

# Feminist Strike: Liberia

by Pamela Scully

**Abstract:** This paper examines the notion of feminist strike in reference to women peacemakers in Liberia. It argues that women's actions to bring an end to the war both instantiates normative notions of the feminist strike and expands them. Drawing on literature which points to a long history of Liberian women organizing as women with special roles and responsibilities in society, the paper invites us to adopt a broad understanding of the feminist strike. It also suggests that women's mobilization around the concept of a sex strike to force the end of war in the early 2000s, was a powerful and savvy move which criticised sexual violence in wartime, leveraged international attention, and also highlighted, if implicitly, the issue of sexual rights in marriage.

**Keywords:** African feminism; Liberia; resistance; sex strike; sexual violence; war

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Veronica Gago and Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar argue that we can think of the emergence of the feminist strike as a particular form of protest that transforms the notion of “riot” and creates a new type of “political technology of social struggle” (2020). I am particularly interested in what this notion of a new political technology means for societies where much of the population is illiterate and where heterogenous concepts of politics coexist. What constitutes “feminist strike” is of course time and place specific. If we are to think about this concept across borders, being open to a capacious understanding of the term becomes necessary. A broad notion of the term ‘feminist strike’ encompasses women acting together according to principles defined in part by local understandings of gender and gender roles, and collectively refusing to perform their usual duties in order to protest against how they are treated, as well as to make larger claims about the need for justice. This reading allows for multiple interpretations of feminism and ‘feminist’ and also allows that some women’s agency might never be fully captured by the term feminist (Campillo 2019).

It is with these provocations in mind that I interrogate women’s protests in Liberia, particularly around the end of the civil war in the early 2000s. Liberia is a state on the west coast of Africa with a complex colonial history linked to the United States.<sup>1</sup> Liberia officially became a country in 1847, with the capital, Monrovia, named in honour of American president James Monroe. Until 1980 descendants of people tracing their lineages back to the USA, known as Americo-Liberians, ruled the country while relegating indigenous Liberians, who still make up the vast majority of the population, to second if not third-class citizenship status. Culturally, Americo-Liberians looked to the US for inspiration including encouraging women’s education to some extent. One of Liberia’s most famous women, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, exemplifies the possibilities for elite women. She attended an elite school in the capital, received an MA from Harvard, and was a minister in successive administrations. But for most Liberian women, local trade and agriculture remain their predominant occupations.

The world of the Liberian elites crumbled in 1980 with the coup orchestrated by Staff Sargent Samuel Doe who was Mandingo, not Americo-Liberian. For the next twenty-three years more or less, Liberia was ravaged by brutality and instability, including two civil wars, which were still raging in the early 2000s. By 2002, about 200,000 people had died, and the war was marked by incredible brutality, including the extensive use of child soldiers and sexual torture. Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, who was president at that time, is now in prison for his part in the blood diamonds trade and crimes against humanity committed during the civil war in Sierra Leone.

Women engaged in a number of collective actions during the war, including, in 2001, through the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), trying to get leaders of Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone to meet in Morocco to find conditions for peace. Leaders also organized collaborations between different religious women's communities across the Christian and Muslim divide through the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) (Gbowee 2011).

In early 2003, women were at the end of their tether. Women of various faith communities came together to try to force an end to the war (Fuest 2009). A key leader was Leymah Gbowee, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her efforts. On April 1, 2003, women of different faiths gathered at the fish market in the capital of Monrovia to call for peace. They chose that venue as President Charles Taylor's cavalcade passed it daily. The women assembled wearing white, the sign of peace, to demand that male leaders end the war. In a society where only some 56 percent of the population was literate, wearing white, the sign of pre-war Christian traditions as well as peace, and showing solidarity through the power of female bodies sitting together, helped telegraph the importance of the movement to everyone.

As part of that protest, Gbowee led women in a sex strike in which women committed to not having sex with their partners until peace came. As Gbowee writes in her autobiography, the group broadcast this decision over the radio saying that "because men were involved in the fighting and women weren't, we were encouraging women to withhold sex as a way to persuade their partners to end the war. The message was that while the fighting continued, no one was innocent—not doing anything to stop it made you guilty" (Gbowee 2011).

According to Gbowee, women in the rural areas were more organized and framed their strike in religious terms saying that "they wouldn't have sex until we saw God's face for peace." The strike lasted for some months and though Gbowee says it did not bring an end to the war, it was highly successful in focusing media attention on the war and the women's peace movement.

Later in April 2003, the women met with Taylor and argued for the need for peace. The women's movement continued to pressure Taylor as well as other warlords by disrupting air traffic by laying down on the runways and occupying the parking lot of the capitol (Moran 2012). Their pervasive presence and persistence helped lead to the peace talks in Accra, Ghana in July 2003. Again, frustrated at the slow pace of discussions, Gbowee and other women occupied the building and refused to leave until the warlords concluded negotiations. When such work did not get results, Gbowee threatened to take off her clothes. The chief mediator, the Ghanaian president, then came out to negotiate with the women, who agreed to leave as long as the peace talks actually started making progress. On August 11, the peace deal was concluded. And finally, after an interim government, and an election, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became president of Liberia, the first elected woman president in Africa in January 2006, and served two terms (Scully 2016).

There are multiple registers in which one can interpret the women's peace movement in Liberia and the way women mobilized. Firstly, it can be read as a classic case of women's organizing work across religious and economic contexts through appeal to shared values and outrage. Secondly, the principle that women are viable organizers for peace draws validity from a notion of the special power and identity of women as mothers rather than warriors which women have used strategically for political mobilization (Van Allen 2008; Whetstone 2013). As various authors have shown, Liberian women's activism must be read within the context of gender roles in indigenous Liberian societies, many of which have strong traditions of female leadership either in secret societies, or, in some cases, as chiefs. Mary Moran argues that Liberian women's willingness to engage in forms of collective action owes something to the importance of the dual sex political system in West Africa (Moran 1989). Men and women occupy very specific places in society with attendant expectations on the roles that they perform and represent: thus, Moran argues that the peace movement instantiates the fact that Liberian women do not see men as able to represent them politically

and are eager and willing to represent women as a collective (Moran 1989).

I think another register of Liberian women's resistance affirms the kind of political theatre outlined by Gago and Gutiérrez Aguilar (2020). The nature of protests, including the sex strike and Gbowee's threat to disrobe, are also part of particular forms of women's resistance across the continent with long histories, though refashioned in new contexts, in which women show their displeasure towards men who violate norms or behave beyond the pale. This includes various forms of collective action such as "sitting on a man" (Van Allen 1972). Strikes by women have a history of being used against men as a collective—for example if men did not fulfill duties expected of men as a group, such as clearing a market, then the women would refuse to cook. Women going naked also was, and is, a way of shaming men, with it being particularly insulting if done by a post-menopausal woman who are accorded status as elders (Ebila and Tripp 2020; Diabate 2022). Thus, we can understand the strike in Liberia as part of a long and wide history of activism by women as women. I argue that it can also be seen as a feminist strike in a specific sense: law in Liberia, both before the war and after, does not recognize marital rape. The Liberian senate refused to include marital rape as part of the passing of the new rape law which came into effect early in 2006. It is expected, at least legally, that if a man wants sex his wife has to agree to it. Also, while exact figures are in doubt, sexual violence was a key feature of the Liberian civil wars. Singling out sex as a bargaining tool for peace was an insightful and incisive intervention: it laid a case for women's autonomy, and it tied the intimate and personal to the political. Focusing on sex as something to be negotiated resonated in the larger Liberian cultural landscape as well as in the specificity of the war.

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