

**ALIGN REPORT**

# Unpacking political masculinities in Liberia



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# About Nunlai Research and Consulting



**NUNLAI RESEARCH & CONSULTING**

FOR THE SAKE OF HUMANITY

Nunlai Research and Consulting is a feminist research and consulting firm based in Monrovia, Liberia. Nunlai (pronounced 'nun-lie') is a word from the Kpelle language that means 'the business of human beings' or, in other words, 'for the sake of humanity'. Nunlai centres the voices, knowledge and experiences of African women as the catalyst for understanding and leading positive change. We explore the cultural, social, economic, and environmental context in which gender inequality and other forms of inequality define the experiences of women and vulnerable populations in various African contexts. We engage local communities in the formulation of sustainable solutions, and produce analyses to influence policies, reduce and eradicate inequalities, and foster strategies to promote meaningful growth and development. Working across multiple levels, we employ feminist research methodology, which differs from traditional research by uncovering the socioeconomic power imbalances and inequalities that underpin Africa's development challenges.

Utilising a feminist research lens, we explore the nexus between gender inequity and our three key pillars of work: national and international development; stakeholder and community engagement; and sustainable natural resource management. Nunlai has supported multiple government, development, and private sector actors across Africa to help them think more critically about the socioeconomic context in which they operate and the impact of their interventions, supporting research, evidence-based analysis, and stakeholder voices to ensure that they feature more prominently in global decision-making processes.

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# Key findings

- There are male politicians in Liberia who could be seen as pro-feminist, given their support for gender equality initiatives. However, a lack of understanding of feminism and feminist politics means that the term is used with caution, and most male politicians still do not identify as a feminist.
- Advocacy for gender equality among male politicians is framed not as feminism, but as a moral imperative. Most male politicians see their role in supporting gender equality initiatives as the right thing to do, given the difficulties women face or the potential contributions that women could make to society and to the political space.
- Male politicians cite the influence that strong women in their lives had on their positive stance to gender equality.
- The impact of their gender equality advocacy is constrained by systemic obstacles to gender norm transformation, such as patriarchal gender norms and a patriarchal political culture.
- There are also several enablers for their support for gender equality initiatives, including an increasingly open political discourse on gender, broader social transformation, and successful examples of female leadership.
- Four themes emerge from the research on the perceptions of male politicians by youth and civil society activists:
  - distrust of male politicians and skepticism about the depth of their commitment to gender equality
  - a lack of pro-gender equality action, with the actions of male politicians perceived as insufficient to have a major impact on gender inequality
  - violence against women in politics, with Liberia's political beliefs rooted in patriarchal norms that limit women's participation
  - cash violence, with politics driven by financial self-interest rather than issues as gender equality and pro-feminism.
- This research reveals five key implications for policy, practice and research:
  - Raise awareness on gender equality and feminism with male politicians and the broader public to support a shift in perspectives towards a pro-feminist agenda.
  - Engage more male politicians across branches of government and political parties in gender equality initiatives that model positive political behaviour and foster a more inclusive political environment, using a community of practice, Palava Hut or Peace Hut model.
  - Share women's lived experiences of gender inequality and GBV to make gender inequality more tangible and spur genuine support to gender equality initiatives.
  - Support female politicians, adopt the gender quota and target pro-feminist men as allies for female politicians.
  - Empower HeForShe civil society organisations financially and technically to promote positive masculinity, engage male politicians in training and peer learning, add male voices to the gender equality debate and enhance the impact of gender equality initiatives.

# Acronyms

<b>AFELL</b>	Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia
<b>AFL</b>	Armed Forces of Liberia
<b>CDC</b>	Congress for Democratic Change
<b>CSMM</b>	Critical studies on men and masculinities
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organisation
<b>FGD</b>	Focus group discussion
<b>FGM</b>	Female genital mutilation
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>GII</b>	Gender Inequality Index
<b>KII</b>	Key informant interview
<b>LFF</b>	Liberian Feminist Forum
<b>LNP</b>	Liberia National Police
<b>MoU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding
<b>NEC</b>	National Elections Commission
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual and gender-based violence
<b>SSR</b>	Security sector reform
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme

# Key terms

**HeForShe.** This global campaign to engage men and boys in the fight for gender equality began as a UN initiative in 2014 and has become a global solidarity movement for gender equality (HeforShe, n.d.). The HeForShe campaign was introduced to post-conflict Liberia as a way to engage men and boys in ending sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The term has become synonymous with men and boys who promote gender equality, have positive attitudes toward women's rights, or who are considered feminists.

**Hegemonic masculinity.** In the literature on multiple masculinities, hegemonic masculinity refers to the construction and practice of masculinity in a way that is dominant and hierarchal in the subordination of women and other non-dominant forms of masculinity, in line with patriarchal norms. Hegemonic implies the use of power and privilege to dominate others in a stratified social, political and economic system. Hegemonic masculinity can be seen as one form of masculinity among other forms, such as complicit, positive or subordinate masculinity. The term is highly contested because of the rigid typologies of gender that ignore fluid and intersectional realities of man as a social category, including geography, race and socioeconomic class (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

**Hypermasculinity.** This is defined in this report as stereotypical behaviours associated with heteronormative ideals of what it means to be masculine. It is often characterised by disproportionate and unearned male privilege in terms of power, gender-based exploitation and abuse, which often justifies the rigid enforcement of gender roles (Adisa et al., 2020).

**Maternal activism.** This can be understood as the use of motherhood to advocate for a cause or participate in political dialogue. The Liberian women's peacebuilding movement used maternal activism as a strategy for appealing to the patriarchal sensitivities of leaders and warlords during the civil conflict, and there are accounts of its effectiveness. The term has been problematised by some feminists, particularly those of the younger generation, because they consider it ineffective for the dismantling of patriarchal norms around women's roles beyond motherhood (Garnett and Roversi, 2023).

**Positive masculinity.** This refers to norms around masculinity that are socially modelled and reproduced, and includes practices that support women and gender equality. Positive masculinity may incorporate the promotion of women's rights or positive attitudes toward a more equal household division of labour, particularly childcare and elderly care responsibilities. Positive masculinity contrasts with other forms of masculinity such as hegemonic masculinity, by contributing to egalitarian relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities (Messerschmidt, 2017).

**Pro-feminism.** In this report, pro-feminism refers to the attitudes and actions of individuals or organisations that espouse or promote women's rights, gender equality or feminism, even though they may not explicitly refer to themselves as feminist.

**Sande and Poro societies.** These are traditional religious and sociopolitical institutions for women and men, respectively, through which social life is organised (Bledsoe, 1976). Both societies serve as informal education systems where skills are transmitted from older to younger generations, and cultural norms are preserved. While these societies have become less relevant in urban areas, they remain dominant in rural areas throughout Liberia and represent an alternative political system.

# Introduction

We are always hearing the statement that actions speak louder than words, right? So, going out in public and telling people 'I'm gender sensitive. Oh, I want to see gender equality.' That is not what we want. That's not what we are looking for. What we are looking for is how far the politician has gone with what he is saying, how many positions his parties have allotted for women.

Male student

Gender norms, both visible and invisible, are central to the current state of gender equality in Liberia, as they determine access to politics, to rights and to decision-making power (Embassy of Sweden and UN Women, 2019). Gender norms are foundational for unpacking and understanding the inherent contradictions in how Liberian women have simultaneously made history in the political arena, with the emergence of two Nobel Peace Laureates, Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, yet continue to suffer the devastating impact of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) at alarmingly high rates.

Gender-based inequality in politics is a key example of women's unequal position in Liberia. According to the Gender Inequality Index (GII) of the United Nations Development Programme, Liberia ranked 164 out of 170 countries worldwide in 2021.<sup>1</sup> The country's GI has been relatively stagnant since 2000 as a result of a global economic decline, persistently high maternal mortality rates, and low political participation, as defined by the share of seats occupied by women in parliament. The GI correlates gender equality to overall human development, another index in which Liberia falls within the *low human development* category, ranking 178 out of 191 countries (UNDP, 2022).

Gender equality is the foundation for social stability, enabling countries to function fully and plan for a future that includes their entire population (UN Women, 2018). This research explores the landscape of political masculinities in Liberia as a way to understand how gender equality can be achieved more sustainably and effectively. It is part of a cross-country research study in Colombia, Malaysia and Liberia, which explores how men in politics define themselves in terms of their perspectives on gender equality and feminist politics, the obstacles and enablers for their support to gender equality initiatives in politics, and the impact of their political positionality on feminist discourse. At its core, this research aims to understand how male leaders can transform gender norms in the political sphere.

This research is timely for Liberia, with the country struggling to implement its National Gender Equality Policy, as seen by its stagnant GI ranking and the limited representation of women in political decision-making. The research aims to enable gender equality advocates to identify effective ways to engage male politicians who have the potential to affect change. It also aims to fill a gap in the literature on political masculinities in Liberia and the West African region, and explores President George Manneh Weah's commitment to feminist foreign policy as the country's self-proclaimed 'Feminist in Chief', and the perceptions of such commitments among youth and gender activists.

## Structure of the report

This report begins with a brief theoretical overview of the literature on masculinities in Africa and in Liberia, as the foundation for exploring political masculinities in the Liberian context. It details the methodology used and the target population engaged for the study. It then describes key findings across five thematic areas: positionality, motivations, obstacles, enablers and impact. Finally, the report identifies the implications for policy, practice and research, including strategies for the engagement of male politicians as critical agents of change.

<sup>1</sup> The GI is a composite indicator based on multiple dimensions of health, empowerment and participation in the labour market.

# Masculinities in Liberia and across Africa

After decades of effort to shift the focus to women and the impact of patriarchal gender norms in local, regional, and global systems, the growing interest in masculinities does seem ironic. However, gender relations are in constant flux, particularly in rapidly transforming societies, such as Liberia, where post-conflict reconstruction has created room for new practices to take root.

While there is an established body of literature on *why* women should be represented in the public sphere, particularly in post-conflict environments (Karam, 2001; Rabrenovic and Roskos, 2001; Nakaya, 2003), debates around the space and place of critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM) in gender studies and feminist theory and practice remains contested (Gardiner, 2004; Horlacher, 2015; Reeser, 2015). The need to reason with men and transform their attitudes and behaviours is one element in a holistic approach to the meaningful and sustainable transformation of gender norms. Several scholars have argued that pro-feminist movements and organisations that attract financial support provide the strongest indications of sustainability and of contributions to the goals of gender equality (Rodriguez et al., 2021; Chappell, 2006), hence the imperative to integrate male gender equality actors into women's rights movements.

CSMM literature is often critical in its assessment of men's role in transforming gender norms. With a degree of cynicism, Matunga (2009) categorises men's roles in promoting gender equality in human rights and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in East Africa as:

**Men for the equality of women and men, masculine partisans of women's liberation, male friends of the women's human rights and social justice movement, women's rights men, male friends of feminist movements, male feminists, pro-feminist men, and self-proclaimed feminists.**

Matunga, 2009: 113

The motivations for their engagement have not featured prominently in the debate: it is simply noted that some men are active in this space. The intellectual challenge is how to engage men without replicating patriarchal discourses where they – once more – become the focal point, thwarting the leadership of women in their own liberation struggle.

