

medica Liberia - The place that African Feminist Love Has Built An Essay Celebrating Liberian Feminist Intergenerational Leadership

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We land at Roberts International, as the amber-coloured sun floods Monrovia's western skyline, drawing the last Saturday in May to an end. Every sunset in Liberia is inescapably dramatic. Bold. Just like the Liberian feminists from medica Liberia who are hosting us. The immigration officials give us a convivial "you're welcome". For black women solo travelers on Zimbabwean passports, habituated to being rudely rejected by other countries, this is an enchanting pan-African experience.

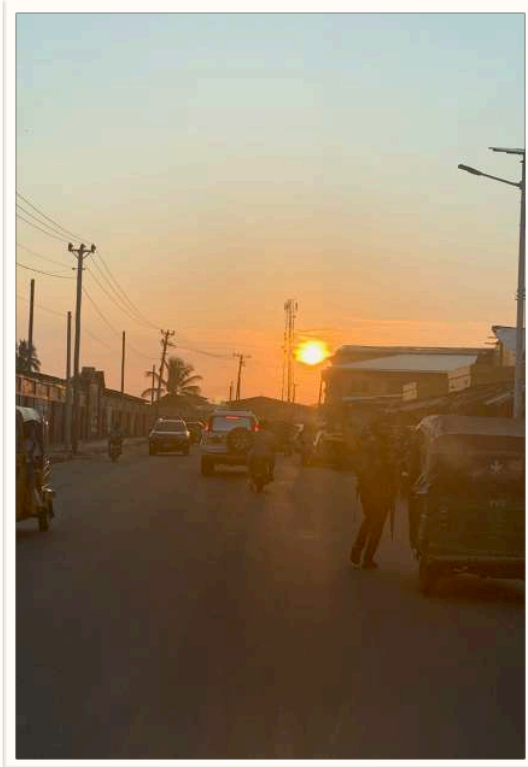


Image of sunset taken in Monrovia, Liberia by Bella Matambanadzo, 2022

Our commute from the airport moves slowly, giving us the fortune to take in the city. We meander through road work detours and are struck by the local architecture: A combination of the old rubs against sparkling new. The rubble of bombed out building shells stands in sacred memorial to Liberia's war years. Recently built government office blocks, five-star hotels and skyscrapers have risen in post-conflict reconstruction promise. It is an uncomfortable, yet forthright tribute to everything that Liberia is. The present carries the past.

A staggering 26 000 Liberian women and girls reported being raped and gang raped during the wars to the **Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission**. Children were forcibly conscripted into rebel groups. Under duress, Liberian girls were made the sex slaves of armed forces and opportunistic men. It was a crude amplification of the patriarchal violence and sexist denigration Liberian women had always experienced.

Liberian women set up emergency feminist protection mechanisms. They stood in the crevasse demanding an end to sexual atrocities, peace, truth, justice, healing and accountability. However, the peace negotiations relegated them to the sidelines. So too did the international community, which has in many ways overshadowed their local activism and

¹ We are grateful to Rudo Kamutepfa and Agnes Mamhute who assisted us with transcribing recordings of interviews.

obliterated their invaluable accomplishments.

Liberian women only got the right to vote in 1947, 100 years after they had claimed independence from America. It was a long wait for them again until 2005, when Liberia became the first country on the continent and amongst the world's few nations, to have a woman President. There are understandably unflattering interpretations about Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's failures. Why wouldn't there be? Black African women leaders the world over are very rarely assessed through a compassionate frame. Instead, they are cliff hung to take the fall for things not of their making.

Even so, the former World Bank economist and 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate's leadership disappointed and crushed Liberia's women. After the horrors they had been through, they had rightly expected more from a woman head of state – one of their own. In particular, they had imagined that a woman president would understand and respond to their pain. That a woman leader would take up and champion an aggressive anti sexual violence programme that provided survivors with comprehensive and genuine justice for the sexual and gender-based crimes committed on them during the war.

