

20 *Transformative leadership in Africa: Lessons from Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's leadership stints in Liberia*

Kazeem Ajasa Badaru and Emmanuel Olusola Adu

Overview

Africa is in dire need of transformative leadership to overcome the leadership deficits militating against sustainable development. Using a narrative literature review approach, this chapter engages perspectives on transformative leadership theory and analyses lessons from Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's leadership in postconflict Liberia. Findings reveal that Sirleaf contributed to the transformation of her country through activism, reconciliation, peacebuilding, and reconstruction of democratic institutions, which ultimately redirected the country to a path of sustainable peace and democracy. This chapter also highlights lessons for prospective and serving leaders in Africa. Without writing an account that smacks of hagiography, the chapter concludes that as president, Sirleaf demonstrated leadership that was not only exemplary, but also transformative, even though her approach was not flawless, and accusations of nepotism and human rights failings were levelled against her.

Introduction

The need for peace and security for Africa's development calls for leadership that turns the fortunes of the continent (Rylander, 2010). While there are African countries such as Angola, South Africa, Botswana, Tanzania, Ghana, and Mauritius, among others, whose leaders have shown visionary and transformative capacities (Rylander, 2010), several others are still grappling with enormous leadership challenges. In light of these challenges, African states launched a 50-year transformative vision in May 2013, *Agenda 2063*, subtitled *The Africa We Want* (Bukusi, 2020, p. 85). It is a 'blueprint and master plan for transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future' (African Union, 2020, para. 1). As Sholle, Papa, and Kipkorir (2019) note, leadership is a crucial means to accomplishing this lofty agenda and, more importantly, transformative leadership is required for Africa to solve the continent's myriad challenges. This corroborates Rylander's (2010) critical view that the transformation of the continent is possible only if the question of bad or poor leadership is addressed across Africa. In addition, the majority of the so-called 'bad' leaders, both in Africa and across the world, have been men (Annan, 2020) and some may argue

that one potential solution is to have more women leaders. For example, Tripp (2003) demonstrates how women have organised for peace in war-torn countries such as Rwanda, Congo, Sudan, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Liberia.

In the case of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf emerged as the first female president in Africa and served for two terms. Mikell (2009) claims that Liberians believed that only a woman could put things in order and transition the country from a conflict-ridden nation to a peacefully governed and democratic one. Mikell goes on to argue how Sirleaf's legitimacy manifested in always separating herself from discredited political elites who had previously ruled Liberia, and by being a newcomer in the polity. Moreover, there is also a belief held by people of Africa that women are generally more responsive to the needs and aspirations of people (Mikell, 2009). Sirleaf became president when citizens' expectations were enormously high (Cook, 2007). She wielded presidential power for 12 years in a country that had suffered decades of socioeconomic deprivation, civil conflict, and tyranny. There is no doubt that she left a legacy of rebuilding infrastructure, improving healthcare services and education, and bringing Charles Taylor, a notorious warlord, to justice. She also led Liberia through the precarious times of the Ebola epidemic of 2014–2015 (Lane, 2016).

Conversely, Afrobarometer researchers Isbell and Jacobs (2017) assert that Sirleaf's leadership was regarded by Liberians as unsatisfactory and negative from the end of her first term until midway through her second term in office. More specifically, citizens expressed dissatisfaction concerning 'unemployment, infrastructure, economic management, education, and agriculture' (Isbell & Jacobs, 2017, p. 1). In fairness to Sirleaf, she also admitted that her first term as president was spent laying a solid foundation for postwar recovery and reconstruction (Adebajo, 2014). Following a youth protest against her re-election in November 2011, she reassured Liberians in her January 2012 inauguration speech that her second term was for delivery of governance in four key challenging areas: youth joblessness, the inadequacy of education for youth, insecurity, and national reconciliation (Adebajo, 2014). Scully (cited in Smith, 2016) notes that Sirleaf is respected internationally, but remains a contentious and divisive personality in her own country. Despite these mixed assessments, she was internationally recognised as the 'Iron lady' of Africa for playing a leading role in the promotion of freedom, peace, justice, democracy, rule of law, and the empowerment of women.