The study of CSMM has flourished primarily in South and Southern Africa, providing a rich landscape for the study of masculinities as it intersects with race, ethnicity, culture, post-coloniality, and capitalism (Shefer and Ratele, 2023). The study of South African men and boys in CSMM has provided a more nuanced understanding of gender and sexuality-related inequalities and how gender is performed. This counters the generalisation that all African men are inherent perpetrators of violence without examining the layers of structural violence and oppression that dictate the performance of hegemonic masculinity (Shefer and Ratele, 2023).

There is criticism that scholarship on 'African masculinities' oversimplifies the multiple realities of African men and ignores the transnational nature of masculinity across the African diaspora. There a particular lack of analysis with a neo-colonial and post-slavery lens (Pasura and Christou, 2017; Ratele, 2019), and an oversimplification of African masculinities as violent, such as in the conflicts that took place in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Rwanda, which are discussed later.

The history of masculinities in most African countries is marked by colonial conquests that altered their forms, particularly by destabilising existing power systems and weakening the power of the



elders, or more widely through the subordination of black men (Broqua and Doquet, 2013). Africa is now one of the only continents where men and masculinities are depicted as more homogenous. When researching the influence of aging, health, politics, NGOs, or migration, one regularly encounters an essential 'African masculinity', with stereotypical and simplistic images of 'the African man' that often have negative connotation. This image is linked to violence, domination, the abuse of power, irresponsibility, drugs, virility and promiscuity (Ammann and Staudacher, 2021). This extensive focus on African men as problematic further complicates the use of the term 'masculinities'.

Young men in Africa are increasingly unable to achieve their ideals of masculinity, such as marrying, fathering, building a house and providing for their families, which has led to a discourse of a 'crisis of masculinity'. Research on men in Ghana, Mali, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Tanzania explores how they are responding to this challenge to give meaning to their lives and to their maleness (Ammann and Staudacher, 2021). CSMM researchers in South Africa, for example, have examined how racial capitalism, poverty, disenfranchisement and migration have 'undermined Black men's capacities to 'live up' to dominant forms of masculinity and expectations of patriarchy, such as being a successful breadwinner and provider' (Shefer and Ratele, 2023:5).

The literature reflects the view that African men are troubled, and that their masculinities are troubling. However, these troubles do not mean that men's reactions to and positions on these difficulties are uniform. Feminist theory highlights the need for intersectionality when analysing women's experiences of gender and positionality (Apusigah, 2006), and studies on men and masculinities require the same approach to uncover gendered practices.

One key limitation of CSMM in Africa is a lack of focus on how masculinities change over the course of a man's life, and on how age shapes masculinities. While there is literature on male youth, middle-aged and elderly men are often absent from these discussions (Ammann and Staudacher, 2021), as are the regional nuances in intergenerational tensions, harmony and cooperation between elders and youth (Moran, 2006). However, the veneration of elders in African culture makes the study of this cohort a critical piece of the puzzle on how power and masculinities are cultivated.

Apartheid in South Africa shows that hegemonic masculinities in Africa are the result of trauma that manifests as a tendency to use *power over* the other, rather than *power with* others (Ratele, 2021). By applying a feminist lens to Africa's colonial struggles, it is apparent that African women's voices were embedded in cultural norms prior to colonialism, buttressed by their socioeconomic activity and involvement in trade and agriculture (Saungweme, 2021). The Yoruba women of modern-day Nigeria are notable examples of women's influence in sociocultural life that was circumvented with the imposition of colonialism.

Colonial liberation struggles galvanised African women and gave emergence to a feminist consciousness. Yet, the continued institutional and structural inequality in modern African states has made some African feminists question whether their sacrifice and struggle yielded any real fruits (Saungweme, 2021). It appears that while the region's political systems may have evolved from colonialism to new African states, patriarchy continues to exclude and oppress African women.

The militarisation and military sub-cultures that take root in conflict zones create a culture of violence that increases the abuse of women (Karam 2001; Zuckerman and Greenberg 2004). Even as soldiers and fighters, women operate within a patriarchal military system that continues to define them in gendered terms (Enloe, 1993). And while women have historically participated in revolutionary action, they are often excluded from the reconstruction of post-conflict societies (Campbell, 2005). As a result, measures to address the disregard of women and male dominance are hardly ever on the reconstruction agenda because that agenda is set by men (Karam, 2001). In short, the deconstruction and reconstruction of the African state through militarisation and conflict may be root causes for the hegemonic masculine political culture that remains dominant in West Africa.

This is an important point of departure for the study of political masculinities in Liberia, where decades of structural violence were compounded by a 14-year civil conflict and linked to persistently high levels of violence. The general absence of any significant support for trauma healing, psychosocial support services, reconciliation, or memorialisation of the various forms of violence experienced in Liberia suggests that there are continued high levels of trauma among the population. SGBV, in particular, is a manifestation of men's power over women, substantiating the role of trauma in the hegemonic behaviours found in gender relations.

Masculinity studies in Africa fail to unpack the complexities of multiple hierarchical masculinities and the challenges that face hegemonic men in the maintenance of power amid social transformation. The neglect of homophobia is a prime example, which remains taboo in many African intellectual and political settings (Ratele, 2014). Non-heteronormative masculinities, such as homosexuality, are seen as a threat to hegemonic masculinity or other dominant forms of male gender practice and this perception is instrumentalised to reproduce and reinforce restrictive forms of masculinity and gender in Africa (Ratele, 2014). Such popular narratives paint homosexuality as somehow 'un-African' and utilise the fear of non-conformity as a tool to distract citizens from the scale of autocracy in certain African states (Tamale, 2013).

Despite this grim prognosis, gender norms are shifting in Africa as part of intergenerational change. Evidence points to younger generations of African men who are embracing fatherhood and positive masculinity by accepting increasing parenting responsibilities in their households (Mvune and Bhana, 2022).

Political masculinities are defined as 'any kind of masculinity that is constructed around, ascribed to and/or claimed by "political players," with specific reference to individuals, groups or members of movements within the political domain' (Starck and Stauer, 2014:6). Scholarship on hegemonic masculinity in South African politics reveals the use of this framework to unpack political masculinities in the African context. However, there is a gap in the literature on how masculinities, attitudes and behaviours are practiced and produced in the Liberian context.

## Historical context of masculinities in Liberia

This research recognises that the lived experiences of women and men are individual, collective, highly contextualised, and challenging to generalise. The focus is on learning the conscious and sub-conscious ways in which male politicians position themselves, and the power they wield, in influencing gender equality and increasing women's political participation. Women's political participation in Liberia remains low with 6.7% of seats in the Senate held by women, rising to just 11% in the House of Representatives (EJS Center, 2024). An understanding of the views and actions of male politicians is crucial for tackling the subversiveness of unequal gender norms that exclude women from formal political activity and that undermine the development progress needed to improve the quality of life for all Liberians.

The concept of men sharing some degree of power and privilege so that women can take a larger role in decision-making is akin to post-war power-sharing, with power intentionally shared among various political players in an effort to maintain peace (Garnett, 2016). The degree to which political power is shared among actors in a political system is an essential element of peace and is, therefore, a potential route to ending violence. The male dominant political culture that excludes women from formal political processes in this context implies that political masculinities are exclusionary. Therefore, the study of how male politicians become allies and supporters of women's political participation is an important element in understanding political masculinity in Liberia. For more information about traditional gender roles in Liberia, see box 1.

**Box 1: Women's agency versus the patriarchal reality**

Women and marriage in pre-colonial or pre-settlement Liberia have been the subject of anthropologists since the 1960s. In her ethnographic work among the Kpelle ethnic group, Bledsoe (1976) recounts how marriage, lineage and kinship ties were means of social mobilisation for both women and men. She highlights the contradictions in Liberian gender norms that persist today: in theory, women have agency to acquire social, political, and financial capital, yet they live in a patriarchal reality that ascribes control to men (Bledsoe, 1976).

Gender roles across West Africa are culturally constructed in separate schools and institutions for males and females, such as the Sande and Poro societies. These separate schools should lay the foundation for women's representation in the modern era (Moran, 1989). These parallel systems for women and men have also been referred to as the dual-sex political system, in which women and men have responsibilities as social and political actors (Okonjo, 1976).

Lovgren (2015) identifies four types of masculinities, which he says have been linked to mass violence in African countries: anxious young masculinities, navigating masculinities, patriarchal masculinities, and vulnerable masculinities. However, he contends that there is nothing specifically African about them. Examining Liberia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, it is possible to frame the violence perpetrated during that period as an example of anxious young masculinities, given the high levels of young male participation in those conflicts.

In Liberia, security sector reform (SSR) has contributed to institutional changes to masculinity within the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) and the Liberia National Police (LNP), illustrating the fact that some programmes and activities may transform negative masculinity to positive masculinity (Quest, 2020). This may be linked to the role of certain international and national SSR programmes, such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, which calls for the active engagement of women in all aspects of the peacebuilding process.

Noting the focus on Liberian women in peacebuilding, feminist scholarship has called for more scholarship on masculinities in Liberia, as there is a lack of discussion on how men and masculinities are evolving in the wake of peace (Moran, 2012). Gender has become conflated as women, at the neglect of men's gendered experiences, which overlooks the important knowledge that could emerge from an analysis of the impact of militarisation and masculinities in the post-conflict era. This would be a significant contribution to the comprehension of gender dynamics during periods of social and political reconstruction (Garnett, 2019).

There is a clear link between militarisation, structural violence, and the normalisation of violence. The failure to seriously tackle SGBV indicates the absence of meaningful peace for women, to the extent that the violence against them has become invisible. What is the meaning of women's political representation if high and pervasive levels of SGBV continue to be ignored? Is it even possible to create safe spaces for women in the public space if there are no safe spaces in the private sphere or anywhere else (Gqola, 2007)?

Research on masculinity in the Liberian setting by the Embassy of Sweden and UN Women (2019) reveals relatively traditional, conservative and binary patterns of behaviour that are closely connected to structural factors, such as the economic system, legal frameworks and religious beliefs. The study finds that traditional gender norms dichotomise men as heads of households, breadwinners and decision-makers, and women as submissive and domestic. It also identifies several key and overlapping structural barriers that limit the transformation of gender norms: patriarchal social structures; negative community pressure; harmful cultural practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM); impunity; religious interference; and widespread violence against adults and children. The study concludes that a history of violence, conflict and crises has contributed to a lack of economic development, high unemployment, and interrupted education, and that these

have, in turn, led to negative or toxic masculinities that can be linked to Liberia's high levels of SGBV (Embassy of Sweden and UN Women, 2019).

The hypermasculinity present in Liberia's post-conflict environment maintains the high levels of rape that began during the civil conflict (Jones et al., 2014). Liberia continues to struggle with one of the world's highest incidences of sexual violence, with minimal prosecution of rape cases. Despite the election of Africa's first female head of state in 2006, former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and the visibility of women in peacebuilding, Liberian women are not free from sexual violence (Gallo-Cruz and Remsberg, 2021).

According to UN Women Liberia, 1,204 cases of SGBV were documented in 2021. In all, 871 were cases of rape, 143 were sexual assaults, and the majority of survivors were girls under the age of 18 (UN Women, 2021). These figures are high for a population of around 5.3 million people (LISGIS, 2022) and may be underestimates, given the likelihood of underreporting as a result of social stigma around sexual crimes. Survivors of SGBV are often stigmatised and, when SGBV is combined with a culture of impunity and weak legal systems for prosecutions, a normalisation and acceptance of violence against women and girls becomes part of masculinity (Lesjane, 2017). It is evident that patterns of violence target women and girls and prevent their participation in most spheres of society, including the economy, politics, and household decision-making (Embassy of Sweden and UN Women, 2019).

