

# Equal Power— Lasting Peace

Liberia.  
The custodians  
of peace.



Equal Power – Lasting Peace  
Obstacles for women's participation  
in peace processes

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# intro duc tion

**H**ow are transitions made from war to peace? Who has the power to build peace? Who decides what peace should entail? Peace matters to everyone living in conflict regions, so who decides the content of that peace?

*Equal Power – Lasting Peace* is a study about women’s participation in peace processes and the particular challenges of building a gender equal peace after a violent conflict. *Equal Power – Lasting Peace* explores obstacles to women’s participation in peace and democracy processes, in regions affected by armed conflict. The report addresses the gaps between words and practice in peace building by gathering experience and knowledge from 79 female peace workers in five different contexts: Armenia/Azerbaijan/Nagorno Karabakh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, DR Congo, Iraq and Liberia. They have a wealth of concrete experience of how exclusion manifests in practice

and how windows of opportunity may open. The aim of *Equal Power – Lasting Peace* is to investigate the intimate connection between gender, power and peace and in addition contribute to a better understanding of the power gaps that prevent women from participating in peace processes.

Summaries of the five conflicts/post-conflicts have been produced, based on the study *Equal Power – Lasting Peace*. This brochure addresses the topic “Liberia. The custodians of peace.”

For the complete study of *Equal Power – Lasting Peace*, please visit [www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org](http://www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org)

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4.1

Population of Liberia in millions  
(The state of world population 2011, UNPFA)

40%

Percentage of Christians in Liberia  
(Some sources claim 70% Christians)

40%

Percentage of indigenous religions in Liberia

20%

Percentage of Muslims in Liberia

990

Maternity mortality per 100.000 live births in Liberia

60.8%

Literacy rate in Liberia (Age 15 and above, 2009 UNESCO)



Liberia is a multilingual country, official language is English, but Mande and Kru (Kwa) are widely spoken.

# Liberia.

## The custodians of peace.

**L**iberian women can truly be called pioneers of peace. Throughout the two civil wars that ravished the country in the past few decades, women played a crucial role in bringing about peace between the warring parties. The roots of the conflicts are manifold but revolve around the country's long history of political and economic domination by one small minority over the great majority. Later on, as the conflict escalated, an ethnic dimension was added to the battle for control of the country's natural resources, diamonds in particular.<sup>1</sup>

The first, seven-year long conflict ended in 1996 through an intervention by the West African peacekeeping force ECOMOG<sup>2</sup> and the UN. Elections in 1997 brought a new president, the former rebel leader Charles Taylor, but did not bring peace. The already dire humanitarian situation was worsening and stories of horrific sexual violence against women and girls and the recruitment of child soldiers shocked the world.<sup>3</sup> After the failure of the ceasefire in 1997, a peace agreement was finally reached

in Accra in 2003. Even though peace has been officially installed in Liberia, the violence against the civilian population, especially women, remains at a very high level.<sup>4</sup> Using the window of opportunity that was opened during the civil war, women's organisations successfully increased their participation in formal political institutions, including the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president in 2005.

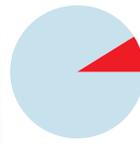


## Experiences of power and participation

This part presents the findings from a field research in Liberia in December 2011. A discussion with a focus group was conducted with 9 participants from key women's organisations, complemented by interviews with key informants from civil society and some key actors at the national and international formal levels.



According to the traditional system of Hinterlands Laws, which exist in parallel with the Constitution, a woman is seen as **the property of her husband**. But, since the election in 2005 several gender-sensitive laws have been adopted.



# 14%

Share of women in parliament (Progress of the world's women 2011–2012).

## Peace and transition. Women as national peacemakers.

“Our children needed to go to school. Our women, whether skilled or unskilled, needed to go to the market. But with the persistent war, they were not able to do that. So the women formed themselves into whatever group they could find, reconciling, mediating, dialoguing, saying let’s go to our male counterparts, let’s tell them, this is the time for you to see the bigger picture – the nation called Liberia.”

Liberian women became world famous for their contribution to the peace accords in 2003. Their struggle to maintain women’s participation in the political landscape continued also after the war. Liberian women claimed their space and were given a chance during the entire process: from peace negotiations, through the initial post-conflict phase, to the present struggle for reconstruction and stabilisation. Even today, almost a decade after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in Accra, women have a crucial role in the ongoing consolidation of peace.

