Mobilizing for Improvement. An Empirical Study of a Women's Movement in West Point, Liberia[1]

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Introduction

Looking down from hill side Monrovia, infamous West Point peninsula appears as a huge field of densely built together makeshift houses covered with corrugated iron sheets; wooden canoes lay alongside the beautiful sandy beach. People are bathing and swimming in the fresh waves of the sea, and further down, some help a fisherman to pull a net ashore. This quarter, however, has a notorious reputation for its violence and a range of other intricacies. West Point, as other social and spacial areas of Liberia, is struggling through the aftermath of the conflict which is manifested in economic and social crisis, and the precarious delivery of goods and services by a weak state.

This paper gives insight into some recent changes and challenges in post-conflict Liberia[2], as a case study serves a women's organization in West Point, a precarious settlement within Monrovia. The capital city is visibly changing and evolving, while West Point is stigmatized and said to be as notorious as it was during the conflict - and before. Though the quarter offers advantages or economic opportunities such as the fishery, residents are bothered by the prevalence of violence, in particular sexual and gender based violence which are evaluated to be the consequences of a "*loose society*".

How do local actors evaluate the setting they live in and how does their agency respond to (social) problems under condition of scarce resources? How do they make their claim towards state actors? One possibility is the way of the West Point Women: A few women got together and formed an organization of self-help and organized collective action. The initially small group grew in number and impact on the community

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[1] A first version of this paper has been submitted to Stichproben, Vienna Journal for African Studies and is currently being reviewed.

[2] The bulk of literature on Liberia concentrates on the conflict, which is addressed elsewhere, i.e. Stephen Ellis (2007), Mary Moran (2006), Mats Utas (2003, 2005b), or the Liberian TRC Report (2009).

and today is a well known movement.

This article aims at describing their organization and their impact in a social space where the state seems to fail to secure the provision of common and public goods, and, in fact, is hardly present. It is looking at the capabilities and creativity of agency in the midst of uncertainty, constraints and change of urban Liberia. Besides, the paper aims at depicting the role of women's movements in post-conflict Liberia and their strong position and impact not only on a community level, but also on the political landscape. The West Point Women is a woman's group rooted in a precarious Monrovian quarter. However, the group is an active part of bigger, coordinated women's movements in Liberia, but also mobilizes within their community, and towards the state.

This paper is part of an ongoing research under the Swiss National Science Foundation funded project „The Work of State Imageries", lead by Prof. Dr. Till Förster of University of Basel. Ethnographic field research in Liberia was conducted for a total of 11 months between 2009 and 2011. Data was collected on various organizations such as women's groups, state actors such as the police or members of government, and triangulated with other social actors. Ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews, observation or participation at events were applied.

Agreeing with Fuest (2009: 116-118), the Liberian society is especially complex regarding social differentiation, division, and in addition: the history of the country, influencing people's perception up to today. Hence, for lack of space, this article has to focus on the main factors and leave out other relevant aspects and topics.

The state, civil society and social movements – a conceptual framework

Post-conflict Liberia is characterized by economic and social challenges, manifested by a precarious delivery and regulation of public and common goods[3] such as security or the provision and distribution of health services. The notion of a precarious

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[3] Basically, public goods and services are non-rivalrous and non-excludable, such as national security or national broadcasting system. Common goods are non-excludable but rivalrous, such as fish stock. As compared to private or club goods, public and common goods are at risk of market failure and generally require provision and regulation by the state (for a detailed discussion see Samuelson 1954 or Olson 1985).

statehood (Caplan 2007, Förster 2009) is a useful concept to analyze the Liberian setting as a weak state has a potential for improvement regarding its institutions and provision, respectively their efficiency. The malfunctioning of a state causes an additional layer of struggle to the everyday life. Under such conditions, the local actors may start to look for other solutions or alternative providers to their needs. There exists a wide range of debates on African states; applying a state-centered point of departure, many African states – which came into being under very different circumstances than the European states – are seen as failing states (Rotberg 2003), collapsed states (Zartman 1995), shadow states (Reno 1998), quasi-states (Jackson 1990) or para-statehood (von Trotha 2004). These deficiency-oriented concepts do not provide a constructive framework for research about new forms of statehood in a post-conflict setting of (re)construction. More helpful are bottom-up approaches questioning the reproduction of the state (i.e. Gupta 1995 or Schlichte 2005) within an existing territorial frame, focusing on the social and cultural construction by the local actors. In conflict-affected areas, local institutions, NGOs and international organizations participate in these construction processes and are taking over tasks that are formally part of the state, and boundaries between state and non-state institutions get blurred, i.e. Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006), Gupta (1995). Public authority is exercised and experienced through several layers of institutions and realms. "Traditional" institutions and arenas, such as the council of elders, coexist and are negotiated with governmental institutions; associations and non-governmental organizations wielding public authority (Jung, Schlichte and Siegelberg 2003: 147). In some areas, the state is or was never present, such as in certain urban spaces. However, it does not necessarily lead to a power-vacuum; in certain areas, the provision and control of security is in the hands of non-state actors besides state actors. Civil society actors may respond and organize collective actions towards the state. The concept of civil society provides a useful perspective to analyze the relationship of state and non-state actors; however, it is loaded with challenges[4]. Nevertheless, according to Neubert (2010: 212, drawing on Whyte 2004), there does exist an undisputed core definition of civil society as an arena of uncoerced organized collective action centered around shared interests, purposes and values. Theoretically, they are differen-

