

Navigating Checkpoints: The Journey of the Liberia Feminist Forum

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In August 1990, I stood at a checkpoint somewhere in Liberia, not ready to die. I was 20. Checkpoints were sad, brutal, dehumanising. This was not the first checkpoint we had navigated, my siblings and I, carrying our paralysed mother in a wheelbarrow. We had walked from one of the neighbourhoods close to a low-cost housing estate built by President Tolbert, who was killed in the military coup in 1990. At the first checkpoint, stories informed by euphoric ignorance about the rebels were shattered. We were heading – in our heads – to a place called safety. At the sight of the fighters and out of fear, I felt my lappa drop to the ground. I had used the lappa to hide the curves of my body, as I was in transition to womanhood; somehow, I sensed that my body would be both an attraction and a menace in ways that would harm my person. The soldiers yelled at me and I pretended not to feel a personal threat. This was not the case fifty checkpoints later, from Dry Rice Market to Johnsonville.

I always say my sister was the oldest in the group, but this is not true. My mother was, but in a wheelbarrow cushioned by quilts and towels to block the heat from the metal frame on her sick body, we tried to make her invisible to the fighters. You see, they had this thing they did. They would ask you if you wanted help with your sick relative and if you said “Yes”, they would shoot the person right before your eyes. We heard about that and saw it happen to others, so we protected our mother in a cocoon of used quilts, pillows and towels. My brothers, younger than us, kept repeating the story we all believed. The soldiers would have deep empathy for our situation and help us get a lift to safety. If we were lucky, they would give us money and food. We did not get lucky.

Later, we arrived at another checkpoint after moving for what seemed like ages. The fighters demanded our identity cards this time. The identity cards would confirm the ethnic background of the holder and put one in the category of friend or enemy – it was binary with limited flexibility. According to the fighters, the penalty for not showing an identity card was twenty-five

lashes on one's bare back. We were ready to go through this, because we did not have our cards; but by the time we reached the front, they had beaten so many people, they forgot the order. Then, we thought we had reached a breakthrough. We heard sirens. Charles Taylor was coming. The soldiers shouted: "Major Taylor, our leader! Commando, brave, strong, intelligent!" Chaos. Shooting. We felt a glimmer of hope. Taylor would end the brutality and murder at the checkpoints. He came, saw and drove through like Jesus going into Jerusalem. Damn, we were on our own.

Then we got to the spot – the one where I knew I was not ready to die. We were in a line and the questions were rolling – all within the frame of identity. I did my best. I called my name and the woman soldier confirmed what she thought was my ethnic group. I said, "Yes". She started to speak to me in Kpelle, my father's ethnic group. She said, "Hello". I answered. "What is your name?" I answered. Then she went to the next level, while I was still processing her previous question. This delay irritated her. How could I have problems understanding my mother tongue? Using expletives, she informed me that she was going to kill me. This could not be true. I was almost at Fendell.¹ I could not die. Who would look after my brothers? I also could not die since the war was going to be short and I would reunite with my boyfriend. I was standing in a daze and out walked this young soldier, lanky, dirty and apparently with one thing on his mind. He walked up to me, kissed me on my lips and turned to the woman. "You cannot kill this fine girl," he said. He told me to leave. I could be someone's wife, was his reason for giving me freedom. I was free and would not be killed.

Not every Liberian was set free with a kiss. Young men read pornographic magazines at the checkpoints and raped women and girls or, in most cases, took women and girls to the commanding officer. I saw a man run for his life like a hunted animal chased by predators. His back was carved with a sharp knife every time they got close enough to him. He did not survive. Approximately 250,000 people died during the war and at checkpoints, including my mother.

