



**Up and Out: Women's Peacebuilding From the
Ground Up in Liberia and Afghanistan**

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"Up and Out: Women's Peacebuilding From the Ground Up in Liberia and Afghanistan"

The clear voice of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Harvard-educated economist and new president of Liberia, penetrated the cheers of the crowd at her inauguration in Monrovia.¹ Only a few years earlier, Monrovia had been chaos. Liberia's second civil war ripped the country apart. Combatants raped women and looted towns.² But a movement of tenacious Christian and Muslim women helped end the violence. They organized to sing, pray, and march in 2003, forcing peace talks that ended the war and led to Sirleaf's democratic election in 2006.³ A continent away, another war-torn country, Afghanistan, has not similarly found peace. An alliance of NATO forces and President Hamid Karzai's government struggle with the radical Islamic Taliban.⁴ While women's lives have improved since the Taliban fell in 2001, the war continues and women remain trapped in violence and prejudice.⁵

Liberia's success shows a way to end war and expand women's rights in peacetime: women working from the ground up through civil society, using their culture and religion. A recent study from ActionAid found that women in several countries define peace as the absence of conflict not only in the nation but also in the household. To them, peace also means "individual rights and freedoms."⁶ This peace often comes not through top-down plans by occupying militaries or international institutions, but by local efforts: civil society groups that help women, independent media with female reporters and coverage of women's issues, and efforts that encourage their participation in the economy, such as microfinance and vocational training.

War has ravaged Africa's oldest republic, Liberia, since the late 1980s.⁷ Though Charles Taylor was elected president of Liberia soon after the first civil war (1989-1996), conflict resumed, this time between disenfranchised warlords and Taylor's men. The rebels called themselves Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, or LURD.⁸ Both sides terrorized civilians, raping 60-90% of Liberian women,⁹ murdering civilians, and looting homes.¹⁰ An estimated twenty thousand child soldiers fought for LURD, other rebel groups, and the government.¹¹ Civilians, especially women, susceptible to rape, lived in fear.

In 2003, the blood stopped flowing. Fed up with war, Leymah Gbowee,¹² a member of the west African organization Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET),¹³ organized members of her church into the Christian Women's Initiative. She also convinced Muslims to join, creating "Mass Action for Peace."¹⁴ Members of existing peace groups from the first civil war, the Liberian Women's Initiative and the Mano River Union Peace Network (MARWOPNET) further strengthened the movement. The women sat daily at the Monrovia fish market along the president's route, chanting, singing, dancing, and holding signs.¹⁵ Finally, as international pressure grew, Charles Taylor acquiesced to peace talks,¹⁶ and Gbowee's group of women blockaded the men inside the room to force an agreement.¹⁷ The sides

agreed to exile Charles Taylor to Nigeria and set up a transitional government that would guide the country to democratic elections.¹⁸ After the war, women described a “new standing” for their gender,¹⁹ and the facts seem to agree. A survey from Liberia’s Ministry of Gender and Development found that President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa’s first female president,²⁰ has appointed more women to government positions than ever before in Liberia.²¹ Though rape continues,²² the Rape Amendment Act of 2006 made it punishable by imprisonment.²³ The women’s interfaith peace movement, starting at the local level, helped end the war and expand women’s rights.

In Afghanistan, however, conflict continues. The ruling Taliban’s refusal to surrender Bin Laden and other Islamic militants provoked American air strikes beginning in October 2001. Opposition groups took power, with president Hamid Karzai serving from 2001 to the present, and a NATO-led military occupation began.²⁴ Women have made some gains since the Taliban fell: girls’ enrollment in primary school has risen to 2.4 million in 2010 from 5,000 during the Taliban regime,²⁵ some women run businesses,²⁶ and a few have been delegates to *jirgas*, or peace meetings.²⁷

However, Afghan women are deeply oppressed.²⁸ A provision in the 2004 constitution guaranteeing equal rights for both genders has not become reality.²⁹ Women in the south, where the Taliban dominates, face threatening letters from militants if they dare to work,³⁰ while girls who want an education face a sad reality: there were at least 185 acid attacks on schools and hospitals in 2011, most by armed groups opposed to girls’ education.³¹ Furthermore, President Karzai has not strongly enforced a 2009 law banning violence against women.³² Hideous cases like that of Sahar Gul, a 15-year-old girl who was tortured by her family for refusing to become a prostitute, are too common.³³ Afghan women face great abuse and prejudice.