The broader question is how far did her leadership role, as evident in the struggles for freedom, peace, social justice, and democratic rule, as well as women's empowerment, advance the transformation of Liberia? Another salient question for this study is what lessons about leadership can be learned for prospective and serving leaders in Africa? This chapter specifically seeks to address questions that touch on elements of transformative leadership theory, on which basis

Sirleaf's leadership performance in Liberia is interrogated with a view to drawing out relevant lessons for the benefit of leaders in Africa, especially young Africans aspiring to become not just leaders, but transformative ones. These are the concerns addressed in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Finding out about Sirleaf

This chapter used a narrative literature review approach consisting of critical analyses of scientific articles in print or electronic journals and books, following Rother (2007). Information was gathered mainly through databases, which included Google Scholar, ResearchGate, EBSCOHost, and AJOL. The search was conducted using a combination of search terms, such as transformative leadership, Africa, political transformation, Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, leadership, success, challenges, and criticisms, within the timeframe 2003 to 2021. The reviewed documents included journal articles, memoirs, speeches, and other online reports on Sirleaf's political career. An initial 189 articles were sifted to 44 relevant documents. The criteria for inclusion were those articles that primarily addressed leadership actions – both those acclaimed and criticised – and were based on the extraction of ideas that coherently fit into the narratives of this study. These were then analysed by considering their alignment with the theory of transformative leadership. While the narrative literature review is a viable approach to research synthesis (Ferrari, 2015), its limitations include, among others, the fact that the assumptions and the planning process are not often known, selection and evaluation biases are not known, and studies based on this methodology are not reproducible (Rumrill & Fitzgerald, 2001).

The lens of transformative leadership

The term 'transformative leadership' has been used by several scholars based on the theory of transformational leadership (Kuğuoğlu & Küçük, 2012; Regier, 2017), while others use transformational leadership and transformative leadership interchangeably and synonymously (Grin, Hassink, Karadzic, & Moors, 2018; Tatlal & Aslam, 2012). Transformative leadership is believed to have roots in the work of Burns (cited in Stephenson, 2011) and has largely drawn on the theoretical works of other authors (Stephenson, 2011). Tatlal and Aslam (2012, p. 557) contend that 'transformative leadership is leadership that is willing to realign structures and relationships to achieve genuine and sustainable change'. The main focus of transformative leadership is to bring about transformation through realignment of political structures and social relationships for the attainment of justice, equity, and democratic development. Shields (cited in Bukusi, 2020, p. 86) opines that '[t]ransformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and addresses both individual and public good'.

Shields's perspective resonates with that of Weiner (2003, p. 89), who posits that transformative leadership is concerned with the exercise of power and authority, beginning with 'questions of justice, democracy, and the dialectic between individual accountability and social responsibility'. Shields (2010, p. 562) identifies seven major elements of transformative leadership in the literature as follows:

a combination of both critique and promise; attempts to effect both deep and equitable changes; deconstruction and reconstruction of the knowledge frameworks that generate inequity; acknowledgment of power and privilege; emphasis on both individual achievement and the public good; a focus on liberation, democracy, equity, and justice; and finally, evidence of moral courage and activism.

These transformative leadership elements provide the theoretical basis and framework upon which the leadership traits and performances of Sirleaf are investigated, interrogated, extracted, analysed, and synthesised to set standards of leadership that could inspire and motivate other leaders, especially young ones, in Africa. More importantly, these elements encapsulate all the dimensions of transformative leadership perspectives espoused by scholars such as Tatlal and Aslam (2012), Shields (cited in Bukusi, 2020), and Weiner (2003).

Weiner's (2003) transformative leadership idea emphasises the basic tenets of democratic practice, such as the fundamental rights of individuals to justice, fairness, equity, accountability, transparency, and social responsibilities. Reflecting on the question of justice, Odora Hoppers (2014, p. 25) believes that justice has two underlying and competing impulses: 'one a cry for revenge; the other for a rejection of the evil committed by others on our very own [African] people'. According to Stephenson (2011), transformative leadership identifies with the process and content of democracy as well as approaches that are very critical to leadership practices. Simply put, it is leadership 'built on a foundation of integrity...driven by self-awareness and a deep sense of purpose' aiming to address problems of inequity and improve the lives of other people, as well as make or influence positive change (Mastercard Foundation, 2014, p. 3). Jun (cited in Bukusi, 2020, p. 87) identifies 'critique, empathy, democracy, dialogue, courage, justice, commitment and equity' as the characteristics of transformative leadership.