The transition to normalcy in Liberia was marked by heightened militarisation with significant geographic and military fragmentation, and a resigned acceptance of Taylor's election. There was a Greater Liberia,² controlled by Taylor and his forces, and there was Monrovia, the capital, controlled by the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States)

Peacekeeping Force and an interim government headed by a well-known Liberian academic and politician, Dr Amos C. Sawyer. This context had implications for free movement. Prince Johnson³ controlled parts of Monrovia. With Liberians in a state of shock and surrounded by mayhem, communities of people returned to their homes to find total destruction or found their property taken over by the fighters. There was a shroud of silence on sexual violence and murders at checkpoints. Most Liberians did not speak about such acts and definitely not about massacres.⁴ The normalisation of these violations was reinforced on a daily basis. As they moved back to their villages, some people encountered and recognised fighters who had manned checkpoints. Stories of open fights abounded, such fights being especially likely when the soldier had been a member of the Small Boys Unit (SBU) and no longer had a gun. Warring factions and their members remained loyal to their command structure and continued to wield power in different forms. Peacekeepers from West African countries protected Monrovia, looted properties and conducted routine arrests during curfew – as contradictory as that sounds.

Liberia is a deeply patriarchal country, although its Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex (cf. Articles 8, 11, and 18). Women and girls are systematically marginalised and discriminated against through patriarchal power relations that combine with other systems of subordinating and exploitative social relations to place them in even more constrained positions than men and boys in the same class, ethnic, age or other relations. With a dual legal system, the Constitution also recognises customary laws “in accordance with the standards enacted by the Legislature” (Article 65). Through the Revised Regulations Governing the Hinterland of Liberia (Customary Law), people in rural areas may be governed by the customary laws of any of the 16 ethnic groups. Whilst these are not identical, they frequently discriminate against women.

Sexual and gender-based violence is a major challenge in Liberia. The narrative that sexual violence in private and public spaces was a new phenomenon that emerged during the 1990 civil crisis ignores the reality that what happened at checkpoints in 1990 was an extension of sexual and other forms of gender-based violence which existed in pre-1990s Liberia. The rape of young indigenous and Americo-Liberian women in family spaces, sometimes linked to incest, was always an unspoken dimension of the broader practice of gender-based violence. Sexual violence only became more public

at the checkpoints and in other public spaces. Rape is the second-most-reported crime in Liberia (UNMIL/OHCHR, 2016).

In 2006, the Rape Law was amended to recognise evolving contexts and issues related to the civil war, for example, gang rape and the use of guns and other objects to rape women. To date, there is limited investment in access to justice for women and the prevention of violence against women and girls. The fundamental clash between dual legal systems – statutory and customary laws – presents an ongoing hurdle to prevention of sexual and other forms of gender-based violence. Public hearings on the recent Domestic Violence Bill in parliament have been marred by this challenge. Similar tensions between statutory and customary laws are also evident in efforts to criminalise female genital mutilation. However, this conjuncture also presents a significant opportunity to engage communities and stakeholders in the process of interrogating and remodelling legal and other power systems towards gender-equality in Liberia.

Women gained the right to vote and the right to stand for elections in 1946. Given the complex history of women's rights, however, a single act of suffrage did not erase the century-long exclusion of women from public space. The political tradition of Liberia at the time also excluded indigenous men from voting, and even with suffrage, women and men had to own property and pay taxes in order to exercise voting rights. Those who did not pay taxes and own property were categorised as “uncivilised”. Other trappings of “civilisation” included membership in Christian churches and other fraternities. Political parties formed women's wings to support men's victory, thereby normalising the instrumentalisation of women. This, in our current-day analysis, would amount to women continuing their social reproductive roles but this time in the public space of political parties and social movements, including student movements.

Leadership was a male-dominated space, and the longterm nature of this problem normalised women's exclusion. The century-long spectrum of exclusion spans historical and current violations of women's rights. The consequences are manifested in women's restricted ability to acquire education, the compulsion to undergo female genital mutilation (FGM) as a social demand of communities, teenage pregnancy and forced marriage. Cultural norms and values thus reinforced the exclusion of women from the public space and justified structural barriers that supported violence against

women and girls. The challenges that women have faced in moving beyond the private space are manifested in both urban and rural contexts.

In the wake of the civil war, Liberian women's networks and organisations responded to the ongoing crisis by mobilising around the issue of ending sexual violence and accelerating the peace process. The women's movement, Mass Action for Peace, joined other Liberian networks to call for an end to the suffering, and challenged Taylor and other fighting forces by using sit-in actions and traditional shaming methods to pressure the warring factions. In 2005, Liberians elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president, a celebrated and historic feat in Africa and globally.