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[4] For debate on Civil Society, see i.e. Neubert (2010), Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), Makumbe (1998) or see the Center for Civil Society at the LSE http://www2.lse.ac.uk/CCS/home.aspx (20.03.2011).

tiated from the realm of the state, the family and the market; in practice, however, these distinctions are often blurred. Civil societies mostly comprise a variety of organizations such as NGOs, local groups, faith-based organizations, self-help groups or social movements, to name a few. The autonomy of such groups has been questioned as they often, especially in the African context, depend on support of or have been stimulated by international donors or even the state (Harbeson 1994: 10, 286; Makumbe 1998: 311). Influence by international sponsors may lead many civil society organizations to adjust their agency in the interest of these and hence adapt their programs to their agenda-setting, and hence, their impact may be redirected or compromised. Besides, the international community has tended to overstate the potency of civil society as a key to addressing social and political challenges (Kasfir 1998). However, receiving funding does not necessarily implicate a one-way relationship toward or passivity of the beneficiary; local groups are creative in bridging donor's interests and their own, local interests (Ellis and van Kessel 2009: 5). This goes in line with the concept of agency and its understanding that actors are not simply reactors to external factors. Agency, according to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), is composed of three temporal dimensions, on which actors draw their capabilities to take decisions even in most limited situations: The habitual aspect is informed by the past; the projective element is oriented towards future projects; and the practical-evaluative element refers to the actors' assessment of a present situation. The interplay of these three elements constitute human agency.

In order to situate the case study into the contextual framework, a few words about the notion of social movements are required, as this concept was earlier defined for Western contexts[5]. Social movements are a form of group action composed of a network of individuals, groups or organizations rooted in civil society (e.g. not the state), formed to protest against social and political issues with the intention to change these or prevent ongoing changes. According to Tilly (2004), social movements in a *classical* sense consist of three major elements: Firstly, campaigns are sustained, organized public efforts towards making collective claims towards target authorities; secondly, they include a repertoire employing different forms of political action such as public meetings, demonstrations or rallies, and thirdly, a concerted public representa-

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[5] For in dept discourses on the concept and historical context of social movements in Europe, see Tilly (1978 and 2004) or Sidney Tarrow (1994). For a literature review see Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2009: 17-43) in Ellis, van Kessel et al. (2009).

tion by participants of unity, numbers and commitment leads to a recognition and visibility of the movement. Social Movements *in Africa* are characterized in that they are embedded in a context of states that are weaker regarding policing or justice than states in Europe or North America, and hence are concerned with broader social and political issues (Habib and Opoku-Mensah 2009: 50ff). Ellis and Van Kessel (2009: 4-16) add that social movements in Africa are often hybrid regarding social-scientific categories due to the blending of social, political as well as religious attributes. The international context plays a crucial role regarding funding or framing by diaspora or global donors, the spreading of international concepts such as the international human rights or discourses on norms and values by religious organizations. Religion thus plays an important role as a source of values and norms. The identification with the group remains crucial to connecting the individual to the group: shared values or aims are vital for a strong participation and solidarity within the organization. Emotions or religion, as stated above, can serve as an additional motivator and unificator to the common cause. In the case of women, shared experiences have contributed to solidarity and organized collective action (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2009: 32).

Summing up, social movements in Africa exist in great diversity, targeting government policy, and, compared to European or North American movements, traditional and new forms of social movements are interwoven (Ellis and van Kessel 2009: 15, Habib and Opoku-Mensah 2009: 50-55).

A case study: The West Point Women

To reach the West Point Women, the rudiments of a road leads passing a dense amalgam of countless small shops, restaurants, video clubs and street sellers. On the way is also a small, almost hidden building; the only police depot, which at times is used for bible study on Sundays. The 15 minutes' walk from downtown Monrovia ends at a mint-green two story house, a rather big and dominant building for West Point. The name of the organization is painted in yellow above the entrance, including an e-mail-address that unfortunately is not operational anymore. This building is far larger and prominent than the local police depot and the magisterial court build-

ings together.

