



Economic Corruption and Its Disproportionate Impact on Women's Leadership: the Case Study of Liberia

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Abstract. Despite significant strides in economic growth, educational parity, and women's rights protection, Liberia has yet to translate these efforts into equal opportunities for women aspiring to public positions. Systemic corruption and stereotypical attitudes towards women opting for public offices have crippled real time equality, plummeting Liberia's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG5). This study explores the cyclical nature of the corruption effect on exacerbating inequality, highlighting how systemic inequalities and gender biases perpetuate corrupt practices that further marginalize women. It employs a qualitative research method, with an emphasis on secondary data analysis. This approach involves a systematic examination and interpretation of existing documents, books, research papers, and interviews conducted by others to gather data relevant to the study. Through a thorough analysis, this research concludes that corruption has profound effects on women, limiting their access to opportunities and perpetuating barriers to their participation in public leadership. This accentuates the need for a vigorous approach to women's public participation through law reform mechanisms, training, and women empowerment programs. These strategies are essential for empowering women, promoting equitable governance, and contributing to sustainable development and social justice.

Index Terms- Corruption, Gender, Women, Leadership

I. Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of global economic challenges, corruption is a pervasive and insidious threat, eroding the fabric of societies and undermining equitable development (Bhandari 2023). Nowhere is more evident than in post-conflict nations striving to rebuild their governance structures and economies. (DANIEL KAUFMANN 1998)Corruption is a harmful menace to society's economic growth and development because it diverts resources from their intended purposes, erodes public trust in institutions, undermines the rule of law, and perpetuates inequality and



poverty. Emerging from the shadows of prolonged civil war, Liberia presents a compelling case study on the disproportionate impact of economic corruption on women's leadership. Despite significant strides towards gender equality and political representation, the vestiges of corruption continue to thwart these efforts, thus impeding sustainable progress.

The Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index has consistently graded Liberia as a corrupt country over the years. Recently, by 2023, Liberia's score on the Global Corruption Barometer was 23%, just 1% lower than the 2022 score of 24%, placing it 145th among 180 countries on the index. The Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia (CENTAL) has conducted a series of corruption perception surveys since 2020, and the results consistently show that Liberia is corrupt. According to a survey, 90% of citizens believe that corruption is high, particularly in the police, judiciary, education, and health systems. The report indicates that 70% of people in Liberia have paid bribes for services. Additionally, 69% of respondents acknowledged that the public sector is most prone to corruption, while 62% said that the government's commitment to fighting corruption is low. The implications of such widespread corruption are profound, particularly for women aspiring to public-service roles. The necessity of paying bribes for basic services and the perception of a corrupt public sector creates significant barriers for women. These conditions not only deter women from seeking public sector employment but also perpetuate an environment in which merit and qualifications are overshadowed by illicit transactions and favoritism. Women, who often lack financial resources and networks compared to their male counterparts, are particularly disadvantaged by such a system. A range of factors, including systemic issues, weak governance structures, cultural norms, and socioeconomic conditions can influence corruption. This article focuses on economic corruption and its disproportional effect on the already marginalized group in Liberia, specifically women.

Transparency International defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for personal gain. However, James Lewis's (2017) definition clearly reveals the concept of corruption that aligns with the objective of this article. According to his analysis, "Corruption is a behavioral consequence of power and greed. With no rulebook. It is covert, opportunistic, repetitive, and powerful, reliant upon dominance, fear, and unspoken codes: a significant component of the 'quiet violence.'" Corruption is a phenomenon in which no country is immune to, and it is a well-known fact for quite some time that the classical view on corruption concerning only less developed countries does not hold. However, the magnitude at which it exists is attributed solely to the majority of African countries. The sociological perspective on corruption identifies it as a social phenomenon that is deeply intertwined with power, gender, and inequality. Therefore, from a sociological standpoint, corruption can be viewed as a manifestation of entrenched power dynamics that reinforce existing social hierarchies and exclusions.