# Liberia's political context

Liberia was founded in 1847 by repatriated Black Americans who ruled in a one-party oligarchy under the True Whig Party until a violent coup toppled the regime in 1980. The coup was led by an indigenous master sergeant from the AFL, Samuel Kanyon Doe, and ended more than a century of Americo-Liberian or 'Congo' rule. It also signalled the beginning of years of political turmoil and violent civil conflict. This only eased when Charles Taylor, the rebel-leader-turned-President, was forced into exile in Nigeria in 2003, before being convicted for Crimes Against Humanity in the Hague, where he is now serving a life sentence (Pailey, 2014).

Following an intensely political and highly gendered election, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected as the first female president in Africa in 2005. Liberia then experienced its first peaceful transfer of power since 1944 with the election of George Manneh Weah in 2017.

Liberia has now enjoyed nearly two decades of peace since the end of the civil war in 2003, and there has been significant progress in re-establishing the rule of law and political freedoms. Many challenges remain, however, including high levels of corruption, unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, as well as the inadequate provision of basic social services, such as education and healthcare (Freedom House, 2022). There is also a stark rural and urban divide, with social services and economic activity concentrated in the capital city, Monrovia.

The Liberian political system is modelled after that of the United States, with a similar constitution, parallel government institutions, three branches of government (the Executive, Judiciary and Legislative), and a bicameral legislature composed of a 30-member Senate and a 73-member House of Representatives (USAID, 2013; Freedom House, 2022). Senators are elected to nine-year terms, representatives to six-year terms, and presidents – who are directly elected – can serve a maximum of two six-year terms.

Liberia is a multi-ethnic democracy and ethnicity-based factions and parties were formed during its 14-year conflict. This included the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy, which represented the Mandingo ethnic group, and the Independent National Patriotic Front, which represented the Gio and Mano ethnic groups. In the interests of peacebuilding, the Sirleaf administration shared power among various factions and made a shift to administrative county representation to avoid making specific reference to ethnicity.

Ethnicity and political affiliation have become more nuanced in the post-conflict era, and most parties cannot be linked to one sole ethnic group. It is also difficult to assign Western classifications to political parties (left, centre or right), as they are based more on the political orientation and alliances of their standard bearers. This does not mean, however, that parties do not have ideological leanings: simply that such ideological differentiations are not sharply pronounced. It is also not uncommon for politicians to shift from one party to another. As of November 2023, there were approximately 18 parties represented in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Historically, political power has been concentrated in the Executive, which has dominated the other two branches. Political pluralism means that political parties are free to form and operate. Opposition parties can and often do form coalitions and have realistic opportunities to win elections, as was the case for the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) in 2017. There are relative levels of political and religious freedoms, although there is social stigma around the LGBTQI+ community (Freedom House, 2022). The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state, and guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Liberia is a majority Christian country with approximately 85% of the population identifying as Christian, 12% as Muslim, 0.5% as adherents of indigenous religious beliefs, and 2.7% who are either from other religious groups or do not claim a religion (LISGIS, 2022).

In some regards, Liberia has seen positive political development since the conflict in terms of political rights and civic freedoms (Freedom House, 2022). The most recent Afrobarometer survey of 2022, which measures public perceptions on democracy, governance, and the economy, revealed that most Liberians believe that democracy is the best form of governance (73.7%) and desire regular, open and honest elections (91%). However, only a minority completely trust Members of Parliament (approximately 23%) or the President (approximately 36.8%). There is little variation in these figures across age groups or sex, which implies that there are relatively low levels of trust in leadership across various segments of the population (Afrobarometer, 2020).

## The 'Feminist-in-Chief'

At the opening of the International SHEROES Forum, organised by the SHEROES Foundation in Monrovia on 17 October 2018, then President Weah declared himself to be Liberia's 'Feminist-in-Chief'. He reported that he had picked a woman as his Vice President, had appointed a woman as the Deputy Chief of Staff of the AFL, had appointed a woman as Deputy Inspector General of the LNP, and had appointed many women to ministerial positions and to the boards of state-owned enterprises. Former President Weah stated that these appointments were clear signs of his strong desire and advocacy for gender equality and for the increasing participation of women in Liberia's governance (Koinyeneh, 2018).

The President affirmed his commitment to pursuing feminist ideals that guarantee or prioritise the rights, well-being, and empowerment of women (Porkpa, 2020). He also called for affirmative actions to foster the greater inclusion of women in national leadership because, according to him, scores of studies show a definite correlation between women's empowerment and sustainable economic development (Koinyeneh, 2018). To date, no other government official has re-echoed former President Weah's sentiments of being a feminist.

Despite his statements and appointments, a barrage of criticisms has been aimed at the former President, particularly from women's organisations, accusing him and his government of failing to match words with actions. During the 2020 mid-term elections, for example, where scores of candidates were vying for the 15 senatorial seats that were up for re-election, MacDella Cooper, the lone female candidate, criticised President Weah and his CDC-led government for not nominating a single woman to contest that election (Porkpa, 2020).

The leadership of the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL) also criticised the then President for vetoing the 30% quota law, which was a progressive amendment to the New Elections Law of Liberia to make 30% gender representation mandatory. AFELL stated that the actions of the President did not align with his self-proclaimed title of 'Feminist-in-Chief' or his past statements of commitment to improving the rights of Liberian women (Independent Probe, 2023). Additional criticisms assert that being a 'Feminist-in-Chief' requires a commitment to equal representation at all levels, reflecting the rights and needs of everyone, particularly women and girls. However, the former President's party, the CDC, did not propose any female candidates in the 2020 senatorial elections and President Weah's cabinet of 19 ministers included only five women (Dubawa, 2023).

Liberia's alarmingly high rates of SGBV worsened during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, and extreme cases of the rape of children and infants led to a large multi-day anti-rape protest organised by women's organisations. The protests prompted then President Weah to declare rape and all forms of SGBV to be a national emergency, with promises to address SGBV through the judicial system (Garnett and Roversi, 2023). Former President Weah promised that he would appoint a special prosecutor for rape cases, set up a sex offenders register, and purchase a DNA machine to facilitate prosecutions. By 2022, however, no special prosecutor had been appointed, no register had been set up, and while the DNA machine had been obtained, it was non-functional because there were no trained personnel to operate it. In addition, his government had also failed to roll out courts specialising in the handling of SGBV trials (Bondo and Johnson-Mbayo, 2022).

## Women's political participation

As Table 1 demonstrates, women represented 3.1% of the candidates from all registered political parties in Liberia from 2005 to 2015, with the most mainstream parties listed as those with the highest number of female candidates (Jallah et al., 2021).

Table 1: Candidate representation by political party, 2005-2015

Political party	Number of female candidates	Percentage
All Liberian Coalition Party	3	1.2
Alliance for Peace and Democracy (APD)	7	2.8
Alternative National Congress	1	0.4
<b>Congress for Democratic Change (CDC)</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>11.1</b>
Citizens Unification Party	2	0.8
Coalition for Transformation of Liberia (COTOL)	9	3.6
Free Alliance Party of Liberia	7	2.8
Free Democratic Party	2	0.8
Grassroots Democratic Party of Liberia	4	1.6
Labor Party of Liberia	2	0.8
Liberia Destiny Party	3	1.2
Liberia Empowerment Party	2	0.8
Liberia National Union	1	0.4
Liberia Reformation Party	6	2.4
Liberia Transformation Party	6	2.4
<b>Liberty Party</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>12.3</b>
Movement for Progressive Change	8	3.2
National Democratic Coalition	6	2.4
National Patriotic Party	11	4.3
National Reformation Party	1	0.4
National Union for Democratic Progress	4	1.6
National Democratic Party of Liberia	11	4.3
Original congress Party of Liberia	4	1.6
People's Unification Party	1	0.4
Progressive Democratic Party	3	1.2
Progressive People's Party	1	0.4
Reformed United Liberia Party	3	1.2
Union of Liberian Democrats	3	1.2
United Democratic alliance	1	0.4
<b>Unity Party</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>16.9</b>
Victory for Change	3	1.2
<b>Independent</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>14.2</b>
Total	253	
Average		3.1

Source: NEC (2017).

One core reason for the lack of women's participation in politics is low literacy rates, particularly for rural women, who often lack the confidence and capacity to participate more fully in the political activities of local government. By extension, gender balance in politics (particularly for women) becomes even more crucial, as it encourages legal protection.

Many international partners supported Liberia's transition when Former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf came to power in 2006 and, as a result, millions of dollars flowed into the country for gender equality and women's empowerment programmes. Women across the country saw this as a complete turnaround and a new beginning for gender equality. However, while it is true that there was little discussion about women's political participation before the election of President Sirleaf, even the election of a woman to the highest office did not eradicate the obstacles to women's meaningful participation in Liberian politics at multiple levels, and they still tend to have a greater presence in appointed positions than in those that are elected (Garnett, 2016).

Women's historical exclusion from politics leaves them largely unprepared to interact with men on a political scale (Harris, 2004). Liberian women also struggle for financial support to run for office and finance campaigns, particularly without the support of their political parties. For example, a study on whether having a woman at the helm of a country's decision-making processes leads to better indicators on women's conditions found no significant changes between the period before and after the first mandate of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Kodila-Tedika and Asongu, 2015). However, the study argued that when women occupy decision-making positions or are endowed with the responsibilities of authority, they can change the aspirations of other women and young girls by serving as role models, with female representation leading to the improvement of gender equality in political rights. As Former President Sirleaf is noted as saying, *'representation is a goal in itself'*.

There are no established political parties that associate themselves with feminist ideology in Liberia, although the country does have a growing feminist movement, with civil society groups that identify with feminism and fight for women's rights in various aspects of life – social, political and economic. Some of these groups, such as the Liberia Feminist Forum (LFF), form part of the African Feminist Forum and seek to create safe spaces for women to build solidarity. The LFF conducts training to demystify feminism within Liberia, particularly because it tends to be associated with Western ideals. As noted, Liberian women were politically active during the civil conflict, even though many of them did not consider themselves to be feminists. However, younger generations of women activists are owning the term and using feminism as a tool to advocate for gender equality (Garnett and Roversi, 2023).

## **Progress on and challenges to Liberia's gender equality politics**

It can be argued that male politicians in Liberia have backed progress towards gender equality in various ways, although much remains to be done. Although Liberia's gender quota, an amendment to the New Elections Law, was vetoed by the President and sent back to the Senate for revision in March 2023, it was initially proposed by male legislators from the National Legislature, a heavily male-dominated bicameral body that spans the Senate and House of Representatives. As a result of the veto, there is no mandated gender quota, but political parties have been encouraged by the National Elections Commission (NEC) to implement their own internal gender quotas. The NEC signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with 25 political parties in May 2023, committing parties to institute the 30% quota and increase women's political participation in the presidential and legislative elections of October 2023.

Despite this MoU, the political parties fell short of the internal 30% quota – a reminder that such quotas might enable access for women in politics but there are still challenges to their enforcement. The power to enforce quotas is often held in the hands of men, and administered at their discretion. There is, therefore, a need for legislation to ensure the enforcement of the quota and other gender equality measures.



