

April 2018



Name of process

Negotiations for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and its implementation

Type of process

Peace-making

Outcome of the process

- Peace agreement signed in 2003, with no subsequent major outbreak of violence
- In 2005, after a transitional government period, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the first woman to be elected President in Africa

Women's inclusion

- Mass action
- Observer status
- Unofficial consultations
- Direct representation in the transitional government
- Inclusive commissions

Women's influence

High level of influence due to:

- Early involvement and coalition building
- Strong women's groups and networks
- A receptive attitude from the mediator and conflict parties
- Inclusive selection criteria for the transitional government and commissions
- High public buy-in and international support

However, influence constrained by:

- Funding obstacles and limited decision-making power
- Later divisions among women's groups
- The co-optation of important women activists into government

Liberia (2003–2011)

Women's groups were highly influential in Liberia's peace process, yielding long-term impacts. The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) had formal observer status during the peace talks, the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) led a mass action campaign, and activists had informal consultations with the mediation team and conflict parties. Women's influence was strongest during the negotiation period. It weakened during the implementation phase, despite women's groups being directly represented in the transitional government and various implementation commissions.

Strong public buy-in, supportive regional and international actors, strong women's groups, pre-existing personal networks, and regional women's networks all contributed to women's influence on the talks. That said, the ad hoc and unstructured nature of women's transfer and communication strategies meant that the impetus for change was not sustained throughout the implementation process. Limited decision-making power, lack of funding, and heterogeneity among the groups also constrained women's continued influence.

I. Background

Liberia is a small nation on the coast of West Africa, with a population of around 4.6 million. Despite external funding and other assistance, it is one of the poorest countries in the world,

Liberia's overall record on women's rights is mixed

at 177 out of 188 in the 2016 Human Development Index.¹ Although advances have been made to address gender inequalities, Liberia's overall record on women's rights is mixed. According to the Gender Inequality Index, Liberia is one of the most unequal countries worldwide, ranking at 150 out of 159.² Similarly, the 2017 Global Gender Gap Report from the World Economic Forum ranks Liberia at 107 out of 144 countries. Unpacking this score shows relatively high ranking for women's political empowerment and economic participation, pulled down by poor scores on educational attainment, health, and survival.³ Liberia continues to have one of the highest incidents of sexual violence against women in the world.⁴

Liberia was founded in 1847, for freed and repatriated African-American slaves. This small minority group of Americo-Liberians (currently less than 2 percent of the population) ruled the country exclusively for over a century. The population is made up of numerous ethnic groups, including the Kpelle (20.3 percent), Bassa (13.4 percent), Grebo (10.0 percent), Gio (8.0 percent), and Mano (7.9 percent). According to the most recent census (2008), around 86 percent of Liberians are Christian, and 12 percent are Muslim.⁵

Over 40,000 women are estimated to have been raped during the two wars

In 1980, an indigenous Liberian, Samuel Doe, led a coup d'état that ended Americo-Liberian rule. Nine years later, armed conflict broke out, and continued until 1997, when Charles Taylor, a leader of one of the armed groups, was elected president. Within two years, however, a second civil war had begun, which lasted until 2003. The figures are disputed, but by most counts around 60,000–80,000 people are estimated to have been killed during the two wars, one million people displaced, and over 40,000 women raped.⁶

Liberia's civil wars are often portrayed as classic "new wars" fought over greed (and not grievances), with client-patron networks of combatants carrying out acts of violence motivated by access to resources and other economic benefits.⁷ Although fighting for access to natural resources such as timber and gold escalated the duration of violence, it would be an oversimplification to see this as the only root cause. A major cause of violence was the exclusionary nature of governance in Liberia. Both the coup d'état in 1980 and Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) used the idea of indigenous inclusion to build legitimacy. Once in power, however, Doe grossly favored his own ethnic group, the Krahn, as well as to a lesser degree the Mandingo. In 1985, a failed coup attempt under Gio leadership was met with reprisals that included the killing of thousands of Gio and Mano; Taylor exploited this to recruit people from these groups into his NPFL. By the time the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) emerged in opposition to Taylor's government, the historical discourse of exclusion between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians had firmly shifted to inter-ethnic contestation. The grievance of exclusion had been ethnicized, but it was also about an overly centralized state, discrimination against a majority of the population, social exclusion, and a lack of access to basic services outside of Monrovia.⁸

