Uncovering strategies for increasing women's civic and political participation
The role of local leaders in rural Liberia

Master thesis International Development Studies

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Abstract

Despite the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as the first female head of state in Africa, the political participation of Liberian women is low. The inclusion of women in politics is integral to create a just and equitable society and ensure lasting peace. This study explores the experiences of rural Liberian women in terms of their civic and political participation. Specifically, it investigates the role that local leaders play in enhancing political participation of women. The objective of the research is to identify strategies on how women can become actively involved in local politics. To explore the issue of women in local politics in rural Liberia, a community-led development intervention is used as a case study. Interviews that were conducted with the project staff and internal reports and documents drafted by the project staff were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Rural women often struggle with becoming active in political processes because of cultural norms. Cultural norms influence other factors that hinder women from entering the political arena e.g. financial means, education and workload at home. The results suggest that the community-led approach of the Appreciative Inquiry method was effective in bringing women into the local leadership structure. However, women were mostly given low-level leadership positions and full equality for women in political and civic decision-making structures is yet to be achieved. Local leaders should also be included in development interventions regarding political participation because they can foster the inclusion of women in politics.

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AI	Appreciative Inquiry
CEDAW	the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of All Women
GAD	Gender and Development
GII	Gender Inequality Index
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
PR	Proportional Representation
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
UN	United Nations
UNMIL	UN Mission in Liberia
UNSCR	UN Security Council Resolution
WID	Women in Development
WPS	Women's Peace and Security

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In recent years, women's political participation and representation have considerably improved in countries such as Sweden, Argentina and Rwanda (Paxton et al., 2007). However, in the majority of countries, women are still marginalized and underrepresented in local and national legislatures and men continue to dominate political institutions. Women's political participation has become an important issue for both researchers and policymakers in recent decades. But still, there is much that is unknown about strategies and factors that can increase women's civic and political participation.

A country that requires strategies that improve political participation for women is Liberia. Liberia has achieved some significant milestones in terms of women's political engagement and representation. Following a violent civil war, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected as the first female Liberian and African head of state. This was regarded as a watershed moment for women's rights and women's political participation. However, according to Garnett (2016), there has not been a lot of progress in terms of women's political participation since then, and the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has not resulted in a substantial change in the lives of Liberian women. Women continue to be marginalized in social, political and civic spheres accounting for only 3.33 percent of the Senate and 12.3 percent of the House of Representatives (Yates, 2020). Locally, the figures are even lower, with women occupying only 6 percent of local government positions (NDI, 2017). Despite the election of a female head of state, women continue to be sidelined and have few opportunities to participate in political and civic life. Scholars have discovered that including women in national legislatures reduces the likelihood of intrastate conflict and helps sustain peace (Demeritt et al., 2014; Caprioli, 2003). Thus, gender equality may positively contribute to a country's peace and therefore the inclusion of women in decision-making processes is integral to sustaining peace and creating a just and equitable society. As a result, given Liberia's status as a post-conflict nation, women's participation in political processes may be critical in fostering inclusive and long-term peace.

1.1 Problem statement

Strategies for involving women in decision-making processes must be identified to ensure women's participation in political and civic life. In post-conflict societies like Liberia, there is a lack of understanding about the structures and mechanisms required to increase the political participation of women (Strickland & Duvvury, 2003). Women's political participation might be hindered by a variety of factors. One of the barriers is the presence and dominance of men in political structures (DAW,

2005). Men may play a critical role in boosting women's political participation and supporting women's initiatives and movements in pursuit of gender equality. Due to patriarchal systems and religious beliefs, men might not support women's inclusion in politics. The political arena in Liberia is dominated by men, even at the local level where men make up 92 percent of the paramount chiefs and town chiefs (NDI, 2017). More research is needed to determine how important key actors may help enhance women's political involvement because local leaders are often gatekeepers who can play a role in promoting women into positions of power. This is the problem that this research seeks to address. This issue will be explored by studying a community-led development initiative in rural Liberia that aims to increase women's political engagement. Top-down development initiatives have been heavily criticized by development scholars and experts and grassroots, bottom-up interventions have become the norm in recent decades. These participatory approaches are seen as much more democratic and context-sensitive alternatives than top-down approaches. However, how fruitful are bottom-up, community-led development initiatives in achieving the desired outcomes? By investigating a community-led program designed to enhance women's political participation in local structures in rural Liberia, this study will contribute to the debate concerning bottom-up approaches.

The research question of this study is: *'What are the experiences of women in rural Liberia with political and civic participation'*. The research will specifically focus on the role that local leaders play in enhancing women's political participation. First of all, the literature on women's political participation is reviewed, followed by an explanation of the study's methodology. After that, the current state of women's political engagement is analyzed including the barriers that rural women in Liberia face as well as their level of political participation. Then, strategies for improving women's political participation are examined by assessing the potential of the Appreciative Inquiry method and the influence of local leaders. Finally, the most relevant research findings are discussed and in the conclusion, the key findings are summarized.

Chapter 2 - Theoretical framework

The literature on women's political participation is reviewed in this chapter. The first section discusses the elements that influence women's political participation, distinguishing between structural and individual issues. Following that, the literature on why women must be included in political decision-making is summarized. Finally, the concept of civic and political involvement is examined, and a conceptual model is built based on the reviewed literature.

2.1 Structural factors influencing political participation of women

Political participation is influenced by a variety of factors. The structural factors on a macro level will be discussed first. Manipulation of electoral systems and conflict are examples of structural factors. The impact of conflict on women's political participation will be the first topic addressed. Then, on a more individual level, socioeconomic concerns that affect the political participation of women will be discussed.

2.1.1 Conflict and political participation

There is a debate in the literature regarding whether conflict might change gender roles, potentially allowing women to participate more fully in political and civic life. Some experts argue that following a conflict, women may have more opportunities to participate in society and politics (Demeritt et al, 2014; Britton & Bauer, 2014; Webster et al., 2019). Conflicts frequently result in forced displacement which can lead to a shift in men's and women's gender roles and responsibilities (Government of Liberia & UN, 2011). Women and girls may be forced to engage in non-traditional roles such as petty trading or survival sex to support their families as a result of men being killed, abducted or forced into the military. When women are displaced and find themselves in refugee camps, they may take on new tasks and roles within their households. In these refugee camps, women may be able to participate in training and development programs that can help them learn new skills and change their roles in their household (Government of Liberia & UN, 2011). According to Britton & Bauer (2006), conflicts can disrupt gender relations leading to women who are willing and able to participate in politics. Furthermore, war affects the lives of women and can help to empower them to advocate for long-term changes in their lives after the conflict has finished, resulting in long-term changes in gender relations (Arostegui, 2013). In post-conflict countries where the female population outnumbers the male population, women may be able to fill positions that were previously held by men. In Rwanda, for

example, women account for more than 60 percent of the population, and after the election in 2003, women won 49 percent of the seats in parliament (Zuckerman & Greenberg, 2010).

Webster et al. (2019) also find that conflict disrupts social and political foundations which creates opportunities for the empowerment of women. However, they also find that these gains in women's empowerment are not sustained beyond 10 or 15 years after the conflict has ended. This finding is consistent with the arguments on the opposing side of the debate about the impact of conflict on women's political participation. On this side, researchers argue that once a conflict has ended, citizens may return to patriarchal ideologies, values and practices to restore the 'status quo' before the conflict (Webster et al., 2019, Kumar, 2001). In societies where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched, a return to former gender roles is likely to happen (Government of Liberia & UN, 2011). Kumar (2001) finds that in Rwanda, El Salvador, Bosnia and Herzegovina the participation of women in public life increased during a conflict. Women became more involved at the community level, volunteering in churches, schools and hospitals and sometimes leading local political organizations. After the conflict ended, however, almost all these countries experienced a drop in the number of women in public life as men resumed their previous roles (Kumar, 2001).

However, Britton & Bauer (2006) found that after a conflict had ended, there was a higher number of women who were willing and able to run for political office which led to an increase in political representation. They found that the increase of women's political participation was linked to their involvement in the creation of new constitutions and laws in a post-conflict setting, the pressure that women's organizations and movements put on political parties to adopt strategies that increased women's representation and the global women's rights movement that African women actively participated in (Britton & Bauer, 2006). So there is widespread evidence that women take on new roles during times of conflict but it is unclear whether women keep these roles after the conflict has ended because there is conflicting evidence about gender roles in post-conflict settings.

2.1.2 Socio-cultural factors
Women's ability to participate in politics is also influenced by socio-cultural factors. A strong patriarchal system that promotes traditional gender roles and values can be a substantial barrier to women's advancement in participating in public and political life (Paxton, 1997). Patriarchal systems often emphasize women's roles as caretakers and their domestic responsibilities. Because this caretaking role is generally low or unpaid and considered apolitical, it restricts women from taking on other responsibilities outside of the home (Kassa, 2015). These cultural ideas about women can affect

the representation of women in politics at different levels. It influences a woman's decision to enter into politics, the selection of female candidates by political parties and voter's decisions during the electoral process (Paxton et al., 2007). Women also encounter challenges and obstacles due to cultural beliefs when they are in office (Kassa, 2015).

A religious belief system can also contribute to the patriarchal norms in society and the cultural barriers that women face. All dominant religions have arguments that see women as inferior to men and these religious texts have frequently been used to exclude women from social, political and religious life (Paxton et al., 2007). The exclusion of women from religious institutions and religious leadership positions may harm the status of women in society and therefore limits their participation in other aspects of society including politics (Kassa, 2015). Gender inequality is frequently perceived as an issue or concern that primarily affects women. Patriarchal beliefs are often recognized as restrictive and harmful for women and beneficial to men. However, this dichotomy of men as power-holders and women as resistors to a patriarchal system is not useful to employ because it is more nuanced. Men may be forced into forms of masculinity which they are uncomfortable with, while women may defend or protect the patriarchal system since it affords them power and status as mothers and grandmothers. Thus, gender norms can also be harmful to men as they are expected to act in specific ways such as being violent, taking risks and rejecting help (Cislaghi, 2019).

2.1.3 Other structural factors

Other elements, besides conflict and socio-cultural factors, also have an impact on women's political participation and representation. These have to do with manipulations of electoral systems through the type of electoral system and electoral quotas. It is generally believed that Proportional Representation (PR) systems are more favorable towards women than plurality-majority or semi-proportional systems (Rule, 1987; Paxton, 1997; Britton & Bauer, 2006). There is evidence that in the case of Africa, the more proportional an electoral system is, the more women will hold legislative positions (Lindberg, 2004). Electoral quotas are also easier to implement in a PR system which adds to increased female representation. Many governments around the world, including countries on the African continent, have established electoral quotas. In the case of Burundi, the implementation of electoral quotas increased the number of women in decision-making positions at all levels of government but this did not result in substantial changes in women's representation or reduced inequalities between men and women in society. Poverty, lack of access to land and property, illiteracy, and time-consuming domestic responsibilities continue to limit the political participation of women living in rural areas (International Alert, 2012).

2.2 Socio-economic factors

Not only do structural factors have an impact on women's political participation but dynamics on the individual and household level also play a role. This was also touched upon in the previous section in the discussion as to why quotas do not always prove to be effective in substantially changing the representation of women. Socio-economic factors also play a role in whether women can participate in politics. The lack of economic resources is seen as one of the biggest barriers that hinder women from participating in politics. Their lack of economic resources means that women are heavily dependent on their husbands or male relatives for their livelihoods (Kassa, 2015). Another factor that ties into this is the level of education and employment of women. It is believed that the better educated citizens are, the more likely they will actively participate in politics (Oyesomi et al., 2017; La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). Education produces human capital resources which make it easier to engage in politics (La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). Age can also have an impact on political participation as Oyesomi et al., (2017) find that in Nigeria, young women participate more in local politics than older women. Still, elders have a lot of influence in some societies and young women may face barriers to speak out and participate in discussions.

Women's marital status may also influence their capacity to participate in decision-making processes. A woman's political participation may be hindered when she is married and subjected to her husband's control. Married women often have domestic responsibilities and these can be difficult to balance with active participation in politics (Oyesomi et al., 2017). The caretaking gap means that women spend more time than men on domestic and childcare responsibilities. For example, in Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay, women spent three to five times more time on unpaid domestic work than men (Franceschet et al., 2015). Poor women, in particular, are limited in pursuing their political ambitions because they lack the financial means to outsource unpaid work to paid domestic help or family members which can be an option for well-off women. The number of children that women have also may influence their political chances as the fewer children they have, the more time they have outside of the home to pursue their political goals (Franceschet et al., 2015).

2.3 Arguments for women's political participation

After the long conflict that Liberia experienced, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf stated that she felt that the country needed a female president because "the country had been led by men for 150 years- and look where that had gotten us" (Johnson Sirleaf, 2009, 261). This shows that some people consider women to be better leaders than men but is there any theoretical grounding for this statement? This section will discuss some of the theories as to why scholars find it important that women are included in political and civic

decision-making processes. For a start, including women in political and civic life is seen as integral to preventing interstate and intrastate conflict, this is supported by several academic studies (Caprioli, 2003; Melander, 2005; Demeritt et al, 2014). For example, Caprioli (2003) finds that gender inequality increases the likelihood of intrastate conflict. There is also evidence that increasing female literacy and increasing participation of women in parliament reduces the likelihood of a return to civil war and thus contributes positively to the continuation of peace (Demeritt et al, 2014). These studies show that female participation in civil and political processes reduces political violence in a country.

There are two theoretical explanations for this. The first is the essentialist argument that gender identities are based on permanent biological features, implying that all women have certain fixed characteristics and roles such as caregivers. This suggests that women have an aversion to violence because they prefer to give life rather than to take it. The opposing argument of the debate is constructivist, which views gender roles as socially constructed and attributes women's inclination for peace to their upbringing as nurturers (Demeritt et al., 2014). Nowadays, gender is generally assumed to be socially constructed, indicating that social differences are superimposed on the biological differences between men and women resulting in social expectations that distinguish between behavior that is suitable for men and women. The evidence that gender is socially constructed lies in certain societies that did not make the distinction between genders (Dzorgbo & Gyan, 2016). In these societies, such as the Yoruba in Nigeria, gender was not constructed and hierarchical relations were based on seniority instead of gender (Oyewumi, 1997).

Another argument as to why women should be represented at all levels of political power is that it is just and equitable and the lack of women in politics reduces the legitimacy of political systems (Fokum et al., 2020). Women should also be equally represented in the political system as only they can represent women's interests which cannot be done properly by men (Asiedu et al., 2018). This view is challenged by some scholars as they point out that not all women are the same and that their interests vary based on factors such as race, ethnicity, class and political ideology (Crenshaw, 1990). A final argument is that women should be included in political processes based on the skills and talents that they possess. It is believed that women who are involved in political decision-making contribute knowledge, skills and expertise and that their inclusion is integral to achieving development and decreasing poverty (Momsen, 2009). Including women as legislators can also lead to increased gender equality as female decision-makers are more likely to sponsor legislation that serves women (Yoon, 2004; Wang, 2013). However, there is also evidence that having a female head of state does not substantially improve conditions for women (Kodila-Tedika & Asongu, 2017).