“We are still the custodians of peace. For example during these last elections, because of our role in the peace process, we were able to meet the various political parties to discuss non-violence for the elections. We were able to meet the citizens, the various unions, youth, and other groups, to discuss the importance of non-violent elections. Now, if we hadn’t gone through that thing, what happened on November 7<sup>5</sup> without any doubt would have been worse.”<sup>6</sup>

The participants in the focus group maintained that everybody in Liberia dreads a relapse into civil war. The eruption of violence shortly before the runoff presidential election in November 2011 caused a general fear among the population. For the women’s groups, that violence and the boycotting of the second round of the presidential elections by the main opposition party CDC was a palpable reminder that the peace must be maintained. It also confirmed the crucial role that women play in this delicate process.

“A lot of people talked about what was going on in the early days of the campaign. But not many had seen the writing on the wall. It was a war of words. Again, it was

the women who started to see the arguments, the kind of violent statements that came forth. We realised that this is what went on during the war, that was how we talked to each other during the war and that could be repeated. And if we didn’t do anything about it we would wake up one day and we would have gone back to war. So we started creating peace campaigns, we started engaging political parties, we started to have anti-war discussions and meetings with civil society... we talked about the fact that some of the political parties are trying to use you and manipulate you into violence and at the end of the day you will be killed.”

Listening to the messages that the women spread during their campaigns, those propagating violence soon realised that they did not want to repeat the mistakes from the past. The peace campaigns organised by women’s groups quickly grew to include other parts of the society, institutions, churches, etc. As one participant put it: “... it became like a blaze, like a fire.”

The incident on November 7 made it clear that the struggle for peace is far from over and that many challenges still remain, including reconciling different parts of the society. Peace building has to be long-term, the focus group emphasized: sweeping old disagreements and conflicts under the carpet, the way it has been done so far in Liberia, can lead to a relapse into war.

When you ask me whether we have peace I will say yes – and no. I will say yes, we have peace sufficiently to take us to elections. I will say no, we have not had peace because it is not concretised, it is not consolidated, it is not deep, it is not being sustained... Let UNMIL go, and if we can live here together then, then we have peace.

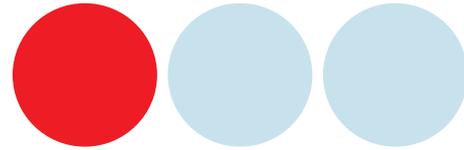
## Power and exclusion. New patterns of gender roles.

Liberian women assumed the role of peacemakers partly out of desperation. In order to be able to take care of their families, the women had to convince the warring parties to put an end to hostilities. As the participants in the focus group pointed out: “Women and children were dying. They suffered the most in the conflict. So that was the underlying premise when we met and talked with President Taylor and the rebels”.

Furthermore, although women in Liberia were, generally speaking, excluded from positions of power,



The level of violence is still very high in Liberia, and for many women the conflict is now going on in their homes as domestic violence has become widespread. However, there is still **no law against domestic violence in Liberia.**



A quota guaranteeing women a **30 percent** representation in political offices and the leadership of political parties has not yet been adopted by the parliament.

several ethnic groups have had women leaders and chiefs throughout history. This, the participants maintained, completely discredits the typical stereotype that all African women are oppressed. Admittedly, in some ethnic groups, especially in the completely isolated southeast, women have been subjected to their male relatives. In other regions, however, they already held powerful positions in their communities and participated in decision-making on an equal footing with men even before the war.

During the war, this history of participation at community level together with the breakdown of societal structures made it possible to re-formulate gender roles and power hierarchies. The war turned women into heads of households and main breadwinners in the family to a high degree. One may assume that this new important position also gave them the self-confidence and the authority in the eyes of the population to defy traditional patterns of exclusion and take an active part in the peace process.

“When this new role was provided to the women it gave them a freedom, a leverage to participate in any process that would secure their family, because they were now heads of households... Then there was the war that brought down the societal structures, those impediments, those stereotypes that hinder women, in their own tribal contexts. So women assumed the roles that traditionally they would not have assumed.”

### Motherhood and collaboration as peacemaking tools.

An additional method of gaining trust and respect was to approach all parties involved in the conflict as mothers. As mothers, they appealed to the rebel group LURD and president Charles Taylor to meet and agree to a ceasefire. And at a later stage, after the failure of the first phase of the DDRR<sup>7</sup> process when the country almost went to war again, they again appealed as mothers to the combatants to hand in their guns.<sup>8</sup> With the traditional respect given to mothers, especially grandmothers, referring to this stereotypical peaceful and neutral identity proved an effective way to get the combatants' attention.

“We have a culture in Liberia where a woman as a mother is respected and where she is able to influence her role and cultural status... Our strategy was... look-

ing at our context as mothers, as people who give birth. And looking at all the warring parties as our children.”

It was the regional women's organisation MARWOPNET, with chapters in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea<sup>9</sup> that managed to identify and locate the rebel group LURD that was attacking Liberia from Guinea. Once identified, the women approached the rebels and urged them to meet with president Taylor.