From the outset of the conflict, women played an active role in advocating for peace

Violence rose and fell over the 14 years of armed conflict, and although it frequently centered on the capital, Monrovia, most parts of the country were targeted by violence at different times, especially Nimba County and Bong County, and port cities like Buchanan.⁹ Women were often victims of gender-based violence at the hands of armed actors, and were both forcibly and voluntarily recruited into the armed opposition groups.¹⁰ As in any armed conflict, numerous women took on interchanging roles as both agents and victims.¹¹ From the outset, women played an active role in advocating for peace, specifically through organizations such as the Liberia Women's Initiative (LWI), created in 1994.

Regional dynamics became an aggravating factor, and regional leaders contributed to internal divisions: Charles Taylor was involved in the conflict in neighboring Sierra Leone and Guinea, and in return, other regional actors became embroiled in Liberia's conflict. Guinea's President Lansana Conté supported LURD in retaliation for Taylor's support of Guinean rebels and Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo backed MODEL because Taylor supported dissidents in an attempted coup against Gbagbo.¹²

Then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan continued to call on the UN Security Council to look for a solution to the conflict.¹³ In 2002, the UN set up an International Contact Group on Liberia (ICGL), with the UN, ECOWAS, AU, World Bank, United States, Ghana, Nigeria, Morocco, United Kingdom, and France as members.¹⁴ Formal negotiations were scheduled for June 2003, with ECOWAS as the chief mediation team, and Ghana as host country. The ICGL appointed former Nigerian President Abdulsalami Abubakar as the lead mediator. Despite LURD and MODEL declaring that they did not want to negotiate with Charles Taylor, all three conflict parties attended the opening ceremony in Accra.

On the first day of the peace talks, 4 June 2003, the prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone unsealed an indictment for Charles Taylor, for war crimes. Taylor was removed from the negotiations, returning to Liberia without arrest. Taylor's removal proved beneficial to the peace process, and a ceasefire agreement was signed two weeks later.

Six civil society entities, including MARWOPNET, were observers in the talks

After the ceasefire was signed, 18 political parties and six civil society entities, including the women's group MARWOPNET, were invited to take part in the talks as observers. Though the ceasefire agreement had been signed, intense fighting continued in Monrovia into August, and thousands of civilians were killed.

Nonetheless, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in Accra on 18 August 2003, after 76 days of negotiation. (Taylor went into exile in Nigeria a few days before the signature.) The CPA set up a transitional government based on a four-way power-sharing arrangement between the Taylor government, LURD, MODEL, and political parties and civil society actors, which took office in October 2003, and remained in place until elections in late 2005. The transitional Chairperson, Gyude Bryant, was chosen by the conflict parties from nominations made by the civilian actors during the negotiations. A Ministry of Gender was set up. The international community has been heavily involved in Liberia's post-war reforms, both financially and technically.

In 2005, Liberia elected the first woman President in Africa

In 2005, Liberia elected the first woman President in Africa, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was inaugurated in January 2006. Implementation processes continue, but this case study concentrates on the role of organized women's groups in the period up to the end of Johnson Sirleaf's first term in 2011.

Actors involved in the process

The main actors included in the negotiations were the armed conflict parties, political parties, civil society organizations, and the ECOWAS mediation team. The armed conflict parties included representatives from MODEL, LURD, and the then Government of Liberia. These were the three negotiating parties. The non-armed parties comprised 18 political parties and several civil society organizations, and held observer status. Five of the six civil society observers represented specific groups, and three of these were the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL), and the diaspora. These groups had a long history of peace activism, especially the IRCL, which had carried out mediation in February 1990 under its earlier name of the Inter-Faith Mediation Committee.¹⁵ The IRCL had also facilitated talks earlier in 2003, with ECOWAS, which ultimately failed because Taylor refused to take part.

Women Involved in the Process

Women's groups' primary aim was an end to the violence and armed conflict

Women were involved in the peace talks both as formal observers and through mass action. The primary aim of the women's groups was to advocate for an end to the violence and armed conflict. This was particularly the case for the mass action campaign led by the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET). WIPNET was formally set up in 2002 as the Liberian chapter of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), an umbrella group for grassroots organizations involved in peacebuilding. WIPNET were not a formal part of the negotiations, but had a significant impact, primarily through their mass action campaign.