Liberia in context: An overview of its political trajectories

Liberia was established first by the American Colonisation Society as an outpost for Black slaves in 1821. The Republic of Liberia, whose motto is 'The love of liberty brought us here', unlike several other African nations which struggled

through nationalist movements against their colonial masters, became the first Black African country to declare its independence on 26 July 1847, almost a century before independence struggles earnestly commenced on the continent. The history of this West African country predates Black migrant settlement, but has been characterised by migrations, wars, exiles, and diasporic returns (Pailey, 2021). William V. S. Tubman, the longest serving president, was president from 1944 until his death in 1971. His successor, William Tolbert, was killed in a military coup led by a 25-year-old master sergeant, Samuel Kanyon Doe, in 1980. The military rule of Samuel Doe came to an end in 1985 following a democratic election that was marred by large-scale fraud and irregularities in an attempt to keep Doe in power. The emergence of the politically ambitious counter-revolutionary Charles Taylor, who had been trained in Libya, led to the launch of an armed rebellion from Côte d'Ivoire against Doe's regime in 1989. No fewer than 200 000 Liberians lost their lives, while an estimated 500 000 to 750 000 became internally displaced (Pailey, 2021). Charles Taylor was elected president in the 1997 election and soon became a despotic ruler. He was ousted in 2003 and went into exile in Nigeria, but was later convicted (26 April 2012) for crimes against humanity during Sierra Leone's civil war. An interim government was set up in Liberia in 2003 which conducted the 2005 election that produced the first female president for the continent of Africa, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, officially sworn in as the 24th Liberian head of state in 2006.

Dissecting the leadership performance of Sirleaf

This section reviews Sirleaf's performance as a transformative leader who worked hard to pull her country out of a political logjam, or what Williams (2006) describes as the 'heart of darkness', and the economic woes that were the result of a 14-year civil war. Ellen Eugenia Johnson was born on 29 October 1938 in Monrovia to a Gola father, Jahmale Johnson, and a Kru-German mother, Martha Dunbar. Her marriage to James Sirleaf in 1956, at the age of 17, produced four sons. She obtained a scholarship in 1961 to travel with her husband, who had also secured a scholarship, for graduate studies in the United States (Emejulu & Kalu, 2020; Sirleaf, E.J., 2009). Sirleaf studied accounting and public administration at Madison Business College and Harvard University in the United States. She started her public service career in Liberia at the Treasury Department, now the Ministry of Finance, and served as the assistant minister of finance (1972–1973) during the presidency of William Tolbert, and again as minister of finance (1980–1985) during the military dictatorship headed by Samuel K. Doe. She was given the moniker 'Iron Lady' for her insistence on fiscal discipline and prudence (due process) at the ministry (Pailey, 2014, p. 171). During the 2005 national election, she presented herself as a 'triple threat: educated, experienced, and female' as a strategy for winning the presidential race (Pailey, 2014, p. 170).

Performance in government

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf inaugurated a government run predominantly by policy experts, professionals, technocrats, and erstwhile opposition activists (Cook, 2007). Her government commenced work by addressing the issues of justice and reconciliation for a peaceful Liberia; this action was indicative of transformative leadership which, in the view of Shields (cited in Bukusi, 2020), begins with and addresses questions of justice and inequitable practices. Sirleaf acknowledged the significant role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Liberia (TRC-L) in the process of healing the nation and pledged her support for the process (Sirleaf, M., 2009). Efforts to seek reconciliation and build peace are important facets of rebuilding societies (Gorpudolo, 2019; Lederach, cited in Singh & Connolly, 2014).

The Truth and Reconciliation Act brought the TRC-L into existence in 2005, to address the nation's legacy of abuses of human rights during the civil wars and turbulent history from 1979 to 2003 (De Ycaza, 2013), ensure accountability, and promote reconciliation (Sirleaf, M., 2009). President Sirleaf appeared before the commission in February 2009, ostensibly for providing financial support to former warring factions. By the time the TRC-L's report was finalised in 2009, she was among the high-profile politicians and public servants recommended for a 30-year ban from public office for financing former president Charles Taylor's war crimes (Harris & Lappin, 2010). Unfortunately, this was an indictment on her leadership status, and led to opposition to the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to her in 2011. She apologised to the people of Liberia and went on to seek re-election for a second term as president. Her argument for staying in office was that implementing the ban would be an unconstitutional violation of her right to procedural due process, as she broke no law by supporting Taylor financially (Cheng, 2011).

