



“But things are coming small small,
that’s how we’re seeing it”

Agency of a Liberian Women’s Organisation in a Context of Insecurity, Scarcity, and Uncertainty

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Young men
transporting fresh
water into
West Point.

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Introduction

Where a state's performance is weak, as in a post-conflict setting, non-state actors may take initiatives and provide goods and services or regulate their provision. This paper attempts to give insights into the activities of the *West Point Women for Health and Development Organization*,¹ quite an extraordinary group of women in a precarious Monrovia community.

Liberia enjoys a certain level of peace and reconstruction, but a large proportion of Liberians is struggling through the aftermath of the conflict which is manifested in economic and social crisis, and the weakness of the state. The everyday life of social actors is characterised by insecurity, scarcity, and uncertainty. These intricacies are even more challenging in West Point, one of the biggest informal settlements² of Monrovia. It is affected by scarce infrastructure such as the lack of sanitation and other public and common goods, mainly because of its dense population. In addition, West Point is stigmatised as a space of violence, especially gender-based violence. In the context of the war-peace continuum, gender-based violence increased. This contribution concentrates on the agency of social actors in such a context: how do local actors evaluate the setting they live in and how do they shape it under the condition of scarce resources? Which actors do they turn to in order to gain access to public services, state or non-state actors? The main aim of the empirical case study on the West Point Women for Health and Development Organization is to depict how such processes can look like: a few women formed a self-help organisation to tackle these complex problems, and their agency does have an impact in a space where the state seems to fail to secure the provision of common and public goods, and, in fact, is hardly present.

The empirical data was collected in a period of one year between October 2009 and March 2011. Ethnographic field research has been conducted in urban and peri-urban Liberia.³ The methodological basis for this paper is a number of interviews,⁴ group discussions, informal conversations, as well as observation of and participation in events by and with the West Point Women. In addition, a number of interviews were conducted with other residents of West Point, non-state actors such as NGOs and network organisations, as well as state actors relevant to the topic such as the police, Ministry of Youth and Sports, or politicians. Lastly, the opinion of other urban dwellers about West Point complements the various perspectives. The research applied an actor-oriented approach in a war-peace continuum, looking at their agency in the midst of uncertainty, constraints and a rapidly changing post-conflict environment.

1 They are often referred to as the *West Point Women*.

2 See discussion on the notions of the "informal" on page 12 and "settlements" on page 10.

3 This paper is part of an ongoing research project that started in June 2009. This is a Swiss National Science Foundation funded project with the title "The Work of State Imageries: How Imageries of Governance and the State Constitute Everyday Practice in Conflict Affected West Africa".

4 Note that quoted texts are mostly "Liberian English" expressions and style. Liberian English is a term to describe the various forms of English that required, at least at the beginning, some translation aid by my research assistant.

The first part of the paper introduces the conceptual framework, and highlights the understanding of state(weakness) and agency in order to conceptually embed the case study. The second part gives a brief insight into women's agency in the war-peace continuum, as it influences present-day agency of the actors. The third and central part concentrates on the precarious context of West Point, and the West Point Women's agency. As Fuest (2009:116–118) states, Liberian society is highly complex regarding social differentiation and division, and, I would add, with regard to its historical configuration. In this article, hence, only a minor aspect of a community in the enormous capital city can be highlighted.

Conceptual Framework: State and Agency

Scholarly debates on African states have been manifold, however, more often than not, they were based on deficiency-oriented perspectives and concepts. Applying a state-centered point of departure, many African states are seen as failing states (Rotberg 2003), collapsed states (Zartman 1995), shadow states (Reno 1998), quasi-states (Jackson 1990), para-statehood (von Trotha 2000) or simply incomplete states. These concepts do not provide a constructive framework for new forms of statehood in a post-conflict setting of (re)construction, as African states have come into being under different circumstances than the Westphalian model state. 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. Little empirical research has been conducted on these construction processes especially in regions affected by conflict, where local institutions and international organisations are taking over tasks that are formally part of the state and where the boundaries between state and non-state institutions are blurred (i.e. Blundo/Olivier de Sardan 2006). Public authority is exercised and experienced through several layers of institutions and realms: local institutions such as the council of elders coexist and negotiate their interests with governmental institutions; associations and non-governmental organisations wield public authority as well (Jung/Schlichte/Siegelberg 2003: 147). Researchers have to look at which institutions the population sees as part of the state and which ones not. The notion of a “weak” or “precarious” state depict the situation and circumstances of a post-conflict transforming state like Liberia more suitably. Drawing on the definition of Förster (2009: 324), precarious statehood can be understood as the deficiency of the state in areas such as security, judiciary, administration or social welfare. The delivery and regulation of public and common goods such as security or the provision and distribution of health services is commonly attributed to the realm of a delivery state.⁵ In the case of state weakness, these tasks may be taken over and carried out by non-state actors.⁶ But this 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 (Bellagamba/Klute 2008: 11). Non-state actors contribute to regulating or providing goods and services, form protests towards the state or find other ways of public articulation, which will be depicted in the present case study on the *West Point Women*. The autonomy of such groups is frequently questioned, as they can be influenced by the state or international donors in the context of peacebuilding, where strengthening the civil society⁷ composes a core focus (Harbeson 1994: 10, 286; Makumbe 1998: 311). Though international donors play an important role for the local organisations, I agree with Ellis and van Kessel (2009: 5) that local actors should not be seen simply as passive receivers, but as actors that find ways of combining donors’ interests and their own. They may adopt notions such as vulnerability or gender-based violence in order to

- 5 Basically, public goods and services are non-rivalrous and non-excludable, such as national security or the national broadcasting system. Common goods are non-excludable but rivalrous, as the consumption by one person reduces the amount available for the next person. These goods require provision and/or regulation. For further information, see Coase 1960, Olson 1985, or Reisman 1990.
- 6 The notion of non-state actor comprises all actors that are not the state and not governmental. It summarises in one category the great variety of such actors of civil society, NGOs, international organisations and companies, to name a few (Peters/Koechlin/Fenner Zinkernagel 2009: 14).
- 7 Civil society, though an interesting perspective to analyse the relationship of state and non-state actors is loaded with challenges. For debates on civil society, see Neubert (2010), Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), or Makumbe (1998).

