

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PEACE-BUILDING: LIBERIA IN PERSPECTIVE

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## **Abstract**

*Much of the gender-based research on war and post-conflict societies focuses on the adverse effects of violent conflict on women. There is comparably less attention dedicated to analyzing the role of women in peace-building. This article contributes to filling this gap by examining the crucial role that women networks played in restoring political and economic stability in post-war Liberia. Based on a feminist participatory methodology, the paper demonstrates that though women were disproportionately affected during the civil wars that ravaged the country, they have been particularly instrumental in the peace process. The findings elucidated have academic as well as practical implications for how gender and violent conflict interrelate.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

The gender-based literature on wars and other forms of social conflict in Africa disproportionately focuses on the devastating effects of mass violence on women. This is motivated by a growing need to draw attention to the plight of women as a particular vulnerable group in conflict settings. Comparably, much less attention has been directed to studying the role of women in post-conflict settings. This article sets out to address this gap by examining women in post-conflict Liberia.

For years, Liberia was trapped in a vicious cycle of violence. The country was in a state of despair as the socio-economic conditions deteriorated during the first phase of a civil war, which lasted from 1989 to 1997. It was not long before the second round of violence erupted in 1999, which continued until 2003. Throughout both phases of the civil war, human rights abuses were extensive and no one in Liberia was safe, regardless of their age or gender. It is estimated that over 150,000 people had been killed and half of the country's 3 million citizens displaced by 2003 (Hammer, 2006). With particular reference to women, rape was a very common human rights violation, where up to 75 percent of women and girls were said to have been subjected to sexual abuse and gender-based violence (SGBV) during the war (Campbell-Nelson, 2008).

In most conflicts, like a general community life, gender roles are strictly defined: women and children are seen as the victims, while men are viewed both as perpetrators and the peacemakers. Statistically, women and children constitute about 80 percent of all refugees and displaced people (Puechguirbal, 2004), so there seems to be something of the truth in that assertion. That stereotype has even been transposed to the post conflict reconstruction stage of peace-building, where women (and their issues) are often ignored. Such was the case during Liberia's peace-building exercise. However, the women fought against it vehemently, eventually making headway and becoming a major force in the peace-building and reconstruction processes in the country.

Since the end of the cold war, several paradigm-shifts have occurred in the international environment. One of such shifts is the prominent role which women have come to play in peace-

building in their societies. Unlike in the Cold War days when agendas of women were never given ear in peace building - or any other thing for that matter. It is now clear that without women's participation, durable peace may never be achieved; or at least not within desirable timeframes. In terms of human security, the role which women play in peace-building is contributory to the gradual return of a conflict ridden society to a more balanced and secured state. However, the initiatives of women of Liberia played a significant role in reducing violence during their country's civil war. It was also their initiatives that contributed a lot after the ceasefires were in place.

This paper examines the contributions of women to peace-building in Liberia. It attempts an exhaustive analysis of the factors that spurred Liberian women to take a keen interest in efforts to restore peace and how their collective voice came to bear in the peace-building and reconstruction processes that followed. To start with, the article defines the concept of peace-building. Afterwards, it looks at women and peace-building in general and then zooms in on women and peace-building in Liberia. The conclusion highlights the central arguments of the paper and stresses the need for recognizing the crucial role of women in peace-building in Liberia and other parts of the world.

## **2 The Concept of Peace-Building**

Since it was introduced in 1992 by then United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Boutros Gali, in a report titled "An Agenda for Peace" (Boutros, 1992), the concept of peace-building has come to acquire widespread acceptance in both academic and political circles. It was conceived as an integral part of UN's efforts to promote peace, and it came to find its place among the organization's more traditional instruments: preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and peacekeeping. However, despite its widespread usage, the precise definition of the term 'peace-building' has remained unclear. As different types of actors - government agencies, international coalitions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) - embrace the concept, each has made its own contributions to the discourse. As a result, there are several significant differences in its interpretation.

