

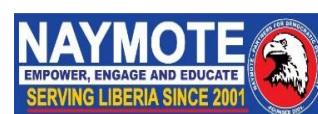
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Policy Brief

Women Leadership and Political Participation in Liberia



Naymote Partners for Democratic Development
Liberia



Policy Brief: Women Leadership and Political Participation in Liberia

There is a global call for gender balance in political representation, participation and decision-making supported by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹ In Liberia, women constitute about half of the number of registered voters² yet they are underrepresented in the country's governance structure at national, county and community level. There are several distinct yet inter-related factors responsible for this problem.

The first is deeply entrenched social norms and practices that restrict women's role to the private realm of the household and family. The second is unequal access to education which contributes to social and economic inequalities and limited access to resources. The third is social stereotype and expectations that men are natural leaders. The fourth is that the electoral law is not strong enough to advance women's political participation.



Under nomination of candidates, Section 4.5 of the New Elections Law (NEL) states:

- (1) Any political party which has been registered by the commission shall send to the commission a list of candidates who will stand for election to several elective offices in the several constituencies

¹ Sustainable Development Goals numbers five (Gender Equality) and ten (Reduced Inequality) are aligned with this concept.

² According to the National Elections Commission (NEC) women constituted 49% of the total registered voters during the 2017 elections.

4.5 c also states: A list of candidates submitted to the commission for an election should endeavor to have no less than 30% of the candidates on the list from each gender”. The word endeavor to ensure is vague and the law does not state what sanction the NEC can apply in the event where there is a bridge by political parties.

At the end of both the presidential and legislative elections in 2017, only nine (9) women were elected to fill the 73 seats in the legislature and five (5) were incumbent. Perhaps the only silver lining for the cause of female leadership was the election of Jewel Howard Taylor, who previously served for 12 years as a senator, as vice president on the presidential ticket of George Weah’s Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC).

In 2019, three women contested to fill the vacant Senatorial seat of Montserrado County due to the death of Geradine Doe Sheriff, but the voters preferred a male candidate, Darius Dillion. In the same year, there was one woman who contested for the District 15 by-election. Even though she lost, the campaign and election were characterized by violence and political intimidation from supporters of the CDC.³ This means that currently, of the thirty (30) Senators, only one is a woman which is a gross underrepresentation of women in the National Legislature.



At the level of the Executive Branch of government, women are also grossly underrepresented. Of the seventeen (17) cabinet ministers only two (2) are women.⁴ Of the fifteen (15) Superintendents, only three (3) are women.

The training went well, it is now time to look at yourself in the mirror and make a change. Thanks to NAYMOT, UN WOMEN and the CANADIAN Government for impacting us with the knowledge to become a good leader, not just a leader but a change maker in our community, our country, and the world at large. It's time to be mentored in order to become a transformational leader!!! Mbatee M. Tamba of Bong County

³ Statement issued by the Elections Coordinating Committee, civil society election observation group.

⁴ The two include the Ministry of Gender Children and Social Protection and Ministry of Health. The Minister of Agriculture is a woman but only playing an Acting role. She has not been formally nominated to the Senate for confirmation.

Within the Judiciary, of the five (5) justices of the Supreme Court, two (2) are women and they were appointed by former President Ellen Sirleaf. Of the 16 Circuit Court judges, five are women, representing 31.3%. At the level of specialized courts, there are four (4) women judges among the thirty-five Specialized Courts judges constituting 11.4%.⁵ This mapping shows that women hold more responsible positions in the judiciary as compared to the other two branches of government.

In response to women's leadership and political participation deficit in Liberia, Naymote Partners for Democratic Development, has adopted a medium-term approach to address this structural problem. Pursuant to this objective, the institution with support from UN Women has implemented a one-year project titled: **"Enhancing Women Political Leadership through Mentorship including pilot leadership clinic inspiring potential women leaders"**. Under this project, NAYMOTE launched a civic education and engagement campaign styled **"The Legislature is not for Men Alone"** with a focus on providing mentorship to young women, the campaign is been held across the 15 counties and led by grassroots leaders who are mentees of the project, over 150 civic engagement events are been held by these grassroots leaders reaching thousands of rural residents with the message to increase and support women participation, and representation in decision-making; and to prepare them to participate in leadership positions at different levels in society.

This engagement yielded some results. For instance, Rebecca Dean (Mentee- Grand Cape Mount County) was appointed as the Vice Principal of Damnalla Community School, Porkpa District while Sametta A. Manuba (Mentee- Montserrado County) was appointed as the Campaign Manager for an aspirant for the 2020 Senatorial Election James Biney in Maryland County. Similarly, Zenabia Taylor (Mentee Bong County) was nominated as the County Coordinator for the All Liberian Party (ALP) for Bong County. In a similar vein, Moijama L. Dunor and Saykwayee H. Henry from Margibi County were selected by Plan International, Ministry of Information, UNICEF, UN Women and all developmental partners to launch the "Girls Take Over" campaign. Jenneh Kemokai was appointed as the Civic and Voter Education Officer with the National Elections Commission (NEC) in Grand Cape Mount County during the Senatorial by-election.