2.4 Gender in development

Starting in the 1970s, women in development (WID) scholars have called for the inclusion of women in development interventions because a study highlighted that women were being left behind in development initiatives (Ransom & Bain, 2011). A decade later the approach of only targeting women and integrating them into development intervention became heavily contested. The WID approach to development was criticized by gender and development (GAD) scholars who believed that gender equality could be achieved by not only focusing on the participation of women but by also focusing on the gender relations between men and women, the roles that are assigned to them and the opportunities they are offered (Ransom & Bain, 2011). Only focusing on women to achieve increased political participation for women is not sufficient as men also play a role in this process. For example, Garnett (2016) finds that there is growing resentment among some Liberian men about the focus on women and gender in policies. This is not constructive to achieving more gender equality thus these men and other local key actors need to be sensitized to the importance of addressing gender inequality (Garnett, 2016). Men can play a crucial role in enhancing women's political participation and can support women's initiatives and movements to achieve gender equality because men are often gatekeepers (DAW, 2005).

For some years, many interventions have focused not only on women but also on the inclusion of men. As was previously discussed, there are a lot of factors that influence women's political participation and in many countries, the inclusion of women in the political sphere is lacking, also in Liberia. There are many reasons why women should be included in politics so the political participation of women must be enhanced. However, it is not always clear how this can be achieved, especially in local contexts and local structures. The role of local leaders and traditional leadership structures is often overlooked. Local leaders often have much influence and can also act as gatekeepers to the political process but it is not clear what role they can play in increasing women's political participation. Therefore, the knowledge gap that this thesis seeks to address is to uncover the strategies that help to enhance the political participation of women with a focus on the role of local leaders in this process.

In this theoretical framework, women have been talked about as one uniform group but it is very important to take into account that there are differences and inequalities among women. Not only their gender but also their social, economic, and cultural status can create inequalities among women (Oyesomi et al., 2017). Therefore this research will take an intersectional approach to highlight that women can be marginalized because of their gender but also because of other factors such as their religion, ethnicity or age (Crenshaw, 1999).

2.5 Political and civic participation

Political participation is a central concept to this research so it is important to define it. There is some debate amongst political scientists on how to define political participation. Van Deth (2014) broadly defines political participation as citizens' activities affecting politics (van Deth, 2014). So political participation only focuses on people in their role as citizens and not on professional politicians. However, other scholars view political participation more broadly. For example, Verba et al. (1995) define political participation as an "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies" (p. 38). This definition of political participation also sees the activities of 'the making or the implementation of public policy' as political participation so this also includes people in decision-making positions.

The definition of political participation from the UN consists of several elements such as voting in elections, 'associating freely' and 'assembling peacefully' but also activities on a higher level such as 'holding public office' (UNGA, 2012). Arowolo & Aluko (2010) (as cited in Oyesomi et al., 2017) identify three levels of political participation. At the spectator level, activities are less time-consuming such as voting, initiating public discussions and trying to convince someone to vote a certain way. At the transitional level, activities are more time-consuming than at the spectator level and require more resources. Attending political meetings or rallies, contributing financially to a campaign and contacting a government official are activities that fall in this category. At the highest gladiator level, activities include holding political office, running for political office or contributing time to a campaign in some way. In this sense, political participation happens on all levels of society, including both citizens and career politicians.

In terms of civic participation, a lot of scholars do not make the distinction between civic and political engagement because they see politics and civil society as interdependent concepts (Macedo et al., 2005). Civic engagement can be defined as "how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241) so civic and political participation are viewed as overlapping concepts. The only difference between the two concepts is that civic participation also includes non-political activities such as volunteering (Longley, 2020). A critical aspect of women's political participation is the difference between women's presence in politics and their active participation and ability to influence decision-making in these processes. The presence of women is not the same as their active participation and influence on decision-making processes (CARE, 2018). This difference is also highlighted by the

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participation ladder which shows different levels of citizen engagement and participation in community-based structures.

Figure 1. Ladder of citizen participation by Arnstein
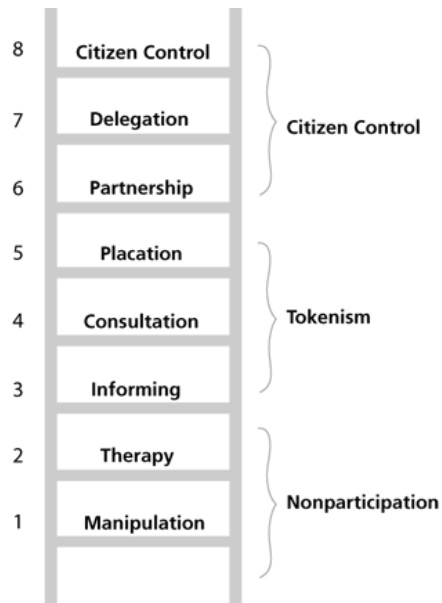
(Arnstein, 1969)

Figure 2 shows the citizen participation ladder that was developed by Arnstein (1969). The ladder describes the level of citizen involvement in planning processes beginning from non-participation to full citizen control over the planning process. The citizen participation ladder was adapted by ZOA (2019) to fit the context of political participation in local communities and has five steps. The first step is manipulation which means that women do not participate at all, tokenism means that women are members of decision-making bodies because it is required by an NGO but they are not able to share their views, while consultation means that women are involved and share their input but their opinions are not included in decision-making. Higher up the ladder is engagement which means that women have the power to make some decisions but approval of men is required for the actual decision and at the last step women are as actively involved in decision-making processes as their male counterparts (ZOA, 2019).

Figure 2. Participation ladder, adapted version
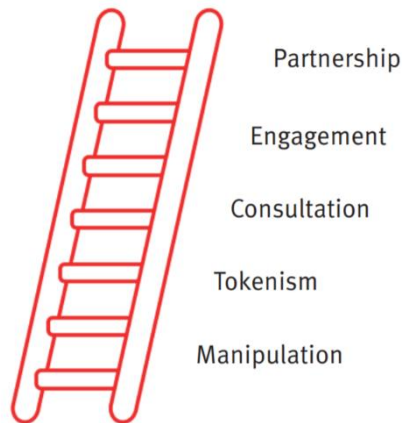
(ZOA, 2019).

2.6 Conceptual model

The conceptual model that is presented in figure 1 shows the different elements that have been discussed in the theoretical framework. The factors that influence the political participation of women are outlined on the left side of the model. Under structural factors fall conflict, violence against women in politics, electoral systems and electoral quotas. The participation ladder is included in the conceptual model to measure the levels of civic and political participation. Socio-cultural factors show the habits, traditions and beliefs that can have an impact on women's political participation such as patriarchal and religious systems. Socio-economic factors are factors that relate to the financial situation of different groups such as education, employment, domestic and childcare responsibilities. Socio-economic factors are also influenced by socio-cultural factors as the amount of economic resources, education, employment, etc. is also affected by a woman's status in society which is derived from existing religious and patriarchal systems. The perceptions of influential key actors also have an impact on the political participation of women as they have the power to improve conditions for women to participate in politics.

Figure 3. Conceptual model
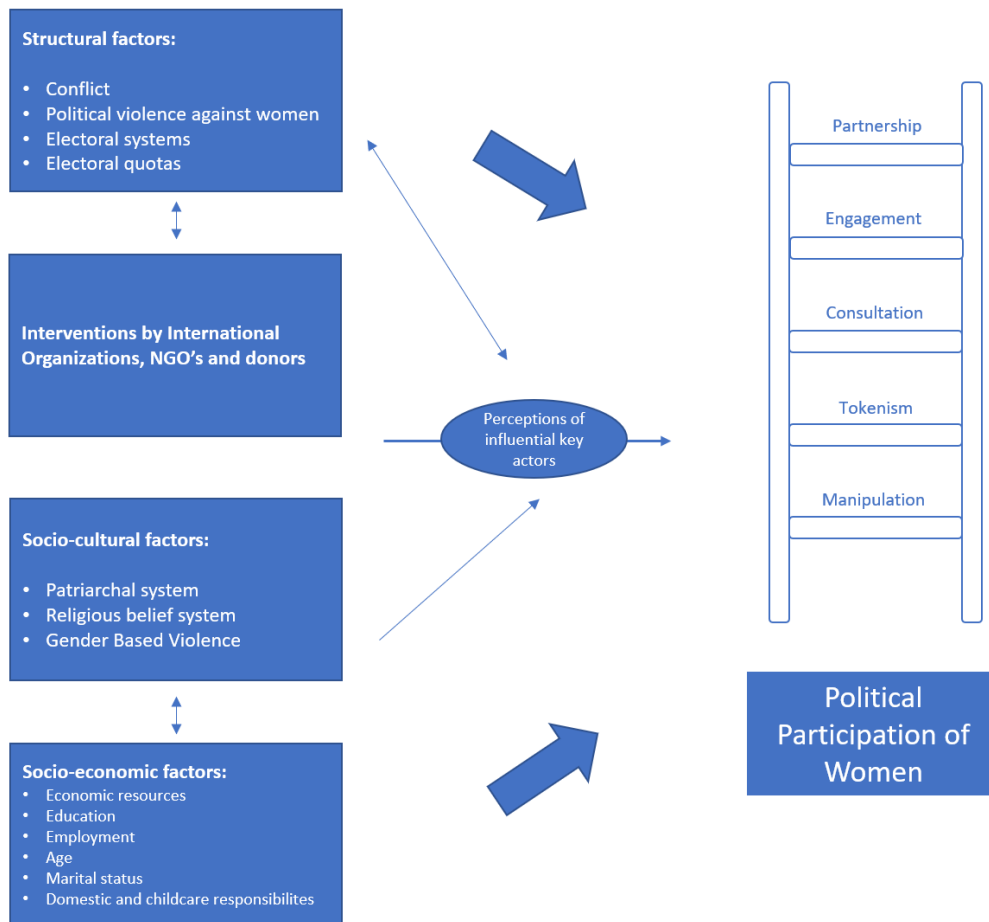
The perceptions of influential actors are influenced by socio-cultural factors and can also influence electoral systems and electoral quotas. Conflict can also influence the perceptions of influential actors on the political participation of women. Political violence against women is widespread and provides a barrier for women to get involved in politics as it may not be safe for them to do so. An electoral system can also have an impact on political participation as some electoral systems are more favorable to female representation in government than others. Electoral quotas can increase female participation by reserving a number or percentage of places in government for an under-represented group, in this case, women. Several scholars have argued that women's increased participation also depends on the influence of the international community to support their efforts through mechanisms such as quota systems, the strengthening of women's groups and other local interventions of international organizations and NGOs (Garnett, 2016). That is why the interventions

by international organizations, NGOs and donors are also included in the conceptual model as these programs often provide space for women to build confidence and become involved in politics.

2.7 Research questions

The objective of the research is to identify factors that increase women's leadership and participation in civic and political life in the post-conflict society of Liberia. As discussed in this chapter, there are many barriers to women's political participation. One of these barriers is the presence and dominance of men in political structures (DAW, 2005). Key actors also play a crucial role in enhancing women's political participation and can support women's initiatives and movements to achieve gender equality since they are often gatekeepers. However, key actors may have negative perceptions about women's political participation because of patriarchal systems and religious beliefs. More research must be done on how local influential key actors can help enhance political and civic participation for women. Therefore, the main research question is: *What are the experiences of women in rural Liberia with political and civic participation?*

This question will be answered in two parts. First, the current state of women's political participation in rural Liberia has to be determined and after that strategies on how it can be improved can be discussed. Therefore the sub-questions are:

1. What is the state of women's civic and political participation in the project communities
    a. What are the barriers to women's political and civic participation?
    b. What level of participation do women have and to what extent is this systematic?

2. How can civic and political participation of women in rural Liberia be improved?
    a. What are the opportunities for women's political and civic participation?
    b. What impact do key actors and the communities have on women's political participation?
        I. What are the influential key actors and institutions in Liberia?
        II. What are the perceptions of key actors on women's political participation and how can these perceptions be changed?

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology of the research, how the concepts will be measured, the research methods and any limitations of the study.

3.1 Operationalization

Table 1 shows how the concepts mentioned in the conceptual model are defined and will be measured in this research. Civic and political participation is an important concept to this research. A lot of studies that focus on women's political representation conceptualize women's political participation as the number of seats held by women in national parliament (Fokum et al., 2020; Britton & Bauer, 2006; Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019). A focus only on national parliamentary seats held by women will not be sufficient for this research because it is focused on a local level and is qualitative. Also, Garnett (2016) points out that while there has been some increase in women's political representation on the national level in Liberia, this has not translated to substantial changes in the lives of most Liberian women. So this study will look at political participation at all levels of society but focuses mostly on local structures. Therefore, political participation is defined as 'activities that women participate in that influence decision-making processes' because this entails activities from citizens and politicians such as voting and holding leadership positions. Civic participation is defined as 'activities that women participate in to help improve their communities and help to shape its future' and civic and political participation will both be measured by the participation ladder which was also included in the conceptual model.

Table 1. Operationalization of concepts

Concept	Definition	Operationalization
Political Participation	Activities that women participate in that influence decision-making processes.	ZOA's participation ladder (partnership, engagement, consultation, tokenism and manipulation)
Civic Participation	Activities that women participate in to help improve their communities and help to shape its future	ZOA's participation ladder (partnership, engagement, consultation, tokenism and manipulation)

Perceptions on political participation of women	An attitude, belief or opinion to women participating in decision-making processes	People's thoughts on women's political participation and the ability of women to act as leaders
Socio-economic factors	Factors relating to women's financial situation that may impact their political participation such as education, employment, age, marital status and childcare and domestic responsibilities	Education; occupation; income or savings; age; married, widowed, divorced or unmarried; number of children or household activities mentioned as a barrier or opportunity to women's political participation
Socio-cultural factors	Factors relating to people's habits, traditions and beliefs which may impact the political participation of women such as religious and patriarchal beliefs	Patriarchal and religious beliefs about the role of women in society and politics
Conflict	A politically organized, large-scale, sustained, physically violent conflict that occurs within a country principally among large/numerically important groups of its inhabitants or citizens over the monopoly of physical force within the country	People mention that gender roles during or after the conflict changed or remained unchanged
Electoral system	The rules that govern an election	Plurality system; majoritarian system; PR system
Electoral quota	A rule or law that is in place to increase the number of women in the government by reserving a certain number or percentage of places to be occupied by women	the number of women that should be in the legislature or on a political party candidate list is determined by law
Violence against women in politics	Physical and psychological violence towards women to prevent women from exercising their political rights and, by extension, to communicate more broadly that women do not belong in politics	Violence targeted towards women participating in politics to discourage them from actively participating in politics
International organizations,	Non-state actors, organizations that consists of	International organizations, NGO's

NGOs and donors	multiple states and individual countries that aim to improve conditions in the Global South through financial and technical assistance	and donors that seek to influence policies on women's political participation or implement programs that strive to increase women's political participation

Conflict in the context of this research is a civil war because this applies to the conflict in Liberia. Civil war can be defined as a 'politically organized, large-scale, sustained, physically violent conflict that occurs within a country principally among large/numerically important groups of its inhabitants or citizens over the monopoly of physical force within the country' (Gersovitz & Kriger, 2013, p. 160). An electoral system is a set of rules governing the election (Ware, 2015) and an electoral quota is a rule or law that is in place to increase the number of women in the government by reserving a certain number or percentage of places to be occupied by women. Violence against women in politics is gender-based violence (UN Women, 2018) and targets women because of their sex and aims to discourage women to be politically active (LEON, 2020). Finally, International Organizations, NGOs and donors can be defined as organizations that aim to improve conditions in the Global South through financial and technical assistance (Galanis, n.d.).

