

# **Mobilizing for Improvement. An Empirical Study of a Women's Organization in West Point, Liberia**

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**Abstract:**

Liberian women's movements raised international attention in mobilizing for peace during the conflict. After the war, the movement did not extinct; but the theme transformed from a peace-movement to topics of the aftermath. Women's efforts play an important role in post-conflict Liberia; they have a strong position and impact not only on a community level, but also within the political landscape. As an example of such efforts can serve the *West Point Women*, a woman's organization in a precarious Monrovia community.

This article describes their organization and extraordinary agency in a social space where the state is hardly present. It highlights under what conditions a social movement can emerge and how it articulates its claims in order to effect social change in a setting characterized by a high level of violence, especially male-to-female violence. Comparable to many civil society organizations in Liberia, the West Point Women are also involved in the provision of certain public goods and services. However, for a number of issues, these women demand state action. The West Point Women's agency is not left unnoticed on the political level for their important impact on social change beyond the community level.

**Introduction**

When viewed from a hill in central Monrovia, the adjacent West Point peninsula appears as a vast field of dense, makeshift houses covered with sheets of corrugated iron. Wooden canoes lie on the sandy beach. People are bathing in the fresh waves of the sea, and further down, others help a

fisherman to pull a net ashore. The seemingly calm neighbourhood, however, has a notorious reputation for its violence and a range of other intricacies. West Point, like many social and spatial areas of Liberia, is struggling through the aftermath of the Liberian conflict. The aftermath has manifested economic and social crises that result in unsteadiness or lack of provision of goods and services by a still weak state. While the capital city is visibly changing and evolving, West Point is said to be as notorious as it was during – and before – the conflict. The neighbourhood offers economic opportunities such as the fishery, but residents are bothered by the prevalence of violence, especially male-to-female violence, which some inhabitants believe to be the consequence of a ‘loose society’. This paper aims to give insight into a women’s organization in West Point that is trying to overcome these complex social problems. Some of the organization’s members were part of women’s movements for peace during the Liberian conflict, movements which influenced the talks that brought an end to fighting in 2003. As part of this process, the larger movement splintered into various organizations, often turning away from politics to donor-driven direct or indirect provision of goods and services.

This is somewhat different for the organization presented in this case study. The ‘West Point Women for Health and Development Organization’ was founded by a few women who decided to form a group of self-help and organized collective action. The small group grew in number and began to have greater impact on the community; today it is a well-known and formalized organization. In this form, a range of women participate in or contribute to public politics. They share a common vision of an improved environment for women and children in West Point and try to achieve this by empowering women and by demanding the government to take action. Other than many local organizations, they address their claims towards state actors, especially those they had elected into office, or ‘make things happen’, as they say.

Under what conditions does a social movement emerge in West Point, and how does it articulate its claims in order to effect social change? These questions will be pursued on the basis of empirical data collected in ethnographic field research in urban and peri-urban Liberia during 11 months between 2009 and 2011. Data was collected applying the Emic

Evaluation Approach (EEA)<sup>1</sup>, thereby specifically focusing on various self-help groups or organizations such as the West Point Women, with whom a number of interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. The main informant was the vice-president, who, along with some of the group's most active members, was most easily accessible at the organization's office. Discourses of other West Point residents as well as urban dwellers from outside the community were captured as a part of the research for this study. In addition, figures from relevant public institutions such as the West Point police, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the district representative, were interviewed. Informal discussions, participation in and observations of events by the West Point Women completed the collection of data<sup>2</sup>.

The Liberian society is multifaceted regarding social differentiation and division and is situated in a complex historical context including a recent conflict (Fuest 2009: 116). This influences the post-conflict situation of the social actors. Researchers report of being denied access to groups (cf. Utas 2003).

This article develops its argument in three steps. First, the conceptual framework introduces the most important concepts that shall serve as a backdrop in which the case study will be embedded: collective action where the state is hardly present. Second, the case study is introduced, and it embeds the historical framework of Liberian women's movements in the recent past. The third part highlights the activities of the women's organization in their ambivalent function as providers and regulators, but also as protesters and demonstrators. The conclusion sums up by highlighting the role and impact of women's movements in post-conflict Liberia.

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed information on the EEA see Förster et al. (2011).

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### **The state, civil society and social movements**

Everyday life in post-conflict Liberia<sup>3</sup> is characterised by a number of economic and social challenges, and by a precarious delivery and regulation of public and common goods<sup>4</sup> such as security or the provision and distribution of health services. The notion of a weak or precarious state (Caplan 2007, Förster 2009)<sup>5</sup> helps best to describe the characteristics of a post-conflict transforming state since a weak state has a potential for improvement regarding its institutions, their efficiency, and the provision of public goods and services. The malfunctioning of the state can cause an additional layer of struggle to everyday life. Under such conditions, local actors may start to look for alternative providers to satisfy their needs. In conflict-affected areas, local non-state institutions, non-government organizations (NGOs) and international organizations participate in these construction processes and are taking over tasks that are formally seen as part of the state, and boundaries between state and non-state institutions get blurred (Blundo; Olivier de Sardan 2006, Gupta 1995). Public authority is exercised and experienced through several layers of institutions that co-exist and are negotiated with governmental institutions (Jung; Schlichte; Siegelberg 2003: 147). In some areas including certain urban spaces, the state is not or was never present. This does not necessarily lead to a power vacuum; in certain areas, the provision and control of security is in the hands of non-state actors beside of state actors (Förster 2009: 325). These actors may respond to the lack of provision or regulation and organize collective actions towards the state.