Arguably, the difficulties in defining the concept of peace-building were present since when it was conceived. Although Boutros Gali made it clear that peace-building consisted of "sustained, co-operative work to deal with underlying economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems...", the measures listed as constituting its framework included disarming, restoring order, destroying weapons, repatriating refugees, training security forces, monitoring elections, advancing the protection of human rights, reforming institutions and "promoting political participation." These measures are, for the most part, mainly associated with short to medium term international interventions for peace, and do not carry the notion of being sustained efforts that address underlying causes that may bring about what the same report refers to as an "achieved peace on a durable foundation" (Boutros, 1992: 55-7). Thus, at the very outset, peace building emerged as a less than clear concept and has remained so ever since. The blurred nature of peace-building has been acknowledged by Roland Paris, who observes that "scholars have devoted relatively little attention to analyzing the concept of peace-building itself, including its underlying assumptions" (Paris, 1997: 55). Similar comments have been passed in other quarters too, but according to Henning Haugerudbraaten, "Diverging interpretations and use of one single term need not present problems, provided that scholars and policy-makers recognize their existence and take care in explaining what they are talking about" (Haugerudbraaten, 1998). Yet, more often than not, the definitions in the literature are either

constantly changing form, or entirely absent. In practical terms, this practice can only bring more confusion to the debate, since such definitions are what form the framework and premises of political decisions and actions.

It should therefore be acknowledged that a comprehensive theory of peace-building is for now far from reality, a fact that will preclude efforts to establish an authoritative definition of peace-building for some time to come. Yet, notwithstanding the need for a clarification of the debate, it is useful to start with the general usage of the term. By reviewing a selection of the extensive literature written on the topic, Haugerudbraaten (1998) identifies six dimensions of variable usage of the term peace-building, which all correspond to what he refers to as "a list of questions":

- What is the aim of peace-building?
- What are the measures employed in peace-building?
- What constitutes the temporal (time) aspects of peace-building - short, medium or long term?
- Who are the main actors in peace-building - indigenous or external actors?
- How is the organization of peace-building activities?

Attempting to answer these questions may lead us closer to a clarification of the term.

## **2.1 What is the Aim of Peace-Building?**

In summary, the aim or purpose of peace-building is to create peace. Galtung (1996: 1-3) suggested two different concepts of peace: negative peace, and positive peace. He called the mere absence of violence, negative peace. On the other hand, positive peace is a stable social equilibrium in which the surfacing of new disputes does not escalate into violence and war. It is generally the promotion of positive peace that peace-building is concerned with. That is because the task of peace-building mainly concerns addressing the 'root causes' of a conflict. However, the root causes of conflicts are frequently complex, and hard to identify and understand. In developing countries, where conflict is almost endemic, the root causes often include skewed land property structures, environmental degradation, and unequal political representation (Zartman, 1995; Markakis, 1998) - issues that are usually very tricky to handle.

It is a truism that the central task of peace-building is to create positive peace - a "stable social equilibrium in which the surfacing of new disputes does not escalate into violence and war" (Haugerudbraaten, 1998). Such a situation of sustainable peace involves the absence of physical and structural violence, the elimination of discrimination, and the nurturing of self-sustainability. Moving towards this sort of environment goes beyond problem solving or conflict management, to social "re-engineering", and repositioning. Peace-building initiatives try to fix the core problems that underlie conflicts and change the patterns of interaction of the involved parties (Reychler, 2001). They aim to move a given population from a condition of extreme vulnerability and dependency to one of self-sufficiency and well-being (Lederach, 1997).

## **2.2 What Are the Measures Employed in Peace-Building?**

Related to the debate on the aims of peace-building, is the debate on what measures are the most important in this undertaking. As long as funding for peace-building ventures remains scarce, peace-builders will need to consider carefully which measures to undertake. Since the chosen policies tend to feed back to analytical concepts, policy-makers effectively promote one particular notion of peace-building, leaving out other dimensions. However, different actors pursue different practices, as is reflected in the literature. They do not agree on the course to

follow, causing further confusion about the concept. Some take a very broad-based approach to peace-building: Regehr stated that, "peace is built... on social, political, economic and ecological foundations that serve the welfare of the people" (DFAIT, 1996). The Canadian Peace-building Coordinating Committee (CCCCP, 1997) published a list which includes a wide variety of economic, political, and security issues that they feel must be addressed in peace-building. While in a paper dealing with UN involvement in Haiti, Kumar and Cousens argue that Haiti is as much a "candidate for nation-building, more accurately called peace building" as for conflict resolution, and present a wide array of challenges and possible responses (Kumar and Cousens, *International Journal of Development and Management Review (INJODEMAR) Vol. 14 No. 1 June, 2019*

