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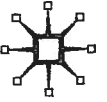
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## Leadership in Postcolonial Africa

Trends Transformed by  
Independence

Edited by  
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First published in 2014 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®  
in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills,  
Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

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ISBN: 978-1-137-47811-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leadership in postcolonial Africa : trends transformed by  
independence / edited by Baba G. Jallow.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-137-47811-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Leadership—Africa. 2. Africa—Politics and government—  
21st century. I. Jallow, Baba Galleh, editor.

HD57.7.L433266 2014

960.3:20922—dc23

2014025560

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd, Chennai, India.

First edition: December 2014

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## Chapter 8

# Patriarchy, Power Distance, and Female Presidency in Liberia

*Robtel Neajai Pailey*

### **Introduction: President... That's Women's Work!**

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

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

followed years later by an eventual conviction in the Hague for crimes against humanity in Sierra Leone's armed conflict. After two years of uninterrupted peace, Liberians handed the mantle of leadership to a woman for the first time through the ballot box in 2005 (National Elections Commission, Republic of Liberia 2005).

President Johnson Sirleaf can be considered something of an anomaly, an outlier of sorts. In 2005, she defeated 21 male candidates in what was described as Liberia's most hotly contested presidential elections and became the first democratically elected female head of state on the continent of Africa. Whereas her predecessors William V. S. Tubman and William R. Tolbert were characterized by authoritarianism and entrenched systems of patronage, and Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor notorious for their brute force and machismo, Johnson Sirleaf has deliberately framed herself as an alternative to the bevy of Liberia's male rulers—a "grandmother" figure and a proverbial "mother of the nation." Feminist critiques of women leaders, particularly female heads of state, often dichotomize them as either overtly "male" or overtly "female" in their approach to leadership, leaving very little room to analyze nuances. This chapter situates Johnson Sirleaf in the middle ground, arguing that her two successive administrations have both advanced heightened patriarchal norms in Liberia while also carving out a small space for Liberian women to subvert those norms, particularly through her attempts to empower rural market women. It employs Dutch social psychologist and anthropologist Geert Hofstede's theory of "power distance" to illustrate how Johnson Sirleaf's presidency has begun to lower the power differentials enabling Liberians for the first time to relate to each other as equals despite the existence of formal institutions of power.

### **Invoking Motherhood as a Cultural Trope in Politics**

During her 2005 presidential campaign, Johnson Sirleaf embarked on a strategic image overhaul, framing herself as a triple threat: educated, experienced, and female. Debunking criticisms that she was of settler lineage and would therefore reconstitute True Whig Party domination, Johnson Sirleaf

heralded her indigenous Gola and Kru heritage, revelling in stories about visiting her ancestral village in Bomi County as a child (Johnson Sirleaf 2009, 8, 20–21). She also distanced herself from Charles Taylor, the rebel leader-turned president with whom she was associated through the Association of Constitutional Democracy in Liberia in the 1980s (Johnson Sirleaf 2009, 171–174). Johnson Sirleaf courted undecided voters with her impressive resume spanning 40 years as a banker and administrator, arguing that her expertise and schooling would steer the affairs of the state better than the younger, less educated soccer star-turned politician, George Weah (Johnson Sirleaf 2009, 245–262). Finally, she abandoned the moniker "Iron Lady," a nickname attributed to her for maintaining fiscal discipline while at the Liberian Ministry of Finance in the 1970s, replacing it with something softer and more palatable: "Ma Ellen." Invoking this maternal trope, Johnson Sirleaf pitched herself as a viable contemporary alternative to the overcrowded pool of 21 male contenders, thereby enlisting an army of women supporters who voted in record numbers (National Elections Commission, Republic of Liberia 2005; Johnson Sirleaf 2006; Johnson Sirleaf 2009, 264; Gbowee 2011, 183–184). In her inauguration speech in 2006, Johnson Sirleaf would acknowledge the women of Liberia for clinching her victory:

It is therefore not surprising that during the period of our elections, Liberian women were galvanized—and demonstrated unmatched passion, enthusiasm, and support for my candidacy. They stood with me; they defended me; they prayed for me. (Johnson Sirleaf 2006)

The "motherhood" motif also framed Johnson Sirleaf as a historical break from the bevy of the former male rulers of Liberia. Thus, she was rebirthed as the "mother of the nation" during her first term in office. This is unsurprising, however, given the prominent role mothers play in African nuclear and extended family networks, argues Oyewumi:

What emerges from such African household and family organization is the importance of motherhood, the fact that mother-derived ties are the most culturally significant, and mothers have

agency and power. Fundamentally, motherhood is not usually constructed in relation to or in opposition to fatherhood; it is conceived in its own right. Mothers are perceived as especially powerful—literally and mystically, in relation to the well-being of the child. They are therefore the pivot around which family life is structured and the child's life rotates. In this family system, unlike in the nuclear family, motherhood is the most important source and model of solidarity, and being a mother is perceived as an attractive and desirable goal to achieve. The privileging of motherhood in the African family organization contrasts with the ambivalence about motherhood in feminism. (2003, 12–13)

In contrast to Western forms of feminism, African feminism valorizes “motherhood and respect for motherhood/maternal politics” (Nnaemeka 1998, 9). “Maternal politics” has emerged as a term that describes a prominent feature of women's political activity, where women's roles as mothers catalyze their “public political actions” (Wells 1998, 251). Not to be confused with feminism, women involved in “mother-centered movements” or “motherism” or “maternal politics,” argues Wells, “are not fighting for their own personal rights as women but for their custodial rights as mothers” (1998, 253). Such movements catapult women into the public sphere, are highly episodic and emotive, and attract individuals from different class hierarchies (Wells 1998, 252–253). Though limited in scope, duration, and impact, mother-centered movements often succeed where others may fail because they invoke the “sanctity of motherhood” deeply embedded in the “social fabric of most societies,” thereby gaining the support of men and government functionaries alike (Wells 1998, 253). Nevertheless, Johnson Sirleaf and others have shown that motherhood can be employed strategically to transcend mother-centered politics thereby carving out a space for women to engage as legitimate stakeholders in the political milieu. As a case in point, Steady (2006, 7) has illustrated how “the concept of motherhood was used to mobilize women for political participation to emphasize the need for development. Motherhood was a collective concept seen as essential for the advancement of both the society and its women.”

While Johnson Sirleaf framed herself as the “mother of the nation” to woo Liberian female and male voters in 2005, she has

proven that motherhood can transgress political ideals thereby compromising development. Although she criticized President William R. Tolbert for nepotism in the 1970s, Johnson Sirleaf has used the office of the president to employ members of her immediate and extended family, most notably her three sons Fombah Sirleaf (as director of the National Security Agency), Charles Sirleaf (as deputy governor of the Central Bank of Liberia), and Robert Sirleaf (as former senior advisor to the president and board chairman of the National Oil Company of Liberia). The president has dismissed public censure about this blatant form of nepotism and defended the decision as legitimate because, according to her logic, all her sons were qualified and competent.<sup>2</sup> This has placed a strain on the mother/nation symbolic relationship, bringing to the fore questions about Johnson Sirleaf's ability to govern without fear or favor. Furthermore, by catapulting her sons into strategic positions of national influence, Johnson Sirleaf has distorted the “mother of the nation” trope by making the personal political.