It should be noted, however, that several leading male politicians selected women as their running mates in the October 2023 general elections, reflecting a generally popular appeal for gender balance on political party ballots. Furthermore, the Legislature has amended the Aliens and Nationality Law, removing gender-discriminatory provisions that prevented children from acquiring the nationality of their mother (UNCHR News, 2022).

Out of the 73 total seats in Liberia's House of Representatives, only eight women were elected as representatives in October 2023 (compared to nine women in the previous election). Women's organisations remain vocal about women's political representation, and the issues affecting women are increasingly prominent in national debates. Overall, women enjoy more rights now than at any other time in Liberia's history, and occupy more leadership roles, including political and legal leadership (FIDH, 2004).

# Research objectives and methods

This report gathers and analyses data on the perceptions of participants, aiming to better understand the role and impact of male politicians as agents of gender equality and political masculinities. The core research questions are as follows:

1. How do male politicians who work on and speak about gender equality issues understand and communicate their politics with regards to feminism?
2. How do gender norms and other factors shape the way in which these men enact their gender agenda and the type of masculinities they demonstrate in the political sphere?
3. How do women in politics, activists and students perceive the activities of men in politics who engage with the gender equality agenda, and do they see any changes in gender norms and masculinities as a result?

Collaborating closely with the Malaysian, Colombian, and ODI research teams, the study developed a common methodology that aligned across country contexts to allow for comparability, while contextualising the findings to each country (see Michalko et al., 2024 for more information).

In addition to the perspectives of male politicians, the cross-country teams explored the perspectives of youth, female politicians, academics, and gender equality activists. A qualitative approach was used for this research, based on key informant interviews (KIIs) with male politicians, female politicians, and feminist activists. In addition, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with university students and civil society organisations (CSOs) working in gender equality. The target numbers of participants for KIIs and FGDs were harmonised across the countries and data collection tools were semi-structured to allow the capture of nuances specific to each country context. Following ODI and Liberia Institutional Review Board processes, data collection was conducted from August to October 2023.

## Key informant interviews

For the purpose of this study, we define 'male politicians' or 'men in politics' as a broad category that encompasses a range of male political actors, including men in the military and traditional leaders and chiefs. This definition allows us to consider men who may not be in formal political institutions, such as the executive or legislative branches of government but who still wield significant power in the Liberian political realm. As outlined below in Table 2, the 15 KIIs targeted male politicians but also included one female political candidate and four gender activists.

The selection criterion for the identification of male participants was the male lawmakers' vote for the amendment to the NEC law on the 30% quota to increase women's political participation. This criterion led to a large share of male politician participants who were in the legislature and senate, and this shaped the findings of the study. The political candidates selected for the study were chosen because of their decision to have female running mates. Although the data collection centred on male politicians, it was critical to include the perspectives of women in the political arena and gender equality advocates. The female participants targeted for interviews worked in the political arena and could offer an in-depth understanding of political masculinities in Liberia.

Table 2: Key informant interviews

No.	Sex	Position
1	Male	Lawmaker
2	Male	Military leader
3	Male	Local government official
4	Male	Lawmaker
5	Male	Political candidate
6	Male	Lawmaker
7	Male	Lawmaker
8	Male	Civil servant
9	Male	Lawmaker
10	Male	Political candidate
11	Male	Gender activist
12	Female	Political candidate
13	Female	Gender activist/media
14	Female	Gender equality activist/lawyer
15	Female	Gender equality activist/academic

## Focus groups

Six FGDs were held, two with CSOs working on gender equality, and four with student groups in two different counties: Montserrado County and Bong County. These counties were selected because they are home to two of Liberia's major universities. As shown in Table 3, the FGDs were disaggregated by sex to allow participants to speak freely about gender inequality and be open in sharing their perspectives. FGD participant numbers ranged from six to eleven people. A total of 48 people (23 males and 25 females) participated in the FGDs.

Participants in CSO focus groups were selected on the basis of their advocacy work on gender equality, positive masculinity, and their understanding of the issues relating to the topic of the research. University students selected for this study were aged 18 and above and were studying social sciences. Liberia's democracy lies in the hands of these young people, given that 63% of the country's total population is below the age of 25 – one primary reason to target this group for research, aiming to better understand their perceptions of male politicians on gender equity (UNFPA, 2024).

Brief surveys were conducted before the FGDs to capture relevant demographic information that might permit the researcher to contrast the participants' perspectives. The FGDs were prompted by President Weah declaring himself to be Liberia's 'Feminist-in-Chief' at the opening of the 2018 international SHEROES Forum in Monrovia (SHEROES Forum, 2024). The goal was to generate conversation and solicit participant views on what the President might have intended by his statement.

Table 3: Focus group discussions

FGD No.	No. of participants	Status	Sex	Urban/rural
1	8 participants	Student	Female	Urban
2	8 participants	Student	Male	Urban
3	11 participants	Student	Female	Rural
4	9 participants	Student	Male	Rural
5	6 participants	Professional	Male	Urban
6	6 participants	Professional	Female	Urban
<b>Total participants</b>	48 participants			

## Limitations

The study had several limitations including the impact of the 2023 general elections. The elections limited the availability of participants, making it more difficult to contact and arrange interviews with target politicians who were actively campaigning and often traveling outside Monrovia. The elections also generated a tense political climate, with election breaks and closures in all schools, universities and certain public offices.

The elections may have also created a bias among KII participants and made them more cautious about being honest, wishing to present themselves as politically correct to avoid any negative backlash. Several male politicians, for example, assumed their KII was a media interview and came prepared to make public statements. As the interviews were conducted by female researchers from a feminist research firm, male politicians may have also felt the need to be more gender positive in their responses, which may have introduced some level of bias into the data. To overcome this bias, the researchers probed participants to unpack their statements and seek clarity on their perspectives. In addition, the selection criteria for KIIs supported the identification of politicians who already had a somewhat gender positive stance.

The lens of analysis of the research focused on the male politicians as individual actors, with a keen interest on their motivations and positionalities. This research did not use the political party as a unit of analysis and did not examine the positionality or masculinities within the frame of their political parties. Most parties in Liberia do not centre on issues or perspectives that could be labelled as liberal, centre or conservative, but are often personality-driven and revolve around party leadership and the *standard bearer* (or the person representing the party in elections). This limits the opportunities for gender-related issues to become part of a platform, rather than an outcome of political activism. The 10 male politicians interviewed for this study represented at least seven different political parties, making it difficult to characterise the positionality of the male politicians along party lines.

In addition, while the study did target a few female politicians, only one was successfully interviewed. The lack of perspectives from female politicians should be overcome in future research to provide more insight into the experience of political masculinities from a professional and collegial perspective.

English is the national and primary spoken language in Liberia. However, Liberian English is the more commonly used colloquial language spoken throughout the country. As a result, some level of translation and editing was conducted during the transcription process to standardise audio recordings to written English for the purposes of this report.

# Findings

This section highlights key findings informed by the voices of study participants. It outlines four overarching themes that emerged from the data:

1. The positionalities of male politicians on feminism and gender equality.
2. Personal motivations for work on gender equality.
3. Systemic obstacles to, and enablers for, the work of male politicians on gender equality.
4. The impact of male politicians on gender norms: youth and activist perspectives.

The male politicians who participated in this study are outliers because of their pro-feminist or gender equality stance, even though they do not necessarily label themselves as feminists. Many of them are leading the transformation of gender norms by advocating for women's participation in the political realm. Interestingly, they tend to be motivated by the lived experiences of the women in their own lives, particularly their mothers. They also share a sense of progressiveness and an interest in social justice.

There is, however, a considerable contrast between how male politicians present themselves and how male politicians are perceived by the youth and gender equality activists who participated in the study. While their perspectives are mixed, they are overwhelmingly sceptical and distrustful of politicians, with many of them perceiving pro-feminism stances among male politicians as a political tactic.

## The positionalities of male politicians on feminism and gender equality

The male politicians interviewed fall into three main categories regarding their relationship to gender equality agendas, as they understand it, summarised in Figure 1. These categories are not mutually exclusive and can be seen as a spectrum of positionalities. Male politicians may shift from one positionality to another over time, based on collaboration and engagement with other male politicians, gender equality advocates, or international actors. In addition, they may be cautious about defining themselves as 'feminists' – concerned that the term itself is seen as problematic, and even as a 'dirty word'.

Figure 1: The positionalities of male politicians



## Political opportunists

Several male politicians promote women in positions of leadership because they recognise the effectiveness of women's contribution to their political agenda. They instrumentalise women's support to access political office and to appeal to women and progressive voters. A few male politicians referred to female politicians and partisans as strong partners.

**Women are [more] reliable than their male counterparts. And if you get a couple of them on your side, rest assured that they can convince others, especially males to join you, to give you the support. So, when I go to elections, I target women for the reliability.**

Male lawmaker

One of the male politicians interviewed selected a female vice-presidential running mate, a decision he states was not a political tactic but because she was qualified for the task:

**The best explanation for gender equality I have is by demonstration. And for me I picked the female as my vice standard bearer. And she is phenomenal, she's above and beyond what I even had as criteria, so mine is all about demonstration, that's how I show my gender equality.**

Male political candidate

## Strategic supporters

*Strategic supporters* are politicians who do not advocate proactively for gender equality or lead any relevant initiatives, but who support agendas related to gender equality if these are promoted by other politicians or other proponents, such as prominent civil society actors or international donor partners. The majority of the male politicians who participated in this study could be seen as *strategic supporters*. One male politician, for example, did not consider himself an advocate because he did not lead gender equality initiatives, but he supported them when necessary:

**I think advocacy means that I go out there trying to actually accomplish that as an objective. No, I don't. It's just that when the circumstances arise, I face it and do something about it.**

Male lawmaker

## Developers of gender equality initiatives

Two of the male politicians interviewed have created and supported gender equality initiatives, including a scholarship programme for underprivileged girls and the creation of a quota for women's participation at the local government level. These *developers* seem less concerned about how their agendas will isolate the traditional electorate and more concerned by the impact of their pro-feminist stance on the women their initiatives are intended to support. As the dominant sociopolitical environment is patriarchal in nature, the *developers* of gender equality initiatives risk becoming isolated for going against the norm. Of the participants in this study, *developers* were in the minority.

## 'Feminism is a dirty word' – being advocates and HeForShe

While 'gender equality' has become a commonly used term, particularly in the public and non-governmental sectors (Garnett, 2016), 'feminism' is used with more caution. In this study, the question

as to whether feminist politics even exist in Liberia was met with mixed responses. As one female activist reflected on the state of feminist politics in Liberia,

**We're not at the point yet really of talking about feminist politics. That's what I've been arguing. Because even some of our female politicians, when you ask them if they're feminists, they say no. It's difficult to really say we have a feminist-politic movement.**

Female gender equality activist/lawyer

Or as another female gender equality activist/academic mentioned:

**Feminism is seen as a dirty word... it is seen as lesbianism.**

Female gender equality activist/academic

Most male politicians in this study do not identify as feminists, even if they support gender equality and women's leadership. Only one of them identified as a feminist, while seven out of ten identified as advocates; for gender equality, meaning they support feminists and promote women's rights. This may be because of a perception that the term feminist is seen as problematic and isolating in a patriarchal political space where traditional structures remain conservative and wield significant political influence. In addition to wishing to remain palatable to a traditional constituency, male politicians may not understand what feminism is, what it means to be a feminist, and what the feminist political agenda seeks to achieve.

