

Broken, Yet Strong:
Women's Quest for Peace
and Justice

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Broken, Yet Strong: **Women's Quest for Peace and Justice**

As a society, we are often afraid of the brokenness that comes from experiences of trauma, loss, grief, and violence. But in women's quests for peace, I see women harnessing their pain and using it to connect with one another and fight for justice.

Too often, our narratives of war and politics discount the contribution of women because of any brokenness. But I have seen first-hand how women's relationship to their own brokenness and the brokenness of others can bring healing, reconciliation, and growth.

In 2002, many countries in the West African sub-region were still struggling with the effects of war and trying to finding peace. Many stakeholders were being mobilized to engage in the process; women, in particular, were being drawn into the discourse around peace and justice. Many movements were being formed and women were figuring out ways that they too could effectively engage in the process.

The Women in Peacebuilding Network – also known as WIPNET – is one of such groups that was established. The Liberian chapter of WIPNET sought to include all categories of women in their peacebuilding efforts. We did this by visiting diverse communities and holding informal dialogue sessions.

One day a group of WIPNET members and I decided to visit a local internally displaced camp and hold a conversation about life in general and being a woman in particular. The conversation was based on a concept we had developed called “shedding off” the weight.

The idea behind this is that in most communities everyone has a space to exhale, but women usually don't. They are expected to hear everyone's problems and help generate solutions. This is even more pronounced in conflict context when women are the protectors, providers and the planners.

On this day, we sat in the room and listened as one after the other women told heart-wrenching stories of grief, pain, abuse, and misuse. The tears from most

women were unstoppable. Many of the women in that circle were from the same community, although they had no idea of the hardship that the others were going through.

One story, in particular, made us go through all the emotions at once. A very beautiful young girl told the story of leaving her community as a result of the war and walking miles with her husband and children, she said at a checkpoint her husband was taken aside and killed, she was raped and abused by many soldiers. She decided to run away and whilst trying to do so she fell, hit her head, and hurt her leg. A few weeks passed and her vision became blurred. After some months she lost her sight completely. The wound was still on her leg when we met her and she could barely walk. She was able to be reunited with her very young children, but life was tough. She informed us that as an internally displaced person, she was never given a place to live and that she was never included on the food rations list. When we probed further she said the guy responsible insists that he had to have sex with her before adding her to the list.

My tears turned to rage and I asked my sisters to join me in seeking out the head of the organization and reporting the case. We had to seek justice for the young woman. Everyone agreed.

We documented the story, wrote a letter to the head of the humanitarian agency and then asked for an audience. We were granted an audience where we put this woman's case forward. What is important to note is that a lot of the women who were seeking justice for this young woman also had similar or worse issues. But for them, justice for her had to be the goal, first and foremost.

Through our intervention, we were able to get her a shelter and her name listed as an official IDP with full benefits. All previous rations were given back to her.

“It is now more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier in modern wars.” This is a quote by Major General Patrick Cammaert, the Deputy Force Commander of the United Nations Mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo. He was describing the mass use of rape and abuse of women as a deliberate strategy of warfare in the DRC and other conflicts. Sexual violence in conflict is both a human rights violation and a war crime. Sexual violence is also a barrier to building peace and resolving conflict.

According to WarsintheWorld.com, there are currently over 68 countries involved in war or some form of military/ violent uprising with over 811 guerillas, militias or armed groups involved. The levels of death and destruction in many of these conflicts leave very little to be imagined about the state of humanity. Women and girls bear the greatest brunt of all of these conflicts. Sex crimes are committed indiscriminately by those in and out of the command structure. The Democratic Republic of Congo, the Rohingya communities in Myanmar, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and many more places continue to be communities where women are suffering many forms of violence.

This, unfortunately, is not a strange phenomenon. In 1990, in my own country Liberia we experienced a violent civil war that would last for 14 years. In those war years over 250,000 were killed, over a million internally displaced and half a million refugees. The infrastructure destruction would take decades to solve.

Women were raped and killed during this war in ways that many are still trying to cope with. Though women bore the biggest brunt of the Liberian war, they were determined to be a part of efforts to restore peace and promote justice.

With 10 USD and a lot of determination, a few of us decided to put out a statement calling on our leaders to end all forms of hostilities.

The question would later be, what drove a group of women who had no political stake in peace to be so focused on bringing an end to the war. The answer was very simple, if not the women then who?

We led daily protests in an open field and called for an immediate, unconditional ceasefire, a fruitful dialogue between all parties, and the deployment of intervention force. The women's demands were strategic as those three conditions if adhered to would ensure a semblance of safety and security.

The women's protest was also seeking to change the dynamics of the media reportage on Liberia. The international press would focus on little boys with guns, high on drugs, shooting randomly at trees. We wanted to make sure that the press shared stories of women and their daily struggles, of nurturing communities

in the midst of chaos. The women wanted the world to see the other side of the war.

And the other reason that the women felt the protest was key, was that by going public they were putting their abused bodies out there to confront the pain of their abuse and confront their perpetrators. Key members of Mass Action for Peace were women who had experienced or were experiencing different forms of trauma. Some had observed their children being killed, others had to live with the pain of being raped (sometimes in the presence of their children), at least all of the members had lost at least one or more family member as a result of the war.

We were all broken. But broken also meant a deep desire to ensure that our children did not have to go through what we were going through and that gave us the strength to seek peace and justice. In our public statements, we repeatedly stated that we were tired of the war, we were tired of our children being raped, and we were motivated into taking a stand because we knew that one day our children would turn to us and ask what our role was during the crisis.

The journey was difficult but we were determined to make a difference in our nation. We were threatened, made fun of, seen as “toothless bulldogs.” But our quest emboldened us daily. And 6 months into our protest a peace agreement was signed.

Liberia had signed many agreements but all had fallen apart based on several factors. Number one, the previous agreements were usually a one-size-fits-all text copied from other peace processes with no contextual link. Number two, they were primarily outsider driven with no real input from the community. Number three, the content of the Peace Agreement was mainly voluminous and difficult for the ordinary citizen to understand.

After the signing of the agreement, and when the dust had settled from all the celebrations, we decided to invite women leaders from all of the counties to come together so that we could “demystify” the agreement and set benchmarks that would guide our advocacy.

This proved to be one of the most effective practices as we worked to ensure that the peace agreement was implemented to the letter. The women again proved

that they could efficiently engage in peace processes even though their issues were never highlighted in any document.

Two years after the signing of the agreement and many hours of planning and advocacy Liberia had elections and we made history by electing Africa's first female president.

The question one must ask is: so what about the issues of abuse and violence that women suffered? Where is their justice? Do these women just go home and sit and not advocate for restitution for themselves and their sisters?

We have been very clear in our advocacy that there can be no peace without justice. But we are also very cautious that the timing of the call for justice is essential.

Electing a female President was no guarantee that women's issues would be of significance to the new government. We knew that we had to keep mobilizing, and know what to ask for and when. As a women's movement, we collaborated with the Female Lawyers Association of Liberia to get two key bills passed into law that would make a significant difference to the rights of women. The rape law – this makes rape a non-bailable offense – and the inheritance law, which ensures that women and children have the same inheritance rights whether the marriage is under civil or common law.

The story of the Liberian women and the quest for peace and justice is the story of women in many parts of the world. The global narrative of women survivors of conflict is not one of strength and courage, but rather one of victimhood and pain. As part of the call for justice, this narrative must change.

A few years ago, women in the DRC were calling on the world's powerful nations to call out the leaders that were perpetuating wars in their region. They insisted that the work for peace and justice had to be circular and not top to bottom. That for peace and justice to occur world leaders had to recognize and include the women's work in the global discourse and take them as serious partners for peace and justice.

Similarly, in Liberia, the call for justice and peace is circular, and not a linear process. In the lead up to the 2017 Presidential elections in Liberia, the women's movement once again mobilized for peace. This time, it was not to stop a war, rather it was to remind all Liberians of how hard we had to fight for peace, and that the elections must be conducted in a way that sustains our peace, rather than threatens the peace. Once again, the women of Liberia stepped forward, knowing that their own rights had not yet been fully realized, but that it was time to share the stories of their brokenness and their triumph and inspire the next generation to fight for change using nonviolent means.

This call for the never ending work of peace and justice is not just the call of the Congolese women or the Liberian women. It is a global call of the women's movement. That women's roles in peace and justice processes must be recognized, validated and engaged.

The strength, tenacity and commitment that women bring to these processes should never be understated or undervalued. All of humanity shares a brokenness. And we must all play a role as we seek peace and justice for our wounded world.