

**Gender, Democracy and Post-Conflict Restructuring in Sierra Leone:
An Interview with Ms. Abator Thomas, Minister of Health and Sanitation**

By Treva Braun, Director of Africa Initiatives for *The Future Group*, a Canadian-based international human rights organization.

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When we speak of democracy, we are referring to a system of government where power is vested in the people and is exercised by them either directly or through elected representatives. It mandates the free and equal right of every person to participate in the system, thus ensuring governance ‘of the people by the people’. Yet the reality is that most countries, including the vast majority of those touted as being electorate democracies, have disproportionately male-dominated governments.¹ Given that roughly half the population of any country is female, there is enormous difficulty in describing these nations as truly democratic.

Africa is no exception. With only three African nations boasting a critical mass of at least 30 percent of parliamentary seats held by women,² the continent may appear to be a hopeless case for genuine democratic reform.

Or is it? Of the forty-four countries in the world with at least 20 percent of seats in parliament held by women, eight are in Africa.³ Almost three-quarters of African nations saw an increase – most of them a huge increase – in the percentage of women parliamentarians between 1990 and 2005.⁴ At the ministerial level, eleven African countries now have at least 20 percent of all posts held by women.⁵ A number of post-conflict countries in Africa have highlighted the importance of including women in reconstruction processes, resulting in marked improvements in the numbers of women in parliament and other decision-making posts.⁶ And in late 2005, the African continent witnessed its first elected female country leader when Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected President of Liberia.

While there is still a great distance to travel on the slow and bumpy road to gender-representative African democracy, the progress made in recent years is real and the process of travelling that road is worthy of close examination. Those groundbreakers who have dedicated their lives to seeing governance in Africa mature out of its patriarchal past should be given audience, for it is through their stories – more so than those of the traditional political elite – that the real status of ‘free and equal’ political participation in Africa becomes clear.

Abator Thomas is one such groundbreaker. Born in Freetown, Sierra Leone on 10 August 1941, Ms. Thomas was destined to become not only one of West Africa’s leading advocates for the advancement of women in politics but also one of the growing number of African women to take on a ministerial

¹ See UNDP Human Development Report 2005, Table 30: Women’s Political Participation, Seats in parliament held by women (Lower or single house), available at http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/pdf/hdr05_table_30.pdf (accessed 3 January 2006).

² *Ibid.* Mozambique (34.8%), Rwanda (48.8%) and South Africa (32.8%). Only fourteen other countries in the world have reached this critical mass as of 2005: Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Costa Rica, Cuba, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Guyana, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Sweden. The U.S. has only 15 percent, France 12.2 percent, and the United Kingdom 18.1 percent.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Beyond Beijing: Towards Gender Equality In Politics*, Report of the One-Day Parliamentary Meeting on the Occasion of the 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women: Beijing +10, (New York: 30 March 2005), available at <http://www.ipu.org/splz-e/csw49/report.pdf> (accessed 3 January 2006), at pp. 2, 7.



post and begin driving her country's governance in new directions. Here, she shares her insights into gender, politics, and post-conflict democracy-building in Sierra Leone.

TB: Have you always been political?

AT: I do not think I ever heard the word politics when I was growing up. Sierra Leone was still colonized by the British in my young days and they were in charge. In my early career when the country was fighting for independence I never thought it had anything to do with me.

TB: What got you interested in politics and gender issues?

AT: My interest started when I was working as Deputy Director of the British Council in Freetown, and it developed further in 1997 during the interregnum in Sierra Leone when I was working for the British Council in the UK. I met a lady called Lesley Abdallah who was a member of the British Council Board. We got talking about gender issues and she introduced the topic of 'women in politics'. I remember she took me to a tree planting session on International Women's Day where a tree was planted for each woman in Parliament. She also told me about her work with women in Ghana and Nigeria. When I returned to Freetown after the war, I invited Lesley to come and run a workshop to introduce women to active political participation. These workshops were the launching pad for the 50/50 Group, an organization I co-founded in 2000 to champion the cause of gender-representative politics in Sierra Leone.