3.2 Research methods

A qualitative approach was chosen to conduct this research as the goal of the research is to understand the perceptions and experiences of women's political participation in Liberia. The country of Liberia was chosen for this research because of its historic election of the first female president in Africa, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Despite this important milestone, the participation of women in politics in Liberia is generally low both nationally and locally. It is therefore interesting to study the political participation of women in Liberia. To gain an in-depth understanding of the political participation of women in rural Liberia, the chosen approach for this research is a case study of the counties of Grand Cape Mount and Margibi. The cases Grand Cape Mount and Margibi were chosen because of the availability of data about these two counties. Because the research had to be conducted online, the researcher could not visit Liberia.

The research was conducted with ZOA Liberia, ZOA is an international relief and recovery organization that helps vulnerable people to rebuild their lives after they have been impacted by a violent conflict or a natural disaster (ZOA, n.d.). ZOA has projects in more than 15 countries around the world including Liberia. ZOA has worked in Liberia since 2003 to help rebuild trust and sustain inclusive peace in the

aftermath of the violent civil war. ZOA works on several programs in Liberia and one of their aims is to empower women and youth to meaningfully participate in conflict resolution, peacebuilding efforts and political and civic engagements. Recently, they conducted a project on women's political participation in Liberia in the counties Grand Cape Mount and Margibi. The two cases provide an interesting comparison because the citizens of Grand Cape Mount are predominantly Muslim while the citizens of Margibi are mostly Christian. Table 2 shows some information about the project. The objective of the project was to improve the political participation of women, people living with disabilities and other marginalized groups. The research mostly focuses on the political participation of women but also takes people with disabilities into account. The project also focused on pre-election campaigning to ensure sustained peace, however, the research will not focus on this objective and only on outcome 1 of the project.

Table 2. Information about project

Project title	Strengthening Inclusive Civic and Political Participation and promoting constructive pre-election campaigning for Sustained Peace in Liberia
Project duration	September 2019- March 2021
Objective	More inclusive and equitable civic and political participation for women, people living with disabilities and other marginalized groups, and constructive pre-election campaigning that contributes to sustained Peace in Liberia.
Outcome 1	Key public actors in two counties establish a more conducive environment for women's and people living with disabilities' participation in civic and political life, based on an inclusive dialogue with empowered local women and disability groups (Grand Cape Mount and Margibi).
Outcome 2	Pre-election campaigning for the 2020 Senatorial Elections are conducted in a peaceful, inclusive and constructive manner in five counties (Bong, Montserrado, Nimba, Grand Gedeh, and Sinoe).

Qualitative methods were used to answer the research question "*What are the experiences of women in rural Liberia with political and civic participation?"*. This was because the research focuses on barriers and perceptions of women's political participation and these could best be explored by using qualitative methods that provide in-depth context. All the research methods that were used during this research are outlined below.

Table 3. Characteristics of selected communities

Code of community	Main religion	Including people with a disability
Grand Cape Mount County		
Community 1	Muslim	No
Community 2	Muslim	Yes
Community 3	Muslim	Yes
Community 4	Muslim	No
Margibi County		
Community 5	Christian	No
Community 6	Christian	No
Community 7	Christian	Yes
Community 8	Muslim and Christian	No

Content analysis. The starting point of this research was the reports that project staff from ZOA had made during the project that aimed to increase women's political participation. Questions and gaps in information that came up during the analysis of reports could further be explored using expert

interviews. The objective of the project was to increase civic and political participation for women and people living with disabilities. To achieve this, eight women's groups and groups of people with disabilities were selected to participate in the project and four appreciative inquiry meetings were held with each group individually over the course of several months. Table 3 describes the main characteristics of the eight groups that were selected for the project.

The Appreciative Inquiry meetings consist of community visits and focus group discussions that try to identify and overcome barriers to political participation with the help of dramas and songs. Since ZOA has conducted a project on the political participation of women, ZOA had reports and documents on the political participation of women in Liberia. The reports consisted of progress reports, notes on Appreciative Inquiry meetings, power analysis of influential actors in the counties and a third-party evaluation of the project. These reports were used as the starting point of this research and were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify barriers and opportunities to political participation and perceptions of actors on political participation of women. The reports also provided information to answer the question about the level of participation of women in the communities. All the reports were read carefully several times and then parts of the text that described relevant themes were given codes that fit the theme. The codebook that was used can be found in the appendix.

Interviews. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to further explore the themes that were identified during the analysis of the reports. In total five interviews were held with the project staff that worked on the project the research focuses on. The five interviews were all held online, four of which were held through Microsoft Teams and one conducted through a Whatsapp video call. An interview guide was designed through gaps that came up through the analysis of the reports and themes that were informed by the conceptual model. The interview guide was altered after the first interview was held because it provided new insights into useful questions. The questions in the interview guide served as a general guideline for the interviews and probes were used during the interview which caused different themes to come up every interview.

3.3 Positionality

I needed to be aware of my positionality as a researcher because it could affect the data analysis process. I was born in the Netherlands and had never visited Africa or Liberia so I did not have a lot of knowledge about the region. I had to be mindful of any preconceptions or stereotypes I had because I could not go to Liberia to conduct the research. I could maintain objectivity during the research if I was aware of these. It was critical to reflect on my role as a researcher throughout the research. The inability to travel

to Liberia during a pandemic and do the research in person may have aided my capacity to reflect on the research because I had to continue to reflect in order to comprehend the local context as an 'outsider'.

3.4 Limitations & Risks

The following paragraph outlines the limitations of the research. It was a challenge to gather data on my own because the research was remote and I was unable to travel to Liberia to conduct the research there. This was a limitation of the research because the extent to which the data collection could be done by the researcher was limited. As a result, the majority of the data used in this study came from ZOA and the individuals who were interviewed were also staff working for ZOA. Because this research relied heavily on data from ZOA Liberia, it may have been biased by their assumptions and beliefs about women's political participation. However, I tried to remain critical of the methods that they use. Because I was unable to recruit research participants myself due to the restrictions of remote research, there may have been a bias in the participants that were included in the study. It was not possible to interview the members of rural communities myself and their experiences were all described by the reports of ZOA and their employees. However, there was some evaluation data collected by an independent organization so not all the data that was used in this research was generated by ZOA.

I was also limited by conducting research online which restricted the possibilities of doing in-depth interviews, these could only be done with staff living in and around the capital Monrovia because there is a lack of telephone and internet connection in other regions. It was difficult to establish rapport during online interviews because of lags in audio and a lack of video due to connectivity issues. It was hard to read body language and to be aware of surroundings during online interviews. Some context of interviews may have been lost because the interviews were conducted online. Furthermore, the analysis of reports sometimes lacked contexts such as surroundings and body language which would have been useful for an in-depth understanding of the situation.

Chapter 4 – Regional context of Liberia

4.1 Background of Liberia

The research on women's civic and political participation was conducted in Liberia. This chapter gives an overview of the relevant national context in Liberia. Liberia had a population of 4.9 million in the year 2019 and its capital is called Monrovia where approximately 1.5 million people live. The official language of the country is English and Liberian English but there are also several indigenous languages. Liberia is one of the poorest countries in the world as 63.8 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and of these people living in poverty, about 48 percent live in extreme poverty (Government of Liberia & UN, 2011).

Figure 4. Map of Liberia

(vidiani.com, n.d.)

Liberia was founded in 1822 by formerly enslaved people returning to Africa from the Americas. In 1847, it became the first African nation to declare independence with the descendants of the formerly

enslaved Americans, known as Americo-Liberians, becoming the ruling class. The Americo-Liberians, who made up less than three percent of the Liberian population, dominated the country's politics until 1980 and indigenous Liberians were marginalized during this long rule (Dennis, 2006). After that, a violent coup by Samuel Doe overthrew the more progressive Americo-Liberian William Tolbert Jr., who sought to include indigenous Liberians in decision-making processes, ending the long rule of the Americo-Liberians by becoming the first indigenous ruler (Bauer, 2009). From this moment on President Doe ruled the country as a dictator. In 1989, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor seized the North of Liberia which started the first civil war. From 1989 to 2003, Liberia experienced two violent civil wars which left up to 80% of the rural population displaced and resulted in the killing of more than 300,000 Liberians (Bauer, 2009). After the first civil war, Charles Taylor was quickly elected president and peace did not last long because in 1999 the fighting started again (Ouellet, 2013).

Figure 5. Timeline of civil war in Liberia
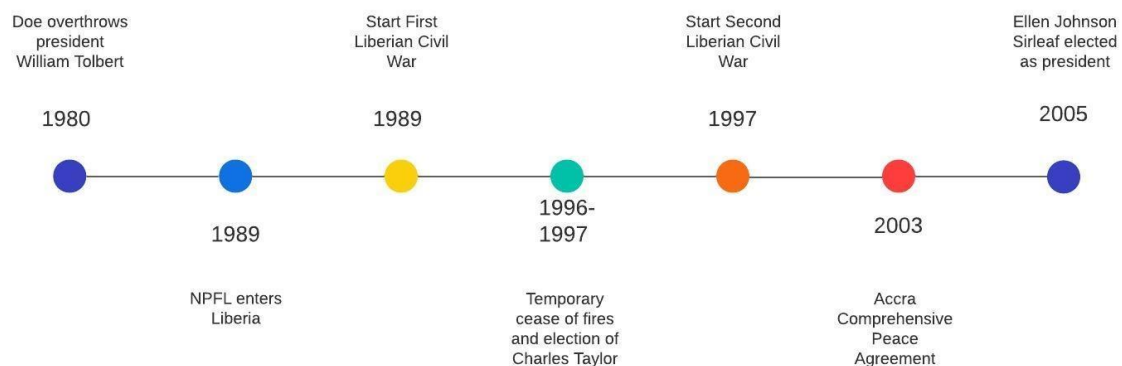
One of the causes of the civil war was that indigenous Liberians were tired of repression under the rule of the Americo-Liberians and because they wanted to take on leadership roles (Government of Liberia & UN, 2011). At first, the indigenous people were fighting against the Americo-Liberians but during the first civil war, the indigenous people also started fighting with each other (Government of Liberia & UN, 2011). This is the cause of ethnic tensions between tribes that still exist to this day (SCORE Liberia, 2018b). In 2003, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was drafted which ended the civil war (Bauer, 2009). Women played a big role in the process of ending the war as Christian and Muslim women gathered to form the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign (Ouellet, 2013). They demanded peace and called upon the leaders of warring factions and soldiers to bring an end to the devastating war (Garnett, 2016).

In the years after the civil war, Liberians and the international community worked to rebuild the country through active disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and the establishment of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) (Dennis, 2006). In 2005, Liberians elected Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf who became the first female African head of state. This was seen as a big win for women's political participation but this development has not brought substantial change to the lives of many Liberian women (Garnett, 2016). From 2006 onwards, the new government has worked on a recovery and reconstruction program to facilitate establishing peace and security. (Government of Liberia & UN, 2011). In May 2005, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to promote national peace, security, unity and reconciliation by investigating more than 20 years of national civil conflict (Mulbah & Dennis, 2017). Since 2018, George Weah, a former football star, has been the president of Liberia. This was the first peaceful transition of power in Liberia since 1944 (Freedom House, 2020). George Weah is not popular as is shown by the recent losses his party suffered in the Senatorial elections. In terms of democracy, Freedom House ranks Liberia at 60 out of 100 which means that it is partly free (Freedom House, 2020).

4.2 Gender roles in Liberia

Liberia is ranked 154th out of 164 countries in the 2017 Gender Inequality Index (GII) which means that gender equality is very low compared to other countries in the world (UNDP, 2020). Women are underrepresented in national politics and leadership positions in political parties. In 2006, 16.6 percent of the Senate and 12.5 percent of the House of Representatives were women but this has now declined to 3.33 percent in the Senate and 12.3 percent in the House (Yates, 2020). Currently, there is only one woman in the Senate out of 30 seats and there are nine elected women in the Lower House which has 73 seats (Freedom House, 2020). On a county level, only seven out of the 15 counties have women in their legislatures and only three out of 15 county superintendents are female (Yates, 2020). Ninety-two percent of the paramount chiefs and town chiefs are men and only six percent of local government positions are held by women (NDI, 2017). While women make up 54 percent of the workforce, they are often underpaid and hold jobs in the informal sector (Kumalo & Kujeke, 2017) so this contributes to their marginalization. Only 27 percent of the women older than 15 years are literate compared to 60.8 percent of Liberian men (UN Women, n.d.) and 48 percent of Liberian girls get pregnant before they turn 18 which adds to the high levels of unemployment in this group (Kumalo & Kujeke, 2017).

Cultural life and relations before the civil war were mostly governed by traditional chiefs and elders in the Poro and Sande secret societies. These secret societies, which can be found in central and western Liberia, were and are still considered as the main institutions that initiate young boys and girls into

adulthood by teaching them social skills that fulfill their expected gender roles. For boys, this entails activities such as hunting, how and when to initiate sexual activity and how to provide for their future families. For girls, it focuses on teaching domestic duties and how to submit to their future husbands. A woman's traditional role is to be obedient and respectful to her husband and her life consists primarily of household responsibilities such as child care, cooking and washing. The status of a woman was determined by the status of the men in her family. In case of the death of her husband, a woman and the properties of the married couple were usually inherited by a male relative and women often did not have the means to contest this decision. (Government of Liberia & UN, 2012). This practice is changing with the implementation of the 2003 Customary Marriages law which gives women more resources to divide properties that a couple acquired during their marriage (Government of Liberia & UN, 2012). During and after the civil war, there were considerable shifts in gender relations but underlying power relations have remained largely intact. Thus, gender relations have not severely changed because the conflict has not led to sustained changes in gender roles (Government of Liberia & UN, 2012).

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is widespread in Liberian society, especially in rural communities (SCORE Liberia, 2018b). Despite efforts to implement laws and increase awareness on the topic, SGBV continues as 18% of women say they have experienced some form of SGBV and 45% say they have experienced physical violence (Government of Liberia & UN, 2012).

4.3 Marginalized groups

Not only women are marginalized in Liberian society based on their gender, but other groups are also excluded and marginalized. For example, elders hold a lot of power in Liberia which means that youths' voices are excluded and this group is marginalized. It is integral that youth are included in all levels of society for peacebuilding and also because they make up a big part of society as one-third of the population is between the age of 15 and 35 (LISGIS, 2012). Religion also played an important role in establishing peace since Christianity and Islam were influential in the women's peace movements and the healing that followed thereafter (Ouellet, 2013). Liberia has no official religion, although the majority of the country is Christian (Freedom House, 2020). Christians make up 85.6 percent of the country while 12.2 percent are Muslim and 0.6 percent have indigenous religious beliefs (United States Department of State, 2018). The Muslim minority experiences discrimination (Freedom House, 2020). Other minorities include disabled people and LGBTQ+ who are also marginalized. Descendants from Lebanese and Asian minorities are not allowed to participate in the political process and are refused citizenship (Freedom House, 2020)

Although the civil war ended 18 years ago, Liberia still has to deal with existing and emerging conflicts (Mulbah & Dennis, 2017). This has the potential to weaken national peace and stability processes in Liberia. The three critical conflict drivers that pose the most danger to the stability of Liberia's democracy are land disputes, corruption and border/boundary disputes (Mulbah & Dennis, 2017).