Image of writing on a wall taken in Monrovia, Liberia by Bella Matambanadzo, 2022





Image at the Medica Liberia offices in Monrovia, Liberia by Bella Matambanadzo, 2022

They had anticipated that she would open up the necessary pathways for the advancement of women’s human rights as well as the enactment of progressive legislation to end all forms of violence against women and girls. They had hoped that clinics and hospitals would show tenderness to survivors of sexual violence and that the police and courts would deploy their joint powers to hold perpetrators to account. Instead, Johnson Sirleaf sidestepped this. She led a government that lacked the political will to substantively tackle injustices against women.

Even today, Liberia’s survivors of sexual crimes and war atrocities continue to live with the pain and suffering caused by widespread sexual crimes. At a location that we cannot disclose for security reasons, we meet with a 52-year-old woman who tells us: “In 1994 I was raped by the soldier-man.

It was just me and my two-year old son. He forgot about it and it became my secret. I didn’t share it with anyone. I was ashamed.”

“I suffered alone for 20 years,” giving us credible and relatable details about what happened to her when she was 24 years old. Our hearts are crushed at the familiarity of what she tells us. Women in Zimbabwe have been through similar experiences.

“Only medica Liberia helped me,” she says reminding us that one of the most underestimated outcomes of sexual violence is isolation and lack of timely support. “I heard about medica Liberia on the radio. Then I saw their team members in my community.”

Established in 2006, medica Liberia is part of the community of feminist institutions

established in collaboration with medica mondiale to respond to post conflict recovery. The medica institutions with have a presence in conflict countries including Afghanistan, The Balkans, the Great Lakes region and other parts of the world, with its head office in Germany.

medica Liberia has established a strong network of locally run and managed feminist Counselling Centres, and Protection Networks in both urban and rural areas in Liberia. We visit those located in two out of the 12 counties of Liberia. There, we witness for ourselves how medica Liberia supports women and girls who've survived sexual and gender-based violence by providing a combination of services that are sensitive to the traumatic experiences that survivors of sexual crimes needs.



Image of a clinic in Monrovia, Liberia by Bella Matambanadzo, 2022

At the clinics, we learn that the medical officers have been trained in gender sensitive referral pathways of assistance. They offer counselling and psychological support to survivors in a way that restores the dignity of survivors and in many instances serves as a suicide prevention measure. We appreciate that part of the healing process medica Liberia offices includes ensuring that survivors have nutritious meals, transportation and new clothing. medica Liberia's staff accompany survivors through the grueling and often repetitious process of making police reports and providing evidence.

At a police station, we hear that while law enforcement officers support medica Liberia's work and are willing to do their jobs, they are hampered by a severe lack of tools and resources to investigate allegations and apprehend suspects. They are especially short of forensic equipment and DNA testing kits to process any evidence they gather. Electricity supply outside of the capital Monrovia is under 4%. Public services rely on generators to conduct automated procedures. The recent spike in global fuel prices means gasoline is a luxury.

Piped water is a rarity. Households, hospitals and clinics alike struggle to secure the requisite supply. Liberia's social institutions and public service delivery systems suffered heavy blows during the war. In these unimaginably difficult operational conditions, it falls on medica Liberia to assist survivors go through the court processes to seek accountability and justice, as well as support magistrates and court clerks with the very basic tools such as stationery. A magistrate tells us that if medica Liberia did not provide survivors with support for transport and credit for phone calls, reporting cases would be futile.



Image of Yah Parwon (left) and Caroline Bowah (right) source: media Liberia report

medica Liberia is now in its third generation of African feminist leadership, headed by Country Director Yah Parwon. She describes medica Liberia as a feminist women's rights organization which "caters to the needs of sexual and gender-based violence survivors, ensuring that the survivors get the services that are supposed to be provided for them."

No country on the African continent offers a lens into understanding the combined effects of the violent imprints of patriarchy, militarization, capitalism, religion, colonialism, racism, sexism and slavery on women and girls with quite the gradation that Liberia does.