formulate or strengthen a common claim, as the case study will show. This, though, goes in line with the concept of agency, which I adopt from Emirbayer and Mische (1998:970) who define it as *the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational context of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations*. Though three different, temporal elements, all components can be found in one empirical instance of action. The *habitual* component refers to past patterns of thought and action which contribute to stability and order. *Imagination* draws upon the capacity of actors to imagine future possibilities, which may be creatively reconfigured in hopes, fears or desires for the future. The last component refers to the present evaluation capacity to make practical and normative *judgements* among various trajectories of action. All aspects of agency are thus considered agentic, in the sense that actors are considered capable of shaping their own responsiveness to problematic situations. Consequently, actors find ways to cope with a given situation, and apply (tactical) agency even in most limited situations (Utas 2003:23), due to the fact that pre-established habits and institutions are constantly reorganised and reconstituted by the actors (Emirbayer/Mische 1998:969 referring to Joas 1996; Förster/Koechlin 2011:7). Creativity is referred to as the *change* in preestablished habitual, socially or culturally bound intentions, which provides new avenues for agency (Förster/Koechlin 2011:7). This understanding of agency with three temporal elements provides a conceptual background to analyze the women's organisation and their specific agency in a challenging environment.

Agency of Women in a War-Peace Continuum

Liberian women gained international attention in the recent context of the conflict.⁸ Their endeavour for peace grew to a visible and powerful movement that shaped the peace process (Moran/Pitcher 2004, Schaefer 2008 or Fuest 2009). In February 2011, the Liberian Women for Peace gathered in a public space to pray, sing and dance for peace in Côte d'Ivoire. In the aftermath⁹ of the Liberian conflict, women and women-lead NGOs are not only part of wider networks but pursue women's interests on grassroots' levels. Women, as other actors, have to cope with an environment of economic and social intricacies, as they tend to children and care for their families, the sick and the elder. The workload may increase due to the unemployment or absence of men. These factors can challenge marital relations (Obrist 2006:92). According to Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen (2001), gender relations undergo transformations during a conflict. During the Liberian conflict, men had to hide in their homes to avoid being recruited or killed by warring factions, while women took over new roles as providers or protectors. As mentioned above, women started to engage in the peace process¹⁰ soon after the beginning of the war, but these activities exposed them even more, and they had to find

8 For further information about the conflict, interested readers are referred to Stephen Ellis (2007), Mary Moran (2006), Mats Utas (2003, 2005b), or the Liberian TRC Report (2009).

9 However, in order to include the consequences of the war in peaceful times, Richards (2005) or Utas (2003) speak of a war-peace continuum.

10 Documentary: Fork Films (2008). Pray the Devil back to Hell.



Women's organisations meet to celebrate the International Women's Day.

new ways of coping with situations that were challenging to evaluate and respond to. A woman explained that due to their daily exposure while looking for food, they developed courage (26.05.2010). To some extent, these challenges became part of daily life to them. Though these women call it *normality*, they did not accept this level of violence, and differentiate between the perceived normality and stability of the pre-war arrangements and daily routines, which are in Liberia widely referred to as the *normal days*¹¹ (cf. Förster 2009: 329, Turshen 2001: 79). Hence, depicting women in the war-peace continuum as passive or victims would be incomplete and wrong. There exist a number of accounts of women joining the warring factions and acting as perpetrators during the conflict, including applying sexual violence (Utas 2003, Schaefer 2008). Nevertheless, it is a fact that a large part of the female population experienced sexual violence, during the conflict and still does today. Sexual and gender-based violence are prevalent in a conflict and post-conflict setting. Human Rights Watch confirm that *[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 2010, cf. Meintjes 2001: 4).¹² Women, as organisations, movements or individuals have played visible and meaningful roles in recent Liberian history and politics. This changing situation has opened up new possibilities for women; President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf or Ruth Perry¹³ show that women can obtain leading positions, and large international women's organisations such as MARWOPNET,¹⁴ WANEP¹⁵ or WIPNET¹⁶ gained vast public attention (Fuest 2009, Schaefer 2008).

- 11 What Liberians call *normal days* is seen as the pre-war period, more especially referring to the living standards including reliable electricity and health services, availability of consumer goods to affordable prices. These *good old days* may be idealised; however, they contrast the current situation of precariousness.
- 12 Human Rights Watch on Liberia. <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/87679> (17.08.2010).
- 13 Perry was interim President of Liberia from 1996 to 1997. Both female leaders had enjoyed higher education and were in leading position of banks and government before (cf. Johnson Sirleaf 2009: 209).
- 14 Mano River Women's Peace Network. <http://www.marwopnet.org/> (31.08.2010).
- 15 West Africa Network for Peacebuilding. <http://www.wanep.org/wanep/> (31.08.2010).
- 16 Women in Peacebuilding Program. <http://www.gnwp.org/members/wipnet> (31.08.2010).

Since the beginning of the conflict and until today, Liberia has experienced a strong growth in women's organisations and power through their joint effort to tackle complex problems. Not only did they play an important role in the peace process, as stated above, but also in self-help and in response to social problems in the aftermath of the conflict. They have been providing support for orphans and widows, built up marketing associations or various forms of saving clubs or vocational skills training and thereby empowering women and children (Moran/Pitcher 2004, Fuest 2009).

However, women's organisations such as saving clubs or religious groups have a history beyond the conflict and not only in Liberia, as Moran (1990) describes. But new forms such as the Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia (AFELL) have grown more powerful and successful in shaping the political landscape. They pushed the passing of a rape law, turning rape into a non-bailable crime and reforming the inheritance law in favour of women's rights.¹⁷ A special court was dedicated to cases of sexual violence.¹⁸ After the conflict, many international and national organisations are providing educational and training programmes on various topics ranging from vocational training to peace building and human rights.¹⁹ Religious institutions, specifically the Interfaith Council or the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, promoted justice and human rights in 1990 (Sawyer 2005: 71, 82). Until today, various workshops, documentations as well as radio programmes address a wide range of people with the aim of educating and creating awareness. UNIFEM for instance provides training for female politicians in rights, public speech or campaigning (Interview with a female politician, 26.05.2010).