Tribalism also plays a big role in the socio-political life of Liberia. Political tribalism has risen since the civil war. Political tribalism refers to the attitudes and behaviors that derive from strong loyalty to the ethnocultural and linguistic group that people belong to (SCORE Liberia, 2018a). Political tribalism can lead to polarization and tensions between tribes and it also emphasizes tribal hierarchies and traditional ways of life over democracy. While ethnic tribal identities can contribute positively to a sense of belonging, political tribalism hinders democratization and other constructive citizenship processes (SCORE Liberia, 2018a). Currently, political tribalism is declining as the national score decreased from 3.0 to 2.5 in 2018 on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means no political tribalism and 10 strong political tribalism (SCORE Liberia, 2018a). There is a strong correlation between political tribalism and support for SGBV and corruption. Corruption is a big problem and remains prevalent (Freedom House, 2020). In 2018, the perceived level of corruption was 4.4 on a scale of 0 (no corruption) to 10 (prevalent corruption on all levels) (SCORE Liberia, 2018b). There are many government institutions tasked with fighting corruption but they do not have the capacity and resources to act effectively so corruption continues (Freedom House, 2020).

4.4 Political system and structures

Because the country of Liberia was established by former enslaved Americans, Liberia's political system closely reflects that of the United States. The government of Liberia exists out of executive, legislative and judicial branches and is bicameral, thus consisting of a Senate and Lower House (Liberia Media Center, 2008). Liberia is a republic and the head of state is the President who can serve a maximum of two six-year terms. On a local level, the government is more complex. Cities are governed by mayors while rural areas are ruled by town chiefs, tribal chiefs and district commissioners (Liberia Media Center, 2008). Liberia consists of 15 counties that are respectively headed by a superintendent who is appointed by the president (Petterson, 2020). The county superintendent, who is appointed by the president and is commonly viewed as the 'County President' (Nyei, 2014). Under the superintendent serve a couple of District Commissioners depending on the size of the county. The superintendent communicates with a group of chiefs who are organized in the hierarchy depicted in the figure below.

Figure 6. Hierarchy of county leadership structure
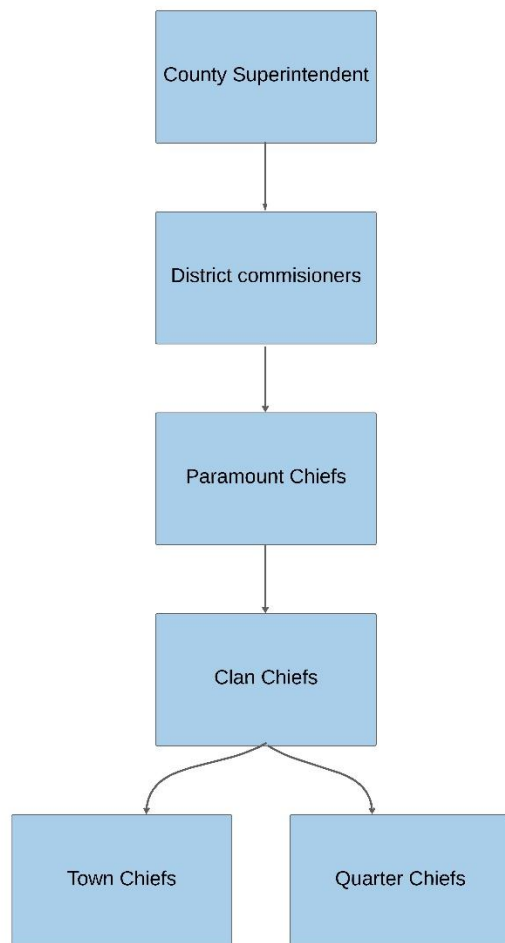
The paramount chief is the highest official of the group of chiefs and serves as a liaison between the government and the clans. The county is divided into districts known as clans which are led by district chiefs, who are also called clan chiefs. At the lowest level, there are town chiefs and quarter elders who are in direct contact with citizens (Richards et al., 2005). In contrast to the other chiefs, the town chiefs are not salaried officials (Beekman, 2015). Chiefs are nominated by elders and then appointed by the government. Officially, the constitution states that chiefs should be elected at the local level; however, due to the civil war and a lack of financial resources, this has not occurred since 1985 (MIA, n.d.). The formal judicial system consists of a Supreme Court and other lower courts. In some communities, there are also traditional courts that are governed by ethnic groups and which remain important (Petterson, 2020).

In 2014, Liberia was one of the three countries in West Africa that was severely affected by the Ebola epidemic. The capital Monrovia was hit the hardest and the outbreak led to the closure of schools, borders, markets and most health facilities resulting in a shortage of fuel and food (WHO Liberia, 2015). The number of total deaths in Liberia was 4810 and the epidemic had devastating effects on the healthcare workforce in the country as it lost eight percent of its doctors, nurses and midwives to the Ebola virus (CDC, 2019). In May 2015, the country was declared Ebola-free, however more cases were discovered after that and the final declaration was made in June 2016 (CDC, 2019). Because of the Ebola crisis, the government responded quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic and issued a general lockdown and social distancing rules in March. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused harm to the economy, trade disruptions and food insecurity among the population (Saito, 2020).

4.5 Gender policies in Liberia

Gender has become a central concept for the government of Liberia and its peacebuilding operations. The Government of Liberia is committed to women's issues and sees it as a necessary step towards building inclusive peace. UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 was adopted in 2000 and since then gender issues have become a key concern in peacekeeping operations and have become central in political, military, development and humanitarian spheres to facilitate peacebuilding (Schia & De Carvalho, 2009). In 2019, the government drafted a National Action Plan on Women's Peace and Security (WPS) and it is only one out of six African countries to do so (Government of Liberia & UN, 2012). The National Action Plan is based on UNSCR 1325 which strives for the inclusion of women in peace and security processes. However, the content of UNSCR 1325 is much more developed on the topic of political representation than in other dimensions such as security and welfare (Schia & De Carvalho, 2009). The government has also shown willingness for implementing policies regarding gender equality by following the provisions and obligations of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of All Women (CEDAW) (Government of Liberia & UN, 2012).

So the Government of Liberia is making active efforts to pursue gender equality in Liberia but little has been implemented (Kumalo & Kujeke, 2017). This is partly because Gender Policy has not been consistently integrated into the national legislature. For example, the Inheritance Law of Liberia states that a young girl is eligible for marriage at the age of 16 while the Penal Code of 2005 states that the age of consent is 18. So enforcement becomes difficult because of these inconsistencies (Kumalo & Kujeke, 2017). In 2013, a Gender Parity Bill which required a 30 percent quota for women in all levels of government and legislature was rejected (Garnett, 2016). Recently, there have been talks about a 25 percent Women Quota Bill but this bill has yet to be passed (Worzi, 2020).

4.6 Grand Cape Mount & Margibi County

This research will focus on two counties in Liberia which are Grand Cape Mount and Margibi. The next section will give a short description of the counties and will discuss their main similarities and differences.

Figure 7. Map of Liberia with counties

(Mapsopensource, n.d.)

Grand Cape Mount County is bordered by the country of Sierra Leone and has Robertsport as its capital. The five major ethnic groups are the Vai, Gola, Mende, Mandingo and Kissi and numerous minority ethnic groups coexist peacefully. In 2008, the county had a population of 129,817 with about 70 percent being Muslim, 25 percent Christian and the rest practicing traditional religions. Subsistence farming is practiced by about 80 percent of the county's rural households.

Margibi was founded in 1984 and is one of the newest counties in Liberia. The Bassa are the dominant ethnic group but all ethnic groups are present in the county. The county is predominantly Christian with

a Muslim minority of 5 percent. The estimated population is 240,996 and the main livelihood activities are subsistence farming, rubber tapping and charcoal production. In general, women work in subsistence agriculture while males work in rubber tapping.

Chapter 5 – Analysis: Barriers to women's political participation

To establish how women's political participation can be improved, it is important to illustrate the barriers that women face in rural Liberia with regard to political participation. Through the documents and interviews, many barriers to women's political participation came up. The barriers to women's civic and political engagement are discussed in this section. The socio-cultural barriers are discussed first, followed by the socio-economic barriers which are frequently intertwined with the cultural barriers.

5.1 Socio-cultural barriers

Many barriers exist in Liberia that restrict women from participating in politics. Cultural norms are the most frequently stated barrier by the project staff in the reports. Every interviewee also mentioned a cultural barrier such as patriarchal and religious beliefs which prevents women from participating in politics, with some citing it as the most significant barrier. This indicates the importance of traditional norms in rural Liberia. The cultural barrier is also described in the conceptual framework as socio-cultural factors. The conceptual framework also distinguishes between religious and patriarchal beliefs and this distinction will be made in this chapter as well. However, religious and patriarchal beliefs tend to overlap as the traditional roles of women are influenced by both the patriarchal system and religion.

In a patriarchal system, men and women are both assigned certain roles. Women are seen as caregivers and men are seen as sole decision-makers within their household. Women are required to remain silent, respect and support their husbands and occupy a role in the background. Because women are restricted by these norms, men hold the majority of power in a patriarchal system. In rural Liberia, women are often expected to 'take the backseat' and be 'back role players' which indicates that a patriarchal system is present. The patriarchal belief that women are caregivers and helpers at home in rural Liberia is incompatible with women taking on leadership responsibilities because it restricts women from pursuing roles outside of the household. Women are also supposed to remain silent in the presence of men, which also prevents women from taking part in politics. Religious norms also contribute to the notion that women should be quiet and serve in subordinate positions. One interviewee explained how the traditional norms work regarding religion.

> *"religion also is a part of those traditional and social norms that some communities, some regions or some locations may have, because in such way that religion is very important, and in as much as religion play a very big role in, in certain, there are a lot of restrictions that come*

with a religion. And there are a lot of reasons that women are to obey their husbands, as per the religion says, and also follow the rules of their husband, not to, you know, speak when your husband is speaking, that is traditional rules, and also to be submissive to your husband, that is a religious rule in a way that women are to be submissive, you should listen to your husband. (Project officer, female, 30)

This quote demonstrates how religion restricts women's freedom because women are expected to be submissive to their husbands. Religious norms exist in both Margibi and Grand Cape Mount but the reports identify Grand Cape Mount as a county where citizens value and rely more on patriarchal and religious norms. According to the reports, the cultural barriers seem to be bigger in Grand Cape Mount than in Margibi because Grand Cape Mount is predominantly Muslim whereas Margibi is largely Christian. It was also mentioned that Muslim women face more restrictions and whenever religion was mentioned as a barrier, it was often in relation to Islam. The differences between Islam and Christianity, and how restrictive they may be for women, were also discussed during the interviews. The project staff expressed different perceptions on the differences between Christian and Muslim women during the interviews as is shown in Table. Two of the interviewees believed that there were differences between Christian and Muslim women and that Muslim women faced more restrictions in terms of opportunities for political participation.

"Religion is still playing its part and the Muslim women and the Christian women there is a vast difference. There is so many leverage on the part of the Christian community that women in churches can play such a role, but in the Mosque or the Muslim women really are limited from playing certain roles at the Mosque" (Project officer, female, 30).

The quote reveals that the participant believes that Christian women have more opportunities within the church where they can obtain certain roles while Muslim women do not have the same opportunities in the Mosque. Another interviewee elaborated on her observations that Christian women were more vocal and confident than Muslim women during the Appreciative Inquiry meetings.

Table 4. Perceptions of staff on the difference between Islam and Christianity

Interviewee	Perception on differences between Islam and Christianity	Norms
Project officer, female, 30	• There is a big difference between Christian and Muslim women • Muslim women face more restrictions	• Islam is more restrictive than Christianity
Project officer, male, 55	• It is difficult for Muslim women to become leaders • According to Islamic tradition, men should lead	• Islam is more restrictive than Christianity
Program coordinator, male, 53	• Muslim and Christian women are both speaking out so there is no difference between them • The only difference is their religion but all have the same goal of inclusive participation	• Religion is not restrictive and there is no difference between Islam and Christianity
Project officer, female, 53	• It depends on the context and the upbringing • Christian women also deal with restrictive social norms if they were taught them	• Both religions can be restrictive depending on the context
Assistant program quality manager, female, 27	• Christian women were more vocal and confident during the Appreciative Inquiry meetings	• No difference between Islam and Christianity

(Source: Interviews conducted with project staff)

This was also noted in a report written by the project staff, which stated that a group of Christian women were 'much more ready to take the bull by the horn' than a group of mostly Muslim women. Not all interviewees agreed that Islam is more restrictive than Christianity. One interviewee stated that Muslim and Christian women are both speaking out and fighting for the goal of inclusive participation regardless

of their religion while another interviewee explained that depending on the context, both religions could be restrictive for women.

As observed by the project staff, there may be some differences between Christian and Muslim women. However, in terms of barriers to political participation but it is hard to establish how substantial these differences are or whether the observed differences by the project team are mostly due to a bias towards the Muslim community, who are a minority in Liberia. So Muslim women were sometimes perceived to be facing bigger barriers to political participation by the project staff than Christian women while some staff members observed no difference between Muslim and Christian women.

Traditional norms are also taught in the Poro and Sande societies which are found in both Counties. The Poro and Sande societies are secret societies that teach men and women respectively about traditional norms and culture. The Poro society, which is for men, is more concentrated in Margibi while the Sande society for women has a greater presence in Grand Cape Mount. The traditional expectations that are taught in the secret societies make it difficult for women to speak out in their communities and compete for leadership positions.

> *"We have the Sande and the Poro, okay. And most of the time the men like to dominate, like to dominate, that if you're not part of the Poro, especially women from the Sande, and all of the issues have been discussed, final decisions have been done there in those societies. So, I would like to see that, yes, we, all our issue, when they are even not part of that particular institution, it become a barrier for why a woman should be held back (Project officer, male, 55)."*

The interviewee explained in the quote that all of the decisions are made in the Poro society, which women are not part of. This makes it difficult for women to assume leadership positions because this is not seen as a role that women can fulfill and women are excluded from the institutions where decisions are made. In one of the reports, a female Paramount Chief shared her struggle to obtain a position in leadership with the project staff. Despite the wishes of the late Paramount Chief who had appointed her as his successor, the council of elders ignored his wish. They claimed that a woman cannot lead because all decisions are made in the Poro society and that if they had a woman as leader, all their secrets would be revealed. So women are excluded from certain decision-making processes by default because they do not have access to institutions such as the Poro society.