The concept of civil society provides a useful perspective to analyse the relationship of state and non-state actors, but it needs to be adopted critically. Despite the controversy surrounding the concept of civil society, especially its emergence in the recent history of developmental discourses

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<sup>3</sup> For the context of the Liberian conflict, readers are referred to Stephen Ellis (2007), Mary Moran (2006), Mats Utas (2003, 2005b), or the Liberian TRC Report (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Public goods and services are non-rivalrous and non-excludable, e.g. national security. Common goods are non-excludable but rivalrous, e.g. fish stock. Public and common goods are at risk of market failure and often require provision and regulation by the state (e.g. Olson 1985).

<sup>5</sup> There exists a wide range of debates on states and statehood in Africa which cannot be debated in this paper. For seminal work see Gupta 1995, Reno 1998, Schlichte 2005 or von Trotha 2004.

on good governance<sup>6</sup>, an undisputed core definition can be delineated, according to Dieter Neubert (2010: 212, drawing on Whyte 2004): Civil society is understood as an arena of uncoerced organized collective action centred around shared interests, purposes and values. Theoretically, civil society is distinguished from the realm of the state, the family and the market; but empirically, these distinctions are often blurred. Civil society is comprised of a variety of forms of social groups and organizations<sup>7</sup> such as NGOs, community groups, faith-based organizations, self-help groups or social movements, to name a few.

In Liberia, the number of organizations has grown since the end of the conflict, due in large part to the influx of international donor support. The autonomy of civil society organizations has been questioned as many of them, especially in the African context, depend on support of or have been stimulated by international donors or the state (Harbeson 1994: 10, 286, Makumbe 1998: 311). Influence by international sponsors may lead organizations to adjust their programmes, agendas and agency<sup>8</sup> in the interest of the donors, and hence, their impact may be compromised. I agree with Stephen Ellis and Ineke van Kessel (2009: 5) in that receiving funding does not necessarily implicate a one-way relationship toward the beneficiary, as the latter are often creative in bridging donors' and their own interests.

For the present paper, I have adapted and adopted the concept of social movements<sup>9</sup> as a form of group action composed of a network of individuals, groups or organizations rooted in civil society (i.e. not the state), formed to protest against social and political issues with the intention

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<sup>6</sup> For a critical debate on civil society, see Comaroff; Comaroff (1999), Makumbe (1998) or Neubert (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Groups are defined as a rather small number of interrelated persons who interact on a common cause (Homas 1960: 103), whereas organizations are bigger and more formalized and structured. Members of an organization do not necessarily interact directly (Müller-Jentsch 2003: 168).

<sup>8</sup> Agency emphasises the capability of social actors to take decisions drawing on habits, imagination of alternative possibilities, and judgment of the present situation (Emirbayer; Mische 1998). For a more detailed analysis of the West Point Women with a specific focus on agency see Kaufmann (2011).

<sup>9</sup> For an in depth analysis of the concept and historical context of social movements in Europe, see Tilly (1978, 2004) or Tarrow (1994) and for social movements in the African context, see Ellis and van Kessel (2009).

to effect change, or to prevent on-going changes. Social movements are typically characterised by grassroots-democratic forms of membership, which makes them less structured than other forms of organization (Müller-Jentsch 2003: 169). According to Charles Tilly (2004: 53), social movements in a classical sense consist of three combined elements: firstly, campaigns are sustained, organized public efforts of making collective claims towards target authorities. Secondly, they include a repertoire employing different forms of political action such as public meetings, demonstrations or rallies. Lastly, a public representation by movement participants in unity, large numbers, and with a sense of commitment contributes to the recognition and visibility of the movement.

Social movement theory has a scholarly tradition in Europe and North Africa, and later in Central and South America. In a rather broad sense, it can serve as a conceptual framework to analyse forms of organized collective action in Africa. However, a few words are needed to contextualise social movements in Africa. As differentiated as African societies may be, many social movements in Africa can be characterised by their context: a context of states that are weaker, with regards to policing or jurisdiction, than states in Europe or North America. This results in the social movements being concerned with broader social and political issues (Habib; Opoku-Mensah 2009: 50). Stephen Ellis and Ineke Van Kessel (2009: 4-16) add that social movements in Africa are often hybrid concerning social-scientific categories due to the blending of social, political as well as religious attributes. The international context plays a crucial role regarding funding or framing by the Diaspora or global donors, as does the spread of international concepts such as human rights, or discourses on values by religious organizations. Religion plays an important role as a source of values and norms. The solidarity and identification with the group is a key factor to connecting the individual to the group, which emerges on the basis of shared values or aims. Identification is vital for cohesion and solidarity within an organization. Emotions or religion can serve as an additional motivator and unifying factor to the common cause. In the case of women, shared experiences have been considered as a source for solidarity and organized collective action (Van Stekelenburg; Klandermans 2009: 32), which will be depicted in the case study: the women are concerned about the high level of male-to-female violence and share sympathy as mothers, grandmothers, sisters or friends of affected women.