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has made powerful efforts for the women in Liberia, also in a symbolical way of being a strong leading figure at the head of the state. Implementing these new ideas and new standards seems to remain one of the biggest challenges on an institutional level to the present government. Many Liberians state that they enjoy *no more gun sound*, but most of the root causes of the conflict were not resolved and reconciled, hence around 8000 UN peace keepers are in charge of national security.²⁰ Seven years after the Accra Peace Agreement was signed in 2003, Liberia still experiences a severe economic and social crisis, and many people criticise the performance of the government.²¹ Most of the international companies had left the country and many local industries were destroyed during the conflict, leading the country into an economic crisis. Due to the precarious services and infrastructures such as running water and electricity, road network, lacking law and order, many international investors have not returned yet. The reconstruction of the private sector in Liberia is slow, and so is the process of job creation. The majority of Liberians lives in precarious conditions, having lost their livelihoods during the war and are now eager to reconstruct what many call a *decent life*, a standard of life collectively remembered from the *normal days*. Social crisis in this context may describe the many problems people face living

17 Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) (2008: 89, 146).

18 <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=87122> (26.08.2010).

19 U.S. Department of State. Liberia Human Rights Report (2009).
<http://www.state.gov/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/af/135961.htm> (24.04.2010).

20 These will remain in Liberia until after the 2011 elections (Security Council 21st progress report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia, 11.08.2010).

21 It is widely discussed that the government should have massive income from international concession agreements, taxation of companies, and international donors. For example, the president stated in her 2011 annual message that the federal bank has over 200Mio USD in reserves. Liberians see that this is money that could be allocated for such goods and services. The issue will still need to be analysed in a broader context.

together in fragmented families, lack of trust,²² and the presence of violence in everyday life. Though the social and the economic spheres are interrelated, they can constitute two different problems in addition to a third, combined one: betrayal and suspicion are said to have been a threat to life for a long period of time, and affects the social and individual understanding of trust, reliability and other values remarkably, even towards family members and friends. As in many other conflict contexts, torture, murder and other atrocities served as a means to dislink newly recruited fighters from their social context (Schaefer 2008: 186).

Local actors explain that the conflict has caused severe damages not only in physical structures but also to their minds and attitudes.²³ At the same time, social order and social institutions are shaped by the growing impact of (new) religious activities, or the international organisations' education and awareness efforts regarding 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 norms and values in an ongoing shaping process. As some actors may be confused about past habits and norms,²⁴ others, in a reorientation process, may see new possibilities.

The reports of the media on corruption, misuse of funds in government and disagreements and disputes in the political realm lead to heated debates in public sphere, contrasted to the high expectations and imageries of a strong leader that should be able to, literally, *get us out of darkness*,²⁵ an image fuelled by the perceived weak performance of state institutions and public services. The weak state struggles to address the most acute problems, and its practices are constantly negotiated in the public. A *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) was set up, and has by 2009 presented a detailed and explicit report including recommendations towards dealing with the conflict and its perpetrators and supporters. This report however is highly contested and the recommendations have, to date, not been implemented. It seems as if it has caused an additional factor of division to the Liberian society. One of the most critical issues is the list of identified perpetrators in the war.²⁶

In addition, the government has elaborated a *Poverty Reduction Strategy*²⁷ (PRS) in collaboration with the IMF and other international organisations. It includes a number of detailed measures to reduce poverty and other social issues that had fuelled the conflict. International organisations are strongly present, not only visibly in central Monrovia or in the media, but actively involved in peace- and state building processes, humanitarian aid projects and collaborations with local organisations. A large number of national NGOs, especially those led by women, receive (start up) funding from international organisations.

22 Trust in a post-conflict society is topic of another research project of the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Basel. <http://www.unibas-ethno.ch/forschung/forschungsprojekte/trust.php> (31.08.2010).

23 They draw on a quotation by Dr. Lawrence Bropleh, former minister of information, calling Liberians to change their minds and attitudes in his keynote speech at the International Women's Day celebration in Bensonville (08.03.2010).

24 Referring to *normal days*, even if they were not always so good.

25 During mid-2010, the University of Liberia only had few hours of electricity per day, and students were complaining.

26 The report includes a list of persons to be excluded from public office. As it includes a number of government officials, politicians and other renowned personalities, it is questioned if an implementation would be feasible.

27 <http://www.liftliberia.gov.lr/> (24.08.2010).

The United Nations and other international organisations are extensively involved in the peacebuilding process, including support of the state in re-building the security sector of Liberia together with the US and other nations. The general level of security is improving, according to the statement of Police Inspector Marc Amblard (Interview in *The Informer*, 08.07.2010). The crime rate is declining significantly as compared to the previous year. He states that the general crime rate has fallen by 57%; crimes like mob violence, rape and minor corruption cases have declined in rate as well, though not that significantly. Drug possession cases have increased, which is explained as a result of increased and more professional police activity. The discourse within the police shows that the police are improving; the opinion of the ordinary people about the police is still ambivalent. The police are not working as well as before the conflict, but live on past glory, as ordinary people put it.



Imageries of the past next to newly renovated buildings.

Living the Precarious City

Monrovia, the heart of centralised government and politics is also the space inhabited by more than a third of the Liberian population of about 3,5 Mio. The local actors are actively and creatively attempting to appropriate the rapid changes, always hoping for new opportunities to improve their livelihoods. Post-conflict Monrovia is constantly being shaped and reshaped. Very much in the sense of Simone (2005:3), Monrovia is, in a physical sense, static and dynamic at the same time: old constructions next to new ones, and changes can take place rapidly while on the other hand, the ruins of the True Whig Party²⁸ and damaged buildings constructed by President Samuel K. Doe are imageries of the county's ambivalent past.

The Lebanese community is building up fancy commercial stores and shopping centres, the Chinese are involved in the construction of roads and buildings in central Monrovia. The glitter and glass of Nigerian and Liberian banks and insurance companies give the central parts a glamorous touch. The physical appearance of the city is hardly recognisable for those who knew the capital before the conflict. It seems as if a race against time started. Within days,²⁹ roads are re-built; daily or weekly, public transportation ran new routes, and new forms of transportation appeared, leading the local actors to navigate an additional dimension of scarce public transportation means and petty business locations. In the same period, the central Monrovia *Waterside Market* that connects the city centre to West Point got visibly less populated, and the biggest market of Monrovia, the *Red Light Market*,³⁰ some kilometers off the centre, turned from crowded to overcrowded. Many local actors stated that Red Light Market is better for business, maybe due to its location as a link to the countryside.

Rules and norms³¹ are shaped and reshaped on all levels. The statement of the confusing *new* Human Rights above showed that in a changing environment Liberians constantly have to reevaluate the present condition and adapt their agency according to these changes. As an example, the idea of *new Human Rights* opens new perspectives of actors in a post-conflict environment of peacebuilding and reconstruction, as the case study will show. The legal sector is evaluated with suspicion and not really trusted. It is said to be corrupt and only working for the rich, a perception that roots in the history of elite rule of the long history of elite rule and domination.³² Hence, mob justice was a common means to overcome criminals.

