

NURTURERS OF PEACE, SUSTAINERS OF AFRICA:

SELECTED WOMEN'S PEACE INITIATIVES



Isis - Women's International
Cross-Cultural Exchange



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PEACE INITIATIVES**

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Jessica B. Nkuuhe
Project Coordinator
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PREFACE

This monograph is a presentation of four unique peace initiatives carried out by African women in different parts of Africa. These women belong to The Women's Peace Center Peace Center of Search for Common Ground in Burundi, The Association for the Promotion of Peace (PROPAZ) in Mozambique, The Women in Peace building Network (WIPNET - Liberia Chapter), and The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET - Sierra Leone Chapter). It was part of an initiative, whose aim was to help in strengthening key institutions in Africa so that they could more effectively and collaboratively address three closely interrelated challenges that Africa faces today. These challenges are peace and security, citizenship and identity, and regional integration. The monograph contains case studies of examples of unique approaches to peace building and conflict resolution in Africa that have been spearheaded by women. Their activities are highlighted so that they can be mainstreamed and legitimised, in order for others to learn from them, as well as build on them to strengthen networking and coalition building among the different actors in the peace processes.

Africa's future depends largely on its capacity to prevent, manage and resolve conflict, because, for the past 40 years, the continent has been torn apart by intra-state, inter-state, ethnic, religious, and resource conflicts.¹ The end of the Cold War at the beginning of the 1990s was supposed to usher in a period when the whole world would enjoy the "peace dividend", with less expenditure on defence and more on development. Instead, the African continent has since been beleaguered mainly by civil wars that have left millions of civilians dead, and even more millions displaced internally or turned into refugees.

For too long, these wars have had the face of a suffering woman: with rape, forced marriage, abductions and sexual slavery, forced conscription into fighting forces topping the list of violations. Above all these abuses, women continue to experience the suffering and torture similar to men's. Time and again, the world is faced with the image of a woman, often with her belongings on her head, a child on her back and the rest of the children walking beside her, roaming country side as an internally displaced person, or crossing borders as a refugee. These are sadly still the harsh realities of war, and they fit perfectly in the patriarchal nature of wars, where such treatment is meant to demoralize or punish the male fighters and portray them as incapable of protecting "their women and children".

But such documentation hardly ever depicts the sheer resilience of women in these circumstances. It largely ignores the contributions of women towards the sustenance and rebuilding of communities, as well as their survival mechanisms, hard work, and invaluable contribution towards the restoration of sanity in countries torn apart by violence. There are numerous grassroots activities all over the African continent that demonstrate the informal work that women do to prevent, manage, or transform conflicts, as well as play an important role in post conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation. However, when it comes to formal peace negotiations to end the violent conflicts, African women have had to beg to be included in these peace processes, and they are either denied access, or restricted in their participation. This is despite regional and international resolutions and Conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all kinds of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

The case studies in this monograph present the two sides of conflict; its destructive effect on communities, and the opportunities it presents for the leadership qualities of women to stand out. It also presents examples of women's ability to add value to the transformation of conflict, through activities that build or restore relationships at the community level and through their active involvement at policy-making levels. It also shows the fearlessness of women, as they transcend barriers and negotiate their way towards the highest levels of governance to contribute towards the peace that goes beyond the signing of agreements; the peace that is stronger than the paper the agreements are written on.

Peace building in these case studies is understood to be a collection of strategies used to reverse the destructive processes that accompany violence. These strategies can set in motion processes that can transform a conflict situation from an atmosphere beset with violence, fear, and uncertainty to one where disputes can be settled non-violently.... (It) involves helping fractured communities toward reconciliation and peaceful transformation while protecting and respecting human rights.²

These are initiatives that should energize women and men working on issues of peace and security at different levels in different countries of the continent. They can be shared and replicated in other countries, taking into consideration the specificities of those countries, to strengthen the networking and coalition building that is so necessary among the women and men of Africa in the quest for sustainable solutions on this war-weary continent.

¹ NEPAD: African Post-Conflict Reconstruction Policy Framework (June 2005)

² Juma Monica Kathina, Unveiling Women as Pillars of Peace: Peace Building in Communities Fractured by Conflict in Kenya. A UNDP Report, May 2000, p.3

Introduction

The idea of documenting the unique initiatives by African women in the area of peace building was borne out of a Special Initiative for Africa (SIA) meeting that took place in Maputo, Mozambique in June 2002 organised by the Ford Foundation. The meeting brought together African men and women activists, researchers and intellectuals to deliberate on the possibility of finding African solutions to Africa's problems in the broad areas of conflict, peace and security, citizenship and identity, and regional integration. The meeting came up with the Maputo Declaration, which, among other things recommended the documentation of the work that African women were carrying out in selected countries of the world, in order to legitimise them, encourage their replication by other groups in other countries, and lobby for increased support for such initiatives.

I. Background to the Documentation

Women's work in peace and conflict resolution usually goes unnoticed in most patriarchal settings. The Special Initiative for Africa accordingly charged Isis-WICCE with the task of highlighting the best practices and relevance within the framework of *“Documentation of successful women's peace initiatives in Africa”* as a sub theme of the Conflict, Peace and Security component. Four cases were selected after a consultative meeting that was held in Kampala, Uganda and had representatives from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, and Uganda. These were:

- The Mano River Women's Network (MARWOPNET), represented by its chapter in Sierra Leone.
- The Women in Peace building Network (WIPNET), a programme of the West African Network for Peace (WANEP), represented by its chapter in Liberia.
- The Association for the Promotion of Peace (PROPAZ) in Mozambique
- The Women's Peace Center of Search for Common Ground in Burundi.

1.1 Overall Objective

The overall objective of the exercise was to make visible the peace building activities carried out by women at community, national, sub regional and regional levels and assess their impact at these levels. The undertaking of the documentation visits to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mozambique and Burundi made that possible.

1.2 Specific objectives

The objectives of the exercise were to document the uniqueness of the successful initiatives carried out by women in post conflict situations in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mozambique and Burundi, and to look into the underlying factors that enabled the various organizations to surmount challenges from within and without and make a difference.

1.3. Methodology

The information in the monograph is based on the field visits conducted by Isis-WICCE to Burundi, Liberia, Mozambique and Sierra Leone in 2004. During the visits, we conducted interviews with beneficiaries of the initiatives, the staff and volunteers working with their coordinating offices, different levels of opinion leaders, the leadership at different levels, and the men and women who observed the activities of the initiatives. There were round table as well as focus group discussions, and key informant interviews as well. In addition, the team participated in specific in-country activities that were taking place at the time of the visit. Some of the information was gathered from documented sources including the Internet. A video documentary has been produced as well.

1.4. The Historical context

The four selected organizations were operating in a given politico-historical context and the peace processes have teased out several issues around the phenomenon of power and its gendered impact in a variety of ways. These four cases demonstrate women's approaches to crises and are a testimony to African women's ability to rise above narrow differences to struggle for the common good.

COUNTRY SUMMARIES

□ **Mozambique:**

This is a former Portuguese colony, the defining features of which are a fractured nationalist movement that was split along ideological lines during the Cold War. The African independence movement exerted pressure on the Portuguese state leading to the April 25, 1974 coup in Portugal that ushered in democracy in the former colonial power. In Africa, the decolonization process in Mozambique after independence in June 1975 was further complicated by the dynamics of the anti apartheid struggle then being waged against the non independent countries in Southern Africa, namely South Africa, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South West Africa (Namibia). This movement was supported by the OAU, with its Liberation Committee based in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, and had top level diplomatic backing from the Frontline States: Tanzania, Zambia and Botswana. These were later joined by Angola, Mozambique and eventually Zimbabwe as each got independence. The newly independent states were bound to face intense pressure and destabilization as a result of their opposition to apartheid. In Mozambique's case, a combination of Cold War policies pursued by the superpowers of the day, the military counterpoint by the minority regimes in Pretoria and Salisbury (Harare), internal contestations at the national level on ideological, political, ethnic and geographical grounds, located in the pre independence differences, led to the power struggle between the FRELIMO government in Maputo and the rebel movement RENAMO.

□ **Burundi:**

Burundi was originally a monarchy that was colonized by Germany as part of German East Africa, and then later ceded to Belgium after the First World War. The seeds for conflict in this country were sown by the misguided policies of the German and then the Belgian colonial rulers who misunderstood the social organization of the small kingdom, which led them to disrupt the political hierarchies headed by the king and his chiefs, and polarized the country by bestowing privileges first on the Tutsi aristocracy, then in the post- World War Two period with a new Government in power in Belgium, switching to the Hutu majority. Yet, despite this Belgian about face, the nationalist movement was led by a Prince, Louis Rwagasore, a son of the ruling king, who was himself married to a Hutu and was the first Prime Minister of Burundi. Dynastic rivalries within the royal family combined with political differences led to the assassination of Prince Louis Rwagasore in October 1961, and his brother a few years later. Another Premier Ngendandumwe was murdered in

1965, the year a large-scale massacre of Hutus took place. By 1966, a young army colonel persuaded the heir apparent to take over from his father the ageing who was then away in Switzerland.

Not only did the Colonel depose the king, but proceeded to evict the young man from office and declared Burundi a Republic. This set 6-2003). That era was characterized by periodic pogroms and excesses (massacres in 1972, 1988, Bagaza's conflict with the Catholic Church). This minority-led political system polarized society on many dimensions, exacerbating tensions and promoting military might as a safeguard for maintaining power and fending off potential challengers. The 1993 elections ushered in a democratically elected government, but the objectives of this government ran afoul of the entrenched military caste leading to the assassination of the elected President, and another coup d'état. These developments resulted in a guerrilla war that made the hills of Burundi extremely dangerous, and urban hit and runs that have not ceased even with the new dispensation arising from the Arusha consensus of 2000 on transitional arrangements. During the negotiations and after, many political forces coalesced around a total of seventeen political parties.

□ Liberia:

Africa's oldest republic and the second in the African world after Haiti was established in July 1847 by freed slaves who named the country to celebrate liberty hence the national motto *'the love of liberty brought us here'*. In the independence era on the African continent, Liberia played a significant role in pan African politics, the establishment of the OAU as the focal point for what was known as the Monrovia Group as well as the enhanced diplomatic struggle against apartheid. Indeed, pursuant to countless OAU and UN resolutions, Liberia joined Ethiopia in 1966 to present the independent African case for the withdrawal of South Africa from what was then South West Africa (present day Namibia). As an added achievement for African women, it was the legendary Liberian lawyer and diplomat Ms. Angie Brooks who became the first African woman and the third African to chair the UN General Assembly at its 25th session in 1969.

However, inside Liberia, the conflicts between the descendants of the freed slaves and the indigenous Liberians centered on issues of equity: equal opportunities, access to and control of the political process, translating into a century of contention over identity politics. In the brutal coup of April 1980, President Tolbert - the immediate past Chairman of the OAU and one of the founders of the Mano River Union - was killed alongside seven

of his Cabinet Ministers, who were rounded up and shot by firing squad at the beach. Prior to the 1989 outbreak of hostilities as Charles Taylor came onto the scene, Doe himself had survived a coup attempt in 1985 before Taylor went to the bush and ECOWAS - the Economic Community of West African States sent in a monitoring force, ECOMOG, commanded by Gen. Victor Malu from Nigeria. Doe met his own horrific death as forces loyal to the rebel leader Prince Johnson, who had split from Taylor, decimated the Presidential guard then killed him in a most gruesome manner by chopping off his limbs one by one till he died.

As the conflict escalated drawing in other countries in the sub region, and transitional arrangements were put in place with Dr. Amos Sawyer, an academic, taking over as interim President of the Government of National Unity (1990- 1994), followed by David Kpomarkor (1994-1995), Wilton Sankawulo (1995-1996), and Ruth Perry (1996-1997), as Chairs of the National Council of State prior to the election that saw Charles Taylor come to power.

In terms of governance, starting from 1980, Doe had been forced to accept political parties as of 1984 at the behest of the USA, and had won an election in 1985 before the rebellion by Charles Taylor and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia in 1989. By 1991, ECOWAS and Taylor had disarmed and set up the Interim Government of National Unity before they fell out and all-out fighting resumed in 1992. Between then and 1994 the warring factions made and unmade several agreements before a peace agreement was signed in 1995 only to unravel by April 1996. Later that year in August, ECOMOG embarked on a disarmament and de-mining programme, and opened up roads to enable refugees to return. An election was held in July of the following year and Charles Taylor won it and became President.

At the sub regional level, fighting erupted in the border areas in January 1999 and Taylor was accused by Ghana and Nigeria of supporting the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels in neighbouring Sierra Leone. Later that same year, rebels ostensibly operating out of Guinean territory launched an attack causing widespread displacement. Guinea then accused Taylor's forces of penetrating its territory and killing civilians in the border areas. As hostilities intensified in September 2000, the Liberians moved in on northern-based rebels, leveling charges against Guinea in the process. Meanwhile, on relations with Freetown, the Liberians denied harbouring the Sierra Leonean warlord, Sam Bockarie (Gen. Mosquito). The situation deteriorated further with a UN Security Council embargo in May 2001 as the blood diamond saga raged. Tens of thousands of Liberian and Sierra Leoneans were fleeing with rebels opposed to Taylor, and were advancing on Monrovia.

In June 2003 peace talks were being held in Ghana even as the Sierra Leonean War Crimes Tribunal issued an international arrest warrant for President Taylor over his involvement in the Sierra Leonean conflict, and it was at this juncture that the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) and the Women in Peace building Network (WIPNET) played a vital role in the resolution of one of West Africa's, most protracted, complex civil and transnational war.

□ Sierra Leone:

Sierra Leone achieved its independence from Britain in 1961, and goes down in history as the first country to appoint a woman Cabinet Minister in Africa, Paramount Chief Madame Ella Koblo Gulama. The major political party at independence, the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (the SLPP), was led by the Margai brothers, Sir Milton (1961-1964) and Sir Albert (1964-1967). The 1967 election was won by the opposition All Peoples Party (APP) led by Siaka Stevens, but the army stepped in and suspended the constitution. Order was not restored until the following year (1968) when Siaka Stevens was able to take up his post as Prime Minister. Two other coup attempts came in 1971 and 1974. Sierra Leone had become a republic in April 1971 and Stevens was re-elected to a second term as President in 1976. By 1977 the country had become a one party state with erstwhile SLPP members joining to take up Cabinet posts from 1982.

Stevens retired from politics in 1985 and appointed the former Army Commander, Maj. Gen. Joseph Saidu Momoh. Under Momoh's rule, matters deteriorated and, with the RUF rebels operating in the North, a group of young army officers led by Capt. Strasser took over power in 1992. Strasser was in turn ousted in 1996 by Brig. Gen Mada Bio who oversaw the general elections in the same year. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah became president but he was also removed in another coup in May 1997 led by Maj. Johnny Paul Koroma of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council Movement. This is the military junta that brought the RUF rebels on board in a power sharing arrangement and ECOMOG moved in to dislodge them. President Kabbah was reinstated in March 1998 but the civil war and its cortege of death and destruction was not over. On January 6 1999, the RUF rebels attempted to take the city of Freetown again and visited unspeakable atrocities on the population. Rape, amputations, abductions, and killings were common. It was within this context that ECOWAS organised the Lome Peace Talks, as a precursor to the Abuja summit of 2000 that saw the birth of MARWOPNET and novel feminist approaches to conflict resolution and peace building.

1.5 The context of conflict: General issues arising

The conflict processes examined in this exercise demonstrate the shortcomings of a range of Western political models of governance (Portuguese, British, American and Belgian) in an African setting. As these case studies demonstrate patriarchal responses leading to the promotion of militaristic, male-streamed systems based on exclusion, polarisation on several fronts: ethnic, religious, geographical, ideological, class, gender and age, have not succeeded anywhere on the continent. They have instead tended to exacerbate differences, leaving little or no room for traditional or alternative mechanisms. The ultimate goal has been power at all costs. The ruling post-independence elite have therefore promoted the potential for conflict through the politics of patronage, rewarding loyalty over meritocracy, intolerance, exclusion, the manipulation of irrational fear through carefully calculated enemy images and personal rule. Apart from statecraft, other issues emerging centre around the long shadow of the Cold War, the anti apartheid struggle, and from the 1990s new geopolitical realignments, internal conflicts feeding into larger sub regional rebel alliances, and the advent of phenomena like child soldiers as well as the proliferation of small arms.

Male dominated peace processes have tended to revolve around power sharing among rival factions jockeying for Cabinet level and other senior posts, security and military issues known as “hard politics” as opposed to the “soft politics” that cover social and humanitarian affairs, which are often part of the root causes of the conflicts. Gender-based concerns are not given the attention they deserve in such processes. As a result, matters of sexual violence get inadequately addressed or redressed if at all, female combatants can get saddled with men’s clothes, and peacekeepers can turn into perpetrators of rape and defilement.

1.6 Common Feminist Attributes

The outstanding features in all the cases had to do with alternative methodologies and organisation. For example, as opposed to the bare knuckled methods and settings of the traditional peace talks, the women in Mozambique, Burundi, Sierra Leone and Liberia all overcame the polarisation that such political processes thrive on! Beyond the ethnic, class, geographical, religious, age and gender divide, women operated in a wider multilateral, multidimensional scope of operations. This was facilitated by the following factors:

- **Methodology:** The women used collaborative, participatory methods such as, dialogue and persuasion, and capacity building for empowerment.
- **Organization:** Networking and delegation characterise the operation of all the initiatives documented.
- **Attributes:** The initiatives transcended barriers and were all-inclusive. Their members emphasised the holistic healing of communities as necessary for sustainable peace. They practiced listening, tenacity, fearlessness, and selfless sacrifice. They sought results, drew on spiritual strength and always left room for alternatives.