In addition to calling for an end to violence, the women's groups advocated for the peace process to address the persistent gender inequalities in the country. The formal observer, MARWOPNET, focused particularly on this aim. MARWOPNET were less of a grassroots organization, and were set up in 2000 under the auspices of ECOWAS.¹⁶ They are a regional body covering Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, and they quickly gained a reputation as peace activists regionally, and even internationally. A delegation of eight women represented MARWOPNET in the Liberia talks, including Amelia Ward, Ruth Perry (who had briefly been appointed interim Head of State in 1996), and Theresa Leigh-Sherman.

One of the representatives of the Liberians in Diaspora group was a woman. There was limited representation of women among the political parties, with the notable

17 percent of the witnesses who signed the CPA were women

exception of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was part of the delegation for the Unity Party, and was later nominated for the Chair of the Transitional Government. In total, 17 percent of the witnesses who signed the CPA—which included all formal observers from political parties and civil society—were women.¹⁷

Modalities of Inclusion of Women's Groups

Women's groups were well represented and played a prominent role in the peace process. They were influential in lobbying the armed actors to end violence as well as ensuring the inclusion of a Ministry of Gender in the transitional government.

There were several modalities of inclusion of women's groups in the peace process.¹⁸ First, WIPNET led a mass action campaign that began before the negotiations started and intensified during the talks. Second, MARWOPNET was given formal observer status during the peace talks, along with other civilian parties. Third, WIPNET and other women participated in informal consultations with the mediator and conflict parties. The influence of the women's groups is also reflected by their direct representation in the transitional government and various implementation commissions.

1 | Mass Action

Women from all sections of Liberian society rallied around the message "We want peace, no more war"

In the run-up to the peace talks, WIPNET mobilized women to pressure the major armed actors to attend talks under the broader banner of Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. Women from all sections of Liberian society rallied around the message "We want peace, no more war." Hundreds of members dressed in white and demanded peace on the streets of Monrovia, forming inter-faith congregations (Christian and Muslim) to pray for peace. Other actions included the promotion of an effective countrywide "sex strike" until the war had ended.

During the talks, a few WIPNET members travelled to Ghana, where they mobilized Liberian women living in refugee camps. They staged protests outside the negotiations. At one point WIPNET activists blocked the entrance to the meeting room, threatening to undress unless significant progress was made. In Liberia it is considered a curse for a man to see his mother naked, and this action added to the pressure on the conflict actors to finalize the peace agreement. Analysts have noted that this was a crucial turning-point, changing the pace of talks.¹⁹

Since the peace talks ended in 2003, the Mass Action group has reconvened at Fishmarket, Monrovia, at critical political moments, in order to continue voicing their message of peace, such as before the 2005 and 2011 elections. However, the group has not mobilized to the same degree or as effectively.

2 | Observer Status

Several civil society groups and political parties were invited to take part in the formal negotiations as official observers after the ceasefire was signed.²⁰ These included

the Unity Party led by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and six civil society organizations including MARWOPNET.

The civil society groups had an organizational secretariat and took part in several working groups. Although they did not have a mandate to negotiate directly, they managed to have considerable influence on the talks. Notably, the civilian parties played a direct role in nominating candidates for the transitional leadership, from which the conflict parties were allowed to choose the transitional Chairperson and transitional Vice Chairperson. They also insisted on the inclusion of a Ministry of Gender in the transitional government.

3 | Unofficial Consultations

Women's adherence to a patriarchal logic of women as mothers and peacebuilders allowed them significant impact on the negotiations

The women activists were taken seriously by the mediators and—albeit to a lesser degree—by the armed parties. This was not least due to women's adherence to a widely resonant patriarchal logic of women as mothers and natural peacebuilders, which allowed them significant impact on the negotiations. WIPNET's successful mass action campaigns led to several consultations with the mediation team, including the mediator Abdulsalami Abubakar. WIPNET were offered a seat as observer to the official negotiations, but they declined on the basis that they could be more effective from outside, and that they did not want to compete with MARWOPNET.²¹