Nevertheless, social movements in Africa exist in great diversity, and most often target government policy. In contrast to European or North American movements, classical and new forms of social movements are interwoven (Ellis; van Kessel 2009: 15, Habib; Opoku-Mensah 2009: 50-55). Social movements demand state action or protest against it. For the case study of the West Point Women presented in this paper, the articulation of a shared vision of better living conditions is a core element of solidarity and therefore remains crucial for their organized collective action.

### **A case study: the West Point Women**

To reach the office of the West Point Women for Health and Development Organization, one needs to take a rudimentary road lined with a dense amalgam of small shops, restaurants, video clubs and street sellers. The mint-green, two-story house is a rather big and dominant building in relation to other structures in West Point. The name of the organization is painted in yellow letters above the entrance, and the sign advertises an e-mail address that is not operational anymore. It is interesting to note that the West Point Women's building is larger than the local police depot and the magisterial court buildings put together. It is composed of two floors with large meeting rooms. The walls are covered with various posters. Some visualise human rights, others teach how to make water safe to drink, another is an advertisement that beckons women to join the army, and yet another is comparing in a provocative way the workload of a family woman compared to that of her idle husband. The rooms are decorated with colourful curtains and paper garlands.

Most of the time, a few members of the West Point Women can be encountered in or in front of their office building. Children sit on their laps as informal and formal conversations take place. The office is publicly accessible for women in need; telephone lines are open day and night, and the numbers of the members are available in case of emergencies at night. The atmosphere seems relaxed even though the women are all the while engaged in a variety of activities to contribute to their household incomes.

A major concern of the West Point Women is the high prevalence of 'gender-based violence'<sup>10</sup>. Using the terminology of international discourse they tell

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<sup>10</sup> As 'empowerment' or 'vulnerability', the notion 'gender-based violence' is derived from the international discourse and the West Point Women apply it to underline their claims and legitimate their activities. Though they appropriated the notion of gender-based

me about excessive violence of men towards women and children, including sexualized violence. The organization takes action against these problems. In pursuing such cases, the members not only mediate and create awareness but have repeatedly helped to provide legal evidence, and have demanded formal justice through forms of collective action. As a result of their successful pursuing of such cases, they have become known beyond West Point<sup>11</sup>.

In narratives about their activities, the women seem quite confident. They use strong words to describe who they are, what they do, what they have achieved, and what they need. To strengthen their arguments during group discussions and interviews, photographs of beaten or abused women and children are shown. Together with each picture they provide information about the status of the case, whether the perpetrator was in prison, if the case was delayed, or if the problem could be resolved by mediation. The women talk openly, and at times, when a help-seeker comes, the issue at hand is discussed within the group of present members, even in the presence of outsiders.

Their collective agency began in 2002, when ten concerned women decided to gather and explore the ways and means of changing the living conditions in West Point. At that time, the conflict was still raging and some of the members had already participated in the women's peace movement. Presumably informed and encouraged by the achievements of women on a national scale, the organization was founded with another motive in mind, namely, to change their community's living conditions and bad reputation, so they say: 'We thought it wise that we too can live in a society of good people,'<sup>12</sup> explained the vice president<sup>13</sup>. According to the women, the neighbourhood was, and still is, stigmatised, and many Monrovia believe the community to be violent and dangerous. A politically influential

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violence and often use it in a general sense, their main concern is male-to-female physical violence such as beating, and sexualized violence such as rape of women and girls (DeKeseredy; Schwartz 2005: 353). Gender-based violence would include other forms such as female-to-male violence as well. During the time spent with the West Point Women I did not encounter nor hear of such cases; however, they would not exclude these.

<sup>11</sup> According to statements in personal communication, e.g. with the district representative (26 March 2010), WONGOSOL (03 March 2011), a police officer of the local police station (05 March 2010) or the West Point Intellectual Forum (16 February 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Quoted excerpts of interviews are mostly in 'Liberian English' expressions and style.

<sup>13</sup> Focus group discussion with the West Point Women, Monrovia, 02 February 2010

Westpointer explained: '[T]he Westpointers [...], they feel rejected, that people [outside West Point] don't like them.'<sup>14</sup>

The vision and achievements of the West Point Women began to attract a number of other women. To the present day, all members are engaged on a voluntary basis. Nevertheless, the organization grew fast in membership, and the women decided to establish a formal organization<sup>15</sup> in order to render themselves more visible. They called themselves West Point Women for Health and Development Organization, or in short, West Point Women. They elected a president, a vice president, a secretary, a chaplain, a treasurer, a public relations officer and a gender-based violence officer. Bylaws and a constitution were written, and they organized their formal accreditation and article of incorporation. In addition, a bank account was opened. Each member contributes a small amount when they attend weekly meetings. The money raised is sufficient to support the organization's activities, and until recently it did not receive external funding. Some international organizations provided in-kind contributions such as workshops, coordination, and educational activities, and the national government granted the use of the building. The USA-based foundation *Global Giving*<sup>16</sup> created a fundraising web page for the organization in mid-2010, which eventually resulted in financial support being generated for the West Point Women.

