

University of Ottawa

## **Africa's Gender Revolution**

To What Extent Has the Increased Presence of Women in High-Level Political Positions in Africa Impacted the Socio-Political Empowerment of Women?

API 6999 – Major Research Paper

Nelly Naze (5961569)

Supervisor: Rita Abrahamsen

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## **Abstract**

This major research paper examines whether women's increased presence in high-level political positions in Rwanda and Liberia impacted the socio-political empowerment of women. Rwanda provides a unique case study, as it was the first country in the world to have a gender parity parliament. Liberia, having elected the first female African president, presents an optimal example of female leadership in the continent. The research question draws on both Anna Philips's theory on *politics of presence* and Drude Dahlerup and Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *critical mass theory*. Both confirm the significance of female representation in political institutions in relation to empowerment. The paper concludes that the increased presence of women in high-level political position initiated greater parliamentary attention to gender equality issues. Yet the success of women's political empowerment in Africa has been accompanied by increasingly authoritarian and/or patriarchal institutions. Hence, women were unable to fully benefit from their increased presence in politics. This paper calls for improved targets for women in political and decision-making positions that are accompanied by determined efforts to remove all obstacles that obstruct women's effectiveness.

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When more women are elected into office, policy-making increasingly reflects their priorities.<sup>1</sup> Studies show that women need to represent at least 30 percent of political institutions, before they can have an impact on state priorities: this is known as the 'critical mass theory' in gender politics.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, while women constitute half the population, they only represent 22 percent of high-level political positions worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Such underrepresentation is often a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes. As a consequence, women and girls have little influence over political decisions and distribution of resources, or are restricted from accessing paid labour. Such barriers happen to coincide with alarming rates of gender-based violence, difficulty in accessing legal rights, and sexual and reproductive health services.<sup>4</sup> Without proper female representation, such circumstances frequently remain unchallenged.

However, despite such low global representation, progress is occurring. For instance, in the last four decades, nowhere in the world has female political representation increased faster than it has in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Between 1960 and 2003, the representation of female parliamentarians grew from 1 to 14.3<sup>5</sup> percent, and again to 22 percent<sup>6</sup> by the end of 2015. As an average, SSA remains in the middle of the pack, with Nordic countries at the top with 41.1 percent, followed by the Americas with 25.5 percent; European countries at 24.4 percent; Asia with 18.4 percent; Middle East

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<sup>1</sup> SADC Framework for Achieving Gender Parity in Political and Decision Making Positions by 2015. (2009). Southern African Development Community, 1-24. Pg.9

<sup>2</sup> Karpowitz, C. F., Mendelberg, T., & Mattioli, L. (2015). Dialogue: Gender, Group Deliberation, and Authority. *Western Political Science Association*, 3(1), 149-177. Pg. 150

<sup>3</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2016). Women in Parliaments: World and Regional Averages. Retrieved from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

<sup>4</sup> The World Bank. (2014). Improving Gender Equality in Africa. Retrieved from <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/brief/improving-gender-equality-in-africa>.

<sup>5</sup> Tripp, A. M. (2003). The Changing Face of Africa's Legislatures: Women and Quotas. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1-9. Pg. 1

<sup>6</sup> Women in Parliament: 20 Years in Review. (2015). Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1-20. Retrieved from <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/WIP20Y-en.pdf>. Pg. 1

and North Africa at 17.1 percent; and the Pacific, with 15.7 percent.<sup>7</sup> Individually, Rwanda leads with 63 percent of female parliament members, followed with Bolivia, Cuba, Seychelles and Sweden with 53.1, 48.9, 43.8 and 43.6 percent, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

The speed at which SSA increased their percentage of female representation is quite remarkable, and this paper aims to investigate some of these impacts. The objective is to examine whether women's increased presence in high-level political positions in Rwanda and Liberia, impacted the socio-political empowerment of women. To do so I assess the success along two dimensions: tangible and symbolic. The research question is informed by both Anna Phillips's theory on *politics of presence* and Drude Dahlerup and Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *critical mass theory*. Phillips's politics of presence argues that female politicians to a greater extent than male politicians represent the interests of women.<sup>9</sup> She explains that the range of political ideas and preferences is significantly constrained by the characteristics of the people who convey them; hence particular needs, interests and concerns that arise from women's experience, will be inadequately addressed in politics that are dominated by men.<sup>10</sup> The critical mass theory already alluded to, is a numerical threshold that once achieved would change legislative priorities in favour of women. Dahlerup and Kanter suggest that at least 30 percent of political positions must be occupied by women.<sup>11</sup> Thus the theory assumes that the percentage of female participation is a key determinant of behavioural change. Hence the absence of a

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<sup>7</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2016). Women in Parliaments: World Classification. Retrieved from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2016). Women in Parliaments: World Classification.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, A. (1998). From a Politics of Ideas to a Politics of Presence? *The Politics of Presence*, 1-26. Pg. 14

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Phillips, A. (1998). Pg. 66

<sup>11</sup> Childs, S., & Krook, M. L. (2008). Critical Mass Theory and Women's Political Representation. *Political Studies*, 56(7), 725-736.pg. 730

critical mass constrains women's abilities to proactively respond to the political environment they are in.

Collectively, both theories form the same conclusion, that female politicians are best equipped to represent the interests of women; primarily because men and women differ substantially in everyday life experiences. Female politicians, at least to some extent, share the experiences of other women, and are thus better equipped to represent women's interests. In other words, there are some concerns that arise from women's daily struggles that will be insufficiently and/or inadequately addressed by men. Both theories therefore determine that increasing female representation will result in greater parliamentary attention to gender equality, family, and social policy, but as well positively impact institutional cultures within parliaments. Such a change in political focus will benefit women's daily lives and remove barriers that will lead to their empowerment.

Empowerment is a contested term that is difficult to define. In this paper I do not directly address these debates but use the term more simply to signify the promotion of women's social and political rights. I also rely on the World Bank's definition that states:

*"Empowerment is the process of increasing the assets and capabilities of individuals or groups to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowered people have freedom of choice and action. This in turn enables them to better influence the course of their lives and the decisions which affect them...In essence empowerment speaks to self-determined change. It implies bringing together the supply and demand sides of development*

*– changing the environment within which poor people live and helping them build and capitalize on their own attributes.”<sup>12</sup>*

However, perceptions of being empowered vary across time and culture. Although there is no single institutional model for empowerment, experience shows that certain elements are almost always present when empowerment efforts are successful. These include; access to information; inclusion and participation; accountability; and local organizational capacity.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, women's empowerment can include, but not be limited to, women's right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and the right to a sense of self-worth.<sup>14</sup>

Achieving a critical mass of female representatives in parliament symbolizes to women that they matter and such a message can then trickle down to the greater public, and can have immeasurable symbolic impacts on women. By symbolic representation I point to the changes in attitudinal and behavioral effects among women in the general public as a result of more women in parliament. Carey Leigh Hogg emphasizes that symbolic representation creates ‘role models’ for women that cannot be conferred by men, regardless of their policy priorities and perspectives.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the expectation is that when women see others ‘like them’ being politically active, they may be inspired to also

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<sup>12</sup> The World Bank (2011). What is Empowerment? Retrieved from <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTEMPOWERMENT/0,,contentMDK:20272299~pagePK:210058~piPK:210062~theSitePK:486411~isCURL:Y,00.html>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. The World Bank (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Women's Empowerment Principles Equality Means Business. (2010). United National Global Compact, 1-16. Pg. 11

<sup>15</sup> Hogg. C.L. (2009). Women's Political Representation in Post- Conflict Rwanda: A Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion? Journal International Women's Study, 11(3), 34-55. Pg. 36

participate in politics.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, such an impact suggests a benefit to constituents beyond policy implications.

Although this paper highlights important forms of gender based discriminatory practices found in state institutions, the research question seemingly perpetuates dominant gender dichotomies that depict men as self-interested actors, and women as passive victims. Such a gender normative understanding of politics does not adequately capture the complexities of state institutions. For instance, not all women necessarily regard themselves as having a responsibility to represent women or advance women's interests. For example, Swanee Hunt notes that the most visible female political leaders, including Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, and Golda Meir showed little interest in promoting issues of common concern to women.<sup>17</sup> Hence, it is important that we problematize traditional groupings of women as having a uniform set of anatomical attributes, or having an inherent desire to prioritize women.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, we should move away from placing such a burden on women in the first place, and put the same expectations on all groups to empower disadvantaged citizens. However, the purpose of this thesis is to examine the tangible and symbolic importance of placing women in political positions.

Regrettably, while women add new dimensions to policy agendas, there is limited evidence that increasing women's representation change policy outputs. Consequently, information about women in parliament is weighted towards the causes of under-representation, with a relative scarcity of knowledge about the consequences of women's

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Hogg. C.L. (2009). Pg. 36

<sup>17</sup> Hunt, S. (2007). Let Women Rule. *Foreign Affairs* 86 (3), 109-121. Pg. 199

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Hogg. C.L. (2009). Pg. 36

parliamentary presence.<sup>19</sup> Gretchen Bauer and Hanna E. Britton note that this is because little scholarly attention is paid after women in parliament have been elected.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, there remains sufficient research to identify promising patterns and societal changes that gradually favor women's empowerment as female political representation increases.

Throughout this paper I aim to both highlight the extent of women's exclusion from politics, but as well exhibit their agency in patriarchal institutions. I also discuss dominant narratives surrounding men's self-interested roles in politics, but as well their role in assisting women achieve political power. In chapter one, I explore the historical patterns of women's involvement in African politics, as well as internal and external dynamics affecting African female politicians. Then, I analyze two countries: Rwanda and Liberia, which have successfully increased female political representation. Rwanda provides a natural case study for it was the first country in the world to have a gender parity political system. While Liberia, having had the first female African president, presents an optimal example of female leadership in the continent. Many lessons can be learned from both case studies, individually and collectively. The paper concludes that when more women are elected into office, policy-making increasingly reflects women's priorities. However as we will see, the evidence emerging from Rwanda and Liberia is quite mixed. On the one hand, the increased presence of women in high-level political position, initiated greater parliamentary attention to gender equality issues. While on the other hand, the success of women's political empowerment in Africa accompanied

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<sup>19</sup> Devlin, C., & Elgie, R. (2008). The Effect of Increased Women's Representation in Parliament: The Case of Rwanda. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61(2), 237-254. Pg. 238

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Devlin, C., & Elgie, R. (2008). Pg. 239

increasingly authoritarian and/or patriarchal institutions. Hence women were unable to fully benefit from their increased presence in politics.

## **1.0 Historical Background**

The legacy of the colonial system in Africa had a negative impact on women's rights. While it is difficult to generalize about the varied histories and societies of pre-colonial Africa, women in many societies are thought to have had substantial roles in both the private and public sphere.<sup>21</sup> They were granted the right to make their own choices, earn income, and participate in long-distance trade.<sup>22</sup> Women in many countries in Africa were also integrated into political structures, had active roles in state administrations, and even held top offices in some societies.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, such responsibilities did not sit well with Europeans conception of women's roles<sup>24</sup>. Therefore the start of the colonial period would have a drastic impact on future gender relations.