TB: What is the 50/50 Group?

AT: The 50/50 Group is a campaigning organisation which aims to increase women's participation in democratic politics and other decision-making processes at all levels to a situation of equal representation between men and women. We believe that more women means better politics. In order to achieve this goal, the group works to change the public perception of women in politics, encourage and empower women through training and advocacy to seek and hold public office and to participate in good governance, advocate against barriers preventing women from going into politics, and lobby for a fair and gender-neutral electoral processes. As part of our work, we trained over 1,000 women in leadership, communication and advocacy skills and the role of women in Parliament in the run-up to the 2002 general election and over 500 in the run-up to the 2004 local elections.

TB: What was the level of women's political participation before the civil war?

AT: It was extremely low. Women were marginalised in all areas of life in Sierra Leone. They experience high rates of illiteracy: eighty percent compared to sixty-one percent among men. The drop out rate from high school as a result of early marriages, high demand for female labour at home and teenage pregnancies was high. The maternal mortality rate of 1,800 per 100,000 births was three times higher than the average for sub-Saharan Africa. Women's rights to resources, social justice and well-being were largely neglected. Women bore the burden of cultural expectations, which limit their role to the private sphere of the home. All of these factors combined to make women's political participation virtually impossible. Thus, despite making up over half the population, only a few of Sierra Leone's MPs were women and only eight percent of administrative and management positions were held by women.

TB: What did that ultimately mean for the female half of Sierra Leone's populace?



- AT: In a male-dominated political system, women are seriously under-represented and this under-representation is part of a broader pattern of inequality in decision-making. Throughout the history of conflict in Sierra Leone women have borne a disproportionate burden of suffering and misery and yet they have seldom been involved in the decision-making processes that lead to conflicts or the cessation of conflict. Despite the guarantee of equality between men and women in our Constitution, men nearly always make the decisions affecting women's daily lives. Certain issues particularly relating to women and children are not adequately addressed. Certain key positions especially political appointments are not given to women, not because there are no competent women, but because men automatically think of other men when they make suggestions for these appointments. Men tend to ignore the skills, talents and experiences of half of our people.
- TB: How has political participation changed since the civil war ended and what role has the women's movement played?
- AT: It has changed tremendously. More people are showing interest, especially women. For example, in the 2002 election 165 women stood for election with eighteen being elected. Previously there were only six women in Parliament. Apart from the very few women who were already in Parliament, the majority of women who ran in this election were trained by the 50/50 Group so women's mobilization has been key to this progress. We also saw a 50 percent increase in the ministerial and deputy ministerial categories, and this election recorded the country's first-ever female presidential and vice-presidential candidates. We have a long way to go, of course. Even with the recent gains, women only hold 14.5 percent of seats in Parliament and 13 percent of ministerial positions. And although local government is often seen as more accessible to women than national politics, at the last local election only 11 percent of candidates elected were women.
- TB: What response does the 50/50 Group get in Sierra Leone?
- AT: A few women are hostile to the group as they still believe in the myth that politics is a man's game and they fear the violence that is usually associated with it. There have been some instances of women being subject to attacks and criticisms from some men. Many 50/50 Group activists are accused of being divorced women who want to undermine the family and displace men. Despite these challenges we have been successful in getting the government to wear its gender lenses, and they take our input on important political appointments and gender issues seriously.
- TB: What challenges and barriers has the women's political movement had to confront?
- AT: Firstly, we need political parties to consider nominating women, and this has been a challenge. Affirmative action is considered to be unconstitutional in Sierra Leone, so political parties have to be persuaded to nominate women as flag-bearers for their parties in the various constituencies. Unless and until we can get the Constitution amended, it will always be an uphill task to get equal representation. Having said this, there are a few women who believe such measures would make them feel inferior so they prefer to fight it out with the men. Before the 2002 general elections, we held a consultative conference with the various party leaders during which we got them to agree to nominate a quota of at least 30 percent women on their party lists. Most of them promised to do so but didn't keep their promises. Most of the time these parties prefer to select male candidates and leave the women to do the cooking.