Today, West Point Women consist of roughly 150 members, of which about 30 core members are involved in most activities. During 2010, eight men<sup>17</sup> became affiliated, complementing and collaborating with the West Point Women. They were referred to as 'partners' and not members per se, but the women see many advantages therein, because male mediators sometimes have better personal access to the men involved in the case. The majority of the members have limited resources due to their economic condition, and the demands of housework and other obligations make it difficult for them to participate actively and regularly. But whenever extra help is needed for

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<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, Monrovia, 26 May 2010

<sup>15</sup> According to the executive director of WONGOSOL (personal communication, Monrovia, 03 March 2011), women's groups were advised to form NGOs in order to structure the endeavours and link them more easily to international donors.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.globalgiving.org> (31 August 2010)

<sup>17</sup> Only in mid-2010, men joined the organization; about the same time external financial support was generated.

fund raising, campaigning or demonstrations, most of the members, along with other concerned actors from the community, will participate. The West Point Women are of varying age and come from different ethnic, religious, economic, and social backgrounds, and yet still have been able to avoid breaching the boundaries of the various milieus that in other regions of Liberia can cause segregation and tension. For the West Point Women, religion does not play a crucial role for shared values and norms. They highlight solidarity as a value, but it should not be forgotten that this is often a normative ascription. Discords do arise, but these issues can mostly be resolved, and no major disagreements or splits have occurred so far, members say.

Two major influences strengthened the coherence and solidarity among the members: First, they were directly or indirectly affected as women – as mothers, grandmothers, sisters, partners, or, having been affected personally – in a context of high prevalence of male-to-female violence. A second factor is their shared experience of reshaping gender roles during and after the conflict. Before looking into their repertoire of action, a brief historical background highlights how new avenues for political participation in public policy opened up for women in Liberia.

### **Women's movements in Liberia**

Social movements had a vast influence on the Liberian political landscape in recent time, especially the women's movement for peace during the late years of the conflict (Fuest 2009, Moran; Pitcher 2004, Schäfer 2008). Today, the women's movement is still energetic, but now addressing specific topics of the aftermath, as a majority of Liberians, among which women are especially affected, live under disadvantaged conditions in an environment of social and economic intricacies. Like women in many urban areas of Africa, their workload often increases as the unemployment of men<sup>18</sup> adds to the burden on women as bread winners. This can lead to a complication of marital relations (cf. Obrist 2006: 55, 92). During the Liberian conflict, men had to hide in their homes in order not to be recruited or killed by warring factions, while women went out to look for food. Gender roles were reshaped, and women started to engage in the peace process exposing them

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<sup>18</sup> Though a vast majority of Liberians do not have a regular income, and therefore unemployment may be a misleading notion, formal employment is considered a main function of a man to contribute to the household (cf. DeKeseredy; Schwarz 2005).

to even greater challenges. One woman explained that due to their daily exposure while looking for food, the women developed more courage<sup>19</sup>. All of them experienced various situations of high risk, and to some extent, these risks became part of daily life. Other sources state that sexual exploitation of and violence towards women and girls was a part of everyday life during the conflict. However, women were not only victims; there exist a number of accounts of women joining warring factions and acting as perpetrators during the fighting, including reports of women applying sexualized violence (Schäfer 2008, Utas 2005b, 2009). These forms of violence continue as a typical aspect of the aftermath of a conflict:

*[T]he incidences of rape of women and girls continued to be alarmingly high in 2009, despite positive efforts by the government and UNMIL, including the establishment of a dedicated court for sexual violence. While public reporting of and police response to reports of rape improved somewhat, efforts to prosecute these cases are hampered by deficiencies in the justice system (HRW 2009, cf. Meintjes 2001).*

Some transformations regarding gender roles and participation have been accomplished on a social level, but also in the political landscape. They have resulted in new political opportunity structures for women. A signalling and encouraging effect was the election of strong female leadership figures such as President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf or Ruth Perry<sup>20</sup>, as well as the activities of large women's organizations such as MARWOPNET<sup>21</sup>, WAPNET<sup>22</sup> or WIPNET<sup>23</sup> (Fuest 2009, Schäfer 2008). Since the beginning of the conflict, Liberia has experienced a strong growth in women's organizations. Coordination efforts are made by the Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL), according to the executive director of the organization<sup>24</sup>. The programme associate of the New African Research

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<sup>19</sup> Personal communication, Monrovia, 26 May 2010

<sup>20</sup> Perry was interim President of Liberia from 1996 to 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Mano River Women's Peace Network. <http://www.marwopnet.org/> (31 August 2010)

<sup>22</sup> West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, <http://www.wanep.org/wanep/> (31 August 2010)

<sup>23</sup> Women in Peacebuilding Program, <http://www.gnwp.org/members/wipnet> (31 August 2010)

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication, Monrovia, 03 March 2011

and Development Agency (NARDA) explained that a similar effort is being undertaken at the Ministry of Gender and Development, and in addition, NARDA is in the process of coordinating a civil society network to structure the countless organizations. For this endeavour, NARDA is developing an NGO policy paper, and the Liberian governance commission is elaborating a civil society policy to consolidate the national organizations and efforts<sup>25</sup>. Obviously, the high numbers of organizations create challenges to the actors of both civil society and the state that are involved in structuring efforts. A significant additional problem that many organizations face is the 'brain drain': members are offered well-paid jobs in government or international organizations, leaving civil society organizations in a vacuum, or, leaders become biased as representatives in two roles (cf. McKeown; Mulbah 2007: 10).

