



Grounded in Peace: Why Gender Matters

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While discourse often presumes war is gendered, with men the violators and women the violated,[\[i\]](#) the reality is far more nuanced. Peace, then, must be gendered too. Women and men experience war differently; gendered thinking considers the multiple experiences and perspectives of each. Gender mainstreaming is a process of inclusion, enabling sustained peace that considers the needs of all stakeholders, especially women who suffer disproportionately during and after war.[\[ii\]](#)

Gender mainstreaming requires more than just talking about women's needs; it involves getting women talking. Not mere victims, women can be powerful agents of peace, possessing the collaborative sensibilities needed to bridge social and political divides. Wartime rhetoric too often essentializes women, lumping "womenandchildren" into one vulnerable mass.[\[iii\]](#) To be sure, women are vulnerable to patriarchal rage but they have no one angle: they are victims, they are combatants, they are sometimes both. Perhaps it is within the role of victim that women, so often knocked to the ground, are better able to recognize the root causes of violence,[\[iv\]](#) addressing them to foster peace. Only when those voices on the bottom rise to meet more powerful voices on top, can harmony prevail. The women of Liberia have proven their voice; the women of Haiti are still struggling to assert theirs.

Both Liberia and Haiti are of unique origin, the world's first independent black republics. Liberia was borne of slaves freed by emancipation, Haiti by revolt. But freedom did not ensure peace amid social inequity and exploitation. In Liberia, America's former slaves lorded over indigenous tribes for over a century. Several coups later, in 1989 Liberia found itself at the start of 14 years of civil wars, wars in which both government and rebel forces terrorized civilians with rape, mutilation, and slaughter, decimating the country's infrastructure. Unlike Liberia, Haiti ostensibly fell victim to an external enemy, a natural disaster. In fact, the earthquake of January 2010 exacerbated an unofficial civil war of sorts, one that long pitted the corrupt elite against the 80 percent impoverished already living amid a background of extreme gender violence.[\[v\]](#)

Liberian women's peace initiatives began with the first atrocities and did not let up even after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2003, an agreement facilitated by the tireless determination of fed-up women who rejected the gender paradigm of victim to become agents of social change.[\[vi\]](#) Women mobilized through various groups across societal divides, transcending class, ethnicity, and religion.[\[vii\]](#) As important, they collaborated with women from Sierra Leone and Guinea, understanding that peace in Liberia was dependent upon regional trust and support. While grounding their initiatives in local culture and needs, they built capacity and sought funding by transnational networking with influential organizations, heads of state, and the United Nations.[\[viii\]](#) Along with goals of stopping wholesale abuse and providing basic humanitarian needs to their shattered communities, these women had a long-term commitment to building sustainable peace. Their fight was to bring warring leaders to the peace table, while

also demanding a seat for themselves.

Momentum drew women to the movement who might have ordinarily been silenced by traditional gender norms and politics as usual.[\[ix\]](#) In 2003, Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace rallied thousands of Muslim and Christian women, many from displacement camps, to join a long-term sit-in, pledging to remain until then-President Taylor agreed to their terms for peace. When he proved unresponsive, they moved their protest to the Parliament at which time they convinced him to meet with the rebel factions. The mass of everyday women who gathered outside the doors at those critical peace talks proved as potent as the few female representatives officially allowed inside. They lobbied organizers and wrote position papers to guide the negotiations and, perceiving the men were not engaged in serious discussion, they blocked the doors so no one could exit until the agreement was signed.

Activist women then set their sights on voter education, leading to the democratic election of President Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson, Africa's first female head of state. Its infrastructure and psyche decimated by war, Liberia is slowly on the mend. Despite improvements in women's legal rights (along with an increased number of women in the police force and deployment of the UN's first all-female peacekeeping unit) gender-based violence remains prevalent, though impunity is no longer guaranteed. The continued ownership of women at a grassroots level combined with top-down engagement will prove key to Liberia's gradual restoration.

The disregard of women's ownership and voice was evident in the immediate aftermath of Haiti's quake, providing a cautionary tale about gender consideration gone awry. The United Nations World Food Program (WFP), ascribing to a widely accepted theory that women would more reliably distribute food fairly among their children and families, enacted a "women-only" food distribution program in Port-au-Prince. Josette Sheeran of WFP explains that given "desperate poverty, access to food is power;"[\[x\]](#) distributing the vouchers to women would shift the power dynamic, protecting them from violence. What was meant to be empowering, instead signaled gender exclusion,[\[xi\]](#) enraging men outside the distribution perimeter who then assaulted the women as they left the guarded area for their long walk home.