28 The True Whig Party is Liberia's oldest party and dominated Liberian politics from 1869 until 1980. This political era is often referred to as a One-Party State.

29 During the period of field research between October 2009 and March 2011.

30 The name does not refer to an area renowned for prostitution, but rather to a traffic light that had been there before the war.

31 Social norms as well as solidarity in a war-peace continuum is a complex topic and will require a debate beyond the scope of this paper.

32 The elite were said to be part of Free Masons. The judges and lawyers, being part of the elite themselves, were also part of the Free Masons. For this reasons, many interviewees have stated, a native Liberian had no chance to win a case against a member of the elite, even in clear cases. Then, the case was repeatedly "delayed". Some informants think that these societies are still existent and influence the outcomes of cases. However, the question has to be asked if the local population understands the works of a judiciary. Could it be that for instance bails and bonds are perceived as corruption by actors who are not familiar with legal language and practices?

Looking back into the history of the city, it is astonishing that the number of inhabitants grew from less than half a Million in 1984, before the conflict, to over 1 Million in 2008,³³ creating a challenge to the infrastructures, and the people. An average household includes eight persons, resulting in a vast majority sharing a bedroom with at least two or more persons.³⁴ The urban growth started in the late 1950ies (Liebenow 1987:158). A first stimulus of migration was caused by the *open-door policy* of President Tubman, attracting international companies and fostering the development of the Freeport, which led to a migration from the hinterland of Liberia to the urban centres (Lacy/Owusu 1988). The phase of strong economic development created an increase in highly paid job opportunities. At the same time, unemployment grew massively due to the increase of uneducated migrants from the countryside. A later stimulus of migration was the newly constructed roads by President Tolbert which provided access to education and employment opportunities for "hinterlanders" in the capital (Liebenow 1987:163). During the conflict, many people fled into neighbouring countries, the United States – or into the capital. A large number of interviewees stated that the war brought them to Monrovia. Already in the early 1980ies, facilities such as electricity, water, and sewage systems were challenged by the rapid growth of Monrovia, especially in low income communities such as West Point.

Due to its location on a peninsula between the city centre and the Freeport of Monrovia, West Point is exposed to hazards such as floods. It is situated between the Mesurado River and the Atlantic Ocean and lies only minimally above sea level. As it is composed of government owned land, the inhabitants of West Point are referred to as squatters. Today's population is estimated at 50,000–75,000 inhabitants, according to different statistics and statements of residents, and it is visible that the community is very densely populated. It is often referred to as one of the rather poor neighbourhoods of low or no cash income,³⁵ and is often quoted 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 say much about the degree to which such conditions prevail, these points all strongly apply to West Point. However, in a capital city like Monrovia after a long and destructive conflict, many parts of the city are run down and densely populated due to internal migration, and many communities lack infrastructure. Hence, many parts of the city could be characterised as *slums*; however, they differ greatly from each other regarding social or economic structure and infrastructures.³⁶ The inhabitants never used the notion slum in reference to their neighbourhood. In general, the residents call it simply West Point, or community. Non-residents also mostly refer to it simply as West Point; the name incorporates the characteristics of the area as being notorious and dangerous. I will hence refer to it simply as West Point, and its inhabitants as *Westpointers*, as they sometimes call themselves.

33 Census 1984 and 2008 (<http://www.lisgis.org> 01.06.2011).

34 UN Habitat/Global Urban Observatory 2003. The Liberian 2008 Population and Housing Report states that an average household consists of 5.4 persons in Montserrado county. However, most of the urban and peri-urban households are very densely populated.

35 There exist many forms of non-monetary income that generate a livelihood. Examples will be given below.

36 Other notions such as Squatters, Ghettos or Township have specific connotations and stand for certain contexts.

In fact, as many Non-Westpointers state, West Point is located in one of the most beautiful places of Monrovia, where other cities would construct recreational structures. This urban residential area was not object of any visible efforts of administrative planning and development activities. Also, the living conditions, infrastructure and services are limited. The first impression of West Point are the rusted corrugated iron sheets. Water is being transported by man-power from outside West Point from as far as Vai Town, because the wells are said to be salty. Bathrooms and other sanitation facilities are scarce and dirty. This hence leaves the local population with no alternative than to use the beach or the river, which adds to the existing hygiene- and health risks.

Plans by the National Housing Authority (NHA) were created to relocate the inhabitants to another part of Monrovia by constructing low-income estates in 1969, but the plans failed because of two simple reasons: not only were the rents of the low-income estates higher than those in West Point,³⁷ but the main source of income in West Point is fishery, and because the estates were constructed on the in-country side of Monrovia, namely the Stephen Tolbert Estate, they were no useful alternative to the Westpointers who largely depend on fishing industry. To date, there are constant rumours about the resettlement of Westpointers that in fact never been concretely implemented or planned. As a result, not much is being invested in the improvement of structures and living conditions, out of fear that the land could be drawn back by the government any time, which has happened to other, smaller squatter areas of Monrovia in the recent past.

West Point, or *old Kru Town*, as it was formerly called, was one of the few parts of Monrovia that originally were inhabited by people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Formerly, mainly Kru and Grebo people were occupying the peninsula, the Kru especially because of their economic specialisation in the fishing business. In addition, Monrovia's Fanti fishermen, originating from Ghana, have settled in that part of Monrovia. Today, many other ethnic groups and nationals such as the Fulani from Guinea are represented. The different ethnic groups are not living in separated compounds or communities. As various informants, inhabitants of West Point as well as other experts stated, there are no tensions along ethnic or religious lines. This is explained by the fact that people live very closely together and consider each other as *brothers*, as a result that people interact and live so jammed together. Intermarriages are said to be common. However, the term marriage needs to be specified. Many people cannot afford to get married officially, and *plastic bag marriages*, meaning dating a person and taking some things in a bag along for the night, is common and socially accepted. In West Point, a majority of children are born in such relationships, which, in contrast to the plastic bag marriage, can create problems, as will be explained shortly. West Point's notoriety is based upon a high crime rate, and, especially in the post conflict context, prevalent gender-based violence. Local actors evaluate these as the consequences of a loose society, as a young woman 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* (05.03.2010). An elderly woman assesses that the West Point youth would be *just sitting around there, doing nothing, and at the end of the day, you see them getting involved into a whole lot of activities* (05.03.2010).