This research delves into the systematic corruption and marginalization that hinders women's equal participation in leadership roles in Liberia. It examines the



challenges faced by women aspiring to public positions. Given that the context of corruption is broad and dynamic, requiring a comprehensive study to fully understand its effects at both the micro and macro levels, we specifically identify the key components of corruption that help us understand the hindrances to gender equality in Liberia. We explored the concept of leadership and women's participation therein, drawing our analysis from both historical and cultural backgrounds. We also consider aspects that have had an entrenched impact on women aspiring for political seats, particularly financial and logistic constraints and patriarchal norms.

Starting with how corruption perpetuates gender inequality, we examine marginalization across different sectors, including the political and economic aspects. The implications of these barriers are profound, leading to a lower representation of women in leadership, which in turn affects policy decisions and economic opportunities and perpetuates long-term gender inequality.

To address this imbalance, this study explores several solutions such as empowering and supporting women in leadership through mentorship programs, leadership training, financial support, and access to resources. Additionally, we recommend policy and institutional reforms as essential aspects. By comprehensively addressing these issues, Liberia can move towards a more inclusive and equitable society in which women can fully realize their leadership potential.

II. Concept of Leadership and Women Participation

Over the years, leadership theories have evolved from the early Great Man Theory, which suggests that leaders are born with inherent traits, to more contemporary approaches, such as the transformational and situational leadership theories of Burns (1978), and further developed by (Bernard M. Bass 1985). Historically, leadership has carried the notion of masculinity, and the belief that men are better leaders than women is still common today (Kiamba 2008). Although the number of female leaders has increased, it is often considered an afterthought. According to (Watende Pius Nyoni 2019) citing (Højgaard 2002), societal conventions regarding gender and leadership traditionally exclude women and view top leadership as a masculine domain. Despite growing attention to women's leadership over the past few decades, significant obstacles remain. Leadership has predominantly been male-dominated, with societal norms and stereotypes often marginalizing women's roles in leadership positions (Manuela Tremmel 2023).

In Liberia, traditional practices continue to reinforce male dominance in leadership structures (United Nations Assessment Report on Liberia)(2015). This is particularly evident in many communities, especially in rural areas, where leadership is centralized in the hands of male chiefs and elders responsible for decision-making, conflict resolution, and maintaining social order. Women, on the other hand, occupy leadership positions only in limited capacity, often restricted to governing the affairs of other women and not the community at large. According to the UN Report prepared by the Human Rights and Protection Section (HRPS), culture in Liberia too



often becomes a space in which serious crimes are committed, and criminal offenses perpetrated through harmful traditional practices often go unpunished because of their perceived cultural dimensions (An Assessment of Human Rights Issues Emanating from Traditional Practices in Liberia 2015) .

In concurrence with the UN Assessment Report, over a period of more than three years, I observed significant leadership disparity in Gbarpolu, and Bomi Counties located in northern Liberia. In community gatherings, the front seats in the hall were reserved for men and boys, whereas women were relegated to the back rows. This seating arrangement underscores the entrenched belief among both men and women in the region, in which men possess a superior understanding of leadership ; therefore, their position must be at the front. Male dominance in leadership is prevalent in many societies, especially Africa. For example, the Zulu tribe in South Africa was historically known to have a patriarchal system, with men occupying most of the leadership positions. Women, although respected in their roles within the family and community, have limited access to formal leadership roles(Elliot Mthembeni Mncwango 2015). Similarly, the Akan people, one of the largest ethnic groups in Ghana, provide clear examples of patriarchal governance . Akan has a hierarchical system with chiefs (Omanhene) at various administrative levels. These chiefs, primarily men, are responsible for the governance, justice, and management of communal resources. (Busia 2018)

These historic cultural norms and practices have played a significant role in reinforcing patriarchal leadership structures in modern societies. Traditional attitudes and beliefs about women's roles continue to influence perceptions of women's ability to participate fully in public life (Naznni Tabassum & Bhabani 2021). Stereotypes about women being dependent, unskilled, and unsuitable for institutional leadership and strategic decision making persist. People may even question the morality of women seeking leadership positions, especially if they are not yet married or divorced, thereby questioning their ability to lead.