Theory did not mesh with reality. Had local nongovernmental and grassroots agencies been consulted, international organizations might have made a different choice. The local women might have relayed what happened when the Haitian city of Gonaives was devastated by a hurricane in 2004. Initially, young men looted the food trucks destined for distribution points. The humanitarians thus decided to distribute the food primarily to women, presumed more passive, at secured centers.[\[xii\]](#) In a prequel to 2010, men attacked the women once they left the guarded distribution perimeter but because these incidents were generally not well documented, the lesson was lost on the international community.[\[xiii\]](#)

A decision meant to benefit women, in fact, worked against them. The international actors were more concerned about food security than the human security of women returning to their camps,[\[xiv\]](#) camps in which gender did not appear to have been considered at all. Overcrowding, poor lighting and sanitation, flimsy tents or tarps, and utter lack of privacy made conditions ripe for rampant

gender-based violence. Local women should have been consulted about their own survival and security needs, rather than enduring top-down decisions that proved ineffective. The mantra must be "Nothing about us without us."[\[xv\]](#)

Without gender consideration, there can be no security, no sustainable peace. Nobel Prize winner Leymah Gbowee notes that lasting peace requires "healing those victimized by war, making them strong again... It's helping victims rediscover their humanity so they can once again become productive members of communities... It's not only making [society] whole, but better."[\[xvi\]](#) Though of clear benefit to women, gender mainstreaming is not just about women. It is also about understanding men and what sustains violence. During ill-attempted food distribution, already alienated men become even more enraged when denied equal access to food; then the women suffer. Lacking adequate psychosocial support, male ex-combatants feel emasculated upon returning to a home in which the women have taken lead roles; then the women suffer. Reintegration programs largely designed for men do not take into account the needs of stigmatized women and girl ex-combatants; then the women suffer.[\[xvii\]](#) Addressing the root causes of sustained conflict through a gendered lens is essential for sustained peace. Involving women in the peacebuilding process is more likely to change the status quo that contributed to the conflict in the first place.[\[xviii\]](#)

To find the will to speak, women need to know their voices will be heard, bottom to top, without recrimination. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 supports this empowerment, recognizing that participation of women is integral to building sustainable peace. Follow-up Resolution 1820 takes further aim at gender-based violence, recognizing that "widespread rape of women in war effectively prevents the very participation in public life that Resolution 1325 identifies as essential to devising durable peace."[\[xix\]](#) All barriers to inclusivity from concerns for safety to the stigma of victimization must be removed. Meetings must be accessible and welcoming. In Haiti, meetings were often held on military bases that locals could not enter. Had they been able to enter, a Creole translation would not have guaranteed understanding. UN-speak can be cumbersome even to skilled practitioners, gender terminology confusing. One UN staff member recalls a Cambodian workshop in which "gender mainstreaming," translated into Khmer as "men and women jumping into the stream together."[\[xx\]](#) In a sense, that is an apt description. Men and women, from all levels of society, must jump into this new paradigm together. All for one, even if it is as difficult as swimming upstream.

Haitians have a tradition of "one helping the other."[\[xxi\]](#) This came into play after the quake as women mobilized not for their own rights, but to begin repairing their communities. Imagine if international donors had supported their needs and capacities how different their aftershocks might have been. Who better to break new ground than those who have nearly been broken?

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[ii] *Women Suffer Disproportionately during and after War* (New York: United Nations Security Council, 29 Oct. 2003).

[iii] Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After, Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley: U of California, 1993) 166.

[iv] Cheldelin and Eliatamby, 230.

[v] Lynn Horton, "After the Earthquake: Gender Inequality and Transformation in Post-Disaster Haiti," *Gender & Development*, vol. 20.2 (London: Routledge-Taylor & Francis, 2012) 296.

[vi] Ekaterina Romanova and Erica Sewell, "Engaging Legislation: Liberia and Chechnya," *Women Waging War and Peace: International Perspectives of Women's Roles in Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*, ed. Sandra I. Cheldelin and Maneshka Eliatamby (London: Continuum, 2011) 225.

[vii] Romanova and Sewell 230.

[viii] Romanova and Sewell 230.

[ix] Romanova and Sewell 228.

[x] Sandra Uwantege Hart, "Women Only: Violence and Gendered Entitlement in Post-Quake Food Distribution in Port-au-Prince, Haiti" (Berne: DDC-Commission Nationale Suisse pour l'UNESCO, 2011) 363.

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[xii] Nadine Puechguirbal, "The Cost of Ignoring Gender in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations: A Feminist Perspective," *Amsterdam Law Forum*, vol 4.1 (2012): 3-19.

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[xvi] Leymah Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War*, (New York: Beast-Perseus, 2011) 82.

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[xviii] Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, *Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why It Matters* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007) 3-4.

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