Although there is still a long way to go before sustainable peace is established in any of these countries, the women's peace activities herein documented have demonstrated clearly that women's participation in formal peace processes is mandatory for peace to be complete. The women bring in aspects and attributes that men alone cannot, and their continued exclusion leaves peace protocols incomplete.

CHAPTER ONE

Women Building Relationships: The Women's Peace Center - Burundi

The woman is the pillar of the household. She manages and ensures that things go well; she ensures peace. Without a woman, a home crumbles. If a man kicks out a woman from the home, the Burundi say ..umuhusha tunga ahusha umugore, meaning that if you kick out a woman, you lose all your wealth and dignity (Participant in a Focus Group Discussion)



Details of the war in Burundi

The roots of the conflict in Burundi can be traced to the colonial era, fanned by the “divide and rule” policies of the colonialists, which, on the basis of questionable racial theories in vogue in the 19th Century, emphasized differences between the Hutu and the Tutsi, and favoured the latter in education and governance. Power struggles erupted at independence with the assassination of the first Prime Minister, Prince Louis Rwagasore, a nationalist, touching off murders, massacres and coups, and leading to the overthrow of the monarchy in 1966. With a succession of military governments at the helm of statecraft, matters came to a head in 1972, when, in an amplified version of an earlier massacre in 1965, the army targeted and killed Hutus, especially the intellectuals. Three more coups took place between 1976 and 1988 when Buyoya first came to power and five years later in 1993, organised an election in which he was also a candidate. FRODEBU, with a mainly Hutu constituency, won and Buyoya, on a UPRONA ticket, came a respectable second. But the stage was set for further mayhem when Melchoir Ndadaye, the first democratically elected President of Burundi, was assassinated by the mainly Tutsi-led army in October 1993. Inter ethnic carnage, by some accounts genocide, ensued, pitting Hutu against Tutsi. The more militant Hutu groups took to an armed struggle against the army, leading to the creation of rebel movements like the FDD-CDD, FLN-Palipehutu and others. Ndadaye’s successor Ntaryamira was himself killed in April 1994 with Rwanda’s Habyarimana in the plane crash over Kigali that triggered the horrific 1994 genocide in that country. In turn, his successor, Ntibantunganya was overthrown in a second coup by Major Buyoya in 1996. The neighbouring countries countered by imposing an embargo against the military government. Regional diplomacy with support from the international community succeeded in brokering the Arusha Peace Talks chaired by retired Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere and at his demise in 1999, Africa’s elder statesman, Nelson Mandela, took over the process. In the interim, as the theatre of conflict widened in Burundi and tensions escalated, many Tutsis were forced to abandon their homes in the hills and settle in urban areas, and Hutus fled to refugee camps in the neighbouring countries, especially Rwanda and Tanzania.

Causes of the Conflict

The tiny Central African country has been bedevilled by bad governance based on the predominance of the Tutsi minority that thrived on militarised politics following the overthrow of the monarchy and rule by a clique of army officers from a commune known as Rutovu in the South. The 1965

and 1972 killings resulted in many Hutu families losing educated officials targeted for liquidation by the largely Tutsi-led army. Impoverished families and communities, abandoned to their devices, bore deep grudges, bitterness and resentment against the Tutsi. The Hutu politicians decried the political dominance of a minority. On the other hand, the ruling Tutsi minority was haunted by its own fears of the eventuality of domination by the Hutu that would ride roughshod over a defeated enemy and thus fail to deliver on the protection of minority. Therefore, the relatively free and fair elections of 1993 were an opportunity for the group that had hitherto felt marginalized to change the status quo, and when the elected president was assassinated soon after, even the top leadership among the Hutu was involved in mobilizing grassroots women and men to avenge this death by attacking the Tutsi. One Hutu woman commented thus:

The death of President Ndadaye made the Hutu desperate. They had hope in the newly elected President, and when he was killed, the situation in Burundi exploded into violence. The Hutu leadership who ran away from the country resolved to get a solution by military means, and mobilized rural groups, especially the unemployed youth, to get the military solution. (Individual interview: Bujumbura)

Effect of the war on women:

Much as the violence in Burundi was a result of these ethnic differences, the repercussions were not discriminatory. Women, men and children of all ethnic groups were adversely affected, as is always the case in violent conflicts. Many became refugees and internally displaced. Women struggled to keep their families fed as the men were indiscriminately targeted for killing. Poverty worsened as a result of living in internally displaced people's camps. The violence meant that women and men could not



work in the fields. Women were victims of rape, and some were forced to sell their bodies in order to ensure family survival. As a result, the incidence of sexually transmitted infections and diseases increased. Other diseases became rampant too, due to the breakdown of the infrastructure and social services.

Within Burundi's patriarchal culture, women became heads of households, taking on responsibilities they were not culturally prepared to perform. This doubled and complicated their tasks. In such a culture, where women are sidelined in all political debates and are not given a voice in decision making at the family, community or national level, the suddenly inherited responsibility of heading households made these women's situation even more complicated.

What does Peace mean in Burundi?

From the individual and focus group discussions held both in the city and the rural areas, it was clear that for the women of Burundi, peace means more than the mere absence of war. It means living in security, the ability to leave one's area and return safely, and much more. The fact that the Burundi greet one another using the words "*Amahoro*" (peace) demonstrates their inherent desire to live in harmony. Therefore, for one woman, peace meant Hutu and Tutsi people being able to meet and greet one another, women and men able to exchange visits and views despite ethnic, class, racial and religious differences. Many women related peace with economic development, the ability to cultivate their fields and to get water without endangering their lives. Peace was also connected with relating well with one's neighbours, whatever group they belong to.

Women also equated peace with being able to visit neighbours and enjoying a good relationship. "When there is peace you can visit and negotiate with friends near and far and come back safely; children are happy playing together", one woman said in a focus group discussion. The women agreed that peace begins in the heart, and that women needed peace to raise their children well.

Some also equated peace with equitable levels of development, the absence of conditions that could lead to a war, with the country well governed politically and economically, and when there is no corruption.

The Women's Peace Center Comes on Scene in Burundi

The Women's Peace Center was started in January 1996 as a project of Search for Common Ground in recognition of the fact that it was important to involve women as key actors in the process of reconciliation between the different ethnic groups of Burundi. It was therefore necessary to give women the requisite skills to do that work in the best way possible. One rural woman commented thus; *"The Women's Peace Center arrives in the field and reaches out to people that others don't touch."*¹ This is perhaps the best way to describe the Women's Peace Center.

The Women's Peace Center as a Localized Women's Organisation

Despite being a programme of an international organisation, the Women's Peace Center has so entrenched its activities within the local realities of Burundi that they can be regarded as part of African women's effort to find African solutions to its challenges. One way it has done this is in its localisation policy. In the recruitment of staff, there is an effort to balance the recruitment of staff from all the ethnic groups. The members of staff are chosen to represent the communities in which the Center wants to work. Therefore, there are Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa women within the staff of the Women's Peace Center. It has also established offices (antennae) in the countryside, enabling it to be on the ground when the issues are. The grassroots groups are involved in the programme formulation, and this makes it people centred. In fact, in all its programmes in Burundi, Search for Common Ground has ensured that international members of staff are reduced to the bare minimum, and their presence at the grassroots level is consciously limited.

Activities of the Women's Peace Center

The Women's Peace Center focuses its activities on reconciling divided communities. Many of the women and men we interviewed rated the fact that the Women's Peace Center is able to bring Hutu and Tutsi women to forgive and understand one another to be a very important prerequisite to sustainable peace in Burundi. The Center has been able to use the people's holistic understanding of peace and assist them in carrying out activities that contribute towards their desired reality of peace. Since its establishment, the Women's Peace Center has worked towards the restoration of the relationship between the Hutu and the Tutsi, as well as including

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the *Twa*, who are regarded as non-people in the countries where they exist. One woman commented in a focus group discussion:

The Batwa were very removed from the society. The Women's Peace Center took Tutsi and Hutu women to visit the Twa and greet them like the Barundikazi (Burundi women) do.

The Center has engaged communities, especially the women in these communities to engage in activities that encourage co-existence, and enable women and men to overcome suspicion and to nurture relationships. For example, communities are assisted to construct houses to meet the basic shelter needs of returning refugees and internally displaced people. One woman from Kinama Quarter in Bujumbura attested to this.

The Women's Peace Center contributed towards helping us to construct houses. The residents made bricks, which would be used to build the houses of returnees; there are 412 such houses so far in Kinama. The problem is they have not got iron sheets.

Ensuring that these returnees have shelter is one sure way of building the relationship between those returning from exile and those who remained at home. The women and men were also mobilized to repair roads and water wells in Kinama Quarter.

The Women's Peace Center gathers women from different ethnic groups, different political trends, and different places, to discuss their concerns. It organises forums where women from the national Parliament, grassroots women, displaced women, women returnees, Tutsi, Hutu, and Batwa women are all able to discuss issues of common concerns, and to realise that as women, they do share common concerns that transcend ethnic and class differences. That is a unique practice, which enables women to get down to earth, and communicate. By enabling women to hold meetings and discuss issues that unite them as well as those that divide them,

the Women's Peace Center is able to build relationships between the different ethnic groups and promote the healing of their hearts.

Training for Women

The Women's Peace Center carries out training that includes Training of Trainers for other women to enable them replicate the training in the communities to hasten its impact. One trainer said,

The question trainers asked us “What do you think a Tutsi thinks about you, how do you want a Tutsi to think about you, and why?” opened our eyes and showed us the positive face of another. Now the fear we had has been reduced and we understand each other. After many discussions, Tutsi who feared to go to Bujumbura Rural decided to visit us (Focus Discussion Group at the Women's Peace Center).



The training covers a lot of topics, such as; how to behave during periods of political conflict, responding to sexual violence, political manipulation, ethnic suspicion, distinguishing good leaders from bad ones, conflict analysis, mitigation and transformation, the resolution of conflicts, and human rights.

Women's doors were closed and they did not have confidence. The Women's Peace Center taught them how to build associations and to live in harmony as Hutu and Tutsi. The Center trained Hutu and Tutsi together and enabled them to dialogue to

hug and begin to love one another. The Center has also helped Hutu and Tutsi women to confront their discrimination of the Twa women, and learn to accord them the same rights they themselves wished to enjoy as citizens of Burundi.

During training, the Women's Peace Center brings together women from different ethnic groups, and when they engage in a common activity, they are enabled to realise that there is more that unites them than what divides them. This experience was narrated in one focus group discussion.

In Makamba, there are not many Tutsi. Therefore when rebels attacked both Tutsi and Hutu ran together shared food and returned together when the area was calm again. The community was scared that government troops would attack them, so many from the two sides ran to Tanzania. The Tutsi had many children in the Burundi army, and the Hutu had many children in rebel army, so the two groups tried to support each other. Some of these refugees are now returning and getting their land.

Makamba people never really had problems with each other and the Women's Peace Center helped them organise meetings to strengthen their community. Hutu wives would warn the Tutsi if they heard from their husbands that there were going to be problems.

The Women's Peace Center has been training women. It enables them to avoid suspicion by helping them to analyse conflict as well as resolve conflict even without resorting to the Bashingantahe² who needed to be bought and given alcohol.

The Women's Peace Center has created antennae all over Burundi to decentralize its activities. The training takes place at the different antennae. It involves both elite and grassroots women, as well as the young and the old. For example, one participant in a Focus Group discussion reported that:

The Hutu and Tutsi students who were in open conflict at the High School in Makamba became friends and created a peace club.³

In addition, the Women's Peace Center's dialogues address the elite as well as grassroots women. During our visit, we were able to interact with women politicians and lawyers as well as human rights activists of both sexes and different ethnic origins within Bujumbura, as well as rural

women and men, who all attested to the fact that the methodology of the Women's Peace Center is adaptable, practical and very well related to the reality of Burundi. Their efforts are focused on conflict resolution, peace and reconciliation, and the representatives of the Center strive as far as possible to remain neutral in these dialogues.

The Center makes strategic linkages between its activities and those of the bigger Search for Common Ground, such as the Victims of Torture Program and Radio Isanganiro. The radio is used to transmit peace messages, and uses Soap Operas to encourage discussions of ethnic differences and promote understanding. The radio transmits as far as Tanzania, Rwanda, and Eastern Congo, where it reaches out to the Burundi in refugee camps, encouraging them to reflect on issues that could build sustainable peace in their country.

The communities are also assisted to organise drama to analyse the community and national conflicts and promote peace building that goes to the roots of the problems. Through theatre, participants can get an idea of what war can do to them and how to avoid it.

Positive Solidarity Days/Visits

Positive Solidarity Days and visits are a truly unique activity that the Women's Peace Center has engaged in to rebuild the fractured relationships of the Hutu and Tutsi. The 1993 assassination of the elected President and the ensuing violence led to most Tutsi families moving out of rural areas and the hills, and settling as internally displaced persons in urban centers in the different quarters countrywide as well as Bujumbura. The Women's Peace Center has been involved in promoting dialogue between the communities that used to live together and are now separated by fear and suspicion. The process is long and involves discussions with each of the communities and enabling it to analyse conflict and take it beyond personalities. The discussions enable the communities to map out their conflicts, and recognise the needs and fears of the other group. Below is an account of one woman whose community had benefited from such dialogues.

There was a time when we thought we were finished as a community. We suffered many attacks from rebels. In 2002, the Women's Peace Center did a lot of work in the area. There are two quarters; Sanzu, which is predominantly Tutsi, and Gasande, predominantly Hutu. There were major suspicions between the two quarters. The people from the Gasande Quarter ran away when they did not have food. Some even



went to Bujumbura. At the beginning of 2003, the Women's Peace Center organised meetings between the representatives of the two Quarters, where people were able to be truthful about their feelings about the people from the other side. Later, the Women's Peace Center organised a

positive solidarity day between the two Quarters. It was a tremendous success. There was singing, dancing, and the exchange of gifts. We realised there is more that unites us than that which divides us.

People from Gasande and Sanzu have now decided to build a big house for joint functions (either happy or sad functions). The house can also be used for children from both sides for joint learning activities that will enable them to know the value of coexistence. The Women's Peace Center assisted us by topping up our contributions for the construction.

The Women's Peace Center organizes meetings of women of different ethnicities in different Quarters to prepare them for the exchange visits. The number of these meetings depends on how long it takes to get the representatives of each side to feel comfortable enough to be able to visit the other. The culmination of these dialogues is a positive solidarity visit. The Women's Peace Center also organizes such dialogues and exchange visits between repatriated, residents and displaced people.

So far, such dialogues and visits have taken place between a number of different Quarters such as the one between the people from Musaga and Kanyosha that the Women's Peace Center facilitated in January 2003. Later the mutual protection between the Hutu and Tutsi of these Quarters could be attributed to the success of the training and exchange visits between the Hutu and Tutsi of the areas. One respondent in a Focus Group Discussion said:

We noticed that during the attacks of July 2003 at Musaga and Kanyosha (by the CNDD-FDD and FNL rebel groups at the time) the Hutu and Tutsi fled together and helped one another, thanks to those kinds of WPC initiatives.

We had an opportunity to be part of a Positive Solidarity Visit between the residents of Nyakabiga a suburb of Bujumbura predominantly inhabited by the Tutsi who had left Muyira in the hills facing Bujumbura, and the predominantly Hutu community that had remained in Muyira. Several sessions of dialogue had been facilitated between the two groups earlier. Each group had considered the other to be made up of killers. The two groups engaged in trauma healing activities that enabled them to get a different perspective of what they experienced in 1993. The dialogues enabled the representatives of the two groups to overcome feelings of suspicion and vengeance.

The Women's Peace Center then helped the representatives of the two groups to reconcile and take back such messages to their communities. Then they started considering an exchange visit and joint cultivation activities that could reunite Nyakabiga and Muyira. The Women's Peace Center helped to give extra hoes, seeds and fertilizer, enabling the two communities to further realise that they had similar fundamental needs and goals.

The culmination of this relationship building activity took place on February 24, 2004, when three buses took residents from Nyakabiga up the hills to Muyira, where the residents of Muyira were waiting for them. It was a moving experience for everyone. The visitors from Nyakabiga arrived in Muyira and they were greeted by singing, drumming and dancing, and were led to grounds of a primary school where the day's activities took place. The day was spent in dancing, making speeches, exchanging gifts, and sharing a meal. The highlight of the visit was when representatives of the two groups participated in drinking traditional beer from the same pot, indicating the renewal of trust and the restoration of their relationship, both prerequisites to sustainable peace.

Such solidarity visits have been successful in other Quarters, and we could see that the likelihood of this success repeating itself between Muyira and Nyakabiga was high.

Observations after the Muyira Solidarity Visit

After the visit, we had a discussion with a cross section of Burundi citizens living in Bujumbura who had accompanied the Nyakabiga residents to Muyira, how they felt about such a Positive Solidarity Visit. Some were impressed by the friendly way in which the women and men of Muyira, who were predominantly Hutu, welcomed those from Nyakabiga who left after violent clashes, and had been away from home for more than 10 years. The natural way in which they performed reconciliation activities was commended and preferred to the hypocritical way politicians act during peace negotiations and the signing of peace accords. It was both powerful and surprising to see people from both communities, who had sworn never to cross over to visit one



another, do so and be welcomed. The reconciliation process that The Women's Peace Centre had undertaken to get to this day was enormous. When given the freedom, the communities could organize themselves and carry out activities that could promote peace. The Women's Peace Center had only facilitated the Muyira and Nyakabiga communities with some finances, but the logistical process was left to the groups, and the results signified the beginning of genuine reconciliation.