#### **Tearing Down False Dichotomies between Public and Private Spheres of Influence**

By employing maternal politics and winning Liberia's 2005 and 2011 presidential elections, respectively, Johnson Sirleaf effectively tore down the false dichotomies that separate the public from the private spheres of influence. Steady has commented on these false dichotomies where the “valued public sphere” has been attributed to men while the “devalued private sphere” has been attributed to women (2006, 2). She argues that “such rigid categorizations do not hold true for all societies and have been contested for failing to show the linkage, overlap, and articulation between these spheres and the potential for social transformation” (2006, 2). Furthermore, Steady describes public and private spheres of influence as Western constructs that do not conform to realities in Africa:

African women have historically operated in the public sphere as rulers and political officials, even in patriarchal societies. In addition, women's associations operate in the “public” sphere

where they challenge the state, formulate policies, demand change, and lobby for greater female representation in decision-making positions...the unsuitability of some of these paradigms to the African reality has become significant in the politics of representation and domination and in the power struggle within feminist scholarship. Instead of dichotomous models, some African women scholars have chosen to use exploratory models that are more flexible, complementary, overlapping, complex, transformative, and African-centered. (2006, 2)

The dichotomizing of public/private spheres of influence is embedded in ancient Greek mythology, where human activities are contained in the visible male realm called *Hermean* (the Greek God of communication) and the invisible female realm called *Hestian* (the Greek Goddess of the home):

*Hermean* space is inherently concrete; it is the space where the philosopher exercises his thinking, the citizen practices his politics, and the researcher explores the complexities of the human intellect. As for the *Hestian* space, it is the space of everyday life, essentially characterised by domestic chores and the satisfaction of survival needs. (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006, 88)

According to Sadiqi and Ennaji who argued that the Moroccan feminist movement democratized and feminized the country's public sphere, the public/private dichotomy is entirely too rigid, thus obscuring how women navigate both spaces simultaneously thereby reorganizing them altogether (2006, 88-90):

The public/private dichotomy is not static, especially now that Morocco is experiencing important socioeconomic transformations. There is both a continuum and a dialectic relationship between the public and private spaces, giving rise to a number of intermediate spaces. The space complexities render a rigid dichotomization of space too reductionist, as it does not account for lived reality. (2006, 93)

For Liberian women, the public and private spheres of influence have always melded together, and the country's conflicts

further reinforced this phenomenon. As Liberia's armed conflicts waged, men and young boys were either conscripted to fight in rival factions or killed. Women and girls, on the other hand, filled roles traditionally occupied by their male counterparts, gaining newfound confidence in their ability to lead in and out of the household. In fact, there is a growing body of literature documenting the role of Liberian women in bringing about a cessation to the conflict in organizations such as the Liberian Women's Initiative, the Mano River Women's Network for Peace, Women in Peace-building Network, and the Women Mass Action for Peace Movement, while simultaneously serving as mothers and breadwinners (Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf 2002; Johnson Sirleaf 2009; Gbowee 2011; Steady 2011).

Johnson Sirleaf's ascendancy to Liberia's highest elected office is also emblematic of an established lineage of women in national and international politics. Having worked for domestic and international agencies as varied as the Liberian Ministry of Finance, the World Bank, Citi Bank, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Johnson Sirleaf stands squarely on the shoulders of giants who preceded her. As a case in point, Nye Suakoko was the first female paramount chief of Bong County, one of Liberia's 15 subpolitical divisions (Dunn et al. 2001). Born in the 1880s, Chief Suakoko mediated wars between indigenous Liberians and settlers (Steady 2011, 108). She also served as a diplomat and ally of the Liberian government until her death in the 1930s (Steady 2011, 109). Years later in 1970, Liberian veteran diplomat Angie Brooks became the first African female president of the UN General Assembly, only the second woman of any nation to head the United Nations (Dunn et al. 2001). She was also the first woman to serve as an associate justice of the Liberian Supreme Court, appointed by President Tolbert in 1977 (Dunn et al. 2001). During this time, Emma Shannon Walser was commissioned as the first female judge of a circuit court in Liberia (Dunn et al. 2001). And as Liberia's armed conflict waned in 1996, another woman, Ruth Sando Perry, was appointed head of the transitional government of Liberia and held that post until elections in 1997 (Dunn et al. 2001). For all the lore and fanfare surrounding the profiles of

the women mentioned herein, however, it would be misleading to assume that they are representative. Indeed, what sets them apart is their exceptionalism in spite of Liberia's patriarchal governance structures. In her memoir, Johnson Sirleaf reflects on the precariousness of Liberian women's roles in both public and private spheres of influence:

Like nearly everywhere else in the world at the time, Liberia was very much a male-dominated society. Though Liberian women had long worked outside the home and even held positions of prominence in the government, and although African women in general are honored as mothers and aunts, women were not regarded as equals. In culture and practice, in spirit and in law, men were heavily and blatantly favored. (2009, 41)

Although urban elite and rural women played significant roles inside and outside the home, their value had been undermined by prevailing patriarchal norms in Liberia. Recognizing this, Johnson Sirleaf set out to transform the office of the president, making it more accessible to the average Liberian and visibly incorporating women in the country's postwar recovery efforts.

#### **Lowering Liberia's Power Distance while Increasing the Profile of Women and Girls**

During her early years in office, Johnson Sirleaf attempted to separate herself from her immediate predecessors, Charles Taylor and Samuel Doe, notorious for their brute force and machismo. She began by first reconfiguring the accessibility of the office of the president, largely through face-to-face consultations about issues of national interest with Liberians in the country's 15 subpolitical divisions. Beginning with consultations in 2008<sup>3</sup> to draft Liberia's first Poverty Reduction Strategy, primarily brokered through the IMF and World Bank, Johnson Sirleaf's administration continued with consultations for the National Vision from 2010 to 2011.<sup>4</sup> One could argue that the consultation process has become a bedrock of the Johnson Sirleaf presidency, serving as an extension of her nationwide campaigning.

For the first time in Liberia's history, Johnson Sirleaf also devolved fiscal authority to Liberia's subpolitical divisions, appointing women in 5 of the 15 superintendent posts.<sup>5</sup> She also allocated county development funds (CDFs) within the national budget for local development projects determined by county citizens. Although the CDFs have been mired in controversies over misuse by county and legislative authorities,<sup>6</sup> the political space has opened up for citizens to expose and criticize incidents of mismanagement. It has also forced executive and legislative branch members into a governance structure that involves regular consultations with appointed residents who serve as custodians of the county's resources. Nevertheless, Johnson Sirleaf's administration has come under attack for not implementing similar systems of horizontal governance with multinationals, which have been awarded concessions covering one-third of Liberia's landmass without the knowledge and approval of local populations.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding, through Johnson Sirleaf's consultation and decentralization processes, Liberia has experienced a symbolic lowering of its power distance index. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist and anthropologist, borrowed the term "power distance" from Mauk Mulder to describe how people perceive power differences in their society (2001, 83). It captures "the degree of inequality in power between a less powerful Individual (I) and a more powerful Other (O), in which I and O belong to the same (loosely or tightly knit) social system" (Hofstede 2001, 83). Hofstede employs "power distance" to measure the rate of human inequality within cultures, employing the study of boss-subordinate relations as a proxy. Although power distance measurements are captured primarily in workplace settings within boss-subordinate relations, the concept can still be appropriated to measure the accessibility of political leaders such as Johnson Sirleaf to their citizens. In Hofstede's analysis, countries with higher power distance, such as Malaysia ranking first, have higher levels of inequality (2001, 87). Countries with lower power distance, such as Australia ranking fifty-third, have lower levels of inequality (2001, 87). Although the power distance index does not capture Liberia specifically, it does aggregate West Africa



at a rank of 10/11, meaning that Economic Community of West African States nations exhibit higher levels of inequality (Hofstede 2001, 87).