“We made a sub-regional effort because the conflict had become sub-regional. They were attacking from our sister nation Guinea. And we went to Mr. Taylor and he said that he didn't know who attacked him, who attacked Liberia. He had heard the name LURD but he didn't know who they were. And if we could find out who they were, he would be happy to meet with them. So, we took on that responsibility... And LURD consented to meet with Mr Taylor, provided we would be there. Because they trusted us.”

This is how representatives from MARWOPNET were invited to the peace talks in Accra, Ghana. At first they were only observers but soon became official participants. One woman from the focus group recalls: “The rebels insisted on having the women there, it was the dynamic in the room that made this happen, it could not be any other way”. The participants underlined that all this was possible thanks to the unity of women from all levels of society: what they lacked in formal power they compensated for in numbers. While women from the upper layers of society participated directly in the talks, grassroots women were gathering outside the conference hall in Accra, as well as at the airfield in Monrovia, forming what would become known as the “Women's mass action for peace”.<sup>10</sup> Dressed in white they sat together, day after day, praying, crying and constantly sharing information with the ‘official’ women inside the hall. “We used to say that whether you are a woman in government or a woman at grassroots level, when the bullet comes, it has no eyes”.

### Political participation. Lack of support from women with power.

In fact, without realising it, the women in Liberia were putting UNSCR 1325 into practice. The majority of them had never heard of the Resolution, and yet they insisted

on being a voice in the re-structuring of the country after the peace had been reached. Building on the trust they gained from the peace talks, women's organisations showed how important women's participation is in the elections that followed in 2005 – both as candidates and as voters. With the help of male members of parliament, they managed to push through an improved rape law. However, this success was not repeated with the Gender Equity Act<sup>11</sup>. The focus group participants thought that one of the main reasons for this failure is Liberia's deeply rooted patriarchal society. Another reason, they thought, was the lack of support from women parliamentarians. While some were opposed to the quota system fearing that less qualified women would enter political arena, others had little interest in women's issues and preferred to vote according to the party line.

“There were many women, women who are role models for us all, women in the executive, in the legislative and in the judiciary, who said the bill is not needed. So how could we push for it in parliament? We need support from women with a position, who are gender-sensitive. But they are not gender-sensitive, they are not feminists, they are just political activists.”

The participants think that the position of women in formal political arenas has not been sufficiently fortified. “We need a lot of support for women and we think because we have a woman president it's okay. It is not okay.”

What they witness now, they asserted, is a kind of ‘back to business as usual’, where women's issues are not taken as seriously as previously. A concrete example is the decline in the number of women elected in the elections in 2011.

“I saw women candidates speaking the truth, what they want to do and what they don't want to do. But the voting populace don't want to hear that. So how do we educate citizens to know the truth and to know the rules and the responsibilities of the lawmakers?”

What happened, the participants thought, was the loss of active support from important groups in the society, such as men and women within government and parliament.

“We lost the support of the men. They were not happy that we elected a woman as president. First, they voted yes, and then they came to their senses, so to speak, when the euphoria was over. And they did not like it. So the support was there, and then they withdrew it.”

Furthermore, the women in government positions were not as committed to women's issues as the activists had been hoping for. Instead of being the leading force promoting women's rights, the women in government often regarded the civil society as competition, especially over funding. The candidates' primary concern was party politics and not gender issues, the participants thought. They did not think that the process of nomination and candidature for government was transparent enough, as

it was more about having the ear of the president than about merit.

“We need to train women who want to take up leadership, to explain to them about feminism and gender, to make them understand, and not assume that they already know just because they are women. They don't just know.”

Additionally, women's organisations themselves are partly responsible for the backlash, they concluded. During the first phase of the conflict in the 1990s, women's groups organised workshops on all levels – from government and religious leaders and schools to various communities, raised public awareness of gender and women's issues and changed the mentality of the population. “At that time, it was easy for us women to come and build consensus among the rest of the population around women's issues,” one of the participants recalled.

“However, since 2005, after we won the election most of the women thought we had arrived. But since then we have new people coming in, we have the internally displaced and the refugees who were not gender-sensitized. So, we cannot rely on the training we did back then in the 1990s... Also, we ourselves did not continue forging alliances and building capacity, not with ourselves as women's groups, nor with the students, the youth or other civil society stakeholders. We didn't do that.”

Some women in government however did not agree with the activists. They underlined the importance of having women in several top positions, including as President.

### Truth and reconciliation. Revisiting history.

“What we need now is to sustain the peace we have... We should talk about reconciliation; we need deep-rooted reconciliation in this country.”