"I am so happy to network with a great team of inspiring young women that are the generation of transformational leaders in Liberia. The training was inspirational and motivational, thanks to NAYMOTE for the opportunity"
Saykwayee H. Henry, Margibi County

Fifteen (15) mentees were selected and participated in NAYMOTE's Young Political Leadership School Africa program held in October 2019. The objective of the program is to increase the skills and knowledge of young people to enable them to compete effectively for contested public offices. Other mentees are playing active leadership roles within their communities serving as volunteers, educating their peers and high school students about building self-esteem and career guidance.

⁵ <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/VWYL%20DLM%20Report-Final.v.int2%20%281%29.pdf>

Six (6) mentees were elected and inducted into office of the leadership of the **National Young Women Political Council**; the Council will serve as a platform to advocate for increase participation of young



women in the political process of the country, and help others young women gain the skills needed to take on greater leadership roles in government, political parties and civil society, etc. Those elected included: Ms. Laura Targbeh, President (Montserrado), Moijama L. Dunor, Vice President (Margibi), Sarah Ellis, Secretary (Sinoe), Sulevee Sampson, Network Coordinator (Maryland), Musu M. Kamara, Financial Secretary (Gbarpolu) and Zenabia Tiangeh Taylor, National Project Coordinator (Bong County).



With the inspiration from NAYMOTE, two (2) young women contested the October 5, 2019 senatorial by-election in Grand Cape Mount County. Forty (40) mentees provided civic education to citizens with a message to elect the young women contestants while others served as members of the campaign teams of the female candidates. As a result of being exposed to the concept of women political representation, seven (7) of the mentees have expressed interest in contesting as representatives of their respective districts during the 2023 general elections and are using the skills and knowledge gains to plan, organize and implement political events and mobilizing other young women to step forward to seek political offices at different levels of

the governance structures.

The project has been instrumental in linking emerging women leaders with their peers across the 15 counties. Through this network, they have shared similar stories of women under political representation and developed a strategy to address this core problem. An inherent part of the strategy is building skills in networking, teambuilding, planning and coordinating political campaigns, issues-based campaign, and public speaking.

The institution has provided internship opportunity for mentees across the country to enable them to learn by doing, and to put in action what they have learned during the project period. The internship is also helping them gain new skills that can be applied to future job opportunity. Feedbacks from the internship program is very positive.

Vice President, Jewel Howard-Taylor, Former President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Former Senator and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court served as motivational speakers during the regional trainings.

Conclusion:

Women have the right to influence decisions that affect their lives, whether in the household, community, public institutions or national government. Achieving women's participation and leadership requires understanding power dynamics and working with women and men to ensure equal access to, and influence in, decision-making processes. Altering unequal power dynamics between men and women requires a long-term commitment in addressing the structural conditions of unequal access to education and economic opportunities.

The declining trend in women's political representation and participation is also inherently due to Liberia's male dominated society. Despite the twelve years long leadership of a female president, a broader culture of women in positions of political authority and election to public office never developed. Increasing women's political engagement requires raising awareness, providing training for women political candidates, running campaigns on gender equality, lobbying for legislative reforms to ensure women's fair access to political spheres.

Despite the decade-long leadership of a female president, a broader culture of women in positions of political authority never developed. These developments are a cause for the sustained engagement with the system to change laws, values and behaviors that give rise to what seems to be a growing gap in women's political representation and participation in Liberia.

Recommendations: To ensure gender parity in political participation, the following policy recommendations are advanced for consideration:

1. The government must account for its international obligations: Liberia is a signatory to several international and regional legal instruments and protocols that promote the advancement of women. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) should engage in sustained advocacy to holding to government to account for its commitment and obligations in advancing the rights of women's political participation.

2. Increase women's representation in national government: While it is true that the citizens work at the will and pleasure of the President, the underrepresentation of women in appointed positions does not reflect the diversity of the Liberian society. CSOs can play an advocacy role in this endeavor.

1. Advocate for the amendment to the New Elections Law on women's political participation: Section 4.5: Nomination of Candidates states:

(2) Any political party which has been registered by the commission shall send to the commission a list of candidates who will stand for election to several elective offices in the several constituencies

c). A list of candidates submitted to the commission for an election should endeavor to have no less than 30% of the candidates on the list from each gender.

This section should be amended to include a stronger language to ensure sanction for non-compliance: Section 4.5 subsection 4.5(1c) of the NEL Chapter 4 is amended, to read: A list of candidates submitted to the commission for an election shall have no less than 30% of the candidates on the list from each gender. Any party not meeting this standard may not have their list of candidates sanctioned by the NEC.

4. Shift the values that support patriarchal structures: Mobilize and engage men and women to dismantle the values that support patriarchal structures and behaviors that discriminate against women and favor their male counterparts.

5. Leverage the 2020 Senatorial Election to support women candidates: The October 2020 Senatorial election provides another opportunity for women to increase their political representation in the Senate. This will require early planning and the provision of technical assistance to women aspirants and candidates in resource mobilization, developing campaign strategies and engaging the voters. Support program like the Young Political Leadership School Africa to *increase the knowledge and skills among young women in planning, organizing, and implementing political events.*

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