Advocacy for gender equality among male politicians, particularly among *strategic supporters*, was framed not as feminism but as a moral imperative. *Strategic supporters* see themselves as progressive, meaning that they approach gender equality as a moral imperative or as a logical prerequisite for national growth and development, not necessarily as a human rights or feminist issue. Most saw their role in supporting gender equality initiatives as the right thing to do given the difficulties women face or the potential contributions that women could make to society and to the political space. For example, one male politician stated:

**I consider myself as someone who will promote individuals who have been discriminated against.**

Male politician

This position was common among the male politicians who framed their role in promoting gender equality as a sign of being progressive or as improving Liberian society by addressing issues of discrimination and social injustice. Several male politicians across the spectrum of positionalities were clear in their articulation of Liberia as a patriarchal society where women are 'downtrodden and oppressed' and 'kept in the background'. These male politicians shared a sense of forward movement or progress in Liberia through their support to gender equality initiatives.

**I one hundred percent support feminists, and I think if we give more women the opportunity in leadership in our country, Liberia, I see us excelling and transforming our country to a better country.**

Male military leader

Only one male politician considered himself to be a feminist: a political candidate in the 2023 elections, who was also one of the youngest politicians interviewed. His age could have been a factor and may represent a generational shift in perspectives around gender equality. Younger politicians who began their political careers at around the time of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's presidency consider having a female-run government as a new political norm. Although the political space has remained male dominated, this may have influenced their attitudes towards gender equality and women's leadership:

**I don't feel like I'm a feminist in the sense of... women must do this. But I feel like I'm a feminist in the sense that why shouldn't a woman do this?.**

Male political candidate

Although this male politician identifies as a feminist, he makes a differentiation in the type of feminist he considers himself to be. He sees himself as one who does not force a feminist agenda but who understands that women can and should be more present in the political domain. However, similarly to other male politicians who consider themselves to be allies rather than feminists, he qualifies his form of feminism as a more subtle support for women's leadership and not as an overt political strategy.

A similar strategy of avoiding the feminist label was also seen among women in politics, signalling a broader concern with societal perceptions of the word. One female politician preferred not to identify herself as a feminist, noting that as a politician, feminist politics or the promotion of gender equality can be challenging for constituents who do not understand feminism or who are not comfortable with the concept, particularly in rural areas with more conservative constituencies. However, female politicians also avoid being labelled as feminists for fear that it will kill their political aspirations:

**I really consider myself an advocate for women's rights at this stage because I really have not understood the entire feminist movement.**

Female political candidate

This point was echoed by a female gender equality activist/lawyer who stated that female politicians already struggle to participate equally in politics, and that openly feminist politics can create an additional barrier for women's ability to attract supporters and voters. This participant also demonstrates a lack of clarity on what is meant by the term 'feminist' and how feminism translates in the Liberian context. This reiterates the finding that the relationship to the term itself is problematic and complex for Liberian politicians, even though they may actually promote certain aspects of the feminist political agenda, such as increasing women's political participation or eliminating GBV and FGM. In several interviews, feminism was portrayed as a Western import and foreign concept.

In contrast, the three female activists interviewed for this study consider themselves to be feminists and are actively engaged in gender equality work in the media, civil society, academia, and the legal system. One female activist noted how perceptions around the word feminism have evolved, even for gender equality activists:

**I remember in the early 2000s, when I would publicly say that I was a feminist, women would look at me. I remember some of the women today who claim themselves as feminists and used to say, I'm not a feminist, I'm an activist. But today we've progressed to the place where a few of them are coming on board now to say I'm a feminist.**

Female gender equality activist/academic

A male gender equality activist for the 'HeForShe' movement – a global movement of all those who stand in solidarity with women – did not refer to himself as a feminist but as 'part of the women'. This is linked to the extent to which he has dedicated his life to the struggle for gender equality, and such self-identification of sameness with women reveals that it is possible for Liberian men to embrace gender equality.

One female gender equality activist noted minimal evidence of positive masculinities in Liberia, and that this is associated primarily with the evolution of the HeForShe movement in the country. The movement became popularised with UN Women's global HeForShe campaign in the 1990s, which gave birth to some civil society mobilisation focused on economic empowerment, GBV prevention, active



fatherhood, and a more equal division of labour in the household. According to a female politician interviewed, however, the HeForShe movement remains relatively grassroots and does not engage in the political arena or in women's political participation initiatives.

Two *developers* supported the view that positive masculinities are not the dominant political culture, reporting that they themselves were seen in a negative light by many of their male colleagues because of their support for gender equality initiatives. According to a male civil servant, one male politician was seen as 'a womaniser', and 'weak in decision-making'. A male lawmaker who could be considered a strategic supporter noted that his colleagues thought it unrealistic to increase women's participation via a quota system:

**There were too many senators who believed we were setting a standard we wouldn't be able to meet.**

Male lawmaker

This comment confirms findings that *developers* who advocate for gender equality may be isolated among male colleagues for going against normative gender roles in politics. They may find it difficult to build alliances with other male politicians, which is an important aspect of the legislative process. Failing to build such alliances could hamper the passing of certain important pro-feminist legislations.

## Personal motivations for work on gender equality

The most common narrative among male politicians about their journey into gender equality work was the influence and impact of strong women on their lives. In particular, these narratives were linked closely with mothers and mother-figures, such as aunts. Several had single mothers who had cared for them despite the difficulties they faced. Other mothers had survived GBV, died in childbirth, or had kept their families together during the civil conflict. Several male politicians also spoke of their relationships with their wives and the support they had provided as a positive factor on their roles as male allies:

**My mother... got educated as far as a master's degree in education and administration. I also saw her as somebody whom other women could become like and be like. That was also a motivation. Then in college, I fell in love with a woman who was also an achiever... and she made me a very, very good home... I'll tell you honestly, all my life has been working with women, living with women who are achieving just as much as I am. And I can't help being conscious of my knowledge that there are so many other women in Liberia, so many other girls in Liberia, who will never have the opportunity. I've said to myself to the extent that I can help, to make it possible.**

Male lawmaker

Personal relationships are, therefore, an important motivator for the promotion of gender equality among male politicians because it makes gender equality a more relatable concept than a more logical argument around feminism and gender equality. This motivation resonates with the role played by 'maternal activism' in the peacebuilding strategies that Liberian women employed during Liberia's civil conflict (see Box 2).

**Box 2: Maternal activism**

Maternal activism is the use of motherhood to advocate for a cause or participate in political dialogue. It was an effective strategy during Liberia's civil conflict, appealing to the patriarchal sensitivities of leaders and warlords. However, it was later criticised by younger feminists who thought its impact was temporary and that it did not address patriarchal norms around women's roles beyond motherhood (Garnett and Roversi, 2023).

In 2003, for example, Liberian women came together across sociopolitical lines and organised the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, a movement that galvanised women's peacebuilding efforts. The women organised protests, including a sex protest where they urged all women to deny their partners and husbands sex until the war ended.

They also wrote letters to warlords and their wives, pleading with them to stop the conflict because Liberian mothers were tired of seeing their children raped and killed (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004). While they were often overlooked and uninvited, the women participated in the disarming of soldiers and organised sit-ins such as the widely documented sit-in of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which was instrumental in ending the Liberia civil war in 2003 (Gbowee and Mithers, 2013).

The positive correlation to mother figures reflects Liberia's sociocultural paradigm, where mothers are revered and older women are respected. In the traditional Sande society, which has been noted an example of women's agency in Liberia (Pailey, 2014), older post-menopausal women are more privileged than their younger counterparts and are allowed to participate in certain male-only rites and ceremonies. The fact that daughters and sisters are rarely cited by male politicians as a motivator for their promotion of gender equality reiterates the point made by younger feminist activists that maternal activism is a limited political strategy because it fails to challenge patriarchal gender norms (Garnett and Roversi, 2023).

The need to protect women and children who are vulnerable in a patriarchal society also served as a motivation to eliminate GBV.

**We all have children. We have daughters. If you fail to protect somebody's sister, if you fail to protect somebody's mother, if you fail to protect somebody's daughter, the next victim could be yours.**

Male political candidate

This form of protectionist masculinity and its focus on men as protectors of women is common in Liberia's patriarchal paradigm and may be related to the history of a civil conflict that targeted women and girls for violence and used GBV as a weapon of war. This perspective aligns more with that of the *strategic supporters* who see gender equality as a moral imperative.

This motivation makes sense, given that Liberia has high levels of GBV and because women's bodies remain in a warzone. However, like maternal activism, it fails to address the underlying causes of the violence, which are rooted in patriarchy and misogyny. For the *strategic supporters* of gender equality, protectionist masculinity positions the protection of women from violence as part of a progressive agenda for peace and national development. However, it underestimates the serious human rights violations that women confront on a daily basis.

Value systems, such as religion and social justice are a key motivation for male politicians' support of gender equality.

I tend to bear on the side of human rights, social and economic rights of people. Early on, I was attracted to the catholic social teaching, *Options for the Poor*... I've always championed issues of the downtrodden and oppressed. That is my leaning in society. That is why I gravitate toward gender issues because I find villainous discrimination when it comes to women that have been long-standing, that is ridiculous and repugnant to how we should live as human beings.

Male lawmaker

The strong language used by this male politician to describe women's status in society implies that ensuring women's human rights is an important motivator for the promotion of gender equality. Many of the male politicians across the spectrum of positionalities consider their role as championing gender equality and shifting the patriarchal and traditional social norms that limit women's rights and participation. They often made the distinction between their perspectives on gender equality and the prevailing social norms:

Being a gender champion and a traditionalist, I play the dual role... I make them understand that I am part of the tradition, but there's a value I have identified to avoid such a practice [gender discrimination].

Male local government official

Two male politicians referred specifically to the difficulty faced by former President Sirleaf in Liberian politics, and the way in which she persevered in a male-dominated and even violent political domain, with one saying:

President Sirleaf was beaten, jailed, and a lot of things done to her, but she could not give up her goal. She still believed in her dream that she was going to become President one day and she became a President. If you are a woman, you want to achieve your goal, you have a dream, you have a vision, you don't mind what society says, you can move on and achieve it.

Male local government official

Male politicians recognise that they are shifting mindsets around gender norms by promoting gender equality, particularly norms around women's political participation and leadership. One male lawmaker referred to his role as creating 'a lifelong legacy' that would be remembered for generations. This implies that male politicians are cognisant of the potential impact of their roles and political agendas on gender equality. This recognition may fall somewhere on the spectrum between *political opportunists* who instrumentalise gender equality to appeal to voters, and *developers* who use their power and influence to promote meaningful gender equality initiatives.

## Male politicians' work on gender equality: systemic obstacles and enablers

The impact of the gender equality advocates among male politicians is hindered by systemic obstacles, including the perceptions of their traditional constituents of gender equality as the Western imposition of values. Other obstacles include the dominant patriarchal and misogynistic political culture, which is seeing a rise in the incidence of violence against women. The findings also reveal several enablers that are having a positive influence on male politicians, such as a more open political discourse on gender, a broader social transformation, and successful examples of female leadership.