As the quote above indicates, Liberia needs a profound reconciliation process that would make peace permanent. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that was set up after the war divided Liberians between those who were for and against the recommendations of the Commission instead of making a lasting peace possible.<sup>12</sup>

However, since the eruption of violence during the elections in November 2011, a wake-up call for many, more voices have been raised to bring the report back to life.

“The TRC did extensive work and came up with a lot of recommendations, but aside from this, the issue of reconciliation, of psychosocial healing and trauma healing, was never our priority... With our history, with the American-Liberians coming, and all the conflicts we had before the civil war, we should have had a good system in place to reconcile people at every level. There is still a lot to do in order to really reconcile.”

In Liberia, there are many divisions that run deep and repeatedly have caused tension in the society. One of the deepest is the division between the native population and the American-Liberians or settlers — freed slaves that left the US in the 1840s and founded the nation of Liberia. Over the years, this particular group has held power most often. Furthermore, there is also a deep distrust between many of the country's 16 ethnic groups. This means that in order to achieve true reconciliation, it is necessary to go a long way back in history, the participants said.

“To be able to really put the pieces together, we have to go maybe 50–60 years back, so that we can connect to what is happening now. Because we are talking about rewriting Liberian history, and if you don't have it right now, you will never have it right at all.”

Women in Liberia contributed extensively to the work of the TRC, both as members of various working groups and as witnesses themselves. Women's organisations increased public awareness about the process in rural communities and held nationwide workshops to obtain women's views on various pillars of the TRC.

The participants concluded that, even though women's organisations today are preoccupied with the specific objectives of their respective organisations, they must continue their efforts to achieve full national reconciliation. The proof that their cooperation has not come to a halt was their collective actions to prevent violence during the 2011 elections. The younger generation is also demanding to be a part of the peace and governance processes and this needs to be utilised.

Focusing on issues that concern all Liberians, be they American-Liberian or native, is what is needed to overcome the deep-rooted divisions in the society.

“We must say that we are Liberians first. Then, if we have this central identification, it will not matter if you are a Krahn or a Kru<sup>13</sup>... it is women who can teach our children that you are Liberian first.”

### Poverty and insecurity – the fight for survival.

“My only daughter was raped, and died from it. That was in 1989. After that I was traumatised. We went to look for food and nobody was looking after the children. She was eight years old... After that I took an interest in children's care. When we started our women's group we decided to develop that particular aspect, so we opened day-care. Nobody paid; it was just to prevent our children from dying.”

During the war, women and children lived under a constant threat of being raped or subjected to other forms of gender-based violence. The frequency of rape and the level of domestic violence continue to be high, even today.

As illustrated in the quote above, poverty and lack of security are closely interconnected. Poverty made women

leave their children alone while they were looking for food. Poverty still continues to affect their daily lives in many ways. Women live under a constant threat of being robbed or raped on the way to the market. In rural areas, women often have to walk long distances to reach the nearest market or town, which exposes them to danger. However, taking a local taxi, usually a motorbike with a driver, may be just as hazardous.

“For me, I am not afraid to go to the market. But in the interior, in the villages, when a person is carrying a woman on a motorbike, he may take her cell phone, her money and he may rape her... If people like that driver can, if they live on their own income, I think that the level of violence against women will be reduced.”

This quote describes a development that can pose a potential threat to stability and the consolidation of peace, the women said. There is a growing frustration among those who feel excluded from the development. A large proportion of the population, many of whom support the opposition party CDC, has been pushed to the margins of society and left without employment or any tangible hope for the future. Jobs for people between 18 and 35 years old are few, and alcohol and drug abuse is on the rise, as is violence. Additionally, as some of the participants pointed out, the entire Liberian population is still suffering from war trauma, which increases the risk of a relapse into violent conflict. In order to come to grips with this development, there is a great need to include groups that up to now have been excluded, the women stated.

“We have not sufficiently rehabilitated ourselves when it comes to change. There is no process going on, no follow-up activities after the DDDR process. Everybody thought it was all right. But everything is not all right... At that time, the men also felt that women had taken over their role. And a chain is as weak as its weakest link. So when you talk about security and domestic violence, this is our weakest link right now, we have a long way to go.”

Liberia is still one of the world's poorest countries. Poverty not only affects women's security but also hinders their possibilities of participating in the democratic process. To become a candidate in elections, one needs to be nominated by a political party, which is difficult in a country where male politicians are preferred. Because this creates a situation in which women have to run as independent candidates and use their own money to finance the campaign, most women can only dream about entering the political scene. In addition, the lack of trust between voters and political candidates has resulted in the tradition of buying votes: “If people don't trust a political candidate, they want money from that person in order to give him their vote.”

