
WOMEN'S ROLE IN ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING PEACE: ANALYZING THROUGH THE CASE OF LIBERIA

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Abstract: Gender equality is considered to be one of the basic principles for peaceful existence of a state at the national and international level. It provides great opportunity for equal representation of all members in the society. For the materialization of gender equality, women's participation in the public sphere is a necessary phenomenon. Their involvement in the public sphere would make the political system more realistic, inclusive and effective in addressing the world's problems and challenges. Various policies and resolutions have been passed supporting the human rights and political participation of women. While describing the experiences of war or conflicts, women's perspectives should also be included other than portraying them as victims. In the light of these issues, the paper would make an attempt in dealing with certain questions- Does women's active involvement in public sphere have any transformatory potential? How can being woman make any difference in the pattern of leadership? Will altering the gender balance in the decision-making structures bring about any significant change? Is it possible that the rate of violence will decrease with women's participation in the public sphere? All these discussions would be explored through the Liberian experience.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Liberia, War and Conflict, Women's leadership and participation.

Introduction: Women, in the present times, have been given recognition in many spheres of life. Many constitutions of the developed as well as developing countries have accepted and included the concept of gender equality in order to provide women their due status in society. The existing gender differences needs to be realised for avoiding any sort of bias and for establishing a new set of belief. It is acknowledged that with women being involved in policy formulation and political decision-making would not only bring change for themselves but also for the environment and society they live in. Women's political participation can also lead to changes regarding social and economic inequalities and reduce the existing gender biases. The increase in the presence of women in public life and their active involvement would lead to further development of democratic institutions. Along with this, is a prevalent notion that the political empowerment of women contributes to a peaceful world. Women are more peaceful and globalistic than men.

The path-breaking resolution that recognized women as a separate individual was the Fourth World Conference in Beijing (1995). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recommended the governments to strengthen the role of women and represent them equally at all decision-making levels in national and international institutions. Participation of women in the administration and various peace processes has been considered as their human rights. Many other laws and resolutions passed in the United Nations Organization have made an attempt to achieve this benchmark. They have not only discussed about women's status during conflicts and war but they have also given equal importance to their participation in the public

sphere. The UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (October 31, 2000) is the first legal document that favours women's rights during war and conflicts and also supported their participation in post-conflict reconciliation. It further calls on actors involved in negotiation and implementation of peace agreements to include gender perspectives. In a similar tone, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820 on Women, Peace and Security (June 19, 2008) aims to create an awareness about sexual violence in armed conflicts and post-conflict situations. Many resolutions have also been passed related to women's role in the political system. Among them the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 110 on Women and Political Participation directly deals with this issue. It advocates women's full and equal participation in the political process and decision-making that would regulate the society in a balanced manner. It would in turn play a pivotal role in furthering women's equal status, including improving their socio-economic status.

Though there are significant changes expected with engaging women in the public sphere but these amendments do not seem to be materializing in the near future. One of the predominant reasons for this is the existing patriarchal system in most parts of the world. Although there are some men who support implementation of equal opportunity measures and other gender equality reforms, at the same time there are many who oppose it too. As an attempt for gender equality, the established institution of masculinity needs to be remade and reconstructed. The interplay of political, socioeconomic and cultural factors have an effect on women's political integration. There are certain political values that hinder women's progress. The public-private dichotomy in traditional

definition of politics is used to exclude women from public political sphere. Similarly, in the socioeconomic aspect, economic backwardness and illiteracy are negatively correlated with women's political representation. Then the cultural constraints are also pessimistic towards political mobilization of women. They being stuck in their traditional productive and reproductive roles rarely have time to take part in the political affairs. All these issues lead to invisibility of women from the public sphere. They rarely get the chance to express their viewpoint and stand for their concerns and thus, remain limited to the private realm only. It is also held that women's participation in decision-making and in political, economic, social and cultural life is negatively affected by poverty, particularly in developing countries. The extent to which the implementation of these theoretical laws must take place in the real life is generally preceded by a set of unevaluated questions - Does women's active involvement in public sphere have any transformatory potential? How can being woman make any difference in the pattern of leadership? Will altering the gender balance in the decision-making structures bring about any significant change? Is it possible that the rate of violence will decrease with women's participation in the public sphere? All these issues will be discussed in the paper with respect to women's role in establishing and maintaining peace in Liberia.

Women's Political Participation in Liberia: Gender is an integral part aspect of structural and cultural violence. It forms the basis of structural inequality in all states. Though gender appears to be an important criterion for explaining the phenomena of violence and war, yet a biased picture is presented. Prevailing gendered hierarchies indicate the ideas, values and beliefs that promote male domination and superiority which is also reflected in the incidents of conflict. The word woman is missing in the context of war. In the context of violence and dissonance, women are pictured as naive, inarticulate and helpless victims of a situation over which they have no control. So much so that even many nation states justify humanitarian intervention on the grounds of protecting women. Though women are not a part of these events yet their lives are affected by them to a large extent (be it in the form of losing family members in the war or use of rape as a weapon of war). Therefore, it can be said that in situations of war and conflicts women have been portrayed centrally as the victim and marginally as agents as the military force is found exclusively to be male. Even during crisis negotiation, women are excluded as it is taken as a competitive endeavour. However, the women in Liberia made an attempt to go beyond these predefined notions and did the unimaginable.