Home to 5 million people, Liberia is today regarded as a lightweight in contemporary

international affairs because of the instability the country has experienced due to war. There is scant recognition for Liberia's radical contributions to anti-colonial struggles. Together with Ethiopia, Liberia took apartheid South Africa to the International Court of Justice in 1960 to end its illegal occupation of Namibia, then named South West Africa. Liberia continued to support demands for black majority rule in both South Africa and Zimbabwe until those countries gained their freedom. And Liberia was integral to the development of black south-south solidarity cultures that were imprinted in the hearts and minds of black revolutionary scholars Marcus Garvey and W.E.B du Bois.

The diverse ancestry of modern Liberians comes from a combination of threads.

Indigenous Liberians of the nearly three dozen local tribes have since 1822, when the United States of America colonized Liberia to establish a safe haven to resettle an estimated 15 000 freed black American slaves, lived in community with Americo-Liberians – many of whom belong to the country’s ruling and economic aristocracy. Liberians are either Christian, the main religion; or Muslim – the minority. Finding comfort, respite and hope in their faith for all the eras of tribulations that they have carried is plausible.

Liberia adopted its first ever documented constitution in 1847. Its provisions mirrored the United States one in many ways. Liberia also declared independence from American colonisation becoming Africa’s first, and therefore oldest republic. In its characteristic paternalistic arrogance, America refused to unshackle Liberia from total oppression, only recognising Liberia’s independence in 1861. And even then, America continued to hover. Using many subtle tactics of imperialism, America held onto Liberia – claiming influence over its government, mineral resources and economy ringfencing its vast extractive interests in Liberia’s timber, rubber, cocoa plantations, maritime assets and sea ports and waterways from European colonisation in the 1880s.

Liberia which means “the land of the free” has not always felt free – or safe for Liberian women and girls. National statistics show that one out of every three Liberian women has been sexually abused. Often by a man she knows. Liberia’s national health care, educational and justice infrastructure was decimated during the war. The rebuilding and reconstruction efforts have not taken into full consideration the public service or material needs of women and girls.

medica Liberia has also created economic opportunities which assist survivors of gender-based violence to develop the skills they need to be economically self-reliant. “We continue to challenge the systems that oppress women”, she explains. “Because if we don't do it, then there's no one that's going to be able to do it. The way feminists do.”



Image of Yah Parwon taken by Xanthe Nyamayedenga, 2022

Parwon was born in 1990, during Liberia’s war. Like millions of other Liberian women and girls, she lived in Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and Ghana as a refugee. She attained her first degree in Social Work *cum laude* at Liberia’s Mother Patern College of Health Sciences. She credits this path to her mother, also a social worker: “My mother always pushed me to volunteer at social welfare institutions at a very young age. She was very intentional and deliberate. It gave me interest in learning and contributing to changing my community”.

Thirty-two-year-old Parwon initially joined medica Liberia as an intern, supporting her Professor's work. It was an invaluable experience for her. She travelled to the South Eastern part of Liberia, to document the stories of Liberian women. "The work was responding to sexualized wartime violence, the violence women experienced

during the war. I would sit in the office and sometimes I would grab my stomach. It pushed me to think deeper. To understand the systems of patriarchy, power and was my moment of liberation," she says.



Image of media Liberia logo taken from medica Liberia Facebook page

medica Liberia has contributed to her feminist consciousness. Her passion and her tenacity. **"I cannot imagine what my life would be like if I didn't have a feminist lens to look through.** Feminism is important if you are in an environment where people still don't understand why women are marginalized. This is the very reason why we have to continue being feminist and taking up spaces."

At 19, Parwon had a life defining moment. "I got pregnant", she says. "My parents and everyone involved were very supportive including my daughter's father. But then they never hid the fact that they were disappointed, they had so many expectations. And I think that really pushed me to say you know what? I am pregnant,

yes. I'm going to have my baby but this does not define who I am. There are many reasons why girls get pregnant at a young age. Either because of lack of access to information or because of their socio-economic background. There are many reasons."

Parwon is not the only young Liberian whose life has been positively impacted by medica Liberia. We hear from groups of adolescent girls and boys about the supportive role that medica Liberia is playing in educating them on transforming their gender relationships with each other.