The Positive Solidarity Day had created a positive image in the community that could eventually neutralise the memory of the killings and insecurity, which were currently being reported in the area. The solidarity day enabled people to demonstrate that reconciliation and the restoration of relationships was possible. This could help in stopping the animosity that had resulted in the violence of past years. It demonstrated positive actions that could change the attitude of the communities towards one another, and hopefully prevent future fighting.

During the visit, there was deliberate emphasis on the use of the word “Amahoro” which means “peace” as a greeting whenever any speaker stood up to address the people. It was an expression that broke barriers between individuals. The fact that the visit involved both young and old people demonstrated hope for the future of these communities. The visit demystified suspicions and created understanding among communities. The use of music, dance and drama, helped to draw in more members of the community being visited, and enabled them to listen to the peace messages. The free mixing of the Tutsi and the Hutu from both communities during the dance showed that both groups felt safe, and were willing to reunite and bury the past. It reassured conflicting groups that peace was possible, and the violent conflicts of the past could be brought to an end through such trust building activities. The shared drink from a common beer pot



demonstrated willingness to restore oneness, trust, sharing and reconciliation in the community.

Such solidarity visits are a way of renewing friendship, a way of breaking the barrier of fear, and restoring faith in the community. They break the isolation of communities that promotes suspicion and destroys the “humanness” of the other side. One woman made a very astute comment about it:

“ Unless you visit one another you won’t know that the other group is also human.”

However, such strategies are not without challenges. One woman commented that Positive Solidarity Visits could not solve the immediate problems of people, which were mainly caused by poverty. It was impossible to sustain peace unless immediate hunger and poverty were addressed. There was therefore need to make strategic linkages with people working on income generating activities/ projects to meet the needs of these communities.

Still one got the impression that such visits were indeed valuable as a beginning of the healing of relationships.

Visits to Prisons

The Women's Peace Center has been able to organize visits to prisons and to internally displaced people's camps. It also organizes visits for those who wish to apologize to those in prison for having accused them falsely and caused their imprisonment. A group in Ngozi, in the northern part of Burundi attested to this.

Counselling and Trauma Healing

As part of holistic peace building, the Women's peace Center uses associations under the Victims of Torture program to carry out counselling for women survivors of rape and torture. Women in different parts of Burundi are encouraged to break their silence on rape and other sexual violations experienced during armed conflict, and speak out in order to embark on the long road towards healing. The cases of torture are taken to the antennae offices of the Women's Peace Center. Different communities are also enabled to address domestic violence by referring the survivors to the different Women's Peace Center antennae.

Reaching Out to the Refugees

The Women's Peace Center has also facilitated women from Burundi to go and visit refugees in Tanzania to show them that life in their country is possible and that they are ready to welcome

them back as their sisters and brothers. As a result of the exchange visits between Burundi women from within the country and the refugees in Tanzania, many refugees were comforted and assured of being welcomed back home. The refugees were happy to note that the group from Burundi was composed of both Hutu and Tutsi, as most of those refugees are Hutu. Some families have been able to return to Burundi as a result of



those visits, and the community helped them to rebuild their homes and establish gardens. The Women's Peace Center has given these returning refugees advice on agriculture. One of the former refugees was able to attest to the impact of the visit during the focus group discussion in Kinama.

The Women's Peace Center taught me what love is. As one who escaped to Tanzania in 1972, I returned home in fear of the Tutsi since they had chased us away. The Women's Peace Center created understanding between me and the community I returned to. They helped me to demystify ethnicity. I wish the work of the Women's Peace Center could continue in Burundi.

The return of refugees benefits women as well as men. Men and women attended the focus group discussion in Kinama, and one man had this to say:

I am a formerly displaced person. I escaped from Kinama Quarter in 1993, and I went 700 miles away. I am now here because Brigitte and Leone (staff of the Women's Peace Center) helped me to return through the visits they made to us in the camps, and because of the creation of good understanding between me and the community, I now feel free to move. The Women's Peace Center and the Kinama community helped me to make bricks and construct a house for myself. A mixture of tribes constructed the houses. We now consider ourselves a community of the Barundi.

Women and Peace Negotiations

Asked whether women should be involved in formal peace negotiations, the women who had been through the training and the dialogues organized by the Women's Peace Center, those that were associated with them, and those who had observed their activities answered in the affirmative. They believed women were natural peacemakers, considering what they did in homes and communities. They also felt that women were less exclusive and less corrupted, and men would not get far in finding comprehensive solutions without the women. Some felt that since the women made up the majority of the population of Burundi, they have the right to be included in the quest for a sustainable solution to Burundi's complex conflict situation. Some felt women are intelligent and engaging, and could do better in good governance, as many do not like violence. It was even believed that the majority of women do not regard the ethnic

question as an issue because women can have Hutu, Twa, and Tutsi partners and then produce children of the mixed ethnicities.

Moreover, the women had suffered inordinately during the war and therefore needed to be involved in peace building so that their voices could be heard in a future peace agreement. At the table for peace negotiations, women would insist that leaders deal with the root causes of the persistent conflicts, and put in place programmes to deal with issues of exclusion and inequitable opportunities. They would bring up the issues of impunity, so that the perpetrators of massive atrocities would not participate in future governance. It was felt that women were of paramount importance in peaceful resolution of conflict, and could not therefore be left out of Burundi peace negotiations.

However some felt that women had to insist and not wait for the day the men would call them to participate. They would need to demonstrate their ability to lead with a difference. In the reality of Burundi, they would have to take the leadership of political parties because it was parties that were represented at the peace table, and were more effectively listened to. Women also needed to be more effectively involved in local administration. They needed to get together and issue statements on what was wrong in Burundi and send them to the media, so that they could get widely disseminated. Many more women needed to speak out and avoid waiting on the fence for the time when it would be safe to participate in politics and governance.

The Women's Peace Center and Women's Contribution to the Arusha Peace Process

During the peace negotiations on Burundi that had taken place in Arusha, Tanzania, the Women's Peace Center organized discussions to enable women to contribute to the process and express ideas on peace to the mediator, President Nelson Mandela. As a result of the exchanges, the women joined other Burundi women in demanding for a place in those negotiations and sent a message to the mediator containing their suggestions. Nelson Mandela sent them a personal response.

The Women's Peace Center demonstrated clearly that the participation of women in the peace processes should be at different levels, and target different actors. One woman in a focus group discussion said,

I decided to work with the Women's Peace Center on the Arusha process by facilitating women's exchanges during the negotiation process, training women in self esteem, and strengthening the movement for women's political participation and I requested the Center to work with different women's association in a network on political issues.

Uniqueness of the Activities

In some quarters, people are arrested and imprisoned for killing and robbery fairly or unfairly. The Women's Peace Center in the different antennae has organized discussions in the communes. The people who killed or robbed apologized publicly in front of their victims. Others whose testimonies led to the jailing of friends unfairly also went to the prisons and apologized to them. Some even carried out public reconciliation activities to try and restore the broken relationships with those they unfairly caused to be imprisoned. Such people ask the Women's Peace Center to accompany them to apologize to the unfairly jailed people. The lawyers would also be invited to these exchanges. Unfortunately, the apology does not result in the prisoner's release from jail, as they still have to wait for the law to take its course.

The Women's Peace Center and Women's Empowerment

The Women's Peace Center encourages women to play an advocacy role in political debates, and empowers women to become models of leadership. By availing women training in leadership and trauma management, and giving them knowledge and skills of conflict prevention, conflict management and conflict resolution as well as human rights, the Center empowers such women to stand head and shoulders above others. Such women are therefore more than prepared to take on any positions of leadership, civil or political, as well as challenge bad leadership. One woman Parliamentarian made the following comment:

As a Member of Parliament, I use the training I got from the Women's Peace Center to respect the point of view of others, to practice inclusiveness, and to be tolerant.⁴

A woman from another Focus Group discussion said,

Politically, the Women's Peace Center showed us how to distinguish a good policy

maker from others. We believe there will be no manipulation again during elections. We are able to elect, not an individual but a programme.⁵

Personal Testimonies on the Effect of the Center's Work on Individuals

It helped me to avoid hating the whole tribe.... I am even looking after orphans from a tribe that killed my family. They call me mother. (Immaculate, Bujumbura FGD)

The Women's Peace Center enabled me to learn how to start and run projects and set up one on addressing HIV in Ngozi. (Ngozi FGD)

As a widow, the Center has benefited me in conflict resolution and peace building, leadership, as well as addressing my problems and those of others. I have learnt to listen to other people's problems and help improve relationships. I am now confident. (Kinama FGD)

It has helped prisoners and their families. For example, 40 members of my family were imprisoned and that traumatized me. For ten years now, my people are still in prison. The counseling and visits from the Women's Peace Center have helped me to calm down and develop peace slowly. (Ngozi FGD)



The activities of the Women's Peace Center stand out when compared to those of other NGOs working in the Burundi communities. The Center facilitates discussions between women's groups that have previously been in conflict, then gives the women their space, and

takes interest in their issues. It also encourages them to be open and express both personal and community issues. It remains accessible to assist where the groups may face difficulties. Their methodology is unique and very often the Center realizes its goals as demonstrated by the Positive Solidarity Visits, and the difference these n visits makes in the individuals as well as the communities.

The Women's Peace Center gives the women an opportunity to excel in their own right and to involve themselves in specific activities that they deem right for their community. A group in the Kinama Quarter chose to build homes for returning refugees, members of a group in Ngozi in the North of Burundi chose to work together tilling fields and growing crops jointly. Some groups chose to visit refugees in Tanzania, while others prepared their communities to welcome refugees back home. All the meetings the Center organises involve Hutu and Tutsi and are aimed at emboldening women to confront ethnicity and deal with it. These joint meetings have enabled women to speak boldly and hear one another out. The Center has supported activities that involve women only because they feel that women need their own space to plan their own strategies without being overpowered by men. One woman in a Focus Group discussion said,

Activities that involve women and men end up being attended by only men. The woman feels she has no place there. The Women's Peace Center gives women space.
(Bujumbura FGD)

So keen is the Center to see harmony among all the people of Burundi that it is determined to address the peace needs of all Burundi citizens; Tutsi, Hutu and Twa. It even has an activity to promote the rights of Twa women in marriage, as was reported in a Focus Group Discussion in Ngozi, Northern Burundi.⁶ Previously, many of the marriages of the Twa were not registered. This made the situation of the women in the home precarious. In March 2003, the Women's Peace Center organised to accompany 25 Twa couples to the registrar's office to register their marriages, as is done by all other Burundi. The activity was very much lauded.

Challenges of The Women's Peace Center

Poverty causes a lot of discontent, and a lot of women cannot concentrate on participation in peace building for long when they are worried about where the next meal for the family will come from. Peace building in biting poverty is not sustainable and a poor woman or man cannot

be at peace for long. In a country where the majority of the population lives below the poverty line, poverty is seen as the most daunting challenge to the peace building work of the Women's Peace Center, and any other peace building organisation. It is therefore imperative that the Center builds strategic linkages with groups that are involved in income generation so that the groups affiliated to the Center can get assistance in starting income generating activities.

Another challenge is the politics of divide and rule that thrive on ethnic differences, and manipulate these differences for political expediency. Our visit took place as Burundi was moving towards Parliamentary and Presidential elections. The Women's Peace Center was worried about the possibility of politicians dismantling the work they had so strenuously put together. The Center was also grappling with the challenge of how to include men without jeopardising the gains made by the women. The Center also realised the need to cover the whole of Burundi without endangering the lives of its staff. Although the use of the radio was helping a lot in this respect, it was still felt that physical visits did a lot to re-emphasize the radio messages.

Other challenges that the Women's Peace Center has had to deal with include the fact that women who have culturally been confined to private space find it difficult to come out, participate meaningfully in the training offered by Center, and challenge the status quo. Many of them lack the confidence, self-esteem and empowerment necessary to do that. It takes a lot of patience to get women out of this state so that they can benefit from the array of opportunities that the Women's Peace Center offers. But the Center does have this patience, and gradually, the positive results are showing in the communities.

In promoting the work in peace building and conflict transformation, the Center risks creating conflict within women and men, and the *Abashingatahe* who are the traditional judges and mostly men. They might feel that the Women's Peace Center is taking over their role in the communities. This is power that these traditional men may not wish to lose so easily.

The Center also needs to link more effectively with local and central administration, as well as intellectuals and leaders in higher levels of governance so that its commendable strategies can be mainstreamed into national policies.

There is a lot of work to do in the area of conflict transformation in Burundi. It is simply a case of "too much harvest with too few workers". The Women's Peace Center faces the challenge of linking effectively with other groups to strengthen the effort in this noble work and increase

effectiveness. Sustainable conflict transformation needs a critical mass of participants in order to show results.

The Way Forward for the Activities of the Women's Peace Center

Even if there are signs of peace today, there is still a long way to go to achieve peace that is sustainable. Therefore the activities of the Women's Peace Center must be continued vigorously.



The Women Peace Center desires to spread its peace building activities in all provinces of Burundi, as their initiatives had caused change in the areas where they operated. Such activities have the potential to improve the leadership of women tomorrow.

Justice is a huge issue, and it needs to be put in the hands of those who suffered to give ideas /suggestions on what the perpetrator can do beyond apology. There is no straight answer to the issues of impunity. There are many possibilities to justice, and the Women's Peace Center's round table discussions on reconciliation are helping in addressing some of these issues. These, and the replication of the commendable activities at the grassroots level need to be supported and strengthened

The Women's Peace Center needs to remain vigilant in playing a leading role in conflict transformation. Because conflict is common and needs to be managed effectively so that it does not turn violent any time, it is the responsibility of the women who have been trained by

the Women's Peace Center to play a leading role in their communities to build on the good practices and maintain the peace. Burundi has been through a lot of trauma as a result of violence, and women can make a difference in dealing with this trauma, as well as in conflict transformation. There is need to sustain the immense gains realised on the ground, and ensure that more and more women and men find common ground; that is, identify those things that unite them, and build on them to transform the deep seated conflicts in the country and ensure sustainable peace in Burundi. The Women's Peace Center will need to continue to identify different strategies for working with various groups including rebels, but also to explore ways of more effective engagement with the politicians to ensure good governance and the rule of law at all times. There is need to keep on emphasizing tolerance and co- existence among the hitherto adversaries, and the need to build a nation of Burundi that is big enough for every ethnic group to participate equally and enjoy full human rights.

CHAPTER TWO

Ex-Combatants Building Bridges and Promoting Peace:

PROPAZ - Mozambique

The Association for the Promotion of Peace (PROPAZ) was established in Mozambique in 1995. The objective of starting it was to address pitfalls of the reintegration process that had been established by the Rome Peace Accord of 1992, which had ended the civil war whose main actors were the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), and the Mozambican National Resistance Army (RENAMO). There were micro-projects under the UN for ex-combatants after the signing of the Rome Peace Accord. PROPAZ was started in order to target the ex-combatants from FRELIMO and RENAMO, as well as the youth, and to foster sustainable peace in both rural and urban areas of Mozambique.



PROPАЗ is one of the few civil society organisations in Africa that addressed the issues of disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDR) in a gender sensitive manner. It was started to introduce a culture of peace among ex-combatants when demanding for their rights, as opposed to violent approaches. It was also necessary to have an organisation that could prepare communities to accept ex-combatants, and build confidence in both the ex-combatants and the communities. Previously, ex-combatants had been regarded as threats to the communities. In order to foster reconciliation and a culture of tolerance in the communities, it was necessary to inspire them by showing them that ex-combatants from both sides (FRELIMO and RENAMO) could live and work side by side in peace, as well as collaborate in developmental activities. This would enable the communities to appreciate the potential of ex-combatants for peace.

During the disarmament and demobilisation process, the ex-soldiers were promised assistance as part of the reintegration process, but this was not given. The UN did not train them to manage projects or the peace issues, and had also promised them land for agricultural work, which they did not provide. This meant that the projects started as part of the UN DDR process had pitfalls even in their first year of implementation because the ex-combatants were not technically equipped with skills to manage the projects. Moreover, it was felt among the ex-combatants that the projects benefited combatants who had been in FRELIMO more than those from RENAMO. This caused resentment among ex-combatants, and threatened the peace process.

Mozambican combatants on both sides of the fighting forces, like those in most parts of Africa, were used to a culture of violence in the bush, with no peace training, and the immediate end of the war meant that some of them had to be demobilised and sent back to the cities as well as their communities. Demobilization and re-integration of fighters centered on providing the demobilized soldiers with funds for income generation. Unfortunately, most of the combatants had dropped out of school or had never been to school. Many of them were demobilised after spending over 16 years in the bush fighting as part of either FRELIMO or RENAMO, with no other skills but those of using the gun to loot and kill. These women and men were used to receiving instructions and not managing things. Therefore, they did not have the requisite education and skills to effectively use such grants. As a result, most of the income generating projects they started with the funds failed due to lack of management skills. The ex-combatants were also violent in the communities where they were resettled, and soon enough the communities began to feel threatened by their presence.

Demobilisation resulted in increased violence in communities. The ex-combatants blocked roads, and took government, UN and NGO staff as hostages as a way of demanding for their rights because they felt neglected after serving their country. Therefore, the ex-combatants were not well accommodated by these communities, and there was need for education of both the communities and the ex-combatants as part of the re-integration process. So AMODEG and ADEMIMO, the associations that had been set up to cater for the welfare of ex-combatants and maimed combatants respectively, met to consider what could be done to address the situation. PROPAZ was therefore formed by the Mozambican Association of Demobilized Soldiers (AMODEG) and the Association of Maimed Combatants (ADEMIMO) in 1995.

Its activities presently cover the provinces that had more ex-combatants according to the UN Statistics. These were: Nampula, Zambezia, Sofala and Maputo. The organization focuses on reconciliation and reintegration of soldiers from both the Mozambique People's Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and Mozambique National Resistance Movement (RENAMO).