On a grassroots level, women's interests are pursued by women's organizations and movements responding to social problems in various forms of collective action. Activities include providing support for orphans and widows, or creating marketing associations and various forms of saving clubs or vocational skills trainings to empower women and children (cf. Moran 1990, Moran; Pitcher 2004, Fuest 2009). The Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia (AFELL) is a powerful and visible organization standing up for women's and children's issues. The passing of a rape law was achieved in 2005, turning rape into a non-bailable crime, and the inheritance law was reformed in favour of women (Poverty Reduction Strategy 2008: 89, 146). A special court was dedicated to cases of sexual violence (Irinnews 2009a). As these laws were debated in the Liberian parliament, women mobilized, took to the streets, and demonstrated at the House of Parliament. Reports of participants lead to the assumption that these protests contributed to the passing of these laws. More importantly, however, is the awareness of national political issues and the women's participation therein. This has contributed to a shift in gender roles.

On a more general level, Liberians state that the conflict caused severe damage not only to physical structures but also to their minds and attitudes<sup>26</sup>. Particularly after the beginning of the conflict and up to the

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<sup>25</sup> Personal communication, Monrovia, 25 February 2011

<sup>26</sup> Slogan of former Minister of Information, Dr. Lawrence Bropleh, calling on Liberians to change their minds and attitudes and to exercise 'good virtues' that would contribute to the development of the country; keynote speech at the International Women's Day 2010

present, many international and national organizations have focused on human rights education through awareness and training programmes (Human Rights Report 2009, Sawyer 2005). At the same time, social order is shaped by the growing impact of (new) religious activities, leading to a plurality and certain level of confusion about norms and values.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has made strong efforts in support of the welfare and political participation of women in Liberia, yet, the implementation of policies remains a major challenge. After a swift starting period, and the raising of hopes on the local, national and international level, a phase of struggle followed; frequent media reports on the misuse of funds in government, and disagreements and disputes in the political realm have led to heated debates in public arenas, fuelled by the poor performance of state institutions and a dearth of public services. The weak state struggles to address the most acute problems of the country. A remaining challenge is that many ordinary Liberians perceive the state as a powerful and wealthy institution that receives vast income from donors, the extraction of natural resources, and taxpayers, and hence should be in the position to improve the living conditions of the local population.

### **West Point, an insecure setting**

West Point is a community characterised by insecurity, scarcity and uncertainty. It is a space where the state is hardly present, even though it is composed of government land. The inhabitants of West Point are often referred to as squatters. One of the characteristics of the community is its dense population of estimated 50,000 to 75,000 inhabitants, depending on whether one consults statistics or relies on estimates of community residents. Most of the inhabitants have a low cash income, or none at all, and West Point is often referred to as the biggest slum<sup>27</sup> in Monrovia. However, this notion is problematic for the Liberian context, as many other parts of Monrovia are run down due to the conflict. West Point inhabitants never used the word slum in reference to their community.

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(08 March 2010, Bensonville)

<sup>27</sup> According to UN Habitat, a slum household is a group of people living together lacking at least one of the following conditions: access to improved water; access to improved sanitation facilities; sufficient living area; structural quality and durability of dwellings; or security of tenure (UN Habitat 2003: 18). All of these characteristics apply to West Point to a high degree.

This urban area was never objective to any planning activities by the state. Also, the living conditions, infrastructure and services were limited due to the dense population already before the conflict. Water is transported into West Point using plastic containers, usually a manually intensive process, because the local wells are salty. According to Westpointers, sanitation facilities are scarce and dirty. For this reason, the local population prefers the beach or the river, which consequently adds up to the many health risks. The National Housing Authority had plans to relocate the inhabitants, but these plans have never been acted on or have been considered rumours (cf. Irinnews 2009b). Nevertheless, Westpointers do not invest to improve their living conditions out of fear that the government could at any time repossess the land and eject them from it, as it has happened to other squatter areas of Monrovia in the recent past.

Various informants emphasized that, unlike in other parts of Liberia, there are no tensions along ethnic or religious lines in West Point, as a result of close interaction that arises from the dense living conditions. Intermarriages are common.<sup>28</sup> West Point's notorious reputation stems from a high crime rate and a high violence rate characterised especially by sexualized violence of men towards women. The level of violence was already high before the conflict. Elderly members<sup>29</sup> in the community recall that there were fights in the streets on a daily basis, and at times they were afraid to be in the streets. Violence is not seen as a consequence of the conflict as such, but excessive male-to-female violence and rape have increased during and after the conflict. The living conditions were difficult even before the conflict, particularly concerning the poor infrastructure, scarce sanitation services, and unhygienic conditions, all of which worsened as the population of West Point grew. The state has failed to provide basic infrastructure and services to the community.