The participants emphasised that education is a key to reducing poverty among women. During the war, almost the entire educational system collapsed, and a whole generation did not attend school at all<sup>14</sup>. According to

Liberia's latest Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, only 40 percent of Liberian women are literate — in rural areas it's just above 30 percent.

### Laws and tradition.

#### Working against impunity.

Fuelled by the arguments put forth by women's organisations, president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's first official decision was to sign the law making rape a criminal offence. Previously, only gang rapes had been illegal whereas other forms of rape were bailable offences. The new law, the availability of health care and the possibility to punish perpetrators, have made women more inclined to seek justice. "Before, rapes were surrounded by hush, hush, it was a stigma. This has changed now". However, people living in the cities perceive rape differently than those in rural areas. Repressed by the stigma that persists in rural Liberia, the majority of those affected seek settlements outside the courtroom through customary law.<sup>15</sup>

The government appointed a specialised unit to handle cases of sexual and gender-based violence, and created a Criminal Court that specializes in crimes of sexual violence, which drastically increased the number of women seeking justice.

However, there are a number of obstacles preventing raped women from getting legal redress. For example, women cannot present any evidence of being raped since there are not enough medical and health care facilities in rural areas. Also, because of the severe shortage of skilled staff in county magistrate courts, the rape law is still not fully implemented. "Most of the people accused of rape are let free. Families also play a role in this since there is no follow-up. If you live 5–7 walking hours' distance from the Court, parents often abandon the idea of seeking justice for their daughter".<sup>16</sup>

The traditional justice system that still exists in parallel to the formal one also prevents rape victims from accessing their legal rights. In traditional societies, the perpetrator often pays the family of the victim and the women therefore abstain from seeking legal justice. Some women's organisations see education and awareness raising as ways to reduce the influence of the traditional system. One organisation created mobile legal units, and brought the law to the people instead of vice versa.

"We have this mobile law and we take it to the market place. A woman who sells mangos can come to us there at the market and she gets her access to justice, we tell her how she can do it. We give her awareness of her rights... Also, we talk to mothers and grand-mothers and we say, look, you have your rights to land and everything but we need to engage the young generation also and you can help us, (since they are your) children or grandchildren. "

A UN representative pointed to the fact that it is difficult to get away from the customary system due to the lack of trained lawyers and skilled staff within the formal justice system. Instead, the co-existence of both

systems needs to be facilitated to reduce the negative effects on women to a minimum. The establishment of community-based 'peace huts' is one such initiative. Based on the traditional male decision-making forum, the palawa huts or peace huts allow women to meet and discuss important issues. In some villages, rape is one such issue that is now being 'delegated' to the peace huts. "The women go through the accusations of rape and then decide if they shall go to the police or not. Once a rape case has gone through the peace hut, the police tend to take it more seriously".<sup>17</sup>

The informants emphasised that the existing laws and justice mechanisms have as yet little impact on the lives of women who live in secluded areas, particularly in south-eastern Liberia. There, the customary laws are very biased against women. For example, they still use trial by ordeal.<sup>18</sup> The formal justice system barely exists in these parts of the country and the few courts in place are often corrupt.

"You talk about justice, but in the south-eastern region people use mob justice, they take the law into their own hands. If they accuse you of something, they will not go to court; rather they will beat you to death... And even if you go to court, the man who raped you can pay the judge. So people never trusted the justice system. Also, if you go to the police they will say that they can do nothing because they have no transportation..."

### Civil society. Weakened relations with international and national actors.

The informants believe that the unity between women's groups still exists. They use this unity to mobilise in times of crisis, as they did in November 2011 when elections almost broke into violence. Simultaneously, they are struggling to find their place in post-war Liberia where unemployment and other social issues have pushed peace out of the political agenda. They insist, though, that peace must be the highest priority for everyone if Liberia is to permanently step away from violence and strive towards equality and social wellbeing for all.

"What is peace? Peace is development, peace is security, peace is health, peace is economics. If you have food on your table, that's peace for you. So this is where we will galvanize our support for the next 10-15 years because we have to solidify the peace, we have to consolidate it, we have to maintain it. We are not out of the wars yet, we are not saved yet."

At the same time, women demand a better national and international acceptance for their struggle and recognition that they are crucial for the post-war society. One of the biggest challenges is to increase women's participation in a broader political sense. A major obstacle, the participants thought, is the lack of a strong and united women's movement with defined structures. They have their women's 'groups' that can be mobilized in times of crisis, but otherwise they work in isolation. In order

to get really strong and to get the attention of formal actors, domestic as well as international, they need more institutional capacity as well as long-term funding, they stressed.