There are always a few women sitting on the stairs, or in the entrance hall on solid wooden chairs. Children sit on their laps, informal and formal conversations take place at the same time. Inside, there is a large meeting room on both floors, with plastic chairs neatly piled up in the corners. Along the walls are awareness posters, visualizing the human rights, teaching how to make water safe to drink, an advertisement for women to join the army, or a provocative poster showing the workload of a family woman compared to that of her unemployed husband. The rooms are beautifully decorated with colorful curtains and paper garlands.

The office is always occupied and publicly accessible for women in need; telephone lines are always open and the numbers of the leadership are known for the case of urgencies at night. The atmosphere seems relaxed; the women are dressed casually or in typical *lappa* suits. Suiting to the atmosphere, a member wears a T-Shirt showing President Obama, smiling, with the inscription "hope". And the West Point Women know, yes, they can: the group is very confident; discussions are always filled with strong words: a clear line of who they are, what they do, what they have achieved, what their potential is, and what they need. Often, to strengthen their arguments and agency, pictures are circulated showing cases of raped or beaten women and children. To each picture they provide information about the status of the case: whether the perpetrator is in prison, if the case was delayed or if the problem could be resolved simply by mediation.

The women talk very openly, and at times, when a help-seeker is present, the respective issue is analyzed and discussed directly in the group, even in the presence of other people.

Their collective agency began in 2002, when ten concerned women decided to get together to make a change to the living condition of West Point. They gave themselves the name *West Point Women for Health and Development Organization,* or in short, *West Point Women.* By that time, the conflict was still raging and some of the members of the organization participated in the women's peace movement.

But the organization was founded for another motive, namely to make a change to the bad reputation of their quarter, "*we thought it wise that we too can live in a society*

of good people,"[6] explained the vice president of the group. According to their evaluation, the quarter was and still is stigmatized, and Liberians obviously believe that nothing good can come out of the quarter, as a politically influential Westpointer explained: "...[*I*]*f you find the Westpointers today (...), they feel rejected, that people [*outside West Point] don't like them.* " Their vision, agency and achievements attracted a number of other women. Up to today, all are engaged on a voluntary basis; nevertheless, the organization grew quite fast in membership and visibility. Therefore, the women decided to organize themselves and elect a president, a vice president, a secretary, a chaplain, a treasurer, a public relations officer, and a gender based violence (GBV) officer. They wrote the bylaws and a constitution, organized their formal accreditation and article of incorporation. In addition, a bank account was opened. Each member contributes a small amount in their weekly meetings. The money is sufficient for their activities, and until recently they did not receive external cash contributions. Some international organizations contributed with in kind contributions such as workshops, coordination or educational activities. *Global Giving* created a fund raising web page by mid 2010 for the group and only recently, they have received some financial support[7].

Today, West Point Women consist of about 150 members, of which 30 core members are involved in most activities. During the past year, eight men[8] have joined the organization, complementing and collaborating with the West Point Women. They were referred to as "partners" and not members per se, but their joining the women has the advantage as they have more direct access to men. The majority of the members share in common limited resources due to their economic condition, the housework load and other obligations that make it difficult to participate actively and regularly. However, if needed, for example for fund raising, campaigning or demonstrations - as a typical social movement - most of the members and additional, concerned actors of the community will participate. Membership is open to any concerned woman, and only recently, to men. The West Point Women for Health and Development Organization are composed of different ethnic, religious, economic and social backgrounds, and age groups; hence overreaching the boundaries of the various milieus that in

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[6]   Quoted excerpts of interviews are mostly in *Liberian English* expressions and style.
[7]   http://www.globalgiving.org. (31.08.2010).
[8]   Only in mid 2010, men joined the organization; about the same time that external financial support was generated. Unfortunately, I was not able to talk to one of the men about their incentives or interest in joining the group.

other regions of Liberia cause separations and segregation. Solidarity is often a normative ascription. Of course, as in all social settings, bad feelings or discord can arise due to various reasons; however, no split or major disagreement is said to have occurred amongst the West Point Women so far.

Generally, two major influences strengthened the coherence and solidarity among the members of the group: being directly or indirectly affected as women in a context of gender based violence, and secondly, their shared history and experience of a re-shaping role of women during and after the conflict.