Leadership in Africa, both historically and in contemporary times, has often been characterized by deeply rooted patriarchal structures (Iwowo 2020) . In pre-colonial African societies, leadership is a multifaceted concept involving political, economic, spiritual, and communal duties. Leadership structures vary widely across different regions and ethnic groups, but many share common features of male dominance, with women playing complementary yet often subordinate roles. According to Growe and Montgomery (2003), leaders provide vision and meaning to an institution and embody the ideals toward which the organization aspires. From this perspective, leadership can transcend gender. However, skepticism still exists regarding women's leadership roles, where gender, rather than age, experience, or competence, often determines the positions they are assigned. Research indicates that these doubts about women leaders remain unfounded. Studies by Growe and Montgomery (2000) on school administration reveal that schools led by female administrators are generally better managed, with higher quality pupil learning and superior professional performance from teachers, compared to those managed by male



administrators . However, the representation of women in high-position jobs is still lingering.

Although culture and traditions are considered the root causes of women's participation in leadership, corruption is one of the branches that holds women back ((GWI) 2021). The primary objectives of this study are to analyze the specific ways in which corruption affects women's leadership, and to identify and analyze the impact of the particular challenges women face when addressing corruption. Specifically, this study seeks to identify how corruption in post-conflict liberalism impairs the development of female leadership and issues related to the relationship between women and corruption.

1. Systemic Corruption and Marginalization

Systemic corruption is a pervasive issue that undermines governance, economic development, and social equity. It affects all segments of society but has a particularly insidious impact on



Figure 1: Information gathered from Cental's Report Editions



Figure 2: Information gathered from AFRO Barometer Website



The Marginalized groups, especially women (The Corruption a Chronic Disease of Humanity: Causes, Effects and Consequences 2023). This refers to the entrenched and pervasive nature of corrupt practices within institutions and society. It involves the manipulation of policies, procedures, and regulations for personal or group gains, often at the expense of the public good. However, women face significant barriers to entering politics because of corruption. The need to engage in corrupt practices to secure political support or positions disproportionately disadvantages women who often have less access to financial resources and political networks (Ortrun Merkle; Sylvi Bratten; Amarsanaa Darisuren; Giulia Sechi & Amarsanaa Darisuren 2021). The Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia (CENTAL) conducted a survey from 2020-2023, and the results show that 9 out of 10 Liberians (90%) believe that corruption is high in Liberia. The chart indicates the reasons for corruption in Liberia, according to CENTAL's SCORE from 2021-2023 to.

According to the CENTAL report, over 40% of Liberians indicated rampant allegations of corruption and a lack of prosecution. Additionally, the Afrobarometer index for Liberia, spanning from 2008 to 2022, reveals that the government's efforts to combat corruption are perceived as fairly bad or very bad by a significant portion of the population, in contrast to those who view it as fairly or very well.

Moreover, CENTAL's survey identified four institutions that are particularly prone to corruption in Liberia: police, judiciary, healthcare, and education sectors.

Corruption within critical institutions, such as the police, judiciary, health sector, and education, erects formidable barriers to women's engagement in public leadership. Gender disparities in Liberia are perpetuated by systemic corruption that limits women's access to fair opportunities, resources, and justice. Women facing such corruption encounter discouragement, reinforced gender biases, and diminished trust in institutions, causing them to shy away (Beaulieu 2018). Despite significant efforts over the past 20 years to combat corruption, including support from major aid agencies and the establishment of numerous reform projects and anti-corruption agencies, success has been limited. This is evident in reports, such as the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index. According to the 2023 Transparency Barometer, 53% of service users in Liberia paid bribes for services, aligning with CENTAL's report that 74% of Liberians witnessed corruption, and 34% paid bribes in 2023. Women are disproportionately affected by rampant bribery, which hinders their ability to acquire quality education, secure well-paid jobs, and access public services.