4 | Direct Representation in the Transitional Government

MARWOPNET was put in charge of the new Ministry of Gender

The negotiation parties agreed to an inclusive transitional government that went on to rule the country for two years pending the first post-war elections in 2005. Civil society was widely represented in this transitional government: seven of 76 seats in the National Transitional Legislative Assembly were reserved for civil society leaders. Notably, MARWOPNET was put in charge of the Ministry of Gender. Moreover, though the transitional Chairperson and Vice Chairperson were chosen by the conflict parties, they were taken from a list of nominations made by civil society organizations and political parties. The nominees included the then leader of the Unity Party, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. However, women leaders and activists were not among the representatives of civil society and political parties who were assigned the leadership of other autonomous agencies and public corporations.

5 | Inclusive Commissions

The peace agreement stipulated that political parties and civil society organizations, including women activists, were to take control of a number of commissions in the transitional government. The CPA and subsequent governing acts made provisions for gender balance in commission membership. Article XVI stipulated the formation of a Governance Reform Commission to oversee the government, and that its "membership shall include women."²² The transitional government appointed Ellen Johnson Sirleaf head of the Governance Reform Commission (she was later replaced by Amos Sawyer). The Governance Commission Act of 2007 went further

The Governance Commission Act of 2007 went further than the CPA in specifying gender balance

in specifying gender balance, setting up a five-person Commissioner body, of which, “no more than three shall be of the same gender” (Section 5.3.3).²³ Two of the Commissioners, including Vice-Chair Elizabeth Selli-Mulbah, are currently women.

The act to set up the Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR) was promulgated in 2005 (although it took another five years for the Commission to be set up). Article IX Section 6 states “the composition of the Commissioners ... shall reflect, to the extent possible, the pluralist nature of Liberian society in terms of sex, ethnicity, language and religion.”²⁴ The INCHR is currently under the leadership of Councillor Gladys Johnson.

Articles IV and VI of the 2005 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Act require the TRC to adopt mechanisms and procedures to address the experiences of women, children, and vulnerable groups; pay particular attention to gender-based violations; employ specialists in women’s rights; protect women’s safety; and not endanger women’s social reintegration or psychological recovery. A minimum of four of the nine commissioners had to be women (Article V). The TRC published their final report in 2009 and a follow-up Commission, the Peace and Reconciliation Commission, was established by Johnson Sirleaf in November 2011. WIPNET leader Leymah Gbowee was appointed Chair.

II. Analysis of Women’s Influence: Enabling and Constraining Factors

Women’s groups in Liberia had a significant impact on the peace process, especially during the negotiation period. Several factors relating to the design of the process (process factors) enabled their influence, including their early involvement as peace activists, the positive attitudes of the armed parties and mediators, successful coalition-building, and selection criteria that emphasized women’s representation. The influence of women was also enabled through several contextual factors: public buy-in, the existence and support of regional women’s networks, and support from both regional and international actors. Nonetheless, some factors constrained women’s influence: the lack of decision-making power, communication strategies (their ad hoc and unstructured nature constrained effectiveness), lack of funding, and the heterogeneity of women’s groups. The last point led to fragmentation in the implementation period, as common goals were lost. Moreover, the inclusive design of the implementation phase led to the co-optation of civil society actors into government positions, weakening the civil society sector.

The following section distinguishes between a number of process and context factors that either enabled or constrained the influence of women in the Liberian peace process, from the negotiations to the implementation phase.

The inclusive design of the implementation led to the co-optation of civil society into government

Process Factors

1 | Beneficial Selection Criteria and Procedures

On the whole, the selection criteria and procedures of the formal modalities of inclusion were beneficial to the inclusion of women's groups.

There was potential for bias in the selection process for observers to the negotiations, as the observers were pre-approved by Charles Taylor. Women were generally perceived as peacebuilders in Liberian society, and Taylor accepted the inclusion of MARWOPNET, which had a prominent role as peace activists. The ECOWAS mediation team's flexibility in applying the formal selection criteria also enabled the inclusion of women delegates. For example, when Nohn Kidau from the Diaspora Group insisted she too get a seat as observer at the negotiating table, they quickly acquiesced.²⁵

The establishment of commissions has been drawn out and the method of selection has been controversial

The peace agreement and subsequent legislation ensured that gender equality featured in selection procedures: Article XXVIII of the peace agreement stipulated gender balance in all elective and non-elective appointments within the National Transitional Government. However, the establishment of commissions has been a drawn-out process and, despite gender balance, the method of selection has been controversial.²⁶ Governmental institutions and corporations were assigned to conflict parties, civil society organizations, and political parties. Many of the official observers were happy to join the transitional government, with the exception of the IRCL, who declined to take part in the interest of maintaining neutrality.