“We are not taken seriously enough because we have not developed the institutional capacity. Our roles are tied to this. For instance, the UN, they don’t have to deal with women’s groups because we are not seen as an institution or taken seriously enough.”

Several participants expressed concern about the shift in power relations between women’s groups and the Ministry of Gender and Development (MoGD). While the international donors preferred working directly with women’s groups during the war, they now mostly channel their funds through the government. And even though this improvement in administration is welcome, women’s organisations now have to ask the Ministry for project funding, thus losing some of their independence.

“It is the role of these state actors to encourage and support women’s organisations... But we are seen as competition – for funding, and especially for recognition – so we are not supported the way we should be. In fact, some parts of our programmes the government will do themselves to get the credit.”

Another consequence is that the relationship with the international community has undergone a major shift. Although the international community has done a great job helping women keep gender issues high on the political agenda, the participants felt that they failed to adequately recognise women’s organisations for their work with peace issues. UNSCR 1325, for example, came to exist thanks to the women’s important contribution to peace and security. Nevertheless, when the international community partners with national actors, the women’s organisations feel excluded. “Most women’s organisations and individuals are still not aware of UNSCR 1325 and do not consider their work as a part of this process, even though it actually is 1325 being implemented,” as one informant put it.

The women also felt excluded from the SSR process, another important peace building tool. The purpose of the process was to reform the military and police forces to strengthen the security for the population. The process was run by a private American company<sup>19</sup> that failed to sufficiently involve the civil society. The implementers encountered severe obstacles in accessing ex-combatants in remote areas.<sup>20</sup> The participants thought that without pronounced local ownership, there is a risk that the process will not be sustained, and that the withdrawal of the UNMIL<sup>21</sup> in the future may lead to the eruption of violence.

“...There is no ownership from the Liberian perspective to say that we are responsible to sustain this peace. People associate the SSR process with jobs, where they go to get a salary. And in the absence of the UNMIL, it

will cause eruption of violence.”

Overall, in order to consolidate the peace efforts they have made so far, the women’s groups called for more long-term support from the international community. Also, having stronger women’s organisations with greater capacity would make it easier to approach the government and offer conflict and gender-related training, a measure that the women considered to be of significant importance.

“Since 2005, we listen to political leaders when they speak, and we hear that they are not conflict-sensitive. But what you say in post-conflict can inflame the situation. We could train them on conflict-sensitive issues, and train them to be more gender-sensitive.”

## Analysis

### Exclusion

The war in Liberia provided women with opportunities to increase their participation in official politics. Nonetheless, a number of major obstacles still hinder their empowerment and participation on a broader scale. Almost ten years after the peace agreement, Liberian women still have to fight for their rights. In some aspects the development is even going backwards.

Women’s roles as peace advocates and conflict resolvers are not connected with their attempts to gain more formal power within the traditionally patriarchal structures of politics. One obvious example is the failure to win acceptance for the Gender Equity Act, despite a female president and several women in senior positions within governmental institutions. One reason for this might be that, instead of focusing on raising gender awareness among different political actors, women solely focused on reaching the number of women in decision-making bodies.

There are more reasons for women’s continued exclusion from the public arena. Traditional and stereotypical gender norms still prevail in rural areas. There, a woman is perceived as subordinate to men in both the public as well as the private spheres of life. Historically considered to be the property of male family members, women are still stuck in abject poverty and illiteracy with very limited possibilities to transform their own lives. Despite some progress in legal matters, such as the reformulation of the inheritance law, women are still excluded from formal and visible power in most parts of Liberia. Moreover, the support they enjoyed from men during peace negotiations and the elections seems to have died.

Sexual violence is another reason why women are not broadly included in public life. Despite the concerted efforts of women activists as well as government and international donors to put an end to the massive violence against women, underlying norms and frustrations among the male population have made it difficult. As women try to advance their position, men might respond

with violence, as this is an effective mechanism to prevent the reformulation of gender roles and prevent women from claiming their rights. Another factor that contributes to the 'normalisation' of gendered violence is the long history of impunity, which not only is a legacy of the war but also of tradition where reconciliation is preferred over formal justice.

### Achievements

The case of Liberia shows how women were able to transform informal into formal power during peace negotiations, and how they had a real impact on the negotiations taking place within the closed spaces of power. By uniting and finding common ground as women, they used their strength in numbers to overcome traditional, excluding norms. In a country as divided as Liberia, women showed that reconciliation and national unity was a feasible path for the future. This was once again demonstrated in the weeks preceding the elections in November 2011. By engaging in collective action, the women managed to curb the violence that was threatening the entire election process.