### **2.3 What Constitutes the Temporal (Time) Aspects of Peace-Building - Short, Medium or Long Term?**

A major point of confusion in the peace-building literature concerns when activities referred to as peace-building commence and when they end. The confusion here is as much as there are commentators on the subject. The European Union refers to a list of phases through which a particular conflict may pass: a situation without obvious tension, a situation of tension, open conflict and a post-conflict situation (European Commission, 1997). To this list should be added a distinct phase, the so-called 'twilight zone', that occurs after open conflict has ended. There is some disagreement on the exact meaning of this term, but it is useful, since it draws attention to a difficult transition phase. The phases of a conflict therefore are to be presented thus: situation without obvious tension; situation of tension; open conflict; twilight zone; and post-conflict situation.

It is generally agreed that peace-building can take place during all these phases, with one notable initial exception suggested by Boutros-Gali, stating that preventive diplomacy seeks to resolve disputes before violence breaks out; peace-making and peace-keeping are required to halt conflicts and preserve peace once it is attained. If successful, they strengthen the opportunity for post-conflict peace-building, which can prevent the recurrence of violence among nations and peoples.

Thus, peace-building was supposed to follow only after peacekeeping activities are concluded, but the Secretary-General modified his position in the 1995 Supplement to An Agenda for Peace (UN, 1995) and suggested that peace-building can also be preventive. It is thus not necessarily related to peacekeeping operations. Hence, peace-building as a concept, from being at first a strictly post-conflict undertaking, has evolved to acquire a broader meaning. The general consensus is that peace-building should already be attempted during the situation of tension phase.

There is also disagreement over the duration of peace building activities. The approach until now has been to schedule the end of peace building efforts at the time of general national elections, as was the case in Mozambique. This adds up to a time span of two to three years for the operation. Paris (1997) feels that this is much too short and recommends a time span of seven to ten years, until the time of the second election. On the other hand, it has been suggested that the purpose of peace building is to avoid a return to conflict and that "in some cases this may require ambitious 'nation-building' efforts" (SIPRI, 1998).

Perhaps not surprisingly, those who are financially able to fund peace-building operations are less likely to recommend long-term international involvement in peace-building, because they do not equate peace-building with nation building. In a policy statement by the OECD Development Assistance Committee, it was emphasized that, "developing countries are

ultimately responsible for their own development ... even in countries in crisis.” (DAC, 1997: 11) In the same vein, the report from a workshop organized by the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik distinguishes between short-term and long-term peace-building, and states that it was "questioned whether the UN has a major role to play" in the latter (Kuhne, 1997: 14). Hence, international involvement in peace-building is strongly envisaged as a relatively short-term process.

Yet another aspect of the starting point in peace-building operations is the fear expressed by some developing countries that premature peace-building efforts could interfere with their sovereignty. They do not subscribe to a concept of peace-building that precedes a peace agreement to end the violent conflict (Haugerudbraaten, 1998)

#### **2.4 Who are the Main Actors in Peace-Building – Indigenous or External Actors?**

Two vital dimensions of peace-building are discussed here. They revolve around the issues of which actors are the main peace-builders, and whether peace-building constitutes a set of concrete actions or is more usefully conceived of as an aggregate process. It is helpful to present these two dimensions together, as term usage in both does not differ significantly. Firstly, some texts dealing with peace-building tend to promote a concept that is heavily dominated by external actors (Kuhne, 1996; 1997). In so far as peace-building is conceived of in this way ignores the actions of locally based citizens and organizations; it can be characterized as donor-biased. This means that it is viewed primarily as actions initiated and undertaken by external actors. An example can be found in the role-sharing implied by Kuhne:

In peace-building activities, special attention should be attached to the roles and obligations of the parties to a conflict, as well as to the local population. Since the co-operation of the parties is essential to the success of peace-building, [increased effort should be made to secure their consent and support for the activities] (Kuhne, 1997, p.41).