III. Barriers to Taking on Leadership Roles

Despite progress made in promoting gender equality, women in Liberia still face numerous barriers that hinder their ability to obtain higher positions, particularly in public leadership and political offices (Liberia Gender Equality Profile 2021). Women's representation in the legislature has been declining steadily from 16% in



2006 to 13% in 2012, 11% in 2014, and 10% in 2021 . This raises key questions regarding the specific reasons why women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions.

Before the 2023 election in Liberia, all political parties and the National Elections Commission (NEC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) mandating that all political parties nominate or elect women for at least 30% of their candidate listings. Gender quotas are a type of “temporary special measure” to accelerate women’s substantive equality with men and achieve the necessary structural and socio-cultural changes to redress the historical marginalization of women from political life. A 30% gender quota for women on candidate listings was first set in Liberia in 2005 stating that each party “shall ensure 30 percent of its candidates are women . However, the current composition of the legislature and other high-ranking positions suggest that the MOU has not achieved the desired results . Presently, there are nine women and 64 men in the House of Representatives, two women and 27 men in the Senate, and five women and 14 men in the Ministers. This indicates that the MOU did not significantly improve women’s representation of their leadership roles. The specific reasons for this persistent underrepresentation include entrenched sociocultural norms, financial barriers, and systemic corruption. Cultural attitudes that prioritize men’s leadership, combined with the high cost of running for office and the prevalence of practices such as sextortion, continue to impede women’s progress (ILO 2018).

Sextortion is a form of bribery that has impeded women’s leadership ability over the years. However, little is known about this. It is a pernicious form of corruption in which sexual favors are solicited in exchange for services or opportunities. Sextortion is a relatively new term that can be both extortion and bribery and is defined by the International Association of Women Judges as the “Abuse of authority in which sex is the currency of bribe.” This form of corruption poses a significant barrier to women’s advancement toward liberalism . It particularly affects sectors such as education and employment, where women and girls often face coercion in sexual relationships to gain admission to school, secure grades, or obtain jobs. In the education sector, sextortion severely undermines the integrity of academic institutions. According to a report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), male teachers and administrators in exchange for grades or admissions (UNDP, 2015) frequently subject female students to sexual harassment and demands for sex. (Parnarouskis, Stevenson and al. 2017)conducted a study of public schools in Monrovia. 90 percent of participants acknowledged that male teachers solicit sex from female students in exchange for better grades. They also reported that female students often obliged teachers to advance to the next grade or prevent teachers from retaliating by giving poor grades. Students described sexual relationships initiated by their teachers and other school officials as having negative consequences for the girls involved, including pregnancy. According to the participants, inconsistent and coercive relationships with school figures have detrimental effects on others.



Similarly, employment opportunities are compromised by sex. Women seeking jobs or promotions often encounter situations in which their supervisors or colleagues use their positions of power to demand sexual favor. A study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) highlighted that women in Liberia's workforce face significant levels of sexual harassment and coercion, hampering their professional growth and economic independence (ILO, 2018). This practice not only deprives women of fair employment opportunities, but also perpetuates a culture of silence and impunity, as many victims fear retaliation or job loss if they report such incidents. This form of exploitation exacerbates existing gender inequalities and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and dependence. When women and girls are denied educational and professional opportunities due to sextortion, they are less likely to achieve economic stability and more likely to remain dependent on men, reinforce patriarchal norms, and limit their participation in leadership roles.

To increase the number of women in leadership roles, the effective enforcement of anti-corruption and anti-harassment laws must be implemented at all levels. A recent study focusing on Europe found that an increase in local female political representation was linked to reductions in both petty and grand corruption (MONIKA BAUHR 2019). Another study concluded that high levels of political corruption and political violence led to lower numbers of women being elected to parliament (Asiedu and Claire Branstette: Neepa Gaekwad-Babulal 2022). These findings raise questions about the interplay between these two factors, specifically whether women's participation in politics reduces corruption, or whether the existence of corruption hinders women's political participation.