Images of clinics supported by media Liberia taken by Bella Matambanadzo, 2022

“We’ve learnt about menstruation, personal hygiene and puberty”, they tell us. The girls speak to us with refreshing confidence and openly of the education they have gained through trainings organized by medica Liberia about their reproductive rights and safety.

The boys listen respectfully without the usual chortling and shaming that happens to girls when they speak about their bodies. medica Liberia’s work is transforming previously taboo topics into healthy dialogue that boosts self-esteem. “We have learnt to stop rape. Not to violate the rights of women. In Liberia beating women is something common. We now know that we must not harass women and we must not get girls pregnant”, the boys say.

It is a terrific change of entrenched gender norms, attitudes and behaviours. Sexual violence was very common amongst boys and girls during Liberia’s wars. Adolescents were often kidnapped and forced into the military or conscripted by rebel groups. Reports say 38% of Liberian children were combatants. The atrocities that boys and girls experienced were of such a horrific nature that in the past it seemed as if developing harmonious peer relationships between Liberia’s young people was a far flung aspiration.

Parwon has a Master’s of Law in Gender, Conflict and Human Rights from Ulster University, and a Bachelor of Law from the Louis Arthur Grimes School of Law at the University of Liberia. Being a lawyer, as well as her membership of the Liberia Female Lawyers Association is no doubt a feather in her cap for her feminist leadership and agency. As is her participation in the Liberia Feminist Forum (LFF). She became medica Liberia’s Advocacy Officer, a role that required her to “engage with local and



Image of Caroline Bowah (left) and Yah Parwon (right) taken by Xanthe Nyamayedenga, 2022

national leaders to influence the development and or implementation of women rights laws and policies and organize advocacy campaigns and activities geared toward behavior change for the elimination of gender-based violence”, she explains.

Publicly naming herself a feminist takes deep courage: “The way we suffer as feminists. There is backlash, and there is a lot of ignorance around what feminism is. It can be very draining,” she explains. “The challenges [of being feminist in Liberia] are similar to the challenges feminists face around the world. But within the African context, the unique challenges that we face I would say at a personal level, labeling yourself a feminist putting it within an African setting - that constant questioning and challenge. This is nothing new, but it remains valid.”