We also faced challenges with biased balloting procedures. For example, one of our outstanding trainees from the original workshop decided to run for election and was nominated by a political party. When the party's list was released, she discovered that her name was placed in a position that would have disadvantaged her chances of being elected according to the proportional representation system that was in operation at the time. We wrote a letter of protest to the party leadership just before the close of nominations. Her name was advanced on the list and she won the election. She is now rated one of the best members of the House. To avoid these kinds of problems, the 50/50 Group lobbies parties to adopt the 'zipper system' – that is, alternating the names of male and female candidates on party lists – any time a proportional representation system is used.

Other key barriers include the high rate of illiteracy among women, socio-cultural factors including traditional beliefs, violence during campaigning, the lack of an enabling environment and the multi-lingual situation in Sierra Leone. Women are also socialized in ways that hinder their participation in politics. For instance, they tend to have negative attitudes towards themselves and others, they are unwilling to take risks and challenges, they lack self-esteem, and they have difficulty coping with criticisms. Money is also a problem as women cannot get loans easily because of lack of collateral. Some cannot even afford the nomination fees.

TB: Often when women do find their way into senior political positions, they are relegated to posts that are seen as inherently 'female' such as social affairs, families, and culture, while men continue to retain control over the more 'powerful' portfolios such as finance, economic development, and justice. What has Sierra Leone's experience been?

AT: This is not the case in Sierra Leone as we have had the first female Foreign Minister in West Africa, a woman as Minister of Economic Development and a woman as Minister of Trade and Industry.

TB: How did your own appointment as Minister of Health and Sanitation come about and what did it feel like for you?

AT: I was invited by the Vice-President to see him. When I went we chatted a bit about some recent events, then he asked about the 50/50 Group and said that the work I was doing was quite political. I quickly explained that it was non-partisan, but in retrospect I realize that he was simply suggesting that I had an interest in politics. Then he dropped the bombshell and asked me if I would consider being the Minister of Health and Sanitation. You could have knocked me down with a feather. I mumbled something about not being a doctor and knowing anything about health but he insisted that he and the President were convinced that I was the right person for the job. He mentioned how effective I was during my two years as Director of the British Council. I asked him to give me time to think about it. I went away with my mind awhirl. After I slept on it and talked to my family, I started getting used to the idea. I realized it was an achievement for women in general and the 50/50 Group in particular. I reasoned that being such a strong advocate for women in politics there was no way I could refuse the offer. By the third day when I had to go and see the Vice-President again I was feeling more confident and resolved that I would give it my best shot to pave the way for more women to be given the opportunity to hold high office.

TB: What have been your impressions of being in Cabinet so far?

AT: Being in Cabinet carries a great responsibility. Decisions taken can have a fundamental impact on the development of the country. It is important that ministers work as a team because in the final analysis everything boils down to the government and Cabinet is a very



important arm of government. As a Cabinet Minister, one must not only think of one's Ministry but also how things will look for the government.

TB: To what extent have you been able to insert a female perspective into your portfolio that wasn't there before?

AT: The reduction of infant and maternal morbidity and mortality is my main priority. Although this is a major aspect in my portfolio, I am adding a new dimension to solving the problem by bringing in women who are not necessarily pregnant or lactating mothers. For example, Freetown has a major garbage collection problem. The markets are the worst as they generate a tremendous amount of vegetable waste. Since mosquitoes live and breed in the waste, this increases the risk of diseases such as malaria particularly in pregnant women and children under five. Although garbage collection has been devolved to the Freetown City Council, my Ministry has embarked on a project with market women who will form themselves into a cooperative and start a compost-making project. The target for the compost is small vegetable growers around Freetown who are mainly women. They will be trained to use the compost to get bigger yields and subsequently higher prices, which in turn will give them more economic empowerment. I am also working on a nutrition project. Malnutrition accounts for 40 percent of infant and maternal deaths in Sierra Leone. It is not that there is not enough food but that people cannot preserve their fresh food. When there is an abundance of fruits and vegetables, they get wasted. When those items go out of season, people do without. We will be encouraging rural women, especially pregnant women and those with children under five, to do backyard gardening as well as small scale food preservation, and antenatal clinics will teach them the value of particular foods especially weaning foods.