While the causality of this relationship is still debated, several possible explanations for the correlation between increasing female political representation and lower levels of corruption have been proposed. Theories include the notion that women are inherently more honest than men, that women are more risk-averse and thus less likely to engage in corrupt practices, and that voters are more likely to punish corruption when committed by men, which acts as a deterrent. If these theories hold true, the need for more women in leadership cannot be emphasized.

1. Financial and Cultural Barriers Exacerbated by Corruption

Financial constraints are another major impediment to women's leadership within liberalism. Running for a political office or attaining higher professional positions often requires substantial financial resources, which many women lack because of economic disparities (Letouzé, Spinardi and al 2021). Political campaigns are notoriously expensive and require substantial financial resources for activities, such as marketing, logistics, staffing, and voter outreach . In Liberia, women often find themselves at a disadvantage because of systemic economic disparities (Mahesh Karra; Mitja Del Bono; Joshua Wilde et al. 2023). Historically, men have been predominantly controlled for wealth and social status in Liberia . This economic disparity is rooted in the country's patriarchal society, in which men have traditionally been the primary breadwinners and business owners . Since the founding of Liberian society, men have led as heads of state, business moguls, and influential community



figures, leaving women with fewer opportunities to accumulate wealth. This historical exclusion from economic power translates directly into political arenas where financial capital is crucial for campaign success.

A study by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) highlighted that female candidates often struggle to finance their campaigns, which diminishes their competitiveness against their male counterparts (Chirillo 2019). The lack of financial backing not only limits their ability to promote their platforms effectively but also affects their perceived legitimacy among voters who equate wealth with capability and influence. Corruption is another significant barrier hampering this process. Corruption in politics can take many forms, from vote buying to misuse of public funds for personal gain. In Liberia, political corruption is pervasive and entrenched, affecting all levels of the government (Johnston 2016). Women who already face financial and social barriers often find it even more challenging to navigate corrupt environments. The costs associated with corruption, such as bribes and kickbacks, are additional financial burdens that women are less able to bear than their male counterparts. This has a significant effect on women running political offices. The corrupt political environment in Liberia discourages qualified women from running for office (Fallah 2021). The need to engage in corrupt practices to secure votes or political favors is often antithetical to the values and principles that many women uphold. Furthermore, women who attempt to expose or challenge corruption risk face severe backlash, including threats and violence (Transparency International, 2019).

Women's underrepresentation in politics is not merely a contemporary issue, but is deeply embedded in the nation's socio-political fabric. Historical exclusion from political processes means that women lack the same political networks and mentorship opportunities men enjoy (Goetz 2003). As political capital is often built through connections and experience, this historical disadvantage continues to impede women's progress (J. M. Kiamba 2008). To make matters worse, societal norms and gender roles significantly influence this process (VERVEER M. 2013). These cultural norms shape voters' behaviors and attitudes towards female political candidates. Women are often subjected to greater scrutiny regarding their personal lives, particularly marital status and motherhood. For instance, a woman's candidacy might be more acceptable if she is married or has children, as this aligns with the traditional gender expectations (Kamara 2019). Conversely, such personal aspects are rarely scrutinized by male candidates, underscoring a significant double standard. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports that gender bias in voter behavior is a significant barrier to women's political participation in many developing countries, including Liberia (UNDP 2020). Voters often harbor preconceived notions that men are more capable leaders, which affects women's electability. This bias is compounded by the media, which often portrays female politicians in less favorable light than their male counterparts.