Once Europeans arrived they brought their own gender ideologies and extended them to African communities. Colonialists' cultural norms considered women's roles to be in tangent with the private sphere and believed that public matters such as state affairs should be left to men.<sup>25</sup> To appeal to communities, colonizers used missionaries and religion to reinforce notions of women's roles in households.<sup>26</sup> In addition, they solidified their ideas through laws that would ensure the erosion of women's position in society.<sup>27</sup> As a result, women's subordination transcended into social institutions and education was instrumentally used to progressively tailor and prepare women for domestic duties as housewives and new policies were introduced to restrict women's movement.

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<sup>21</sup> Jones, R. (2014). African Women and Political Representation: Trends and Patterns in the Fight for Equality. Retrieved from <http://africanakaleidoscopes.com/portfolio/african-women-and-political-representation/>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Jones, R. (2014).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Jones, R. (2014).

<sup>24</sup> Boserup, E. (1970). *Loss of Status under European Rule*. London, UK: Earthscan.

<sup>25</sup> The Effect of Colonialism on African Women. (2007). Retrieved from <https://afrikaneye.wordpress.com/2007/03/08/the-effect-of-colonialism-on-african-women/>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Jones, R. (2014).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. The Effect of Colonialism on African Women. (2007).

Rachel Jones adds that in addition to colonialists' customs, this change in roles happened to be in the interests of colonizers. She explains that by giving men increased control over their families; these men were less likely to protest at their decreased control over resources and power in the colonial state.<sup>28</sup> This she argues led to a male dominated ideology that created spheres of opportunity for African men.<sup>29</sup> Overall such regulations greatly impacted women's abilities to trade, earn employment, and access any new political and administrative systems.<sup>30</sup> As a result, once countries gradually gained independence, European gender ideals were embedded in the cultural structures of African societies.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence, colonial rule weakened the customary powers and rights of women.

### *1.1 The Rise of African Women*

In the post-World War II era, while the majority of African countries won independence, women continued to be sidelined as men reinforced patriarchal privileges.<sup>32</sup> Within the first decade of independence, most African countries either reverted to authoritative rule or turned to single party states. Single party regimes precluded women from leadership positions as many countries held little to no elections.<sup>33</sup> As a result, in many centralized regimes, the most senior position for women were as leader's wives.<sup>34</sup> It was not until broader political changes occurred in the 20th century that women's socio-political standings altered. Below I briefly explore three

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Jones, R. (2014).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Jones, R. (2014).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Jones, R. (2014).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Jones, R. (2014).

<sup>32</sup> Tinker, I. (2004). Quotas for Women in Elected Legislatures: Do they Really Empower Women? *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27(5-6), 531-546. Pg. 533

<sup>33</sup> Bauer, G., & Okpotor, F. (2013). "Her Excellency": An Exploratory Overview of Women Cabinet Ministers in Africa. *Africa Today*, 60(1), 77-97. Pg. 89

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Bauer, G., & Okpotor, F. (2013).

significant interrelated political factors: international pressure; post conflict transitions, and democratization, which ultimately facilitated the increase of women's socio-political standings. I then devote the rest of the chapter to a fourth factor; the rise of gender quota policies as their impact and rapidity has been quite unique to the African continent.

### *1.1.1 International Pressure*

The drive to promote African women in decision-making positions gained momentum through a series of international conferences. The UN Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China, in 1995 created for the first time a Platform of Action that encouraged countries to advance women's political leadership, by calling for at least 30 percent representation of women in national governments. Ali Mari Tripp found a connection between such normative influences to the increased appointment of women to political offices across Africa.<sup>35</sup> In addition, she found that countries most inclined to comply with international treaties regarding women's rights were also the most donor dependent states in the continent.<sup>36</sup> Therefore concluded that the international community used finance to incentivise the promotion of gender inclusivity in the political sphere.

However, dominant narratives often ignore contributions by African women to the global women's movements, primarily because there has been a long tendency in Western scholarship to see international influences in women's rights as external to Africa.<sup>37</sup> Africa not only absorbed international women's rights norms and practices, but

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<sup>35</sup> Tripp, A. M. (2013). Women and Politics in Africa Today. Retrieved from <http://democracyinafrica.org/women-politics-africa-today/>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Tripp, A. M. (2013).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Tripp, A. M. (2013).

also had a hand in producing it.<sup>38</sup> Women in Africa, especially after the mid-1970s, started forming their own movements. In part, as a response to the lack of available research on women in Africa, but as well the monopoly of research by Western scholars on women in Africa. African scholars were critical of the patronizing assumptions that Western scholars had regarding their capabilities to look after their own interests.<sup>39</sup> As a result, women's movements in Africa increasingly defined their own agendas towards areas of violence against women, conflict, the economy and political decision-making, which greatly facilitated the increase of women's position in the home.

### *1.1.2 Post Conflict Reconstruction*

The end of a conflict more readily creates opportunities like peace negotiations and constitution-making exercises that allow women to demand for rights and representation.<sup>40</sup> This was particularly evident during the 1990s, when countries that had undergone major conflict, disrupted gender roles. During conflict women are often ascribed more control over resources and as conflicts end women usually take the occasion to demand for rights. To date countries that have experienced post-conflict transitions are believed to have twice as many women in politics and woman-friendly legislations, in comparison to non-post-conflict countries.<sup>41</sup> Therefore changes in women's political advancement continue to be most noticeable in post-conflict countries.

The two case studies discussed in the next chapters also follow similar patterns. In both Rwanda and Liberia, women made significant contributions that forced many

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Tripp, A. M. (2013).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Tripp, A. M. (2013).

<sup>40</sup> Zuckerman, E., & Greenberg, M. (2009). The Gender Dimensions of Post-Conflict Reconstruction: An Analytical Framework for Policymakers. *Gender & Development*, 70-82. Pg.70

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Tripp, A. M. (2013).

women to transform their roles to cope with new demands and opened new opportunities for women to mobilize for political change during their post conflict reconstruction periods, and thereafter. Therefore, it is often through difficult times that women are able to transform the views of communities at large, and themselves, that they are capable actors.

### *1.1.3 Democratization*

Women's rise to power has much to do with political transitioning, often in the wake of prolonged conflict towards democracy.<sup>42</sup> Democracy opens up political space that gives women new possibilities to mobilize and demand political rights. However, democracy itself is not a factor; for democratic and non-democratic countries have similar levels of female political representation in Africa, in part, because of the adoption of quotas by non-democratic countries like Rwanda and Uganda.<sup>43</sup> Thus, there is little if any relation between the presence of democracy and high numbers of women in political office. The democratization process after a post conflict transition and the introduction of gender quotas in African governments has been significant in creating promising outcomes for women's socio-political empowerment.<sup>44</sup>

### *1.1.4 The Rise of Quota Systems*

Electoral gender quotas are being implemented at a remarkable rate in SSA, making it a leader in women's parliamentary representation.<sup>45</sup> Today, there are three main types of quota systems: reserved, voluntary, and compulsory quotas. While reserved

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Tripp, A. M. (2013).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Tripp, A. M. (2013).

<sup>44</sup> Krook, M. L. (2013). Gender Quotas and Democracy: Insights From Africa and Beyond. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 41, 160-163. Pg.161

<sup>45</sup> Global Database of Quotas for Women. About Quotas. (2009). Retrieved from <http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm>

seats regulate the number of women elected, the other two forms set a minimum for the share of women on the candidate lists, either as a measure written into the statutes of individual political parties, or as a legal requirement.<sup>46</sup> The type of electoral gender quota used is heavily influenced by the type of electoral system a country uses; typically voluntary party quotas were found to be used with proportional representation electoral systems, while reserved with plurality electoral systems.<sup>47</sup> These two are most commonly used in Africa, for the compulsory quotas tend to be a less successful mechanism because they are imposed on parties'.<sup>48</sup>

In the decades leading up to 1995, only six countries in SSA had adopted quotas, while today more than half have done so.<sup>49</sup> Women's increased political representation was first visible in Uganda, in its first post-conflict election in 1989, where 17.6 percent of women were elected to office.<sup>50</sup> However it was not until 2008 that Rwanda became the first country in the world to have more women than men in a national government, which increased from 56.3 to 63.4 percent today.<sup>51</sup> Increases in the number of women serving in high level political offices also followed in Senegal, Seychelles and South Africa, with more than 40 percent, and in Mozambique, Angola, and Tanzania with 35 percent.<sup>52</sup>

Africa's success is identified by Drude Dahlerup as a 'fast track' path to parliament for women; which describes a numerical jump in women's representation, in a relatively short space of time; in contrast to the 'slow track' that is characterized by

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Global Database of Quotas for Women. About Quotas. (2009).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. Global Database of Quotas for Women. About Quotas. (2009).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Tripp, A. M. (2013).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Tripp, A. M. (2013).

<sup>50</sup> Ballington, J. (2004). The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, IDEA. 1 -133. Pg.18

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. Ballington, J. (2004). Pg.70

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Tripp, A. M. (2013).

incremental changes that coincide with political and socio-economic improvements.<sup>53</sup> The former used to describe Nordic countries, for example Sweden, which took 80 years to achieve 45 percent representation for women.<sup>54</sup> The intent of introducing quotas is to compensate for barriers that prevent women from entering the realm of politics. In many respects, quotas are intended to be a temporary measure, temporary being ambiguous, seeing as it may take decades before social, cultural and political barriers limiting women's political representation are completely removed.

However, quota systems have not always delivered the benefits that are expected. For example, scholars such as Mona Lena Krook argue that gender quota violate the rights of voters to select their preferred candidate, and are therefore fundamentally undemocratic.<sup>55</sup> While other scholars, warn that increasing women to political structures that are inherently patriarchal can likely lead to further discrimination, frustration, exclusion or tokenism. For example, Julie Ballington warns that gender quotas can lead to the maintenance of patronage systems.<sup>56</sup> She explains that the affirmative action seats in parliament create groups of legislators more beholden to the regime in their loyalties than to the cause of women's emancipation.<sup>57</sup> As we will see in Rwanda, many female parliamentarians owe their positions to President Paul Kagame; which critics such as Ballington argue reproduce existing systems of patronage. Despite such criticism, gender quota systems remain necessary in entrenched patriarchal systems found both in Africa and around the world.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Ballington, J. (2004). Pg.14

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Ballington, J. (2004). Pg.14

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Krook, M. L. (2013). Pg.160

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Ballington, J. (2004). Pg.76

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Ballington, J. (2004). Pg.76

*Conclusion*

In past two decades Africa has experienced significant political factors that have ultimately facilitated the increase of women's political standings. Four have been discussed in this chapter: post conflict transitions, democratization, international pressure, and gender quotas. However, the impacts of attempting to manually increase female representation have been mixed. Despite the criticism, African women have gained more high-level political positions than ever before. In the next two chapters I explore whether such an increase has impacted women's socio-political empowerment. I begin with a chapter on Rwanda and then Liberia; the former having the highest representation of women in politics, while the latter being the first to nominate a female president, provide for a great case studies.