Although many women's groups were fighting sexual abuse and violence, the women's movement did not have an ideological framework guiding its actions, given the *ad hoc* way in which it was formed and the fact that it operated during a period of extreme challenges. Nevertheless, some members of the movement who identified as feminist were associated with feminist organisations across Africa, notably Akina Mama wa Afrika.⁵ To the best of my knowledge, there had been no formal organising of women under the banner of feminism and no Liberian woman had self-identified as a feminist during that period, prior to the election of Sirleaf. In fact, feminism was considered a derogatory term linked to lesbianism and a disrespect for the socio-cultural configuration of Liberian society. For most people in the women's movement, as well as in Liberian society more generally, gender equality represents a threat to the power and position of men and boys, and thus the social norm that women and girls should be subordinate. This perception has affected the quality of engagement with traditional and other male leaders in Liberian society, as they see programmes and narratives that challenge gender inequality as destabilising to the current context of normalised discrimination. From this perspective, gender equality is a political project aimed at the disempowerment of men and destabilisation of the patriarchal power and positioning inherent in fundamentalist interpretations of politics, religion or culture.⁶

In 2008, three Liberian women attended the African Feminist Forum in Uganda. The mandate to organise country forums was given to participants, and, while we did not have a feminist forum until 2014, the idea of forming a Liberia Feminist Forum was born. In 2013, one of the first concrete steps towards this mobilisation was a two-day training workshop for around

twenty-five Liberian women, organised and led by Sara Mukasa, then of the African Women's Development Fund, and Anu Pillay, a renowned South African and Ugandan feminist working in Liberia. The two women self-identified as feminists. The decision to form the Liberia Feminist Forum was met with resistance from within the women's movement.

An introductory training workshop ended with a significant decision to remove the nomenclature of "feminism", as it was against the Constitution and carried a particular stigma in Liberian society. Limited attention was paid to the sense in which the Liberian Constitution was written for Americo-Liberian men to own resources and control power in a society that did not grant women suffrage until a century after independence. Yet the emphasis within the women's movement was on the attribution of equivalence between feminism and lesbianism, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Constitution's criminalisation of same-sex relationships. Against this backdrop, the prevailing view was that the movement should not be organised around feminism. The preferred name of the forum was Women Civil Society Steering Group.

There was a gap in activities until 2013, when the possibility of finding funding for the inception activities became more realistic. After a year of seeking consensus amongst potential members, in 2014 there was an agreement to organise a formal convening and hold the first Liberia Feminist Forum (LFF). Individuals were expected to join voluntarily, based on a commitment to the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists (2017) and an undertaking to abide by these principles. This agreement represented a milestone in women's rights work because the organising of the Liberia Feminist Forum took place outside the sphere of non-governmental organisations, national and international.

Then another huge hurdle began to emerge in the West African sub-region: the Ebola crisis in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. In July 2014, the Technical Working Group of the LFF convened its first forum, amidst the risk and fears of Ebola. The Zimbabwe Feminist Forum provided technical advice and a sister feminist from amongst them, Bella Matambanadzo, supported facilitation of the meeting. This was despite the fact that international flights were ending their service to Liberia during that period. The African Women's Development Fund and Kvinna til Kvinna⁷ (Woman to Woman) funded the convening.

LFF members, who are women from different professional and personal backgrounds, meet every two years, like the African Feminist Forum. Whilst

the LFF has not met or organised an LFF activity between 2014 and 2016, we had a planned convening and other activities in 2016, tied to elections. At the same time, individual LFF members have used their professional and personal platforms to work on the objectives of the LFF. We have had power-analysis dialogues on the need to use feminist analysis and strategy in addressing Liberia's development challenges, with close to 70 persons participating. One member has formed an initiative for first-time women voters to help in aligning their rights with a feminist analysis of the current issues in the country. There is also a feminist poetry reading session held on a monthly basis, called #ResistingtheNarrative. Work on addressing the structural causes of violence against women and girls as well as advocacy on LGBT rights are all part of this context. From the original set of twenty-five women who attended the first convening, the impact of the LFF has definitely increased. This is felt not only in terms of challenging the status quo but also with respect to unlearning patriarchal narratives that have defined women's lives. This emerging movement is the struggle against patriarchal hegemony which reinforces the subjugation of women and girls.