However, donor-biased perceptions in peace-building pay less attention to actions taken by different groups especially those of (former) adversaries themselves (Haugerudbraaten, 1998).

Secondly, peace-building can be conceptualized in two different ways: either as the concrete actions taken to support and promote peace, or as an aggregate process. This process involves a modification of social structures (political, economic, social, cultural, psychological, etc.) through a number of broad developments, notably democratization, economic development and demilitarization. The adjective 'aggregate' is used to highlight the fact that peace-building in this sense is an outcome that depends on the combined effect of a number of actions occurring at different levels. Nevertheless, the fact that most of the literature mentions the need to obtain the consent of the conflicting parties and the local population, does not change the impression that peace-building is conceived of as being dominated by external actors. Frequently, scant attention is paid to the consideration of peace-building as an indigenous undertaking. The focus remains on the role of the international community, whether played by NGOs, IGOs or UN agencies. This obviously also has to do with who writes and develops such concepts: but they may result in donor-bias all the same. In the post-conflict situation, the international community moves into the former conflict zone, establishes itself and launches a set of peace-building programmes. It acts as a conscious and purposeful peace-builder.

## **2.5 How is the Organization of Peace-Building Activities?**

The issue of who are the main actors in peace-building is interwoven with whether and how it should be coordinated. One perspective promoted by, among others, Kuhne, sees the centralization of efforts as critical to successful implementation of peace-building programmes:

[A] Coherent approach to peace-building on the ground [is] a condition sine qua non for success ... The overall leadership for peace-building during a peace-keeping operation and in the immediate aftermath ('short-term peace-building') should be the UN's responsibility (Kuhne, 1997: 7).

Another perspective is multi-track diplomacy. The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy has a more egalitarian perception of peace-building. It sees the efforts of NGOs and other volunteer organizations as just as important as efforts undertaken through bilateral programmes and Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs). It is believed that different tracks by various actors and with a variety of means complement each other and create a positive synergy.

## **3.0 Women and Peace-Building**

The term peace-building is of popular characterization specifically in relation to issues of women. This is reflected in the fact that the term is not used within the Platform for Action (PFA), the consensus statement adopted by representatives of 181 nations at the 1995 United Nations (UN) World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China. (This is in spite of the fact that women's participation in governance, women's peace-building, women's human rights, and violence against women are topical issues in contemporary international discourse). Nonetheless, the PFA serves as a blueprint for women's global leadership to advance women's status and, hence, it is a peace-building related document in its own right, based on the fact that it focuses on women issues in both war and peacetime.

However, because of how ubiquitous the term peace-building has become within the vocabulary of UN, national governments, and even nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) after the Beijing Conference, feminist peace researchers are evidently curious about meanings attributed to peace-building, especially as it relates to women. Mazurana and McKay (1999), proceeding from the basic premise that senior policy-making men's usage of the term (i.e., Boutros-Ghali, (1992), for instance) differed from that of women. NGOs and grassroots organizations, conducted a gender analysis of the meanings of peace-building at UN, NGOs, and grassroots levels. Based upon that understanding of the contextualized and process oriented nature of women's grassroots NGOs' peace-building, they developed this broad conceptualization concerning peace-building:

Peace-building includes gender-aware and woman-empowering political, social, economic, and human rights. It involves personal and group accountability and reconciliation processes that contribute to the reduction or prevention of violence. It fosters the ability of women, men, girls, and boys in their own culture(s) to promote conditions of nonviolence, equality, justice, and human rights of all people, to build democratic institutions, and to sustain the environment (Mazurana & McKay, 1999: 9)

This conceptualization exercise by Mackay and Mazurana indeed broadens the focuses of peace-building to include the needs of women, girls and the feminist gender in very clear and general terms, and not only the needs of society as interpreted by men. However, it opens our eyes to the reality that peace-building, just like all other social concepts, is exposed to the same conceptual weakness of gender bias, a limitation that often nullifies the strengths or appropriateness of concepts, usually drawn upon to explain concrete social phenomena. Viewing

from that 'gendered tilt', several researchers, both feminists and non-feminists, have argued that gender is relevant to questions of conflict resolution and peace. There are also those who use biological explanations and claim that women are more peaceful than men by nature and therefore more equal gender relations will result in a higher degree of peace (Gierycz, 2001).