2 | Limited and Ineffective Decision-making Power

Formally, only the conflict parties had decision-making powers during the negotiations, and they used the continuing violence in Monrovia to gain concessions. The women's group observing the negotiations was, however, able to exert influence on the decision-makers, as illustrated in the inclusion of a Ministry of Gender in the final peace accords.

The leadership of ministries and public corporations was not legislated, but largely left open

The transitional government provided a concrete decision-making role for civil society, including women's groups, who were also represented in the transitional assembly. This decision-making power was less strong though, as the focus of a common goal was lost during implementation. In contrast to the legislated selection criteria for commissions, the leadership of specific government ministries or public corporations was largely left open. This led to fighting and tension over the assignment of posts, which weakened civil society's position overall.²⁷ Over time, the women's groups and activists began shift and vary their focus.

In the long run, the decision-making power gained by women was not effectively utilized. For example, the Ministry of Gender and Development—which MARWOPNET was initially in charge of—was later accused of focusing on women, rather than involving both genders to address Liberia's unequal power relations and gender inequalities.²⁸

3 | Short-lived but Effective Coalition Building

MARWOPNET and WIPNET differed in their strategies and were not always on the best of terms. However, as the negotiations began they slowly started to consult with each other. MARWOPNET members would brief WIPNET about the proceedings, and WIPNET would target pressure on the parties from the outside. The most significant turning-point in the relations of the two groups occurred after WIPNET declined mediator Abubakar's invitation to join the table as an observer. This invitation came as a result of their highly publicized protest, when they blocked the doors of the negotiation venue and threatened to undress. WIPNET declined the seat because they felt adequately informed on the proceedings from MARWOPNET and did not want to undermine the latter's role in representing the women of Liberia. This move helped improve relations between the two groups.

Cooperation between women's groups culminated in a Women's Forum to reflect on the talks

Cooperation between the groups culminated in the organization of a Women's Forum to reflect on the talks. This Forum concluded with a final declaration, the Golden Tulip Declaration of Liberian Women Attending the Peace Talks, issued a few days before the peace accord was signed. It detailed the combined demands of the women's groups, and highlighted the importance of addressing gender-based discrimination. After the peace agreement was signed there was an initial period during which the groups continued to work together on dissemination. However, as the implementation period went on, pre-existing class divisions between the groups resurfaced and unity between the two groups weakened.

4 | Effective Transfer, Communication, and Advocacy Strategies

During the peace negotiations, civil society actors' strategies for the transfer and communication of their preferences, including women's groups, mainly consisted of informal consultations with the mediator and armed parties. There was one direct input into plenary sessions, namely through the list of nominees for the transitional leadership. Civil society actors also prepared statements on thematic issues, and presented them to the mediator, armed parties, and sometimes the press. Connections stemming from strong personal networks were influential in gaining access to armed conflict parties. For example, WIPNET member Asatu Bah Kenneth found a former classmate within the LURD delegation, and took advantage of this to speak to him openly and informally.

Strong personal networks were influential in women gaining access to armed conflict parties

WIPNET activists provided a strong visual message through their actions. The sheer number of women, all dressed in white, was highly symbolic in the protests both at Fishmarket in Monrovia and at the negotiations in Accra. In Accra, the women used banners and chants to remind delegates of the continued atrocities being committed in Liberia. WIPNET's protests—including a sex strike and physically barring a room full of conflict actors in a plenary session of the official peace talks—drew considerable media attention. The story of the Mass Action movement was later documented in a film, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, and the main spokesperson, Leymah Gbowee, was a joint recipient of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

The sheer number of women, all dressed in white, was highly symbolic

In Monrovia, women met to discuss what measures should be taken to implement the CPA