Johnson Sirleaf's third strategy for transforming the office of the president, thereby symbolically lowering Liberia's power distance, has been achieved through increasing the profile of market women. In her memoir, she fondly recollects that her grandmother, Juah Sarwee, "was a native farmer and market woman from Greenville, Sinoe County" (2009, 11). A mainstay peculiar to West Africa, market women illustrate how African women have always occupied spaces in the world of work unlike their prefeminist counterparts in the West, argues Aidoo:

These women, popularly known as "market women" or "market mammies," are in trade and commerce. But of course, not all of them actually work from the markets, although the great majority do. Their activities range from gem dealing and high finance to "petty" trading. Therefore, their workplaces also range from highly sophisticated modern office complexes to the pavements of the cities where their kiosks stand. For these women, "the market" is both a business arena and a home away from home. From early morning when they occupy their stalls they conduct both their commercial business and their business as homemakers, including the day's cooking for husband and children... Meanwhile, these women make enough money to feed, clothe, and educate their children, and sometimes support their men. (1998, 45-46)

Johnson Sirleaf deliberately and strategically courted market women during her 2005 and 2011 campaigns, promising that, if elected, she would award the peace dividends to this particular constituency. This is unsurprising since Liberian women conduct 85 percent of the country's agricultural marketing and trading, representing the main source of income for 68 percent of women in the country (Sirleaf Market Women's Fund [SMWF] 2012, 1). Estimates suggest that of the 500,000 Liberian women involved in the informal economy, approximately 450,000 are self-employed individuals who sell a diverse range of goods in and around municipal structures

throughout the country (SMWF 2012, 5). According to a study conducted by Subah-Belleh Associates in partnership with Liberia's ministries of gender and development, commerce and industry, the UNDP, and the UN Development Fund for Women, more than 50 percent of market women are the heads of their households and sole income earners (SMWF 2012, 6-8).

Thus, market women have gradually transformed into the human face of Johnson Sirleaf's presidency, receiving targeted recognition and support from her administration. With the full endorsement of President Johnson Sirleaf, the eponymous SMWF was established in 2007 by Liberians and friends of Liberia abroad to rehabilitate market infrastructure throughout Liberia, provide literacy training to market women, and increase their access to capital through microcredit facilities (SMWF 2012, 1, 9). Markets have been a prominent feature of Liberia's contemporary economic milieu and a major sphere of influence for Liberian women where private and public life converge. The first markets were built in 1834, with market development undergoing massive expansion with parallel road network construction in the 1970s under the presidency of William R. Tolbert (SMWF 2012, 14). The majority of Liberia's current 224 markets were constructed in the past 30 years, from the 1980s onward, by small groups of marketers with the assistance of local communities, private individuals, or public figures (SMWF 2012, 14). Incorporated in both Liberia and the United States, the SMWF had rehabilitated or constructed 13 of the 224 markets throughout Liberia as of 2012, providing daycare and preschool services for the children of market women as well as safe storage and banking facilities within the markets (SMWF 2012, 3, 11). Microcredit loans represent a bedrock of the SMWF organizational mandate, with US\$26,000 disbursed to rural markets and US\$35,000 disbursed to urban markets, benefitting 663 women in 10 of the 13 markets renovated or constructed as of 2011 (SMWF 2012, 20). Illustrating its institutional entanglement with the Liberian government, the Liberia arm of the SMWF established a board of directors comprising not only market women, civil society actors, and the Liberia

Marketing Association, but also representatives from the ministries of public works, agriculture, commerce and industry, health and social welfare, and gender and development (SMWF 2012, 10).

While empowering market women, Johnson Sirleaf has also adopted institutional reforms to respond to the needs of Liberian women and girls more generally, including, but not limited to, the Rape Law (the most comprehensive law of its kind in Africa), Equal Rights of the Customary Law, the National Gender Policy, National Gender-based Violence Plan, National Girls' Education Policy, and the Liberia Action Plan for the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (Steady 2011, 111). Because rampant violence against women and girls represents a residual consequence of Liberia's armed conflicts, the government established a gender-based violence unit within the ministry of gender and development, and a special court established in 1972, Criminal Court E, was renovated in 2008 to try gender-based violence cases solely.<sup>8</sup> In 2009, Johnson Sirleaf further increased the profile of Liberian women and girls by cosponsoring with Finnish President Tarja Halonen the International Colloquium on Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security,<sup>9</sup> bringing together women from all over the world to Liberia's capital, Monrovia, to discuss barriers to women's leadership. It was during this conference that the Angie Brooks International Centre for Women's Research, Peace, and Security was launched.<sup>10</sup> When in 2011 Johnson Sirleaf won the Nobel Peace Prize jointly with Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee and Yemeni prodemocracy campaigner Tawakkol Karman "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work,"<sup>11</sup> Liberia officially became the poster child for women's empowerment.