Feminism, as an analytical tool, could be regarded as one of the concepts that are grounded within the confines of critical studies and is therefore not a concept that should be specified on its own terms. In this work, however, while keeping that preconception in mind, feminism is defined on its own terms as well.

Generally, the feminist framework seeks simply to promote the notion that both women and men are individuals within society, and should be treated equally, thereby downing against all forms of gendered discrimination in society. The theory of feminism evolves three major strands, as Collins (2006) outlines them. First among these is the liberal feminist framework, which wishes to see a complete equality of opportunity between men and women. Liberal feminists wish to see an ending to the exclusion of women in public life and are keen to see equal representation of women in the high offices of state and advocate the right of women to participate in activities, such as combat, that have traditionally been ascribed to men by society.

As gender biases are gradually being deconstructed in contemporary times, it should be noted clearly that there are many different ways in which women have lived in times of war: as fighters, community leaders, social organizers, workers, farmers, traders, welfare workers etc. Perhaps most notably, some women have been seen to use these different roles to try to minimize the effects of violence, if not actively to try to end the violence themselves, by acting as peacemakers (Ferris, 1993). Historically, the incidence of such "role-play" by women has often bequeathed them with hopes and opportunities for liberation from older, often oppressive, social orders. As the need arose for them to take on men's roles in their absence, they had to shake off the restrictions of their cultures and live in a new way. Usually, as a fall-out of this very vital role which the women played, some political movements even come to take seriously the demands of women for improved rights, and accept women's political representation and other forms of rights in the post conflict situation. The allocation of places for women on the local Resistance Committees in post-1986 Uganda is a good example, with the establishment of a Ministry for Women also common. But this is usually where the positive aspects of women's experiences of war ends, because in the post-war peace, women have often suffered a backlash from government and society against their new found freedoms - a situation that has been called a 'gendered peace' (Pankhurst, & Pearce, 1997).

However, the participation of women in post conflict peace-building holds great promise for enriching the entire process. Moreover, it is only fair that women do participate actively in these processes, given the scale of suffering they usually have to endure during wars. Measures to enhance women's personal security include calling to account men who commit sexual violence, most especially rape and violent acts committed against girls are even more hidden than those against adult women, and urgently require investigation along with support services for girls in most post-war situations (Nordstrom, 1997).

After the conflict, women nonetheless rarely receive recognition for their contributions as providers and care-givers, let alone reward for their roles as social and political organizers. They usually receive much less support than male fighters in post conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation projects (Goldblatt & Meintjes, 1998), whilst at the same time they face increased levels of domestic violence. Although peace-building initiatives to assist ex-combatants (including children) are important, especially with respect to minimizing the use of violence in

peacetime, it is also important that an overview of the resources include the consideration of all women's needs, not least because the majority of caring and providing for the whole population is often provided by women after war, and so addressing women's basic needs benefits the whole society (El Bushra, 1998). However, this treatise is not oblivious of the fact that men, despite being prosecutors of war also play their roles in peace-building. This synergy accounts for the success in peace-building.

Perhaps the most difficult question which now faces those concerned with gender issues in post conflict situations, however, is not the ways to assess the extent of women's suffering, but how women fit into the complex picture of innocence and guilt, and what this means for post conflict peace-building. Where peace-building is to take gender seriously, it also has to have an analysis of the variety of women's roles in conflict. The danger in ignoring women's active participation, as well as their collusion, in organized violence is that false assumptions might be made about the potential role of women in peace. Measures which attempt to assist people to handle such divisions without violence, if not resolved or overcome are rarely given consideration in peace-building strategies.