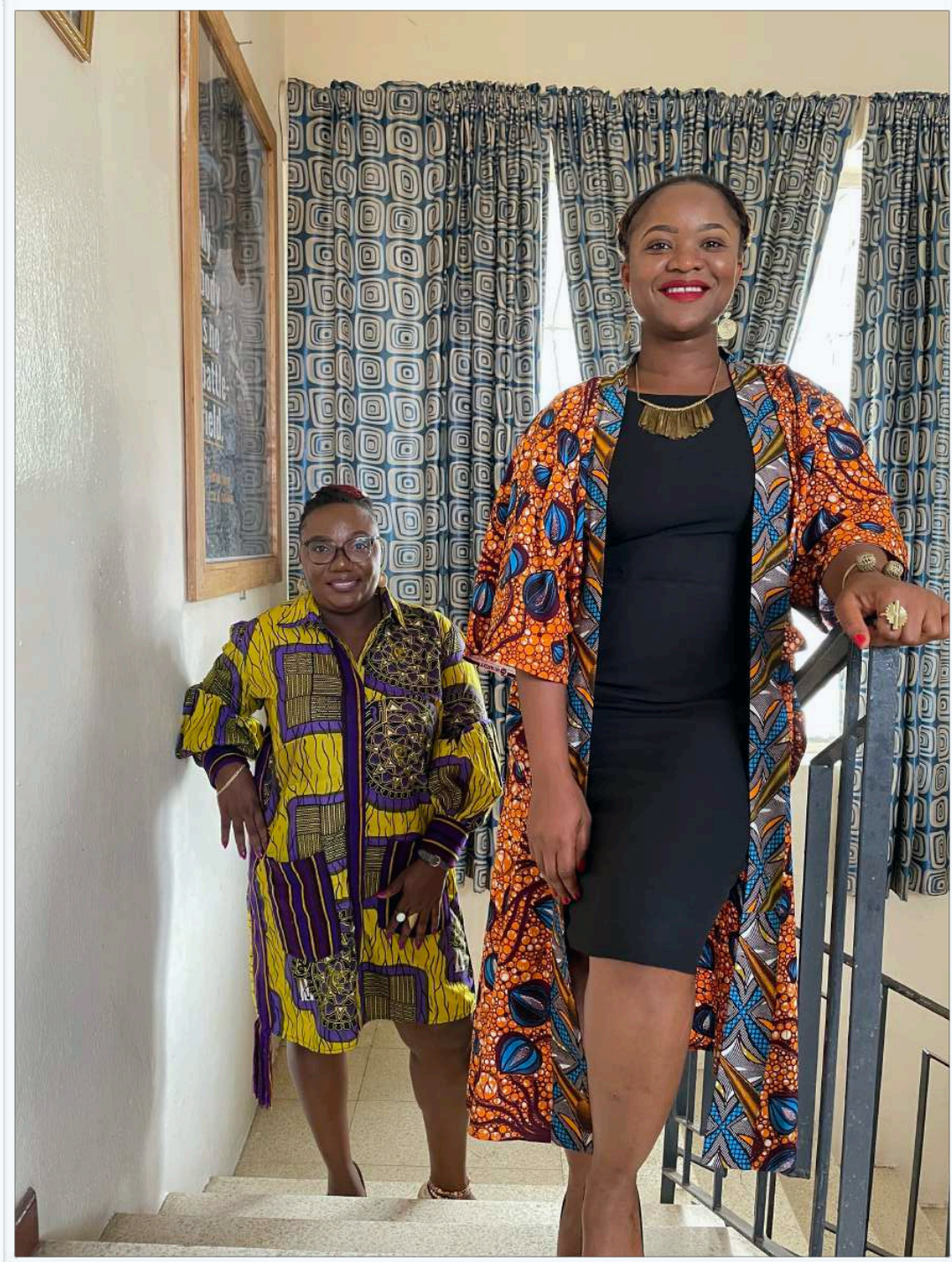


Image of Caroline Bowah (left) and Yah Parwon (right) taken by Xanthe Nyamayedenga, 2022

Even with the dangers and discouraging views about feminists, Parwon's dedication is unquestionable. "My biggest motivation, inspiration, those moments that I hold on to forever, they've all been influenced by

women in my life and they continue to inspire me. You get to a point where you reclaim your time and your energy", she tells us. "You to recognize that it is not your responsibility to educate everyone about

feminism, unless you want to have a dialogue and then you choose who to have that with. For what purpose? One of the major challenges is just the challenge of being a feminist”.

Parwon is an honest, steadfast, visionary feminist leader who knows where to direct her wisdom and intellect. She speaks endearingly about how feminism has taught her about the centrality of self-care. “One of the blessings of the feminist movement is I try to practice self-care in multiple ways. I have a very good support system, from my family to my work environment. But there's also the fact that it is challenging to play multiple roles. To head an institution, being a parent and I also co-found other women’s organizations. I've been able to contextualize what self-care means for me. What are the things that I can easily do to prevent burn out”.

Not everyone approves of feminist organizing. The evidence of the assassination of feminist leaders is there for all to see. “Working in a feminist organization has its own challenges. When you go out and represent feminist organizations, they don’t want feminists in those spaces”, says Parwon. **“But the greatest thing is to constantly remind yourself that I'm a feminist. Full stop. And get into those spaces in a strategic way. It can be really hard and painful sometimes if you have to constantly say no! I'm a feminist.”**

It’s clear to us that Parwon is not just one to offer empty words. She follows her own wisdom with authenticity: “Step out of your comfort zone,” she advises younger women. “That’s such a big thing for me to do. And every time I do it, I recognize that those fears were never because I'm

incapable. It’s just because I'm entering new territory”.

She sparkles, a little mischievously, when she thinks of this, adding “You build those friendships. They're never leave you, it’s not perfect you know, we're all human beings. But I just find so much joy and peace in having healthy relationships with the women in my life, my friends, my sister, older sisters. Just sort of keep that energy without burning out”.