President Sirleaf's response was tactical and diplomatic. She received the report with appreciation to the commissioners for their time and investigative work. She gave assurances that she was committed to responding to those recommendations that lived up to the commission's mission and mandate (Harris & Lappin, 2010). She restated her commitment to making a restorative rather than a vindictive response to people named as war criminals. Her commitment and moral courage was demonstrative of transformative leadership elements, namely the exercise of power for the attainment of peace, justice, and democratic development (Bukusi, 2020; Weiner, 2003). According to Emejulu & Kalu (2020), Sirleaf left behind enduring legacies in Liberia. Her peacebuilding efforts culminated in freedom of speech, equal rights for women, and rights to free, universal, and elementary education, all of which had suffered neglect and gross abuse during the period of civil conflict (Kieh, cited in Emejulu & Kalu, 2020). Her peace efforts also facilitated the inclusion of women in the decision-

making process and representation in governance, which was consistent with the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security of 2000, and the UN 2030 Agenda (Otieno, 2020). As the chairperson of the international association Mano River Union, Sirleaf's leadership similarly saw to the promotion of peace in neighbouring countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Sierra Leone (Cook, 2007).

Positive aspects of Sirleaf's leadership legacy

Research shows that Liberia undoubtedly went through transformation, especially during the first six years of Sirleaf's tenure, that created an enabling and safer environment for Liberians in the diaspora to return and re-engage in the socioeconomic and political reconstruction of their home country (Pailey, 2011). By the end of her first term in office, Liberia had significantly transformed, from a war-torn state to a nascent democracy with prospects for further growth in the economy (Sharpe, 2012). Her administration diligently executed the Poverty Reduction Strategy that provided jobs through training and vocational education programmes for the reduction of unemployment and the risks of returning to insurgencies (Sirleaf, 2011). She built a new national military of well-trained and professionalised men and women, effectively under the control of the country's Ministry of National Defence; carried out extensive police and judicial reforms to address small crimes and breakdown of order; and restored the citizens' sense of safety and security. In addition, the Sirleaf administration was able to secure debt relief for Liberia through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative of the International Monetary Fund (Sirleaf, 2011).

The rule of law and institutions for governance were strengthened through certain mechanisms for the promotion of freedoms of speech, individual rights to equality, women's rights to education, and protection against gender-based violence. Schools were rehabilitated and young Liberians, particularly child soldiers, were encouraged to return to school. Roads, hospitals, and clinics were rebuilt, while electricity and water supplies were restored and other infrastructural services were expanded (Sirleaf, 2011). Her administration also provided funds for market women and the building of new market structures with all the required modern facilities (Mikell, 2009). The administration was able to mobilise more than US\$16 billion in foreign direct investment. It also attracted over US\$5 million in private resources for funding of scholarships and capacity building, and the rehabilitation of schools, markets, and clinics. Sirleaf succeeded in negotiating external debt relief to the tune of US\$4.6 billion and lifting the embargo on trade transactions imposed on her country by the UN. She was also able to raise the country's annual budget from US\$80 million in 2006 to US\$672 million in 2012, with more than 7 per cent average yearly GDP growth (Mastercard Foundation, 2014). GDP per capita, as noted by

Otieno (2020), rose from US\$294.89 in 2005 to US\$698.70 in 2017. Research by Margaret Kruk and others, as well as official records of Liberia, indicate that the country witnessed a lot of improvements in sectors such as health, education, and security during Sirleaf's administration (Otieno, 2020). These observations on her leadership performance are consistent with Tatlah and Aslam's (2012) argument that transformative leadership is the willingness of a leader to support the realignment of political structures and social relationships for a genuine and sustainable change.

Corruption was one of her government's challenges. Sirleaf came into power with a visionary agenda for the transformation of the Liberian economy and sociopolitical space. The country's value system had been eroded by the institutionalised system of bad governance and a culture of rent-seeking behaviour that pervaded successive governments prior to the 2005 national elections (Sirleaf, 2011). The Sirleaf administration took on corruption by firing all appointees of the National Transitional Government of Liberia and announcing an audit of this government (Cook, 2007). It also sacked the workforce in the country's Ministry of Finance while awaiting outcomes of the screening exercise on workers' qualifications and state of propriety. When corruption thrives, no meaningful development will take place, and it remains doubtful, therefore, whether Sirleaf would have achieved anything tangible without first tackling the monster of corruption in the public sector. Although her administration cannot be exonerated from corrupt practices, she put in place a legal framework that sent the right signals to public servants: corruption was not going to be tolerated by the new government. It is important to note that although Sirleaf's administration drove hard to fight corruption, it was unable to stamp it out completely. Transformative leadership can be idealistic and set out to achieve reforms, but it does not have to achieve all its aims to be called transformative.