## Patriarchal norms: tradition and westernisation

Only one male politician was clear in his articulation that Liberia is a patrilineal society, a system where descent is organised around the male lineage of fathers. However, all of the male politicians interviewed referred to Liberia's gender inequality, linking that norm primarily to 'deeply rooted cultural practices' or the general exclusion and mistreatment of women.

A few participants, however, discussed a noticeable shift in traditional or more conservative gender roles over time, including the ability to openly discuss topics that were previously considered taboo, such as FGM. One male gender equality activist who is an advocate for positive masculinity in the HeForShe movement outlined how dangerous such advocacy had been in the past:

**At Radio Kintoma, a male gender advocate who was the station manager, worked with us during the global FGM awareness campaign. A few days later, the station caught on fire and burned to ashes... It is a little challenging but... we've chosen to sacrifice in order to have the kind of massive change we want to see.**

Male gender equality activist

The debates around the elimination of FGM demonstrate the tensions between traditional norms (based on a customary system) and evolving perspectives around women's rights (based on a statutory system). From a historical standpoint, the statutory system itself is a Western concept, based on a dichotomy rooted in Liberia's much-disputed colonial founding as a Western democratic and Christian state.

The statutory system has co-existed with the customary system, which predated the formation of Liberia as a state. However, the customary system continues to dominate sociopolitical life in rural areas. This is the result, in part, of the inability of the customary system to reform at the same pace as the statutory system, particularly in relation to the historical marginalisation of women, girls, youth and other minorities (Toe, 2017).

The harmonisation of Liberia's customary and statutory legal systems has been a subject of legal reform, particularly for gender equality activists who seek to ensure protection for the legal and human rights of women across both systems. The Inheritance Law passed in 2003, for example, guaranteed that women can inherit land from their fathers in the customary system. However, this remains an issue in many parts of the country where only male heirs can inherit from their fathers and this jeopardises women's financial independence and livelihood, particularly in a largely agrarian society.

At the same time, legal changes to the customary system are seen by many Liberian traditionalists as an imposition of Western values. This perspective is exacerbated by the fact that international actors, such as UN Women and the governments of the United States and Sweden, are advocating for legal reforms related to human rights, gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights. The concept of Westernisation was mentioned by two male politicians who seem to be grappling with their role in shifting gender norms in a patriarchal context, with one saying:

**Because in getting more women in politics, we're trying to reconcile two forces: African culture and traditions and Westernisation.**

Male lawmaker

These male politicians refer to gender equality as a Western concept, and they highlight the role that they play in contextualising gender equality to Liberia's political setting, noting a contrast between their progressive gender equality agendas and traditional gender norms. Some male politicians may

find it difficult to navigate this contrast, particularly *strategic supporters*, who appear torn between their gender equality work and the maintenance of African cultural values:

**We as Africans depend on the Western world to survive. So, what they consider in their culture...we should just endorse it. Where somebody will say, 'Let a man marry a man'... in the African context, it's an insult during those days in Africa... for a man to sleep with a man. But now, the international community, the Western world, that have the money, are twisting African leaders that either sign this, or you don't get our assistance.**

Male local government official

This male politician highlights LGBTQI+ rights as going against African values and sees them as a Western imposition resulting from Africa's dependency. Yet, he considers himself to be a gender advocate because he perceives his role as reconciling these differences in value systems.

This finding reveals an important aspect of Liberia's sociopolitical discourse on gender equality, and illustrates the environment in which male politicians must operate as they advocate for gender equality. It may also suggest a degree of essentialism around gender equality, with limited understanding or consideration of the intersectional nature of gender norms in Liberia. This may explain why male politicians who are *developers* in the promotion of gender equality are in the minority, particularly if their male colleagues and the constituents they represent originate from more traditional counties and districts. It also indicates that *strategic supporters* and *developers* who advocate for gender equality and who remain politically relevant may have amassed sufficient social, political, and perhaps financial capital to go against traditional norms.

## A patriarchal political culture and violence against female politicians

According to gender equality activists, male politicians tend to play zero-sum game politics, are aggressive and less cooperative, as seen during several campaign seasons, with several incidence of violence against female politicians and their families reported in the media (Kellow, 2010). These include the case of Boto Kanneh, a female lawmaker who was threatened and denied entry into several districts while campaigning in rural areas of Gbarpolu county in the 2020 senatorial campaign season (New Dawn, 2020).

Female politicians were seen as less aggressive than their male counterparts and more willing to compromise and share space with other political contesters. This could be perceived as adhering to traditional gender norms around female politicians being more '*gentle*', according to a female political candidate. However, several female activists agreed that the political culture is male dominated and adheres to hegemonic masculinity norms associated with competition (Connell, 2015).

**The men use that force, that violence to get it. They just feel that they should have this controlling power. Whether they are able to make impact or not. They don't care... and realistically, if you look... at competent females, they will really, really make the difference. But the males are mostly concentrating on power. They don't want to relinquish power. So, they want to do everything they can to ensure that they remain in power.**

Female political candidate

This supports the perspective of several gender equality activists that the political arena is patriarchal and divisive. It is difficult to ascertain whether the behaviour of male politicians considered as *developers* differs from this norm because it was not mentioned specifically by the male politicians themselves. However, it is possible that support for the 30% quota implies

that some *developers* are willing to enact policies and legislation that empower women to take on more leadership in the political arena. Several gender equality activists interviewed for this study mentioned that the pro-feminist stance of male politicians may, however, be performative to attract voters and donor partners.

Women's political participation was discussed intensively during most interviews and the focus group discussions, particularly the lack of space for women in politics and the barriers for women who seek elected office. One key barrier to women's political representation as discussed by female activists was the lack of finances required to participate in Liberia's cash-intensive campaigning. According to them, male politicians tend to use 'cash violence'<sup>2</sup>, as it is referred to in Liberia, which could be seen as an effective political strategy, given Liberia's high poverty rates.

As a result, politics have become more transactional, and less issue based. The selling of votes and cash violence present challenges to the political participation of women who are historically, in Liberia and globally, unequal income earners. This implies that if women had more financial, social, or political capital, they could be more competitive in a political domain that is a cash-intensive arena.

Gender equality activists agree that women and men differ in their approach to politics. The behaviour of male politicians could be described as a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity, where 'power over' is preferred to a 'power with' approach. This is evident in the violence that is common in the electoral process, including – as mentioned – the many reported incidence of violence against women (New Dawn, 2023; the New Republic, 2022). The growing trend of violence against women in elections led to the drafting and signing of the Violence Against Women in Elections and Politics (VAWIE/P) Protocol in February 2023, which included representatives from various political parties and from the NEC.

**The VAWIE/P Protocol... sought to define what violence against women in elections is, but also link it to existing violence that is punishable by law because violence against women was often left not being investigated and treated as, 'Oh, it's just elections'.**

Female gender equality activist/lawyer

All female gender activists interviewed see violence as a barrier to women's political participation. The majority of male politicians recognise the difficulties women face in participating fully in the political domain, and how a patriarchal system and discrimination serve as barriers for women's political leadership. This was reiterated by one male lawmaker who stated:

**Some women today are even a bit afraid to take up leadership roles because of what they have experienced in the past.**

Male lawmaker

This male politician recognises that some women may be afraid to enter politics, yet none of the male politicians interviewed discussed the violence encountered by female politicians in the electoral process specifically. While they implicitly position themselves as HeForShes who are more progressive than the political norm, it is unclear whether the male politicians interviewed also demonstrate the patriarchal tendencies associated with typical male politicians in Liberia. The lack of reference to the violence faced by female politicians implies a lack of concern or interest in an important issue for both gender equality and politics.

<sup>2</sup> In Liberia, cash violence is commonly considered to be the misuse of financial capital to gain control over others in the household, community or political arena.

## Social transformation and women's leadership in and out of politics

Liberian society has been through a relatively rapid and dramatic transformation over the past four decades, from a peaceful developing nation to a war-torn failed state, and then from a transitional government with Africa's first appointed head of state, to a peaceful democracy with Africa's first elected female head of state. Liberia's civil conflict was, in itself, a dramatic transformation, creating displacement, migration, refugees and a new political order. It also demonstrated that perhaps the only positive aspect of violent conflict is the social upheaval that can reshape norms for women who were previously confined by patriarchal social structures (Karam, 2001). Elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, Rwanda and South Africa saw a significant increase in women's representation in the post-conflict and post-apartheid period. The Liberian women's peacebuilding movement is a notable example of the increased mobilization of women during wartime that was subsequently transferred to their political mobilisation into voter registration and participation in elections (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004).

Shifting gender norms are part of the country's social transformation, and can be viewed as coming into Liberia from international influences, donor partners and the international media. The influence of international actors in Liberia's gender equality debate may be related to the donor dependency that is found in many post-conflict African states (it also highlights the view of a male politician that gender equality is a Western value that he is working to reconcile with Liberian norms). However, social transformation has also come from within, as younger and post-war generations become increasingly active politically and play more of a role in the political sphere. Whether emanating from external or internal sources, ongoing social transformations have created more space for women's political leadership. A few of the male politicians interviewed discussed the ways in which gender norms are shifting over time:

**We are in changing times. You will want the next generation, especially our females, to cope with the reality of time. I bet you two, three generations from now, things like bush society [Sande society] will go away.**

Male lawmaker

Several male politicians and activists mentioned progress on women's political participation, including the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2005. Her legacy was noted by several participants as a key enabler and gender advocacy tool because she helped to change the mindset on women's leadership capabilities:

**We have a female President in Liberia that served as an eye-opening for most of us who think that a woman is just somebody who cooks in the kitchen and brings it on the table. So, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's ascendancy to the presidency has also served as a working tool for us as advocates.**

Male gender equality activist

According to this male advocate, examples of strong female leadership have helped to ease the gender norms that have restricted women to the private sphere. The majority of men in Liberia's national legislature indicate, that for the recently passed GBV bill and FGM bills to succeed, male politicians must have supported them. A *strategic supporter* confirmed that he and his male colleagues supported both bills because they considered them important for gender equality in Liberia and empathised with women impacted by legislative inaction.

**The Domestic Violence Bill that we passed was not a bill that I initiated but a bill that I was a principal advocate for that led to the passage on the floor. That brought into focus at the public policy level that women are not property, they have rights, even in the home they have rights, human, social**

**and political that must be respected equally as men's. And that society will protect their right both of their physical person and in principle.**

Male lawmaker

The passage of such bills has been facilitated by the long-term advocacy of local and international CSOs and UN agencies, such as the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL) and UN Women. AFELL has worked with legislators to identify and amend portions of the Liberian law that are gender biased. Both organisations and other actors had also raised awareness at the community level and at the level of the legislature for over a decade before the FGM and GBV bills were passed.

Indeed, many of the male politicians can be considered *strategic supporters* precisely because they can be convinced, when lobbied, to support certain gender equality initiatives that they have not necessarily initiated. This kind of consistent pressure and lobbying appears to be an effective approach for shifting perspectives and pushing for legislative action.

Reiterating the motivations of several of the male politicians, two *strategic supporters* alluded to the idea that qualified female leaders can have a positive impact and form part of a progressive national agenda:

**I can tell you that the new Liberia, at least my administration, I honestly believe that in areas of power, in areas of authority, I honestly believe that there are going to be more women than men in my administration and I do believe that these women will move this country forward.**

Male political candidate

**So, if we don't give them the opportunity, we are adversely impacting the development of our country. We are leaving out a significant part of our human resource and it affects our country. That's very important for me.**

Male lawmaker

These statements reflect the social transformations that are helping to shift political gender norms and enable the greater participation for women in the political realm. This report's findings reveal an evolving feature of political masculinities: a growing acceptance of women's leadership roles. This could be linked to the broader post-war transformation, international influences from other contexts where women participate more fully, successful examples of female leadership, or a progressive perspective that requires social and economic progress for women to support the development of Liberia.