Today, as we prepare for the end of President Sirleaf's tenure and for a new president, the physical checkpoints are no longer present. However, women's and girls' bodies remain the sites of violence cited above. Identity – from the perspectives of gender, sexual orientation, economics, class, ethnicity and geographic context – remains one of the most controversial issues. Like Taylor riding into checkpoints, Sirleaf rides through, leaving her team with the power to act, change or respond to the issues that affect the people.

President Sirleaf's twelve-year rule ultimately represents enormous missed opportunities to prioritise women's rights in a political and sustainable manner. This would have meant recognising and applying gender analysis to the unequal power relations among Liberians as well as providing funding for the necessary changes. The missed opportunities are only reinforced by the emerging backlash against even the limited gains and heightened visibility of women in public spaces. The celebration of fundamentalisms, whether on the basis of culture, religion or politics, frames this backlash. Social media and other forms of media have become toxic, spreading patriarchal, homophobic and violent narratives that devalue the work of human-rights defenders, including defenders of LGBT rights, women's rights and those who champion the need for natural-resource management. Digital security for women human

rights defenders is compromised by ridicule and cyber-bullying, emanating from deeply held patriarchal values by men.

The arts and music not only incorporate misogynistic representations of women's social status but echo the backlash against women's leadership, proclaiming how it has failed Liberians. As *hipco*⁸ becomes more significant in the Liberian society and beyond, it is important to highlight the need to support a new generation of progressive women and men who occupy information spaces and for feminist analysis of the patriarchal narratives which form major hindrances to promoting a progressive feminist culture in Liberian society. A recent example of such a hindrance was the launch of a *hipco* song called *I Here*, which won the song of the year award.⁹ The song reinforces the downward trend in girls' status and protection. The artist claims otherwise. Yet when he says, "I am the boy who kills your dog", it is clear that the artist is referring to sex in a demeaning as well as violent manner. Sexual intimacy is couched as "killing a dog", influenced largely by post-war language and vocabulary modification in which violence frames how we communicate generally, as well as how we describe sex in Liberian culture. The violence is a carryover from the civil war and from sexual abuse at checkpoints. The widespread acceptance of language that ridicules points to how women and girls are affected by patriarchal and militarised values. It also highlights women's desensitisation to the impact of this acceptance on women's ability to exercise control over their own bodies.

By contrast, the Liberia Feminist Forum and its values serve as a safe space to identify and challenge the erection of checkpoints in Liberia again. The Feminist Forum represents a commitment to interrogate the impact of a woman-led government over the last ten years, one linked to patriarchy and men's artificial sense of privilege and superiority. The LFF enables us to understand our strength as women, deconstructing the myth of male supremacy and the power of patriarchy when combined with other systems of subordinating and exploitative social relations. Our focus is a political project to unlearn old ways and learn new skills of dismantling the checkpoints. A project which presents a clear, political and feminist analysis of Liberia's direction will lift the cover from our eyes – men and women. Addressing inequalities from the perspective of women's collective organising, with a defined political ideology and strategy, will enable

Liberian women to challenge the status quo that subjugates women and girls and the systems of oppression which violate women's rights.

Endnotes

- 1 The state university situated outside of Monrovia, which catered for agriculture and science majors.
- 2 Greater Liberia included all political divisions of Liberia (counties) except Montserrado County.
- 3 Prince Johnson is the warlord who broke away from Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia and killed President Samuel Doe in September 1990.
- 4 Massacres had occurred across the country with warring factions being held accountable, although there were never formal charges or indictments against any group for atrocities committed in Liberia.
- 5 Former Gender and Development Minister Varbah Gayflor was among several Liberian women trained by Akina Mama wa Afrika.
- 6 This assertion is supported by my professional experience of close to 20 years working in Liberia on women's rights and other development issues.
- 7 Kvinna til Kvinna (Woman to Woman) is a Swedish foundation that supports work on women's rights and peace.
- 8 *Hipco*, an abbreviation of "hip hop" and "colloquial", is a movement of young Liberian artists using Liberian English and their post-war experience to influence Liberian society.
- 9 Liberia Entertainment Award, 2017.

References

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