### **3.2 Women and Peace-building in Liberia**

The Civil War in Liberia took a great toll on the Liberian women in terms of both structured and unstructured violence, and the trauma that followed afterwards. As a result of this the women took a very decisive stand, demanding and insisting that peace and stability must return to their country. Indeed, women organizing at the grassroots level have become an important component of that civil society agenda for peace. Since the beginning of the Liberian civil war in 1989, Liberian women have organized to assist the victims and encourage national and regional peace initiatives. I will seek to describe the process, bringing out the critical factor of women participation as a major element of the peace-building process in Liberia.

### **3.3 Women's Peace Activism in Liberia**

The Liberian women's participation in the peace process is very interesting to observe, in terms of how it started and progressed through different stages, and how women were finally acknowledged in the process. The movement by women for participation in the peace process was propelled by one thing alone: their collective will to see violence and its attendant effects being addressed in their country. It was this "un-colored" background and context that informs the Liberian women's peace-building movement.

### **3.4 Foundations of the Movement**

For fourteen years, women in Liberia bore the brunt of two brutal wars characterized by the use of child soldiers, mass displacement, widespread sexual violence, abuse, deprivation and extreme poverty. Women played many roles in the conflict: as politicians, combatants, victims, and certainly as peace-builders (Aisha, 2005). As peace-builders, Liberian women have engaged in trauma healing, conflict resolution, mediation, campaigning and networking, often at significant risk to themselves. In the mid-1990s, the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI) actively campaigned for an end to the first civil war and participated in the disarmament process. They led strikes and protests and campaigned for greater inclusion of women in the peace processes, leading some LWI members to be harassed and threatened with death by the warring parties (Solomon, 2005). Liberian women also attended the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995. The Mano River Union Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), created in 2000, brought

together women peace-builders from Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia to encourage women's participation in peace processes and appealed to their heads of state to end violence in the region (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004; UNIFEM, 2006), while, In 2001, the Women in Peace-building Network (WIPNET) was launched as programme of the Ghana-based West Africa Network for Peace-building (WANEP). There is therefore enough background to support the development of peace activism consciousness among the Liberian women.

The Liberian women's peace movement evolved in response to the horrendous societal conditions and indiscriminate violence that the war produced. The dimension of this violence on women is of great interest, as women were treated as worthless human beings, people with no say, no initiative, and nothing whatsoever to do concerning events that are happening, around, and that affect them. Martha, a participant of the women's movement, recalled the horrors of the war:

The war came without anyone knowing what it really meant. During the war, everyone started looking for places to hide. My sister lost her older son. We don't know if he is dead or alive. Women did not get support during the war. Women were sex slaves to warlords, lost their children and were treated like nothing during the war. Soldiers could just take women as wives. Women couldn't refuse because the soldiers had the guns (Sewell, 2007: 15).

A particular dimension of this violence was the physical and sexual abuse suffered by women. Victoria, a leader in the women's movement, commented on the abuse that women endured during the war:

Some of the things that were happening [during the war] were so barbaric that people don't want to talk about them. I mean the rebels would look at a pregnant woman and say "that is a boy or no that is a girl. Okay let's find out." Then they would walk up to a pregnant woman and rip her stomach open, take the baby out and cut the umbilical cord from the woman and leave her to die. Then they would cut the baby's head off and use it to play ping pong. Forget the woman that they have just cut open. These were the type of things that were happening during the war and it was an everyday thing (Sewell, 2007:15).

This widespread sexual and physical abuse that the women endured is a factor that propelled the movement forward. The women's peace movement took on a new dimension with the formation of the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI) on February 4, 1994. Before LWI, women were engaged in relief efforts, advocacy and other organizations—such as the Association of Women in Action (AWA), Abused Women and Girls Project, Women's Development Association (WDA), and the Rural Women's Association (RWA)—but LWI became the front for women's advocacy and political activities. Thus was it that LWI became a pressure group against killing and sexual abuse, and the methods used were mainly peaceful demonstrations and stakeholder consultations.