Even though the success story of the peace negotiations did not turn into a transformation of stereotypical gender roles, the importance of women's participation should not be underestimated. Generally, women's self-confidence has increased due to their role in the peace process, and even in rural areas, more women are now prepared to stand up and speak their mind. As the feminist researcher and political scientist S. Meintjes argues, true transformation is about "internal processes of consciousness, of creating words and language that will provide women with a sense of their own agency".<sup>22</sup>

This new agency that Meintjes mentions has been manifested in various ways in Liberia. Women were instrumental in increasing gender-sensitivity within the legal arena, such as the new rape law and the creation of special court for cases of sexual violence. They were also successful in pushing for a gender quota within the military and police force – crucial steps in a country with a widespread culture of abuse within the security sector.

### Challenges

Liberia's women – as well as the entire country – are at a crossroads. The events from November 2011 were a clear reminder that there is a long road ahead. Liberian people are still traumatised and the nervousness that lies just beneath the surface could easily escalate into violence.

In this very volatile situation, women have an important role to play as peace makers. In order to remain relevant in post-emergency Liberia, women's organisations must not only utilise the influence they had during the transitional period, but also search for new fields of intervention. As researcher A. Pillay states: "The challenge is to protect the seeds of transformation sown during the upheaval and to use them to grow the transformation in the transitional period of reconstruction".<sup>23</sup>

This is a process that must take place on two parallel

levels. The traditional, pre-war dominance of men seems to be re-emerging. It is highly likely that this is caused by the exclusion of a very large group of unemployed men, some of whom are ex-combatants, from the ongoing efforts to improve socioeconomic conditions.

These exclusion mechanisms can help us understand why the window of opportunity that was opened during the conflict seems to be shut again. Hence, the women themselves cannot rely solely on the support that they gained in connection with their accomplishments at the time of the peace negotiations. The extraordinary circumstances that contributed to the strong position of women and their unity at that time, are, hopefully, history. This implies however that women's organisations must find other motivators for uniting and speaking with one voice. In Liberia, there are so many women with hands-on experience of peace work, something that could be translated into other activities in the struggle for women's equal participation.

However, in order for this to happen, the international community must support women in their efforts to broaden their scope of activity and to be taken seriously by bodies that hold formal power. With all the attention on Liberian women in their capacity as peacemakers, there is a potential risk of an emerging 'peace tourism'. Almost a decade after peace was officially installed in Liberia, actors from all over the world still want to meet them and hear their story – a unique circumstance that may render it difficult for them to move on and engage as actively in new areas of society.

As one of the participants explained during the focus group: "as soon as there is a national crisis, everyone starts calling for the women. But afterwards everything is back to normal again".



# things to bear in mind

## 1. Finding

The position of women in formal political arenas has not been sufficiently consolidated, one concrete illustration being the decline in the number of women chosen at the elections in 2011.

### Recommendation

In order to start preparing for the 2014 bi-elections to the Senate and the next election in 2016:

- a. Platforms and other forms of connections must be created between women in politics and other higher positions and women within the civil society.
- b. Women and men need to be educated on the importance of women in politics and why they should vote for women.
- c. There should be a focus on young women's participation, since there is now a gap between generations both in politics and civil society.

## 2. Finding

Women and civil society have not been sufficiently involved in the Security Sector Reform (SSR). Without pronounced local ownership, there is a risk that the process will not be sufficiently sustained, and that the withdrawal of the UNMIL in the future may lead to the eruption of violence.

### Recommendation

- a. Women's view on security/insecurity and their need for protection and justice must be present in the SSR process. Civilian oversight and governance of the SSR are key to a successful process.
- b. Challenges to a gender-sensitive SSR process – such as lack of resources to ensure implementation of policies, outreach to remote areas, and the lack of mechanisms in order to work with community-based structures – should be recognized.

## 3. Finding

The traditional justice system, which exists in parallel with the formal justice system, is a serious impediment to women's access to legal rights.

### Recommendation

With almost no female personnel in customary courts, discriminatory attitudes are common. Remedies for domestic violence under customary law are non-existent because realities of domestic violence are not recognized. Also harmful practices such as trial by ordeal (TBO), witchcraft and female genital mutilation (FGM) are common. In relation to security it is important to address the double legal system (formal and traditional).

## 4. Finding

For Liberian women poverty and lack of security are closely interconnected, and poverty not only affects women's security but also hinders their possibilities of participating in the democratic process.

### Recommendation

There is a need for connecting economic empowerment of women with peace building at community level in order to adhere to the discrepancies in resources and power, not least in relation to urban/rural areas.

## 5. Finding

In order to consolidate peace in Liberia, a profound reconciliation process is necessary and to continue striving for national reconciliation would be a logical task for women's organisations in the future.

