

Our Strength Comes From Our Bitter Past Say Liberian Women

By Darren Taylor
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Former Liberian President Charles Taylor is on trial for war crimes at The Hague. Liberian women overcame his resistance to forge peace in their nation.

In late 2005, Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became Africa's first elected female head of state. A 14-year civil war had devastated Liberia, and the country remains in urgent need of rebuilding. President Sirleaf promised that women would play important roles in Liberia's reconstruction. She has since chosen women to head several key ministries in her government. But have developments such as these improved the lives of the average woman in Liberia? In the first part of a series on this issue, VOA's Darren Taylor reflects on the roles that women played in securing peace in the country, and the strength that it's given them as they face the future.

"We can't forget our past, because its taste is still bitter in our mouths," says Leymah Gbowee, one of Liberia's most prominent human rights activists, who remains at the forefront of efforts to ensure that women

occupy increasingly prominent positions in her society.

Gbowee is the executive director of the Women's Peace and Security Network for Africa, based in Accra, Ghana, and was a commissioner-designate for Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She was instrumental in securing peace in the country after decades of instability and brutal conflict.

In the late 1990's and early years of the present decade, Gbowee was one of the leaders of an unprecedented groundswell of female activism in West Africa, which many in the international community have credited with ending the war that killed an estimated 200,000 people.

Her struggles, and those of other women, set the tone for what many see as Liberia's present gradual evolution from failed state to beacon of hope in Africa.

In late 2005, President Sirleaf's ascension to power inspired an entire continent, with the president pledging to entrench peace and good governance.

As part of this promise, Mrs. Sirleaf has appointed women to head Liberia's ministries of commerce, justice, finance, youth and sports and gender and development. As far as the country's economy is concerned, there are moves to secure female participation in the lucrative industries of timber, gold and diamonds, and construction of infrastructure.

"Women's advocacy for peace and security really started in Liberia in 1991, and it's because of this history that Liberian women are now so aggressive in trying to get bigger roles in the overall development of their country," Gbowee explains.

In 1997, after Charles Taylor became president of Liberia, he failed to institute democracy - thereby sparking another round of a war that had essentially been simmering since the early

1980's. The "sufferings" of the late 1990's, says Gbowee, "hardened" her and other Liberian women.

"That's when the worst atrocities were committed against women and children. Rape was a toy of war, not a tool anymore. Young boys would bet (one another) how many women (they could rape). It wasn't about beauty; it defied beauty. It went beyond everything, like age: the older you were, the better you were to be raped. (In) the African society, women stop engaging in sexual activity at a certain age. So (the young fighters) said: 'Okay, these (old women) are as good as new (and prime targets for rape).'"

Out of this pain and trauma, Gbowee insists, strength has emerged and Liberian women are now "no longer willing to take a back seat" in Liberia's reconstruction.

"You can't hurt the women of Liberia any more than they have already been hurt. The worst things in the world have been done to them, and this is what makes them so strong now. They have no more fear, and they are going to take what is rightfully theirs."

Dealing with someone like Taylor, who is presently on trial in The Hague for war crimes relating to his alleged role in fomenting atrocities in Sierra Leone, has further emboldened women like Gbowee.

"I think if one has been able to talk with a man such as Charles Taylor – and deal on a day to day basis with such a stubborn leader – then there are not many leaders in the world who you are not able to deal with!" she laughs.

In the late 1990's, a band of Liberian women, including Gbowee, approached Taylor and asked him to make peace with the rebels who were bent on his destruction. Liberia's besieged leader responded by issuing the women an ultimatum he was sure they would be unable to fulfill.

Gbowee recalls: "Mr. Taylor told us, 'Find the rebels and speak with them first. If you don't come back with an agreement from them that they also want peace, then I'll take it as a sign that you women are on the side of the rebels.'"

But the women surprised everyone – including themselves.

"Without any money, without any knowledge of where the rebels were located, we started our journey. Fortunately for us, we found them in Sierra Leone, where the Sierra Leonean women who were working for peace called us and said, 'We understand that some of your rebel leaders frequent so-and-so hotel'. And we sent three women with their (air) tickets and \$200 into Sierra Leone, and we got an agreement from the rebels and then Mr. Taylor had no choice but to listen to us," says Gbowee.

By the time peace talks were held in Accra, she adds, the women had gained the respect of all belligerents – because the opposing forces recognized that the women didn't have a political agenda.

"In 2003, a group of civil society – ordinary women such as myself, a mother of four children – and internally displaced women decided that we were going to even take it further; we are going to confront the powers of terror and madness in our country. We started the famous Women of Liberia Mass Action Peace Campaign. This campaign took us from every part of Liberia; we went to Accra, we went to Sierra Leone; we went to rebel bases and we met with them. And at the end of the day, this campaign paid off. We saw peace in 2003."

Gbowee remembers that by the time she and the other female peace activists returned to Monrovia, after the signing of the peace agreement, "people knew that we meant business, that we were not aligned with either Taylor or with the rebels. We gave no-nonsense messages to the groups. We were not interested in who took over the political space in Liberia. All we wanted was peace and security."

She says Liberian women "never dreamed" that their country would one day be led by a female president, and says there are still men in Liberia who are convinced that the women orchestrated Mrs. Sirleaf's ascension to power.

In reality, Gbowee says, "this gender thing was the furthest from our minds! We didn't care at that stage who became president, as long as there was no more fighting."

She says most Liberian men expected their female counterparts to "fade into the background" after the success of their peace efforts.

"They were wrong," she whispers.

"Usually what is expected of women after you sign the agreement – we go back, we dance, we beat the drums, we kill some chickens, and we have a big celebration and that's it. But we went back around the (negotiating) table and said: 'Is this what we want; have we really attained what we thought we'd started to do?' And the answer was a resounding 'No; we need to do something more; what do we need to do?'"