## The impact of male politicians on gender norms: youth and activist perspectives

This section delves into the impact of pro-feminist male politicians have on Liberian society, based primarily on the perspectives of youth and gender equality activists who took part in the FGDs. Their discussions on impact provide perspectives that differ to those shared by the male politicians who expressed their positive commitments to gender equality initiatives across the spectrum of positionalities, revealing a gap between popular perceptions and the way in which male politicians view themselves and their initiatives. According to the FGD participants, few male politicians demonstrate desirable leadership qualities or behaviours that youth want to emulate, nor do they promote desirable politics.



The FGDs were opportunities to hear from youth and civil society representatives who are impacted by political discourse yet are often excluded from the national political debate. The discussions by the FGD participants did not address the politicians who participated in the research study specifically, but rather a broader group of politicians, in which some of the male politicians interviewed could be considered the minority. This is particularly the case for *developers* who are going against political norms by developing and promoting gender equality initiatives. As mentioned by a youth participant, concrete actions are more important than expressions of supposed gender equality.

**We are always hearing the statement that actions speak louder than words, right? So, going out in public and telling people 'I'm gender sensitive. Oh, I want to see gender equality.' That is not what we want. That's not what we are looking for. What we are looking for is how far the politician has gone with what he is saying, how many positions his parties have allotted for women.**

Male student

## Key themes emerging from the focus group discussions

While gender and gender equality were familiar terms for the participants, *masculinity* or *positive masculinity* were not. Four key themes emerged during the FGDs: distrust and scepticism; the lack of pro-gender equality action; violence against women in politics; and cash violence.

### Distrust and scepticism

Although there are male politicians who promote gender equality, generally, the predominant perceptions of male politicians are negative and they are seen as self-interested and untrustworthy. When asked how they would describe the typical behaviour of men in politics in Liberia, most participants – male and female – described them as self-centred, domineering, conceited, deceptive, exploitative, patriarchal and patrilineal. They also feel that male politicians are insensitive to the plight of citizens in general, and of women in particular. Several participants feel that politics is practiced deceptively, with politicians making empty and unrealistic promises.

There is some consensus that the practice of politics by both politicians and the electorate is all about self-interest, rather than the wider interests of the country and its people. Emphasising the insensitive behaviour of politicians toward the electorate, a male student commented:

**Politicians don't look for what benefits the people, but they are so concerned about what will benefit them.**

Male student

These negative views could also refer to female politicians and may indicate a general distrust of all politicians. However female politicians are in the minority in Liberia, which may make a *male politician* somewhat synonymous with a *politician*.

When participants were asked to share their expectations for male politicians who support gender equality, they provided a long list of the actions they would like to see, agreeing that male politicians should:

- act in everybody's interest
- practice gender inclusivity
- provide opportunities that benefit both males and females
- raise public awareness about women's rights and opportunities

- put women in leadership positions
- shun negative stereotypes against women
- refuse to engage in activities that would portray them as favouring one gender over another
- identify and promote women's voices
- champion women's causes and the empowerment of women, given that women are marginalised at all levels in society, including in education, politics, national leadership, sports and employment.

As one male student noted, it is not just about:

**... allotting those positions to women, but also focusing on how effective or decision-making-related those positions are. If we have politicians that have women playing key roles in parties, then we can say yes, and categorise such a person as someone who wants to push forward gender equality.**

Male student

## The lack of pro-gender equality action

The actions of male politicians are seen as insufficient to have any significant impact on gender inequality, or as a political strategy to appeal to voters. Some male students in FGDs, both in Monrovia and outside the city, credited President Weah for appointing women to key positions and fostering gender equality, while others felt these actions were superficial and failed to drive substantial change. They also debated whether male politicians in Liberia, in general, take effective measures to address gender equality or just use it as a political strategy.

CSO representatives in the FGDs in Monrovia feel the actions by President Weah and other male politicians are more about political gain than any genuine commitment. The general perception among male participants, both younger and older, is one of major scepticism towards and distrust of male politicians, including President Weah, who they imply has used gender equality as a political tool rather than an honest commitment.

Like the students, the CSO participants also see male politicians as predominantly self-serving, with their actions driven more by political strategy than a real desire to effect change. They also feel that male politicians are failing to make significant changes, and are not genuine role models for promoting gender equality. The older professional women who work mostly in Monrovia, closer to the seat of power, acknowledge some positive steps, such as the passing of the Domestic Violence Act. However, they criticise the lack of substantial progress in other areas, such as the failure to pass the quota bill. There is a sense that while some laws that favour gender equality have been passed, more significant and systemic changes are still needed.

Like the male participants, the female participants (regardless of their age and professional background), feel that male politicians lack a true commitment to gender equality issues. They view them as being more interested in appearing to support women's rights than in making substantive changes. They mentioned, for example, instances where male politicians showed a lack of commitment to addressing issues like GBV, inequality in education and employment, and sexual exploitation:

**Giving our girls the same education that you gave to boys, if there is a scholarship, you put the same amount of females as males, then give that woman a job for her qualification. Because most of the time when women go for a job, they ask them for their body and not for how qualified they are.**

Female student

Other participants identified and named several politicians who they believed treat the issue of gender equality with little more than lip service. Focus group participants referenced the 30% quota and the fact that the related bill was not passed. There was limited discussion on this attempt by some male politicians to promote gender equality, but the quota served as a confirmation that the political context is male dominated and lacking gender equality.

## Violence against women in politics

Liberia's political culture was considered in terms of the patriarchal norms that limit women's participation. Both students and professional male focus group participants emphasise the 'ownership of power' and a sense that men in politics feel entitled to power, thus marginalising women's access to leadership. Several male participants agreed that 'power politics' is typical behaviour for male politicians in Liberia, reiterating the findings on hegemonic masculinity in the political sphere. They were also clear about the attitudes of male politicians to traditional patriarchal norms:

**They [male politicians] feel that they are the owners of the land; they feel that society depends on them, so they feel that everything about women should come from them... so in every aspect of life, whether politics or whatever, they should be the head and that is a man in politics.**

Male CSO member

**They [men] still have that ancient... belief that power belongs to men... they are still promoting patriarchy... that everything should be [about] men, and this is why it is... difficult having women in various sectors at the top management level of leadership...**

Male student

Female CSO participants see men's behaviour as emanating from 'cultural norms', where 'women were considered properties and had no decision' (Female CSO member). Patriarchal norms are also exhibited in the belief that support to young women in politics implies a sexual transaction. A few female students maintained that some male politicians are fond of having romantic affairs with female politicians, or proposing romantic affairs with them, before providing them with assistance:

**Some men in politics, once we the girls go to them for help, they will want to sleep with us before they can help.**

Female student

This point was discussed only in FGDs with young women, with the exception of one interview with a pro-feminist male politician who shared his frustrations that his support for young women's scholarships was assumed to be sexually exploitative. This appears to be a primary concern for the young women who tend to be the target of sexual exploitation by certain male politicians.

When participants were asked for their views on how women's political participation could promote gender equality in Liberia, some participants – the females in particular – concluded that women's participation would be a positive contribution. They felt women's contributions were significant, not just for gender equality, but also for the entire country, because women are more aware of the problems that affect them:

**Yes, we are women. We know our own issues...I am not saying men can't make decisions for women. No! But we know our own issues. We know our problems. It is said that there is nothing for us without us. So, if you are to talk about us,**

**you have to include us... You will have to include women in the discussion, so you need to include us because everything you discuss is gender sensitive... You cannot move forward without the other gender.**

Female student

## Cash violence – financial self-interest

Participants feel that politics – particularly elections – are driven by money and financial interests, rather than issues or ideology, such as gender equality and pro-feminism. They also note that the political sphere is combative, confrontational and even – according to one male student – ‘diabolical’.

Commenting on the deceptive nature of political practice, several male CSO participants reported that voters often demand money from politicians before voting, because they believe that politicians will be insensitive to their plight once they are elected. FGD participants emphasised the concept of cash violence and the ways that politicians use financial capital to win votes or to get the endorsements of others:

**The political leaders in our country have that same attitude wherein cash violence comes in... after the first round, you will find the two political parties in the runoff always coming, using cash to get the support of the political parties that didn't make it in the first round. Even the voters, too, need cash... so they go for the cash in order to give their vote to somebody whom they even don't trust, but they just do it because of cash to support their family.**

Male CSO representative

One female student also commented on cash violence in Liberian politics, revealing that this is an issue that is being discussed in civil society and among students, and seen as a default position in the political system:

**'So, politics in Liberia is more of a negotiation... I give you my money; you vote for me; you don't expect me to represent you... the politicians know that they will bring their money, and we the citizens who are greedy, will hold that money. It has become a custom in Liberia that if you don't have money as a politician, you will not have any vote.**

Female student

This focus on cash violence suggests the lack of issue-based political discourse, including issues of human rights and gender equality. It reinforces the finding that Liberia's political culture is a zero-sum game dominated by intense competition, patriarchal norms and financial capital. It also implies that male politicians who are genuine in their promotion of gender equality and women's representation as a political agenda are in the minority and may find it difficult to promote these issues as a key element of their political platform.

## What does it mean to be a 'Feminist-in-Chief'?

The statement from President George Weah that he is the 'Feminist-in-Chief' is seen by all activists and CSO focus groups participants to be a statement that has not been followed up with any concrete actions. This has led activists to question the authenticity of President Weah's statement and implies that he is a *political opportunist*.

The perspectives of the students on the authenticity of the president's statement were more nuanced and they were more trusting that Weah is a pro-feminist politician. Both male and female students believe that he has made efforts to engage women, and a few cited his choice of a female Vice President, Jewel Howard Taylor, and several other female appointees as evidence of his commitment to feminist ideals.

**If you look at some of these ministries, you will find females heading it. Like the Ministry of Health is a female, the National Fisheries & Aquaculture Authority... is a female, etc. You find females in some of these areas as a minister. Yes, he pushed female ahead to take certain positions that males could occupy.**

Female student

While there are several female appointees, as noted by this student, one activist suggested that the Vice President has been sidelined throughout Weah's presidency. This could be related to her gender and to the political consolidation between Weah's ruling CDC party and her party, the National Patriotic Party. There was also some nuance in the responses of gender equality CSO FGD participants, with some noting examples of Weah's pro-feminist stance, such as passing the rape bill, even though this was an initiative by the Sirleaf government:

**But is he really the 'Feminist-in-Chief' with rape on a high rise? And the issue of rape has not really been addressed, especially during the time of the Coronavirus, when it was at its peak.**

Female CSO member

## Summary of findings

This study has analysed political masculinities in Liberia to better understand the critical role of male politicians in fostering a shift towards gender equality. It contributes new empirical data on African masculinity and adds Liberia to the growing body of countries reviewed in CSMM literature in Africa.