37 Some residents rent out some rooms and hence make a living as landlords. However, the land belongs to the government, and the inhabitants have no legal tenure.

According to statistics by the youth empowerment office of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the teenage pregnancy rate in Liberia is at 68% (interview of 20.04.2010). Young mothers face bigger difficulties of sustaining themselves and the child if the father is not willing or capable to support the young family, as they are often not in a position to sustain themselves and hence depend on family members. Some might even drop out of school. Un- or underemployment³⁸ is not an exception in this part of town, and especially young people find it difficult to sustain themselves economically. Astonishingly, and unlike the classical definition of a slum would lead to assume, the opportunities to make fast money in West Point are many, as the population of consumers is dense and fisheries provide goods to be processed and sold. But the main problem of the area remains the high level of violence. This is not a typical post-conflict symptom but has been prevalent since the 1980ies, says the vice president of the West Point Women who recalls those days: *[I]t 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* (31.03.2010). Hence, in the past as well as today, the state has failed to provide basic infrastructure and services such as sanitation or security to this precarious community. Governmental and non-governmental institutions are not as present and active as compared to other areas in Monrovia or rural Liberia which are dotted with signboards of governmental institutions, NGOs, International and Faithbased Organisations. There are a number of religious institutions, however, mainly Islamic institutions and Pentecostal churches; and the only clinic in West Point is lead by the Liberian Catholic Church. The clinic is overburdened, and it does not have an ambulance to transport emergencies to a hospital.

West Point has one police station and a magistrate court; hence, the capacities and resources of the security and justice providers are limited (cf. Schaefer 2008:209). Some interviewees evaluate the general justice and security services as unreliable, and state that the police as well as inhabitants rely on local security providers such as community members or youth watch teams for protection. *Mob justice* had been common also in West Point, however, these cases are said to have been reduced, and the local actors prefer to catch criminals and take them to the police depot.

Why does West Point remain home of these actors under the condition of insecurity, scarcity and uncertainty? Some actors do have the means and opportunities to move, and some had moved out before, but returned after a while. Against all odds, many interview partners state that this community offers manifold prospects as compared to others: business opportunities, especially in the fishery, are ample and provide a certain revenue per day. Other petty businesses are attractive, as the dense population needs to be supplied with consumer goods and entertainment. Expenses for housing and transportation remain low, as residents are in walking distance to the big *Waterside market*, or employment opportunities in central Monrovia or the Freeport (Lacy/Owusu 1988:228). As mentioned above, according to the evaluation of the local actors, there hardly exist any major tensions between ethnic groups and religious beliefs; they

38 Formal employment, especially by the government is though much desired as it would create stability through a regular, reliable income, but the formal sector as employer is vanishingly low. The division between formal and informal is questioned, as the formal sector is not strong and most activities Liberians live on are informal. Most actors find cash or in kind income in other ways (see also Roitman 2004 or Chabal/Daloz 1999).

are said to coexist well and tolerate each other. In addition, tensions and fear within neighbours and family members are relatively low: accusations of creating intentional harm such as witchcraft or poisoning, as compared to other parts of Monrovia, are hardly existent in West Point. During the interviews and review of cases at the office of the West Point Women, indeed such events were never mentioned.

Hence, the major threat to society according to the evaluation by the West Point Women is said to be violence, especially gender-based violence. They have identified a major cause as well: the women's lack of knowledge of their rights, and hence, lack of women's empowerment.³⁹ The influence of the large women's movements for peace or other national and international actor's impact in peace building and human rights awareness evidently did not stop at the boundaries of West Point.



A group of members of the West Point Women on the upper floor of their office, where night school takes place.

39 What leads a man to act with violence is an issue that will be analysed elsewhere. Of course there are many factors that lead to gender-based violence, such as unemployment, economic hardship, drug and alcohol abuse and other social problems. Many men stated in the interviews that they should in fact be the breadwinners but they feel that there is nothing they can do.

The West Point Women for Health and Development Organization (WPHD)

A few women assembled in 2002 and decided to contribute to a change of the living conditions of women in the neighbourhood. During the evenings, they met at a school and decided to form an organisation they named the West Point Women for Health and Development Organization (WPHD). Mostly, they are referred to as West Point Women.

The vice president of the organisation explains that there are two interrelated reasons that lead to the founding of the organisation: *West Point Women for Health and Development Organization was founded by the concerned women of West Point (...). And West Point (...) has a very bad reputation. And we thought it wise that we too can live in a society of good people. Because before we find out that when you tell people like these (strangers) to come to West Point, they be afraid. People will feel that by the time they enter the street of West Point, their bags will be jacked or somebody will stab them; and people used to be afraid. Number two, the main reason for forming the organisation: our children were being raped too much. Our women were being abused, brutalised. And, when they raped somebody, people were compromising too much. And we find out our children are our future (02.02.2010).* According to her evaluation, the neighbourhood was and still is stigmatised and Liberians obviously believe that nothing good can come out of West Point, as a politician originating from West Point states: *... [If you find the Westpointers today (...) let me put it this way: most of them, they feel rejected, that people [outside West Point] don't like them (26.05.2010).*

Aim of the group was to change and improve the living conditions of women and children in West Point. As a result of their evaluation, this meant to respond to the key problems by empowering and educating the women, especially regarding human rights. They started by fighting for basic rights and at the same time educating women's rights, as one of the West Point Women's members explains: *... for Liberia, people felt long ago*

[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 (31.03.2010).



West Point Women at the International Women's Day 2011

After a few first gatherings, and a fast growing number of new members, the women decided to hold elections and structure their endeavour.⁴⁰ They elected a president, a vice president, a secretary, a chaplain, a treasurer, a public relations officer and a gender-based violence officer. Bylaws and a constitution were brought to paper, and formal accreditation and an article of incorporation were organised. In addition, a bank account was opened. Originally, the organisation was self-funded by contributions of each member during the weekly meetings. The majority of the members have limited resources due to their economic condition, the housework load and other obligations that make it difficult to participate actively and regularly. If needed, however, they find the means to join, even with their limited resources. The weekly contributions of the West Point Women members were said to be sufficient to pay the expenditures for the most important cases they pursue, especially paying transportation to the hospital and the bills for treatment. All work is voluntary and hence unpaid; each member sustains herself from selling fish or other products, party catering, family or church work or other activities.