### Reconstituting Patriarchy in Postwar Liberia

Despite efforts to transform the office of the president while empowering Liberian women and girls, Johnson Sirleaf's

presidency has in some ways entrenched patriarchal norms. Steady challenges the assumption that a positive correlation exists between women occupying positions of leadership and fundamental changes in structures limiting gender equity: "Women can replace men in economic and political positions without necessarily transforming structural inequalities embedded in society" (2006, 2). During her campaigning, Johnson Sirleaf vowed to meaningfully incorporate women in Liberia's postwar recovery (Johnson Sirleaf 2009, 277–278), yet her record on appointing women in positions of leadership does not represent a shattering of the glass ceiling. For instance, Johnson Sirleaf has attempted to decentralize fiscal authority through Liberia's decentralization policy, but much of that process has been administered by men at the ministry of finance. In addition to selecting five female superintendents, the president also appointed only five women at a time to head cabinet level ministries and agencies in her first and second administrations. The representation of women in county and cabinet posts is a mild form of tokenism and does not indicate a fundamental break from the past. Furthermore, Johnson Sirleaf has appointed middle-aged women in these positions, while carving out lucrative positions in her cabinet particularly for younger men in their late thirties and early forties.

Another indication of Johnson Sirleaf's reconstituting of patriarchal norms is her administration's decision in 2012 to indefinitely shut down the Sande society,<sup>12</sup> which served as the cultural custodian of initiation practices for young girls. Steady discusses the importance of secret societies such as the Sande, arguing that they are "the best examples of women's associations serving as cultural mechanisms for socialization, non-formal education, and mutual support" (2006, 95). Under the guise of preventing female genital cutting and increasing the enrolment of young girls in formal schooling—decidedly a feminist undertaking—the unilateral closure of Sande was conducted without consultation or dialogue. Johnson Sirleaf's administration rendered obsolete a long-standing means by which women in rural societies derive power and agency, aside from the practice of female genital cutting. This act of erasure

and silencing effectively entrenched patriarchy in rural communities across Liberia. Some have argued that a desire to outlaw the practice of female genital cutting in Liberia, which serves as a bedrock of initiation from childhood to adulthood for young women in Sande practice, did not justify an overhaul of Sande altogether. Furthermore, the seizure and appropriation of Sande land represents a further transgression by the Liberian government because it disrupted the livelihood strategies of Sande zoes without providing alternatives. According to Steady, Sande and its male equivalent, Poro, serve important functions in the socioeconomic life-worlds of the communities in which they are entrenched:

Both Sande and Poro emphasize male and female socioeconomic spheres of activity and impose regulations to ensure that each is maintained with a certain degree of autonomy. Some of these regulations determine procedures and obligations in the gender division of labor and regulate behavior between men and women. As a result, Sande has functioned as an association that protects and defends women's rights as defined by the traditional lore and custom. For example, Sande leaders can reprimand and impose punishment on men who disrespect, use violence against women or mistreat women. As a corollary, Poro leaders can reprimand socially unacceptable behavior by women toward men. An institutional mechanism is thus created which promotes mutual respect, interdependence and complementary rights and obligations in male/female relationships. (2006, 96)

The enduring features of Sande are what make it "an important power base for women" that should not be relegated to the dustbins of history or mediated through an ethnocentric prism, argues Steady (2006, 108):

It [Sande] is also an effective mechanism for life-long bonding and female solidarity. It utilizes its membership to create important networking opportunities with women who have political access or are in a political position themselves. It can also act as a pressure group with important political functions. For example, its membership can be a critical factor in the selection of female

candidates for political office and in deciding the strength of the ballot.