The context of present-day women's movements in Liberia

Women's movements had a vast influence in the Liberian political landscape, especially in the peace process. This has been documented by diverse social scientists such as Moran and Pitcher (2004), Schaefer (2008) or Fuest (2009). The movements are still energetic, however, are now addressing specific topics of the aftermath: A majority of Liberian women live in an environment of social and economic intricacies. Women bear children, care for their families, and are physically and socially exposed to high risks (Obrist 2006: 55). In urban areas, the work load of women often increases as the unemployment of men adds to the burden on women and children as bread winners. This can lead to a complication of marital relations (Obrist 2006: 92). During the war, men had to hide in their homes in order not to be recruited or killed by warring factions, while women went out to look for food. A reshaping process of gender roles started, and women started to engage in the peace process[9], exposing them to even dangers. But one woman explained that due to their daily exposure while looking for food, the women developed courage. All of them experienced various situations of high risk, and to some extent, these risks became part of daily life and normality to them. Other sources state that sexual exploitation and violence of and towards women and girls was a sad part of everyday life during the conflict. However, it should not be neglected that women were not victims only. There exist a number of accounts of women joining the warring factions and acting as perpetrators during the conflict, including applying sexual and gender based violence (Schaefer 2008, Utas

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[9]   Documentary: Fork Films (2008). Pray the Devil back to Hell.

2005b, 2009). These forms of violence often continue as a typical aspect of the aftermath of a conflict, "[t]*he incidences of rape of women and girls continued to be alarmingly high in 2009, despite positive efforts by the government and UNMIL, including the establishment of a dedicated court for sexual violence. While public reporting of and police response to reports of rape improved somewhat, efforts to prosecute these cases are hampered by deficiencies in the justice system.*" (HRW 2009, cf. Meintjes 2001).

Some transformation regarding women's roles and participation have occurred, even on the political landscape. A signaling and encouraging effect were the elections of strong leader figures such as President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf or Ruth Perry[10] or the large, interwoven women's organizations such as MARWOPNET[11], WANEP[12] or WIPNET[13] (Fuest 2008, Schaefer 2008). Since the beginning of the conflict and until today, Liberia has experienced a strong growth in women's organizations and influence through organized collective action. Coordination efforts are made by the Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL) according to the executive director of the organizations. The program associate of the New African Research and Development Agency (NARDA) explained that a similar effort is being done at the Ministry for Gender and Development, and in addition, NARDA is in the process of coordinating a Civil Society Network to structure the countless numbers and forms of organizations. For this endeavor, NARDA has been assigned by the Liberian NGO Network (LINK) to elaborate a NGO policy paper, while the governance commission is elaborating a CS policy. Clearly, the numbers and layers of organizations and umbrella organizations constitute a challenge to the structuring efforts. An additional huge challenge to many organizations constitutes the brain drain: members or leaders are offered well paid jobs in government or international organizations, hence leaving organizations with a vacuum, or are biased as representatives in two roles (cf. McKeown and Mulbah 2007: 10).

On a grassroots' level, women's interests are pursued by the women's organizations and movements responding to social problems in various forms such as for example

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[10] Perry was interim President of Liberia from 1996 to 1997.
[11] Mano River Women's Peace Network. http://www.marwopnet.org/ (31.08.2010).
[12] West Africa Network for Peacebuilding. http://www.wanep.org/wanep/ (31.08.2010).
[13] Women in Peacebuilding Program. http://www.gnwp.org/members/wipnet (31.08.2010).

the provision of support for orphans and widows or the creation of marketing associations and various forms of saving clubs or vocational skills trainings to empower women and children (cf. Moran (1990), Moran and Pitcher (2004), Fuest (2009)). The Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia (AFELL) is a powerful and visible organization standing up for women's and children's issues. The passing a "rape law" was achieved in 2005, turning rape into a non-bailable crime, and the "inheritance law" was reformed in favor of the women (Poverty Reduction Strategy 2008: 89, 146). A special court was dedicated to cases of sexual violence (Irinnews 2009). As these laws were debated in the parliament, the women mobilized and marched the streets and demonstrated at the house of parliament to support the passing of these laws, according to statements by the West Point Women who participated as well.

Many Liberians state that the conflict caused severe damages not only in physical structures but also to their minds and attitudes[14]. After the conflict and up to the present time, many international and national organizations are providing educational and training programs on various topics ranging from vocational training to trauma healing and human rights (Human Rights Report 2009, Sawyer 2005). At the same time, social order is shaped by the growing impact of (new) religious activities, "traditional" revival, or the local appropriation of human rights, to name a few. "Before, we had traditional law. Then they brought human rights. Now we are confused!" - a statement of a Liberian emphasizing the precariousness – or plurality of social order in a negotiation process.

The President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has made strong efforts for the women in Liberia, however, the implementation of policies still a major challenge. After a swift starting period and the raising of spirit and hopes in the local, national and international community, a phase of struggle followed: the frequent reports of the media on corruption and misuse of funds in government and disagreements and disputes in the political realm lead to heated debates in public arenas, fueled by the poor performance of state institutions and public services. The weak state struggles to address the most acute problems of the country.

