

Iron Ladies of Liberia  
52 minute, 2007, U.S.A.  
The Cinema Guild  
Directors: Siatta Scott Johnson and Daniel Junge  
Language: English

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is the first African female head of state. Since taking the reins of the Liberian government in 2006 she has been loved by some, contested by others. *Iron Ladies of Liberia* focuses mainly on the challenges Johnson Sirleaf met in the first few months of her presidency as a mediator and a political and economic diplomat. In these roles, she tried to resolve issues such as corruption while securing international funding and investment and working toward maintaining peace. The film also documents the impact and role that women in prominent posts in the new government are having in that West African nation.

Viewers from countries where political figures rarely venture into the public without a buffer of bodyguards and rely on the legal-rational system for enforcing unpopular policies will be surprised by the conflict resolution approaches taken by the ladies portrayed in the film. Johnson Sirleaf acts toward her collaborators in the stout and demanding manner of an administrator who knows what is wrong and makes sure that others do what is needed to make it right. But in situations of crisis as depicted in the film, such as the protest by soldiers of the former Taylor regime who wanted to claim their pensions, she goes directly into the streets and speaks one-on-one with the men, invites them inside, and patiently works out a solution. Therefore, rather than imposing a decision, hiding behind the law, or enforcing it by force, the president hears the grievances of others, acknowledges them, and shows understanding. Johnson Sirleaf further explains the government's position and finds a compromise where the government and those voicing grievances are somehow satisfied. The film also portrays her chief of police using a similar style of conflict resolution.

For conflict resolutionists, *Iron Ladies of Liberia* illustrates how the legal system and political authority legitimize the roles of Johnson Sirleaf and the chief of police as third parties and mediators who base their approaches on their knowledge of local culture and society. Consequently, important issues raised by the film include: whether negotiation styles used by these government representatives are influenced by culture or gender; whether governance by women in a continent where men tend to take care of the fighting and the ruling can effectively bring stability, peace and reconciliation to a post conflict nation; and whether gender relations in Liberia will change because of it. From a gender issue and conflict resolution perspective, therefore, *Iron ladies of Liberia* is a fascinating documentary.

Despite the positive elements that make *Iron Ladies of Liberia* an interesting work, the movie does not live up to its title. The name indicates that the film will review the situations of more than one iron lady and though it does, none of the others are portrayed with the same depth as the president. The portion of the film that is

dedicated to following Johnson Sirleaf is disproportionately larger than that given to the other women, such as the chief of police or the Minister of Finance. Although the president carries the public burden of their government's success or failure, she relies heavily on these two appointees to make it work. Therefore, it is important to show more about the challenges faced by these "iron ladies" and the obstacles to their success. A more befitting title for this film would have been *Johnson Sirleaf and the Iron Ladies of Liberia* to avoid generating unfounded expectations about its content.

In addition, the documentary presents interviews of women who are not in the polity and their perspectives on having female leaders. However it does not take into account women, if any, from non-governmental organizations or academic institutions who are mobilizing or educating the population. Furthermore, the film leaves the viewer wondering whether the election of Johnson Sirleaf as president has had any impact on gender relations in the regions of Liberia beyond the capital.

In spite of its shortcomings, *Iron Ladies of Liberia* is an insightful and entertaining documentary about a new era in Liberian politics and the country's promising future. Students, academics, and the general public will find it of interest. The DVD is not sold separately but as part of the *Why democracy?* collection. For more information visit The Cinema Guild at [www.Cinemaguild.com](http://www.Cinemaguild.com).

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