Activities

The activities of PROPAZ involve ex-combatants and women and men from civil society interested in reintegrating ex-combatants. Its aim is to promote relationship building for a society divided by politics and parties, to promote social development in order to address conflict, and to establish and reintegrate former soldiers into society.



PROPAZ has provincial trainers who sensitise communities on the dangers of the proliferation of small arms, especially among cattle keeping groups. They use a community approach where they destroy guns and provide incentives instead of reporting gunrunners to police. They also train groups in peace building and conflict transformation with

special emphasis on mediation. PROPАЗ believes in education and actions of peace as proactive approaches of early warning to avert possible conflicts. They have established other Conflict Resolution Community Groups. The challenge for PROPАЗ is that many of their peace building activities are not documented and risk being lost with the passing on of the actors.

The training workshops that PROPАЗ gives have enabled the ex-combatants from FRELIMO and RENAMO to overcome their differences and to work together. They work together in offices and share their war experiences from both camps, and this helps them to open up and strengthen relationships.

Some of the well-known activities of PROPАЗ include the training of peace promoters, training in and practicing conflict management and conflict resolution at community level to help reintegrate ex-combatants, and educating communities on disarmament as well as collecting small arms from the communities they work in. In fact, there were conflicts between ex-combatants in communities in which local governments could not intervene because of the violence of the ex-combatants, but now, PROPАЗ addresses such conflicts. So unique is the work of PROPАЗ that they can carry out activities of conflict prevention through disseminating their experiences to other countries undergoing similar processes, such as Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa, and they have participated in disarmament and reintegration activities even further afield in Nicaragua and Northern Ireland, sharing their experiences in conflict transformation.⁷

The Effect Of War On Women

Traditionally Mozambican women are marginalized and discriminated against, the matrilineal systems therein notwithstanding. Therefore, when it came to war, women were doubly suffering. They had to run from one place to another with children for fear of abduction, and had to take the responsibility for children, including those who were not theirs.

In spite of ensuring the sustainability of families and communities during the war, as well as taking the brunt of the gender based as well as other forms of violence, women were not trusted during any planning processes. During the designing of military plans or hiding places, women were not involved, because the men feared that they could tell the enemy when captured and tortured.



During the violent conflict in Mozambique, gender specific violations of human rights including rape, forced marriages, sexual slavery, and girl-child marriages were common. Rape was used as a weapon of war to punish women whose fathers, brothers, husbands, or other male relatives belonged to a specific fighting group, and to demolarise and humiliate those men for

being incapable of protecting “their women”. Many women did not speak out on such sexual violations because they still carry a stigma in Mozambican society. They therefore had to suffer in silence.

PROPAZ And Women's Human Rights: Women In Combat

The marginalisation and discrimination of women during peacetime is simply magnified during times of widespread violent conflict. Therefore the discrimination was evident both in the FRELIMO and RENAMO fighting forces. This strengthened the need for women from both sides of the fighting forces to come together and address the common suffering resulting from military discrimination, as women from both sides. These women combatants had not been able to visit their relatives in different areas because of the war. They had also lost a lot of people/ family members due to war and needed to be involved in activities that promoted sustainable peace. In any case, that would also contribute to their personal healing. As Lena Magaia, a woman ex-combatant, ex-Member of Parliament said:

Sometimes I hate the things I did during the war so I want to cleanse myself and ease my conscience. I believe people can live by discussing their problems other than the strange forms of living. Because of the atrocities committed, we get affected, so you

end up drinking a lot of alcohol to rid yourself of the experience. One time, a child-soldier told me he wanted to kill me, and I could see a young boy wanting to misuse the gun- I saw that the war was not good for children. The young boy says he is haunted by spirits of those people he killed. There is need to build peace to assist such children, to give them a new life. From such experiences, I wrote a book called “ Double Massacre in Mozambique”. These boys are simply forced to do what they do.

After the peace treaty had been signed, it was good to have ex-combatants, especially women, from both sides of the violent conflict coming together to manage the peace because, in the words of Jacinta Jorge of PROPAZ;

We considered this to be good. We do not need to divide people during peacetime. Peace is the concern of us all. In any case the people who were keen to support us financially encouraged us to work as a community and not to segment ourselves. Neither they nor we wanted to divide the country further. The country had suffered enough. It was time to unite, and we were keen to do so.

A discussion with women ex-combatants reveals that their experiences of war were similar, in spite of the fact that they participated on different sides during the war. Both FRELIMO and RENAMO used abduction as the method of conscripting many young women and men into the fighting forces, and they both used child soldiers.

We did not join voluntarily; it was not our choice. Therefore, when we left the war it was important for us to find solutions to our needs, which seemed common, and we are all women. (Focus Group Discussion)

However, some women felt they needed to contribute more practically to the war effort on either side.

The situation demanded that women should participate. As I wrote in my book: “Run for Your Life”. In 1985, my Director General was kidnapped. A FRELIMO commander called North visited and I asked him why we did not organize as women and men, both young and old, to protect our communities. People were being kidnapped,

women were being raped and the population was experiencing a host of other atrocities. I talked to Samora Machel and asked him to help us. So he asked the Army General to give us what we needed to protect our people and ourselves. Ours was a kind of paramilitary group. The workers turned into militia for our defence against RENAMO who infiltrated and roughed up people. So it was not voluntary but conditions forced us to defend people in the sugar factory. Later when Manhica was in danger, I was sent to create a defence team for the people there; I was on the consultative team. People lived in fear; it was not possible to do farming. This resulted in starvation and dependence on food aid, especially for people in the province of Manhica. I was part of the fighting forces of FRELIMO. (Lina Magaia)

Women's Experiences in the Fighting Forces

During the war, FRELIMO had a policy of equality and women's emancipation on paper, but it was not practical in reality. Women became secretaries, when men were taken to train and were given high ranks with the accompanying salaries. Such discrimination was reported to be happening at the time of the interviews (2004). During the war, if a woman was in a commanding position of the battalion, she was not referred to as a commander, yet the men in these positions were always referred to as commanders. Women were often not sent to the frontline even when they were trained. Instead, they were expected to carry out first aid work and secure the armoury. This kind of treatment made the women resentful of the military. One of them said, *"I stayed in combat for survival purposes, as there was no way out."* (Focus Group Discussion)

Although the women ex-combatants did not admit to have been raped, the treatment some of them received at the hands of male soldiers was tantamount to sexual slavery. One of them made this comment:

Fellow soldiers did not rape us. If a soldier wanted you (sexually), he would request that you get transferred to his detach so he would negotiate with the commanders to get that transfer effected..."

There was a lot of discrimination between men and women in the military in Mozambique.

However valiant the women were in their service in the military, such valour did not translate itself into appropriate promotion. In a Focus Group discussion held with the women ex-combatant members of PROPAZ, the following comments were made:

- ▮ *One woman was promoted to the rank of Major after many years of her training but her salary has not changed at all. The rights of women were only introduced in 1982, yet I only know of one female Lieutenant Colonel.*
- ▮ *Finishing military academy meant that you had become a Captain, but I was denied this title when I completed, because I am a woman.*
- ▮ *In the military academy, out of the team of 100 trainees, there were only 3 women. One woman got pregnant and was dropped, one dropped out before completion, and I was the only one who completed.*
- ▮ *There was a lot of discrimination of female combatants during the war.*
- ▮ *I have always been trying to fight for justice. I saw some injustices in the military that I never wanted to happen to other women:*

The Meaning of Peace

In our discussions with different a cross-section men and women, it was clear that peace meant more than a cessation of hostilities in Mozambique. To the women of PROPAZ, in particular, peace meant tranquility, freedom to move, and low levels of criminality. It meant the ability to feel independent with the security to do what one wants to do. Peace was believed to reign when there were no constraints like hunger, poverty, disease, crime, and women, men and children enjoy good health (*Different Focus group discussions*)

The DDR Process in Mozambique and the Unique Concerns of Women

The Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Rehabilitation (DDR) process looked at the problems of Mozambique in general. There were those who felt that there should be no special

attention paid to women's needs since they are part of society, and since all people were adversely affected by the violent conflict, there should be no preferential treatment in DDR processes. As a result women felt that even the programmes that were aimed at the emancipation of women were not genuine. The community used traditional methods to address the problems of war, including rape and children born out of rape, but there was no specific government programme to address such issues. The problem is that these traditional methods have not been documented.

The demobilization packages did not consider the unique needs of women ex-combatants. As a result, the packages for women had trousers and men's underwear, and there was absolutely no consideration of the specific needs of demobilised women soldiers. There were no consultations with women before the DDR packages were given out, and that was why their needs were not catered for and their packages had men's utilities. There was no concern over the progress of female ex-combatants who were re-integrated in the community, as there was no follow up of their progress of reintegration.

Therefore, after the signing of the Peace Accord, some of the women ex-combatants were determined to ensure that fellow women ex-combatants should be involved in projects that empowered them more effectively for the future, so that they would participate in being subjects of change, not objects. Jacinta Jorge said this:

“I wanted to enrol myself at AMODEG but I found no women sector there. I was asked to establish the Women's Department in AMODEG. Projects for women were, however, only limited to tailoring. I wanted women to be involved in sustainable projects like continuing studies and obtaining business skills. I was asked to establish PROPAZ, and I was able to market the programme to donors and civil society.”

Women ex-combatants therefore decided to join peace work in very practical ways to fight for justice for their fellow women, and to ensure that things would be different for them. Many had experienced a lot of injustices in active combat, and did not want such injustices to happen to other women or to be perpetuated after the war. The women from FRELIMO and those from RENAMO decided to work together across the divides that existed during the fighting. They gave the following reasons for doing so:

Most of the women in combat on either side had a common background: we were abducted into the fighting forces be it into RENAMO or FRELIMO. We did not join voluntarily; it was not our choice. Therefore, when we left the war it was important for us to find solutions to our needs, which seemed common. We are all women. We considered this to be good; we do not need to divide people during peacetime. Peace is a concern of us all.

PROPAZ in the DDR Process

During disarmament process, PROPAZ was successful in sensitising people to give in their guns, but it was the government officials who would collect the guns from the people and provide incentives to those who returned the guns. The activity is still part of the work PROPAZ carries out in its community outreach.

When PROPAZ was established, it contributed to the success of the DDR process in Mozambique in that it became a community based programme, and built networks that were prepared to make strong and strategic linkages with groups such as the Christian Church Council to carry out the disarmament activities. Because of its openness and desire to work across different divides, PROPAZ has gained the confidence of local leaders.



PROPAZ has carried out unique work in the desire to reintegrate ex-combatants into communities. The organization participates in conflict mediation, and has a network of peace activists from grassroots to the upper levels of society. It constantly monitors and evaluates its activities to ensure that they are

causing the desired change. It also sensitises communities about the dangers of small arms and helps in identifying them for the government officials to collect.

What makes PROPAZ unique in its activities is that they address a sensitive group of the community- the ex-combatants in a gender sensitive manner. If ex-combatants are disgruntled, the peace process is doomed to fail. The uniqueness of the work of PROPAZ lies in the ability to have a membership composed of ex-combatants from both RENAMO and FRELIMO. These erstwhile enemies have been successfully demobilized and re-integrated into communities where they have formed peace groups and are participating in national development. PROPAZ has enabled ex-combatants to understand that it is through non-violent means that problems can be resolved. Because ex-combatants are sensitive in that they have for long been used to using force to solve their problems and therefore need to have their minds de-militarised, PROPAZ remains closely engaged with them even when they are re-integrated in the communities. The organisation carries out follow-up activities with ex-combatants to ensure that they implement what they have been trained in, and practice what they have learned. PROPAZ is thus able to deal with the realities on the ground during these follow-up activities. All members of staff at PROPAZ are ex-combatants, so they understand their fellow ex-combatants, and know how to deal with them compassionately. They can also bear with the harsh conditions during fieldwork.

In its desire to deal with the challenge of poverty, which tempts ex-combatants to resort back to arms, and poses a great challenge to sustainable peace, PROPAZ has kept strategic linkages with AMODEC, which promotes projects for members in income generation to sustain their families. Income generation is in the form of literacy classes, business, and animal rearing. PROPAZ had persuaded Micro Finance Institutions to provide loans to ex-combatants, and the organisation trains the members in the careful utilisation of these loans.

The activities of PROPAZ have women's needs and interests at their centre. A woman, who was also a member of a core Women's Organisation in Mozambique (OMM) was particularly appointed as the Executive Director of PROPAZ to ensure that women's concerns got addressed. Some women ex-combatants gave these testimonies at a Focus Group Discussion:

- *I went through carpentry course and I have used this skill to help orphans who have lost parents, as well as widows. I think I am contributing to peace.*
- *I also designed a project to take care of street children, and although it has not*

worked out yet, it is my dream. If the farming that I am doing on my father's farm materializes, I will use the proceeds to realize this dream.

- *It will be good to use music to show that disability is not inability; such people can also be useful. Music is the best vehicle to pass the message across; it could boost the morale of the disabled ex-combatants.*

The Key Challenges Faced by PROPAZ in Peace Work

Much as PROPAZ has had tremendous success in participating in the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process in Mozambique, and in assisting women ex-combatant to work together across ideological divides, they are also faced by various challenges. These include the ongoing challenge of how to enable the ex-combatants appreciate that they are no longer in the army and so should stop violence, and completely de-militarise their minds. PROPAZ also faces the challenge of making civilians in communities understand that ex-combatants are part of the community and need to be accepted back wholeheartedly.

PROPAZ also continuously faces the challenge of helping women ex-combatants who are ashamed of being known as ex-fighters, as society regards them as merely having served the sexual interests of soldiers. Convincing rural communities that female soldiers were not sexually servicing male soldiers has been challenging, and this has put an unnecessarily enormous burden and stigma on the women ex-combatants, and as such, they tend to be regarded as second-rate, as compared to their male counterparts.

PROPAZ also faces the challenge of dealing with leaders who manipulate tribal differences to exacerbate conflict. Examples of such thinking are reflected in the observation that some programmes implemented by government are not evenly distributed, and that the northern part of the country of Mozambique has benefited more from state led activities. This means that the organization will need to continue addressing political and ethnic issues as part of conflict analysis in the training it gives both to the ex-combatants and the communities. It also indicates that PROPAZ must participate in challenging the government of Mozambique to ensure that the development programmes it implements are equitably distributed over the whole country. Such are the activities that will contribute to sustainable peace in Mozambique.

Much of the story of PROPAZ and many of its activities are not documented and risk being lost with the passing on of the actors.

There is need to have more women in high position of decision making, who can put in place the policies necessary to enable a fundamental change, not only for women ex-combatants, but for Mozambican women in general. Women are still not effectively listened to at the decision-making level and in government. There is still need to ensure

that women are empowered to participate effectively in formal processes, and to demand for their rights in all areas. Unfortunately, the high level of illiteracy among women, coupled by patriarchy still deters this.



The Way Forward

Mozambique is a country where traditional values are held in high esteem. There is therefore need to combine traditional and modern approaches to addressing women's issues. In fact, the women of PROPAZ expressed the need to strengthen networking with African based organizations to promote the cultural environment and one another as people, as well as learn from one another.

There is need for PROPAZ to continue building sustainable strategies for the implementation of its work. The organization will need to remain vibrant by creating early warning systems to potential conflicts, and to continue promoting peace. PROPAZ needs the courage to continue working with people of different political convictions and gender.

PROPAZ has succeeded in changing the mentality of ex-combatants on how they are expected to behave in the community, and continues to strengthen their skills to be able to survive as civilians and co-exist with other members of society. However, there is still more need to continue addressing the communities' ability to accept ex-combatants in their midst.

The need continues to exist for empowering women, especially ex-combatant women to overcome inferiority complex in order to gain confidence and demand their rights in both private and public space. There is therefore need to promote projects that help to strengthen and enhance women's self esteem and management capacity.

PROPAZ continues to need support to enable it to expand its work to other communities, since its work is so relevant to the needs of many people in Mozambique. The organization will also need to continue making the strategic linkages and networks necessary to ensure that its good work spreads all over Mozambique.

PROPAZ will need to tread carefully as it implements its peace activities to ensure that there is no envy or unnecessary competition among the stakeholders, which can easily result in further conflict.

PROPAZ is a growing organization, which needs to continue taking care of itself as an institution. It is implementing commendable activities in Mozambique, which if replicated in other countries recovering from conflict will bring about fundamental change in the way DDR processes are implemented, to ensure that both women's and men's needs are taken care of, whether they are ex-combatants or civilians. It is necessary to popularise this work, and spread its message to other countries on the African Continent.

Finally, peace is a process and needs to be worked on long after the war is officially over. There is need for persistence when doing peace work. It is a process whose results do not materialize quickly. Women and men must be involved in the hard work towards sustainable peace, which involves social, political, and economic activities, and demands the participation of everybody.

On A Personal Level, Different Women Ex-Combatants Expressed These Dreams.

- My dream is to have all combatants access medication and other opportunities as I have had.
- To see combatants being able to educate their children
- I want to see a financing bank to give management skills and capital to ex-combatants.
- The history of liberation of Mozambique should be written before combatants die, to ensure

that people tell their story as part of healing, but also tell a correct story, for state memory.

- I want to build a house of peace. I commissioned the 10th anniversary of the peace accord in 1992 by building a peace monument.

