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Women Waging Peace

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On the eve of President Bush's visit to Liberia and as U.S. election campaign rhetoric continues to focus on "change," Americans can learn a great deal from Liberian women who risked everything -- careers, families, and lives -- to stop a 14-year-long civil war and vote into office Africa's first elected female head of state, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Recently, five Liberian women leaders attended a Women and Security Executive Program designed by Harvard's Women and Public Policy Program to advance women toward the most senior levels of the police, military, and government. The story of one of these pioneers demonstrates how Liberian women utilized diverse tactics to accomplish real change and bring peace to their country.

Cerue Konah Garlo, a lifelong political activist, staged demonstrations against the war, during which, from 1989-2003, about 200,000 Liberians were killed and half the country's 3 million people were displaced. In 2003, she organized thousands of women to dress in funereal white, sit for eight months in the sun and the rain, and demand that President Charles Taylor agree to a ceasefire and start peace talks. The women denied sex to their husbands, if they were fighting in the war, and threatened to strip naked (a curse in Liberia), if the warlords did not come up with an agreement. Their tenacity paved the way for a new government in which President Johnson-Sirleaf appointed many women to traditionally male positions, including ministers of commerce, justice, finance, and foreign affairs, as well as top police positions.

Today, Liberia (which was founded by freed American slaves in 1847) is still struggling to recover from war. Some of the most visible people helping to keep the peace are, in fact, women. A highly-trained, all-female, 125-member UN peacekeeping force from India patrols the streets. This female unit is not only a testament to the role that women can play in peacekeeping efforts, but also makes it unlikely that "sex for food" allegations will plague UN forces in Liberia as they have elsewhere.

Other countries have developed important initiatives that provide a greater role for women in security and policing. Brazil, for example, established 300 all-women police stations, dramatically increasing sexual assault and domestic violence reporting. In stabilized post-genocidal Rwanda, there are more women in parliament -- close to 50 percent -- than any other country in the world, and women play a significant role in security issues there. By comparison, the US ranks 68th out of 189 countries, with approximately 16 percent of its legislature being women.

It is no secret that women are vital to security. United Nations Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, recognizes the unique role women can play in resolving conflicts and urges UN member states to include women in peace and security initiatives. UN research shows that the presence of female police and military officers inspires greater confidence in security forces in the wake of conflict. At the same time, UN data reveals that increased collaboration among security officials and women from all arenas (private sector, government, and non-governmental organizations) boosts the legitimacy and effectiveness of a nation's armed forces.

Cerue Konah Garlo was but one of several dozen women who participated in Harvard's Initiative for Inclusive Securities Forum last month. She was joined by delegations of female security leaders from Afghanistan, Colombia, Haiti, Israel, and Palestine who took their message to some 450 high-level policy makers in Washington, D.C. The group included Colombia's former minister of defense, a retired Israeli military general, Liberia's deputy commissioner of immigration, two parliamentarians from Afghanistan, a Haitian senator, and a senior adviser for Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas. These women all carried the same message: For a country's security sector to be fully effective, it should include a female perspective. Women who have a collaborative nature are well equipped to negotiate peace agreements, and their inclusion helps lead to secure borders, resources, and infrastructure.

This message of inclusion is born out by the experiences of the participants. A case in point is Martha Lucía Ramírez. In 2002, she was appointed by then President Uribe to serve as Colombia's minister of defense. Ramírez was the second woman in Latin America -- and the first in Colombia -- to ever hold this position. In the wake of decades of civil conflict, she expanded the Defense Department's role to include economic security, infrastructure development, and educational support. Within a few years, her support programs -- safe housing, education, jobs, and counseling -- helped thousands of child soldiers leave guerilla and paramilitary groups and return to their families. Currently a member of the Colombian Senate, her holistic approach to security continues to reduce the nation's violence. One of her current legislative initiatives is to lift restrictions against women being promoted to the rank of general in the military.

Despite the support of the UN and the amount of evidence that has been accumulated in recent years, however, only five percent of police and military worldwide are female.

That percentage should be increased. When security is redefined to include nation building, community policing, services for innumerable rape victims, and social programs that curb violence, there will be even more significant roles for women to play. As more women like Liberia's President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Liberian activist Cerue Konah Garlo, and Colombian Senator Martha Lucía Ramírez assume places as parliamentarians, cabinet officials, military generals, and heads of state, their commitment to integrate additional women into the security sector -- to assume top leadership positions waging peace -- may well make the world safer for all.

Aileen Adams, a former Cabinet Secretary in California, Director of the Office of Victims of Crime in the U.S. Justice Department, and USC Vice Provost, is currently a fellow at Harvard's Women and Public Policy Program, Kennedy School of Government.

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