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[14] They draw on a famous quotation by Dr. Lawrence Bropleh, former Minister of Information, calling Liberians to change their minds and attitudes and to exercise "*good virtues*" that would contribute to the development of the country (e.g. key note speech at the International Women's Day, Bensonville, 08.03.2010).

West Point, a precarious setting

The context of the West Point Women is a precarious quarter, were the state is hardly present. However, according to many statements, it is one of the most beautiful spots of Monrovia and would be ideal for a recreational zone: It is situated on a peninsula North of Monrovia, between the city center and the Freeport of Monrovia, located between the Mesurado River and the Atlantic Ocean and lies only minimally above sea level. It is composed of government land and hence, the inhabitants of West Point are referred to as squatters. One of the characteristics is the dense population of estimated 50'000-75'000 inhabitants, depending on statistics or estimates of residents. Most of the inhabitants have a low or no cash income, and it is often referred to as the biggest slum in Monrovia. According to UN Habitat, a slum household is a group of people living together lacking at least one of the following conditions: Access to improved water; access to improved sanitation facilities; sufficient-living area, not overcrowded; structural quality/durability of dwellings; and security of tenure (UN Habitat 2003: 18). Although this definition does not reveal the degree of the conditions, all of these characteristics apply to West Point to a strong degree. However, this notion is problematic for the Liberian context: the conflict destructed many parts of Monrovia; however, quarters differ greatly regarding infrastructure and social or economic structures. The inhabitants as well as non-residents never used the word "slum" in reference to their quarter; instead, they call it simply West Point, or community. The name comprises the characteristics of the quarter. I will hence refer to the quarter simply as *West Point*, and its inhabitants as *Westpointers*, as they call to themselves.

This urban area was never objective to any administrative planning or development activities by the state. Also, the living conditions, infrastructure and services were limited due to the dense population already before the conflict. Water is being transported in plastic containers by man-power from outside West Point, because the local wells are salty. Sanitation facilities are scarce and dirty, hence the local population prefers the beach or the river - adding up to the many hygiene- and health risks. The land belongs to the government, and the inhabitants have no legal tenure. There existed plans by the National Housing Authority (NHA) to relocate the inhabitants, but

up to present were not executed – or have been considered as rumors, according to informants. However, Westpointers do not invest in the improvement of their living condition, out of fear that the land could be drawn back by the government any time, which has happened to other squatter areas of Monrovia in the recent past.

Old Kru Town, as it was called before, was founded by Kru and Grebo people; today, the many ethnic groups do not live separated compounds or communities. As various informants emphasize, there are factually no tensions along ethnic or religious lines in West Point, unlike other areas of Liberia, as a result of close interaction and living together in so jammed condition. Intermarriages are common; however, the term marriage needs to be specified: many people cannot afford to get married officially, so for a certain period of time, "*plastic bag marriages*" are quite common and socially accepted, meaning dating a person and "*engaging the place small small*".

West Point's notorious reputation is based upon a high crime rate, specifically sexual and gender based violence. According to several statements, the living conditions were always experienced to be precarious regarding violence, even before the conflict. A member of the West Point Women lives in the quarter since the early 1980ies and narrates "*it was so much rudeness, everyday, it was one fighting after another. You couldn't really get out there freely. The place was so frightful, people started being so afraid, to you know, move around, because there was so much violence.*" Hence, violence is not evaluated as a consequence of the conflict as such, but rather, as stated above, gender and sexual based violence have increased during and after the conflict. Besides, the living conditions have been precarious before the conflict, especially regarding infrastructures such as sanitation and hygienic conditions, due to the dense population of West Point. The state has failed to provide basic infrastructure and services to this quarter.

According to informants, these social problems are the consequences of a *loose society*, e.g. a loss of norms and values that threaten society. They are evaluated to be the result of parents neglecting their children and youth, hence leaving them without control and guidance, as a civil servant working in West Point describes: "*Late hour, the children [are] still in video club, the children have their own will, they go to fishing, for themselves, to earn money, so they are just vulnerable, parents don't care. Parents don't care on how the children went fishing, on how they went sell, so they don't pay much attention to their children.*" West Point's youth is "*just sitting around there,*

doing nothing, and at the end of the day, you see them getting involved into a whole lot of activities," as another informant puts it. According to informants at the Ministry of Youth and Sports, teenage pregnancy, abandonment or neglect of women, children and elderly persons are indeed social problems prevalent in West Point. Young mothers are socially and economically at risk, some of them drop out of school. At the time of the interview, the Ministry of Youth and Sports was running programs of HIV/AIDS awareness for young people; however, it did not cover West Point. Institutions of governmental, NGOs and INGOs are not as active in West Point as compared to central Monrovia or rural Liberia. However, a number of religious institutions are active in the quarter, for example the only clinic is run by the Liberian Catholic Church. West Point has one police station and one magistrate court; hence, the capacities and resources of the security and justice system are severely limited (cf. Schaefer 2008: 209). Some interviewees assess the general juristic and security services as unreliable, resulting in the populace taking the initiative and applying "*mob justice*". These cases are said to reduce, and personal observations confirmed that in West Point, "*criminals*" are taken to the police depot for formal justice.

