



ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF  
PRESIDENTIAL CENTER FOR  
WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

# Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

## First Female President of Liberia & Nobel Peace Laureate

Internationally known as “Africa’s Iron Lady,” Nobel Laureate Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is a leading promoter of freedom, peace, justice, women’s empowerment and democratic rule. As Africa’s first democratically-elected female head of state, she led Liberia through reconciliation and recovery following the nation’s decade-long civil war, as well as the Ebola Crisis, winning international acclaim for achieving economic, social, and political change. Recognized as a global leader for women’s empowerment, President Sirleaf was awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize for Peace in 2011. She is the recipient of The Presidential Medal of Freedom – the United States’ highest civilian award – for her personal courage and unwavering commitment to expanding freedom and improving the lives of Africans. Her many honors also include the Grand Croix of the Légion d’Honneur, France’s highest public distinction, and being named one of Forbes’s “100 Most Powerful Women in the World.”

In 2017, former President Sirleaf was the first female recipient of the Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership, which celebrates excellence in African leadership. The Ibrahim Prize recognizes African leaders who, during their time in office, have developed their countries, strengthened democracy and human rights for the shared benefit of their people, and advanced sustainable development.

President Sirleaf was elected President of the Republic of Liberia in 2005, two years after the nation’s bloody civil war ended. Her historic inauguration as Africa’s first democratically elected head of state took place on January 16, 2006. Prior to the election, she had served in the transitional government, where she chaired the Governance Reform Commission and led the country’s anti-corruption reform. She won reelection in November 2011.

During her two terms as president, Johnson Sirleaf focused on rebuilding the country, attracting over \$16 billion in foreign direct investment. She also attracted more than \$5million in private resources to rebuild schools, clinics and markets, and fund scholarships for capacity building. She successfully negotiated \$4.6 billion in external debt forgiveness and the lifting of UN trade sanctions, which allowed Liberia to once again access international markets. She increased the national budget from \$80 million in 2006 to over \$672 million in 2012, with an annual GDP growth rate of more than 7%.

Over a twelve-month term, beginning in June 2016, President Sirleaf served as the first female Chairperson of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In May 2012, she was appointed co-chair of the United Nations Secretary General's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The panel is tasked with crafting a roadmap for global recovery and sustainable development.

President Sirleaf began her career in the Treasury Department in Liberia in 1965. In 1979, she rose to the position of Minister of Finance and introduced measures to curb the mismanagement of government finances. After the 1980 military coup d'état, she became president of the Liberian Bank for Development and Investment, but fled Liberia that same year, escaping an increasingly suppressive military government. Johnson Sirleaf has also served as vice president of Citicorp's Africa regional office in Nairobi, as a senior loan officer at the World Bank, and as a vice president for Equator Bank.

Prior to her first campaign for the presidency, Johnson Sirleaf served as assistant administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and as director of its Regional Bureau of Africa, with the rank of assistant secretary-general of the United Nations, a post she resigned from to contest the 1997 presidential elections. After coming in second, she went into self-imposed exile in neighboring Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). While in exile, she established a venture capital vehicle for African entrepreneurs and founded Measuagoon, a Liberian community development NGO.

President Sirleaf has been awarded honorary doctorates by more than 15 institutions, including: Tilburg University (Netherlands), the Nigerian Defence Academy, the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Harvard University, Rutgers University, Yale University, Georgetown University, the University of Abeokuta (Nigeria), the University of Minnesota, Furman University of South Carolina, Brown University, Indiana University, Dartmouth College, Concordia University, Langston University, Spelman College and Marquette University.

In addition to her Nobel Prize, President Sirleaf is the recipient of numerous honors, including: the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace Disarmament and Development (2012), the African Gender Award (2011), Friend of the Media Award (2010), FUECH Grand Cross Award (2009), FAO's CERES Medal (2008), Golden Plate Award (2008), International Women's Leadership Award (2008), International Crisis Group Fred Cuny Award for the Prevention of Deadly Crisis (2008); James and Eunice K. Matthews Bridge Building Award (2008), American Academy of Achievement Golden Plate Award (2008), National Civil Rights Museum Annual Freedom Award (2007), National Democratic Institute Harriman Award (2007), Bishop T. Walker Humanitarian Award (2007), Gold Medal of the President of the Italian Republic (2006), Africa Prize for Leadership for the Sustainable End of Hunger (2006), National Reconciliation Award (2006), International Woman of the Year (2006), and International Republican Institute Freedom Award (2006).

President Sirleaf has been ranked among the top 100 most powerful women in the world (Forbes, 2012), the most powerful woman in Africa (Forbes Africa, 2011), one of six "Women of the Year" (Glamour, 2010), among the 10 best leaders in the world (Newsweek, 2010) and top 10 female leaders (TIME, 2010). In 2010, The Economist called her "the best President the country has ever had."

Born Ellen Eugenia Johnson, President Sirleaf is the granddaughter of a traditional chief of renown in western Liberia and a market woman from the southeast. U.S. educated, she holds a master's in public administration (MPA) from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. She also earned a degree in accounting at Madison Business College in Wisconsin and received a diploma from the University of Colorado's Economics Institute.

President Sirleaf has written widely on financial, development and human rights issues, and in 2008 she published her critically acclaimed memoir, *This Child Will Be Great*. She is the proud mother of four sons and grandmother of 12.