## 2.0 Rwanda's Gender Revolution

With a devastating past and a promising future, Rwanda has been identified as a success story for the African continent. Despite being a low-income country, Rwanda is currently experiencing their highest growth rate in history, combined with great strides in human development.<sup>58</sup> One primarily celebrated achievement is Rwanda's decision to introduce a more inclusive political framework that has advanced women's participation. More specifically, the number of parliamentary seats held by women increased from 11.4 percent in 1994 to 63.8 percent in 2015, making Rwanda the first country in the world to have a majority of women in parliament.<sup>59</sup> This chapter will begin by exploring how women in Rwanda achieved such an attainment. It then, explores how the increased representation of women in high-level political positions impacted the socio-political empowerment of women in Rwanda. To do so, I examine two policies: the Inheritance and Marital Bill and the Gender Based Violence (GBV) Bill. Both these laws were distinctively created and championed by female politicians and have led to the systematic empowerment of women. Following, I explore some symbolic effects of the introduction of gender quotas. This includes highlighting whether higher rates of female politicians altered gendered ideas about women, but more specifically whether it legitimized women as potential leaders in their communities. I then describe some consequences of obtaining such a high percentage of female representation in a relatively short period of time. Finally, I examine limitations of having a gender parity political system within an increasingly authoritative government.

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<sup>58</sup> The World Bank. (2014). Republic of Rwanda Agriculture Policy Note. 1-56. Retrieved from [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSPContentServer/WDSP/IB/2014/07/16/000470435\\_20140716105512/Rendered/PDF/ACS97190WPOP1400Box385238B00PUBLIC0.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSPContentServer/WDSP/IB/2014/07/16/000470435_20140716105512/Rendered/PDF/ACS97190WPOP1400Box385238B00PUBLIC0.pdf). Pg. 16

<sup>59</sup> Women in Parliament: 20 Years in Review. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2015). Inter-Parliamentary Union. Web. <<http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/WIP20Y-en.pdf>> Pg.2

## *2.1 Rwanda*

The Republic of Rwanda is a landlocked country located in Central and Eastern Africa. It is bordered by the Democratic Republic of Congo to the west, Uganda to the north, Tanzania to the east, and Burundi to the south. The country has a population of about 12 million people, which makes Rwanda the most densely populated country in SSA. The state is composed of three ethnic groups: Hutu (84%), Tutsi (15%) and Twa (1%). Christianity constitutes the largest religion, with Catholics representing 56.5 percent of the population, followed by Protestants, Muslims and those claiming no religious beliefs at 37.1, 4.6, and 1.7 percent, respectively.<sup>60</sup> In addition the country is predominantly young with 42.7 percent of the population under the age of 15, with a mean age of 18.8. The sex ratio of the country is relatively even, with 52 percent females and 48 percent males.<sup>61</sup>

### *2.1 The Rwandan Genocide*

Rwanda has a particular devastating history. Rwanda experienced a genocide that erupted after four years of civil war, and over forty years of violence between the two largest ethnic groups: the Hutu and Tutsi. Since colonial rule prior to the turn of the 20th century, Tutsis were placed in powerful positions by German colonizers. However, after World War I, Germany lost its colony to Belgium. During this period, power was redirected to favour Hutus, causing tension between the two groups. The genocide

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<sup>60</sup> Rwanda. International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 (2011): United States Department of State. Web. <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/192958.pdf>>. Pg.2

<sup>61</sup> Rwanda. (2014). Central Intelligence Agency. The World FactBook. Web. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rw.html>>.

accumulated as political turbulence and economic hardship increased.<sup>62</sup> The catalyst of the genocide occurred on April 6, 1994, when President Juvenal Habyarimana was assassinated, and the stage was set for a new interim government. Hardliners moved swiftly to outmanoeuvre moderates and to establish their own government; meanwhile the Tutsi-led Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) rebel forces advanced from north-eastern Rwanda to battle for control over the state.<sup>63</sup> Hutu hardliners captured states resources such as the military and media, and began propagating the civilian administration and population to identify, sort and exterminate Tutsi civilians.<sup>64</sup>

Scott Straus argues that three factors ultimately drove the genocide: war, state institutions and ethnicity. He explains that war legitimized mass killing, while state authorities successfully defused influence over local levels, which labelled Tutsis as enemies.<sup>65</sup> Straus then concluded that the genocide was carried out so successfully because it was an extension of ideological dominance among the political and military elite upon local groups.<sup>66</sup> The dominant narrative hinged on a self-preservation and Hutu revolution, in a last ditch attempt by an increasingly autocratic and unpopular regime to cling to power.<sup>67</sup> The advancement of the RPF further escalated such a threat. Straus further explains that combined with a military confrontation that posed real risks, the founding narrative pushed decision-making elites to frame the conflict as one between a core, threatened ‘us’ defined in identity terms and an underserving ‘them’ dichotomy.<sup>68</sup> Such a founding narrative of imminent urgency and self-protection, ultimately influenced

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<sup>62</sup> Straus, S. (2015). *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa*. USA: Cornell University Press. Pg. 274

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. Straus, S. (2015). Pg. 274

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Straus, S. (2015). Pg. 274-5

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. Straus, S. (2006). *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Pg. 9-10

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Straus, S. (2015). Pg. 275

<sup>67</sup> Hintjens, H. M. (1999). Explaining the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* *J. Mod. Afr. Stud.*, 37(2), 241-286. Pg. 247

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. Straus, S. (2015). Pg. 275

decision making elites to orchestrate and sustain a strategy of violence that in the presence of weak restraints, escalated into mass categorical violence.<sup>69</sup> However, the violence would not have succeeded or taken the form that it did without local level agency.

Rwanda's densely populated country provided limited opportunities to hide and escape from genocidaires. Consequently, from April to July 1994, members of the Hutu tribe murdered as many as 800,000 to 1 million people, mostly Tutsis. By the time the RPF gained control of the country through a military offense in early July, hundreds of thousands of Rwandans were killed and many more displaced from their homes. The RPF victory created 2 million more refugees (mainly Hutus) from Rwanda, exacerbating what had already become a full-blown humanitarian crisis.<sup>70</sup> Rwanda's institutions suffered heavily during the 1994 Genocide. Since then, Rwanda has made significant advances in national reconciliation, law and order, accountability as well as rebuilding and strengthening the national capacity for good governance.<sup>71</sup>

One need not look further than news headlines regarding the status of women in Rwanda, to identify the international community's proclamation of the country as a 'beacon of hope' for gender equality in Africa.<sup>72</sup> Such reports highlight that women in post-conflict Rwanda are among the most politically represented women on the planet, and hold the world's highest percentage of female parliamentarians.<sup>73</sup> Critics on the other hand, remain sceptical and argue that because women owe their positions to RPF

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Straus, S. (2015). Pg. 275

<sup>70</sup> The Rwandan Genocide (2009). A&E Television Networks. Web. <<http://www.history.com/topics/rwandan-genocide>>.

<sup>71</sup> United Nations Rwanda. (2013). Rwanda United Nation Developed Assistance Plan. United Nations Statistical Yearbook (Ser. S) Statistical Yearbook, 787-812. Pg.8

<sup>72</sup> Blair, Tony (4 April 2014). "20 Years after the Genocide, Rwanda Is a Beacon of Hope." The Guardian. Web. <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/06/rwanda-genocide-beacon-hope-healing-nation>>.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Hogg, Carey Leigh (2009). Pg. 34

members, they remain more likely to toe the political line to stay in power, hence focus less on achieving policies that empower women. I will discuss these two different perspectives momentarily, but first a background on women's historical and contemporary political positions in Rwanda.

### *2.3 Women's Historical Political Positions*

While women in Rwanda were granted the right to stand for election in 1961, it was not until the RPF came into power in 1994 that women substantially participated in politics. According to Gretchen Bauer, since independence in 1962, women were unrepresented in governments.<sup>74</sup> Dating back to Rwanda's first elected president Grégoire Kayibanda, only one woman served in the cabinet as the Minister of Social Affairs and Public Health between 1964-51 and only one female parliamentarian in 1952. Following in 1973, the change of power to Habyarimana, little improved. By 1985 women constituted 12 percent of parliamentarians, which gave rise to prominent female politicians such as Agathe Uwilingiyimana, who became Rwanda's first and only female prime minister.<sup>75</sup> Overall, politics continued to be dominated by men during this period.<sup>76</sup>

To a large extent, this was attributed to the gender discriminatory laws found in the country. Rwandan law prohibited women from participating in paid labour, engaging in commercial activities, or entering into financial contracts unless they had consent from their husbands.<sup>77</sup> In addition, it was considered taboo in Rwandan culture for women to publicly challenge men, which discouraged women's involvement in politics. Even in the

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<sup>74</sup> Bauer, G. (2011). Sub Saharan Africa. In G. Bauer & M. Tremblay (Eds.), *Women in Executive Power: A Global Overview* (pp. 85-104). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. Pg.93

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Bauer, G. (2011). Pg. 93

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Bauer, G. (2011). Pg. 93

<sup>77</sup> Hebert, L. A. (2015). "Women Run the Show": Gender Violence Reform and the "Stretching" of Human Rights in Rwanda. *Journal of Human Rights*, 14(1), 23-40. Pg. 28

private sphere, while women were granted some respect for their roles as child bearers and caretakers, men retained final authority over family affairs and women were prohibited from inheriting or owning land, thereby reinforcing their economic dependence on male family members.<sup>78</sup>

Thankfully, Rwanda had a strong women's movement promoting women's rights, dating back to the late 1980s and the 1990s. The first women's movement began following the third United Nations Conference on Women in 1985. During this period, women's organizations were largely perceived as apolitical and therefore unthreatening to Habyarimana's government (and the RPF), hence the government did nothing to curtail their work. As a result, the force of women's organizations increased quite gradually, and their efforts consistent, which had a large impact on the future of Rwanda.<sup>79</sup>

#### *2.4 Rwandan Women and Political Representation*

Rwanda's indigenous drive and comprehensive framework to mainstream gender during their post-conflict reconstruction process was key to transforming women's identities, subjectivities, and agencies in the country.<sup>80</sup> The government's commitment was rooted in a general acknowledgment of women's personalized suffering during the genocide, and their instrumental role in Rwanda's social and economic reconstruction process.<sup>81</sup> The government's gratitude was best illustrated by their decision to exponentially increase women's participation in politics by implementing specific mechanisms that would ensure such an increase. These included constitutional

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. Hebert, L. A. (2015). Pg.28

<sup>79</sup> Burnet, J. (2008). Gender Balance and the Meanings of Women in Governance in Post- Genocide Rwanda. African Affairs, 107(428), 361-386. Pg.387

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2008). Pg.381

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Hogg, Carey Leigh (2009). Pg. 39

guarantees, quota systems, and innovative electoral structures. In addition, the RPF created a Ministry of Gender, and organized women's councils at various administration levels.<sup>82</sup>

As a result, while the first post-genocide parliament in 1994 consisted of 11.4 percent held by women, by January 1997 women's representation rose to 17.1 percent, and in 2000 to 25.7 percent.<sup>83</sup> The first presidential and national assembly elections were held in 2003, retaining Kagame (who had become president of the transitional government in 2000). That same year a new constitution included a quota policy that ensured women at least 30 percent of posts in all decision-making organs. Under this system, a striking 48.8 percent of women were elected to parliament. Following, a second set of post genocide legislative elections were held in 2008, electing more women than men, launching Rwanda to a position as world leader in women's parliamentary representation.<sup>84</sup>

In addition, the government revised both their constitutional and legal frameworks to remove any discriminatory provisions, and as well targeted women in voter registration, provided security during elections, and trained female candidates.<sup>85</sup> Although the impact of Rwanda's gender parity political system continues to be highly debated, it nonetheless remains one of Rwanda's most recent achievements. Next we examine whether the increased presence of women in Rwanda's government led to the socio-political empowerment of women. I explore two policies to date that were both

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2008). Pg. 363

<sup>83</sup> Powley, E. (2006). Rwanda: The Impact of Women Legislators on Policy Outcomes Affecting Children and Families. UNICEF, 1-22. Pg.4

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. Bauer, G. (2011). Pg. 94

<sup>85</sup> Armed Conflict: Effect on Women."(2011). Springer Reference. Pg. 7

championed by female politicians: the Inheritance and Marital bill and the Gender Based Violence (GBV) Bill and examine their impact.