In spite of all these challenges, the inhabitants of West Point do not want to move out into another part of town. Some had moved out before, but returned after a while, for this quarter seems to offer a lot of opportunities as compared to other quarters: business, especially in the fishery, runs well and provides a certain revenue per day. Loads of fish are processed each day, and hence, food security is guaranteed. Other petty businesses are attractive due to the dense population. Residents are in walking distance to the big *Waterside market* and employment or other occasional opportunities in central Monrovia or at the Freeport (Lacey and Owusu 1988: 228).

Towards improvement: empowering women

According to the evaluation of the West Point Women, a central condition to the improvement of the quarter meant in a first step to empower the women. They started to create awareness on human rights and especially to educate women's rights: "*... for Liberia, people felt long ago [*note: for a long time*] that only men..., only men have the right to education, only men have the right to freedom of speech, only the men*

supposed to be out there, and not women. Women's place was only in the kitchen. So we decided to fight for these rights. And the right we wanted to fight for was the right to education, the women rights to freedom of speech, the right to gender equality and the right to health care."

They encouraged other women to participate in their organization. According to them, an educated woman knows about her rights, can defend herself and is less exposed and vulnerable. Violence and misuse has to be reported and not kept secret by the victim. Therefore, empowerment and knowledge is crucial for a woman's wellbeing. Complemented by and in collaboration with other organizations such as the International Rescue Committee (ICR), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), or Oxfam, and from the government's side by the Ministry of Gender and Development, workshops and other educational activities are organized for women and girls. These educational activities range from informal discussions with other women about human rights to concrete health education i.e. in purifying water or awareness marches, hence education does not only include human rights but includes awareness about health risks of West Point, especially for women and children. Latrines and bathrooms are scarce and not properly cared of, and the water of the public wells is not clean. The "*government latrine*" (e.g. public latrine) right behind the West Point Women's building causes serious problems: not only that it "*ruins your nose*", as one woman puts it, but at times it floods and spills out over the football field. Hence, it causes serious health problems to children that play on the field in the evenings. One of their next actions was to organize a demonstration at the parliament to urge the government to remove the latrine "*we will march up there again*". At my return in February 2011, the latrine had been repaired by the government and the bad sent had gone.

The women received trainings how to treat water to make it safe to drink, how to make soap and other skills. And recently they have started an elementary night school for their members, engaging a teacher. The West Point Women for Health and Development Organization transmit this knowledge to other women in the community. In addition, as a minor encouragement by government, they receive some financial support to regularly take a broom and sweep the streets of West Point. This is in fact one of their most regular and visible activity, according to statements by other residents.

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These examples depict the flexibility of the West Point Women's agency in applying tools towards social and other problems in the quarter: at times as a transmitter of knowledge or tools provided by the state or INGOs, then again as a mass movement targeting the state. The state is seen as being both responsible and also capable to provide solutions to the complex problems in the community.

Movement for formal justice

The West Point Women were part of the women's movements that was marching through town and demonstrating at the Capitol Hill[15] when the rape law was discussed and finally passed in 2005. Besides, one of the first achievements of their group was the persistent pursuing of rape cases for formal justice, explains the vice president *"…[…] like one time they raped a child and they brought this complain to us […] because the parents were compromising, they gave the parents 50 dollars [...]. So they decided to cover that case. And the women decided to march, march out there, march to Gender Ministry, the Gender Ministry said, well, you have to go AFELL. And we went to AFELL, I think we were there three days. That's when AFELL decided to come to West Point. AFELL came, and we had a workshop with over 1'000 plus people, because the whole school building was crowded. Because they said, it was the first time in history, for women in history* [of Liberia] *to get up and say they wanted justice. They wanted their rights. We were the first women to get up, to get out there. So, it raised concern."*

Nationwide, rape cases are still high, however, according to an interview with the Women and Child Protection Section of the Liberian National Police[16], there is a decrease in West Point: "*Yes, I see a lot of changes. At first, when I came to West Point, everyday, we have cases, gender based violence, sexual violence, rape. Every other time. Maybe in a week we see two to three rape cases! But for now, we try doing awareness, with the help of our counterparts, we try carrying on awareness, at*

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[15] E.g. the center of government, where the Executive Mansion, the Parliament and the Temple of Justice are located

[16] The Women and Child Protection Section is an institution of the LNP, established in collaboration with UNICEF, see (http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=77406, or http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/liberia_2513.html , and also the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS 2008: 54).