According to informants, these problems are the consequences of a 'loose society', i.e. a society threatened by the loss of norms and values. They consider them to be the result of parents neglecting their children and youth and leaving them without guidance. West Point's youth is 'just sitting around there, doing nothing, and at the end of the day, you see them getting involved into a whole lot of activities', as one informant put it<sup>30</sup>. According

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<sup>28</sup> Focus group discussion with the West Point Women, Monrovia, 09 June 2010

<sup>29</sup> E.g. personal communication, Monrovia, 02 February 2010

<sup>30</sup> Personal communication, 05 March 2010

to sources at the Ministry of Youth and Sports<sup>31</sup>, teenage pregnancy, and abandonment or neglect of women, children and elderly persons contribute to social problems in West Point. Young mothers are socially and economically at risk, and some of them drop out of school. At the time of the interview, the Ministry of Youth and Sports was running programmes of HIV/AIDS awareness for young people, but these programmes were not made available in West Point. Moreover, other programmes implemented by the state, civil society or international organizations are not as active in West Point as compared to central Monrovia or rural Liberia. But a number of religious institutions are active in the community. The only clinic is run by the Liberian Catholic Church. West Point has one police station and one magistrate court. The capacities and resources of the health, security and justice system are severely limited (cf. Schäfer 2008: 209). Inhabitants evaluate the general juristic and security services as unreliable, resulting in the populace taking the initiative and applying 'mob justice'. Cases of mob justice are said to be in the decline, and personal observations confirmed that in West Point, 'criminals' are taken to the police depot for formal justice.

In spite of all these challenges, the inhabitants of West Point do not want to move to another part of town. Some residents moved before, only to return after a while. This community seems to offer a lot of opportunities as compared to others; a number of businesses exist, and especially the fishery provides certain income for a number of people. Loads of fish are processed each day, and generally, food security is guaranteed. Other petty businesses are attractive due to the dense population. Residents are in walking distance to the big Waterside Market and employment or occasional opportunities in central Monrovia or at the Freeport (Lacey; Owusu 1988: 228).

In the following, three major areas of collective action show how the West Point Women tackle the complex social problems of West Point. The examples show under what circumstances a social movement can emerge and how it articulates its claims in order to achieve social change.

### **Areas of collective action: empowering women**

According to the West Point Women, women's empowerment was central

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<sup>31</sup> Focus group discussion with four members of the youth empowerment programme and HIV/AIDS awareness programme at the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Monrovia, 20 April 2010

for the improvement of the community. They started to create awareness on human rights and women's rights. The group members encouraged other women to participate in their endeavour. According to the West Point Women, an educated woman knows about her rights, can defend herself and is less vulnerable. Violence and misuse has to be reported and not kept secret. Therefore, knowledge about their rights is crucial for a woman's well-being.

Complemented by and in collaboration with other organizations, such as the International Rescue Committee, the Norwegian Refugee Council, or Oxfam, and from the government's side by the Ministry of Gender and Development, workshops are organized for women and girls. Other educational activities range from informal discussions with women about human rights to practical health education or awareness marches. Education campaigns are not limited to human rights, but have included awareness-raising about health risks of West Point. The 'government latrine' behind the West Point Women's building caused serious problems, not only in that it 'ruins your nose', as one woman put it, but that at times it flooded and spilled out over a nearby football field. It caused serious health problems to children playing on the field. The women reacted and organized a demonstration at parliament to urge the government to remove the latrine or 'we will march up there again'<sup>32</sup>. At my return in February 2011, the latrine had been repaired by the government.

The women received training on how to treat water to make it safe to drink, how to make soap, and other skills. Recently, they have started an elementary night school for their members and have hired a teacher. The organization transmits this acquired knowledge to other women in the community. In addition, as a minor encouragement from the government, they are paid to sweep the streets of West Point.

These examples depict the flexibility of the West Point Women's agency in applying tools towards problems in the neighbourhood. At times they are transmitters of knowledge or recipients of tools provided by the state or INGOs; and at other times they act as a mass movement targeting the state. The state is seen as being both responsible and capable of providing solutions to the needs of the community.

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<sup>32</sup> 'Up there' meaning the Capitol Hill, the centre of government, group discussion with the West Point Women, 02 February 2010

### **Areas of collective action: demanding formal justice**

Some of the West Point Women were part of the women's movements that marched through town and demonstrated at Capitol Hill when the rape law was debated in parliament and finally passed in 2005. One of the first achievements of the West Point Women was the persistent pursuing of rape cases for formal justice, explains the vice president:

*Like one time they raped a child and they brought this complain to us [...] because the parents were compromising, they gave the parents 50 dollars [...]. So they decided to cover that case. And the women decided to march, march out there, march to gender ministry, the gender ministry said, well, you have to go AFELL. And we went to AFELL, I think we were there three days. That's when AFELL decided to come to West Point. AFELL came, and we had a workshop with over 1,000 plus people, because the whole school building was crowded. Because they said, it was the first time in history, for women in history [of Liberia] to get up and say they wanted justice. They wanted their rights. We were the first women to get up, to get out there. So, it raised concern.<sup>33</sup>*

Through their persistent action they caught the attention of the Ministry of Gender as well as the Association of Female Lawyers (AFELL). The West Point Women had achieved a major milestone in their fight against gender-based violence. Nationwide, rape cases are still prevalent, but according to statements of an officer of the Child Protection Section of the Liberian National Police<sup>34</sup>, there is a decrease in West Point.<sup>35</sup>