Figure 8. Linkages between cultural and socio-economic barriers
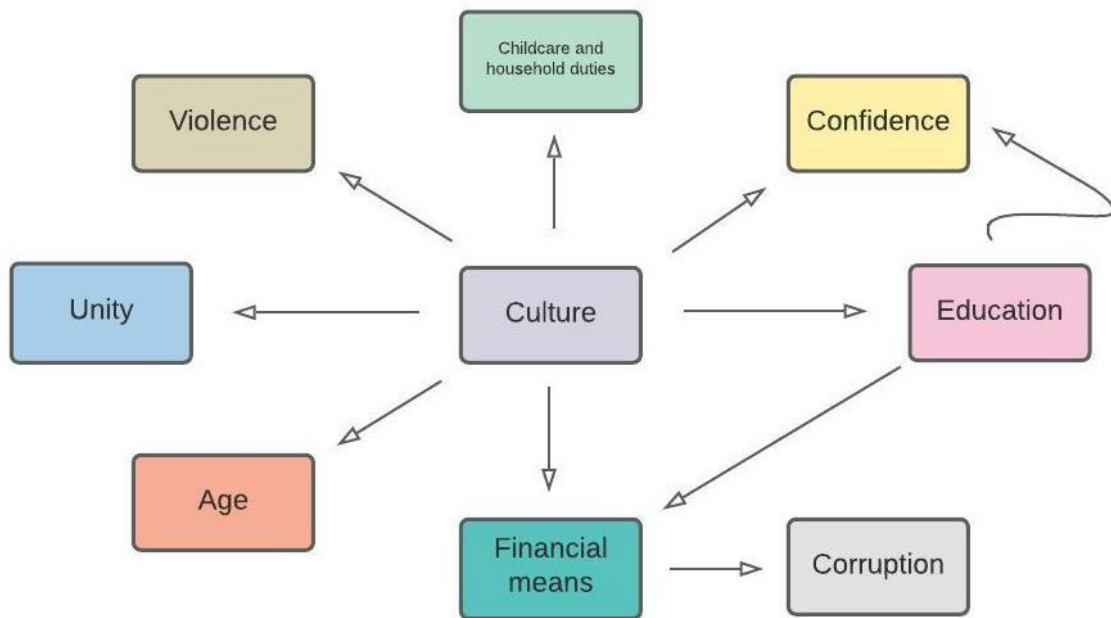
As demonstrated in Figure 6, cultural norms can also instigate gender-based violence to discourage women from running for political positions. Gender-based violence or violence against women in politics was not mentioned in the reports but it was discussed during the interviews. All of the interviewees agreed that violence against women is used to discourage women from participating in politics in Liberia. One of the interviewees explained how women are deterred from running for political positions.

> *"If a woman challenges the man. She go, she say, No, we have to be in the race too. So the men physically will attack them. Yes, the men will physically attack them. The men will pay a mob, they will pay a group of youths that will come and do more violence against against them. There have been a lot of cases (Project officer, female, 53) ."*

So violence against women in politics exists in Liberia and restricts women from participating in civic and political life.

A lack of unity and structure among women was also mentioned frequently during the Appreciative Inquiry meetings. This is related to perceptions on female leadership held by women influenced by

cultural norms. Women in the communities believed that in the past, female candidates did not win elections because women did not vote for them. Unity of women is viewed as the key to success by the communities. People living with disabilities were also seen as having a lack of unity and organized structure, and it was frequently stated that they needed to organize themselves to improve their political and civic participation. Women are believed to be capable of competing for leadership positions when they agree on which female candidate to support. During the Appreciative Inquiry meetings, the women agreed that by continuously supporting one another, they can have more women in leadership positions. The women say that they are willing to put aside their differences in order to support a female candidate collectively. Some women, however, support specific politicians or political parties, making it harder to unite behind a single candidate.

> *"What seems a challenge for this group is the internal political divide among them. Most women in this group are strong political allies to major politicians and political institutions at both county and national levels. This makes it a little difficult to use their base to galvanize support for one of their own" (ZOA project officers talking about a women's group in Margibi).*

Several interviewees raised the issue of women not supporting one another and one interviewee explained why women did not support other women. He claimed that cultural norms prevent women from voting for female candidates and that bribes persuade women to vote for male candidates rather than female candidates. One interviewee stated the greatest challenge they faced in the communities was a lack of female unity and support.

> *But the only challenge we have is that that the women themselves have to be worked on, because they are jealous of each other. They will be very jealous of each other. And we saw it clearly that um when we asked them before the last election, who they want to vote for. There was a woman who was contesting in the county, in Cape Mount. Several of them to support the woman, they did not support, we asked them why, they start giving some excuses. Say, the woman is not friendly (Project officer, male, 55).*

In the quote, he explains that he believes women do not support female candidates because they are jealous of them. As a result, the lack of female unity is also linked to cultural norms in which women perceive female candidates to be unqualified. Another interviewee stated that it was an issue but that

only 2 percent of the women did not support other women, while 98 percent were willing to support female candidates so he did not view it as the most pressing issue in the community.

5.2 Socio-economic barriers

The cultural barriers also affect the socio-economic factors that were discussed in the conceptual framework such as education, financial means and household and childcare responsibilities. The relations between the socio-economic and cultural barriers are also illustrated in Figure 6. Education is seen as essential to women's empowerment and political inclusion in the reports and the interviews. According to one interviewee, women gain confidence and the ability to earn their own income when they receive an education which allows them to realize political positions.

> *"you're getting this opportunity to go to school. Educated, once you are educated, you can represent yourself, you'll be very brave. There'll be no more feared. You do your work, you get money, you can get in political processes, you can create awareness for other women that come in after you." (Male, program coordinator, 53)*

The quote reveals that confidence is regarded as important because women are able to represent themselves without fear. In the reports and interviews, education was frequently associated with confidence. It was perceived by the project staff and key actors that women who have not received an education are often insecure because they believe that they lack the skills or competencies to participate in politics. As a result, it was perceived that when women did not receive an education, they felt compelled to take the back seat and were unable to participate in political life. One woman in a position of leadership also stated that receiving an education gave her the confidence to run for a leadership position and has made her ambitious. Therefore, confidence is linked with education in Figure 6. Low or no education is also linked to the cultural barrier in Figure 6 as tradition often dictates that girls stay at home to work while boys go to school. As a result, women have lower levels of education than men, making it harder for women to pursue political positions.

The project staff also identified illiteracy as a problem for women, citing the reliance of women on the men in their communities for reading and writing. One interviewee explained that: *"they are illiterate. They cannot write. They cannot even sign their names. They are all using their thumbprint. It make them to have the self-esteem and feel that they're not competent to be a ruler (Project officer, female, 53)."* This example illustrates how illiteracy not only makes women dependent on others but also makes

them insecure about their own abilities. Despite being illiterate and uneducated, some women recognize the value and knowledge they can bring to decision-making. However, a lack of education is frequently a barrier for women themselves because they are insecure and do not feel qualified to participate in politics.

Insufficient financial means is another socioeconomic barrier associated with a lack of education. Women without education often lack the financial resources to pay a registration fee or fund a campaign. Even when women are educated, they frequently do not have their own financial means due to the cultural practice of their husbands managing the majority of the household income. The linkages between financial means and education and culture are also shown in figure 6. It is believed by one interviewee that even if women have some money, they will use it to sustain and provide for their children rather than for political purposes. According to the reports, women have a widely held belief that money is required to win an election.

Corruption was also mentioned as a problem in Liberia in the reports and interviews which is also related to the financial barrier. One interviewee described that, in one instance, even when women can pay their registration fees, men may pay a lot more as a bribe and the position will go to a man. Consequently, women are thought to be disproportionately affected by men's corrupt practices. The reports also remarked that vote-buying is a common practice in Liberia and that it has impacted the project communities. Vote-buying refers to candidates bribing citizens with money or goods in order to obtain their votes. Citizens will be persuaded by these bribes and the project staff perceived that they will choose the hand-outs over good leadership. So it is believed that a candidate needs a lot of money to win, which is often not feasible for women. Men often have more money to pay for campaigns and can bribe people, putting women at a disadvantage in getting elected for leadership positions.

Because of cultural norms, women perform the majority of household tasks. According to the reports, the women cook, clean and care for their children, leaving them with little time to pursue their ambitions outside of the home. When women also work outside of the home, they are faced with a double burden of work, as a female chief describes. **"*So I made sure my husband didn't miss me at home. I woke up early, took care of the family first, and then got out to serve my mentor (Clan chief, female, 62).*"** This shows the additional work that women endure when participating in politics. Thus, cultural norms that require women to be the primary caregivers are a barrier to women's political participation.

Age is another barrier influenced by cultural norms and practices. Although age was not mentioned as a barrier in the reports, it was discussed with the participants during the interviews because it was mentioned as a barrier in the conceptual model. The interviewees had differing opinions on whether age influences women's political participation. Two interviewees stated that age has no impact on political participation and that the process of selecting a leader is objective, with their competencies given priority. The other three interviewees agreed that age did play a role as one participant stated in the quote below.

> *"so the age also goes along with the behavior, the character and the and the, and the potential that a leader can apply for the community. But it is also it is also considered that someone that is very, very, very, very young has a way to learn when it comes to leadership. So in that way, such person is encouraged to learn from the already leader, or past leader will mentor them, encourage them, support them, teach them the way so that they can prepare them to be ready for leadership roles (Project officer, female, 30)."*

This demonstrates the importance of age in Africa, where it is generally believed that wisdom comes with age and where elders hold respect. As a result, some interviewees believe that young women should first learn from their elders. However, age does not play a significant role in the decision to choose a leader because the communities primarily consider candidates' capacities and competencies of candidates but young people are sometimes expected to learn from their superiors in order to obtain higher leadership positions as this is part of the culture.

To conclude this chapter, women are marginalized in Liberia mostly because of cultural norms. Cultural norms are tied to religion and a patriarchal system and make it difficult for women to participate in politics because this system is dominated by men and places women in subordinate positions. The norms inform both men's and women's perceptions on political participation of women and both genders uphold the view that men are naturally better leaders than women. The cultural norms influence other factors that hinder women from entering the political arena e.g. financial means, education and workload at home. Because of their unequal position in society, women are less likely to possess financial resources and education and are burdened with the majority of tasks at home. So culture plays a major role in trapping women in the private sphere from which they cannot enter the public and political sphere easily.

Chapter 6 – Analysis: Level of participation

To explore the current status of women's political participation in rural Liberia, it is important to establish the level of political participation of women before and after the project. The level of participation of the project communities can be determined by using the participation ladder which distinguishes five levels of participation. The five levels of participation are manipulation, tokenism, engagement, consultation and partnership with manipulation being the lowest level and partnership the highest. Figure 9 outlines the five levels of participation and the characteristics of each level. These indicators are used to determine the level of participation in the project communities in Grand Cape Mount and Margibi before and after the project.

Figure 9. Indicators of levels of participation

Manipulation	Tokenism	Consultation	Engagement	Partnership
• Women are not part of community committees • Women's views are unwanted • Women's needs are not assessed • Men do not see women's participation as important	• Women are members of community committees as a requirement of an NGO • Women are informed of their role and what is expected of them in the committee • The female members do not have the opportunity or power to share their views with the committee • Women do not shape their own roles	• Women are members of community committees • Women are informed of their role and what is expected of them in the committee • There is space for women to share their input and speak up • Women's views are listened to and may help to shape decisions • It is unclear how the input of women is considered in the decision-making process • Women are excluded from the actual decision-making process	• Women are members of community committees • Women are informed and consulted • Women have power to make some decisions but these require approval by male committee members	• Women are members of community committees • Female and male committee members jointly plan and make decisions • Women's input is of equal value as their male counterparts

(Figure based on information from ZOA, 2019)

6.1 State of women's civic and political participation

Chapter 4 about the regional context of Liberia established that participation of women in politics is low, both nationally and on a local level. This chapter analyzes the level of participation on a local level in the project communities in Margibi and Grand Cape Mount. Before the project, women were not involved in and informed about decision-making processes in the communities. However, women were involved in the communities in some ways prior to the project. During the Appreciative Inquiry meetings, women often talked about their accomplishments in the communities. They talked about the valuable roles they occupied by keeping their communities calm and clean. They also mentioned that they settle disputes among themselves and other community members and also fine people who break

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away from social norms. So there was some level of civic engagement but these were informal roles mostly limited to conflict resolution and maintaining cleanliness. On the front of political participation, women were not involved at all. Women were expected to be silent, take a background position and women and men could not discuss issues regarding their community together. Women were excluded from decision-making processes and were not informed about decisions that were made. For example, women were not involved in concession agreements that were made by local leaders.

Women were also not invited to attend community meetings or other important meetings that involved their interests such as the County Sitting. This is also true for women with disabilities and people with a disability in general as they were also excluded from decision-making regarding their well-being. Even on the rare occasion that women were present in meetings, they were observers instead of active participants. One interviewee describes that women are not given the chance to speak when they are invited to meetings because men often dominate the discussion.

> *"But the point is, the female say you invited us but did you listen to us? Did you allow us to talk? Did you allow us to speak. So, that's one of the challenge (Project officer, female, 53)."*

Since women were not involved in decision-making processes, the situation before the project can be described as the lowest rung of the participation ladder which is manipulation.

6.2 State of women's political participation after project

Throughout the project, the level of participation of women in civic and political life began to improve. Instead of being excluded or only observers, women in the project communities are currently more involved in decision-making processes than before the project. Men consider women as good leaders who make smart decisions in the best interest of the whole town, thus men value the women's input. Women can also express their concerns to their local leaders and women have grown more involved in their communities as a result of this. But what level of civic and political participation have they attained in their communities?

6.2.1 Partnership

The level of participation might vary slightly across the different communities but it is clear that it has improved in all the communities. There are elements of full partnership in some of the communities. For example, one interviewee mentioned that in all the project communities decisions are made by men

and women together through consensus. When asked about whether the men in community meetings listened to the opinions of the women, the interviewee said: *"In fact, sometime they were very constructive, they take a um unanimous decision, a bit of a consensus. Yes, yes, it is not how it was before, no. Their voices are being heard (Project officer, male, 55)."* So this shows that women play a part in community meetings and men and women vote on decisions together. Speaking out in front of men is something that women had not been able to do before but it has been occurring frequently. Another example of the influence women have is a situation that happened in project community 4 in Grand Cape Mount. In this community, women have the power to outvote men on certain decisions as they currently have more financial means. The project team describes in the report that:

> *"the women of the town are strongly engaging in village saving loan (VSL) that is empowering them financially. This has contributed to their immense strength in finances. This has made them powerful and can vote out the men in any decision that they would want. An example was when they decided to use the social development fund, wherein the men suggested for them to purchase praying mats for the mosque. The women on the other hand suggested to buy chairs for the community meetings. Eventually, when they went to vote, the women became victorious and the chairs were purchased."*

This example demonstrates that women are not dependent on men for all decision-making processes and that they can make some decisions for the community themselves, no matter how small. However, this is only one example of one community where women can overturn the vote. There was no mention that this happened in this community more often or that something similar happened in other communities. So while there are some elements of partnership in the communities, the reports show that the highest rung of the ladder has not been reached in any of the communities yet as women are still advocating for full and equal participation. This was also mentioned during focus group discussions where community members of different communities observed that progress had been made but improvement is still necessary.