TB: Do you experience any gender bias in your new political role?

AT: No. If anything the woman minister is more respected. It is believed that for a woman to achieve such a high position she must have excelled in other areas.

TB: What are the main lessons that you have learned about African democracy since you became involved in politics?

AT: African democracy is characterised by violence although a few countries have escaped this phenomenon, for example Tanzania, South Africa and more recently Sierra Leone where the last two elections were violence-free. However, I do not think the majority of people really understand what democracy stands for. I feel a lot of sensitisation is needed to enable the population to understand the role *they* have to play in a democracy to make it work.

TB: What are the greatest challenges that lie ahead for democracy in Sierra Leone?

AT: There are many, but chief among them are education and economic empowerment. If people are not educated they will not understand the main issues of the day and will not be able to make informed judgements. When people are poor they are too busy eking out a living to be interested in anything else. They do not have good health. We as a government have to work very hard to reduce poverty, and this is being addressed through the Poverty Reduction Strategy. Once these areas are addressed, then people will see this country as democratic. Also, women's equal participation in decision-making is vital if development in Sierra Leone is to be truly democratic. If only we can get a critical mass of women in decision-making positions, I think it will significantly help to turn this country around.

While the post-war gains are to be applauded, Ms. Thomas and others working on gender issues in Sierra Leone still have their work cut out for them. The conflict-ravaged country's track record for

both overall human development and gender equality is among the worst in the world. In the UNDP's 2005 Human Development Report, Sierra Leone ranked 176th out of 177 countries in the human development index⁷ and 139th out of 140 in the gender-related development index.⁸

Clearly, for women to participate equally and equitably in their own governance, they must be on a level playing field with men in all other areas of social and economic life including education, literacy and economic empowerment. Yet those pre-conditions are far from being met. Based on figures from 2003,⁹ the adult literacy rate for females is a mere 20.5 per cent, half that of the male population. There is some sign of improvement evident in the comparable figures for youths - female youths aged 15 to 24 have a literacy rate of 29.9 per cent or 64 per cent of that for male youths – but the gap remains alarmingly large. Added to this is the fact that, according to UNICEF, “while primary school enrolment levels are increasing each year in Sierra Leone, ... the gender gap is still widening ...”.¹⁰ For the years 2000 to 2005, the ratio of girls to boys enrolled in primary school sat at 70 per cent. The combined gross enrolment ratio for primary, secondary and tertiary level schools as of 2002/03 was a meagre 38 per cent for girls compared with 52 per cent for boys.¹¹

These educational discrepancies are mirrored in the relative empowerment of men and women in the workforce, with female workers in Sierra Leone earning only 42 per cent as much as men. Women's economic activity has increased slightly since 1990, however it still sits at only 55 per cent of that of their male counterparts.¹² And in the political arena, while *de jure* discrimination against women was eliminated almost half a century ago with women gaining the right to vote and to stand for election in 1961,¹³ *de facto* discrimination clearly remains an issue.

So what does all this mean for gender and democracy in Sierra Leone? As evidenced by the statistics, the problems are far from insignificant and change will not occur overnight. But the hard work and tangible results of people like Abator Thomas should give Sierra Leonean women, and Africans generally, hope and encouragement that change is both possible and well underway.

⁷ UNDP Human Development Report (2005), Country Fact Sheets, Sierra Leone, available at http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_SLE.html (accessed 11 March 2006). The Human Development Index (HDI) measures

⁸ Ibid. The Gender-related Development Index (GDI) is the HDI adjusted for gender disparities. It is described by UNDP as “simply the HDI adjusted downward for gender inequality”.

⁹ UNDP Human Development Report (2005), Country Sheet, Sierra Leone, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/countries.cfm?c=SLE> (accessed 11 March 2006)

¹⁰ UNICEF website, Info by Country, “At a glance: Sierra Leone” available at <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/sierraleone.html> (accessed 11 March 2006).

¹¹ Above note 9.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.