After the first persistent pursuit of a rape case which was successful, they had attracted the attention of AFELL, who thereafter began to assist the group and organised a workshop in West Point, at which more than 1000 persons participated. One thing led to another, the impact of the West Point Women attracted a number of other women, and the organisation grew quite fast in membership. Today, they consist of more than 150 members, of which a core of 30 members are involved in most activities. However, if needed, for example for fundraising, campaigning or demonstrations, most of the passive members will participate. Membership is open; and the group represents different ethnic, religious, social and backgrounds, educational levels and age groups. Only recently, in 2010, a few men joined the organisation, and, according to the president, they collaborate well with the women. She adds that men are important partners as they have more influence and access to men involved in cases, for example in issues regarding violent men.⁴¹ However, the men are mostly referred to as partners, and not members.

The West Point Women received attention by a few international organisations such as Oxfam and the IRC. In 2010, *globalgiving* created a fundraising web page for the West Point Women,⁴² which has generated additional attention for example by the *philanthropics*,⁴³ and provided a quite high amount of funding in late 2010 and early 2011. These changes may challenge the solidarity of the group, as their growing attention has attracted international donors. International funds open up new capacities and possibilities to the group; however, they also provide a testing ground for in-group solidarity and altruism: will the interests and aims of the group and its members change with the new incentives? In case of a specific agenda of international donors, will the group find a way to combine the internal and external goals and interests?

40 In 1998, the Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL) was founded with the aim of coordinating the women's NGOs in Liberia, building their capacities and connecting them with international donors, according to the executive director of WONGOSOL (03.03.2011). I assume that the formal structure of the West Point is linked to this effort; however, apart from the division of tasks and responsibilities among the West Point Women's members, these structures were not visible in their actions nor play a role in the conversations or interviews.

41 Only in mid-2010, men joined the organisation; 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.

42 <http://www.globalgiving.org/projects/support-for-the-west-point-women-in-liberia> (31.08.2010).

43 The organisation was referred to as such, the name and aim of the organisation is not clear to the author.

So far, national and international organisations had been ambivalent actors in their view: the group had received in kind support in form of education, knowledge or materials, and they profit from the coordination effort of these organisations. On the other hand, they had always wished to receive financial donations or concrete support such as a vehicle or ambulance for West Point. Rather than that, they had received a generator and a computer, the use of which was not evident to the group at first. In addition, they explain that so many national and international individuals or NGOs had contacted the West Point Women, took interviews, pictures and time, made promises, but never returned. The West Point Women did not see the practical benefit they would get from these meetings, as they are all struggling to make a living in difficult circumstances, and hence often see such meetings as being in vain. Large events such as the International Women's Day 2011, where thousands of women and women's organisations took part, create a level of excitement and change to the everyday routine. But again, the West Point Women had an ambivalent opinion about the event as the vice president said disappointedly: she felt that they were only invited to contribute to a large appearance; they had no active part, and in addition, for technical reasons, one could not hear what was said by the *big people there*. Earlier, she had stated that the West Point Women would celebrate their own Women's Day in the community.

Apart from international actors, the organisation continues to expect some level of appreciation by the Liberian government, not necessarily monetary, so they say, but for example support for their claims. They feel that, in fact, they are filling a gap of missing public goods and services such as transportation of injured persons, access to medical services, and legal support or security. Much had been promised in the campaigns of the 2005 elections, but they feel that government has forgotten about them. The president has visited West Point in September 2010, and had promised to build the roads, under the condition that the West Point inhabitants create the space to do so. Public appeals and complaint are useful tools to generate attention regarding the lack of means and hence, can be applied as a form of fundraising. Part of the West Point Women's intention is to create public awareness of their needs.

The members of the organisation are diverse, but they have in common that they are all women⁴⁴ – mothers, sisters, wives – and have the same goal: to reduce sexual and gender-based violence. There are two influences that strengthened coherence and solidarity within the group⁴⁵: being directly or indirectly affected by gender-based violence, and secondly, the history and shared experience of reshaping the role of women during and after the conflict. Experiences of the past, the image of strong women supporting their families during the conflict and their engagement for peace are said to have encouraged the women's agency.

The West Point Women decided to make an effort to jointly address these complex problems. The major interest and aim of the group, as stated above, is to create an environment of improved security to their children and women. The experienced threat to society seems to be the consequences of the *loose society*, hence resonating a fear of loss of norms and values. These consequences are seen as the result of parents who do not care about their children and youth properly, and leave them without control and guidance. This "looseness" is manifested in the high prevalence of teenage pregnancy or the excessive consumption of films and games in the various video clubs by their

44 And for the male partners of the West Point Women, they share solidarity as husbands, fathers or partners.

45 Solidarity is often normative and in reality may be challenged. The British Social Anthropology has drawn a lot of attention to this topic, however, in a war-peace continuum it is a more complex and complicated issue that will require further analysis beyond the scope of this paper (see also footnote 31).

youth and children. So the West Point Women, in addition to their core activities around gender-based violence, also address these problems and create awareness. Due to their awareness programmes, counselling, mediating, advocating and educating activities in human rights, gender-based violence reduced in West Point, according to interviewee's experiences and observations, as well as statements by local security personnel. The organisation can hence be seen as a contributor to the process of (re-)generating social order in the community. The inhabitants of West point are aware of their activities and consider the group as one of the active groups in West Point that influence the living conditions. In the following, the range of activities the women address will be looked at more closely.

Women Fighting Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Human rights provided a new tool and valuable capacity to the West Point Women: it has provided a useful approach to fight gender-based violence. As this section shows how they tackle the problem, it also clearly shows the influence of an international discourse in the use of language and concepts, such as *gender-based violence* or even *awareness*, which are adopted and adapted according to their interest and use.

Today, there are still frequent cases of rape of women and minors even though the government and international organisations have implemented a number of measurements to address this problem, such as the rape law mentioned above that specified rape as a criminal act, or the Women and Child Protection Section that was implemented in collaboration with UNICEF to strengthen the Liberian National Police regarding such delicate cases.⁴⁶ Nationwide, rape is rampantly high, however, according to a police officer of the Women and Child Protection Section of the Liberian National Police in West Point, rape cases have decreased in the community: *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 least, it's decreasing* (05.03.2010). Before, victims did not report their cases, out of fear, shame or other personal reasons. In other cases, parents and perpetrators were compromising aiming at covering the perpetrator and hiding the case. These were some of the cases that drew attention to the West Point Women. Today, rape cases are reported more frequently, to the satisfaction of the police.