Memories

The most difficult moment was in 1992 when I was caught in an ambush and shot at a man in the leg. The driver of our car was shot dead as the car kept going, another man in the car picked the steering wheel, he too was shot at through the genital organs, and I was forced to take over. My leg was shot at and I could not drive any more, so the few of us remaining had to run for our lives in the bush. I served in the military from 1979-1983, and was demobilized in 1991, at the rank of 2nd Sergeant. I was a singer in the army and I even equipped the officers with dancing skills. I also learnt carpentry trained by ADEMIMO. (Luisa Boaventura, musician and ex-combatant)

CHAPTER THREE

Women's Mass Action For Peace: **WIPNET - Liberia**

The civil war in Liberia, which started in 1989, affected every area of the country. There was no family, village or town that was not affected in a terrifying way. Forced conscription, killings, displacement, maiming, and gender-based violence, often of the most horrific kind...all these were experiences of women and men in Liberia.



What were the causes of the war in Liberia?

The breakdown of the body politic in Liberia was the major cause of the conflict, and this happened over time. The very creation of the state of Liberia by freed slaves from the United States of America resulted in the predominance of the settlers and their descendants, and the marginalisation of the indigenous people in the political and economic spheres. By 1980, there was a big gap between haves and have-nots, and the country had no middle class to do damage control. There was also lack of education among the indigenous people, and poverty among them was rampant. This is a recipe for disaster anywhere in the world, and in Liberia, it created conditions that brought Sergeant Samuel Doe to power through a coup d'état in 1980, and the beginning of overt violence.

There had been greed and lack of patriotism, selfishness and corruption on the part of the leadership. There was also a breakdown of values, where even the young people lost the will to work for money and developed a mindset of quick gains. The spirit of voluntarism had died. The leaders dominated the people instead of serving them.

Some of the respondents interviewed quoted a combination of issues causing the violence and instability in Liberia. Among these were the struggle for resources, and the land crisis whereby people had no control of the land. The issue of access and control of land has been a source of several crises in Liberia. There was no harmony amongst the citizens, prospects for development were low for the majority of the citizens, and the future was bleak. There were many young people in the country that felt that there was no future for them, and hence the dream of the majority was to leave the country and go, preferably to the USA or to Europe.

The lack of education for all had made children from rich families to feel that they were more privileged than others. Many of Liberia's citizens did not feel a sense of belonging. Therefore, it was not difficult to recruit young people into militia.

How Did War Affect the Country?

Liberia experienced several episodes of war from the time Samuel Doe took over power. Charles Taylor himself fought his way to a forced election, where people voted for him, not because he was the preferred or most capable choice, but because they were terrified he would go back to

the bush and wreak more havoc on them. Throughout the period of his presidency, Taylor is believed to have fuelled conflict in neighbouring countries, especially in Sierra Leone. Therefore, it was not difficult that Liberian rebels could organise in one of the neighbouring countries to try and topple him. When the war finally broke out in Liberia at the beginning of 2000, it had devastating effects on women and men.



It promoted cycles of violence and carnage, and destroyed family life as the Liberians had known it before. Poverty and disease were exacerbated. The women were inordinately affected, and their physical and psychological well being suffered greatly.

Many women suffered rape and sexual slavery. Young girls were captured and turned into sexual slaves and bush wives to the combatants, often forced to share partners. The women were relegated to the status of being dependant.

There was an increase in female-headed households as well as single parenthood. Many women lost hope and turned to prostitution for survival. There was no social and economic means to care for children. Therefore two generations of women and girls have been destroyed.

On the other hand, the war empowered the women as they took on responsibilities that had hitherto been the preserve of men. The war and its negative effects promoted the desire among women to contribute towards sustainable peace building. It galvanised more women to realise that war and peace issues were not a monopoly of men. Therefore, women from all sectors, including those in the market, petty traders, social workers, trauma healers, grassroots women, doctors, lawyers, teachers, and women from other walks of life began participating in initiatives that could bring about sustainable peace.

What is “Peace” for the Women of Liberia?

For the women of Liberia in general, and those of WIPNET in particular, peace means an array of things. It is definitely more than a mere absence of war or an end to fighting. Because the war in Liberia was particularly harsh on the children and turned them into killing machines, without respect for parents, relatives, or their own kith and kin, the women of Liberia are particularly concerned that the kind of peace that returns to their nation should be capable of bringing sanity to their children. It would mean that their children can sleep in their homes and not in the bush, and the children would be working for development and not engaged in destruction. Peace would mean safety for their husbands and children; a period when they would not be dying needlessly because of wars. The children would be in school, attaining an education, and they would remain with or near their parents, engaged in activities that would promote development. One woman said, “Peace will come when my children are at home and are able to bury me.”

Peace also means freedom to move around one's country without fear, the ability to have empathy for one another that would stop Liberians from shedding one another's blood, security of a person as well as their belongings. Peace would be meaningful when there were no more guns or gunshots, and every one was free from hunger; when there is complete disarmament.

Indeed for the women of Liberia, peace would not be complete if it did not mean the end of harassment for women, end of rape and the fear of being attacked or raped. Sustainable peace would only come when women's rights are promoted, protected, and respected, and there was justice and fairness for both women and men. In fact, many believed that sustainable peace would come when there was reconciliation between the different people that make up Liberia.

How were Women Prompted to Act?

As a group that had borne the brunt of the war, and that had watched helplessly as children were forcibly conscripted and turned into killing machines, the women of Liberia felt that it was time for them to organise themselves into a group that would demand an end to war. They had for long been excluded from the table discussions for peace. More men were involved in peace negotiations, but they did not address root causes



of the violent conflicts. Instead, the tables were discussions for power, money, and not real community issues. The women felt that they could not as mothers, sit back to be just victims of war. They would be equally to blame if they just sat back and let things continue in the way they were happening.

WIPNET Comes on the Stage

The West African Network for Peace building (WANEP) was started in Liberia in 1998 to address the conflicts that were threatening the security of the whole of West Africa. However, because of the war in Liberia, it moved its offices to Accra, Ghana. In 2002, WANEP developed a programme that would enable women to actively participate in peacemaking. This was intended to build the capacity of women in the area of active peace building. The programme was called Women in Peace building Network (henceforth called WIPNET).

Therefore, WIPNET was started from an underlying philosophy that women had their own unique experiences in situations of armed conflict, had their unique needs as far as post-conflict reconstruction, rehabilitation and peace building were concerned, and needed to be more actively involved in the formal peace building processes of any country.⁸

WIPNET in Liberia

WIPNET became a programme in Liberia after a five-day training of trainers for twenty women that was held in Monrovia in November 2001.⁹ At the end of the training, the women decided that they could not just go home with the training. They realized the need to replicate the skills they had acquired at that training. They wanted something to be sustained, and they started a Peace Outreach Project (POP). Their theme was, “**Women of Liberia, Awake for Peace.**” They went to markets, churches, mosques, and any place that was likely to have women gathered in big numbers, and called on women to rise and actively demand for peace.

WIPNET, therefore, was started in Liberia by women who worked as volunteers for peace. They were committed to the cause of peace without prior training, but they were able to sustain a mass action with a diverse group of women: inter-denominational, inter-ethnic, and made up of different classes. The women made a conscious effort to be involved in the peace building effort at every level of decision-making.

Isis-WICCE and the Documentation of WIPNET's Activities

When Isis-WICCE set out to document the uniqueness of the peace initiatives in Liberia, its aim was to contribute towards the raising of the visibility of the activities of the Women's Mass Action for Peace which were carried out by the Women in Peace building Network (WIPNET) through providing written evidence of some of their activities. It also sought to identify and document the concrete steps that women have taken as part of their peace building activities, including the impact they have made, the challenges they face, and the lessons they have learnt, in order to contribute to the strengthened role for women in the processes that affect national and regional peace and security issues. It also sought to advocate for the mainstreaming of the best practices of the women of WIPNET into the peace building and conflict resolution initiatives in the different regions.

What Sparked off the Women's Mass Action for Peace?

From the start, WIPNET - Liberia had two active groups: The Liberian Muslim Women for Peace, and the Christian Women's Peace Initiative. The Christian women met every Friday at midday, and they would say prayers for peace in Liberia. The Muslim women would meet every Friday

after prayers and discuss issues affecting them as women, consider ways of incorporating more women into their group, and pray for peace.

At the end of March 2003, the Muslim women approached WIPNET, asking how they could join their Christian sisters and together address the deteriorating security



situation in Liberia. They wanted the meeting to be organised by WIPNET. WIPNET used the radio to call women to the meeting, and over 800 women turned up for that first meeting. It took place on April 2, 2003, and different sectors of society attended. At the end of the meeting, the two groups issued a strong press release calling on all parties to stop the war and engage in dialogue for peace. They then formed a planning committee and a secretariat of three women.

On April 4, 2003, the women issued a strongly worded position statement condemning the war in Liberia, demanding for immediate and unconditional ceasefire, dialogue between the government and the rebels, and asking the government to accept the intervention of peacekeepers. They also demanded for the international community to give the logistical supplies for the peacekeepers.

The women called for another meeting on April 9, and this time wanted other women included so that it could be truly a mass action. This was the beginning of the Liberian Women's Mass Action for Peace.

Why only Women?

The women believed that using just women would indicate to the Taylor government, which smelt rebels in every gathering, that this was just a "harmless women's venture" that would not threaten the security of the state. Little did the latter know that the organising of the women would contribute towards its demise!

Activities of the Women's Mass Action for Peace

On April 11, the women had a programme and invited President Charles Taylor in order to present him with their position statement on the war. There were over 2,000 women at that meeting. Their only desire was for sustainable peace in Liberia. Charles Taylor did not come. The women then sent five different letters with five different individuals to ensure that at least one would reach him. Taylor did not take the women seriously. He regarded them as a group of harmless individuals that would soon get tired of meeting and get on with their lives. He had greatly under-estimated the women's determination to contribute towards the ending of the war.

The women expected a response from Taylor's office by April 14, 2003, and when this did not come, they started a non-violent sit-in protest, which doubled as a peace vigil at an unused airfield in Sinkor, a suburb of Monrovia, in full view of people going to and coming from the centre of the city. The women vowed not to move until peace returned to the whole of Liberia. They vowed to remain in the burning sun, in "sack cloth and ashes"¹⁰ until the following had been achieved:



- ❑ Fruitful dialogue for peace
- ❑ Unconditional ceasefire
- ❑ Deployment of international troops all over Liberia.



When the President refused to listen, the women continued to sit in the rain and sun. These included women with children on their backs. The road the President and Mrs Taylor used to go to the city passed by the airfield, and the women's constant presence and their suffering struck them.

I went to their sit-in- strikes/ peace vigil, and gave the women beddings and medical supplies. (Jewel Taylor in an interview)

The women did not confine their activities to the airfield. On April 17, 2003, over 2,500 women organised themselves and went to the Liberian Parliament. They sat all over the parking areas. The President of the Senate, who was a woman, came to meet them, and assured them that President Taylor would meet with them within a week. Within four days, the women marched back to Parliament, and insisted that they had to see Taylor. They got more assurance from the President of the Senate. On April 23, the Speaker of the House of Representatives told the women that Taylor would meet them on April 24 at the Executive Mansion (the official residence and offices of the Liberian President).

President Taylor Meets the Women

Over 4,000 women went in the delegation to meet Charles Taylor¹¹. Threatened by the sheer numbers, President Taylor at first wanted to see only a few of the women, twenty at most, in his office. The women insisted that he had to meet them all. At the meeting, the women refused seats, and sat on the floor, in “sackcloth and ashes”. Some just prayed, and others wept at the condition their country had been reduced to. They mourned the deaths of sisters, brothers, fathers and mothers, and all the children in urban and rural areas. Leymah Gbowee presented the statement that demanded President Taylor to show leadership in issuing an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, and attend the peace talks that were going to be held in Ghana. They also urged him to invite the international community to send troops to enforce peace in all parts of Liberia. There was no clapping during the speech; the women’s silence spoke volumes that even a war-hardened Charles Taylor could not ignore.

He committed himself to go and meet the rebels if that would make the women of Liberia move off the



airfield and the streets of Monrovia. In addition, he offered the women US\$5000.00 (five thousand US dollars). The women accepted the money for their activities without clapping or standing up to acknowledge the gift, and still insisted that their demands had to be met. The protest continued.

The women also marched to the USA Embassy, the UN offices and the offices of the Economic Community of West African States, demanding for their intervention to ensure that peace returned to Liberia. In fact, Ms. Jewel Taylor, Charles Taylor's wife, joined in the march to the Embassy of the USA. In an interview, she said,

I also went along with women of WIPNET in the march up to the American embassy to demand for peace. We presented our statement in which we asked the international community to step in and stop the war, which was progressing into the city, and the rising number of IDPs, who had come to the city. This statement was a cry for help asking the USA embassy to address the crisis.¹²

When Charles Taylor finally succumbed and went to the peace talks in Ghana, the Women's Mass Action for Peace chose representatives from amongst themselves to go to Ghana and continue with the pressure for the government and the rebels to sign a meaningful peace treaty. Seven women went from Liberia to Ghana on May 26, 2005, to mobilise Liberian women from the refugee camps and from Accra to join the mass action for peace. These women came with their children and braved the elements with their sisters from inside Liberia, to demand for sustainable peace in their country.

The peace negotiations started in Ghana on June 4, 2003, and on that day, 300 women from Liberia staged a peaceful protest at the entrance of the meeting hall. The women kept on monitoring the peace process to put pressure on the conflicting parties, by: writing protest papers, writing in the media on the progress of the process. These women could endure as many as eight hours of sitting to make their point to the negotiating teams inside the hall. In a rare spirit of collaboration, the women of WIPNET were satisfied that their sisters from the Mano River Network for Peace (MARWOPNET) would represent them at the negotiation table, while they themselves carried out lobbying activities and maintained the pressure on the process outside the meeting hall.

Meanwhile, back in Liberia, there was a constant presence of women at the airfield, conducting multi religious peace prayers, and maintaining the pressure from their end. Later, when the

talks moved further north to Akosombo, about 25 Liberian women from the Women's Mass Action for Peace moved with the entourage. They continued coming daily to the meetings, issuing regular statements on their feelings concerning the peace process, and carrying placards with anti-war messages. 50 Liberian children were taken from the refugee camps to Akosombo to present statements to the delegates on their need for sustainable peace that would allow them to enjoy their human rights as children.

By the time the meeting moved back to Accra, WIPNET-Liberia was recognised as a force to reckon with in the Liberian peace process.

Vernon Sherman, the Vice Chairman of the Interim government made this comment:

These women were in Ghana. They refused to go away from the peace negotiation area until a realistic peace agreement was signed. They prayed the whole day and fasted.

Tension Heightens at the Talks

Between July 7 and 31, 2003, tensions heightened at the peace talks. July 26 was Independence Day for Liberia. The shelling in Monrovia was worsening, with close to 200 civilians being killed in the city each day. Liberian women went to the rebels to ask why they were worsening the



attack on Monrovia. The rebels insisted that Charles Taylor had to leave, and in any case, they did not care if the people died, as they themselves would procreate when they returned to Monrovia.

These statements angered the women, and they decided to lock the delegates in the hall until they came up with an acceptable agreement. The women linked arms and prevented the delegates

from leaving the room, even to visit convenience rooms. They threatened to undress if a peaceful settlement to the governance of Liberia was not reached. This issue of women undressing has a lot of cultural significance in Liberia, and most of Africa. It spells a curse on anyone it is directed to. It took the mediation of the Chief Mediator, General Absalaam Abubaker of Nigeria to partially pacify the women and convince them to end the barricade.

The women had demonstrated that they could no longer take any nonsense from the belligerents, and they were prepared to strengthen their advocacy for the end of the war, using all means at their disposal. After this incident, the meeting progressed faster. The women had left an indelible mark on the peace process. One of the Liberian women who was present at the talks said:

Women surrounded the conference hall and barricaded the peace negotiators (Liberian President and rebel groups) to sign the peace accord and stop the war from progressing into the city of Monrovia. We closed the men in the negotiation hall so that they could see how it feels to be without a home, so they could also see the discomfort of war in order to agree on peace.¹³

After the talks in Accra, Ghana, it was clear that Charles Taylor was regarded as part of the problem, and he had to step down and leave the country for exile in Nigeria. The indiscriminate bombing that continued over Monrovia meant that more innocent women, men and children were dying, in spite of the signing of a peace accord. Mrs Taylor made this remark concerning her family's departure for exile.

After the discussion in Accra, Ghana, my husband told me that if he were the problem he would leave. So he stepped down for peace in Liberia, and we had to leave for exile. The indiscriminate bombing of the city, which also victimized innocent civilians, was so touching to him. He couldn't take it for people dying indiscriminately because of him, so he stepped down for the people. We as a family left Liberia on 11th August to avoid unnecessary loss of life.¹⁴

After Charles Taylor left power, and an interim government took over the governance of Liberia, peace still eluded that country much as the guns had gone silent. The women again took the lead in the attempt to build peace. Under the auspices of WIPNET, the women embarked on the next phase of their campaign; the “**Never Again**” campaign. This campaign included aspects such

as: *never again will we sit by to see our children being used as child soldiers..., never again shall our girls/daughters be used as sex slaves...., Never again shall we see our husbands plan wars in our homes, Women combatants have resolved to be used as instruments of peace instead of picking guns for war.*¹⁵

This specific project of *Never Again* continues in Liberia, and at the time of the documentation, it was pushing for complete demobilisation, disarmament, re-integration, and reconciliation, as well as good governance, and the rooting out of corruption, which were major causes of conflict. Leymah Gbowee, one of the chief architects of the campaign had this to say,

*The Never Again Campaign is a watchful campaign to work out and speak out on nitty gritty things that can cause war. We started this with children since many of them were soldiers. This addresses the conflict from its grass roots.*¹⁶

WIPNET then launched a 50/50 Campaign, demanding more inclusion of women in governance. The Network was offered a political position in the Interim government, and to their credit, they declined it, feeling that it would conflict with their post-conflict campaign, where they believed their role was to push for good governance in all areas of the post-conflict processes. This action set the leadership of the Women's Mass Action for Peace apart. Whereas many groups regard the putting down of guns as the end of war and a time to take their share of the national cake, these women did not consider their work done until they could see the tackling of the root causes of the violence in Liberia. To this day, these women have the resolve that the war is not yet over and that the absence of war is not peace.