least, it's decreasing." Before, many victims did not report their cases, out of fear, shame or other personal reasons. In other cases, parents and perpetrators were compromising, hence covering the perpetrator and hiding the case. Today, rape cases are reported more frequently. But to achieve the goal of reducing GBV, the solution is not always formal justice, e.g. arresting the perpetrator. More important, according to the police and the West Point Women, is a pragmatic solution to each individual case. For instance, if rape leads to a pregnancy of a girl, mediation is conducted with all involved persons, even the parents of the boy and the girl. A solution will be found to see how best the circumstances can be improved for the child and the future of the girl. The first successful cases the West Point Women pursued persistently, where formal justice was spoken and the perpetrator was jailed, had a signaling effect on the community. Their approach and action differs from case to case. What they want to avoid, however, is that a rape case is compromised or concealed. This is why awareness is considered a central part of the West Point Women's activities. They show a picture of a young woman that was seriously injured by her former boyfriend. In such cases, the women first take the case to the hospital, where the victim is treated. X-ray, pictures and other diagnostic findings will serve as evidence for the legal prosecution of the case, because as a next step, the West Point Women will take the case to court. As justice is precarious in Liberia, the West Point Women in the past had taken major efforts in assuring that cases are pursued, for example by physical presence of the group in court until the case was closed.

West Point Women, state and non-state actors negotiating

After their first success and attention by AFELL, Oxfam and a few other NGOs came to support the women's group. NGOs are thus ambivalent actors in the West Point Women's view: On one hand, they appreciate the support regarding education or material, and they profit from the coordination effort of these organizations. But the huge generator they received from one NGO is not really of use to them because they do not have equipment that needs electricity, apart from mobile phones. Only in recent time, a computer was installed. Though with only one computer literate in the group and one being trained, its use is projected to the future. On the other hand, the West Point Women would wish financial contributions or concrete support such as a ve-

hicle or ambulance for West Point.

Many individuals or NGOs came to the West Point Women, took interviews, pictures and time, made promises, but never returned. The West Point Women do not see much benefit from these meetings. Lastly, they would expect some level of appreciation by the Liberian government – hence the people *they* have elected - not necessarily by funding, but acknowledgement for their efforts and actions. "[…] *because when the people come* […], *the big people that are in the government, when they want position […] because the population that's in West Point, when they* [the West-pointers] *vote for that person, the person can win! Ain't you getting me?* […] *So let the government come and do something*!" The disappointment about the government seems to persist, especially about the district representative: the ambulance was still not provided, the road not fixed and the street lights are still out. The women feel that it was them, the women, who had mobilized the masses and hence through them, these people were brought to power. Hence they feel there is a need to collaborate with the "*big people"*, and let them know what problems persist.

The most visible campaigns of the group are marches – "*parading".* Depending on the context and topic, these are either organized by one of the mentioned international organization or umbrella organizations; or as a local movement such as the West Point Women. The action depends on the audience and the target. Marching or parading in their understanding means an organized action mostly for general issues, executed by the group, assembling and starting at a central point of town. Topics can be general awareness as well as political topics. Spontaneously, as an example, the Liberian Women for Peace gathered on a public space in Monrovia to pray and dance for peace in Cote d'Ivoire for two weeks in February 2011. Most often, movements wear uniform clothing, mostly a white T-shirt with imprinted logos and mottos[17]. Often, crown-like paper decorations are carried on the head, displaying logos and mottos, such as "*Don't beat your woman. She is special*" or "*Equal rights, equal opportunities, progress for all*", "*Men and Women as Partners in Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*" or "*Stop Woman and Child Abandonment*", in order to underline their claim. Colorful paper banners underline the theme and motto of the parade, verbal statements and songs in chorus are sung as the group moves through the major streets of town. For bigger events, marching bands lead the movement.

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[17] Whereas these are not typically Liberian but found in other African countries.

Spectators along the pavement often halt and watch the group passing by, traffic is blocked. The audience is watching and listening attentively and often actively takes part in the demonstration by supporting the group with acknowledging statements, by criticizing loudly or by joining the parade. Demonstrations are not only literally collective action by a joint group, but also a dialogue with the audience of the street. Sometimes, media are present to follow and report on the event.

Other activities address the state, like the campaign the West Point Women organized regarding the latrine that caused more damage than utility to the community: "[…] *we went to the mansion building. We marched, we went there. We talked about the toilet here. But since then, nobody never talked of it again. We talk, talk, talk, and we still talk about it. We just want the toilet to move from here. And they refuse to take it from here. But* [soon*), we will stage protest march. Because we will make sure that this toilet move from here. They should move this toilet, and use it for town hall, let them use this building for town hall.*" They planned an action to demonstrate at the Capitol Hill, not on the streets. It was again a successful action by the West Point Women as in 2011, the problem was solved somewhat as the latrine was repaired.