But, it is a point of wonder to observe how the LWI was able to mobilize the whole women (a sizeable majority, at least) to act collectively and with great resolve, to get them committed to the cause of fighting for peace right to when peace deals were eventually brokered. That is aside the fact that they played a very crucial role in forcing the peace accords to be signed. The question then becomes: what were the underlying factors that served as catalysts for the women's zealous involvement in the movement? Ruth Cesar, former member of Liberia's House of Representatives and active member of LWI and the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), elaborated on the conditions:

It [the movement] started off as the right to survive. We said, "Enough was enough." Women saw their children, their husbands being killed and slaughtered. They saw their relatives dying. We ourselves were struggling and internally displaced persons but we have a natural-born instinct to protect the family, to protect our children, when our families are in danger, our lives are also in danger; it was just to survive, to protect the family. The women had to come together to see how to stop the war and to advocate against it. The women were brave enough to seek out the fighting parties, meet church leaders, and international peacekeepers. To meet them to say enough is enough and we want the war to stop (Sewett, 2007: 16).

It is apparent that the women carried out different strategies, and Mary Brownell spoke of the danger of the situation:

We tried to carry our activities outside of Monrovia and when we got to the Po River Bridge, there were armed fighters on the bridge. I got out of the bus thinking that when they saw me, a big woman, they would let us pass. They walked up to me and said, "What do you want?" I said, "We are going to Bomi Hills." The boy had the audacity to say, "If you and your women don't get back in your buses and leave I will spray you all." With that they put their guns in position and they said, "Get off the bridge." So we had to get back in our buses, reverse, and headed back to Monrovia (Sewell, 2007: 16).

Mary Brownell emphasized that the women carried out a variety of activities under difficult circumstances, risking their lives for peace.

### **3.5 Challenges to Women's Peace-building**

The bitter truth about women's peace-building is that women are seen as "no-gooders" in peace-building processes: they are seen as not capable of adding any real value to the process. Some sources of the difficulty to women's participation in peace-building include:

1. Low Commitment to Gender Mainstreaming
2. Neglect of Women's Needs in Truth and Reconciliation Processes
3. Neglect of Women's Special Needs in Economic Rehabilitation

### **4.0 Conclusion**

This paper examined the role of women in peace-building with specific focus on Liberia. As a departure to extant literature where the main focus is on the adverse effects of violence on women, the paper illustrated the immense contribution of women in restoring peace.

Since 2003, the women in peace-building network have built on a history of women's peace activism in Liberia and increased the space for women in politics. Through their action for peace, WIPNET members gave a human face - indeed, a woman's - face to issues of peace and security and called attention to the important roles women play in peace-building.

It first considers how peace-building impinges on women's issues. It points out that gender, being the source of discrimination against women in society, has been used to discriminate against women even in terms of conflict and peace: and because of the women who suffer the most from these issues, it is believed that this will systematically cascade the discussion in the paper, pointing towards its point of reference — the role that women have been playing in peace-building.

The activism and successes of the Liberian women's peace movement illustrate that women can be more than victims during times of war or strife and instead can be agents of social change. This culminated in the 2005 election of Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf,

Africa's first female head of state. This goes a long way in showing women's efforts at building peace in Liberia, if the first female head of state in Africa can emerge from a country just coming out of a war that lasted over a decade.

When assessing the contribution of women to the peace process, an important question is whether it is the fact that they are women that matters or just that they are members of civil society willing to work for peace? It is evident that while women continue to face challenges in participating in the peace process, they can make (and have made) a vital and unique contribution to conflict management.

Women bring a different perspective to formal and informal peace processes. Their involvement in conflict prevention, stopping war, and the stabilization of regions impacted by warfare is essential because women can bridge religious, ethnic, political and cultural divides. Women are known to play a critical role in mobilizing their communities to begin the process of reconciliation and rebuilding, rehabilitation, reintegration and reemergence of economic activities in a society. The presence of women in the peace process changes the dialogue. Their concerns stem not only from their own experiences, but from their nature and their relationship to their communities.

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