After the peace agreement, the civil society actors who had been observers informally disseminated the results of the negotiations. MARWOPNET, the Liberia Women Initiative, and WIPNET invited a cross-section of women to a meeting in Monrovia's city hall, where they translated each provision of the CPA step by step, and discussed what measures should be taken to ensure implementation. However, this event was a one-off. From then on, activities were largely separate and focused on issues other than the peace process. In the run-up to the 2005 elections for example, WIPNET helped with voter registration, targeting market women in the final days of registration and providing transportation, childcare, and supervision of market stalls.²⁹

5 | Supportive Mediator and Respectful Attitudes of Conflict Parties

The lead mediator encouraged women to interact and put pressure on the armed parties

Charles Taylor had approved the mediator Abdulsalami Abubakar from a list drawn up by ECOWAS, and he was then appointed by the ICGL. However, despite potential selection bias Abubakar was very supportive of the inclusion of civil society, especially women's groups. He listened carefully to their ideas and encouraged them to interact and put pressure on the conflict actors. He offered WIPNET a role as observer.

Initially, the LURD and MODEL representatives were critical of the civil society observers, pointing to the bias in their selection. However, over time and as the observers demonstrated their independence, such skepticism declined. In general, women activists were widely respected as advocates for peace, giving them agency in an otherwise patriarchal society. According to civil society actors, including women activists, the armed parties, some of whom they had known for a long time, listened to them.³⁰

6 | Early Involvement of Women in the Process

The women's groups built on a reputation gained by women in the 1990s

The two major women's groups involved in the peace process from 2003 had only recently been created. However, many of their leaders had been prominent in women's groups of the 1990s, and built on a reputation gained by women in this earlier period. One of the founders of the Liberian chapter of MARWOPNET was Mary Brownell, who had also been a leading figure in the Liberia Women Initiative. LWI were founded in 1994, and drew particular attention to the plight of women during the conflict. The LWI secured a position as observer during one of the mediation attempts in 1994, however they lost their position during the later stages and agreements of 1995 and 1996.³¹

WIPNET formed the Mass Action campaign, and was also involved in the run-up to the talks. For example they sent a delegation of three women to talk to LURD in Freetown, Sierra Leone, before the peace talks started, urging them to attend.³² Leymah Gbowee, a leader of WIPNET, had received training through WANEP.

7 | Funding Constraints

Funding constrained the influence of women activists, although not all women were affected equally

Funding constrained the influence of women activists, although not all women were affected equally. Many of the women present at the talks came from the elite, and were able to personally cover the costs of travelling to Ghana, at least partially. MARWOPNET also received some international funding for their peace work, which contributed to travel costs, and official observers at the peace negotiations received food and lodging once they arrived at the talks.

WIPNET was renowned for being a truly grassroots organization

However, for those groups without official status, the extended duration of the talks proved challenging. WIPNET relied on self-funding, and donations from members and other regional network members, to support their stay in Ghana. Some WIPNET representatives returned to Monrovia during the talks, and were replaced by women already living in the refugee camp close by.³³ The impetus to return to Monrovia was exacerbated by concerns for the families that they had left behind.

Context Factors

Context enabled women's influence. Contributing factors included high public buy-in, the existence and support of regional women's groups, and the strength of Liberian women's groups and their existing personal networks. International actors encouraged these women, and the positive attitude of mediators and conflict parties was encouraged by a widely held perception of women as peacebuilders. The heterogeneity of the women's groups however did constrain their influence, which began to decline in the post-war period.

1 | Presence of Strong Women's Groups

WIPNET and MARWOPNET were both widely respected at the time of the negotiations, and this increased as the talks went on. The presence of these very vocal groups, which had a clear position of wanting to end violence, and wide societal support, had a positive influence on the peace agreement. In the transitional period, however, co-optation of the groups into the government weakened them.

2 | Strong Public Buy-in

The civil society actors involved in the 2003 peace negotiations were not all perceived to be equally legitimate, but on the whole the women's groups were highly respected, especially WIPNET. WIPNET received widespread societal support during the negotiations and the implementation period. It was renowned for being a truly grassroots organization, including women from all social, religious, and political backgrounds. The group was also geographically diverse because its members included people from large refugee and displaced persons' communities. Their legitimacy and input heightened public buy-in of the peace process.³⁴

Members of MARWOPNET were generally respected and supported in society and among political stakeholders, partly due to the deference to elders, such as Mary Brownell, who has been Chairperson of the LWI and was also a founding member of MARWOPNET. However, MARWOPNET's role in the negotiations was generally less known by broader society, and they were perceived to come from the Monrovia elite, which meant they did not have the same level of support.

