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## IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA

Liberia / USA 2007 - 76 minutes

Free Screening – HRWIFF Education Programme 2008

The Ritzy cinema, Monday 17 March, 10.15am

For students of Citizenship, Geography, Politics, Film & Media, Sociology

### Why see this documentary?

- Witness the inner workings of a government at its highest level, as filmmakers are given unprecedented behind the scenes access.
- Witness how the first woman elected president in Africa overcomes significant challenges in attempt to gain the respect and trust of her people and bring about real change.
- Consider an optimistic future for Liberia, a country whose infrastructure has been devastated by the conflict and political instability typical of many African states.
- Gain an awareness of Liberia's political history and learn about the long-term economic and social impacts of corrupt governments.
- Consider the implication of gender in politics and whether or not men and women have different strengths as leaders.

### A real Story Happening Right now

"As a journalist I have a responsibility to be neutral" explains Siatta Scott Johnson, speaking to the camera in the opening scenes of IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA. But it is easy to see that Siatta is thrilled at the prospect of living, as a woman, in the first African country to have a female elected president "I am a woman, and I know this is my time".

It is January 2006 and Siatta is in her homeland Liberia making a documentary about the newly elected female President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Liberia is a country that has been wrecked by civil war for over 14 years, and its people are long overdue a change for the better. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has just been voted into power as Africa's first elected female president of state and she begins her work by appointing a team of fellow women leaders in top positions, including Police Chief and ministers of Justice, commerce and finance.

As we are taken behind the scenes for an exclusive up close look at government operations a constant state of flux between optimism and frustration is unveiled. There is no doubt that this new government has more zest and determination than any of its predecessors, but the obstacles they face are significant. They have inherited a country with 90% unemployment, a shattered infrastructure, widespread corruption and seemingly insurmountable levels of international debt.

The film follows Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf throughout her first year in office, inviting viewers to ask the same questions that are on the minds of many Liberians; what will it take for Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf



and her government to rebuild this devastated nation? Will the new female leaders really act that differently to their male predecessors? Are women intrinsically better suited to healing the rifts necessary to preserve peace? And, can change happen rapidly enough to starve off more armed conflict?

**We hope that filmmaker Siatta Scott Johnson will be able to join us at The Ritzy after the HRWIFF education screening.**

### **Who made this film and Why?**

In January 2006 US Filmmaker Daniel Junge was granted access to film coverage of the newly elected president of Liberia for a maximum of two weeks. He and producer Henry Ansbacher thought the footage might make for an interesting short film. One year and 500 tapes later, with the help of co-director of Liberian journalist Siatta Scott Johnson, they realised that what they really had was the makings of an important feature length documentary.

Daniel Junge attended film school at New York University. Since graduation Junge has worked in the Los Angeles, New York, and London film/television industries as an assistant director, assistant editor, researcher, and production assistant. In 2003 Junge was named as one of the 25 up-and-coming filmmakers and has been involved in the production of several award winning documentaries. Junge regularly teaches at the Colorado College and University of Colorado. He is creative director for Just Media, a non-profit production company dedicated to social justice, the environment, and education.

Co-Director Siatta Scott-Johnson was born in Buchanan, Liberia, 1974, and raised in rural Grand Bassa County. She has five years of experience as a reporter and producer at DCTV, one of Liberia's few broadcast television stations, and is a founding member of Omuahtee Africa Media. IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA is the first film Siatta Scott-Johnson's first has directed.

### **Questions to consider before the screening**

- Liberia borders with Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire and sits on the coast of West Africa. All of these countries have experienced political unrest and conflict in recent history. What can you find about the recent history and current situation in each of these countries. Research invasion, civil war, political leaders, religion, ethnicity and the ongoing presence and role of NATO.
- Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is the first elected woman president in Africa. Where else in the world have women been appointed to presidency roles and what can you find out about them? Can you identify similarities in their leadership styles? Research and consider the famous UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as a comparison.
- During the making of this film the filmmakers were given an unusually free rein to film government meetings and events that would ordinarily be off limits. Why do you think President Johnson-Sirleaf allowed this? What benefits or problems might this exposure bring to President Johnson-Sirleaf / the people of Liberia / people in the western world?
- At the start of the film Siatta Scott-Johnson states that, as a journalist, she has a responsibility to be neutral. Do you think she and co-director Daniel B Gold have achieved this? When considering the four main types of documentary - expository, observational, interactive and reflective - how would you categorise this film?

## Further reading and Research

**IRON LADIES OF LIBERIA website:** [www.whydemocracy.net/film/8](http://www.whydemocracy.net/film/8)

**Teaching resources/ ideas for taking action:**

[www.pbs.org/independentlens/ironladies/getinvolved.html](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/ironladies/getinvolved.html)

**Denver Post interview with Daniel Junge:**

[www.huntalternatives.org/download/894\\_11\\_15\\_07\\_liberia\\_s\\_iron\\_ladies\\_forge\\_nation\\_s\\_recovery.pdf](http://www.huntalternatives.org/download/894_11_15_07_liberia_s_iron_ladies_forge_nation_s_recovery.pdf)

**BBC Radio World Service interview with President Johnson-Sirleaf**

[www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/924\\_interview\\_archiv/page14.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/924_interview_archiv/page14.shtml)

**Liberia Country Profile:** [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country\\_profiles/1043500.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1043500.stm)

**General information on Liberia:** [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberia)

**Human Rights Watch work in Liberia:** [hrw.org/doc/?t=africa&c=liberi](http://hrw.org/doc/?t=africa&c=liberi)