Peacebuilders should realize that occupying militaries, even if they consider women, may not greatly improve women’s lives. In 2003, the U.S. considered sending peacekeeping troops to Liberia but did not; native Liberians, especially women, ended the conflict without international military help.³⁴ In Afghanistan, by comparison, the U.S. and its allies have fought for over a decade, but there is no lasting peace. Leymah Gbowee explains. “You cannot go to another country and make a plan for it...People who have lived through a terrible conflict...often have very good ideas about how peace can evolve, and they need to be asked...most especially women.”³⁵ A recent report from the U.S. Institute of Peace recommended that local Afghan society be empowered so that they can “take ownership” of peacebuilding.³⁶ Women, in particular, are often excluded from politics and formal peace processes, but this situates them to creatively build peace from civil society. Liberian women’s local action forced an uneasy peace. Similar grassroots initiative must appear in Afghanistan if peace is to last after the military occupation.

Local women should use their religious positions to support their peacebuilding.

Leymah Gbowee's group of Christian and Muslim women spoke to religious leaders - pastors and imams - who then influenced the combatants.³⁷ Women can thus find common ground across cultures and religions where men have failed.³⁸ In fundamentalist Afghanistan, women have sometimes succeeded despite an often oppressive religion. The subtly radical "Islamic feminists" in Afghanistan and other countries work within their tradition to gain rights by reinterpreting the Quran in favor of women.³⁹ Their efforts contribute to a broader peace, not just an end to national conflict but also an end to prejudice and violence against women. However, outsiders should be careful when attempting to build a "gendered" peace. Well-intentioned plans may harm rather than help. In Afghanistan, a Western campaign against the burqa may reduce women's freedom because their husbands and male relatives will no longer allow them to go out in public.⁴⁰

Likewise, women peacebuilders in warring countries should take advantage of not only religion but also culture. When the Liberian women surrounded the room where warlords and government representatives were holding peace talks, a security guard threatened to arrest Leymah Gbowee. She responded by stripping. In Africa, seeing one's mother naked is a curse,⁴¹ so Gbowee, symbolically a mother, used tradition to preserve the demonstration. Liberian wives also held a sex strike that attracted international pressure for peace talks. "As a woman, you have the power to deny a man something he wants until the other men stop what they are doing," Gbowee wrote.⁴² Liberian women used their positions as wives and mothers to end the war.

In Afghanistan, since women's actions must first be approved by the men, women should also be careful to consider tradition, slowly changing men's perceptions from the inside out. Solutions like microfinance, allowing them to make a living at home, or vocational training might increase their standing in men's eyes above housekeepers.⁴³ In Liberia, the women's group MARWOPNET successfully used vocational training to integrate women into the postwar economy.⁴⁴ Locally-produced radio programs might also change biases by featuring women as role models; for example, the Afghan "Breadwinners" series profiles female entrepreneurs.⁴⁵ The United States also funds Nai, an independent media training organization,⁴⁶ which recently recognized several female Afghans for women's rights reporting.⁴⁷ Afghans often distrust foreign media,⁴⁸ so supporting local efforts is essential. Women of the warring countries should work within their traditions to gain rights and end wars; outside peacebuilders can sometimes support them.

Women have been historically marginalized in peacebuilding,⁴⁹ but their local efforts cause national change. Though few Liberian women were included formally as delegates to the peace talks,⁵⁰ many were effective by taking full advantage of nongovernmental positions they already held: as worshipers by recruiting in the church and as wives through a sex strike. Women in Afghanistan and around the world can emulate them by working from the ground up to end conflict. Instead of imposing large bureaucratic plans, outside countries and individuals should focus on supporting women peacebuilders in civil society, independent media, and other

non-governmental organizations within the country. A woman can start a movement or run a business or broadcast without a burqa, and in doing so, change a country.

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End Notes

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