Negative aspects of Sirleaf's leadership legacy

Despite the achievements of the Sirleaf presidency, her administration was not without challenges and shortcomings. Sirleaf was confronted with a myriad of challenges in meeting high citizen expectations (Cook, 2007). Among these challenges were the urgent need for the restoration of peace and security, the revitalisation of the battered economy, and the rebuilding of governance and the rule of law (Sirleaf, 2011). Moreover, there were deficiencies in terms of financial, administrative, and technical capacities, as her administration was lacking in both human and material resources at the time of taking over the reins of government in 2006. For instance, there were 800 medical doctors available in the country at the start of the war in 1989, but this declined to 50 by 2003 (Sirleaf, 2011, p. 3). Sirleaf lamented the difficulties associated with post-war

reconstruction in Liberia, involving all sectors of the economy, security, basic services, infrastructure, governance, as well as the urgent need for national healing and reconciliation. She further emphasised the fact that most of Liberia's infrastructure had been destroyed and was in dire need of complete overhaul and reconstruction at the national and county levels. The economy was in a sharp decline. The nation's peace and security were threatened by the absence of functional security forces (military and police) as thousands of ex-combatants, who were not yet demobilised, resulted in a deluge of armed non-state actors (insurgents). The presence of UN peacekeeping troops provided essential security in the country.

Another major critique of the Sirleaf administration was that it overemphasised state-building to the detriment of nation-building. Pailey (2011, p. 16) succinctly explains how state-building differs from nation-building as follows:

While nation-building is 'people centric' and domestically driven, requiring national agency, ownership, and resources, state-building is 'institution centric' and externally driven, often soliciting international resources and involving some form of social engineering through a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

This was one of several administrative weaknesses. There were also allegations of deep-seated corruption inhibiting sustainable development in Liberia (Pailey, 2011). For instance, Sirleaf failed to ensure that private companies dealing in logwood were held accountable for payments to government. The judicial system had also collapsed, paving the way for endemic and systemic corruption. Sirleaf was particularly criticised for interfering with a criminal investigation that involved her son, Fombah Sirleaf, and the National Security Agency, in the case of Korean nationals whose money (US\$247 500) was illegally seized during a hotel raid without following due process (Bartuah, 2014). Another son, Charles Sirleaf, was also charged in 2019 with economic sabotage and corruption for unlawfully printing Liberian bank notes which amounted to US\$75 million (*BBC News*, 2019). All these acts were in contradiction of the ideals of transformative leadership, the foundation of which is built on integrity, individual accountability, and transparency.

Sirleaf was also accused of nepotism for appointing three of her sons in influential and strategic political offices: Fombah Sirleaf as the National Security Agency's director, Charles Sirleaf as the Central Bank of Liberia's deputy governor, and Robert Sirleaf as senior advisor to the president and later as the National Oil Company of Liberia's board chair (Pailey, 2014). Thus, Sirleaf too became guilty of practices similar to those of previous regimes that ran the Liberian government with the involvement of family members as private estates.

Other critics note that she had also failed to adopt ‘a feminist political economy’ as promoted by some organisations, including the Women’s International Leagues for Peace and Freedom (Otieno, 2020). This resulted in her failure to bridge the widened gaps between the ruling elite and the poor masses. Sirleaf was also criticised for her draconian and brutal response in handling the 2014 Ebola outbreak. One instance of this brutality was the shooting to death of a slum dweller who attempted to cross the government-imposed cordon (Otieno, 2020).