#### *2.4.1 The Inheritance and Marital Bill*

Excluding women from inheriting land exacerbates women's vulnerability to chronic poverty.<sup>86</sup> In a country where roughly 90 percent of the population is employed in the agricultural sector, and of that 93 percent make up female farmers, women's access and ownership to land is crucial.<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately, women in Rwanda were systematically denied property rights for decades. It was not until 1996 that women in parliament and civil society organizations attempted to reverse such trends.<sup>88</sup> In 1999, they succeeded, and the government ratified the Inheritance and Marital bill (from now on the inheritance bill), making it one of the best legal frameworks for gender equal land distribution in SSA.<sup>89</sup>

The success of the inheritance bill is largely attributed to the leadership and championing of Rwanda's Forum des Femmes Rwandaises Parlementaires (Forum of Women Parliamentarians - FFRP). The FFRP consists of an all-female cross party parliament organization, which distinctively discusses and advocates for issues of common importance to women. For years the FFRP closely formulated the inheritance bill, and lobbied decision makers in ministries and within inner circles of the RPF to pass the controversial bill. Since its introduction, the inheritance law has remained among their most hallmarked legislation.

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<sup>86</sup> Cooper, E. (2011). Challenges and Opportunities in Inheritance Rights in Rwanda. Chronic Poverty Research Center, 1-8. Pg.2

<sup>87</sup> Spencer, R. (2009). Rights. Retrieved from <http://www.globalgrassroots.org/rights.html>

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. Spencer, R. (2009).

<sup>89</sup> Kagaba, M. (2015). Women's Experiences of Gender Equality Laws in Rural Rwanda: The Case of Kamonyi District. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 9(4), 574-592. Pg.575

The bill gave women and their daughters the right to inherit property from their husbands and fathers. More specifically, it outlined that during marriage, the written and registered consent of both spouses was required for transactions such as the sale, donation, exchange, mortgage, or long-term lease of land.<sup>90</sup> In addition, if a spouse were to pass away, the widow would inherit all property. If a spouse remarried with children from a deceased partner, s/he would retain one quarter of the property and three-quarters would be administered to their children, if both husband and wife passed away, their children whether boys or girls would inherit the property.

In addition, the bill permitted women to gain full legal rights to enter into contracts, seek paid employment, own property separately from their husbands, and finally open bank accounts without the authorization of their husbands or fathers.<sup>91</sup> The law was a first of its kind to advance women's legal positions, which until that point was only protected by the 1992 Family Code that formally designated men as the heads of households and only vaguely outlined women's legal position in relation to marriage, divorce, and child custody.<sup>92</sup> Following, in 2003, the government made further progress by ratifying a new constitution enhancing gender equality by prohibiting gender-based discrimination.

As a result, since 2005 studies have found that women's bargaining power within household relationships have improved, as young women more readily receive parcels of land from their families.<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Daley et al. established that a number of women, prior to the law, were mindful of the consequences of disagreeing with their husbands,

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid. Cooper, E. (2011). Pg. 3

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2008). Pg. 367-7

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. Spencer, R. (2009).

<sup>93</sup> Ali, D. A., Deiniger, K., & Tanaka, T. (2014). The Impact of the 1999 Inheritance and Succession Law on Land Inheritance and Implications for Women's Bargaining Power in Rwanda. Integrating Land Governance into the Post-2015, 1-23. Pg.2

but that such fears slowly diminished as they inherited their own land.<sup>94</sup> In Mediatrix Kagaba's study she also discovered that women's lives prior to the law provided them with little agency in household responsibilities. However, after the law was ratified women explained, that they were legally afforded the right to influence household land decisions, and as a result granting them negotiation privileges between their spouses.<sup>95</sup>

One woman mentioned *"things have changed completely, in my time as a woman you couldn't say anything at home regarding family assets because the husband would tell you, 'remember you brought nothing'...I now have inheritance right, whenever I want, I can go back and ask my parents to give me my share, so when you have it, your husband will not despise you as before."*<sup>96</sup> This woman and many others she interviewed described how achieving influence in the household increased their self-esteem, which was a result from their new financial independence.<sup>97</sup> Therefore Daley and Kagaba's studies reveal that in great thanks to the inheritance bill, women's capacity to generate independent income increased their empowerment.

Nonetheless, there were a few limitations to the inheritance bill. For instance the law only applied to registered legal marriages, which were relatively uncommon. Furthermore, in reality women struggled to benefit from their rights, seeing as some were unaware of its existence.<sup>98</sup> Subsequently in 2005, the National Land Policy was introduced to ensure that all Rwandans enjoyed the same rights of access to land without any discrimination whatsoever. It specified that women, married or not, could not be

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<sup>94</sup> Daley, E., Dore-Weeks, R., & Umuhoza, C. (2010). Ahead of the game: Land tenure reform in Rwanda and the process of securing women's land rights. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 4(1), 131-152. Pg.138

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. Kagaba, M. (2015). pg.579.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. Kagaba, M. (2015). pg.579.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. Kagaba, M. (2015). pg.579.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. Spencer, R. (2009).

excluded from achieving property rights. In addition, to improve the lack of awareness of the law, the government teamed up with NGO's like Haguruka, which focuses on women's and children's rights and the Rwanda Women's Network, which is active in trying to raise similar awareness by training paralegals and holding public education sessions, all in an effort to decentralize information pertaining to the laws.<sup>99</sup> However, lack of adequate financial support continues to limit NGOs' outreach. Overall, thanks to the dedicated work of FFRP and women's civil society organizations, more women in Rwanda today enjoy equitable property and inheritance rights that have greatly improved their social and political rights.

#### *2.4.2 Gender-Based Violence Bill*

Between 2002 and 2004, 6,440 gender based violence crimes were reported against women and children in Rwanda. In addition, interviews conducted by UNIFEM of a sample of 720 women nationwide revealed that more the 50 percent of women had been raped during the 1994 Genocide; and post genocide, more than 50 percent of women had been assaulted for various reasons ranging from suspicion of adultery to not preparing meals on time.<sup>100</sup> Female parliamentarians highlighted the urgent need for a bill to address such high incidences of assault. The FFRP once again became instrumental in formulating law, getting it passed, with the collaboration of male deputies' right from the outset of the legislative process. The FFRP's draft law represented the first bill introduced into parliament that did not originate in the executive branch, signalling the

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. Cooper, E. (2011). Pg.5

<sup>100</sup> UNIFEM. (2006). Gender-Based Violence Bill Passes in Rwandan Parliament. Retrieved from <http://reliefweb.int/report/rwanda/gender-based-violence-bill-passes-rwanda-parliament>

ability of female parliamentarians and activists to create spaces to press women's rights claims.<sup>101</sup>

In the course of the campaign, the FFRP came to recognize that Rwandan law was silent on violence against women, even as the government's own research confirmed the common occurrence of domestic violence and sexual assault across Rwandan society. Although remedies for domestic violence, rape, and sexual harassment were already available under other provisions of the Penal Code, these forms of violence were not separately defined as crimes in themselves, therefore obstructing efforts to assess the scale of gender-related crimes or allow for considerable judicial discretion in the handling of these cases.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, police officers and judges inclined to approach gender violence as a private affair and were therefore reluctant to pursue legal remedies against perpetrators or, if pursued, often resulted in limited or no legal sanctions. Despite such obstacles and differences of opinions, the GBV bill was adopted by a general consensus in the Rwandan parliament on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006.

Today the bill is particularly significant because it provides a legal definition of rape, including acts of 'sexual torture' as a 'Category 1' offense in national prosecutions for genocide and crimes against humanity. GBV are now crimes subject to the most severe penalties under the law and set clear punishments for offenders.<sup>103</sup> The law consists of five chapters: the first identifies the objectives of the law and definition of terms, the second addresses fundamental principles for the prevention of GBV, the third identifies the obligations of various stakeholders in preventing GBV, the fourth provides

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. Hebert, L. A. (2015). Pg.30

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. Hebert, L. A. (2015). Pg.28

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. UNIFEM. (2006).

for the penalties for various categories of GBV-related crimes, and the fifth shows the relationship between the GBV bill and other penal laws.<sup>104</sup> International instruments that enshrine the rights of women, such as the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Platform for Action heavily influenced the GBV bill.

To acquire full parliamentary approval, female parliamentarians began by highlighting the strong relations between GBV and poverty. Secondly, they exposed Rwandan society's tolerance towards the use of violence against women. Additionally, the FFRP organized a two-day conference that brought together various stakeholders to develop a framework for the law and established a consultative committee comprised of government officials, legal advisors, and representatives of civil society responsible of drafting the bill.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps most uniquely, they organized nationwide "*trips to the field*" with female and male parliamentarians to raise public awareness of gender violence.<sup>106</sup> They successfully provided information to local communities on the policy-making process, and inquired public feedback on priorities that needed to be addressed.<sup>107</sup>

The FFRP was deliberate in seeking out male allies to support the bill's ratification. This went a long way toward easing the bill's movement through the enactment process, particularly because resistance did occur during deliberations.<sup>108</sup> Members of the FFRP did not indicate that they felt disempowered by the enlistment of men as advocates for the bill; rather, they spoke with pride about having conceived,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. UNIFEM. (2006).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. Powley, E. (2006). Pg.22

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. Powley, E. (2006). Pg.22

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. Powley, E. (2006). Pg.22

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. Hebert, L. A. (2015). Pg.30

directed, and executed a process in which they chose to involve men.<sup>109</sup> Despite this, some disagreements still arose. For example there was a reluctance to include penalties for marital rape. Some felt strongly that it was a private matter, while others were dissatisfied with the definition provided. Others were discontent with the nature of punishments, and questioned the consequences it would have on families. Consequently, the GBV bill was delayed in committee for nearly two years as the final language was hammered out in consultation with the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion and the president's office. It eventually became law in 2008 and added important protections to women's, as well as children's' rights and made domestic violence, including marital rape, illegal under Rwandan law.<sup>110</sup>

Since the enactment of the law, researchers have identified a decrease in GBV cases. In Susan Franceschet et al. study, one women explained that “*because of awareness-raising campaigns and because men have realized the dignity of women,*” husbands no longer hit their wives.<sup>111</sup> Other woman linked quotas to the government’s awareness campaigns against domestic violence to the changing attitudes of men.<sup>112</sup> With such success, Rwanda became the first country in SSA to pass a comprehensive gender violence law. Since its enactment, Rwanda’s political savvy female politicians and supportive male legislators have frequently described the law as “*ground-breaking.*”<sup>113</sup> As we can see by both the creation of the Inheritance bill and the GBV bill, women's

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<sup>109</sup> Powley, E. (2006). Rwanda: The Impact of Women Legislators on Policy Outcomes Affecting Children and Families. UNICEF, 1-22. Pg.20

<sup>110</sup> Bauer, G., & Burnet, J. E. (2013). Gender Quotas, Democracy, and Women's Representation in Africa: Some Insights From Democratic Botswana and Autocratic Rwanda. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 41, 103-112. Pg.6

<sup>111</sup> Franceschet, S., Krook, M. L., & Piscopo, J. M. (2012). *The Impact of Gender Quotas*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pg. 204. Pg.198

<sup>112</sup> Burnet, J. E. (2011). Women Have Found Respect: Gender Quotas, Symbolic Representation, and Female Empowerment in Rwanda. *Pol & Gen Politics & Gender*, 7(03), 303-334. Pg.320

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* Hebert, L. A. (2015). Pg.30

presence in high level political positions was crucial to the laws being successfully passed.

