



IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA

A Documentary by
Daniel Junge, Siatta Scott-Johnson,
Henry Ansbacher and Jonathan Stack

DISCUSSION GUIDE

She's already overcome tremendous obstacles to become the first woman ever elected president in Africa—now all she has to do is turn around Liberia—a country devastated by unemployment, debt, corruption, and the legacy of civil war. Follow Ellen Johnson Sirleaf through her first year in office as she faces angry mobs, ambitious political rivals, and high-ranking members of the international community. Her story is inspiring a new generation of leaders in Africa and around the world.



FROM THE FILMMAKER

When producer Henry Ansbacher and I look back on how, weeks before her inauguration, we learned we might have access to the first days of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's term in office as Liberia's president, it's funny to think how, at the time, we thought this might make for an interesting short film. One year and 500 taped hours later, IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA proved to be more than just an interesting short film.

This indeed was appetizing subject matter for a filmmaker—a chance not only to see the inner workings of government at the highest level, but also an opportunity to explore the resonant subjects of female leadership, post-conflict re-development and democracy in the developing world. Perhaps most importantly, it offered an opportunity to witness—as our other producer Jonathan Stack calls it—“the most unabashedly positive story to come out of Africa since Nelson Mandela.” This comes from a producer whose last experience in Liberia was dodging bullets during the country's brutal civil war.

The door cracked open for us to film the president's inauguration for two weeks, and we firmly wedged our foot in that door, ultimately filming for a year with our Liberian crew. Often filming IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA proved to be an exercise in self-discipline. The task of simply keeping the camera steady and in focus, while remaining neutral to the significance of what we were shooting, was, to say the least, difficult. Not only were we privy to the inner workings of government at a level allowed to few in film history, and witnessing history being made by Africa's first female president, we were also fortunate to be present at critical and possibly history-changing moments in President Sirleaf's first dramatic year. So it was with difficulty that we had to anesthetize ourselves to these realizations just to keep the camera in focus.

As much as this proved a difficult task for our non-Liberian crew, for our Liberian co-director Siatta Johnson it was an even greater challenge. Here is a woman who, like most Liberians, lost everything during the country's wars. Now, in Sirleaf's presidency, she sees her first prospect for a “normal” life (a very low bar, measured by Western standards). “I'm not a partisan,” she often said, but we would catch her smiling when filming the president.

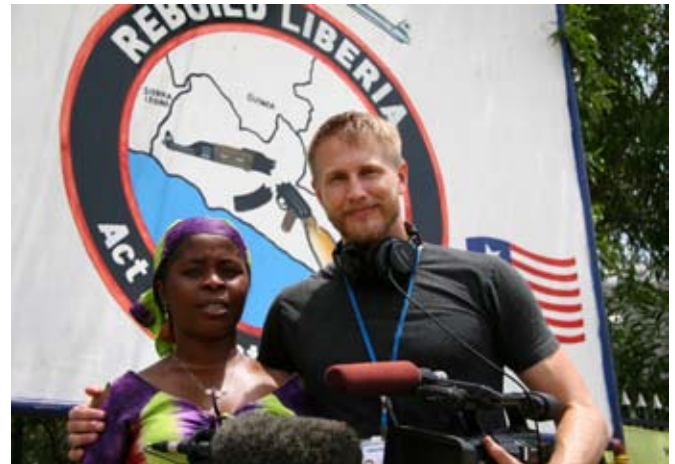
Like the best of politicians, President Sirleaf is adept at constantly reacting to her environment, and yet she was able to disregard our presence, even at moments in which her leadership may have appeared fragile. While, for the most part, she ignored our cameras (a blessing for filmmakers), producer Jonathan Stack told me that there would come a time when the president would give us “a conspiratorial look”—when she would be willing not only to let us film, but also bring us into her process. “Then,” Jonathan said, “then we'll know we've got a film.”

That moment came towards the end of production, in a heated conversation between the president and representatives of the World Bank regarding Liberia's debt relief. At a particularly rancorous moment the president looked my way. It was at a moment like this when typically we would be invited to leave the meeting. But this look was different. This look was to make sure we were rolling—a conspiratorial look—before she leveled into the men.