Image of Yah Parwon (left) and Caroline Bowah (right) taken by Xanthe Nyamayedenga, 2022

Beyond medica Liberia, Parwon has been active in various social initiatives. In 2015 Parwon was a Hansen Summer Institute Fellow. In 2017 she was a Nobel Women’s Initiative Sister-To-Sister Mentorship Program Fellow. She’s the Co-Founder of Rising Youth Mentorship Initiative a non-profit organization. She’s keen to study further and has plans to make her PhD ambitions a reality in the next five years. “I

definitely want to get a PhD at some point. I definitely want to travel around Africa.”

Parwon credits her feminist leadership perspicacity to the lifetime of feminist mentorship, friendship and support that she’s been sure of: “The sort of feminist mentorship and guidance that nourish me, to first of all know the power, the labor, the love in my work came from a certain generation that has impacted my generation and created space for us to take on leadership and lead. I understand my role and responsibility to the feminist movement is to also create space for those behind you. For us to be able to lead, we have to be able to recognize those that came before us. It’s not that easy to call yourself a feminist or African feminist, but we can do that because of the generations before us”.

A Chevening scholar, Parwon says being an effective leader entails making the effort to “find and keep good mentors. People that you can always reach out to be able to get guidance”.

On hearing this, Parwon’s mentor and former supervisor, Caroline Bowah, cannot conceal her pride. “She had what the organization needed. Whether it was a 100% perfect didn’t matter. We needed someone with feminist values and who would ensure that things do not fall apart”.

A Liberian feminist leader and human rights activist, 47-year old Bowah was medical Liberia’s second generation of feminist leader. She was born and raised in rural Liberia to a family that was determined to ensure that she would overcome the poverty and suffering that persecuted them. She was 14 years old when the war broke out: mature enough to be both a reliable witness offering detailed testimony

and a resolute memory holder, an unyielding survivor.

Like Parwon, she was also a refugee in the countries neighbouring Liberia. “It was a tough experience. I had a hard life. There were many difficulties,” recalls Bowah.



Image of Caroline Bowah taken by Xanthe Nyamayedenga, 2022

Bowah’s intelligence, integrity and steadfastness, coupled with her guts and reliability caught the eyes of her early employers. She was hired on teams that worked extensively on security sector reforms in the Mano River region, focusing mainly on Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. Her work has contributed to transforming the police and army forces in the region so that they integrate gender sensitive approaches to their responsibilities and understand the importance of being peace makers, keepers rather than belligerents.

“Most of my feminist work was in the areas of peacebuilding, security sector reform, gender and transitional justice,” she explains. “Even in normal situations, we are always fighting to be seen. We are fighting to be heard.”

Bowah has a Bachelor’s degree in Economics from the University of Liberia. She was a student in Uganda where she studied for her Master’s degree in Economic Policy Management from Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda and

often lectures at the University of Liberia’s Economics Department.

Bowah led medica Liberia for 11 years. She attributes her successful feminist mentorship skills to re-modelling, refining and replicating how she was supported and mentored by older feminist leaders when she was a young feminist. “People think I am a magician. I am just giving back what I learnt from how people treated me. I had Anu. I had Joanna. I learnt so much from those women. They taught me that when it



Image of Yah Parwon (left) and Caroline Bowah (right) taken by Xanthe Nyamayedenga, 2022

comes to work, I must deliver. I must get results. That's what I have passed on".

Bowah steered medica Liberia through the Ebola crisis and the more recent Covid19 emergency. "When we have conflict and crisis, women's issues become invisible," Bowah explains recalling that during the pandemics pregnant women and sexual and gender-based violence survivors could not access timely and sufficient health care services.



Image of a poster taken by Bella Matambanadzo, 2022

Parwon and Bowah have jointly worked through one of the most inspiring feminist leadership transitions we have witnessed. She remembers that, "There is a picture of the two of us. It was taken in 2013 when we were celebrating medica mondiale's 20th anniversary. Yah and I are standing together. That picture meant something because it was also used on the cover of our 2013 Annual Report."