### *2.4.3 Symbolic Representation*

Cultural norms regarding women's roles in Rwanda have changed a great deal since the genocide, in large part due to governmental support. Before the implementation of quotas in the 2003 constitution, women in Rwanda were unlikely to speak up at public meetings, and were easily silenced by men if they did not agree with them.<sup>114</sup> However, recently the willingness and acceptance of women participating in public settings has grown dramatically.<sup>115</sup> Researchers found that the presence of high-level female politicians brought changes in the political process and culture, and marked great influence in legislations on a wide range of issues affecting the daily wellbeing of all of society.<sup>116</sup> As a result, women considered themselves to have a substantive influence on policy making and the political process, and saw themselves as role models for others to join politics, or simply be leaders in all ventures of their lives.<sup>117</sup>

The victorious achievements of high-level female politicians also trickled down, as women serving at local levels also increased. Burnet observed such changes in local political dynamics and noted that women gained the capacity to speak and be heard in public forums, and in decision making at home.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, she found that women were twice as likely to communicate with local elected officials when they were female.<sup>119</sup> Burnet also concludes that although Rwandan women made few legislative

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. Francechet, S., Krook, M.L., & Piscopo, J.M. (2012). Pg. 198

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2011). Pg. 318

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. Francechet, S., Krook, M.L., & Piscopo, J.M. (2012). Pg. 197

<sup>117</sup> Coffé, H. (2012). Conceptions of Female Political Representation. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 35(4), 1- 12. Pg.2

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2011). Pg. 318

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2011). Pg. 317

gains, they had reaped other benefits, including increased respect from family and community members as legitimate leaders.<sup>120</sup>

Researchers also found that women gained an increased assertiveness in making decisions about family resources.<sup>121</sup> For instance, in Burnet's case study she found that female interviewees, even those who classified their marriages as “good” before the 1994 genocide, noted a change in the ways that spouses made decisions about family incomes.<sup>122</sup> They mentioned that their husbands had begun to recognize that they also had good ideas and were resourceful in budgeting family incomes.<sup>123</sup> Almost universally, both urban and rural women voiced pride about the change in status of women in homes. Overall, the large number of women in local government, coupled with the clear endorsement of women as political authorities by President Kagame, the RPF, and the central government, sent a clear message to citizens that women should be accepted as equal citizens and legitimate political agents.<sup>124</sup>

Regrettably, Rwanda's relatively fast increase in female political participation has led to some negative consequences. For instance, some female representatives felt they had a double burden of advocating for women, while being conscious of the interests and needs of men and children alike.<sup>125</sup> In addition, Burnet's study found that rural and urban respondents cited increased marital discord as a consequence of the quotas and improved status of women. Respondents attributed the increased marital tension to men's ignorance about women's dignity and rights, or took offence to women's greater economic

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2011). Pg. 320-1

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2011). Pg. 325

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2011). Pg. 320

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2011). Pg. 318

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. (2011). Pg. 318

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. Coffé, H. (2012). Pg.2

autonomy, a privilege that had previously been reserved for men. Consequently, some wives were less willing to silence them when they thought their husbands were making unwise decisions, which increased domestic conflict and in minor instances escalated to violence. Accordingly, the 'gender revolution' in Rwanda was not completely positive.<sup>126</sup>

#### *2.4.4 Authoritarianism and Gender Parity Politics*

The Rwandan political system is characterized by limited party competition and political diversity. In recent years, the Rwandan government has been suspected of infiltrating opposition parties in an attempt to dismantle or divide them. Consequently, Freedom House categorized the country 'not free' in 2015, due to limited political pluralism and has rated Rwanda's civil liberties a 6 from a previous 5 in 2014 (1 being the best, and 7 being the worst).<sup>127</sup> In addition in December 2015, Rwanda held a referendum, which successfully allowed Kagame a third presidential term, further escalating criticism surrounding his influence on the state.

For starters, some academics have suggested that Kagame's decision to increase female political participation was not based on his progressive ideals, but on his personal desire to procure international aid, and therefore maintain the country's 'donor darling' status.<sup>128</sup> This critique stems from the fact that multilateral and bilateral donors increasingly exert pressure on developing countries to increase women's political participation, combined with Rwanda's need for aid to maintain growth rates. In addition, other analysts strongly argued that women who gained positions through quotas now

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. E. (2008). Pg.324

<sup>127</sup> Freedom House. (2014). Rwanda. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/rwanda>

<sup>128</sup> Provost, C. (2014). Rwanda: A Puzzling Tale of Growth and Political Repression. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/datablog/2014/apr/03/rwanda-genocide-growth-political-repression-data>

owed their allegiance to Kagame's RPF party and hence toed the party line to maintain their positions.<sup>129</sup>

Burnet, being a champion of this idea, exposed measures in which women in the government voted on, but had further decreased the legal protections of women. For instance, she found that in 2009 a labour law was passed that reduced paid maternity leave from eight to two weeks. She therefore argued that female parliamentarians put their individual interests ahead of average Rwandan women.<sup>130</sup> While a fair conclusion in 2009, Rwanda has made significant steps to revolve such discriminatory practices. For instance, in March 2015, Rwanda approved a draft bill on maternity protection that granted mothers up to twelve weeks of paid leave.<sup>131</sup> While Burnet's previous evidence no longer holds, her observations however remain significant.

Burnet also revealed the orchestrated nature of elections in Rwanda. She explained that since 1998 the population has been generally informed in advance of the 'correct' candidate for whom to vote for, and that most female politicians are RPF members and thus owe their allegiance to the ruling political party.<sup>132</sup> She therefore questioned the legitimacy of Rwanda's gender parity political system and concluded that such a grip on the electoral process will further undermine democracy in the country, and consequently weaken women's influence in decision-making bodies in the future. However, such assumptions revoke the agency of female politicians, and have the possibility of overgeneralizing Kagame's influence on individual political members. The inheritance and GBV bills discussed above demonstrate the collective fluidity in which

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid. Franceschet, S., Krook, M. L., & Piscopo, J. M. (2012). Pg. 204

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. E. (2008). Pg.314

<sup>131</sup> Rwanda: Kagame Approves Bill Seeking 100% Payment During Maternity Leave." (2015). Retrieved January 28, 2016, from <http://allafrica.com/stories/201503240230.html>

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. E. (2008). Pg.310

women had in achieving their priorities. Therefore while Burnets findings underscore important political influences in Rwanda that continue to hinder women's effective engagement, the greater representation of women in government has transformed women subjectivities and has paved the way for more cooperative engagement.

### *Conclusion*

Rwanda is known throughout the world for its high percentage of women in parliament. Women parliamentarians are among a pioneer generation, challenging traditional gender roles, taking on new responsibilities, and embracing high profile positions. The Rwandan case study reveals how an increased presence of women in politics can lead to the socio-political improvement of women in general. Female politicians distinctively spearheaded both the inheritance law and the GBV bill resulting in the systematic improvement of women's socio-political life. Furthermore, women were also empowered as a result of the symbolism attributed to a gender parity political system. However, Rwanda being an increasingly authoritative government, has limited the influence of women in power. There is an argument that women remain pawns in Kagame's present and future ambitions, such as earning international financial assistance.

Overall, this chapter aimed to both highlight such concern, but also express that Rwanda being identified, as an authoritarian country is not its single story. Despite being a developing country, Rwanda was able to achieve something that no other country in the world has before. Therefore signifying that there can be important democratic achievements in authoritarian systems, and that the promotion of gender equality can occur in multiple environments. In the next chapter, we explore a distinctively different political environment; one in which the highest political position is occupied by a woman

and therefore question whether a female head of state can impact the socio-political empowerment of women.

### **3.0 Liberia's Gender Revolution**

While male leadership dominates Africa, there have been a handful of women who have broken the glass ceiling. To date, only four heads of states have been female: Ellen Sirleaf Johnson of Liberia (2006 - present), Joyce Banda of Malawi (2012 - 2014), Catherine Samba-Panza of the Central African Republic (2014 - 2016) and Ameenah Gurib of Mauritius (2015 - present). In addition, six women have been appointed as acting president: Carmen Pereira of Guinea Bissau (1984), Sylvie Kinigi of Burundi (1993 - 1994), Ruth Sando Perry of Liberia (1996 - 19997), Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri of South African (2005 & 2008), Rose Francine Rogombé of Gabon (2009), and Monique Ohsan Bellepeau of Mauritius (2012 & 2015). These women are exceedingly rare, yet illustrate that women can achieve a country's most powerful office. While the symbolism alone is significant, this chapter also aims to examine the extent to which it has a tangible impact. I use Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's tenure to analyze such causation. I begin the chapter by providing a background on Liberia and a concise biography on Sirleaf. Then I examine women's historical political positions in Liberia. Following, I analyze policies introduced that empower women: Gender Based Violence Bill, Rape Law, and Education Reform Act. Then, I explore some symbolic effects that have been identified since Sirleaf was sworn in, by questioning whether a female president legitimized women as leaders in their communities.

#### *3.1 Liberia*

The Republic of Liberia is located in West Africa bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Sierra Leone to the west, Guinea to the north and Ivory Coast to the east. The country has a population of about 4.1 million inhabitants, of those; 1.2 million reside

in the capital city Monrovia. Liberia is unique in Africa for not having been colonized by Europeans. Rather, freed American slaves beginning in 1822 settled the territory. When Britain declared slavery illegal, Liberia also became a place where 'recaptured' Africans involved in the Atlantic slave trade were settled.<sup>133</sup> In 1847, Liberia was established as a republic, and Americo-Liberians dominated the country. While the slave descendants only constituted 3 percent of the population, they took control of the territory. Some academics further described that Americo-Liberians perceived themselves to be superior and virtually "*took the character of the slave masters*" over the indigenous groups and consequently imposed discriminatory policies on them.<sup>134</sup> For instance, Liberia's first president, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, restricted most Liberians from acquiring education, in order to deter competition with the ruling elite class. Leaving Americo-Liberian classes to practice a system of patronage and dominate the country for over a century.