Her government equally faced a public backlash over the criminalisation of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people in Liberia. Due to her government’s discriminatory legislation against the rights of LGBTI persons in Liberia, there was even a call for the revocation of Sirleaf’s Nobel Peace Prize (Broch, 2012). In February 2012, the country’s legislative houses considered two bills for anti-LGBTI laws: one was seeking to extend the criminal penalty for same-sex practices to a felony punishable by up to five years in jail, while the second was to prohibit same-sex marriages. The executive government headed by Sirleaf appeared to be walking a tightrope concerning the rights of LGBTI Liberians (Sillah, 2017). On the one hand, she claimed to be defending her country’s traditional value system by supporting existing anti-homosexuality laws. On the other hand, she declined to sign new bills into law either for or against the LGBTI population. Her (in)action resulted in gay people suffering open intimidation, arbitrary detention, stigmatisation, social exclusion, physical violence, and the violation and/or denial of their rights. LGBTI activists therefore criticised the Sirleaf government for not taking any action to protect people perceived to be homosexuals against threat of arrest and prosecution, discrimination, vilification, harassment, and even physical violence by anti-LGBTI advocates. Sirleaf’s administration was said to have done little to outlaw the poor political treatment of LGBTI people; her critics alleged that she treated LGBTI people’s rights as if they were not human rights at all.

In the final analysis, Sirleaf’s transformative administration restored hope for an entirely new democratic experience and left positive changes for democratisation in the country’s political history. Despite her shortcomings, Sirleaf may be regarded as a transformative leader, as she is in Scully’s critical view (cited in Otieno, 2020).

Gender, integrity, vision and power: Lessons for leaders in Africa

This section highlights lessons that can be learned by current and prospective leaders in Africa. First and foremost, Sirleaf was well prepared for a leadership role. One major attribute of a transformative leader is personal growth. She was well educated and highly experienced. She also had very good international

exposure and connections. Despite having married and given birth to four children at a very young age, she still had the determination to return to school. Education played a key role in her personal and leadership success. She has set a good example of female leadership for young Africans through her national and international records. Transformative leadership emphasises on both personal achievement and the public good, as exemplified by Sirleaf (Shields, 2010).

Second, she projected her personal and professional integrity through her unchanging leadership practices. She was quick to resign or quit her official positions in regimes whose policies and practices clashed with her moral principles of justice, transparency, and accountability. As the president, for instance, she once handed suspensions to her son, Charles Sirleaf, and 45 other government officials, for failing to declare their assets as required by the country's anti-corruption law. The suspension of her son from public office would have sent a strong signal to the rest of the political elite and the public at large that she meant to fight corruption and enthrone accountability and transparency in public service delivery. The bottom line is that African leaders need to exemplify integrity and present themselves as role models for good governance. Transformative leadership is premised upon the foundation of integrity, moral courage, transparency, and accountability.

Third, she remained perfectly poised as a visionary leader. Sirleaf was not just a woman president but a visionary one, whose transformative leadership stints were characterised by authenticity, vision, and inspiration that could motivate other women and girls, particularly in West Africa and Africa as a whole. Well armed with her vision, she was committed to liberating Liberia from war and establishing a new democratic country for all. She implemented multiple transformative ideas for effective governance and political renewal for long-suffering Liberians. It is therefore crucial for young Africans not just to aspire to become leaders, but to plan leadership actions that result in transformative outcomes. Transformative leadership is about commitment to liberation, democratic tenets, social responsibilities, and improving people's lives, as demonstrated by Sirleaf.

Fourth, Sirleaf transformed the Liberian presidency by bridging the power divide that had existed between the president and citizens. She made her office accessible to citizens in ways unheard of under the regimes of her predecessors. Sirleaf made a big difference by having consultations with her citizens and encouraging other political office holders at the county level to do the same. Her administration's consultations and decentralisation processes birthed the National Vision from 2010 to 2011, which was the template used for developing the Poverty Reduction Strategy and incorporating women into government. The important lesson here is that leaders should be more accessible to their people. This helps to promote mutual understanding and trust between the

government and citizens. Transformative leadership has to identify with the processes, contents and critical approaches found in democratic practices (Stephenson, 2011).

Conclusion

This chapter was written to reflect on transformative leadership theory and to bring the application of the theory into analysis from the African perspective by exploring the political activism and leadership of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female president on the continent of Africa. Of note are the rare qualities that qualify her as a transformative leader; the contributions she made towards the transformation of Liberia through the processes of reconciliation, peacebuilding, and institutional and economic reconstruction; how her leadership styles impacted on postwar recovery efforts in Liberia; and lessons from her transformative leadership performance.