Indeed, we knew then we had a film.

Personally I'm honored to have been a witness and, hopefully, to have appropriately documented this critical chapter in African history, thus helping to open a wider dialogue on the themes mentioned above. While it's easy to become a cheerleader for Ellen as she confronts her Herculean tasks, I don't want the film to be agitprop for her nor against the dominant model in African politics, but rather for viewers to appreciate the complexity of the situation, including our complicity as Westerners. That viewers ask their own questions, not the least of which would be: Are women intrinsically better leaders than men? I have my answer to that one, but I expect audiences will come up with their own.

- Daniel Junge



Siatta Scott Johnson and Daniel Junge

THE FILM

On its surface, *IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA*, an hour-long documentary, is a straightforward profile of a remarkable woman: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia. A former political prisoner (for having criticized the previous governments of both Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor) Sirleaf took office in January 2006 facing the immense challenge of repairing the social and economic fabric of a country torn apart by years of civil war.

The film takes viewers behind the scenes of government operations to reveal a complex balancing act between optimism and frustration. Sirleaf, the first elected female head of state in all of Africa, appointed many women to top positions, including cabinet posts and chief of police. While there is a sense that this new kind of leadership might lead to a new kind of success for the country, the obstacles are significant. A battered infrastructure, 90 percent unemployment, debt that far exceeds the country's GDP, widespread corruption and ongoing factional tensions are only a few of the seemingly insurmountable problems that they must resolve.

Selected People Featured in *IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA*

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf – President of the Republic of Liberia

Beatrice Munah Sieh – Chief of Police

Antoinette Sayeh – Minister of Finance

Edwin Snowe, Jr. – Former Speaker of the House, outspoken opponent of President Sirleaf

IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA invites viewers to ask the same questions that are on the minds of many Liberians: What will it take for the Sirleaf government to succeed in its attempt to rebuild this devastated nation? Will the women in power act differently than male predecessors? Are women especially well suited to healing the rifts necessary to solidify Liberia's democracy and preserve peace? And, can change happen rapidly enough to stave off more armed conflict?



BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT LIBERIA

Located on the coast of western Africa, Liberia was established as a republic in 1847 by freed slaves from the United States. Its approximately 3.3 million people identify as Christian (40 percent), Muslim (20 percent), and followers of indigenous religious traditions (40 percent). With a climate favorable for many types of agriculture, the country is potentially rich in resources like timber and rubber.

However, two civil wars have left the country's economy and infrastructure in ruins. In 1980, Samuel Doe's military coup ended more than a century of dominance by the minority Americo-Liberians over the majority indigenous population. After nearly a decade of authoritarian rule, Doe's government was toppled by rebels, leaving the country with at least three separate armed factions. By 1997, the country was stable enough to conduct elections, and rebel leader Charles Taylor acceded to power, winning 75 percent of the vote. Major fighting erupted again in 2000, in part because of corruption and human rights violations associated with Taylor's government.

Three years later a peace agreement sent Taylor into exile, and the United Nations established a Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to help rebuild the struggling nation and reintegrate rebel soldiers into a civilian economy. Fifteen thousand UN peacekeeping forces disarmed more than 100,000 rebels and brought enough stability to conduct national elections, but not before the civil wars had claimed more than 200,000 lives and displaced a million people.

In 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Harvard-trained economist, won the democratic presidential election. Her government has been diligent in its pursuit of foreign economic help and has enjoyed a few successes, including debt forgiveness by its largest creditor, the United States. However, aid from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank has been slow to materialize and may come with strings that Liberians are unwilling to accept. Thus far, the Sirleaf government has kept disputes in check, but the threat that former rebels might reignite civil war continues to simmer just below the surface.