6.2.2 Social norms and gender roles
It is hard to break away from social norms for some communities and women still put a lot of value on patriarchal beliefs and religious norms. This is revealed by the way some groups view power. Especially in Margibi, most groups view power as remaining respectful to traditional norms. *"the ability to be good care givers and maintain the traditional family value and dignity is a show of power for them.*

Interestingly, they also think that anyone who has the ability to keep a community peaceful, and can bring transformation through economic and human empowerment is the real powerful person." This shows that women are trying to advocate for power-sharing with men while still respecting traditional and social norms. However, the project was able to change some gender norms and roles. For example, one important way in which the husbands of the women supported them is by taking on domestic and childcare duties when their wives attend the AI meetings. The women usually have to deal with the majority of household tasks and the farming workload which makes it difficult for them to attend community meetings because they have no time left. Men will help with collecting water, taking care of the children and doing household tasks such as doing laundry. Men are not only helping out at home but also helping the women by taking over the market stalls or doing more of the farming work. The fact that men help out at home lessens the burden of being responsible for the household and affords the women the opportunity to attend the AI and community meetings. Men taking on household chores shows a change in gender roles and cultural norms where it is acceptable for women to perform tasks outside of the home and for men to take on tasks within the home. It also provides space for women to aspire to take on political roles in which they may be more likely to succeed as they are not weighed down by household tasks. The support of their husbands helps women overcome some of the barriers that they face such as bearing the majority of household and childcare duties. A female Town Chief accounts much of her success to her husband and children.

> *"Today, I cannot better tell my story without mentioning my husband and my children. They supported me by making the sacrifice to share their time with my ambition, and to let me live a life beyond being just a wife and mother. They inspired me a lot and I knew they were proud of me (Clan chief, 62, Margibi)."*

So this shows that the support of family is important as they can help share household responsibilities. If women do not have this support, they have a double burden of tasks within and outside of their homes and might be less likely to achieve their political ambitions. It also seems that numerous key actors are willing to break away from these social norms and let women take the lead as they encourage women to speak up instead of being silent observers. At the end of the project a woman stated that women can now serve as leaders in the community regardless of their religious and traditional norms so this shows that social norms are considered less of a barrier in the communities. This also shows that social norms in the communities are slowly changing that this process will probably continue after the end of the project. The fact that social norms are slowly changing means that the communities are beyond the step

of tokenism on the participation ladder since they view political participation of women as an important issue which shows that the inclusion of women in politics is not only happening because of the intervention by ZOA.

6.2.3 Women in leadership positions

The communities are slowly moving towards more inclusion of women in civic and political processes. In total, there were 10 women appointed to leadership positions at the end of the project which is illustrated in table 3. Most of the positions that women now occupy in the town leadership are on a low level such as quarter chief and chair ladies. Only two women were appointed to a higher position in the town leadership such as town chief. No women were appointed to higher positions in the county leadership such as clan chief. Although the women of community 1 requested to be on the supporting staff of the commissioner, this request had not been fulfilled yet.

Table 5. Women in leadership roles after the Appreciative Inquiry meetings

Grand Cape Mount	
Community 1	1 district chair lady
Community 2	-
Community 3	1 chair lady
Community 4	1 town chief
Margibi	
Community 5	2 quarter chiefs
	2 deputy quarter chiefs
	1 town chief
Community 6	1 manager of the traditional water road
Community 7	-
Community 8	1 head of zone

(Reports)

In community 6 in Margibi, a woman is in the position of managing the traditional waterway which has never been managed by a woman in the past. In communities 4 & 5, a woman was appointed as town chief which had not happened before in community 4. This shows the progress that was made in the communities in terms of women's political participation. One thing that is noticeable about the table representing the women in leadership after the project is that the communities of 2 & 7 do not have any women in leadership structures because of the project. Interestingly, these were the groups that included people with a disability. This shows that people with a disability are marginalized in the communities and there needs to be a lot of work before they can also participate fully. The low-level leadership positions might also be explained by the fact that people with a disability did not opt for leadership positions. For example, it was observed in the reports that the people with disabilities of community 7 in Margibi did not strive for leadership positions but instead focused on legislative and policy issues. They want their leaders to be aware of them, to be able to vote and to be represented in political positions. However, they did not say they aspired to occupy these positions themselves. They mostly focus on achieving an organized structure. So that might also explain their low representation in the leadership structure.

Something that also came up during the analysis was the theme of conflict resolution. It was mentioned that women were solving disputes in the communities before the project started and it was also mentioned often during the project as strengths of the women. One woman who was appointed as head of a zone was also mentioned to be influential in settling disputes. And in community 4, women have also been allowed to serve as judges in the town. However, during a discussion about the tasks that women in leadership perform and whether these were the same as male leaders. It was reiterated by all the participants that: "*Women in leadership settle disputes, head community meetings, and represent the community. They also do other jobs that the position requires.*" So it was established that there is no difference in tasks between male and female leaders and that female leaders perform tasks that are required by the position they hold.

Taking all the changes happening in the communities into account, it can be deduced that the level of participation in the communities is on the level of consultation. Consultation means that women are part of community meetings and are allowed to talk during the meetings. However, it is unclear how their input is used in actual decision-making processes from which they are excluded. This fits the situation in the project communities as women are allowed to attend community meetings and can voice their

concerns to the community and their local leaders. However, local leadership positions are still dominated by men so decisions on a clan or county level are mostly taken by the men that occupy leadership positions. The kind of positions that women held in the communities were lower-level local positions such as Chairlady for the town, Quarter Chief and Co-chairs and chairs for organizations. The communities were able to get to the level of consultation because of changing social norms that allowed women to enter public spaces and discuss issues concerning their communities together with male members of the community. Since social norms are slowly changing and the majority of the members in the community see the importance of women's political participation, it is likely that the improvement of women's political participation is systematic and that the communities will not go back to the way it was before when women were excluded from all discussions regarding decision-making. However, full participation of women has not been achieved and more work needs to be done to ensure that women will reach full participation in all communities.

Chapter 7 – Analysis: Opportunities for women's political participation

Several opportunities can help women overcome the barriers that were mentioned in the reports and interviews. This chapter discusses the opportunities that came up during the analysis of the reports and interviews.

7.1 Appreciative Inquiry

The project uses Appreciative Inquiry meetings to create a dialogue between men and women and create more space for women in the political sphere of the communities. Appreciative Inquiry is a participatory approach that focuses on positive strategic thinking and best practices to establish a shared vision of the future (ZOA Liberia, 2021). This method was chosen as it focuses on best practices to make a plan for the future instead of dwelling on negative aspects such as problems in the communities.

Figure 10. The trajectory of the Appreciative Inquiry method
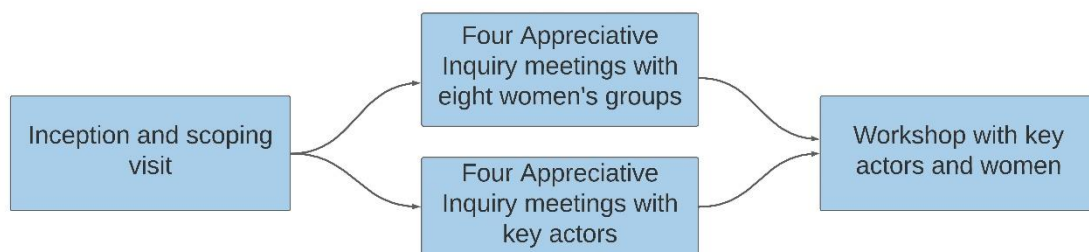
Every Appreciative Inquiry (AI) meeting was tailored differently to the needs of that particular community because it is a bottom-up approach instead of a top-down approach. The approach is community-led in the sense that the community can determine how the goal of improving women's political participation can be achieved. The women in the community had freedom and space to determine what power meant for them. The project started with an inception and scoping visit where the project staff determined which communities and groups are selected for the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) meetings. Four AI meetings were held during the project with eight different women's groups in the two Counties and there were also separate meetings held with key actors but key actors were also allowed to attend AI meetings that were held with the women's groups. After the AI meetings, a meeting was organized where the women's groups could present their concerns and issues to their local leaders.

At the end of the project, the method of the Appreciative Inquiry meetings was evaluated by the communities and independent evaluators observed that the community members were not familiar with the Appreciative Inquiry method when asked if they could describe the method. However, when the evaluators explained the method to the participants, they admitted that the method has brought about changes in their communities and increased the role of females in local decision-making.

Many of the women in the community expressed their gratitude for the exposure and empowerment that the project has given them at the end of the project. The project has brought awareness to the topic of political participation of women which many citizens in the community did not have before. As one of the women stated: *"we were in the darkness, now that we have light because a chair lady is in our town right now" (Community 4 member, female, Grand Cape Mount)*. So there is awareness on the issue of women's political participation and the communities have realized the importance of this topic. They have more knowledge about the topic and knowledge is mentioned as a reason that women are currently able to share power with men. The Appreciative Inquiry meetings have helped the women realize their potentials, skills and abilities which made them more confident in speaking up.

> *"And they later realized through our appreciative inquiry, and they now became to understand that women have the right to say what they feel or what they think but in a more appropriate way, in a more constructive way, for respect for her husband. And the husband is also advocated to listen to his wife, and also advise or or suggest to her in a very appropriate manner. (Project officer, female 30)."*

The quote shows that hearing each other's views through continued dialogue has helped the community work together. Everyone became aware of the role they had to play in the community, that men should listen to women and the women should not remain silent. Men were not aware of how controlling they were of women and women were not aware that they often took a background position. With the awareness that was raised, the men and women learned how to sit together and discuss issues regarding their communities, something that did not occur before the project. *"We glad that ZOA have come to teach us the men how to work with our women for the good of our community. Women know how to make things work"* So the project was able to change perceptions on the topic of women's political participation through continued dialogue in the communities where everyone was able to share their views. This brought awareness and knowledge about the importance of women's political inclusion.

Figure 11. Opportunities for increasing women's political participation
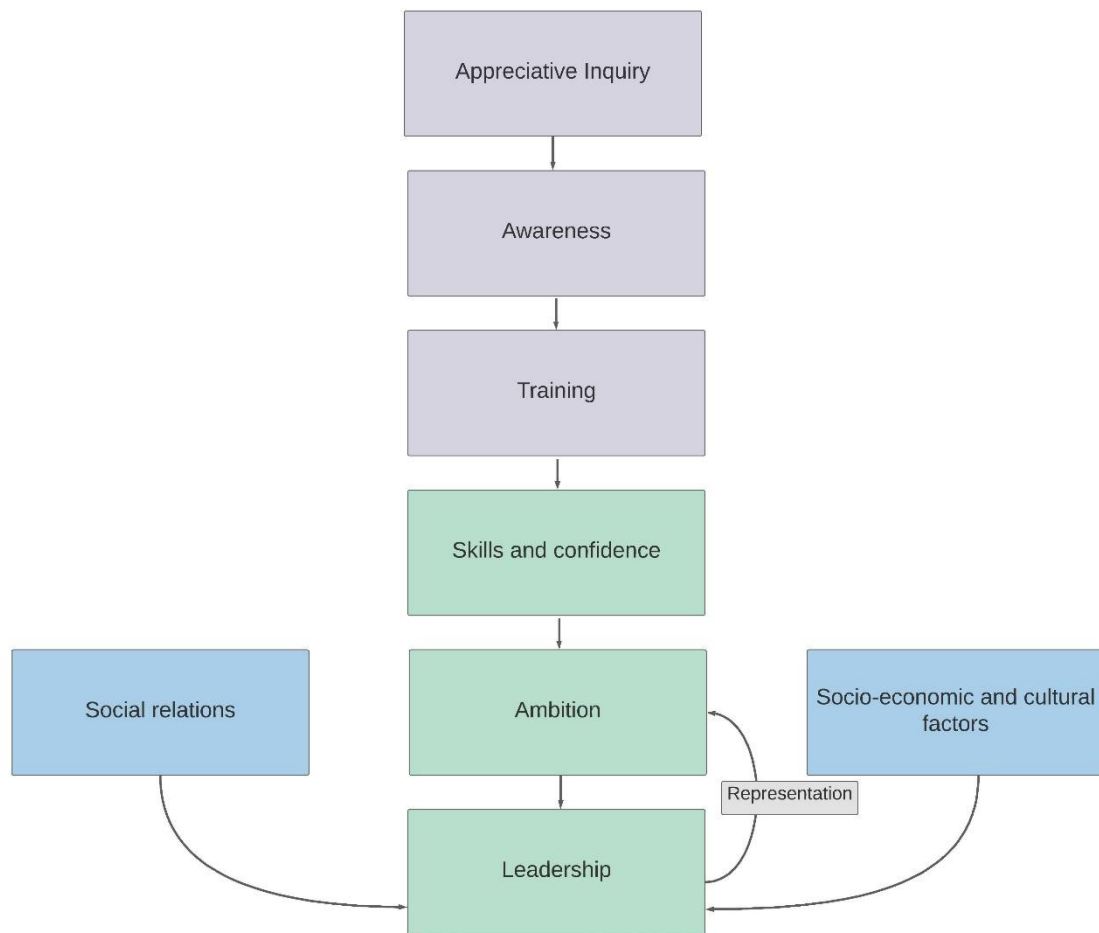
7.2 Training

Figure 11 describes the process of how women can strive for leadership positions on the local level. This chart is not generalizable to a process that all women follow but is useful to describe and connect the opportunities that came up during the analysis. The awareness that the AI meetings garnered helped local leaders, the majority of whom are men, support the women by setting up initiatives of training ambitious women who are interested in leadership roles. The reports present training as a solution that can increase women's political participation. One interviewee explained how training can help women to become more politically active.

> *"When women are empowered with basic skills, like communication skills, like confidence, like listening skills, like, you know, speaking out, you know, being a fluent speaker, eloquent*

speaker. If those basic skills, women are groomed with those basic skills. Especially from teenage, to the time they become adults, that will also help. They will be able to see that they are important also in society, they should take the lead. (Project officer, female, 53)."

This project officer explains that training will help women develop their capacity, skills and confidence, empowering them to take on leadership roles. Practical examples of training are that women participate in meetings with elders, the Town Chief and visitors, judging daily problems that come up in the community and draft reports to the key actors in town. As women have been excluded from decision-making for a long time, a lot of women are not skilled and confident to assume a position in leadership. Through the training, women are building capacity, skills and confidence to become ambitious to take the lead. Local leaders view the training of women as their duty so that women can actively participate in politics as voters and candidates. So by providing space in leadership for women, they can tackle traditional norms that make women afraid to speak up. The project staff believed that training can provide an opportunity for more women to become politically active because it provides them with the skills, confidence and ambition they need to opt for leadership roles.

7.3 Social connections

Another opportunity for women to vie for political positions is existing social relations between them and the communities. The project communities support women because of existing social connections between them and the female candidate. Because they know the women, they are familiar with their qualities and competencies. One participant explained that

"There are some testimonies from men that support their wives who say 'Yes, my wife has been taking good care of the family for years, she is caring, has cared for her neighbors and the entire community like a grandmother figure. She cares a lot about the people around her. That's a very good quality for a leader, someone in a leadership position. They recognize this and they say: Yes, maybe she should use her qualities for political issues. Yes, they begin to realize that it is in the best interest of the entire community (Assistant program quality manager, female, 27)."

So the communities see the effort that the women put in taking care of their families and their community and recognize this. Because they are aware of a woman's competencies within the household, they are able to support her for positions outside of the household because they know she is

capable of being a good leader. As mentioned before, a lack of support from women can also be a barrier to political participation. During the interview, a participant explained why women sometimes do not support female candidates.

> *Some of them, they say oh 'the person don't speak to us, the person, the person, the person will not ask, the person only comes when there is an election. The person does not identify with us. You see, yeah. And some of the women only go to the community, when they have election, the person does not identify with the women before the processes. So the women, some have feel offended. It's about, It is only when election time when you come to us (Project officer, male, 55).*

So the interviewee explains that women do not support a female candidate because they are not familiar with her ideas and competencies. Therefore, it is difficult for them to support a female candidate because they are not sure whether they can trust her. This shows that existing social connections are important to build trust between a female candidate and the community and can help a woman to successfully get elected into a leadership position.