Liberia presents a unique case study for African masculinity as one of the few spaces where the colonial influence may have had less influence on traditional gender norms than seen in other African states with a strong European colonial presence. As a result, the customary system, and the traditional Sande and Poro societies retain a strong influence, interrupted primarily by the country's civil conflict in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Key findings from this study reveal there are male politicians in Liberia who could be considered as pro-feminist, given their support for gender equality initiatives. However, a lack of understanding of feminism and feminist politics leads to the term being used with caution and, consequently, most male politicians do not identify as feminists. Advocacy for gender equality among male politicians was framed not as feminism, but as a moral imperative. Most saw their role in supporting gender equality initiatives as the right thing to do, given the difficulties women face or the potential contributions that women could make to society and to the political space.

The male politicians interviewed fall into three main categories on a spectrum in terms of their relationship to gender equality agendas. At one end of the spectrum, *political opportunists* promote women in leadership positions because they recognise the effectiveness of women's contributions.

In the middle of the spectrum, *strategic supporters* do not advocate proactively for gender equality or take the lead on initiatives, but they do support agendas related to gender equality if they are raised by other politicians or proponents. Most of the male politicians who participated in this study

are *strategic supporters*. This means that they do not necessarily instrumentalise gender equality to gain political power or support like the *political opportunists*, nor do they take the initiative to develop gender equality initiatives like the *developers*. Instead, *strategic supporters* tend to see themselves as progressive and approach gender equality as a logical prerequisite for national growth.

At the other end of the spectrum, *developers* of gender equality initiatives are concerned with the impact of their pro-feminist stance. As the dominant sociopolitical environment is patriarchal in nature, *developers* are in the minority and may become isolated from other male political colleagues who do not understand (or misunderstand) their intentions to promote gender equality initiatives.

The most common narrative among male politicians reflects the influence of strong women in their lives and the impact that this has had on their positive stance to gender equality. The narratives are closely linked with their mothers and mother figures, such as aunts. Personal relationships are an important motivation for the promotion of gender equality among male politicians because it makes gender equality a more relatable concept, as compared to a more logical argument around feminism and gender equality.

This motivation resonates with the role played by *maternal activism* in the peacebuilding strategies used by Liberian women during the country's civil conflict. The fact that daughters and sisters are rarely cited by male politicians as a motivator for promoting gender equality reinforces the point made by younger feminist activists that maternal activism is a limited political strategy because it fails to challenge patriarchal gender norms.

Several male politicians view gender equality as a Western concept that is imposed through donor agendas. This means that while gender-related issues might be important to them, they are not a priority for many. In addition, the male politicians who keep gender equity on their political agenda emphasise the need for financial support to continue to champion the issue and withstand the backlash from other traditionalists.

The impact of gender equality advocacy among male politicians is hindered by systemic obstacles to gender-norm transformation, such as patriarchal gender norms and a patriarchal political culture. However, several enablers are having a positive influence on male politicians' support for gender equality initiatives, including more open political discourse on gender, broader social transformation, and successful examples of female leadership.

The discussions also revealed four key perceptions of male politicians and Liberia's current political culture among youth and civil society representatives:

- **Distrust and scepticism.** While there are male politicians who promote gender equality, the perceptions of male politicians are mostly negative, and they are seen as self-interested and untrustworthy.
- **A lack of pro-gender equality action.** The actions of male politicians are perceived as insufficient to have any significant impact on gender inequality, or as an effective political strategy to appeal to voters.
- **Violence against women in politics.** Liberia's political culture is seen as rooted in patriarchal norms that limit women's participation.
- **Cash violence/financial self-interest.** Politics are driven by financial interest, rather than by issues or ideology, such as gender equality and pro-feminism.

This study sheds light on the spectrum of positionalities related to feminism and gender equality advocacy. These include the view that feminism is a foreign (particularly Western) concept that must be reconciled with a contrasting African value system – a view that prevails in Liberia’s political discourse. This has led to the rejection of feminist politics by both men and women politicians, as being politically feasible in this context.

This study also reveals, however, that pro-feminist political actors can exist in a male-dominated political system, even though they may not define themselves as feminist or even recognise that they are pursuing a pro-feminist agenda. Their interest in increasing women’s political participation in the public realm, by voting for the 30% quota for example, implies an openness to inclusion and the transformation of patriarchal gender norms that have historically excluded women from political participation.

This suggests that the ambiguity and caution around the term feminism may be less important than the elements associated with it. In other words, more emphasis needs to be placed on the tenets of the feminist agenda and the promotion of gender equality that resonate with political actors. This could be achieved via progressive and constructive political projects that promote women’s rights and increase their participation.

# Implications for policy, research and practice

At its core, this research has set out to understand how male leaders are using their power and influence to transform gender norms and positively impact feminist discourse in Liberia. Five key implications have emerged from the study that relate to the strengthening of engagement with male politicians as change agents and increasing the quality of their support for gender equality advocacy and initiatives.

## 1. Raise awareness on gender equality and feminism with male politicians and the broader public

As seen in the discussions with participants, the male politicians interviewed may be implementing pro-feminist agendas without recognising or acknowledging this. A deeper understanding of feminism will demystify this topic and support a shift in perspectives on the importance of a pro-feminist agenda for gender equality and sustainable human development in Liberia. The findings reveal a level of ignorance on what feminism is, how it relates to gender equality, and what it intends to achieve – and emphasises the need to understand feminism as a crucial first step towards a positive shift in political masculinities towards pro-feminism.

Periodic training on gender sensitivity, gender and development, gender and leadership, African feminism, and gender mainstreaming could highlight the role of power, privilege and patriarchy in Liberia's current political system. Ideally, such training would be conducted by local feminist organisations that have a deep understanding of the country's political context, cultures and value systems, and that can speak to politicians from a place of common understanding.

The LFF, for example, has conducted training on Feminism 101, which aimed to debunk myths around feminism and feminists. The international organisation, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), has also conducted training in multiple counties across Liberia on ending violence against women during elections. However, it is unclear who was engaged and the overall impact of their engagement. Therefore, monitoring, evaluation, learning and dissemination should be integrated into training to assess its impact, improve the effectiveness of training modalities, and capture learning that can be shared with a broad range of stakeholders.

Raising awareness at the community level and with civil society has the potential to improve understanding of feminism among citizens, which could form part of a growing issues-based political discourse that holds politicians and political parties to account. More grassroots mobilisation at the community level and with the relevant 'gatekeepers', such as traditional and religious leaders, and schools (teachers, administrators, students, parent-teacher associations) could also help to shift perspectives on gender roles at the community and household levels.

## 2. Engage more male politicians across branches of government and political parties

This study has targeted men in the Senate and Legislature as key informants because of their potential impact on drafting, amending and approving bills that are critical for gender equality, such as the Rape Law and the Inheritance Law. This report's findings confirm that they constitute a core group of male politicians who can have a significant impact on gender norms because of the power and influence they wield in national political discourse and their political and financial capital, which enable them to go against patriarchal gender norms. They could, therefore, be targeted as positive role models because of their potential influence on other male (and potentially female) politicians. Several of the male politicians interviewed saw this as a potential strategy for the engagement of



more male politicians in the Senate and the Legislature, and possibly within the executive branch. Male gender equality champions can model positive behaviour to their colleagues, and wherever possible, follow that behaviour with concrete action that demonstrate their commitment to gender equality initiatives.

Younger male politicians may be easier to engage because gender equality and feminism are more familiar concepts for them. As discussed in these findings, the only male politician who identified as a feminist was one of the youngest politicians interviewed. However, these findings indicate that pro-feminist men come from all age groups and are found across all political party lines. It is their personal relationships and lived experiences that have had the greatest impact on their positionality, and not necessarily their age or political party affiliation.

### **3. Share women's lived experiences of gender inequality and gender-based violence**

Women's lived experiences of gender inequality are fundamental for meaningful change in the patriarchal gender norms that exclude them from political spaces. The lived experiences of female politicians were beyond the scope of this study, but research on this issue would provide insights into the challenges that women face in the political space from their perspective. The experiences of ordinary women who are dealing with GBV, and the inability of the medical and judicial systems to address this challenge, could help to reveal the urgent need to address gender inequality. For example, a few of the male politicians interviewed said that some of their colleagues did not think the 30% quota was important, which indicates that some male politicians, or some Liberian men more broadly, do not fully understand the impact of gender inequality on women's lives.

Targeted discussions with male politicians and a cross-section of Liberian women could shine a light on gender inequality to make it more tangible and spur genuine support to gender equality initiatives. One male politician, for example, noted the positive impact of having women share their stories of FGM to spur interest and action among male politicians. This type of initiative could be integrated into awareness raising or community-of-practice programmes that provide spaces for survivors and advocates to engage in formal or informal settings, such as the Palava Huts or Peace Huts. The Palava Hut is a traditional Liberian way to resolve disputes at the community level, with community members meeting in public outdoor spaces to discuss issues, and where elders gather to make decisions concerning their communities. Following Liberia's conflict, the Peace Hut model built on the Palava Hut approach to provide a safe space where women can share their grievances and receive support from the council and other women in their communities.

### **4. Support female politicians and adopt a gender quota**

Support for female politicians requires cultural and systemic changes in the political landscape that foster gender equality. More mentorship opportunities must be available for women entering politics, particularly as female politicians remain a minority. There should be a greater emphasis on passing and implementing laws that improve women's participation in politics. Female politicians can also benefit from training in gender equality and feminism. In addition, greater enforcement and stricter laws and measures are needed to address gender-based violence and ensure safety for women and girls.

The amendment to the NEC law requiring the 30% quota for women's participation has a notoriously non-committal phrase that is often cited by activists. It states that political parties must 'endeavour to ensure' women's inclusion on party ballots, but there is no incentive to do so, or any consequence for parties that fail to meet the quota, such as a penalty or fine. The study findings have demonstrated that entrenched patriarchal norms and cash-intensive political culture are significant barriers to women's participation and political leadership, and that more stringent measures will be required to effect change.

The study suggests that pro-feminist male politicians can be positive allies for female politicians and could be formally engaged to support more female politicians in the electoral process and as colleagues in the legislature. This would counter the hegemonic masculinity narrative that is currently associated with male politicians in Liberia and model more positive masculinity in the political space.

### **5. Empower HeForShe civil society organisations to engage male politicians**

These findings reveal that HeForShe organisations are active in civil society and are promoting positive masculinity, yet they tend to work mostly at community levels and do not feature prominently in national debates on gender equality. HeForShe organisations provide examples of positive masculinity and pro-feminism that could have a positive impact on male politicians and the broader public. They could be empowered financially and technically by local and international actors to engage with male politicians in training and peer-learning activities at local and national levels. Their capacity to engage with political actors and the media could also be strengthened to increase awareness on masculinities in the Liberian context, including political masculinity. This would contribute more male voices to the gender equality debate and broaden the impact of gender equality initiatives.

### **Areas for further study**

Further studies could focus on female politicians, the challenges they face in promoting gender equality, and the opportunities for feminist politics in the male-dominated political arena. This research could enhance an understanding of the realities faced by female politicians on a daily basis, the limitations they encounter and pathways to address such obstacles. It is vital to uncover and address these barriers in order to strengthen female political inclusivity. Future research could also focus on the role of political parties in transforming gender norms. This could set out the foundations for gender equality as a core value and strategic priority for Liberia's political parties and its democratic future.

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**About ALIGN**

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms.

**About this report**

This Liberia country report is part of ALIGN's 'Men in politics as agents of gender equitable change: gender norms and political masculinities' series.

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