The Uniqueness of WIPNET-Liberia's Methodology

The women of WIPNET used several strategies to achieve the impressive results in a short time. They visited the areas where the rebels were. For example, in April 2003, representatives of the Women's Mass Action for Peace visited Guinea where the rebels were, to try and ascertain what their issues were, and what it would take for them to engage in peace talks. Later, they also sent representatives to Freetown, Sierra Leone, for another meeting with the rebels.

The women also reached out to other women in Camps for the Internally Displaced People to express solidarity with them and convince the women to join them in the Women's Mass Action for Peace. They would go to these IDP camps to talk to children to denounce rebel activities,

and to urge the community to live at peace with one another. These visits would also be used to promote religious co-existence and tolerance, and to demonstrate to the different religious groups that they could work together for the promotion of peace. They used the radio to call even more women to action, and issued strong press releases to condemn the war and call on all parties to stop it and engage in dialogue towards sustainable peace.

The women also picketed major streets in Monrovia, and made tee shirts and placards with peace messages, so that all who saw them knew what their mission and demands were. Indeed, whenever we passed UN peacekeepers' roadblocks and the army asked for identity cards, the women's answer saying "My tee shirt is my identity card" was enough to let us through the roadblocks without further questions. By the end of April 2004, the women gained the recognition hitherto unknown to them, and the men and women of Liberia realised they were serious about sacrificing themselves for the sake of peace.

The women's non-violent activities such as picketing quietly while giving peace messages, crying the whole day together for the nation, praying and fasting for peace in Liberia, peace matches and walks, sit in vigils and sacrifices of comfort, lying on the belly for the whole day, mourning in "sack cloth and ashes" for six months, and talking to and sensitising people about peace, demonstrated that it was possible to achieve the desired results without resorting to violence. Indeed, the activities of the Women's Mass Action for Peace were so powerful that they enabled women to gain support among the policy makers, the middle class Liberians, as well as grassroots women and men.

The women who were interviewed gave different reasons for being attracted to WIPNET and its activities in Liberia. In a focus group discussion, these were some of the reasons.

- The prayers being held to ensure peace were powerful.
- I was tired of war and I needed peace.
- I wanted to express to Liberia and to the rest of the world that women are tired of wars, and actions must happen to promote peace.
- Our political leaders were involved in crude business, and had forgotten about God.
- Liberian women were suppressed and had no voice, so this is a women's voice.

So successful were WIPNET's strategies that by the end of April 2003, the women had gained recognition in Monrovia and other parts of Liberia, and people realised that they were serious in their demands.

The Impact of WIPNET's Activities

The activities carried out by the Women's Mass Action for Peace contributed to the ceasefire in Liberia, and enabled men to have a higher regard for women in general. Many of the women emerged as totally committed, even when they and their children had little to eat for days. The commitment they showed sitting out at the airfield, and at the peace talks in Accra, as well as their participation in post-conflict activities demonstrated the women's resilience, and the fact that in a situation such as the one that existed in Liberia, they could even outshine the men in their innovativeness.

Their activities promoted equal opportunities for women, and enabled them to gain a lot of respect. This resulted in women being offered high positions in the Interim government. At the time of the documentation, the Minister of Gender was a woman, and there were women on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. There were also four women in the House of Representatives, one of whom was a member of WIPNET. When we visited Ms. Varbar Garfour, the Minister of Gender, she had this to say:

The women of WIPNET have made men afraid in Monrovia. They have made sacrifices at the peril of their lives. When there is a problem, it is the women who are called upon to intervene. These women cannot be bought for money; they have refused to associate themselves with important people in government, as this could discredit them. They tell the truth at whatever cost. Today, the security of the country rests on them. They have been asked to participate in the DDR processes.¹⁷

WIPNET's activities have promoted tolerance, and co-existence. From the time the organisation started work in Liberia, they emphasised the need for women to form a critical mass by working together across religious, class, and ethnic divides. A visit to the places where the women still hold weekly vigils indicates that women have continued working together across all these divides. The women's ability to pray and then get up and carry out determined advocacy activities has destroyed the myth that religion is the opium of the oppressed. The women of WIPNET have used prayer to galvanise them towards activities that are causing positive changes for sustainable peace in Liberia. As one woman commented: *"Our continued prayer has changed many things."¹⁸*

Even when guns are silent (with the negotiated cease fire), WIPNET continues to promote peace. The Network is galvanizing many grass roots women to be involved in peace building. It has demonstrated the power of women's organising, and the power of numbers and the importance of mass actions.



WIPNET has brought new meaning and a new dimension to the peace context in Liberia. Their campaign using vigils and mass action was creative, serious and consistent. The women have struggled to die for their belief by sitting in open spaces demanding for peace come rain or shine. The Network has shown women's willingness to be fully involved in the peace process and not in

token gestures. When they wrote to the President wanting to discuss the issue of peace and he refused to talk to them, the women opted for a sit down strike, which was a new strategy in Liberia. A woman journalist made these comments in a focus group discussion:

The work of WIPNET is remarkable in addressing the crisis in the country. It is so steadfast despite the threats by both government and rebels. The women of WIPNET have weathered the rain and sun, sleeping on the floor for the sake of peace. Such practices should be replicated in other countries. Women in other countries need to swallow the pill and copy this approach to peace work, it demands perseverance.¹⁹

Challenges

WIPNET-Liberia's commendable work is not without challenges. As in any African country, poverty is a great challenge. The poverty in Liberia has been exacerbated by the long years of war that have meant that the majority of the population had to abandon the country side and settle in the urban area, where they could not carry out cultivation and had to rely on markets for food. This poverty has a predominantly woman's face. The war also meant that many women and men lost everything. It is very difficult to galvanise such destitute communities for long -term work for sustainable peace building.

There is always the danger of politicians infiltrating WIPNET and using the Network for their

own ends. The Network must remain wary of this challenge. It also needs to ensure that it reaches as many rural women as possible with its campaign by raising awareness on the vigils, encouraging other women to join them, and showing inclusiveness for all.

Resource mobilisation is also a challenge. The network spends precious time fundraising when this time could be spent strengthening its activities and membership.

Another challenge is that WIPNET could easily be stopped from operating if its activities seem a threat to existing powers, so the network needs to be wary of that and create the strategic linkages necessary for protection without selling out on their vision.

The Way Forward For WIPNET

The women of WIPNET-Liberia are organising girls to join the network for sustainability. These efforts will continue. WIPNET continues to inculcate the values it espouses to the security forces through training. WIPNET's capacity to network with various sectors will ensure that such good work continues.

WIPNET will continue to mobilise other women to challenge political leaders on the need for peace and also to make strategic linkages with micro credit organisations to enable women in the group to engage in activities that will help them overcome poverty. It will continue in the effort to enable women to learn life and survival skills so that they are able not only to look after their children but also prevent them from going into war.

The Network is in the process of spreading WIPNET's work to areas up-country, so that in future, it can be visible at sub-county level, so that the peace messages can be spread to that level.

WIPNET - Liberia intends to continue focusing its activities on peace until it is fully achieved, and ensure that it builds on existing gains. The Network will spread its work and share its successes with other women's groups on the African Continent to demonstrate what women with a united vision and focus can achieve.



CHAPTER FOUR

Women and High Level Negotiation: MARWOPNET in the Mano River Basin

'Peace has no cut off date.' (Hon. Ms. Abatoir Thomas, Minister of Health, Sierra Leone).

"Its work to ensure gender equality in all spheres of national building, and to teach conflict resolution and negotiation techniques is likely to pay long-term dividends to future generations in the Mano River Region." ²⁰



The Wars of the Mano River Basin

The Sierra Leone and Liberian civil wars were inextricably linked for reasons of geo-political design ably aided by the physical and human geography of the Mano River Union countries. As the Liberian warlord factions allied with and promoted the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, refugees fled in all directions. As a result, there are Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone, Sierra Leonean refugees in Liberia, and Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea. The same conflicts also generated internally displaced persons in all three countries. Depending on the route taken in flight, refugees ended up in UNHCR camps in the countryside or as urban refugees in the cities and towns.

Often, women's work in peace building and conflict resolution in such complex wars that are in highly patriarchal settings goes largely unnoticed. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in spite of the fact that the women of Sierra Leone have continued to make a significant contribution towards the peace building process and the resolution of the brutal conflict in Sierra Leone and Liberia that had degenerated into a dire humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions, this contribution has not been given its due recognition. The women played a leading role in the cessation of the hostilities as well as the peace negotiations for a return to sanity.



Isis-WICCE set out on the documentation trip to Sierra Leone in order to validate the impact of the peace building and conflict resolution activities carried out at the community and national level that demonstrated the Sierra Leone Chapter of the Mano River Women's Peace Network's (MARWOPNET) ability to use high level negotiation skills for building peace. The objective was to look into the underlying factors that enabled a sub regional organisation to surmount challenges from within and without and cause the desired change.

The Documentation Methodology

Apart from the key informant interviews, the documentation team also interacted with an impressive array of stakeholders ranging from civil society, policy makers- including Cabinet Ministers, Parliamentarians, the Secretary General of the Mano River Union, UNAMSIL functionaries, ordinary citizens and beneficiaries in addition to serendipitous encounters. Finally in a class of its own, came the meeting with the Head of State, President Tejan Kabbah. These interviews and meetings went a long way to give better insights of the role played by MARWOPNET in the sub-region in general and post conflict Sierra Leone in particular.

Causes of the War in Sierra Leone

In the Sierra Leonean situation, the years of bad governance caused the citizens to lose faith in government. The quest for wealth and power later spurred Foday Sankoh into an alliance with Liberia and Libya, engulfing neighbours Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast. The greed for wealth and power was underscored during the peace negotiations when the RUF not only demanded the Vice presidential slot but also a slew of 14 Ministerial positions including the control of the diamond industry! This situation was akin to “giving the cat the fish to keep”! As if that was not enough, Foday Sankoh was secretly negotiating parallel deals with South African companies.

What was the Effect of the War on the Women and Men of Sierra Leone?

Sierra Leonean women and men have bitter tales of war: maiming, especially the cutting off of limbs of women, men and children, killings, entire families wiped out, families separated, homesteads razed to the ground and food crops, livestock and fruit trees destroyed, villages pillaged and burnt, and people forced to flee. As we witnessed in the Togbanda Refugee Camp, full personhood cannot be restored by food hand-outs; tablets and other medicines doled out by the relief



agencies cannot be of much use until full self worth is reclaimed and recuperated. These were adults running their families and livelihoods, young people eagerly facing the future before the disruptive war set in.

Specific Experiences

One woman had two children who went missing in a place known as Mombe. She looked for them everywhere then heard of conscripted children in Bo. She made her way there and found her daughter had been raped and her leg amputated. Her son saw her and fearfully asked her why she had come. They tried to escape at night but the rebels caught up with them and beheaded the boy. She demonstrated, gesturing in African style to the documentation team, the chilling song the killers sang and danced to as they held her son's head and put it in her hands, ordering her to kiss it in a gruesome ritual. (This haunting tune was recorded and grew in on the documentation team long after the trip had ended). In the hiding place where she had sought refuge after fleeing what must have left an indelible mark on her psyche, she heard of the Mano River Women's Peace Network and has since been trained in soap making and benefited along the way from the counselling programme.²¹



The Jimmi Bagbo chief first married and started a family in 1962, the year after Sierra Leone's independence. By the time the atrocities broke out, he had 6 children, some were in senior secondary school but he had lost all of them. They were all "still at large" as he put it euphemistically. He lost all his property and pointed to the land across the road where his homestead once stood. All that remained were some old trees bordering what has now become a vegetable plot. But not all is lost. In his old age, he has decided to remarry and he is now bringing up a young family, the eldest of whom is now six years old.²²



There was the case of the young man who was abducted while still a schoolboy and conscripted into rebel ranks in Liberia. At the end of the war, he came back to find his battle scarred school still there. Those of his peers from Jimmi Bagbo who had escaped abduction on the night of the attack had gone on to complete their secondary and University studies and were now “working and driving

cars”. This made him bitter as he felt he could have done as well as those colleagues, or even better.²³

The Role of Women in the Armed Conflict Situation

Women were not just victims. There were many who fought on both sides as combatants; young girl abductees were conscripted into the fighting forces while teenagers joined in willingly. At the family level, certain individuals capitalised on the conflict to exact revenge in long standing property feuds and other vendettas.

Prior to Abuja, women had organised regular peace marches and demonstrations, as well as prayer meetings in an atmosphere of religious fervour but the Government was “dragging its feet” even as the rebels became more and more stubborn, funded as they were from outside. One of the attributes that enabled the women of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia to forge ahead with the sub regional initiative was the fact that Sierra Leone - and the region at large - has a critical mass of stalwart women as well as many professional women, who were joined by concerned mothers in a committed citizens’ front against the war.

The Genesis of the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET)

Women's Organising

Starting from the heady days of marches and demonstrations in 1994, Sierra Leonean women transcended ideological, political and social barriers to campaign against the war, embark on initiatives that led to the Women's Forum and the Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace, before changing tack to confront the political agenda. Peace could only be achieved through a return to civilian democratic rule.

Not to be outdone in the run up to the 1995 Beijing Conference, the women of Sierra Leone, as concerned citizens and mothers had participated in earlier fora such as at the African Regional Conference held in 1994 in Dakar with its Peace Tent. On return to Freetown they organised an unprecedented peace rally attended by their First Lady alongside Police and Army wives. By that time, women were tackling the crisis from all angles as last resort influences on sons, brothers and husbands, as commercial operators, and in the education sector. Market women and schoolgirls were enduring the impact on high visibility areas that had been swiftly disrupted like trade and education. Over and above protests and marches, the situation was evolving into more concrete interventions and targeted crisis response. FAWE, for example, put up English language schools for Sierra Leonean refugee girls in neighbouring French-speaking Guinea.



Guinean women who were also against the war expressed their solidarity by assisting the Sierra Leonean refugees with office space thus setting the tone for future collaboration. The resultant synergy of various civil society interventions nationally and across the borders conscientised the women into exerting relentless pressure on the powers involved to stop the war on the road to Abuja.

The genesis of the Mano River Women's peace Network (MARWOPNET) goes back to the ECOWAS summit in Abuja, Nigeria, in May 2000 where the Femmes Africa Solidarite (FAS) brought together 10 women each from Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. At that time there were civil wars in both Sierra Leone and Liberia, with neighbouring Guinea bearing the brunt of the resultant refugee crisis. The summit brought in a government delegation as well as the RUF rebels of Sierra Leone.

Ms. Taylor Lewis then gave a background to the women's movement in Sierra Leone; the scope of activities and how women got engaged the peace process with the inception of MARWOPNET. She was a member of the Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians, which was itself a member of the Women's Forum.

The formation of MARWOPNET therefore filled in the organisational vacuum and promoted concerted action in the areas of capacity and peace building as well as empowerment. Their spectacular success notwithstanding, MARWOPNET is an integral part of civil society which also includes women's advocacy organization, like 50/50. They also work closely with the Mano River Peace Forum.

The latter body linked up networks like the YWCA and the National Organisation of Women (NOW). At the Abuja meeting where 30 women from organisations in the Mano River basin met, it was decided to form a regional organ with an executive composed of a President, two Vice Presidents and a local focal point in each of the three countries. The justification for the establishment of MARWOPNET was the 10-year war that had ushered in an era of gross violations of the human rights of all, with women and children bearing the brunt of the worst atrocities. Many suffered rape, mutilations and displacement. There were refugee camps in all three countries and the strategy therefore was to come up with a regional peace initiative involving women. The male warlords in the sub region had wreaked havoc on the civilian population especially women and children, and it was felt that the effort to bring about the immediate cessation of hostilities required the participation of women and men. Arising from the involvement of Femmes Africa Solidarite (FAS) in the advocacy to have a UN Resolution on women, peace and security, which resulted in the October 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that calls for women's participation peace processes at all levels, the women in the Mano River Union had seen the need to embark on a process to end a war that had sown untold desolation and destruction in their sub-region since March 1991.

MARWOPNET was founded in 2001 when the situation was really dramatic in the sub-region, and

the three governments would not meet. Political dialogue was completely blocked, and people were dying from violence because the governments could not create dialogue within the political framework they had put into place. There were some protocols, some treaties, but they were not respected.

The Mano River women stand out as far as their lobbying strategies and “vibrant fearless outlook” is concerned. One example of their fearless high level lobbying is that of the Charles Taylor/Lansana Conte impasse in August 2001 when a delegation from all three chapters of the



recently formed MARWOPNET, rose to the challenge and urged Sierra Leonean President Tejan Kabba to mediate between his feuding peers. Involving the leaders in the peace process was no easy task given the cold war between the Liberian president and his Guinean counterpart.

Diplomatic relations went sour following the expulsion from Monrovia of the Guinean ambassador. The MARWOPNET women prevailed and broke the deadlock. President Kabba instructed his Foreign Minister to raise his counterparts. That set the ball rolling for diplomatic mechanisms that ended with a Mano River Summit, specifically convened to address the deteriorating security situation. According to Mrs. Mbayo, sub regional advocacy is closely intertwined with community, and national level interventions. Thus, even as MARWOPNET practises high-level advocacy, she is of the opinion that the role of the local chapters is just as important. As the situation was developing in the small town of Yenga, on the north-western border with Guinea, the Sierra Leone chapter of MARWOPNET sought audience with the Vice President and Minister for Internal Affairs to advocate for peace.