Today, Liberia continues to be inhabited by indigenous Africans, with the slaves' descendants composing of 5 percent of the population.<sup>135</sup> The country also consists of 16 ethnic groups, the Kpelle and Bassa constituting the largest with 20.3 and 13.4 percent, respectively. English is the official language, and over 29 indigenous languages spoken throughout the country. Christianity constitutes the largest religion, with Catholics representing 85.5 percent of the population, followed by Muslims, those claiming no religious beliefs, and traditional indigenous religions at 12.2, 1.5, and 0.5 percent, respectively.<sup>136</sup> In addition the country is predominantly young with 42.7 percent of the

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<sup>133</sup> Nmoma, V. (1997). The Civil War and the Refugee Crisis in Liberia. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 17(1). Retrieved from <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/11734/12489>

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. Nmoma, V. (1997).

<sup>135</sup> Liberia Country Profile - BBC News. (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13729504>

<sup>136</sup> The World FactBook - Liberia. (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/li.html>

population under the age of 15, with a mean age of 18.1.<sup>137</sup> The sex ratio of the country is relatively even, with 50.3 percent males and 49.7 percent females.<sup>138</sup>

### *3.2 Liberia's Civil Wars*

Liberia underwent two ruthless civil wars that left the state in tatters. The first civil war was largely a struggle for power among warring factions, rooted from more than a century of oppression by the elite minority. Leading to the civil war, a coup in 1980 successfully ousted President William Tolbert, which then brought an end to the Americo-Liberian monopoly over power. Samuel Doe subsequently took power, becoming the first Liberian President of non Americo-Liberian descent. Unfortunately, Doe was not very different from his predecessors and continued to blatantly discriminate against other groups, further dividing the country along ethnic lines.

The civil war officially began in 1989, when Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia launched an invasion through northern Liberia from Ivory Coast. Taylor's objective was to overthrow the 10 year-old corrupt and dictatorial rule of Doe. However, what started as an attempt to oust Doe, degenerated into massacres, killings thousands of innocent civilians. Finally, the Economic Community of West African States and the UN stepped in, initiating the 1996 peace agreement. Unfortunately, the conflict killed over 200,000, and displaced 800,000 people.<sup>139</sup> The civil war ended with the Liberian general election in 1997, where Charles Taylor gained power.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid. The World FactBook - Liberia. (2016).

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. The World FactBook - Liberia. (2016).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. Nmoma, V. (1997).

The second civil war is largely attributed to Taylor's actions (or inaction) during his ascendancy. These included the regime's human right abuses, failures to tackle chronic social and economic problems, and the inherent failures of the post first war peacebuilding agreement. As a result, the war began in 1999 when the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy emerged from the north. In 2003 a second rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia, emerged further escalating the conflict. The combined rebel forces shut down the country. During this time Taylor had only a third of the country under control; losing his positioning, he fled to Nigeria.<sup>140</sup> On August 18, 2003 the warring parties signed the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement, marking the end of the conflict and the beginning of the country's transition to peace.<sup>141</sup> Liberia's first general election after the civil war took place in 2005, where Sirleaf would be victorious.

### *3.2.1 Women and War*

The toll women faced during, and after both civil wars were immeasurable. Similarly to the genocide in Rwanda, a woman's personalized suffering changed gender roles in the country. Without denying the extensive exploitation women faced during periods of war, not all were victims; many found areas of agency. For instance, it was estimated that between 2 and 20 percent of the total fighting force were women.<sup>142</sup> Researchers also found that many women had a hand in physically protecting their

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid. Nmoma, V. (1997).

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. Nmoma, V. (1997).

<sup>142</sup> Fuest, V. (2008). 'This is the Time to get in Front': Changing Roles and Opportunities for Women in Liberia. *African Affairs*, 107(427), 201-224. Pg. 210

husbands and family members from combatants. Some of these women became killers and more feared than their male counterparts.<sup>143</sup>

The respect women earned throughout the conflict, opened new roles for women. For instance, women's peace-making efforts effectively led to the end of the war. During the summer of 2003, thousands of women in all white t-shirts marched in the streets of the capital city Monrovia to demand an end to the violence. They occupied parking lots of the national Capitol, so that legislators could not park their cars.<sup>144</sup> They took over the runway of the airports and disrupted flights; they laid the bodies of dead family members at the gates of the U.S. Embassy.<sup>145</sup> In this way, they gained international attention, as well as significant support and funding from outside sources.<sup>146</sup>

As the war came to an end, gender roles shifted quite considerably. The war seemed to have increased the legitimacy and confidence of women's claims to power and political participation at both national and local levels. They were also granted a seat at the 2003 national peace agreement, and, a few gender-relevant policies were created.<sup>147</sup> The Liberian population also publicly recognized women's social, economic and political achievements during the war, which then mirrored to some extent in families' priorities. For instance, after the war families increasingly enrolled their daughters in school, something that was not economically viable before the war. Some parents indicated that their perception of educated girls changed once women proved to be more reliable economic providers than men.<sup>148</sup> Overall, the 'emancipation' that Liberian woman won

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid. Fuest, V. (2008). Pg. 210

<sup>144</sup> Moran, M. (2012). Our Mothers Have Spoken: Synthesizing Old and New Forms of Women's Political Authority in Liberia. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(4), 51-66. Pg. 60

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. Maran, M. (2012). Pg. 60

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. Maran, M. (2012). Pg. 60

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. Fuest, V. (2008). Pg. 214

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. Fuest, V. (2008). Pg. 217

seemed to have been a result of the war, which then threatened the very institutions that defined women's role in society.<sup>149</sup>

### *3.3 President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf*

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was born in Monrovia, Liberia in 1938. Before serving in the government, she completed her studies in the United States (US). After completing her education she moved back and served as an assistant minister of Finance in President Tolbert's administration. In 1980, a military coup overthrew Tolbert, sending Sirleaf into exile in Kenya and then the US. She then returned in 1985 in the midst of the national elections and campaigned for a seat in the Senate, meanwhile openly criticizing the military government. Her public criticisms led to her arrest and a 10-year prison sentence. However, mounting international pressure particularly from the US congress led to her swift release and departure from Liberia.<sup>150</sup>

During her time in exile Liberia collapsed into civil war. Meanwhile, Sirleaf became an influential economist for the World Bank, and became the United Nations Development Programme director of the African Regional Bureau.<sup>151</sup> After a truce was reached in Liberia's conflict Sirleaf ran for presidency in the 1997 election representing the Unity Party. She finished second to Charles Taylor, who then charged her with treason and forced her back into exile. By 1999 Liberia's civil war had resumed. After Taylor went into exile in 2003, Sirleaf returned to oversee Liberia's preparations for elections.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid. Fuest, V. (2008). Pg. 223

<sup>150</sup> Sy, S. (2015). Ellen Johnson Sirleaf talks to Stephanie Sy. Retrieved from <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/talk-to-al-jazeera/articles/2015/10/3/ellen-johnson-sirleaf-talks-to-al-jazeera.html>

<sup>151</sup> Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Ellen-Johnson-Sirleaf>

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. (2014).

In November 2005, Sirleaf embarked on her second run for presidency, this time highlighting her exceptional life and political experiences, and succeeded. She defeated a former soccer star George Weah and 20 other candidates, becoming the first woman ever democratically elected to head an African country. Many academics and herself credit her victory to the widespread and enthusiastic support she received from women and because literate females had the highest turnout of any group in the Liberian electorate.<sup>153</sup> Sirleaf was also reelected in 2011, making her the first woman to be re-elected into presidency in Africa.

During the 2005 and 2011 elections, Sirleaf strategically portrayed multiple identities, appealing to both male and female constituencies. She recognized the need to mobilize Liberian women as a political vehicle of institutional change, and therefore made women's rights central in her platform. She also acknowledged her role as a mother, which uniquely strengthened her candidacy for presidency.<sup>154</sup> At the same time, she exuded traits of strength, assertiveness and confidence when discussing issues such as the revitalization of Liberia's economy, rebuilding infrastructure and restoring homes. These are traits that are commonly interpreted as masculine and were considered extremely important to her success.<sup>155</sup>

Media stylizations of Sirleaf therefore ranged from that of a "*grandmother*" to an "*iron lady*" to "*Ma Ellen*" mother of a country, which successfully related to both genders.<sup>156</sup> John Wilson and Diane Boxer poetically add: "*it is this 'masculine' discursive identity within which she frequently contextualizes her discourse on women's rights as*

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<sup>153</sup> Bauer, J. (2009). Women and the 2005 Election in Liberia\*. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* J. Mod. Afr. Stud., 47(02), 193. Pg. 194

<sup>154</sup> Wilson, J., & Boxer, D. (Eds.). (2015). *Discourse, Politics and Women as Global leaders*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. Wilson, J., & Boxer, D. (Eds.). (2015). Pg. 317

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. Wilson, J., & Boxer, D. (Eds.). (2015). Pg. 315

well, arguably making the pill for women's rights discourse more palatable for male supporters to swallow."<sup>157</sup> Such a breakthrough had significant impacts on the lives of women in Liberia during the post conflict period.

Today, Sirleaf is symbolized as being among the main leaders that led the war-torn nation to restored freedom and peace. In 2011 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in securing women's rights and participation in peace building. She also catalyzed a number of policies that invested women's socio-political empowerment. However, before examining some of these, I begin with a breakdown of women's historical political positions in Liberia.

### *3.4 Women's Historical Political Positions*

Liberia has had a long history of prominent women in high-level political positions, and was renowned for having stood at the forefront of women's political emancipation in Africa. In the nineteenth century women in Liberia could buy and sell land, enter into contracts, bring legal suits and initiate divorces, appeal to legislatures, and exercise similar forms of agency.<sup>158</sup> In 1946, under President Tubman, Liberian women gained the right to vote and participate in public elections, making it one of only six African countries, including Cameroon, South Africa, Senegal, Togo, and Djibouti to grant women suffrage.<sup>159</sup>

By 1950, women also occupied key offices in ministries and other high-level decision-making positions in the government.<sup>160</sup> Under Tolbert in the 1970s, women

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid. Wilson, J., & Boxer, D. (Eds.). (2015). Pg. 317

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. Fuest, V. (2008). Pg. 207

<sup>159</sup> Al-bakriNyei, I. (2014). Liberia's Constitutional Review Process: Why It Matters To Women. Retrieved from <http://www.constitutionnet.org/news/liberias-constitutional-review-process-why-it-matters-women>

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. Fuest, V. (2008). Pg. 207

held eight ministerial posts, such as Agriculture, Telecommunication and Finance (the last held by Sirleaf herself).<sup>161</sup> Doe followed in Tolbert's footsteps and appointed women as Ministers of Health and Social Welfare, Postal Affairs and Commerce, and Industry and Transportation. Even during Charles Taylor's leadership, women were appointed to high-level ministerial positions, such as Ministers of Planning and Economic Affairs, Education, Commerce and Industry, Post and Telecommunication, and Gender and Development.<sup>162</sup> Furthermore, he appointed prominent female officers in his armed faction with county superintendent positions.<sup>163</sup>

However, women from the capital and the coast of Liberia more readily enjoyed such privileges. Leading scholars suggested that these achievements were a political maneuver to promote women of their own group in national political roles, rather than risk opening the field to men of indigenous ethnicities.<sup>164</sup> Nevertheless, all women were still not regarded as equals with men, and were subjected to varying burdens both at home and in the labor force.<sup>165</sup> Nonetheless, the rights women enjoyed were among the most progressive in the continent at the time, even if they were not equally available to all women.