Their campaigns are constructive: they have a clear message and present it physically close and visible to the politicians. The actions are always peaceful and attract other people to join. Riots or forms of excesses are no viable option. In addition, their agency is – at least partially - successful, as the problems are addressed. The activities have created awareness in the past, for instance the West Point Women have received a building to use as their office by the government and have successfully raised attention to the urgently needed ambulance in West Point. The representative of the district mentioned in an interview that this is an issue she will address in the near future. However, state actors also suffer the expectations that are laid on them, for example, by the lack of knowledge of the tasks and duties of a parliamentarian. And on the other side, according to a Liberian intellectual "[...] *many African leaders in both government and civil society […], who lack the public trust [*are*] left alone with funds for implementation of clearly defined tasks.*"

Conclusion: West Point Women and the state – a collaboration!

This empirical study aimed at giving insight in a dynamic women's organization in Liberia that navigates flexibly as part of bigger, coordinated women's movements, but also mobilizes within the community, and thirdly, towards the state. It shows the role of women's movements in post-conflict Liberia and their strong position and impact not only on a community level, but also within the political landscape: The West Point Women state their claims, and pursue these persistently. If necessary, they have the mobilizing power to assemble a huge group of Women in West Point, to march to the Capitol Hill and "*make things happen*". This case study showed how organized collective action can contribute to the process of (re-)generation of social order in a setting of economic and social crisis of a post-conflict community. In the past nine years of existence of the West Point Women for Health and Development Organization, their awareness activities and persistent seeking for justice have contributed to better living conditions in West Point.

The organization and their agency are an example of how state and non-state actors can complement and work towards an improvement in a community. The group's movement interestingly addresses the government's institutions by moving towards them - but also assisting them and cooperating with them. This means legitimacy of the state, its actors and institutions exists, as the above presented examples showed. The movement feels they have to approach the state actors actively and directly, and insist on rights and services they deserve. As depicted, state institutions such as the police, the court, the district representative, the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Gender and Development are some of the first targets of the West Point Women. Alternatively, they could have acted otherwise, for example by building up own groups of security, or turn to violent groups to create pressure. But, the government institutions are respected and expected to be the first institutions to provide public services to the citizens. The social movement and their agency is hence not per se in opposition to the state, but is seeing the state as capable to provide solutions to their problems and needs.

NGOs and International Organizations, in the group's view, are ambivalent actors, and the West Point Women would expect them to respond more specifically to their needs, especially regarding financial support or the ambulance. Many organizations

interacted with the West Point Women, but never responded. Some brought practical and useful tools and knowledge, however, the group still considers itself as an independent, local movement and not influenced or biased by larger NGOs or INGOs.

The West Point Women work towards the state and its actors by means of physical presence, clear messages and firm claims regarding their specific needs: a safe and improved environment for the women in West Point and society at large. They not only claim infrastructure and services from the state in general, but, rather, address and hold responsible a specific state actor as for instance the representative of the district. They have very high expectations towards state actors, who then have to stand responsible as a personification of the state to address their needs. The state actors on the other hand argue that they suffer from the high expectancies of these groups, because the latter hold them responsible and hence, put them under pressure. However, not responding to needs of a community can quickly damage the state actor's reputation simply by rumors and, in case of a parliamentarian for example, endanger a re-election. They try to react by informing the non-state actors about the tasks and duties of a parliamentarian, in this example, and the rights and duties of a citizen on the other hand. The pressure towards elected actors is mounting as the country moves towards elections in late 2011, and the demands of the promises made before the last elections intensify.

Their bargaining process is constructive and leading towards a solution for the participants. In the past, some of the problems could be resolved, or at least, reduced, mainly due to the consequent agency of the West Point Women's movement. Collaboration between the women's group and the police hence not only seems lead to more efficiency on both sides, but moreover to a decrease in cases such as gender based violence. Services such as police are benefiting due to the collaboration help them to have a wider outreach and impact, in addition, their own security increases, as they are in general unarmed.

Interestingly, in the organization's view, the state is seen as a solution to the problems, at least theoretically. It could provide security, electricity or running water. What the Liberian government does is simply not enough, in the West Point Women's perception, and it is not understandable for many informants in West Point, why gov-

ernment seems to forget about them. An often heard criticism is that in political campaigns, the candidates are very visible and close to the people. After the election, the constituency and promises seem to be forgotten. The West Point Women for Health and Development Organization would expect financial contributions to their work, and most of all: appreciation by official Liberia. In their perception, lacking support by the state could be due a lack of information, so they will just keep on marching and demonstrating for their needs.

Acknowledgements

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