Despite efforts by the Liberian government to clip its wings, Sande has resisted termination, further indicating that cultural practices have the power to endure.

Entrenched patriarchy in Liberia is not only a function of Johnson Sirleaf's policies in doling out executive appointments primarily to men and shutting down female secret societies. It is also indicative of cultural barriers to women's leadership in elected office. In addition to social structures and political institutions, traditional attitudes about gender roles severely inhibit the election of women to public office, particularly national assemblies and parliaments (Norris and Inglehart 2000, 1). As a case in point, Liberia experienced equilibrium and decline in the number of female senators and representatives rather than anticipated increases in the number of women elected in the national legislature since 2005 (National Elections Commission, Republic of Liberia 2011). In the 2011 legislative elections, four women were elected in the senate out of a possible 30 senators, while in 2005 five were elected (National Elections Commission, Republic of Liberia 2005; National Elections Commission, Republic of Liberia 2011). A byelection held in 2009 replaced one deceased female senator in Montserrado County from the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) with Geraldine Doe-Sheriff of the same party, thereby maintaining 17 percent female representation in the senate.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, a byelection held in 2013 in Grand Bassa County increased the current number of female senators to five with the addition of Nyonblee Karnga-Lawrence.<sup>14</sup> In the house of representatives, eight women were elected out of a possible 73 in 2011, representing 11 percent of that body, while eight were elected in 2005 out of a possible 64 representing 13 percent (National Elections Commission, Republic of Liberia 2005; National Elections Commission, Republic of Liberia 2011).

In an attempt to increase the number of women in elected office, a proposed Gender Equity in Politics Act was introduced by the members of the Women's Legislative Caucus in March

2010 mandating that women occupy at least 30 percent of the leadership of political parties in Liberia.<sup>15</sup> The bill, which forms part of a proposed Electoral Reform Law currently under consideration, encountered stiff opposition from men in the house and senate who eschewed it as a misguided quota system. In the 2012 byelection, Johnson Sirleaf indirectly snubbed the proposed bill by supporting a male candidate from her Unity Party while the Women's Legislative Caucus advocated for reserving the vacant seat for a woman. After Doe-Sheriff of the CDC eventually won that seat, Johnson Sirleaf subsequently endorsed the Gender Equity in Politics Act. One could argue that her belated support aided in the proposed bill's final approval by the senate in March 2014.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Johnson Sirleaf's initial reticence about the bill speaks to the fact that while empowering market women might be politically expedient, increasing the number of women in elected office represents a threat to the old guard upon which patriarchy stands. Meanwhile, Norris and Inglehart posit that cultural barriers to women's leadership will gradually fade among younger generations in postindustrial societies because of modernization and the shifting patterns of women's roles in political life (2000, 14–15).

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Liberia's first democratically elected president, Johnson Sirleaf, has attempted to frame herself in two successive administrations as an alternative to a succession of male heads of state. On one hand, she has succeeded in unsettling patriarchal structures by lowering Liberia's power distance thereby increasing her accessibility to average Liberian citizens through face-to-face community and national consultations. She has also introduced gender-sensitive reforms to improve the conditions of women and girls while enhancing the livelihoods of market women throughout the country. On the other hand, however, Johnson Sirleaf has invoked "motherhood" as a cultural trope to further entrench patriarchy by appointing men, most notably her three sons, in strategic positions of power at the

expense of equally competent women. Her administration has also effectively abolished one of the most powerful traditional forms of female agency, the Sande society, in the interest of political expediency. Although Johnson Sirleaf was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for promoting the rights of women and girls, her legacy thus far remains contested in this regard.

### Notes

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