Liberian women were the victim of politics of exclusion as they held a constrained and limited place in the society at all levels. In spite of such negligence, women took up critical humanitarian roles during the civil war and the success of such peace works led them to organize and form the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI). This group played an active role in highlighting the difficulties faced by women and children, the abuse of women and use of child soldiers in the war. The Liberian Women's Mass Action for Peace brought the native women together to say 'never again' to violence and war. This women's peace activism with time presented a visible and vocal challenge to militarism and structural violence, which in turn paved the path for women's participation in politics and peace building. In the 1994 Accra Conference, women's observer groups mastered the art of 'corridor lobbying' where they literally waited to talk to the delegates in the corridors and tried to convince them to sign the peace accord by submitting declarations. They also maintained external pressure by issuing statements and formulating resolutions that they presented to mediators from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and foreign embassies. Through their contacts with regional media, they also ensured that their exclusion from the official talks was also made public.

Leymah Gbowee and her allies, including a Mandingo-Muslim woman named Asatu organized Christian and Muslim women who, together, pressured warring parties into the 2002 negotiations that ultimately ended years of horrific war. What makes the Liberian situation unique is that women, irrespective of their different religion, social and economic background, came together to achieve peace and national reconciliation and also to make an attempt for women's inclusion in national development and social welfare issues. Recognizing this achievement, the Nobel Committee awarded Ms. Gbowee the 2011 Peace Prize for her nonviolent struggle for women's rights and full participation in peace-building work.

Following each of Liberia's civil wars, Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DDRR) processes were conducted to rehabilitate combatants. The initial process only included a few hundred woman fighters, roughly 3% of the total. Realizing that women's roles were broader than that of victims, the Liberian DDRR program expanded eligibility also to the members of non-fighting groups and finally demobilized over 22,000 women or 28% of participants.

The women in Liberia not only took the initiative to put an end to the twenty five years of genocidal civil conflict in the country but they also saw to it that after the end of the civil war the government which

comes to power should be empathetic towards the citizens of Liberia. They believed that the post-conflict democratic leadership should be under such a leader who realizes the importance of democratic sustainability for Liberian people and play an active role in women's empowerment. In the year 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf came to power after putting an end to the dictatorial regime of Charles Taylor. This led to the achievement of the most significant milestone for Liberia, thus representing a great accomplishment for a society that has been historically plagued by political and other discrimination against women. In her presidency, women were recruited to crucial position with the faith that they can be trusted and placed through hazardous situations, believing they can do better. What needs to be examined here is the extent of the alteration of the measures of post-conflict reconciliation as a result of this change in administration.

Women's Leadership in Liberia: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first visionary female President in the African continent, relies on democratic, pluralistic, culturally diversified approaches. The policies formed during her governance have an optimistic prospect for a sustainable post-conflict reconciliation, rehabilitation, reconstruction and ethno-cultural inclusion for national redemption. She aimed to lead "a government of inclusion" and for healing away the wounds of war, she wanted to instill "motherly sensitivity and emotion to the presidency." Sirleaf also took various measures to remove potential dispute between Liberia's rival ethnic groups.

During her tenure, President Johnson Sirleaf gained popularity and praise for ensuring stability and the rule of law which has paved way for democracy and lasting peace for Liberia. She has been instrumental in building strong relations with regional partners and the international community, attracting investment of over US\$16 billion in Liberia's mining, agriculture, forestry and hydrocarbon sectors to provide jobs for her people. Her leadership led to Liberia's US\$4.6 billion external debt forgiveness in June 2010, and the lifting of UN trade sanctions to allow Liberia access to international markets. Under her government, the National Budget grew from a mere US\$80 million in 2006 to over US\$672 million in 2012, with an annual GDP growth increase of 8.7 percent. In the next five years the budget is expected to rise over 1 billion USD. She has also attracted over \$5 million of private resources to rebuild schools, clinics and markets, and scholarships for capacity building. Given that she represents a region which

rife with poverty and massive human/women's rights violations her accomplishments are very significant.

Conclusion: With women's participation, certain traits of honesty, compassion, creativity, communitarian and outgoing attitude will be more recognized in the outer world. Women have the ability to work out compromises, represent the interests of the society and stand up for what they believe. Though women have the ability to act rationally and competitively at the required hour, but what makes them more unique is their approach to moral dilemmas. The three questions that every policy makers should consider are: First, will the decision threaten or cause harm to each other? Second, will the decision strengthen or weaken positive, constructive relationships? Third, will the decision detract or add to the total security of all? Women leaders have been raising these questions in the interest of every individual. While women have the potential to change the existing scenario in the political sphere, it is also believed that women gaining an important position in administration can lower the propensity towards violence during a crisis. A women-centric approach to war provides an insight into an 'other' experience of war because women generally have an attitude of cooperativeness, connectedness and care. Women are likely to use collective and consensual approach to problem solving and conflict resolution. Because of their unique roles and access, women are often particularly well-placed to get a negotiation process started and keep it moving forward. The priorities women address in peace agreements extend beyond the struggle for power or territory to the everyday requirements of communities. Only when these needs are addressed, welfare state can be established. Women's role in achieving and maintaining peace in Liberia, the socio-economic developments in the post-conflict era, the effective leadership of LWI and presidency of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf sets up an example for the rest of the world.

Women's participation in the public sphere will open up new and innovative explanation to the existing phenomena. Recognizing their voice in the means of administration will lead to representation of not only women but all the other sections of society. With women coming to the forefront, a new definition of peace and stability will be established which would prove to be beneficial not only to the deprived section of the society but to the majority of men. Therefore, in order to dream of a world without violence and conflict, introduction of women to the political and public realm is a necessary phenomenon.

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