### *3.5 Liberian Women and Political Empowerment*

Appointing Sirleaf as president was a significant achievement for the Liberian people. With the bulk of voters being women, the anticipation was quite high for a change in public priorities. Sirleaf, being a pronounced feminist, seemed like a

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid. Fuest, V. (2008). Pg. 208

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. Bauer, G. (2011). Pg. 92

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. Moran, M. (2012). Pg. 59-60

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. Fuest, V. (2008). Pg. 207

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. Fuest, V. (2008). Pg. 207

guaranteed representative for their demands. Two terms later, research remains quite mixed on her impact on women's empowerment. For instance, women's presence in the political sphere has slightly increased in some senior positions, but decreased in other spheres. Meanwhile Sirleaf has successfully presided over a government that has enacted a number of gender friendly laws.

During Sirleaf's first term, women occupied 30 percent of cabinet level posts and 28 percent of ministerial positions such as the Ministry of Finance, Agriculture, Commerce, Foreign Affairs, Justice, Gender and Development, and Youth and Sports.<sup>166</sup> In addition, 5 of the 15 county superintendents were women; five women were assigned to the Supreme Court; and for the first time in Liberian history, a female chief of police was appointed.<sup>167</sup> By her second term, women's representation in senior ministerial positions, increased slightly to 31 percent in 2013, from 28 percent in 2006.<sup>168</sup>

However, in Sirleaf's second term women's representation in parliament declined in a few positions. The proportion of seats held by female senators reduced to four women in 2002, from five in 2005,<sup>169</sup> while women in national parliament decreased from 13 percent in 2006, to 11 percent in 2015.<sup>170</sup> Criticism increased as researchers witnessed a numerical decline from a relatively low figure. A number of scholars, such as Samuel Cole quickly concluded that the election of a female head of state did not translate into strong representations of women in politics.<sup>171</sup> He argued that since Liberia

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid. Bauer G. (2011). Pg. 101

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. Bauer, G. (2011). Pg.101

<sup>168</sup> Garnett, T. A. (2016). "Ellen Is Our Man". International Feminist Journal of Politics, 1-20. Pg.8

<sup>169</sup> The World Bank (2015). Proportion of Seats Held By Women in National Parliaments (%). Retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>

<sup>170</sup> Jallow, B. G. (2014). Leadership in Postcolonial Africa: Trends Transformed by Independence. Palgrave Macmillan US. Pg. 183-184

<sup>171</sup> Cole, S. (2011). Increasing Women's Political Participation in Liberia. Hubert Humphrey Democracy Studies Fellowship Paper, 1-22. Pg.4

had yet to achieve a 30 percent minimum representation of women in politics, after more than a decade of female leadership, as disappointing.

Nevertheless, there are a few possible reasons as to why Sirleaf was unable to increase female participation. These include: entrenched traditional norms, cultural practices, and limited education of women. Gender inequality and women's marginalization in Liberia were maintained by traditional and religious perceptions of women as subordinate and men as superior. Women and men were socialized and culturally ascribed different and rigid roles, duties and responsibilities with regard to divisions of labor, access and control over resources and decision-making positions.<sup>172</sup> In turn, these were transferred into schools, the community and the workplace. Finally, education levels for girls remained low and often not prioritized in households, further impeding women's abilities and desire to stand for office.

However, presumably since all these barriers were present in her first parliament, something else needed to have further hindered Sirleaf's authority. To date there has been limited research on such correlations. Yet, one event stands out: the outbreak of Ebola. On March 2014, Liberia was among West Africa's hardest hit. By April 8, 2015, Liberia reported over 9,860 cases of Ebola Virus Diseases, and over 4,400 deaths.<sup>173</sup> In addition, the economic recovery Liberia had briefly enjoyed plummeted, as public services shut down for over a year; 40 percent of households reported not working; and agricultural production declined, further increasing food insecurity.<sup>174</sup> Sirleaf called for international assistance throughout the pandemic, yet only received assistance much too

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. Ministry of Gender and Development (2009). Pg. 6

<sup>173</sup> Himelein, K. (2015). The Socio-Economic Impacts of Ebola in Liberia. Retrieved from [http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Poverty documents/Socio-Economic Impacts of Ebola in Liberia, April 15 \(final\).pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Poverty%20documents/Socio-Economic%20Impacts%20of%20Ebola%20in%20Liberia%20April%2015%20(final).pdf). Pg. 4

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. Himelein, K. (2015). Pg. 6

late.<sup>175</sup> While not a direct correlation, the Ebola crisis demonstrates that Sirleaf's priorities or even desire to increase female political representation in her second term was suspended.

Despite President Sirleaf's inability to meet public expectation of female inclusivity, there is sufficient evidence that demonstrates her willingness to increase women's empowerment. Beginning in 2006, Sirleaf's administration and the Ministry of Gender and Development introduced a National Gender Policy that attempted to address gender inequalities by mainstreaming gender in all national development processes. This included implementing codes of conduct, broadening the scope for affirmative action that would reduce gender disparities and create strategies that empowered young women to take up leadership positions in schools.<sup>176</sup> The objectives outlined in the policy demonstrated Sirleaf's political will and commitment to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination in the political sphere. However, attempts by the government to mitigate overarching inequalities have been widely ineffective.

On August 2011, Liberia's Women's Caucus presented a new draft of the National Gender Policy, and named it the Gender Representation Bill.<sup>177</sup> It requested that Parliament legislate gender quotas. However, like previous occasion, the bill was scrutinized by the male dominated legislatures, and was rejected a month later. Male politicians rejected the bill on the grounds that it violated the country's constitution; they argued that all Liberian citizens should have equal opportunities for work and

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<sup>175</sup> Paulson, T. (2015). Liberian President Sirleaf: Ebola Crisis Fueled by Weak Health Systems. Retrieved from <http://www.humanosphere.org/global-health/2015/10/liberian-president-sirleaf-ebola-crisis-fueled-by-weak-health-systems/>

<sup>176</sup> Ministry of Gender and Development (2009). The National Gender Policy. The Liberia National Gender Policy, 1-30. Pg.20

<sup>177</sup> Boyle, J. (2012). Women Of Liberia – Find Your Voices. Retrieved from <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=2543624&fileId=2831649>

employment, regardless of their gender or religion.<sup>178</sup> In other words, they thought the bill discriminated against men. Other criticisms of the bill deemed it selfish and lazy; they qualified that women's initiative as counterproductive to Liberia's fledging democratic undertakings and that it would potentially lead other groups such as people with disabilities to call for political representation as well.<sup>179</sup> Consequently, the bill lay dormant in committee rooms. However, despite these challenges, women's organizations in Liberia continue to lobby and advocate for increased female political representation in all governmental positions.

### *3.5.1 Gender Based Violence*

While Sirleaf has varied reviews regarding her abilities to empower women politically, she has had more of an observable impact empowering women's social status. One of the most celebrated achievements of Sirleaf's stint in office is her crackdown on Gender Based Violence and rape in the country. Both forms of violence were highly prevalent in Liberia, both during and after the civil war. Approximately 49 percent of women were raped or sexually abused during the war.<sup>180</sup> Such staggering numbers encouraged Sirleaf to move quickly to address the rampant violence.

The government created the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Management of Gender-Based Violence, which focused on prevention and response. The plan had five pillars: health, psychosocial, justice, protection and coordination stages. The overall goal of the plan was to prevent GBV in a systematic and comprehensive

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<sup>178</sup> American Jewish World Service. (2011). Why Liberia's Government Must Listen to Women. Retrieved March 15, 2016, from <https://ajws.org/blog/liberian-election/>

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. American Jewish World Service. (2011).

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. Garnett, T. A. (2016). Pg. 10

manner, through a multi-sectorial and multi-dimensional approach, and to respond with holistic care and services to GBV survivors.

To do so, the government established a Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Crimes (SGBV) Unit at the Ministry of Justice to prosecute sexual offence cases and ensure protection over victims. In 2008, Sirleaf's administration established the Criminal Court 'E' to try sexual offence cases and constructed Safe Homes to provide protection to survivors.<sup>181</sup> These safe homes provided temporary protective shelters for abused women and children. The survivors also received medical care and psychosocial counseling.<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, to support the government in its efforts, the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia and the Liberia National Bar Association established free legal clinics where GBV survivors could receive legal aid.<sup>183</sup>

### *3.5.2 Rape Law*

In 2008 Sirleaf's administration introduced a Rape Law. The law was groundbreaking because it shifted the onus from victims to perpetrators; increased the penalty for rape; created programs that educated the public and the police about the importance of rape policy procedures; and encouraged victims to seek protection from police forces.<sup>184</sup> This was quite significant, for the Liberian population had little trust in the criminal court system and labeled it as corrupt, lengthy and sometimes counterintuitive. Victims complained that the police and courts dissuaded survivors from reporting rape cases for fear of retaliation, stigmatization or accusing them of lying.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> National Review Report on Beijing 20. (2014). Government of Liberia, 1-40.Pg. 20

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. National Review Report on Beijing 20. (2014). Pg. 20

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. National Review Report on Beijing 20. (2014). Pg. 21

<sup>184</sup> Medie, P. A. (2013). Fighting Gender-Based Violence: The Women's Movement and the Enforcement of Rape Law in Liberia.

*African Affairs*, 112(448), 377-397. Pg. 362

<sup>185</sup> Ibid. Medie, P. A. (2013). Pg. 385

Hence the perception of Liberia's police force on the rape culture inherently shaped their overall engagement.