3 | Positive Role of Regional and International Actors

Both regionally and internationally, there was a lot of external pressure to find a solution to the conflict in Liberia, which had gone on for years and contributed to complex regional conflict dynamics.

The reputation of the women's groups gave them access to major stakeholders

The international community encouraged the involvement of civil society generally, without any special focus on women. However, UN Resolution 1325 gave a normative impetus for women's participation in peace processes. The reputation and growing prominence of the various women's groups as peace activists gave them access to major stakeholders including regional actors. For example, the President of Guinea, Lansana Conté, agreed to meet with Mary Brownell (from LWI and MARWOPNET), and she encouraged him to talk to Charles Taylor.

4 | Heterogeneity of Women's Identities and Class Divides

The class division between the women's groups became more salient in the postwar period

The class division between the women's groups became more salient in the post-war period, and contributed to a decline in their influence. WIPNET had more than 5,000 members from all over the country and claimed to represent ordinary Liberians. They mobilized women from all levels of society, and included rural and urban women, professional and non-professional. They used collective decision-making to organize the Mass Action campaign, discouraged the use of "big English," and all members wore a uniform of white T-shirts and *lappas* (material worn as skirts) from the same fabric. WIPNET repeatedly invited MARWOPNET and LWI to attend their protests at Fishmarket, but the groups rarely attended. When they did come to one protest, they brought chairs and placed them at the front, which undermined the symbolism of all women sitting on the ground in all weathers. Although class divisions were put aside during the negotiations, and LWI and MARWOPNET were seen as committed activists, "at some risks to their lives," they were criticized for being members of the educated elite, and having wined and dined with armed parties in their roles as official delegates.³⁵ Members of LWI and MARWOPNET deny this elitism, but it is a critique of civil society organizations that persists in the post-war period.³⁶

Divisions and disagreements made it difficult to work together on common positions and actions in the post-war era. In the aftermath of the signing of the peace agreement, LWI and MARWOPNET members joined the transitional government and various commissions, whereas the grassroots campaigners from WIPNET largely returned to their previous lives. Leymah Gbowee was appointed head of a national Peace and Reconciliation Commission by President Sirleaf in 2011, but in 2012 (after the time

period of this case study) she resigned, citing nepotism and corruption in the Sirleaf administration. Gbowee was in turn accused of a misuse of funds.³⁷ When Leymah Gbowee was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, other women activists felt that their equally prominent roles had been overlooked.

5 | Positive Attitudes and Expectations Surrounding Societal Gender Roles

The women's rights activists were widely respected and held in high esteem by the conflict actors and broader Liberian society. This is despite its overall patriarchal nature, and was partly due to the women adhering to patriarchal logic by lobbying under the banner of being mothers, wives, daughters, aunts, and sisters.³⁸ This self-imposed stereotyping of peaceful and non-threatening traditional women's roles facilitated their access to conflict parties.³⁹ Such a narrative assumes essentialist identities that have the potential of limiting women's agency to passive victimhood.⁴⁰ However, by strategically molding their advocacy to reaffirm societal expectations of women, a considerable degree of agency was made possible. In fact, though at first their primary aim was to end violence rather than address gender discrimination, they were influential in achieving increased women's rights more broadly. The women's groups gained access to Charles Taylor, LURD, regional stakeholders (e.g. Guinean President Conté), and international actors such as the ICGL.

By molding their advocacy to reaffirm societal expectations, women increased their agency

6 | Useful Linkages to Regional and International Women's Networks

Both MARWOPNET and WIPNET were national chapters of regional bodies, in line with the regional dynamics of the Liberian conflict. MARWOPNET were a regional body created in 2000 under the auspices of ECOWAS. The theme of their first meeting was "Encouraging Women's Participation in the Peace Process, notably the Mano River Union," and was organized by the NGO Femmes Africa Solidarité and the African Women's Committee for Peace and Development, with the support of the African Union, African Economic Community, UN Development Program and the Nigerian government.⁴¹ MARWOPNET in Liberia were supported through this regional network.