Though the statistics show an increase in incidents of reported rape, the absolute cases are declining (cf. Human Rights Report 2010, the Informer 08 July 2010), as it is felt in West Point. Before, many victims did not report their cases out of fear, shame or other personal reasons; in other cases, parents and perpetrators compromised, thereby shielding the latter and hiding the case. Today, rape cases are reported more frequently. But to achieve the goal of reducing these incidents, the solution is not always

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<sup>33</sup> West Point Women Group discussion, Monrovia, 31 March 2010

<sup>34</sup> The Women and Child Protection Section is an institution of the LNP, established in collaboration with UNICEF, see <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=77406>, or the PRS (2008: 54)

<sup>35</sup> Personal communication, Monrovia, 05 March 2010

formal justice involving the arrest of the perpetrator. More important, according to the local police as well as the West Point Women, is a pragmatic solution to each case. As an example, if a case of rape involving minors leads to a pregnancy, mediation with all involved persons, including the parents of the boy and the girl, will be conducted. This way, a solution can be found that could improve the future circumstances of the girl and her child.

The first successful cases the West Point Women pursued persistently had a signalling effect on the community: Formal justice had resulted in the detention of a perpetrator. But generally, what they want to avoid is having rape cases compromised or concealed, this is why awareness-raising is considered a central part of the West Point Women's activities. One of the circulated pictures shows a young woman who was seriously injured by her former boyfriend. In such cases, the women first take the case to the hospital, where the victim is treated. X-ray, pictures and other diagnostic findings will serve as evidence for the legal prosecution of the case, because as a next step, the West Point Women will take the case to court. Since legal justice was considered unreliable in the past, the West Point Women took efforts to assure that cases were pursued by informing the district representative and attending trial proceedings in numbers until a case was closed.

### **Areas of collective action: Demanding state action**

AFELL, Oxfam and other organizations began to offer support to the West Point Women. While they appreciate the support in education or other materials, and while they have benefited from the coordinated efforts of these organizations, the West Point Women still wish for financial contributions or material support to further their work, such as the provision of an ambulance or a vehicle that could be used in emergency cases. Whereas many other local NGOs focus on the acquisition of donor funding as a solution for social problems, I found the West Point Women extraordinary in their use of strategy and demands for state action.

Though they benefited from the in-kind support of various organizations, they hold higher expectations of the Liberian government. In political campaigns, candidates have presented themselves as being close to the ordinary people and their interests. West Point has received many promises from candidates during elections, but once the candidates were in office, not

much changed, according to the West Point Women. So they state their claims towards the people 'they' have elected – that is the president, and, the district representative, who is more directly accessible. This is one of the most powerful arguments they have to mobilize the community with and to mount pressure on state actors. Their disappointment in the government seems to persist, especially towards the district representative: in early 2011, a promised ambulance had still not been provided, the road had not been fixed, and streetlights were still out. And most importantly, they argue that they had never received any symbolic recognition from the government for their efforts. The women feel that it was them, the women, who had mobilized the masses, and it was only through them that elected officials had been brought to power. The West Point Women feel there is a need to contact politicians in government positions – whom they call the 'big people' – and let them know what problems persist.

The most visible campaigns are marches, or 'parading'. Depending on the topic, a parade is either organized by one of the aforementioned NGOs or umbrella organizations or by a local movement emanating from a neighbourhood like West Point Women. The action depends on the target audience or authority. Parading, as the women understand it, means to organize an action for general or specific issues, and to execute it as a group, assembling at a central point in town and walking the main streets, thereby blocking traffic. Topics can be a variety of issues, as for example the Liberian Women for Peace gathered in a public space in Monrovia to pray and dance for peace in Côte d'Ivoire for two weeks in February 2011. Most often, participants will wear uniform clothing, such as white T-shirts with imprinted logos. Often, crown-like paper decorations are carried on the head, displaying mottos, such as 'Don't Beat your Woman. She is Special', or 'Men and Women as Partners in Ending Violence Against Women and Girls', or 'Stop Woman and Child Abandonment', in order to underscore their claims<sup>36</sup>. Colourful paper banners emphasise the theme of the parade, and verbal statements and songs are sung as the group moves through the streets. For bigger events, marching bands lead the movement.

Spectators along the pavement often stop and watch as the movement passes by. The audience watches and listens attentively, often taking part in the demonstration by supporting the group with statements of

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<sup>36</sup> These kinds of slogans and forms of awareness are not typical for Liberia but are found in other countries and contexts as well.

acknowledgment or criticism, or by joining the parade. Demonstrations are not only literally a collective action of a group, but also a dialogue with the audience of the street. Sometimes, journalists are present to report on the event.