Still, sexual and gender-based violence create emergencies in West Point. These cases are very severe and delicate to deal with, because they include more than one person, and if it results in a pregnancy, a child's future. The goal to reduce sexual and gender-based violence does not in all cases mean that seeking formal justice is the best solution. For many cases, even some cases of rape of minors, for example, the aim is not to have the perpetrator jailed. More importantly, according to the police as well as the West Point Women, is a pragmatic solution to each individual case, as for instance if a young girl gets pregnant: by mediating 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 so that the child is catered to and the girl can continue her education. The police officer goes on explaining: *[W]e are there to protect the child. If you say, if this case is persistent non-support, and we try to hold the man for rape, who will support*

46 <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=77406>, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/liberia_2513.html, cf. Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS 2008: 54). Due to its declaration as a crime and broad awareness, cases are reported more frequently. So raising statistics and decreasing cases reported by the police officer does not necessarily contradict each other: In an absolute sense, cases raise in the statistics, while relatively, they are decreasing.

Women's organisations raising awareness through role-play.



the child? That child will remain vulnerable. So we try to drop the rape side, and at least look at the persistent support first. That is, we try to talk to the man. But we will tell him, we will tell them what it means, we tell him, you have raped this girl, she was under the statutory age, you didn't supposed to do so (05.03.2010). Is this consistent with their aim of reducing gender-based violence? The West Point Women say yes, the first cases they pursued persistently, where formal justice was done and the perpetrator was imprisoned, had a signalling effect. However, their approach differs from case to case: at times, the aim is to have the perpetrator punished, yet in another case, a different solution is envisaged, as will be shown below. What they want to avoid in any case is that a rape case is compromised or concealed. This is why the West Point Women consider awareness as one of the most important part of their activities.

They show a picture of a young woman that was seriously injured by her ex-boyfriend. In such cases, the women first take the case to the hospital, where the wounded person is treated. X-rays, photos 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. A frequent problem the West Point Women address is the abandonment of women and children. For various reasons men leave their women, which can be precarious if the woman has small children or is a young mother. Because of vast migration during the conflict, women and men of different regions or even countries formed relationships, and due to their distant relatives and family members, especially mothers lack important family and hence, social security ties. As a majority cannot afford to marry, many have children and live together as fiancées or in loose relationships. There are cases where men and/or their relatives take the children from the woman, or even her belongings. The West Point Women recall one of the first cases: *... the first person we had to send back home when the man brought her and neglected her, it was one Freetown (Sierra Leonean) woman they call Hawa. And we had to look for transportation, I think 6000,⁴⁷ and send her back home (31.03.2010).* Again, in many cases,

47 Liberian Dollars, which is equivalent to 80USD.

the West Point Women try to mediate between two partners to find a better solution for both. Often, disputes and violence root in misunderstandings, as the West Point Women explain, which can be resolved quite easily. They create awareness and teach the women as well as men how to handle a difficult situation. And, last but not least, they give psychological support by encouraging and comforting the ill-treated person.

Advocating for Education, Human Rights and Health

The aim of the women is to achieve better living conditions in West Point. A major tool thereby is the awareness of human rights: by educating the women, they learn about their rights and hence get empowered. According to the West Point Women's experiences, an educated woman knows her rights, which affects her agency by providing novel possibilities of action. Violence and abuse should be reported and not kept secret by the woman, so they say. Therefore, empowerment and knowledge is considered crucial for a woman's wellbeing.

Together or with the support of other organisations such as the International Rescue Committee (ICR), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), or Oxfam, and from the government side the Ministry of Gender and Youth and Sports, educational workshops for women and girls are organised. The national and international NGOs and government institutions also conduct workshops for women's organisations about certain social or health topics like soap making. The women then transmit knowledge into their communities, as the West Point Women create workshops or awareness within the area. These educational activities range from informal discussions with other women about human rights, on topics such as female genital mutilation, purification of water and other health and social issues. Recently, the West Point Women opened a night school for women to fight women's illiteracy in the community. This was made possible through funds by online fundraising.

Health risks are prevalent in West Point, especially for women and children. Provision as well as regulation is lacking: latrines and bathrooms are scarce and not properly taken care of, and the water of the public wells is not clean. The government latrine right behind the West Point Women's building causes serious problems, as it smells bad and at times floods and spills out over the nearby football field. Hence, it causes serious health problem to the community, and more especially to the children that play on the field in the evenings. In July 2010, the West Point Women had planned a demonstration to the Capitol Hill⁴⁸ to have the latrine removed. By February 2011, the government had repaired the latrine.

As one of the encouragements of government, they receive funding to clean up the community. They regularly take a broom and sweep the streets of West Point. This is in fact their most visible activity, according to statements by other residents.

Welfare Actors

The West Point Women's growing impact and reputation starts to create some challenges to them, as they are being contacted for and involved into various topics of welfare and social problems in the area. Since there is no public institution addressing these social problems, they are evaluated as alternative actors capable of stepping in and resolving challenges: *... usually, the people tell you that so many things are going on in this*

48 The Capitol Hill is the centre of government, where the Executive Mansion, the House of Parliament and the Temple of Justice are located.

community. *People just feel, we [the WP Women] have to handle that, ok?* (16.02.2011), a statement of the president of the West Point Women indicating that they are perceived as welfare actors in the community.

The case of an old, sick former soldier without family network was exemplary. One night, the man was found laying outside the West Point Women's office. He had been taken from the local authority to the police, back and forth for some time. The West Point Women had been monitoring the case, as they are aware of what's going on in the community ... *that morning, I think the day before I was going somewhere, then I saw the man in the wheelbarrow. They carried him to one house, across there [direction of the Freeport], they said that's where his family people were. They carried him laying down in the wheelbarrow. But then the next morning, I got up, the people said, they carried one man, I said "where?" That's how we came, we met the man lying down here. Then, I said, "Oh! That's the same man I saw lying in the wheelbarrow!" Then the man started explaining how the chief, the town chief, the chief for the... (Another woman adds: the government), for the Grand Kru people there, because that's a Grand Geddeh village man, said that the chief put him in the wheelbarrow, carrying him on this side. So from one to the other – the people them, the chief, drag him and brought him here (someone laughs). So we couldn't do anything about it. But then, I asked him whether he has somebody, he said yes* (16.02.2011).