The leadership of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is undoubtedly a source of motivation and inspiration to young Africans, especially women, because they are still grossly underrepresented in the scheme of political leadership and governance across the continent of Africa. Sirleaf leveraged her educational background, professional expertise, and political activism first in the liberation struggles and later in the democratic movements, leading to her emergence as the first woman president in Africa. Her leadership provided some new insights and possibilities for women and girls in Liberia and other parts of Africa. She piloted the affairs of Liberia, a failed state, by focusing on the reconciliation and recovery processes necessitated by the country's long civil war and the public health crisis resulting from the Ebola outbreak. All these efforts won her international recognition and accolades. Rewarding her with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 and the 2017 Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership was indeed not out of place. On the one hand, she might deserve those awards as a transformative leader not only in West Africa, but also in Africa as a whole. On the other hand, it can be argued that Sirleaf was not a transformative leader without contestations, controversies, and shortcomings. Her tenure as president, however, exemplifies a transformative role of leadership that women's participation in politics should represent in the processes of nation-building, postconflict reconstruction, peacebuilding, democratisation, and gender mainstreaming in Africa.

#EllenJohnsonSirleafLeadership

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is acclaimed for peacebuilding and the reconstruction of democracy, but is also accused of nepotism and LGBTI rights abuse. Is it possible to be a transformative leader in some areas, but not others?

Questions for discussion

1. To what extent does Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president of postwar Liberia qualify as a transformative leader?
2. What impact do personal failings have on transformative leadership successes?
3. Is it possible to be transformative in some areas but not in others, or to seek social justice in some areas but not others?

References

- Adebajo, A. (2014). Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: The iron lady. In A. Adebajo (Ed.). *Africa's peacemakers: Nobel Peace laureates of African descent* (pp. 281–299). London, United Kingdom: Zed Books.
- African Union. (2020). *Agenda 2063: The Africa we want*. Retrieved from <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>.
- Annan, N. (2020). Women and political leadership in Africa. In D. Rosser-Mims, J. R. McNellis, J. Johnson-Bailey, & C. Egan (Eds). *Pathways into the political arena: The perspectives of global women leaders* (pp. 87–113). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Bartuah, J. (2014, 8 November). Liberia: Committee setup to investigate President Sirleaf's son on seizure of Korean US\$247,000.00 releases report with recommendations; ordering refund of the money. *GNN Liberia*. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20191111143254/http://gnnliberia.com/2014/11/08/liberia-committee-setup-to-investigate-president-sirleafs-son-on-seizure-of-korean-us247000-00-releases-report-with-recommendations-ordering-refund-of-the-money/>.
- BBC News*. (2019, 5 March). Liberia's 'missing millions': Charles Sirleaf charged. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47450217>.
- Broch, E. (2012, 11 April). Liberian President backtracks on anti-gay comments. *Pink News*. Retrieved from <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2012/04/11/liberian-president-backtracks-on-anti-gay-comments/>.
- Bukusi, A. D. (2020). What transformative leaders do: Emerging perspectives in the 21st century. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 12(4), 85–93.
- Cheng, C. (2011). Sirleaf: A controversial laureate? *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2011/10/12/sirleaf-a-controversial-laureate>.
- Cook, N. (2007, 30 August). *Liberia's post-war recovery: Key issues and developments*. Congressional Research Service Report for Congress. Retrieved from <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA471935.pdf>.
- De Ycaza, C. (2013). A search for truth: A critical analysis of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Human Rights Review*, 14(3), 189–212.
- Emejulu, I. & Kalu, B. U. (2020). Contributions of selected African women to peace building in Africa, 1995–2015. *International Journal of Development and Management Review*, 15(1), 127–146.