Prior to the bill, public attitude towards rape was largely negative, but ranked differently amongst victims. Rape against children was perceived as a serious threat, whereas the rape against women was seen as less serious.<sup>186</sup> In addition, the police forces tended to blame victims rather than perpetrators. Therefore Peace A. Medie found that once the police was trained, they were more likely to refer cases to courts and ensure that more women had their cases proceed to trial.<sup>187</sup> Medie argued that two conditions were significant in the implementation process: an open political environment and political and material support from international organizations.<sup>188</sup> Medie concludes that the political opportunity structure favored women's organizations and provided women and NGOs with openings to have a voice in policy design and implementation; a commitment unique to the Liberian state.<sup>189</sup>

While there were instances of women addressing GBV and rape prior to the war, Sirleaf's commitments were the most sustained and inclusive campaigns.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, a specialized rape court was created to expedite cases,<sup>191</sup> and hospitals established SGBV Units and trained health workers to respond to rape cases. To deal with large amount of cases, 173 health workers and 120 health care providers were trained in clinical management of rape, and 325 community members from 12 communities were trained to provide psychosocial services to GBV survivors.<sup>192</sup> Unfortunately, high rates of rape

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid. Medie, P. A. (2013). Pg. 386

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. Medie, P. A. (2013). Pg.396

<sup>188</sup> Ibid. Medie, P. A. (2013). Pg.396

<sup>189</sup> Ibid. Medie, P. A. (2013). Pg. 388

<sup>190</sup> Ibid. Medie, P. A. (2013). Pg. 286

<sup>191</sup> Ibid. Bauer, G. (2011). Pg.101

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. National Review Report on Beijing 20. (2014). Pg. 19

were still prevalent and there remained a lack of equal access to the justice system and limited public understanding of citizens' rights. In addition, financial commitments for anti-rape initiatives had been quite inadequate, which reflected the low quality legal and financial institutions present in the country.<sup>193</sup> However, progress is occurring and more cases have been tried than ever before.<sup>194</sup>

### *3.5.3 Education Reform Act*

When Sirleaf came to power, the government was faced with the enormous challenge of rebuilding the country. Teachers had fled Liberia, and an entire generation had missed out on their education. However despite this, Sirleaf introduced free schooling for primary students in 2006. This increased the enrolment of girls by 40 percent, even in rural areas, where tradition and poverty had often kept girls out of the classroom. In 2008, Sirleaf increased spending on education, which reached 8.6 percent of the budget, second only to health as the single largest budget line.<sup>195</sup> As a result, in 2002, the literacy rate of 15 to 24 year olds was 34.7 percent and increased to 71.1 percent in 2007 and again to 74.8 percent in 2008.<sup>196</sup> However, Liberia continues to be significantly behind most African countries in nearly every educational measurement.<sup>197</sup> Furthermore, progress in education was halted by the Ebola outbreak as schools shut down, and further marginalized children's chances to access education.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid. Medie, P. A. (2013). Pg. 388

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. Ministry of Gender and Development (2009). Pg. 13-14

<sup>195</sup> Fleshman, M. (2010). Even with peace, Liberia's women struggle | Africa Renewal Online. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2010/even-peace-liberia's-women-struggle>

<sup>196</sup> Women Urged to Take 50% of Seats in 2017. (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.lr.undp.org/content/liberia/en/home/presscenter/articles/2015/11/06/women-urged-to-take-50-of-seats-in-2017->

<sup>197</sup> Gboko, S. J. (2015). Liberia: 'Trees That Are Slow to Grow Bear the Best Fruits' Retrieved from <http://allafrica.com/stories/201504300873.html>

<sup>198</sup> Pearce, N. A. (2014). Women Presidents Outperform Their Male Counterparts in Complex Economies. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nicholas-a-pearce-phd/president-women-in-politics\\_b\\_4682062.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nicholas-a-pearce-phd/president-women-in-politics_b_4682062.html)

Since the Ebola outbreak, the government passed an Education Reform Act that revised policies on girls' education. The reform act improved girls and women's access to vocational training, science and technology. It also stressed the development and implementation of training and retraining of women, especially young women re-entering the labor market, so that young women could keep up with Liberia's changing socio-economic opportunities.<sup>199</sup> Overall, commitments brought forward by Sirleaf's administration led to the construction of over 250 schools across the country, increasing access to education to over 1.3 million students in pre-primary and primary schools,<sup>200</sup> of which girls constitute 46.9, 45 and 42 percent of primary, junior and secondary school levels, respectively.<sup>201</sup>

#### 3.5.4 Symbolic Representation

By electing a female president, the Liberian population weakened traditional stereotypes of women as politically naive, weak or lacking authority. In addition, there is an overriding view - although more common inside the capital - that the majority of women in the political spheres have insofar done a good job and have demonstrated to the electorates that women are just as capable as men.<sup>202</sup> One female Liberian politician commented, '*men have started to understand that women have a stake in politics – and some are even encouraging them to participate.*'<sup>203</sup> Hence, to a great extent Sirleaf's achievements opened the door for other women to access political positions; women took advantage of this and men witnessed firsthand the benefits.

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid. National Review Report on Beijing 20. (2014). Pg. 13

<sup>200</sup> Foray, J. (2012). Liberia: Achievements Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Administration. Retrieved from <http://africanreality.over-blog.net/article-liberia-achievements-ellen-johnson-sirleaf-administration-2006-2012-106862125.html>

<sup>201</sup> Ibid. National Review Report on Beijing 20. (2014). Pg. 15

<sup>202</sup> Kellow, T. (2010). Women, Elections and Violence in West Africa. International Alert, 1-35.Pg. 18

<sup>203</sup> Ibid. Kellow, T. (2010). Women, Elections and Violence in West Africa. Pg. 18

Furthermore, Sirleaf has become a symbol of gender fluidity; whereby she conveys a wider and more flexible range of gender expression that are not confined to stereotypical boundaries of gendered roles ascribed to women and men. Formally known as ‘Ma Ellen’ or ‘Iron Lady’ she is able to create combinations of gender imagery to communicate her political messages.<sup>204</sup> She exuded both toughness, while utilizing her feminine characteristics to emphasize her compassion and commitment to her country. However, for some academics Sirleaf's tactics to achieve presidency only further entrenched patriarchal norms. For instance, the Liberian electorate accepted and promoted the image of Sirleaf as a formidable woman with leadership traits similar to that of men, so much that they proclaimed her to be "*our man*."<sup>205</sup> If President Sirleaf could only be elected on the basis of her male characteristics, this could be a barrier for women who do not resemble Sirleaf, yet are attempting to enter politics. Therefore, the impact of Sirleaf's symbolism is contentious. However, supporters highlight her experience and determination in acquiring the most powerful position in the country as sufficiently symbolic to herald a new era of opportunities for Liberian women.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter aimed to explore whether President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was able to empower women's socio-political entitlements, and found that the evidence is quite mixed. On one hand, Sirleaf successfully exuded the benefits of Philips's politics of presence, by undisputedly breaking new ground for African women and providing a springboard for further advances in Liberia and abroad. She brought peace to a war-torn

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<sup>204</sup> "You Made a Mistake - You Selected a Women!":\* The Implementation of Political Gender Quotas in Post Conflict African Nations. HeinOnline, 203-223. Pg. 209

<sup>205</sup> Ibid. Conner, B. (2009). Pg. 209

country, slightly increased women's political representation, enforced GBV laws and improved education levels for young women. On the other hand, Sirleaf was unable to meet Dahlerup and Kanter's critical mass theory and therefore has to date been unable to meet the expectations placed upon her, in regard to women's political empowerment. As a result women and girls continue to have limited influence over political decisions. Such barriers largely coincide with alarming rates of gender based violence, and lack of access to education for girls. However with Sirleaf in power, such circumstances are more readily challenged. Therefore while some argue that placing a woman at the pinnacle of executive power was not enough to significantly weaken overarching patriarchal institutions, such expectations are perhaps impossible for any gender, let alone for one woman to tackle in less than a decade. However, with that said it is quite accurate to conclude that while President Sirleaf was able to impact the socio-empowerment of women in Liberia, she was unable to do the same for women's political empowerment.

## Conclusion

When more women are elected into office, policy-making increasingly reflects women's priorities. Therefore, Africa's *gender revolution* ought to have significantly improved women's socio-political standing. The evidence emerging from Rwanda and Liberia is quite mixed. While the *gender revolution* was not a broad based transformation, as the term would imply; nevertheless women's presence in politics has perversely and rapidly changed Africa's social structures. On the one hand, the increased presence of women in high level political position, initiated greater parliamentary attention to gender equality issues, altered societal perceptions of gender roles and further motivated more women to take part in political affairs. On the other hand, the success of women's political empowerment in Africa accompanied increasingly authoritarian and/or patriarchal institutions. Hence, women are unable to fully benefit from their increased presence in politics, and such diverse and contradictory developments demonstrate the importance of highlighting both the extent of women's victimization and their agency in patriarchal and authoritarian institutions.

Rwanda achieving the first gender parity political system in the world is highly impressive. Rwanda successfully achieved Dahlerup and Kanter's critical mass and as a result women have enjoyed majority status and have found it easier to prioritize their needs. Two significant policies discussed in this thesis were created and championed by female politicians: the Inheritance and Marital Bill and the Gender Based Violence Bill. Both positively affected women's bargaining power within households. However, Rwanda being an increasingly authoritative government, limited the influence of women in power, leaving some academics to conclude that women remain pawns in Kagame's

rule.<sup>206</sup> Nonetheless, despite such criticism, women have gained more legitimacy as leaders in their communities.

Liberia, having elected the first female president, provided an optimal example of female leadership in Africa. Having completed two terms, research remains inconclusive on Sirleaf's overall impact on women's political empowerment. For instance, women's presence in political positions slightly increased in some areas, but declined in other spheres. Unlike Rwanda, Liberia was unable to meet Dahlerup and Kanter's critical mass. As a result, women remain constrained by their minority status and were unable to respond proactively in their environment. Therefore, critics such as Cole argue that electing a female head of state has not translated into stronger representations for women in politics.<sup>207</sup> However, Sirleaf has had more of an observable impact empowering women's social positioning. One of the most celebrated achievements of Sirleaf's time in office, was her successful crackdown on Gender Based Violence and rape, and as well as her improvements in girls access to education. Moreover, Sirleaf was able to weaken traditional stereotypes of Liberian women from politically naive, to capable.

So what lessons can be learned from this analysis on women and politics? Targets set for women in political and decision-making positions must be accompanied by determined efforts to remove all obstacles that obstruct women's effective involvement. Some barriers discussed throughout this thesis included: entrenched patriarchal institutions, cultural and traditional practices, and lack of access to education and social services. Furthermore, the numerical representation of women is significant as Dahlerup and Kanter's critical theory proves, and quota systems remain one of the most readily

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid. Burnet, J. E. (2011). Pg.314

<sup>207</sup> Ibid. Cole, S. (2011). Pg. 4

used political mechanisms for getting more women into parliament. However, there remain a few limitations to the implementation of gender quotas, for instance in authoritative structures, they may simply create token positions whereby women have limited say in policy making. Finally, Phillips' presence of politics solidifies how different experiences create different values, priorities and interest. Hence, moving forward it is vital that states have sufficient representations of both genders in parliament, but more importantly that they both have active participation in policy making.

However, we must recognize that not all women necessarily regard themselves as having a responsibility to represent women or advance women's interests, nor are all men self-interested actors. Furthermore, women's experiences of discrimination are not homogeneous, but are shaped by their status within their communities, their class positions and their ethnicity. In Liberia we saw this quite vividly, as women from the city and coast of Liberia were systematically privileged and gained more political opportunities in comparison to women from the interior of the country. This is because women frequently rise to power when they are considered members of a privileged group. In both Liberia and Rwanda, elite women made great strides despite the low status of women overall. Therefore, it is important that we question who is being empowered and why, as well as the relative importance of gender vis-à-vis other identity markers such as class and race.

Overall, women in Rwanda and Liberia offer remarkable evidence of the strides that women can make in Africa, yet both also hold plenty of opportunity to improve women's voice in parliament. Achieving greater equality between women and men will require state led initiatives at many levels, including political decision-making structures,

legal, economic, and individual attitudes. Any future strategy must strengthen women's capacity, in order for women to achieve and maintain political positions. Men and women need to be taught the causes and affects of women's discrimination, but as well the benefits of empowering women in the political sphere. Such a goal will require systematic and consistent effort.

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