Gbowee says the women of Liberia weren't satisfied with merely gaining peace for their country. They wanted the agreement to lead to "meaningful and positive change" in Liberians' lives.

"We women were confused about the peace agreement – even those of us with university degrees couldn't really understand it."

So they held a five-day meeting of all the women's groups in Liberia to "demystify" the agreement. The terms and conditions were simplified, in a way that allowed the people of the country to hold their leaders accountable.

"We set benchmarks. And the way we set the benchmarks was that it was so simple that even the women in the village knew at what point in time something was supposed to be happening according to the peace agreement," Gbowee explains.

In this way, she says, the people of Liberia were informed ahead of time of the day in December 2003 when the authorities were supposed to begin disarming the rebels throughout the country. Yet the disarmament process initially "failed miserably" when the rebels refused to surrender their weapons, says Gbowee.

"The first round of disarmament failed largely because we women were excluded from the process. By that stage the men had told the women to get back home, to stop agitating. We were protesting; we were doing everything. And the men loved us in those days when we were making our bodies the barrier for peace. But by the time peace came, people were saying to us: 'Go back home and sit.' Even when we were saying: 'We have a stake in this disarmament process,' they said: 'No, you can't do anything; it's a militarized process.'"

Juanita Jarrett, another stalwart of the country's women's movement and a founding member of the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia, says the disarmament process in her country was "very slow, because the UN failed to involve the women. As long as the women were not there, things were very slow and atrocities continued to be committed."

After the initial failure of the disarmament initiative, the female activists established contact with Liberia's military leaders and asked the United Nations to pressure the generals to agree to disarm the rebels. But UN officials refused to allow the women into their meeting with the generals...leading to an unexpected occurrence, one which would set the tone for the future participation of women in Liberia's democratic transition.

"By the time we got to the UN office, they said: 'You can't go in; we'll only take the generals.' The generals turned around and said: 'If they can't come, then we're not coming in.' We spent three hours in that meeting. Every time they said something, we would write on a piece of note and

pass it to the generals, saying: 'This is what we want.' We formed our power base, especially with them (the generals)."

Gbowee says this meeting was a "key turning point in the history of women" in Liberia.

"That the most male of men, and men who were really anti-women, the generals, had gained such respect for women was something unexpected."

Jarrett credits the women for eventually "turning the tide."

"Because the women, they were the mothers of the fighters. They knew the nooks and crannies where these fighters were hiding their guns. Once the women were allowed to get involved in the disarmament efforts, the conflict came to a halt."

Gbowee says it was in the immediate aftermath of the disarmament process that women took the lead in Liberia's peace building efforts, when a collective cry arose from the international mediators.

"They said: 'Let the Liberian women take over; they know exactly what they are doing.' We went into the camps; we engaged the fighters, and it (the fighting) calmed down. Today, people will tell you that in Liberia - and I don't mean to sound conceited - Liberia has one of the best practical experiences of women engaging in a disarmament process in the world."

Carla Koppell, of the Initiative for Inclusive Security in Washington D.C., agrees. She visited Liberia last year and was seated at a function alongside Vice-President Joseph Boakai. Koppell says she asked him for his views on the role that women played in getting peace in Liberia.

"He said: 'Well, at a minimum I can tell you peace would not have come with the speed that it came, without the women; they were the ones that gave the negotiations impetus and a motor.' He stopped necessarily short of saying that it wouldn't have come at all (without the women). But he was absolutely open in giving a great deal of credit to the women's movement in Liberia for bringing about peace."

Later, when the peace talks began to stall, Koppell recalls how the women, led by Gbowee and others, locked all the negotiators in the hall and refused to free them until they'd begun to talk through their problems.

Even after the rebels were disarmed and the peace agreement was signed, the women refused to rest on their laurels. Gbowee and her fellow leaders perceived that women were not interested in voting.

"All along, the government structures had never benefited women. So they were asking: 'Why should we vote? How will it help us? At the end of the day, the men will take power and we will just be pushed aside.'"

Gbowee and the female activists again took to the streets of Monrovia to encourage their fellow women to vote.

"So we went out there - 200 women in the streets, for five days. We registered 7, 485 women in five days. When it came time to vote, we had to be out there. One of my favorite campaign messages was: 'Where is the women's place? The women's place is on the hill!' In Liberia, where the parliament is and where the executive is, it's called Capitol Hill (just like in the United States). So the women's place is not in the kitchen anymore; it's on the Hill. That's what I was saying, and that's what I continue to say."

Jarrett says some women were adamant that they could not afford to vote.

"Some of them said, 'We can't vote; who will look after our market stalls?' Then I told them: 'If there is war again, you will have no markets, so go and vote.'"

It's this never-say-die attitude, this willingness to sacrifice, that has carried the women of Liberia through "thick and thin," says Jarrett.

After Gbowee and Jarrett had completed their voter education campaign, they were "amazed" by the results they achieved, with Mrs. Sirleaf ultimately defeating the "most male" of candidates, Liberian soccer star George Weah.

"After it all, we had registered 51 women for every male voter. It's no wonder Ellen won! Definitely, the results reflected a gender dimension. And the song we sang during the elections was called, 'Women, This is our Time.' So women went out there with this attitude that if we don't act and vote now, we'll never have a chance at power in the next 100 plus years. So we acted," says Gbowee.

"And our victory was not a victory for the women of Liberia, but for all the people of the country and for all the people of Africa, in fact."

Jarrett says all the struggles of the past have merely served to strengthen Liberian women and have ensured that they "no longer suffer from a crisis of confidence" and feelings of "inadequacy."

And Gbowee adds, "Our place is now as much in the corridors of political and economic power as it is in our homes and on our farms."

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