NGOs working in the field could not even move because of armed groups who continued uncontrolled because a criminal economic system had developed in this sub-region. Trafficking of drugs, children, women, arms... a kind of parallel economy had been set up and those involved had no interest in peace.

By organizing protest marches, sit-ins in front of parliament, writing articles, discussing issues on the radio and the women sometimes spoke directly to rebel groups, saying, 'Why are you using guns against us?' They challenged the rebels groups, as well as the government.

At the grassroots level, in Guinea, for example, the women of MARWOPNET gave space to women refugee groups to use their office space to have their meetings, do their computer work, or to type letters or documents. They did that so that the women would be visible, and to raise their concerns to UNHCR or to the UN systems.

Also, each year on national day, and on women's day, MARWOPNET would give women refugees the opportunity to explain what had happened or was happening in their countries. They described the violence they had experienced, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, the killing of loved ones, the mutilations, and the amputation of their limbs or those of loved ones.

The drive up country to Bo in South Eastern Sierra Leone was one long stretch of pristine nature at its African best. Miles and miles of emerald green palm tree groves some overhung with thick lianas stretching as far as the eye could see into the horizon, crystal clear rivers roaring down to the Atlantic, the blue mountains ever present in their wraith like charm. An environmental dream: no encroachment on wetlands, no farming on water catchment areas: the unspoilt charm beloved of tourist brochures. But with charm came anxiety: most of the countryside was uninhabited. Where had all the people gone? Who was tending the palm groves and the rice fields? There was no livestock in sight, no cows grazing on the abundant pastureland. Signs of life began to emerge 91 miles from Freetown in the form of a bombed out school. Slowly it dawned that this was a country emerging from "trouble in paradise"! The reality of the human tragedy began to sink in: a rebellion that started on the border with Liberia but slowly spread north west and south westwards leaving in its wake a trail of burnt villages, refugees fleeing turmoil, upheavals in local communities, massacres rapidly turning into gruesome amputations as the rebels forged ahead meting out brutal atrocities and mutilation, separating families caught in the crossfire, innocent civilians, paying dearly with their lives, limbs and property. A discussion with our MARWOPNET companions revealed that, as in other parts of the continent, women and children had borne the brunt of the violent conflict in physical, economic psychological

and emotional terms: rape, sexual slavery, and the trauma of heading households and having to ensure physical sustenance for families under extremely difficult circumstances. The international community refers to it as reconstruction and humanitarian aid but rebuilding lives, as we discovered, goes beyond dry rations and NFIs (non food items). How did MARWOPNET contribute towards this daunting challenge?

Uniqueness of the Work of MARWOPNET

MARWOPNET still stands out. It is a sub regional network led by formidable undaunted women committed to peace and ready to work at all levels, from the grassroots to the sub regional Heads of State irrespective of the circumstances. Every member of MARWOPNET we met in Sierra Leone gave a picture of this “fearless commitment’ during the different crises in the Mano River Union, precipitated by former Liberian President, Charles Taylor. Not only was he arming the rebels in Sierra Leone, but also he was also not on talking terms with President Tejan Kabba. Relations with Guinea were even more strained as the refugee situation in the Guinean forest region had led to tensions with President Lansana Conté’s own internal opposition and President Taylor had closed his border with Guinea. MARWOPNET shuttled between the capitals, wrote to all the Heads of State, and eventually Charles Taylor reopened the borders.²⁴



Intervention strategies included information sharing across the sub region, advocacy workshops and training programmes to equip MARWOPNET members with the requisite skills to do their work effectively.

Organizational Structure

In the interests of good governance and leading by example, by March 2001, MARWOPNET had met in Monrovia, Liberia and held its first election, came up with a draft constitution and appointed a Board. The post of President went to Guinea with Liberia and Sierra Leone taking the positions of First and Second Vice President respectively. The General Assembly was to meet every two years. The rotational principle in the election of office bearers can be seen in the results of the 2004 elections.

With regard to the success of MARWOPNET, there are two angles: the qualitative and the quantitative. They are endowed with the willingness to participate and they deal with a cross section of players. An example is of their intervention in Liberia where they facilitated the LURD talks employing tact and the meeting “ended without a fight”. At the time of the diplomatic crisis during which the Ambassadors of Guinea and Sierra Leone were expelled, but MARWOPNET through patient lobbying and skill secured heir release. All the chapters work together be it in Guinea, Sierra Leone or Liberia. In the short run, MARWOPNET needs to address challenges in areas like headquarters status, permanent staffing and capacity building to facilitate better time management. The language issue has to be looked into in terms of smooth networking. On the calibre of women running MARWOPNET, she made the observation that unlike the unhealthy

situation in many women's organisations, there have been no personality clashes given that “successful women bring status.” In the interest of continuity, MARWOPNET should endeavour to be visible at all levels and deal with everyone irrespective of differences in family background and upbringing as they bring people together.



What does Peace Mean for MARWOPNET Women?

For women, as for the other African women documented in this monograph, peace means much more than the absence of war. As women deal closely with the health and deprivation issues of the most vulnerable, they regard peace in a holistic way, to include social and economic issues as well. Therefore, peace building programmes must focus on the empowerment of the vulnerable groups through entrepreneurial activities like soap making and tie and dye techniques known as *garra* in Sierra Leone.

In the process of negotiating for sustainable peace, MARWOPNET works across the different countries of the Mano River Basin, and reaches out, not only to the top-level authorities but also works within the countries and down to the provinces. Undoubtedly it is at that human level that tangible involvement is manifest. Therefore, MARWOPNET's activities are also evident in areas such as the immunisation campaign for all children under five in Sierra Leone, interventions that were severely curtailed during the war, and HIV/AIDS programmes, that pose great threats to the most vulnerable of the populations in the Region.

Women in Crisis also carries out reproductive health interventions with emphasis on HIV-Aids with outreach peer educator programmes that call for collaboration with other organisations.

In addition, peace also meant the end of violence, the peace of mind, the ability to unite, end tribalism and religious differences, and an end to violence in the home and the community. This would enable Sierra Leoneans to face challenges together, and hold hands to use their vast natural resources to develop their country, instead of using them to destroy one another.

To some, peace also meant restored health, the new opportunities that came with restored calm such as skills training, and the resultant earnings that enabled them to care for their families given that more gainful employment helped do away with social ills and augured well for reconciliation as well as counselling services.

These communitarian responses harked back to the pre-conflict open solidarity in African villages and gave the impression of people who once lived in more harmonious settings. The question was then asked: why was there conflict in Liberia? Again responses pointed to diversions from the norm.

Achievements

MARWOPNET's Success in High Level Peace Negotiation

Dr. Diallo of the Mano River Union Office had very high regards for the women of MARWOPNET. He had been working closely with them since 2000. He had poignant memories of a particularly difficult ECOWAS Council meeting in May 2000 where women from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea sought inclusion on the agenda of the Ministerial caucus at an extraordinarily tense situation in the sub region. First and foremost there were matters of accreditation problems in line with the protocol of traditional Vienna Convention diplomacy. Secondly the region was in upheaval as civil society organisations made calls for peace in Sierra Leone and held demonstrations against Sierra Leonean rebel commander, Foday Sankoh, an ally of the then President Charles Taylor of Liberia. There was 'evidence of rebels along the border with Guinea poised to launch an invasion' and in Conakry President Lansana Conté was clearly running out of patience.



The women from the three countries sent a message to the Council of Ministers and then went higher to the Summit itself. In a radical departure from the staid rhythms of top level meetings, the women who only had fifteen minutes made sure each chapter of MARWOPNET gave its message to the assembled Heads of State and that their concerns were incorporated into the agenda. Women and mothers, their children, husbands and kin were getting killed and 'women were dying like flies'. According to Dr. Diallo the women were "demanding peace", a cry that touched the then Chair of ECOWAS, Malian President Alpha Oumar Konaré. That move set a precedent for advocacy at the highest level.

This bold move in influencing policy at the top level continued as MARWOPNET demanded participation at the Joint Security Meeting that addresses issues of defence, security and internal affairs. The lobbying bore fruit and at the 2001 meeting that took place at Cape Sierra, the Network was granted observer status enabling them to attend all meetings. They gave a message for peace and reconciliation with the caution that the populace was at the end of its tether with the social arrest in the river basin. The unstoppable peace campaigners then participated at a Mano River Union Summit held in Conakry with the Côte d'Ivoire and Mali as partners. The Guinean chapter of MARWOPNET organised a reception and called for peace.

MARWOPNET successfully lobbied the government of Sierra Leone as well as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), who they visited on their territory by taking a helicopter into a rebel controlled area to meet the commanders at their Makeni headquarters, in their attempt to convince the two warring parties to have dialogue. After meeting with the rebels, they then explained to the Government the rebel's stance. In Liberia the MARWOPNET women lobbied Charles Taylor, who was a major supporter of the rebels, and in Sierra Leone, they rooted for total disarmament before elections given that peace would not be sustainable in Sierra Leone in the absence of a full decommissioning of weapons.

During the interview with Mrs. Agnes Taylor-Lewis, a founder member of MARWOPNET, and former Minister of Health, she pointed out that disarmament was not



synonymous with peace. To sustain the peace, efforts were being made to empower women, address the needs of the unemployed youths, re-direct street children into homes and orphanages, and address the repercussion of the burgeoning HIV pandemic. Speaking as a former Minister of Health she described AIDS as “another war.”²⁵

MARWOPNET women have exhibited fearlessness as far as conflict resolution is concerned, and they have shown willingness to go the extra mile for the sake of peace. For example, in order to undertake the Makeni trip and meet the rebels, the women had to bravely go to the district of Makeni, deep in RUF rebel territory with just a cameraman and no advance appointment. On arrival, the rebels who had been watching the chopper as it made its approach to land told them: “You are all welcome. We could see you!”²⁶



Dr. Nana Pratt, the Focal Point person for MARWOPNET in Sierra Leone, explained that at the 2000 Abuja Summit, humanitarian problems were both security and human rights issues. Women had been raped irrespective of age, and the entire sub region was restive especially in the border areas. It was therefore fitting that appropriate mechanisms be put in place to promote the peace process and usher in reconstruction. Key among these was the training component in the new discipline of

conflict resolution and peace building. The MARWOPNET plan of action therefore comprised of advocacy for the three countries, capacity building in lobbying skills, and engaging the appropriate UN and ECOWAS mechanisms. Mindful of their varied backgrounds and the specific nature of the conflict, MARWOPNET embarked on skills training to the extent that when the problem arose with up to a quarter of a million Sierra Leonean refugees trapped in the Parrot's Beak area around the town of Gueckedou in Guinea, and Guinean IDPs were also caught in the logjam, the women were conversant with team building, conflict resolution and mediation skills for the situation. The training had been carried out by the Nairobi Peace Initiative (NPI) with funding from FAS, the UN's Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), ECOWAS and the OAU.²⁷

With regard to the factors underlying the successful lobbying and advocacy strategy deployed by MARWOPNET in convincing the sub regional Heads of State to resolve the conflict, Dr Pratt explained that the stakes were high. In geopolitical terms, the war had been exported to Sierra Leone's blood diamond mines in what was seen as Libya's bid to secure a 'foothold for leverage in West Africa'. That notwithstanding, President Tejan Kabba still proved flexible and accepted to attend a meeting in Rabat, Morocco. But the women were lobbying for peace at all costs. As the war raged on, insecurity deepened at the border regions, jeopardising child immunisation campaigns and to cap it all, the Sierra Leonean warlord, Foday Sankoh held the Pakistani UNAMSIL contingent hostage. It took the intervention of MARWOPNET, among others, to secure their release.²⁸

The success of MARWOPNET is seen as both qualitative and quantitative. The members of the network are endowed with the willingness to participate and they make strategic linkages with a cross section of players. An example is when they intervened in Liberia where they facilitated the LURD talks employing tact and the meeting "ended without a fight". At the time of the diplomatic crisis during which the Ambassadors of Guinea and Sierra Leone were expelled, MARWOPNET, through patient lobbying and skill, secured their release. All the chapters work together; be it in Guinea, Sierra Leone or Liberia. On the calibre of women running MARWOPNET, it has been observed that, unlike the unhealthy situation in many women's organisations, there have been no personality clashes given that "successful women bring status."²⁹

The Mano River women stand out as far as their lobbying strategies and "vibrant fearless outlook" is concerned. She gave the example of the Charles Taylor/Lansana Conte impasse in August 2001 when a delegation from all three chapters of a then recently formed MARWOPNET, alarmed at the worsening tension levels in the sub region, rose up to the challenge and urged Sierra Leonean President Tejan Kabba to mediate between his feuding peers. Involving the leaders in the peace process was no easy task given the cold war between the Liberian president and his Guinean counterpart. Diplomatic relations were at a low ebb following the expulsion from Monrovia of the Guinean ambassador. The MARWOPNET women prevailed and broke the deadlock. President Kabba instructed his Foreign Minister to raise his counterparts and that set the ball rolling for diplomatic mechanisms that ended with a Mano River Summit, specifically convened to address the deteriorating security situation. According to Ms. Mbayo, sub regional advocacy is closely intertwined with community, and national level interventions. Thus, even as MARWOPNET practises high-level advocacy, she is of the opinion that the role of the local chapters is just as important. As the situation was developing in the small town of Yenga, on the

north - western border with Guinea, MARWOPNET, Sierra Leone chapter sought audience with the Vice President and Minister for Internal Affairs to advocate for peace. 30

Team Work:

Thirty women banded together in a holistic feminist approach to peace building, reinforcing one another in the overall interest of the initiative.

Making The Peace Process Gender-sensitive:

The women addressed socio-economic issues arising from the decade long conflict- matters such as the immunisation of children, economic and political empowerment, and border situations as they impacted on women traders. Peace for MARWOPNET was a holistic process.

Awareness Raising:

Teamwork led to even greater awareness the context of in which they were operating and thus enhanced their resolve. The women also sought to learn about the relevant UN Resolutions, saw the linkages between their roles in raising children in the home to governance matters at national and sub regional levels.

Women's Human Rights Focus:

Spurred by their objective, the MARWOPNET women were able to get involved in humanitarian aspect of conflict from the feminist perspective: starting with visits to the refugee and IDP camps as well as the setting up of way stations in places like Zimmi on the border with Liberia. With this first hand experience, MARWOPNET was in a position to address and report on human rights violations with a view to seeking redress. Given the high incidence of rape, interventions on gender based violence culminated in MARWOPNET being awarded the UN Human Rights Prize for 2003.

MARWOPNET at the Grassroots Level

Women can only participate effectively in peace processes if they have been healed of the trauma they experience in situations of armed conflict. Coming down to the specifics of what MARWOPNET meant in their lives, the individual women that were interviewed were full of praise for the network which had imparted psycho-social counseling, skills training, income generation tips and bringing together women of diverse origins. One woman explained how she would ruminate over all the negative things that had happened to her, or how she would get angry with her children when she could not feed them. She was always in a garrulous mood. Her participation in the activities organized by MARWOPNET had assisted her overcome her trauma.³¹



Through sensitisation, MARWOPNET had helped women members to overcome differences. The network had counselled women refugees and those that were internally displaced, and brought them together to participate in ending violence. Grassroots women had been enabled to lessen worries, and children were sensitised on the evils of violent conflict, and the need to desist from joining rebels and other armed groups.³²

Having suffered the trauma and stress arising from the conflict situation in their country, as well as that arising from refugee life, these refugees obviously needed to undergo a healing process, and MARWOPNET assisted them to go through this. With regard to benefits at the personal level, three women shared the changes they had experiences as they interacted with the network and its activities.

“I now have inner peace and have become a peacemaker. I work to reconcile community members in the Community peace network.”

“I used to work at a radio station in Liberia. I now want to use the radio to ensure that there are no more conflicts. I am now a peacemaker counselling children.”

“With all the counselling and leadership training I have had, I now know how to address people and how to counsel children. I no longer beat my own children and consider all children as my own. I am now a humble servant.”

“The sensitisation has helped me achieve inner peace and helped me learn how to live with others. With the skills training, I now keep busy and have overcome my trauma.”

“I was traumatised and kept getting flashbacks but now I have forgotten the past.”

“Trauma counselling has helped us women to address our domestic problems.”

“Not all the worries have been forgotten in the current conditions but the counselling has been of great help.”³³

“MSF brings medicine, the WFP provides food, the UNHCR gives us shelter but MARWOPNET reaches and counsels our hearts.”

“I was always angry with my children. I have overcome the trauma slowly as I used to have sleepless nights, with worry (anxiety). Now my heart has cooled down. I have come to terms with it.

I used to have no peace, I could not eat. I was always worrying as my heart was in Liberia. I now have a peaceful heart.

“MARWOPNET works with women only and therefore concentrates on our issues. They have helped us open up and express our grievances. As opposed to the relief NGOs, they have helped us learn how to live together peacefully. They pay frequent visits.”