"I think we have to put in the work to get to where we want to be. Mentorship is like planting trees. You can plant multiple seeds and give them everything. Some will grow and others won't grow." Bowah's leadership handover to Parwon has been a well thought through and stable feminist power transfer and handover process. "I knew that one day I would leave. I had an exit plan. I took part in a five-year feminist leadership programme. We would meet for one week a year over a five-year period and plan where we were going."

Bowah, who has served on Liberia's Board of Directors of the National Bureau of Veteran Affairs, an agency established to support the welfare of former members of the Armed Forces of Liberia understands the importance of ensuring that feminist organizational governance is sturdy. "As feminist leaders, the odds are always against us. Our communities need us and our organisations need us. Our families need us. We work with very small resources. We try to nurture, give feedback and it is up to them to decide what they want to do. Everything comes from having feminist values. As feminists we understand that we need to build organizational systems that are strong and make it easy to delegate and share the workload"

Bowah was mentored by South African feminist scholar and activist, Dr Anu Pillay, medica Liberia's founding Country Director and a technical expert to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Together, they witnessed and contributed to as well as shepherded the efforts of Liberian women and feminists to have dialogue, get healing and justice for war time crimes.

From this, Liberia has made a seismic contribution to women's human rights and global jurisprudence. Though this is often

down-played, the West African country not only extradited its powerful former head of state President Charles Taylor, took him to court and testimonies from women and girls who had survived the war contributed to his imprisonment for gross human rights violations. The tragic and unjust experiences of Liberian women during the war have left an indelible contribution to the legal definition for and interpretation of rape.

The experiences of Liberian women and girls have influenced the emergence of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009) and 1889 (2009) - all of which deal with different aspects of women, peace and security. They recognise the impacts war on women and girls.

The advances in Liberia for women's rights have not come easily. Liberian feminists and women's rights advocates have consistently had to demand that donors and their governments avail the financial resources promised to women's rights organisations at the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China.

"My Ma, she's very tough", Saah, our driver says of Bowah with admiration as he skillfully navigates through the honey bee yellow buzz of **PePe** motorbikes and **KeKe** three-wheeler automated tri-cycles that ferry passengers to their destinations. Liberia is anything but monochromatic. From the peppery flavours of its lip-smackingly indigenous cuisine to the creative genius of its couture, both held preciously in the hands and memories of the country's women - Liberia offers incomparable range and intrigue.



Image of Mr Saah taken by Bella Matambanadzo, 2022

As she bids farewell to medica Liberia, Bowah will spend her time with her sons, working on her farm and continue to be a feminist community leader and organizer. She has built that Kwalo Yie-Peeah, a wellness, healing and retreat center for feminist human rights defenders "Kwalo Yie-Peeah is my mother's language, Gio. It means women getting together to fish.

What inspired me is both personal and professional. From my experience of over 10 years working with women and girls survivors of violence and also in terms of issues women face in Liberia, we have seen some gaps, we have seen some opportunities and also I think responding to the lack of safe space for women and girls, we thought that it was important to have a structure. It started with one idea, I come from a very difficult past. I thought okay, now that I am starting clean, I can do something positive so we started up with a piece of land and then slowly it started to grow and this is where we are now".



Bowah explains “Kwalo Yie-Peeah is a project that is close to 8 years of work, building the structure. Of course, we have had difficulties in terms of construction but also you know the funding to make this possible. My vision and my dream are to respond to us, activists because in most cases we are responding to the external communities, we are responding to women and girls outside but not our own health, our own mental health, our own physical health but hopefully we will be able to provide some services for women’s rights activists as well as other members of the community who might be in

need for some safe space to take some time off work, take some time to break.”

We walk together barefoot on the beach, in the way that women building feminist friendships and sisterhood do. Bowah bends and picks up a shell. She points out at the north Atlantic ocean and beams: **“It’s going to be beautiful”**.



Image of Xanthe Nyamayedenga (left), Bella Matambanadzo (centre) and Rungano Muchetu (right)

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