WIPNET was a sub-group of West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), which was founded in 1998 and is the largest peacebuilding network in West Africa. WIPNET is one of its most prominent members. Though WIPNET were very successful on their own terms, they had less support from their regional body, which was not specific to women per se. Gbowee and WIPNET became increasingly frustrated with the all-male leadership of WANEP during the implementation period and in 2006 core members of WIPNET left to create an independent organization, the Women Peace and Security Network Africa (WIPSEN-Africa).

WIPNET became frustrated with the all-male leadership of WANEP during the implementation period

III. Conclusion

Women's groups were highly influential on the Liberian peace process, in particular during the negotiations in 2003. This influence fell during the implementation period, although the women's organizations did ensure significant long-term impact on Liberia's post-conflict governance.

During the peace talks, the strength of the women's groups was contextually facilitated by high public buy-in, supportive regional and international actors, strong personal and regional networks, as well as perceptions of women as natural peacebuilders. Regarding the negotiation process itself, this influence was enabled through early involvement in peace activism, coalition-building, strong cooperation between the women's groups, as well as the receptiveness of the mediation team towards the women delegates.

Women were able to have a significant impact during the negotiations

Women activists were able to have a significant impact during the negotiations. And while their primary aim was the ending of violence, they contributed to considerable additional achievements, including provisions for gender-specific selection criteria for various new commissions and the creation of a Ministry of Gender.

This context and their achievements gave the women's groups momentum to build on during the implementation period. Members of WIPNET went on to play prominent roles in the government in the years to follow, including Asatu Bah Kenneth, who in 2011 became Deputy Director of the Drug Enforcement Agency, and Leymah Gbowee, who was as Head of the Peace and Reconciliation Commission.⁴² Amelia Ward from MARWOPNET was made part of the Constitutional Review Committee that was launched in 2012. The women's groups were internationally lauded for their role, with MARWOPNET winning the UN Prize for Human Rights in recognition of its important work in 2003 and Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf being two of three joint recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. Perhaps most symbolically, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf went on to become the first democratically elected woman President in Africa.

During the transitional government, however, women's influence fell, as their goals diversified, the co-optation of the women's groups into government weakened the civil society sector, and the ad hoc nature of communications meant that the impetus for change was not sustained.

Despite the achievements in political representation, the future of women's and rights in Liberia is uncertain

Despite the introduction of gender-specific institutions, including specialized police units for the protection of women and children and a court with exclusive jurisdiction over gender-based violence, advocates believe that violence against women continues to be widespread. In fact, judicial protection has been unable to effectively deal with the sheer number of incidents and newer programs have focused on training community leaders in women's right and dealing with gender-based violence.⁴³

While women have filled officially appointed positions, including as county superintendent or Mayor of Monrovia (Mary Broh 2009-2013), women's representation in parliament remains low, at 12.3 percent of seats in the 2017 elections.⁴⁴ The latest presidential election in 2017 saw the one woman candidate, MacDella Cooper, win only 0.7 percent of the vote.⁴⁵ Despite the achievements in political representation of women during the peace negotiation and implementation, the future progress of women's representation and rights in Liberia is uncertain.

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Women in Peace and Transition Processes

Case studies in this series are based on findings of the “Broadening Participation in Political Negotiations and Implementation” research project (2011–2017), a multi-year comparative research project led by Dr. Thania Paffenholz at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. The Broadening Participation project examined how and under which conditions various actors participated in and influenced peace and political transition processes. The project’s dataset comprises 40 mainly qualitative case studies of negotiation and implementation processes, covering 34 countries, and ranging from 1989 to 2014. These cases are categorized according to a range of groups of included actors and a framework of seven inclusion modalities developed by Thania Paffenholz. Among the case studies under review for this project, 28 included measurable involvement of women. In this context, women were defined as relatively organized groups, including delegations of women, women’s civil society organizations, coalitions or networks, which sought inclusion in peace negotiations and the implementation of agreements. The project did not investigate the role of women as mediators. For more information, see: www.inclusivepeace.org.

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