Other activities address the state, like the campaign the West Point Women organized regarding the latrine, for which they planned to demonstrate at Capitol Hill:

*We marched, we went there. We talked about the toilet here. But since then, nobody never talked of it again. We talk, talk, talk, and we still talk about it. We just want the toilet to move from here. And they refuse to take it from here. But [soon], we will stage protest march. Because we will make sure that this toilet move from here. They should move this toilet, and use it for town hall, let them use this building for town hall.<sup>37</sup>*

Their campaigns are constructive. They usually have a clear message and use their physical presence to visibly announce themselves to political leaders. The actions are peaceful and attract other people to join in. In addition, they are successful in that they make the problems known to the public, and, at least at times, provoke action by the government to address the problem in question. This way, the West Point Women were granted a building to use as their office by the government, and successfully raised attention as to the urgent need for an ambulance in West Point. The representative for the district assured them that the issue would be resolved in the near future.

Not responding to needs of a community can quickly damage a state actor's reputation by rumours and, in case of a parliamentarian for example, endanger his or her re-election. Some officials try to react by informing the ordinary people about the tasks and duties of a parliamentarian, in this example, and the rights and duties of a citizen. The pressure on elected actors is mounting as the country moves towards elections in late 2011, and the demands to fulfil promises made before the elections have intensified.

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<sup>37</sup> Focus group discussion with the West Point Women, Monrovia, 02 February 2010

## Conclusion

The legacy of the well-known women's movements that contributed to the peace in Liberia is still visible in the country. They had an impact on the political landscape by setting the stage for women as political participants and leaders. These movements have not faded away but are now addressing specific topics of the aftermath of the conflict characterized by social and economic intricacies. The movements have transformed into a number of civil society organizations, but the experiences, contacts and the networks remain. In response to issues of public concern, masses of women will gather to fill the streets of Monrovia and the Capitol Hill.

This empirical study aimed at giving insight into the dynamics of a women's organization in Liberia, the West Point Women. I have highlighted their special way of pursuing community-based interests through formalized organization. But for certain issues, mainly social and legal problems, they demand state action. If necessary, they have the mobilizing power to assemble not just a large group of women, but also men and children in West Point, to march to the Capitol Hill, 'make things happen', and hence, a social movement emerges. Three areas of collective action depicted the avenues of the West Point Women to effect social change in West Point. Their collective action contributes to the process of (re-)generation of social order in a setting of crisis in a post-conflict community. Since its foundation in 2002, the West Point Women's use of awareness-creating activities and persistent quest for justice has contributed to a decrease in gender-based violence and to better living conditions in West Point. The West Point Women work to influence state actors by using their own physical presence, accompanied by clear messages and firm claims regarding their needs, namely, a safe and improved environment for the women and children in West Point and the community at large. They not only demand better infrastructure and services from the state in general, but also target specific state actors when making requests, such as the president and the district representative, whom they helped to get voted in. Public institutions such as the legislature, the police, the court, the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Gender and Development are further targets of the West Point Women. By approaching these actors directly, they differ from many other local NGOs who call on international donor organizations.

Alternatively, the West Point Women could have acted by building up their own groups to enforce security, or turn to other forms of contestation. But,

the state institutions are expected to be the first institutions to provide such public services to the citizens. Interestingly, in the organization's view, the state is seen as a solution to the problems: It could provide security, electricity or running water. What the Liberian government does is simply not enough, according to informants, and it seems as if the government forgets about the communities and the promises that were made. Members of the West Point Women Organization hope for financial contributions to support their work, and most of all, appreciation and acknowledgment for their efforts by state representatives.

Post-conflict Liberia is characterised by a growth in civil society organizations supported by international donors that provide goods and services normally attributed to the state administration. This case study showed that social movements have had an important role not only in the recent history of the country. For political and social issues, the movements demand state action. In a context of scarcities on one hand, but political structures that foster democratisation and in particular the participation of women on the other hand, women's movements play a vital role on the political landscape and have an important impact on social change beyond community level.

**Abstract:**

Der eindrucksvolle Einsatz der liberianischen Frauenbewegungen für den Frieden während dem Krieg hat ihnen internationale Aufmerksamkeit geschaffen. Nach dem Konflikt wandte sich das Motiv der Bewegung den Problemen des Nachkriegskontextes zu. Das kollektive Engagement von Frauen spielt auch in Zeiten des Friedens eine wichtige Rolle, dies nicht nur in lokalen Kontexten, sondern auch auf nationaler Ebene. Ein Beispiel hierfür sind die *West Point Women*, eine Frauenorganisation in West Point, einem speziell prekären Quartier in Monrovia. Der vorliegende Artikel setzt sich mit dieser Organisation auseinander und legt den Schwerpunkt auf die Frage, wie eine Bewegung entstehen kann und wie sie ihre Interessen artikuliert, um verbesserte Bedingungen in West Point zu erlangen. Dieses Quartier leidet unter verschiedenen Formen von Gewalt, insbesondere unter Gewalt von Männern gegenüber Frauen. Diese Form von Gewalt

hat während und nach dem Krieg zugenommen.

Viele zivilgesellschaftliche Organisationen beschäftigen sich mit der Bereitstellung öffentlicher Gütern und Dienstleistungen. Dies ist auch ein Bereich, in dem sich die West Point Women engagieren. Wo sie sich aber von vielen solchen Organisationen unterscheiden, sind ihre Forderungen an staatliche Akteure. Die West Point Women sind über die Quartiersgrenzen hinaus bekannt und spielen eine wichtige Rolle in Bezug auf sozialen Wandel im Nachkriegskontext.

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