### Recommendation

Support the participation of women in the reconciliation process, which has been somewhat stalled but is now finding new momentum with the reconciliation initiative led by Mrs Leymah Gbowee.

<sup>1</sup> European Union, [http://www.europa-eu-un.org/articles/en/article\\_7000\\_en.htm](http://www.europa-eu-un.org/articles/en/article_7000_en.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group was a West African multilateral armed force, established in 1990 to intervene in Liberia.

<sup>3</sup> More information about sexual violence for instance is to be found in Human Security in the Mano River Union, International Alert, May 2010 and Sexual violence against women and girls in war and its aftermath, UNFPA, June, 2006. Regarding child soldiers in Liberia, see Child soldiers Global Report, 2008 for instance.

<sup>4</sup> According to police statistics, rape, especially of girls between 10 and 14 years of age, is the most reported crime in Liberia (UNICEF 2008).

<sup>5</sup> In November 2011, women dressed in white gathered at the airfield outside Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, and managed to soothe the tense situation that threatened to escalate into violence ahead of the 2011 election run-off.

<sup>6</sup> The day before the presidential runoff, the main opposition leader Winston Tubman urged his supporters to boycott the poll, claiming that the first round, won by the incumbent Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, had not been free and fair. As his supporters demonstrated, a clash with the police left at least two people dead. In order to stem further violence the women gathered at the airfield and called for a peaceful election.

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<sup>8</sup> When the UNMIL-led DDR process commenced in December 2003, thousands of armed ex-combatants threatened to resort to violence, as they were disappointed with not receiving full payment at once. Centre for International Cooperation and Security, University of Bradford 2008, 8.

<sup>9</sup> In 2008, Côte D'Ivoire also joined the regional network. All four countries have suffered from tensions or armed conflict during the last decades.

<sup>10</sup> Under the leadership of Women in Peacebuilding (Wipnet) and one of the three recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, Leymah Gwobee.

<sup>11</sup> Gender Equity Act guarantees women 30 per cent representation in political offices and the leadership of political parties, but has not been adopted.

<sup>12</sup> The final report of the TRC included a list of 49 names of people who should not be allowed to hold public office due to their involvement in the civil war. Among these names was Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

<sup>13</sup> There are 16 ethnic groups in Liberia of which Krahn and Kru are two.

<sup>14</sup> International Development Law Organization 2010, 15.

<sup>15</sup> US Department of State 2010, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview, Monrovia, 1 December 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Personal interview, Monrovia, 7 December 2012.

<sup>18</sup> In such cases, the accused is forced to swallow a poisonous brew or to endure other forms of torture to see if he or she survives and thus is deemed innocent. In Liberia, the poison most often used is called sassywood, made from the bark of a tree.

<sup>19</sup> The company was in charge of reforming the Armed Forces of Liberia as well as the Special Security Service, whereas the UNMIL were in charge of reforms within the Liberia National Police.

<sup>20</sup> Post-conflict Peacebuilding in Liberia, Center for International Peace Operations/Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, 2007, 110.

<sup>21</sup> The United Nations Mission in Liberia was established in September 2003 to support the implementation of the ceasefire agreement and the peace process. The Mission was also mandated to assist with preparations for the general elections in 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Meintjes et. al. 2001.

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation supports women during times of war and conflict to increase women's power and influence in society. We collaborate with over 130 organisations that empower women to participate in working for sustainable peace and rebuilding.

In wars and conflicts, violence against women and girls is used as a method of warfare. Women are subjected to mass rape, are mutilated and killed. Women are locked in their homes and girls are not allowed to attend school. Women's voices are silenced if they express what they think and feel.

But history shows that women are important actors in the struggle for peace. The world witnessed this in the Balkans, in Liberia and in Northern Ireland. Yet women are seldom allowed to play a part in deciding how to arrive at peace and democracy. This is why The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation exists. Our partner organisations educate people in women's human rights, they work with women's health issues and combat violence against women. They create meeting places for women, where it

is otherwise difficult to meet. They wield political influence and create dialogue across the borders of conflict.

Kvinna till Kvinna is a Swedish Foundation which supports women's organisations in Central and West Africa, the Middle East, South Caucasus and the Western Balkans.

The role of The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is to provide financial support and mediate contacts between organisations, in co-operation with our partner organisations. Our mission is to participate in empowering women's movements in regions of conflict.

We influence development assistance and security policies by contributing to increased awareness of the situation of women in conflicts and the importance of women's representation in peace processes. We spread information about women in conflicts to the general public, government bodies and organisations in Sweden, and at the EU and UN levels.

We support studies and research relating to women's conditions in conflicts and the positive effects of women's participation in peace initiatives.



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