7.4 Representation

One of the other frequently mentioned themes is representation, which is also an opportunity to improve women's political participation. Some interviewees mentioned the role of women in the brokering of peace that ended the civil war and that many Liberian women look up to the women that were part of this movement. One interviewee mentioned that women's organizations that called for the inclusion of women in politics also emerged after the civil war. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia's and Africa's first female president, is one name that comes up frequently in this context. Many women regard her as a role model, and it is frequently stated that when she was elected, things began to change in terms of women's political participation. So her election was seen as a turning point for women's rights in the reports and the interviews. According to one chief:

> *"Men were used to stepping us aside for a long time. During Ma Ellen's administration, things changed for the better and a lot of us who could not measure up with men for local positions are now making headways because of Madam Sirleaf (Chief, male, Margibi)"*

This example demonstrates that women look up to other women in positions of leadership and that women in positions of leadership can serve as role models and inspire ambitious women to begin their own political careers. The project team employs this strategy in the Appreciative Inquiry meetings as well. They use examples of local women in leadership to demonstrate to women that they, too, can be leaders. They also use role models such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to demonstrate to communities what can happen when women are in positions of power. So representation provides an opportunity to increase women's political participation. Including more women in leadership can inspire more women to compete for leadership positions.

7.5 Electoral quota

Another opportunity for increasing women's political participation is an electoral quota. It is not mentioned in Figure 11 as it is a national opportunity rather than a local one. An electoral quota was mentioned only once in the reports when a women's group from Grand Cape Mount County asked their leaders to reserve spaces for women in local leadership structures, which can be considered a quota. Furthermore, a national electoral quota was discussed with some interviewees, one of whom was in favor of implementing a quota. He stated:

> *"We have to give them a space. We have to, you see the problem is women and men are not given equal access. As I said, from the beginning, most of the, our tradition in our homes. People prefer to send their boys children to school and leave the girl child home. But that is changing gradually. So if they are given an opportunity and the space, they will do much better than their male counterparts. So we have to create a space to give them equal opportunity and space (Project coordinator, male, 53)."*

This participant believes that implementing an electoral quota can result in equal access and opportunity. Another participant, on the other hand, stated that an electoral quota would not be beneficial in the case of Liberia because men would feel threatened by it and thus would not support the issue of women's political participation. Only a national electoral quota was discussed, but not at the local level, as it may be less relevant in local politics. So an electoral quota might be useful on a national scale while the AI meetings, training, social connections and representation are useful opportunities on a local level.

Chapter 8 - Impact of key actors

This chapter discusses the impact of local leaders on the inclusion of women in local leadership structures. It shows the perceptions of the communities on women's political participation and the importance of the inclusion of local leaders in the AI meetings.

8.1 Key actors and institutions

The actors in the local leadership structure that were discussed in the regional framework are influential on a county level. So superintendents, district commissioners, clan and town chiefs are all influential in a county. Religious leaders from Christian and Muslim communities, while not government officials are also important stakeholders because they are influential in their respective communities. Other traditional actors that hold power are Zoes who are leaders in the Sande and Poro societies (UNMIL, 2015).

One institution that emerged as important during the analysis was the County Development Fund that was established in 2006 to support locally-driven development in the county (Nye, 2014). The allocation of the funds is decided during the County Sitting which is viewed as an important platform of influence by the communities. Some project groups, particularly those including people with a disability, felt excluded from this decision-making process and demanded representation at the County Sitting throughout the project. Town chiefs and commissioners are responsible for selecting delegates for the County Sitting. The County sitting was seen as an important institution by the communities as they often strived to be included in the meeting.

8.2 Perceptions of key actors

Local political and religious leaders were invited to participate in the project and the Appreciative Inquiry meetings and the majority of them agreed that increasing women's political participation is an important issue and should be addressed. Overall, local actors in both counties were supportive of the issue of women's political participation and appeared willing to implement solutions to increase women's participation in leadership. Local actors demonstrated their support for women's political participation in a variety of ways. Some overlapping themes can be identified in the range of perceptions about women's political participation held by key actors as well as the rest of the community. The perceptions can be grouped into four main themes which does not mean that these were the only perceptions held by local leaders and male community members. The four themes are presented in Table

6 which also includes quotes that describe the view of the community on women's political participation.

Table 6. Perceptions on women's political participation held by the project communities

Perception	Example
The inclusion of women benefits the community and society	Other chiefs in the meeting expressed a promising future of collaboration with their female counterparts, and said that women's leadership has always been productive and makes the community better in terms of food security, development and peaceful co-existence. (ZOA project officers on meeting between chiefs in Margibi)
Women are capable of leaders	One of the men told us that 'Oh, it is better to support a woman because women are able to manage resources, women um takes care of the whole situation that we'll find ourselves. (Project officer, male, 53)
It is time for women to be in power	They want a change. They've seen that male dominated rulership has not really satisfied them and has not helped them with solutions about gender or with their children. So they feel that a woman, she'll do it better. She's the solution. (Project officer, female, 53)
The inclusion of women benefits the health of male leaders	Because if you support a woman, it will reduce your stress. It will reduce your emotion, you are trying to delegate some of the responsibilities. If you delegate, you, you give responsibility out, as a man you live long, you have time to think about other things. (Program coordinator, male, 53)

First and foremost, local actors and men in the community frequently state that including women in civic and political processes benefits the community and society as a whole. It was widely assumed that women bring about change, create more opportunities in society, keep the community peaceful and make the community a better place. So local leaders see the inclusion of women in politics as beneficial to their community.

Another reason why the key actors and male community members believed that women should be included in decision-making processes relates to the assumption that female leadership makes the community a better place. People in the communities regard women as capable leaders and therefore trust them to make decisions regarding the welfare of their community. The sentiment that women are good leaders was also reiterated in the interviews where interviewees explained that the communities believed that women are capable of managing community resources. Some interviewees also believed that women could be better leaders than men. *"It make you to know that it is important to include every sector of the society in decision making, especially women, as I said, from the beginning, what men can do, women can do it better (Program coordinator, male, 53)."*

A third argument given for women's inclusion in politics is the notion that it is time for women to take the lead. This sentiment was held by men of a community who came to realize that men had been in power for generations and that women should now be allowed to lead. According to a report, the men told the women that *'the space is now open to the women of [community 4]'* because the men have served for a long time and the youth is not ready to lead. Men in the community regard women as good problem-solvers, particularly when it comes to issues affecting women such as childcare and women's rights.

However, the key actors saw women's political participation as beneficial not only to women but also to men. Some key actors agreed that *'some of the burdens will be less when women are politically involved'*. They realized that involving women in politics could improve their health and allow them to live longer lives. Women can help share the workload when local leaders delegate tasks to them which will benefit the health of the local leaders. This was also the reason for the appointment of a woman as town chief in community 4 during the project. The previous male town chief was also the head of the traditional leaders in the county, so he was too busy with his responsibilities as Town Chief. He decided to hand over his position to a woman, who became the community's first female Town Chief.

Thus, the majority of local leaders agreed that increasing women's political participation is an important issue that should be addressed. Women's political participation is viewed by ZOA as something that contributes to peacebuilding and a more inclusive society. There is this assumption that the inclusion of women in society is positive and helps to achieve lasting peace. This sentiment was shared by most local leaders and the communities as they viewed female leadership as beneficial to the community. However, there were also some members of the communities who were skeptical of women in positions of power. Before the project, the staff also visited other communities where some people believed it was unwise to have women in positions of power. For example, one elder from one of the Islamic communities said that: *"Senator Job is like the president for the County so we just can not make women senator, even our religion will not accept it (Male, Grand Cape Mount)"*. So this individual did not believe that women are capable leaders and are allowed to hold high political positions. One of the reports also mentions a man who believed that the inclusion of women in politics would lead to conflict.

> *"This male expressed his reservation about females being in positions of authority since, according to him such women often try to challenged their husbands, insisting that they can do as well as or better than men. This he said, often creates conflicts (ZOA project officers on meeting in Bambala, Grand Cape Mount)."*

This shows that not all members of the community saw political participation as beneficial to their community because some believed it would lead to conflict. This contradicts the assumption of many NGOs that women's political participation contributes to peace rather than conflict. The belief that women's inclusion may contribute to conflict demonstrates that the view that inclusion of women contributes to peacebuilding is not universally held. So involving women in political processes may not always result in peace and may even lead to conflict. Men, especially when they are not involved in the process of inclusion, may feel threatened by women's political participation because they think that there is no longer a place for them. The following section will explain the importance of the inclusion of key actors and male community members in the process of increasing women's political participation.

8.3 Inclusion key actors and male community members

Male community members and key actors must not feel excluded from the process of including more women in leadership as they can provide support to women who are interested in leadership positions. Overall, local actors in both counties were supportive of the issue of women's political participation

and seemed willing to implement solutions that can help to increase the participation of women in leadership. The women were supported at all levels of leadership, from the superintendent to Clan and Town Chiefs. Many key actors attended the Appreciative Inquiry meetings at least once and others even more often. The women welcomed the support of their leaders and it made them more aware of their competencies and skills.

It is also important that local leaders are included in the process of increasing women's political participation because they are gatekeepers to political positions in the community. Local positions are appointed so current leaders are influential in deciding who will obtain a leadership position and will succeed them. The key actors provided space for women to assume leadership roles by reserving positions that could only be filled by women and asked the women to put a candidate forward. So local leaders influence the decision-making process and can make choices that help to involve more women in these decision-making processes. The key actors also supported the women by setting up initiatives of training ambitious women who are interested in leadership roles which were already discussed in the previous chapter. The local leaders feel that they have a part to play in the process of including more women in the political process. For example, the Assistant Town Chief in one of the communities stated that: *"We will not get tire of backing them up with training and advices"*. This shows that the local leaders are willing to share their knowledge with the women and appreciate that they are part of the process. By providing space in leadership for women, they can tackle traditional norms that make women afraid to speak up.

Although the key actors supported the women through training and providing space to serve in leadership positions, the women did encounter some problems with getting the local leaders to execute their wishes. After a workshop where the women shared the outcomes that they want to achieve in the future such as equal participation and office space, the women were working together with key actors to achieve these outcomes. However, this proved to be difficult because of the Senatorial Election that was taking place around that time so the superintendent was unavailable to work with. This shows that while the local leaders are supportive, women's political participation might not always be on the top of their list of issues and it seems that some local leaders are more on top of the issue than others. Thus, it is important to keep engaging with local leaders on the issue of women's political inclusion as the issue might not be a priority for all of them.

Another group that provided support for the women and is important to include in the process are male community members. The husbands and other male family members of the women provided support by attending AI meetings and listening to the discussions. The men also took on household tasks, allowed women to go out of town to represent their community and were involved in training. They encourage the women that are hesitant to speak up by holding open discussions with them so the women can learn to speak in public. This support of the men provides the space for the women to build skills and capacity to become leaders. Men support women because they feel like they can play a role in the process of improving women's political participation. They see it as their task to train women and prepare them for leadership roles. This is an important factor to the support of men as they feel included in the process, they support women's political participation and view the benefits of including women as beneficial to themselves and their communities. If they were left out of the process and felt like they had no part to play in this process, they might have been less supportive, viewed women's political participation as a zero-sum game and felt threatened by the inclusion of women in the political sphere. Therefore, it is necessary to involve male community members and local actors in the process of women's political inclusion.

Chapter 9 - Discussion

In this chapter, the most important results that were outlined in the previous chapters are discussed and placed in a wider context. The limitations of the research are also discussed.

9.1 Civil war and gender roles

After the civil war, there were changes in gender roles and women's political participation but the interviewees placed these changes in the context of the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and women's movements demanding equality both nationally and globally rather than the disruptions caused by the civil war. Some interviewees pointed out the hardships that the civil war caused both for women and men and it might be difficult for them to see war resulting in something positive. This belief is also in line with studies on the subject that find that there may have been some changes in gender roles because of the civil war but it is not clear how sustainable these changes are. However, the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is a climax in the historical process of women demanding representation and the process has been accelerated by foreign interventions targeting gender (Fuest, 2008). Also, women's active involvement with the establishment of peace after the civil war has contributed to this process (Garnett, 2016).

9.2 Social capital

It was established in the previous chapters that the reason local leaders were willing to support women vying for leadership positions in their communities was because of social connections between them and the women. This means that women who have many social connections within their communities can obtain a leadership position more easily than women who do not have these connections. The concept of social capital can provide more insight to explain this process. Social capital can be described as the resources that you have as a person or group through the network of relationships that you have. The community knows what resources the women in their community possess and therefore entrusts them with leadership positions. Coleman (1988) explains that social capital exists "in the relations among persons". By having a network within the community and good relations with citizens in the community, women have more opportunities to opt for leadership positions. The importance of good relations within the community is also illustrated by the reason that women sometimes do not support female candidates because they are not familiar with them and their beliefs. This finding that social capital plays a role in the mobilization of women in local political structures is in line with previous findings on social capital, political involvement and gender (Lowndes, 2004). It also supports the

argument that the social capital of women is based on trust and builds on 'informal community connections' (Lowndes, 2004). So women that have social capital can use it as a resource to achieve leadership positions within the community. This research also supports the argument embedded in the theory of social capital which argues that private relationships provide important resources for engagements in the public sphere (Sapiro, 2005). While private relationships can sometimes provide barriers for women to enter the public sphere because childcare duties exclude them from access to politics. In this case, communities were able to support women because of trust in their childcare activities and other activities benefiting the community. This has implications for the often assumed dichotomy between the private and public spheres which seems to overlap in this case.

Since women have these social networks and connections in their communities, it might be easier for women on the local level to obtain a leadership position but harder for women on the county or national level as misinformation is widespread. Myths, stereotypes and false information are common about female candidates and this will discourage people from voting for a female candidate that they are not familiar with. For example during the senatorial election, the husband of one female candidate was believed to be a senator which meant that the female candidate could not become a senator. However, this was the spread of misinformation as the female candidate did not have a husband who was a senator. This is also tied with the financial means that female candidates have, which are often less than that of men who have generally more to spend on political campaigns. A common practice in Liberia is vote-buying, which means that a candidate will promise goods or money for citizens who vote for them. Women often do not have the means to participate in such schemes. Even at the local level, at the end of the project, most women were in more lower-level leadership positions such as chair ladies and district chiefs. This might have to do with the financial means the women possess but the lower-level leadership positions of women might also be explained by men and key actors not viewing women to be capable of occupying higher positions or simply because the women do not have much experience in leadership roles so a lower position is a good way to garner experience and then climb to a position at a higher level.

As was mentioned during the analysis, people with a disability did not have any leadership positions in their communities after the end of the project. This might be explained by the fact that because of their marginalization and exclusion from the communities, they have no or low social capital and therefore are not able to run for leadership positions. Since people with a disability have such a hard time participating in politics, it is even harder for women with a disability to opt for a political position. This

finding makes it clear that some women face more barriers than others and that there exist inequalities among women that limit their participation in politics. For example, women living in poverty have to deal with more of the barriers than women from higher socio-economic backgrounds. These inequalities are also highlighted by the discussion of differences between Christian and Muslim women. Whether Muslim women face more restrictions to participate in politics because of their religion or not. Muslim women might have a harder time opting for leadership positions because of assumptions about their religious beliefs.