- Ferrari, R. (2015). Writing narrative style literature reviews. *Medical Writing*, 24(4), 230–235.
- Gorpudolo, C. Z. (2019). *Community-based restorative justice in peacebuilding: A case study of Liberia's Palava Hut pilot project*. Master's thesis, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Netherlands. Retrieved from <https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/51330>.
- Grin, J., Hassink, J., Karadzic, M., & Moors, E. H. (2018). Transformative leadership and contextual change. *Sustainability*, 10(7), 21–59.
- Harris, D. & Lappin, R. (2010). The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Reconciling or re-dividing Liberia? *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 9(1), 181–191.
- Isbell, T. & Jacobs, D. (2017, 9 June). *As Liberia's election approaches, what will citizens be looking for in their next government?* Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 151. Retrieved from <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad151-liberias-election-approaches-what-will-citizens-be-looking-their-next-government/>
- Kuğuoğlu, I. & Küçük, M. (2012). Turkish primary school principals' transformative leadership styles perceived by teachers. *Turkish Journal of Teacher Education*, 1(2), 90–101.
- Lane, R. (2016, 13 July). The inside story of how Ellen Johnson Sirleaf rescued Liberia. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/randalllane/2016/07/31/the-inside-story-of-how-ellen-johnson-sirleaf-rescued-liberia/?sh=6a5f28b49a3d>.
- Mastercard Foundation. (2014). *Women's transformative leadership in Africa*. Retrieved from <https://mastercardfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Womens-Transformative-Leadership-2014-accessible.pdf>.
- Mikell, G. (2009). A woman you can trust: Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 10(1), 17–25.
- Odora Hoppers, C. (2014). Wounded healers and transformative leadership: Towards revolutionary ethics. In K. Kondlo (Ed.), *Perspectives on thought leadership for Africa's renewal* (pp. 23–36). Pretoria, South Africa: Africa Institute of South Africa.
- Otieno, A. (2020). Peace profile: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. *Peace Review*, 32(4), 554–563.
- Pailey, R. N. (2011). Evaluating the dual citizenship/state-building/nation-building nexus in Liberia. *Liberian Studies Journal*, 36(1), 1–24.
- Pailey, R. N. (2014). Patriarchy, power distance, and female presidency in Liberia. In B. G. Jallow (Ed.), *Leadership in postcolonial Africa: Trends transformed by independence* (pp. 169–187). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pailey, R. N. (2021). *Development, (dual) citizenship and its discontents in Africa: The political economy of belonging to Liberia*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Regier, G. P. (2017). *Transformative leadership and its development in public service reform in Kenya*. PhD thesis, Walden University, Minneapolis, USA. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/3366/>.
- Rother, E. T. (2007). Revisão sistemática X revisão narrativa [Systematic literature review X narrative review]. *Acta Paulista de Enfermagem*, 20(2). <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-21002007000200001>.
- Rumrill, P. D. & Fitzgerald, S. M. (2001). Using narrative literature reviews to build a scientific knowledge base. *Work*, 16(2), 165–170.

- Rylander, S. (2010). *Governance and transformative leadership in Africa: Progress, prospects and challenges* (ACBF DMS/005/2010). Library of the African Studies Centre Leiden. Retrieved from <https://www.asclibrary.nl/docs/408423056.pdf>.
- Sharpe, T. (2012). Original sin, social justice, and citizenship: Lessons from peacebuilding in Liberia. *International Journal*, 67(2), 351–364.
- Shields, C. M. (2010). Transformative leadership: Working for equity in diverse contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(4), 558–589.
- Sholle, J. K., Papa, A. P., & Kipkorir, B. (2019). Transformative leadership for the 21st century: Africa at glance. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 9(11), 494–500.
- Sillah, B. (2017, 24 January). Why gay rights not human rights in Liberia? ‘Tacit tolerance’ undermined. *FrontPage Africa*. Retrieved from <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/opinion/why-gay-rights-not-human-rights-in-liberia-tacit-tolerance-undermined/>.
- Singh, P. & Connolly, L. (2014). *The road to reconciliation: A case study of Liberia’s reconciliation roadmap* (PPB #030). Africa Portal. Retrieved from <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/the-road-to-reconciliation-a-case-study-of-liberias-reconciliation-roadmap/>.
- Sirleaf, E. J. (2009b). *This child will be great: Memoir of a remarkable life by Africa’s first woman president*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Sirleaf, E. J. (2011). *The challenges of post-war reconstruction: The Liberian experience* [Transcript]. Chatham House. Retrieved from <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/130611sirleaf.pdf>.
- Sirleaf, M. (2009). Regional approach to transitional justice? Examining the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Liberia. *Florida Journal of International Law*, 21(2), 209–284.
- Smith, D. V. (2016). Ohio short histories of Africa: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf by Pamela Scully [Review]. *Africa Today*, 63(2), 151–152.
- Stephenson, L. (2011). Developing a leadership education framework: A transformative leadership perspective. *Counterpoints*, 409, 321–341.
- Tatlah, I. A. & Aslam, T. M. (2012). Emotional intelligence and transformative leadership style of principals in high schools. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 2(4), 556–566.
- Tripp, A. M. (2003). Women in movement transformations in African political landscapes. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 5(2), 233–255.
- Weiner, E. J. (2003). Secretary Paulo Freire and the democratization of power: Toward a theory of transformative leadership. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 35(1), 89–106.
- Williams, G. I. H. (2006). *Liberia: The heart of darkness*. Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing.