancing women.

Women think when the minds of voters are transformed, they can make a huge impact. They think they should start their own fundraising initiatives. Women should extend hands of encouragement to their female counterparts, moral and financial. Support for one another boosts self-image. Spreading information and educating one another is also crucial to women development. Knowledge is power; an informed person makes informed decisions.

Women should have the courage to step up; more representation is needed in both Houses. The examples of role models, who are women whose behavior or success can be emulated by others, can inspire more women aspiring for political office. Having women leaders at the local level as town and paramount chiefs, and city mayors also serves as a boost to women and may encourage other women to enter politics. Community dwellers should nominate competent, visionary women for elections. Women need the men to join them in this process. Both women and men's votes are needed to win an election. Political parties should be encouraged to put forth women for public office. Government should ensure that political parties not having the requisite number of women should not be cleared to contest by the elections commission. The following final chapter concludes this research paper.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

This research focused on the reasons for the low representation of women in the Liberian Legislature and what can be done to increase women participation in politics. Since the post-war years, issues of women rights and empowerment have come to the limelight, with women becoming more aware of their rights as human beings, and as women.

During the research, I observed that interviewees tended to make much reference to patriarchal norms and culture. Even though strides are being made, Liberia is still very much a patriarchal society. Women are trying to find their way around the existing social structures as best they can; often by proffering ideas and making the men think the ideas emanated from them. It was painful to listen to some of the interviewees, especially during discussions of violence against women, women with disabilities, patriarchy and social norms. The emotional pain I felt from hearing women tell their stories while interspersing the discussion with jokes told just how resilient Liberian women can be.

The experience was educative; I learned much more from asking questions about these and other issues. Using semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewee leeway to discuss as well as vent, from which I learned more new information. It also gave me the opportunity to see issues from other perspectives. While daunting, this research was also a gratifying task. It also taught me that while every research may follow certain basic rudiments, each one is unique.

This research revealed five several findings. First, long-running patriarchal structures, entrenched traditional beliefs and control of resources have cast men in the role of the providers and women in that of the caregivers. Men have for a long time being the decision makers and politicians. Politics being seen as 'dirty', and 'for men', women did not dare aspire for political office. Traditional beliefs which have been handed down from generation to generation further strengthened the ideology that women are the 'weaker' creatures; hence, they do not have the same capabilities as men. This power relation between men and women inadvertently gave men control over the finances, whether at home or in an organization. As a result, women have had to rely on men to provide finances. This culture has nourished the idea of women often lacking the resources needed to venture into areas like politics. Perceptions are changing, but at a snail's pace; so, women still find themselves in the cycle of disempowerment.

Second, political parties seem to be doing little to increase women's participation in politics. While it has been said that men allude to supporting women candidates in public, it is quite a different story privately. Some political parties foot the registration fees for their women candidates; however, elections

are not won only by paying registration fees. Much material and financial logistics and time go into winning an election. These expenses are often borne by the candidate; women usually lack the financial capacity to follow a campaign successfully through the entire campaign period. Few political parties have women on their executive committees, the party's highest decision-making body. This means decisions concerning women are often made by men. This lip-service behavior to women by political parties yields less women political participation.

Third, institutional capacity is a barrier to women's political participation. Most political parties are founded by men, who often also bear the costs of running the party, such as administrative and other costs. Oftentimes, the party leader(s) that foot the bills call the shots. If such leader(s) do not favor women emancipation, or think the political arena is strictly for men, they are not likely to support women politicians. For a political party to really become an inclusive institution, all members should support the party, financially and morally. Having one, or a few men dictate the direction of the party can be detrimental to women. The national body in charge of regulating elections laws could bring this under control by instituting measures that provide a more level playing field for women.

Fourth, women cited the lack of education and access to information and opportunities as a barrier to entering politics. Due to patriarchal and traditional structures, many women often lack education. An illiterate or semi-literate woman may be unable to access information that may yield opportunities for her advancement. Not having access to information means not being able to take advantage of opportunities. Hence, opportunities are not wasted because women are not seizing them; rather, it is because they are not aware that there are opportunities to be seized.

Fifth, hard work is eventually rewarded. The political arena already being seen as a man's place is often unfriendly to women in many ways. However, perception is changing, although not at the pace women would like; but it is better than being stagnant. Some sacrifice should be made for one to be a successful politician, especially for a woman. After elections, women tend to somewhat disengage from party activities until the next election comes up. To the contrary, post-elections period provides the woman candidate with a learning curve: the time to reflect, learn from mistakes, and improve on her skills as a woman politician without pressure from campaigning and elections. Women in politics have issues peculiar to them; therefore, that period presents the opportunity for women to endear themselves both to their political parties and the voters.

In efforts to answer the main research question, I followed it up with three sub-questions. The first discussed in-depth the issues facing women politicians in Liberia. I first defended the argument as to why women should be in politics;

other than being a right, it provides for equality and good governance. A discussion of traditional and patriarchal norms and its impact on women underrepresentation in politics was followed by access to education, information and opportunities. In a twist, I brought in the peculiar issues of women with disabilities in politics and the intersectional challenges they face. Lastly, the increasing wave of violence against women in politics was discussed on a global as well as local scale.

Efforts for affirmative action and lawmakers' rapport in passing women-friendly legislations were the focus of the next sub-section. I discussed three Liberian women-friendly bills currently being stalled at the Legislature, along with a sub-section on views about quotas. Women's views on their relationships with their male counterparts came next, followed by two male lawmakers' thoughts on their relationship with their female counterparts and passing women-friendly legislations. Female and male lawmakers have a cordial relationship; however, their thoughts about affirmative action vary greatly.

The final sub-questions gauged women's views on ways to increase women political participation in Liberia. Women throughout the world should occupy the same proportion of democratically elected seats as the percentage in which they comprise their respective populations. Regrettably, this is not the case, since countless barriers hinder women's progress to equitable representation. Gender inequality exists the world over. Even though gender quotas are often met with controversy, it is a necessary action to bridge the wide gap of gender inequality.

Nonetheless, it is not just about electing more women to public office. The objective should be attaining some practical representation with resulting positive changes for women, men and children. Women should move beyond party politics and focus on issues of women. Women coming from post-conflict situations have had to come to terms with severe losses. However, those conflicts and losses brought with them the opportunity to claim what is rightfully theirs: empowerment. For what it is worth, empowerment should not be seen as a privilege.

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