9.3 Cultural norms and gender

The results show that cultural beliefs are not static and that there is some room for change. This is shown by the result of the project that women were able to opt for leadership positions while this is not necessarily seen as a role that women occupy regarding traditional beliefs. Of course, there were already a few women in leadership positions in some project communities but the project made it possible for women to occupy positions that were previously only held by men, and the AI meetings were able to garner the support of local leaders and male community members for women in leadership positions. However, the current changes are still made within the same 'system' of cultural norms and gender roles and it will take time before women and men can fully break away from gender stereotypes. This is also related to the fact that conflict resolution was often mentioned in relation to the tasks that women perform in the communities. It is not clear why this is the case but it might be because women are generally perceived to be more calm and peaceful than men and therefore people hold the assumption that women are good at resolving conflict and these kinds of tasks are often given to women instead of men. The assumption that women are naturally peaceful does not seem harmful for women but it does reinforce gender stereotypes that may prevent women from occupying other roles.

This is also related to the assumption that gender equality contributes to a decrease in inter and intra-state war. This assumption is widely held and supported by multiple studies (Caprioli, 2003; Melander, 2005; Demeritt et al, 2014) which were also discussed in the theoretical framework. This is also the same reasoning that ZOA gives for developing a project on increasing women's political participation. Including more women in decision-making processes is assumed to contribute to sustained peace. But as mentioned before, this reasoning does not attempt to transform gender roles and instead relies on a predetermined characteristic that women are more peaceful than men. The risk of the instrumentalization of gender equality and peace is that increased representation of women is no longer a matter of equity and justice but instead is seen as the means to an end, in this case, sustained peace

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(Bjarnegård & Melander, 2011). This rationale can become harmful in the long run as powerful male actors can shelve women's empowerment when it no longer serves the goal they want to achieve. This study also identified multiple reasons why male local leaders were able to support the issue of women's political participation. For example, many community members viewed women as inherently good leaders but that might be because they assign predetermined characteristics to women, such as caregivers and aversion to violence. Reasons such as making the community a better place and being beneficial to men's health were also stated as reasons to support the issue of women's inclusion in decision-making processes. But what happens when increasing women's political participation no longer serves these purposes in the communities? Fortunately, local leaders also gave other reasons for the inclusion of women such as women deserving to lead after being excluded for a long time. Still, it is important to consider the harms of presenting women's empowerment as being beneficial to society or contributing to sustained peace because the issue is often not as unambiguous in reality.

9.4 Appreciative Inquiry

During the analysis, it became apparent that the community members were not familiar with the Appreciative Inquiry method when asked if they could describe the method. However, when the evaluators explained the method to the participants, they admitted that the method has brought about changes in their communities and increased the role of females in local decision-making. The Appreciative Inquiry method is meant to be a community-led development process and when communities do not understand how the method works, it is questionable if the process is truly community-led. Project staff who were facilitators of the Appreciative Inquiry meetings might have had a lot of power leading the discussions if the goal of the meetings was not clear to the communities. One other critique of the method is that the goal of the project was already determined by ZOA beforehand so the communities did not have any say in the goal of increasing women's political participation. Nevertheless, the communities were mostly free to come up with their own solutions and goals during the project so they could determine what increasing women's political participation meant for their community.

9.5 Biases of the research

The way the project communities embraced the issue of increasing women's political participation and participated in the project was not expected by the researcher beforehand. The reason why the project was able to garner support from the communities and local leaders might be because of the selection of the communities and the key actors. Only local actors that were so-called 'enablers' were included in

the project so only data on local political and religious leaders who already had generally positive perceptions on political participation of women was used for this research. This is a limitation of the research because the inclusion of local actors with negative perceptions on women's political participation might have provided more insight into the way perceptions can be changed and what role local leaders play in the process of increasing women's political participation. It would have been interesting to explore how much influence local actors with negative perceptions on women's political participation had on the whole process to validate the current argument that local leaders are important to include. Also, whether these local leaders would have seriously influenced the level of participation that the communities achieved.

Another way that the research might have been influenced is by the selection of project communities. This was the first time that ZOA conducted a project on women's political participation in Liberia and also the first time that they used the Appreciative Inquiry method. NGOs often choose communities where they are confident that their intervention will succeed when they first develop an intervention. This has a good reason because NGOs want a project to succeed so they can get more funding to expand the project into other communities. However, this means that the communities that were chosen for this project might not have been communities where women were extremely marginalized. It was confirmed by the project staff that the communities that were selected included marginalized women with the potential to grow, so the communities were chosen because they had the potential to increase women's political participation. A community where women are more restricted and marginalized might have had different results than the communities that were selected for the project. Therefore, the results of this research should be considered as a case study and cannot be generalized over the entire country of Liberia.

Chapter 10 - Conclusion

This thesis has provided an in-depth overview of experiences of women with civic and political participation in rural Liberia. This chapter concludes the research by discussing how all of the research questions have been answered. The first question that this research sought to answer was "*What is the state of women's civic and political participation in the project communities?*" Chapters 5 & 6 addressed this question by examining the barriers that women face and what level of participation the women in the project communities have achieved. Rural women often struggle with becoming active in political processes because of cultural norms. Cultural norms are tied to religion and a patriarchal system and make it difficult for women to participate in politics because this system is dominated by men and places women in subordinate positions. Cultural norms inform both men's and women's perceptions of the political participation of women. Other factors that hinder women from entering politics e.g. financial means, education and workload at home, are also influenced by cultural norms. Because of their unequal position in society, women are less likely to possess financial resources and education and are burdened with the majority of tasks at home. So cultural norms play a major role in restricting women's access to the public and political sphere.

Prior to the project, women were not involved in decision-making processes at all. They participated in some civic engagement such as settling disputes and maintaining cleanliness in the community. Overall, the level of participation was low and can be described as manipulation. During the AI meetings, the level of participation improved in all the communities but it did not reach the highest level of partnership. However, the current level of participation in the communities can be described as consultation as women are part of communities and are allowed to talk during the meetings but it is unclear how their input is used to reach the final decision. Women with a disability have a harder time competing for local positions as they are often more marginalized because of their disability.

As chapters 5 & 6 established the current status of women's political participation in rural Liberia, the second research question could be answered in the following chapters. The question *'How can civic and political participation of women in rural Liberia be improved?'* was answered in chapters 7 & 8. Chapter 7 discussed the opportunities for increasing women's political participation that came up during the analysis. The AI meetings helped create awareness and dialogue which helped to change the perceptions of the communities on women's political participation and ease restrictive cultural norms for women. The AI meetings also contributed to strengthening social capital in communities through

dialogue between men and women. One strategy that is important to increase women's political participation is the representation of women in national and local legislatures. They often act as role models that inspire women to opt for leadership positions. They can also provide mentorship for young women that have the ambition to participate in politics. The case of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf shows the importance of the representation of women in the national legislature. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president after the end of the civil war and this is generally seen as a turning point in women's political participation. The women in the communities often mentioned her as a strong leader and respected her, this sentiment was also shared widely by men. Training was also identified as an opportunity because it helps to build women's capacity, skills and confidence to serve in local leadership roles.

Chapter 8 discussed the perceptions that local leaders held about the issue of women's political participation. It also established the importance of including local leaders and male community members in the process of increasing women in leadership positions as they can help promote women's inclusion in decision-making processes. Local leaders are influential in improving women's political participation because they are gatekeepers and influence the appointment of leadership positions. Local leaders support women that strive for leadership positions because they view women's political participation as important and as beneficial to their community and society in general. Also, existing social capital in the communities makes it easier for local leaders to put forward a female candidate that they know and trust. Therefore, social capital makes it easier for women to vie for local positions than for national positions because on a national level there is misinformation about female candidates. Local leaders serve as role models to the rest of the community so their view on women's political participation can influence the view of the rest of the community. They can set an example by including women in local leadership structures. Local leaders can play a role in easing cultural and social norms that limit women from participating in politics. By including local leaders in the process of increasing women's political participation, women see that their leaders support them in their ambitions of obtaining leadership positions and therefore can overcome restricting social norms.

10.1 Recommendations

The project focused mostly on changing social and cultural norms regarding the inclusion of women in politics and did not contain any financial resources for the communities. However, it was established that culture and lack of financial means are the biggest barriers that women face. The rural women that were targeted by the project have a low income so having financial means would make a difference in their lives and would make it easier to become politically active. This is also shown by the fact that in

one community women were able to outvote men because of their village savings loan which granted them power in handling financial resources. So these types of community-led interventions should also include a financial aspect through which women can also be empowered financially. This reduces the financial barrier for women and gives them more opportunities to participate in politics. The AI meetings were able to ease cultural norms which restrict women from participating in politics. However, local leaders also played a constructive role in this process and their support for the issue also helped ease cultural norms and change perceptions on women's political participation. Including key actors in community-led development interventions is integral to their success and the role of local leaders should not be overlooked by policymakers in future development interventions.

However, this research only focused on local actors that were generally supportive of women's political participation and had positive perceptions on the topic. Because of the exclusion of actors with negative attitudes on women's political participation, further research has to be conducted on the role that they play in increasing women's political participation. As local leaders are influential in fostering women's political participation, local leaders with negative perceptions might hinder the inclusion of more women in local decision-making structures. It is important to establish whether the Appreciative Inquiry method would be able to change the perceptions of these leaders and make them support the project or at least not hinder the inclusion of women in politics. The research also found that women with a disability have a harder time competing for leadership positions than abled women. One explanation for this is their marginalized positions in the community and their lack of social capital. Because this study has shown that it is difficult to include them in decision-making processes, future research should focus on the strategies that may help to improve the political participation of women with a disability.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Expert interview guide:

Introduction of the research and informed consent

introductory questions

1. What is your age?
2. What is your current job position?

opening question

3. Can you tell me something about your professional background?

    (Probe: did you work on women's issues before this project?)

barriers

4. What kind of barriers are there for women to not participate in politics?

    (Probe: how do women in leadership positions overcome these barriers?)

socio-cultural factors

5. What role does religion play in the participation of women in civic and political life?

    (Probes: Does it happen in this community or in other communities as well? did you notice differences between Christian and Muslim women? Where do you think these differences come from? Can you give an example?)

6. What role do social norms play in the participation of women in civic and political life?

conflict

7. How has the civil war impacted the political participation of women?

Appreciative Inquiry

8. How would you describe the appreciative inquiry meetings?

    (Probe: what did you do? Can you give an example of a memorable moment?)

9. Who spoke the most during the meetings?

    (Probe: women, men, leaders)

disability

10. What role do women with a disability play in the communities?

    (Probe: have they taken on leadership positions?)

age

11. What role does age play in the participation of women in leadership roles?

   (Probe: do people trust young women to take on leadership roles? Why (not)?

Violence against women in politics

12. Have there been any instances of violence against women as a means to discourage their political participation?

   (Probe: can you give an example?)

attitude of key actors/community

13. How do the communities support the women who want to take on leadership positions?

   (Probe: Why do key actors or husbands support the women? how did husbands, families or influential actors react to their ambitions?)

level of participation

14. Do women equally participate during community meetings? What was the last time that this happened?

   (Probes: does this happen often? are women invited to town meetings, listened to, allowed to give their opinion? Do female leaders have the same influence as male leaders?)

closing question

15. What recommendations (strategies) would you propose to improve the political participation of women?

   (Probe: do you think a quota is effective? What can we do to reserve spaces for women?)

Appendix B

Codebook

Age	Age is mentioned as a barrier or opportunity to WPP
Ambition	This code is used whenever a woman expresses her desire to participate in politics; take on a leadership role
Appreciative Inquiry	Activities that were conducted during the AI meetings are described
Awareness	There is now increased knowledge and awareness of men and women on the topic of women's political participation
Childcare and domestic responsibilities	Childcare and domestic responsibilities are mentioned as barriers or opportunities to WPP
Conflict resolution	The process of conflict resolution is mentioned
Consultation	Women are members of community committees Women are informed of their role and what is expected of them in the committee There is space for women to share their input Women's views are listened to and may help to shape decisions It is unclear how the input of women is considered in the decision-making process Women are excluded from the actual decision-making process
Corruption	Corruption is mentioned as a barrier or opportunity for WPP
Current status of WPP	This code is used whenever the status of women's political participation before the project is mentioned
Donor	Donors that seek to influence policies on women's political participation or implement programs that strive to increase women's political participation
Education	Education is mentioned as a barrier or opportunity to WPP
Electoral quota	When someone mentions that the number of women that should be in the legislature or on a political party candidate list should be determined by law
Employment	Occupation is mentioned as a barrier or opportunity to WPP
Engagement	Women are members of community committees Women are informed and consulted Women have power to make some decisions but these require approval by male committee members
familiarity	Social connections with their communities that helped women vie for leadership positions

Financial means	Financial means are mentioned as barriers or opportunities to WPP
Gender roles after conflict	People mention that gender roles after the conflict changed/remained unchanged
Gender roles before conflict	People mention gender roles before the conflict
Gender roles during conflict	People mention that gender roles during the conflict changed/remained unchanged
International organization	International organizations that seek to influence policies on women's political participation or implement programs that strive to increase women's political participation
Manipulation	Women are not part of community committees Women's views are unwanted Women's needs are not assessed
Marital status	A woman's marital status is mentioned as a barrier or opportunity to WPP
misinformation	female candidates will not receive support because of myths and propaganda surrounding their campaign/ a barrier to WPP
NGO	NGO's that seek to influence policies on women's political participation or implement programs that strive to increase women's political participation
Organized structure	Organized structure is mentioned as a barrier or opportunity for WPP
Partnership	Women are members of community committees Female and male committee members jointly plan and make decisions Women's input is of equal value as their male counterparts
Patriarchal belief	Women as a birth-giver, a caretaker and a mother; Men as head of the household and decision-maker
peacebuilding	the assumption that women's political participation leads to peacebuilding and conflict reduction
Perception on WPP	This code is used when people express thoughts on women's political participation and the ability of women to act as leaders
Power	When the community talks about what power means to them
Religious belief	Women are subordinate to men Women are confined to the home because of religious beliefs
Representation	Representation mentioned as a barrier or opportunity for WPP. For example, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson as an inspiration

social network	social network (social contacts, connections) as a barrier or opportunity for WPP
Support key actors	Activities that local leaders perform to include more women in decision-making processes
Support of men	Men showing support for their wives attending AI meetings by taking on activities; taking on tasks of women so they can attend these meetings
tasks of women	Tasks that women perform in the communities are described
Tokenism	Women are members of community committees as a requirement of an NGO Women are informed of their role and what is expected of them in the committee The female members do not have the opportunity or power to share their views with the committee Women do not shape their own roles
training	This code is used when training is mentioned in the reports or interviews
trust in government	level of trust that citizens and local leaders have in the national government
Violence against women in politics	Violence targeted towards women participating in politics to discourage them from actively participating in politics
Vote buying	This code is used when citizens mention that they received money or goods from a candidate to vote for said candidate
women in leadership	Women in leadership positions because of the Appreciative Inquiry meetings
women supporting women	Activities that women perform to include more women in decision-making processes