Sources: whydemocracy.net; CIA World Factbook



BACKGROUND ON ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF

Ellen Johnson was born on October 29, 1938 in Monrovia, Liberia. She was a descendant of former American slaves who were the original colonists of Liberia, a privileged class known as Americo-Liberians. As a youth she studied accounting and economics. In 1961, after marriage at age 17 to James Sirleaf, she went to the U.S., continuing her study in economics at the University of Colorado and the University of Wisconsin. In 1971, she earned a Masters in Public Administration from Harvard. She is a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, the first sorority founded by and for African American women. She was also a founding board member of the International Institute for Women in Political Leadership. Now divorced, Sirleaf is the mother of four boys and grandmother of six children.

Political Career

1972-1973 / Sirleaf returned to Liberia from the U.S. to serve as Minister of Finance in the administration of William Tolbert. She left the government after a disagreement over public spending.

1980 / Under Tolbert, Liberia's one-party state became increasingly polarized, to the benefit of the Americo-Liberian elite. Samuel Doe, a member of the indigenous Krahn ethnic group, seized power in a military coup. Tolbert and several members of his cabinet were executed by firing squad. Sirleaf fled to Kenya.

1982-1985 / Sirleaf served as vice president of Citibank's Africa Regional Office in Nairobi, Kenya.

1985 / Sirleaf returned to Liberia following a reinstatement of political parties by the Doe government. When she ran for senate in opposition to the Doe administration she was arrested and sentenced to 10 years for speaking out against the government. She served a short part of that sentence and then was allowed to leave the country.

1986-1992 / In exile, Sirleaf served as vice president at Equator Bank in Washington, D.C.

1990-1996 / Samuel Doe was assassinated by forces loyal to Charles Taylor, starting what would be an on-again-off-again 15-year civil war.

1992-1997 / While Taylor was in power, Sirleaf served as director of the United Nations Development Program Regional Bureau for Africa and as a senior loan officer at the World Bank.

1997 / By 1996, UN peacekeepers had enforced a ceasefire in the ongoing civil war, paving the way for elections. Although she had originally supported Charles Taylor's overthrow of Doe's government, Sirleaf returned to Liberia to contest for leadership, garnering 10 percent of the vote in her losing bid to Taylor, who won with 75 percent of the vote. For campaigning against Taylor, Sirleaf was tried for treason and again went into exile.

2003 / Civil war returned during Taylor's administration, eventually spilling over into neighboring nations. International interests pressured Taylor to step down. He ultimately agreed to hand over power to his deputy and he went into exile in Nigeria, accused of human rights violations and other crimes. The interim government signed a peace accord with rebel groups. They considered installing Sirleaf as president, but chose instead the more neutral Charles Gyude Bryant. Sirleaf was still perceived by some as affiliated with the elitist oppression of the Tolbert government.

2004-2005 / Sirleaf spearheaded government reform as head of Liberia's Commission on Good Governance.

2005 / Liberia conducts its first democratic elections in nearly a decade, resulting in Sirleaf's election as president on the Unity Party line. She defeated popular soccer player George Weah, who initially contested the elected results, though observers declared the election fair. Her platform emphasized the need for an end to the social inequalities between indigenous Liberians and Americo-Liberians. She has rejected the accusation that she is simply another leader representing the privileged minority class of slave descendants saying, "If such a class existed, it has been obliterated over the last few years from intermarriages and social integration."

Sources: <http://people.africadatabase.org/en/profile/2655.html>; <http://africanhistory.about.com/od/liberia/p/Sirleaf.htm>; www.agendaforafrica



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

General

- If you could ask the Liberian president a question, what would you ask her and why?
- Prior to viewing the film, what was your image of Liberia? What were your sources of information? In what ways did the film challenge or confirm your ideas?