One woman, eager to share her new found economic independence spoke enthusiastically of how gainfully employed women not only create employment but also contribute to the return to normalcy in the community. The transformation of gender roles in a post conflict situation was not lost on the young ex-combatant who, no doubt a beneficiary, readily chimed in. **“Economically**

empowered women generate incomes, assist refugees and help families” where the time honoured traditional concept of the male as the provider does not necessarily feature. The multipurpose training project involved skills acquisition and replication, health and education as well as advocacy tools for village leaders. It extended to micro-credit facilities for small businesses which enabled women to support their families.³⁴

One of MARWOPNET's strategies in the Jimmi Bagbo area had been to set up a group of supportive men, their leader being the Chief of the area. These men appreciated the fact that women were now empowered with skills like weaving and soap making and this no doubt was an asset in rebuilding a war-ravaged economy. In fact, one of them described women as “partners in development’. There was greater awareness of the role of women with organisations like 50/50 campaigning for women's representation at municipal level elections. This had lessened domestic tensions and had obviously blunted the edge of male domination.³⁵

While this might sound like time worn development agency-speak, it has to be borne in mind that the Sierra Leone conflict raged for over ten years and had far reaching effects on small rural communities like Jimmi Bagbo. The village still bears signs of armed conflict with bullet marks on ruined buildings, abandoned houses and unkempt farms. Reconstruction to pre-war conditions requires the participation of all, and it was instructive to note that the male members of the group, irrespective of age, station in life, and educational level, were all in agreement with the emancipating role of the MARWOPNET intervention.

Women's Role in DDR Processes

On external ties with organisations MARWOPNET were aware of the efforts being made in the setting up of an early warning system and the monitoring of the border areas as the Network had attended meetings of the Secretary General's Special Representatives in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone. The MARWOPNET perspective would therefore greatly influence the harmonious delivery of the DDR process in the sub region as well as the monitoring activities undertaken at that level. She underscored the fact that during the war it was women who engaged in petty trading and farming. The women involved in the war were either those from difficult family backgrounds, single parents fending for themselves and were therefore ‘easy bait ‘for conscription and other exactions. The DDR process therefore should take into consideration the raising of children in stable families and the sensitisation of grass roots women

as part of the peace process. A truly all-inclusive brief must address the needs of single mothers as some are little more than children with no direction.

There is need for enhanced cooperation especially in peace education, greater interaction at the grassroots and community levels in conjunction with other agencies and the wider civil society, because peace is interdependent.

Lessons Learnt

MARWOPNET is a civil society organisation led by women who were aware of their responsibilities and ready to defend their interests. Women were able to go that extra mile and at that Heads of State summit, it was evident that there could not have been any consolidation of the peace process in the absence of the 'instrumental and even pivotal' role played by the women. As such they had to be recognised as stakeholders for economic recovery and capacity building in the reconstruction process. To that end, empowerment is a central plank in ameliorating the status of women in the sub region.

The lessons learnt from the war indicate that adequate early warning systems need to be established, especially in the border areas. Indeed, during the visit of the team, trouble was brewing in a place called Yenga, on the border with Guinea. As such the network intends to set up offices to work with Community Based Organisations, get involved in areas like the control of small arms proliferation and also to liaise with sister organisations which already have already structures on the ground like FAWE. MARWOPNET already has a joint project in the Pujehun district with an organisation called Conciliation Resources run by Ms. Jeannette Eno, herself a well known figure in the African women's movement and therefore an important ally and asset.

Challenges

The high level negotiations were not without challenges; foremost among these is the issue of language. Guinea is French speaking and even between Sierra Leone and Liberia, the local languages as well as the different English and Krio dialects posed communication barriers. There was always the danger of inadvertently conveying wrong messages! *"Sierra Leone is deeply Anglophone while Liberia is deeply USA!"*, she quipped.³⁶

In a bid to reinforce networking and cooperation between and within the chapters, the challenge for MARWOPNET is to consolidate the membership at all levels, combine high-level diplomacy with grassroots activities without losing sight of the all important language problem. Horizontal cooperation with organisations like hers which runs children's peace clubs, was also important over the long term in securing generational transitions.

MARWOPNET needs more effective support in all three countries: Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and more so with the possibility of the Côte d' Ivoire coming on board. Re echoing her other colleagues, she called for assistance with French language learning as the importance of cross border communications could not be overemphasised, the same applying to the HIV/AIDS campaign.

Another critical factor in the sustainability of the MARWOPNET project is women's education given the undeniable role they play in inculcating positive national values as they raise children. More women need to be involved in MARWOPNET activities at the grassroots level, which in Juliana's estimation ' is important in any society'

Challenges include limited human and financial resources as most of the members are operating on a voluntary basis. For the time being the Sierra Leone chapter is also attending to the secretariat, which is housed by the Mano River Union at its headquarters in Freetown. While office space has been availed, outstanding problems include communications, transport and language issues: conference interpretation and document translation.

Further challenges arise from the fact that the reconstruction process is taking place in a context of poverty, insecurity and a shattered social fabric. MARWOPNET has to grapple with issues of confidentiality, gender based violence with cases of rape on the rise. Women need capacity building to acquire the requisite skills in areas like research and documentation, ICT, African and foreign languages and the all important conflict resolution. Different cadres of trainers, animators and promoters have to be equipped with this new knowledge in a society emerging from over ten years of conflict.

Reaching the provinces is a major problem, especially as MARWOPNET would like to reach out to every corner of Sierra Leone.

Travelling into the countryside especially to the rural areas requires a four -wheel drive vehicle, as reliance on UN helicopters is not sustainable over time.

In the short run, MARWOPNET needs to address challenges in areas like headquarters status, permanent staffing and capacity building to facilitate better time management. The language issue has to be looked into in terms of smooth networking.

In spite of the demobilization taking place in the sub region, one cannot categorically state that an era of peace has been ushered in. There can really be no peace in a context of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and the attendant social ills like “drugged abductees on the loose”. The network therefore has to collaborate with other civil society organizations as well as government organs to address matters like early warning signs, capacity building, the resettlement of refugees, a wider community based membership especially a some of the advocacy work is set to target border area CBOs. Specifically on women, there is the issue of female perpetrators and value based challenges in the areas of health and education as well as property rights. She also mentioned the language barrier that acts as an impediment to communication.

Challenges to the initiative include the lack of a functional Secretariat where the members can hold together as a “coherent whole”. Secondly, in the aftermath of an active multi-country conflict, it was important not to lose sight of local concerns. Her third point related to the maintenance of the sub regional focus through team building while celebrating difference. The lessons learnt were that issues had to be faced without fear, the problem named and perpetrators shamed.

The future for the region is made uncertain by the developments in the Ivory Coast and Guinea that are potentially unsettling. These will be the real test to MARWOPNET's high profile advocacy and sustained commitment inculcated at an early stage. Values like honesty constitute the building blocks of good governance in society to avert distortions such as the usurpation of power by illegitimate means.

Vision for the Future

MARWOPNET is in a strong position to rise up to its challenges, capitalise on opportunities and become a fully-fledged organisation with its own modern high tech headquarters and full time staff. The women of MARWOPNET envisage it partnering with the family of African women's organisations that include FAS, Isis-WICCE and others. Their vision is a peaceful sub region where health and educational concerns are adequately addressed, with respect for human rights and

equity, a region out to combat injustice bad governance and the pervasive democracy deficit; a sub region where sustainable peace, duly engendered, reigns.

The experience of living in the sub region had taught the women of MARWOPNET that without peace, there can be no success. Peace was “fundamental to Sierra Leone and beyond” if the prerequisites of development were to be addressed. Each one had to play their part and avoid the lone ranger approach. MARWOPNET would continue to work trans nationally as a sub regional network. On the generational transition, she underscored the importance of involving young people through inbuilt mechanisms and structures. This was a crucial priority area.

Proposals have been made to potential donors with regard to the establishment of a permanent secretariat and the recruitment of paid full time staff. MARWOPNET should start edging towards transition from the role played in a relief and emergency context into greater focus on the challenges of reconstruction and development in the sub region. This tallied with her future vision for the network. The overt, shooting phase of the war might be over but there is still need for sensitisation especially at the grass roots. The long war years had caused displacement and devastation with the millions on the refugee trail and the time for resettlement and integration had come. The onus is now on the membership to embark on a metamorphosis that would see MARWOPNET transfigure from “an organisation of the past ”into a dynamic 21st century network receptive to younger members.

Apart for the project proposals for income generation, plans also included the purchase of a commercial liner to ferry both goods and passengers and studies have been commissioned!

The way forward can only be secured through ownership of the process for sustainable peace. The information gap must be addressed through dissemination of information on the effects of the conflict. Women were not blameless in some of the atrocities committed during the war and hence the importance that must be given to sensitisation. One seasoned Christian activist calls on women to draw on their strength by rededicating themselves to the objectives for which MARWOPNET was founded. Adherence to and ownership of objectives has seen older organisations like the YWCA go from strength to strength, promoting girls' education in Sierra Leone for the last one hundred years.

MARWOPNET must move forward, transcending the barriers, reaching out to other parts of Africa and beyond, and interacting with women from other conflict zones. In this way, MARWOPNET can contribute to violence-free West Africa, Africa and the world.

CONCLUSION

The case studies presented in this monograph depict women at the forefront of strategizing and acting to build peace in their communities and nations, as well as making strategic linkages to ensure that the initiatives that work are replicated in their sub-regions. They also illustrate women's holistic understanding of peace, and their ability to initiate activities that contribute towards the realization of their vision of peace. The activities in the different countries have shown women to be fearless and willing to go the extra mile to ensure that peace is restored in their countries.

Our visits exposed us to women working with grassroots groups to ensure that relationships are built or restored among conflicting groups. Women were no longer satisfied with working informally; they were educating themselves and others on conflict analysis, management and transformation, and ensuring that their groups obtained the requisite information to empower them and end their dependence on men for information and ideas.

In Burundi, the women are using an array of methods to achieve their objectives in non-violent conflict resolution. They are very practical in their approach to relationship building, ranging from visiting refugees and prisoners, to welcoming returnees, and assisting them with building shelter or starting gardens. They build the skills of women in conflict analysis to demonstrate to "enemy ethnic groups" that their fears of one another are unfounded, and use dialogue and persuasion to appeal to the leadership to adopt non-militaristic methods of conflict resolution. Their activities also demonstrate that psychosocial and relational peace building projects need to be emphasized to enable individuals and communities to heal from the trauma of wars. Without this healing, it is impossible for women, men and children to play their role in peace building.

In Mozambique, women ex-combatants have demonstrated their ability to work together to ensure that DDR processes benefit both female and male ex-combatants. The ability of ex-combatants from FRELIMO and RENAMO, erstwhile enemies, to work together in PROPAZ, and grieve as well as share experiences as a way of healing, demonstrates the women's willingness to transcend barriers, and make their initiatives all-inclusive. Their desire to ensure that ex-combatants learn skills to be able to survive in communities after demobilisation and desist from the desire to use guns for survival shows their desire to have sustainable peace. Their continued participation in the disarmament exercise further illustrates this desire.

The example of the Liberian Women's Mass Action for Peace is a telling case in point of what organised, determined, and focused women can achieve. Their spirit of resilience and willingness

to sacrifice to the point of leaving children unfed to demonstrate for peace shows the women's determination, tenacity, fearlessness, and self-sacrifice can achieve a great deal. Their relational and spiritual peace building, demonstrated by their prayerful actions and willingness to unite across the religious divide shows their willingness to adapt to changing situations, and their focused strategy for peace building.

The activities of MARWOPNET demonstrate that women can no longer take the back seat and wait for the men to negotiate and present their position on peace building. That they were able to risk their lives and visit the rebels without notice is an indicator of their willingness to sacrifice for the sake of peace. The ease with which they were able to meet the presidents of their region cannot be taken for granted. It is an indication of women's ability to make the strategic linkages necessary to achieve their goals, and their unrelenting ability to lobby until they achieve their desired goal. The United Nations recognized the importance of the work of MARWOPNET by awarding them the Human Rights Prize for 2003.

Therefore, while these women's initiatives are diverse, their similarity lies in the fact that they address similar issues, and they have achieved the objective of lessening the political, social and ethnic tensions. Their practices can therefore be replicated in other African countries faced with armed conflict. They serve to energise and challenge women in other countries to rise up and take the leadership in activities of conflict transformation in their countries. The women that made up the leadership and membership of the different initiatives expressed the desire to strengthen their linkages with other women of like mind on the continent. This would improve their numbers as well as their quality, as they would be able to share their best practices.

The challenge is that all the initiatives documented are relatively new on the peace-building scene. They need to be supported morally and financially in order to survive the test of time, to prove that they have staying power, and to continue building on the gains they have made. This will enable them to keep on increasing quantitative as well as qualitative strength to be able to be true agents of change for Africa. It has been proved that networks and coalitions that enable women's groups to strategise gain energy and momentum, and push for peace at the local, regional, and global levels (Dyan Mazurana and Susan Mackay 1999). This is the desired goal for these unique peace initiatives on the African Continent.

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security (2000) calls for more women to be involved in all levels of the peace processes at the national, regional, and international level. These initiatives have illustrated that when women are organized and focused, they can achieve a lot. They are worthy of support and replication.

APPENDIX 1

List of Organisations Documented in the Project

Women's Peace Centre-Search for Common Ground (WPC-SfCG)

27 Avenue de l'Ámitié
BP 6180, Bujumbura
BURUNDI
Tel: 257 21696/ 922 412
Fax: 257 21 6331, 217189

Association for the Promotion of Peace (ProPaz),

Av Agostinho Neto No. 772, R/c,
C. Posta 3278, Maputo
MOZAMBIQUE
Telefax: 258 1 310 073
Email: propaz@isl.co.mz
matinada@yahoo.com

West Africa Network for Peace building (WIPNET/WANEP)

CHAL Compound,
7th Street Sinkor,
P.O. Box 10-22559,
Monrovia,
LIBERIA
Wanep_liberia@yahoo.com, stvarpilah@yahoo.com,
URL: www.wanep.org

Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET)

12 Lightfoot Boston Street, 4th Floor Delco House,
Freetown,
SIERRA LEONE
Tel: 232 22 228 320
marwopnetsl@yahoo.com

APPENDIX 2

Geneva, 3 December 2003

MARWOPNET AWARDED 2003 UNITED NATIONS PRIZE IN THE FIELD OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) is happy to announce that the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) has been awarded the United Nations Prize for Human Rights for 2003 by the UN General Assembly in recognition of its outstanding achievement in human rights. The 2003 Prize will be presented by UN General Assembly President, H.E. Julian R. Hunte, at an event at UN Headquarters in New York on 10 December 2003, as part of the annual commemoration of Human Rights Day. A delegation from MARWOPNET consisting of its Chair, Mrs Saran Daraba Kaba (Guinea), and two Vice-Chairs, Mrs Theresa Leigh-Sherman (Liberia) and Mrs Agnes Taylor-Lewis (Sierra Leone), accompanied by FAS's Executive Director, Mrs Bineta Diop (Senegal), will accept the Prize.

MARWOPNET is a joint peace initiative by the women of the Mano River region (Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea) who combined the forces of the diverse networks already operating in the region to ensure the successful implementation of a new platform for action. Its founders share the conviction that women can contribute meaningfully to the quest for regional peace and security and that the lasting absence of conflict is a necessary condition for fulfilling of the human rights of all.

FAS facilitated the process that led to the creation of MARWOPNET in May 2000 in Abuja, Nigeria. FAS, with the support of UN agencies, the OAU, EAC and ECOWAS, brought together women leaders and representatives of local non-government organisations (NGOs), including networks of women ministers and parliamentarians, journalists, lawyers, academics, researchers, and individuals from the private sector who have demonstrated potential in the fields of peace, human rights and development. Out of their meeting MARWOPNET was borne.

MARWOPNET has played a critical role in the Mano River region from its inception. With refugee flows from Liberia and Sierra Leone into Guinea reaching unprecedented levels, MARWOPNET prevented the outbreak of hostilities between the three countries by bringing their leaders back to the negotiating table. By its early action, MARWOPNET impeded the erosion of human rights which occurs in wartime and furthered the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325. In his report to the Security Council in April 2001, UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, commended MARWOPNET's positive contribution to peace building.

FAS is proud to have contributed to MARWOPNET's development through its programme of capacity building and advocacy in the Mano River region. Since MARWOPNET was launched, MARWOPNET members have benefited from various training and team-building workshops organised by FAS so that they could more effectively influence the region's peace processes and advance women's empowerment. With FAS's ongoing support, MARWOPNET continues its important work in the Mano River region.

The United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights is an honorary award given to individuals and organisations in recognition of their outstanding achievement in human rights. The United Nations Prizes in the Field of Human Rights were instituted by the General Assembly in 1966 to be awarded for the first time on 10 December 1968 on the occasion of the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Past winners of the Prize include Nelson Mandela and Amnesty International. FAS is delighted to have nominated MARWOPNET for the Prize and honoured to see MARWOPNET join the distinguished list of individuals and organisations that have won it.

FAS is an international women's organisation working to empower African women to assume a leadership role in peace building, and conflict resolution. FAS programmes operate mainly in war-torn countries such as the Mano River and the Great Lakes regions. FAS works closely with UN agencies and African bodies such as the African Union and ECOWAS to ensure greater involvement of women in decision-making processes for peace and development. FAS chairs the Committee on the Status of Women's Working Group for Peace, a part of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations in Consultative Status with the United Nations (CONGO), and is in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

MISSION

Isis-WICCE exists to strengthen the voice, capacity and visibility of African women towards the promotion of global justice and the empowerment of women, through action-oriented documentation and cross-cultural exchange of information and skills to increase women's ability and potential at all levels.

VISION

Isis-WICCE envisions a well informed society that values and ensures women's rights in order to realise their capacities and potential.

CORE PURPOSE

Isis-WICCE promotes human rights and the cross-cultural exchange of information and skills, to contribute towards women's transformation.



Isis - Women's International
Cross-Cultural Exchange

Women continue to suffer the consequences of wars in Africa, inspite of the fact that they are not involved in starting them. Ironically, several attempts at ending these wars have excluded the participation of women.

Increasingly, women led peace initiatives have emerged all over the African continent, demonstrating that women do add value to peace-building and that their inclusion in all peace processes is mandatory if their results are going to be sustainable on the Continent.

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