The group at first did not agree to take care of the case, for they knew that this will have a signalling effect, besides, they are already burdened with gender-based violence cases. However, as neither the police nor other authorities took the responsibility, they decided to arrange bathing, feeding and clothing of the person and tried to find contacts of family members. The West Point Women know the community well and were able to trace a son's contact in Asia.⁴⁹ This way, they were able to shift the responsibility back to the family network of the man. Such cases are challenges to the group, as their own resources are limited, but at the same time, residents have begun to expect the West Point Women to respond to these problems. However, they find ways to handle these, as both the individual agency of the members as well as their social agency has changed. The habits, judgement and imagination of the actors have been transformed in many ways, and are underpinned by a repertoire of experiences and networks they can draw on to find a solution to each specific case.

Action Towards the State

The West Point Women are not only organised and structured within their community. They are also registered member of the national Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia WONGOSOL.

WONGOSOL coordinates activities of NGOs and as an example connects donors with organisations. As part of a national women's network, large-scale events such as the International Women's day or awareness marches are organised. Some of the West Point Women had participated at the Capitol Hill when the rape law or the inheritance law was discussed in parliament.⁵⁰

49 Tracing family members in such cases is a familiar practice not only in Liberia. However, many Liberians fled the country during the conflict and hence, family ties exist to many parts of the world.

50 The West Point Women as part of the Liberian women's movement has been highlighted elsewhere (Kaufmann 2011, forthcoming).



A large, street-filling march through Monrovia.

Other, smaller events are organised within West Point, and at times in collaboration with INGOs or the Ministry of Gender and Development. The form of event depends on the audience to be addressed, and the aim. Marching means a joint action mostly for general awareness topics, executed by the group walking through the main streets of the community or capital in similar clothing, mostly white, printed T-Shirts displaying sponsor logos, and importantly, holding banners with the motto of the event. Some of the mottos were for example: *WISE Women Working Together To Stop Violence, 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*.⁵¹ Verbal statements and songs in chorus underline the movement. People along the pavement often halt and watch the group passing by, or even join the group for a while.

Depending on the size of the group, the traffic gets blocked. The audience is watching and listening attentively and often actively takes part in the demonstration by supporting the group with acknowledging statements or by criticizing loudly. These forms of demonstrations are not only literally a collective action by a group, but also a dialogue with the audience of the street. Sometimes, media follow and report on the event.

Other activities of the West Point Women are addressed to the politicians, such as the march the group planned to get help for the latrine that causes more damage than benefit to the community. They were planning an action to demonstrate at the house of parliament, not on the streets. Generally, these demonstrations are constructive: they have a clear message and express it to the politicians. These actions are peaceful and attract other people to watch or join. They do not cause riots or other forms of excesses.

Another form is seeking a dialogue with state actors in government, such as the district representative. The group is in direct contact with the representative and inter-

51 As stated before, the influence of international actors and activities is strong and becomes visible in these mottos. They are not unique to Liberia.

acts with her on a regular basis. The agency of the West Point Women has created awareness for their needs, and have had certain successes, for example they have received a building to use as their office by the government. In addition, they have successfully raised attention to the urgently needed ambulance in West Point, which has been promised by the representative. The representative assured that this is an issue she will address in the near future. However, by February 2011 the community had not received the ambulance, and the emergencies are still pushed by wheelbarrow to the next taxi stand. The representative is burdened by high expectations, which, she says, state actors cannot fulfill due to the lack of knowledge and capacities. However, the West Point Women know that they have mobilizing power within the community and are aware that when elections come near, they will be able to make a strong claim as they are a densely populated community and constituency.

Conclusion

The type of agency developed by the organisation is an example of how state and non-state actors can complement and work towards an improvement in a community. Unlike many other groups in Liberia that mainly exist on signboards and focus on fundraising from international donors with vague ideas and slogans, the West Point Women act on a grassroots level. The group's initiatives interestingly address the state's institutions by assisting them and cooperating with them. This means legitimacy of the state, its actors and institutions exists, especially in the context of the above presented examples. However, the group feels they have to approach the state actors actively and directly, and insist on rights and services they deserve. As shown above, state institutions such as the police, the court, the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Gender and Development are some of the most important targets of the West Point Women. Alternatively, they could have also supported 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 group's efforts and claims for West Point do not constitute an opposition to the state, but they assess the state as a solution to their social problems and main provider for their needs. Even though the organisation has a considerable impact and they are aware of it, they share an implicit understanding that it is the state that should redistribute public goods. And although their activities open up new possibilities and solutions to the area and now even start to create income to the group, the women attribute these tasks to the realm of state actors.

NGOs and international organisations are ambivalent actors in their view, and the West Point Women would expect them to respond to their needs, especially regarding financial support or the ambulance. Many organisations came and talked to the West Point Women, took interviews and time, and made promises, but most of them never returned. However, if the group starts to receive external funding, they might have to face the challenge of bridging the interests of the global donors with their own. External funding will serve as a test of the in-group solidarity regarding the interest of the organisation's members.

The West Point Women work towards the state and its actors by means of physical presence, clear messages and firm claims to lobby for their needs. They not only claim infrastructure and services from the state, but, as an additional tool, address or hold res-

possible a specific state actor as for instance the representative of the district. They have 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 complain that they suffer from these groups, because the latter hold them responsible and hence, put them under pressure. Not responding to needs of a community can quickly damage the state actor's reputation simply by rumours, and, in case of a parliamentarian for example, endanger his or her re-election. Parliamentarians, on the other hand, try to react by informing the non-state actors about their duties, but also about the rights and duties of a citizen and voter.

In these interactions we observe an interesting collaboration and constant articulation process between state and non-state actors. The mutual shaping 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 effective agency of the West Point Women. The police for example see and recognise the achievements of the group, however, they also suffer from limited resources and capacities. Before, people addressed various problems and incidences directly to the police, who were already limited. Due to successful mediation and conflict management, a lot of cases can be resolved by the West Point Women without the involvement of the police. 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. Service providers such as the police are benefiting due to the collaboration, as the local actors have a wider outreach and impact, and hence, the police officers personal security increases.

Interestingly, in the organisation's view, the state is seen as having a solution to all problems, at least theoretically. It *could* provide security, electricity, running water, social welfare or an improved road network. They consider the Liberian government does simply not do enough, and it is not understandable for many informants in West Point why the government seems to neglect 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 their needs.

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