Various legislative measures have been proposed and implemented in response to gender disparities. One such measure is the memorandum of



understanding to ensure a 30% representation of women in political positions. While this is a step in the right direction, it is insufficient to achieve true gender parity. Quotas can provide a necessary starting point for increasing women's representation; however, they do not address the underlying issues of financial disparity and societal norms (Freidenvall 2015). For quotas to be effective, they must be accompanied by comprehensive support systems, including financial assistance, mentorship programs, and public awareness campaigns, to shift societal perceptions of women in leadership roles.

IV. Solutions to Addressing the Imbalance

1. Strengthening Legal Framework and Quota

Strengthening the implementation and enforcement of the existing 30% quota for women's representation in political parties is the first step towards ensuring equality in the legislature. The National Election Commission (NEC) must ensure that pre-electoral education reflects gender-sensitive messages, including citizens' attitudes towards women's political candidates. Implementation of the gender quota should not be left political; it must be a prerequisite to the parties' participation in electoral processes. Despite the quota, only two political parties adhered to ensuring the representation of women.

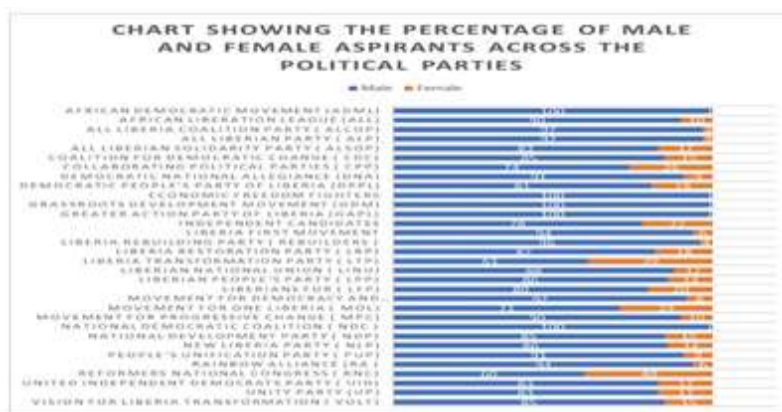


Figure 3: Source: Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa
ELSA

2. Training and Capacity-Building

Addressing the imbalance in leadership in Liberia requires a multi-faceted approach, with a significant emphasis on early training for women who aspire to become leaders. While advocating for equal representation is crucial, it is equally important to ensure that women in leadership positions are well-qualified and capable of performing independently and effectively. To achieve this, robust training programmes must be established to prepare women for future leadership roles. These programs should focus on essential areas, such as public service, public speaking, self-confidence building, and other basic skills necessary for public offices. Early



training can provide women with the competencies required to navigate the complexities of political and public administration. If women are not adequately trained before elections, they might shy away from seeking public office because of their lack of confidence and preparedness. Even if they are selected for leadership roles without proper training, they may struggle to perform effectively, which could undermine the overall goal of achieving meaningful and impactful gender parity in leadership.

Therefore, robust training programs for professional women must be at the center of the government's priority. These initiatives should aim to build a pipeline of qualified female leaders ready to take on public roles with confidence and competence.

Another critical solution to address the leadership imbalance in Liberia is the development of strong networks and coalitions among women leaders. Building such networks can provide a support system that fosters collaboration, mentorship, and advocacy among women in politics and public services. Networks can work together to increase the visibility of women leaders in the media and public discourse, challenge stereotypes, and promote positive role models for future generations.

V. Conclusion

To effectively address the imbalance in leadership in Liberia, it is crucial to establish a corruption-free system and to strictly penalize corrupt officials. This requires strong political will and restructuring of existing laws to create a more equitable environment for women. Given that men often have greater access to a country's resources, it is unjust to implement one-size-fits-all laws and policies. Therefore, tailored requirements should be developed for women seeking to join political parties while acknowledging the unique challenges they face. Additionally, support for female candidates during elections should be more substantial than that for their male counterparts, recognizing the need to level the playing field. This may include increased financial support, access to resources, and targeted training programs. By adapting laws and policies to specifically address these disparities, Liberia can create a more just and equitable political landscape that promotes the equal participation and representation of women in leadership roles.

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