Politics

- Consider President Sirleaf's actions in the following situations:
 - Firestone workers demonstrating to receive a promised wage hike
 - Former soldiers blocking streets in the capital, Monrovia, to receive promised retirement benefits
 How would you describe Sirleaf's style of problem-solving? In your view, what are the strengths and weaknesses of her approach?
- When police arrest the leader of an opposition demonstrator, Sirleaf orders his immediate release saying, "We don't need to make a hero out of anybody for nothing." Yet Sirleaf also recognizes that "dissent can be dangerous," especially in a fragile democracy. In your view, was Sirleaf's decision to release the opposition leader more likely to strengthen or weaken Liberia's democracy?
- In the film, viewers see Sirleaf and her Finance Minister asking for help from international organizations. What are the responsibilities, if any, of people outside Liberia to help the Sirleaf government rebuild the nation? How might other nations benefit from stability in Liberia?
- In what ways, if any, does Liberia's unique connection to the United States influence American responsibility to provide aid to the struggling nation? Should the United States force Liberia to choose between receiving American aid and receiving aid and investment from the Chinese government? Why or why not?
- If you were a member of Sirleaf's cabinet, how would you advise her to deal with the following problems? Explain your reasoning:
 - Government employees charging inappropriate fees to "expedite" passport applications
 - Using limited funds to pay former soldiers promised retirement benefits to stave off potentially violent protests or using those funds to help villagers who suffered loss of property and life at the hands of those former soldiers
 - Risk losing a key employer by forcing Firestone to grant its workers a large wage increase promised by the former government, or deny poverty-level workers their raise but keep jobs in the country and foreign companies interested in possible future investments

- The filmmaker observes that, "The citizens of Liberia are not used to hearing the truth from politicians and people in power." What is the effect on democracy when citizens do not trust their government to tell them the truth?
- What is Sirleaf's responsibility to fulfill promises made by the former government of Charles Taylor? What are the possible consequences of governments choosing to ignore the promises made by previous administrations?
- What do you learn from Liberia about democracy? How is an emerging democracy like Liberia similar to and/or different from an established democracy? How is the nation similar to or different from other emerging democracies?

Gender

- In your view, what role does gender play in what President Sirleaf is and is not able to accomplish in her first few months in office? What might make a government run by women different from a government run by men? Does it matter if women are in positions of government power? Why or why not?
- Some people believe that women are more natural peacemakers than men. How might this view empower women? How might it limit them?
- What do Sirleaf supporters mean when they describe their president as the "Iron Lady"? What is the significance of everyday Liberians addressing Sirleaf as "Ma"?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin with these suggestions:

- Host a forum for local women who hold (or have held) political office to speak about their experience and to encourage other women to run for office.
- Convene a study group on the history of Liberia. Find public ways to share what you learn, perhaps as part of a Juneteenth celebration or a library exhibit for Black History Month (February).
- Find a local group working on human rights issues and inquire about what you can do to support their efforts.
- Contact the World Bank or similar organizations and urge them to do what they can to help Liberia rebuild its infrastructure and economy.

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens, the website of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station

Before you leave this event, commit yourself to pursuing one item from the brainstorm list.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY & ACTION

About Liberia

www.unmil.org - The United Nations Mission to Liberia was originally tasked with helping to maintain a ceasefire, including disarming rebel forces and helping to rebuild Liberia's security structure, including its police force. It has also helped to establish the civil structure necessary to conduct elections and guarantee human rights.

www.liberianonline.com/ - The purpose of this website is to facilitate communication among Liberians across the globe and help keep them informed about what is happening in Liberia. Non-Liberians will find the general information about Liberia helpful.

<http://allafrica.com/liberia/> - All Africa, an online news distributor focused on stories from Africa, provides easy access to current events reporting from Liberia.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1043500.stm - This BBC site provides general background information on Liberia from a Western perspective, including links to recent news stories and a profile of President Sirleaf.

Women and Politics

www.idea.int/gender/ - The website of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance includes a special section on the role of women in establishing and sustaining stable democracies. Search on "Sirleaf" for specific references to Liberia.

www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/statistics.htm - A quick reference for statistics related to women and politics.

www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/index.html - The Center for Women's Global Leadership facilitates women's leadership in human rights and social justice initiatives.

IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES INDEPENDENT LENS ON MARCH 18, 2008 AT 9 PM. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

Iron Ladies of Liberia is a co-production of Just Media and Gabriel Films and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). The Emmy Award-winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved.