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Liberia's Peace Women: Tribeca 2008 Remembers What the World Overlooked in 2003

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Just this last week I have had the most extraordinary experience: a film I produced together with my friend Gini Reticker won the Best Documentary honors at the Tribeca Film Festival. I think of myself as just a regular old mother of four, but this week I've shook hands with movie stars and presidents (well, OK, only one president, but anyway....) and I am wondering when I'll wake up from this Cinderella dream.

Many, many people who have seen our film, "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," have asked me what got us interested in making this film, which details the incredible story of women fighting for peace in the conflict-plagued West African country of Liberia. It's a good question, and the answer says much about the barriers faced by women in politics all around the world.

In 2003 I journeyed to Liberia with a delegation from the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in the hopes of offering whatever help or support I could (which I suspected was not much, but a girl can try!) to the first woman elected head of state in Africa, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. We had all flown a very long way because of our deep respect for the significance of Ellen's election, and because we all recognized how much it mattered to women everywhere that she succeed at her job.

I have spent many years thinking about, talking up and generally advocating for women's political leadership at all levels of the political spectrum. I haven't done this out of any cosmic sense of women's superiority, but rather because I believe that the world has been managed by only half of its inhabitants for too long. Down to the tips of my toes I know that the addition of women's voices to the bargaining tables, congressional chambers, courts, boardrooms and head offices of the world would enrich and strengthen the integrity of the decision-making processes in those places and therefore make the world a better, cleaner, safer and more just place. Color me crazy but that just sounds like a good plan to me.

While I was there the most interesting thing happened. I heard a little snippet of a story from one of the women I spoke to. She referred to it in passing, I think assuming that I already knew it, and it sounded like something significant, but the moment passed so quickly I wasn't sure I had heard her right. And then later it happened again with another woman. And again. And again.

The story goes like this: at the height of the civil war, when ordinary Liberians had been terrorized too much and for too long a group of women joined together, Muslim and Christian, educated and unlettered, rich and poor, urban and rural. They wore white to signify that they wanted peace. And they protested at great risk to themselves and to their families. After months of protest they were able to persuade both the president and the rebels to attend peace talks. And then they demonstrated outside the peace talks to show the leaders that they were being watched. When the peace talks got bogged down in the treachery and complacency typical of such international meetings, the women surrounded the building, locked arms and sent a note inside saying that they were taking the participants hostage until a peace agreement was signed.

Well this couldn't have happened, right? I mean, if it had happened, wouldn't I have read about it in the *New York Times*?? Or the *Washington Post*?? How was it possible that these Liberian women had accomplished such an enormous feat without having been noticed and reported on by the news outlets I had come to know and trust?

And then I remembered. Of course it hadn't been recognized. Of course they were being forgotten. Of course this act of enormous courage and integrity and perseverance and fortitude would dissolve into the mist as so many other women's accomplishments had. This was the process of historical erasure that has led us to forget and to fail to credit so many of women's accomplishments over the centuries.

It had to be stopped. Once we had verified the story and found the leaders of the group, my producing partner Gini Reticker and I resolved that just this once it might be possible to lift these women up into the light and force the world to give them the respect that they deserved. And so we made a film. It is called "Pray the Devil Back to Hell." It is a testament to the women of Liberia, and a call to action and a gesture of solidarity with women everywhere who fight to bring peace and equity to the places they live in.

And now that Tribeca has recognized our work and the incredible accomplishments of our Liberian sisters, I am more optimistic than ever that just this once the work of women for peace will remain in the public memory. Maybe -- just maybe -- the next time a group rises up in protest to another ridiculous and pointless war, they will be strengthened by the memory of these remarkable women in Liberia.

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