Women and Religion in Liberia’s Peace and Reconciliation

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This paper discusses the role of women and religion in ending Liberia’s second civil war. While women have long held positions as peacemakers, they frequently go unrecognized for their work on local, national, and global levels. Positive impacts of religion and spirituality are similarly sidelined in discussions concerning matters of national unrest and reconciliation. Centered around the story of 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee, this article looks at why women and religion were crucial to Liberia’s struggle for positive peace. I begin by exploring the significance of religion in Gbowee’s call to action, and then discuss how the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign gained authority through religious values. Finally, I take a broader and more critical look at the involvement of women and religion in Liberia’s long-term reconciliation process.

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The 2003 Accra Peace Talks had been in session for over a month when delegates heard reports that the fighting in Liberia was escalating, the death toll rising. This news was the last straw for the growing group of Liberian women who had made the journey to Ghana to informally witness what was quickly becoming a failed attempt at reconciliation. With the help of Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean allies, they formed a shield of 200 women that dotted the perimeter of the conference hall. Day in and day out, they surrounded that room, protesting the violent civil wars that had controlled the lives of so many families for over a decade. Very much excluded from political decision-making, the power of these women had gone largely underestimated for months (Disney, 2008). No one had given much thought to the increasing numbers of white-clad bodies gathering daily in Monrovia’s fish market to protest the war. No one acknowledged the boiling emotions and steadfast convictions that were building beneath their dancing, singing, praying silhouettes.
For over a decade, Liberian women had suffered unimaginable atrocities; “those who were not brutally murdered experienced and/or witnessed unimaginable acts of sexual brutality, mutilation, cannibalism, and torture” (Goodfriend & Pillay, 2009, p. 11). From 1989 to 2003, over 80% of Liberian women were sexually assaulted (Goodfriend & Pillay, 2009); many were raped with objects including blades and knives. Most lost their homes, their access to drinking water, and their children who were systematically recruited as soldiers (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2011, p. 7). This article will look at why women and religion were so pivotal to Liberia’s reconciliation process. I will not attempt to cover all the ways in which they have affected and been effected by the transition. Instead, I will examine key events and organizations, focusing on the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign, that have demonstrated the necessity and value of both throughout the process.

Background

In 1980, the military seized control of Liberia in a rebellion led by Sergeant Samuel Doe. Initially, many civilians supported military rule, believing that it would bring about structural changes necessary to the realization of national equality and democracy. That optimism was quickly replaced by widespread frustration as the new government began to replicate old oppressive systems (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2011). The National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) was formed and responded with an aggressive movement against the prevailing Doe regime. Doe countered with his own violent attack. As the warring factions grew on both sides and hostility escalated, a small group split off from the NPFL to form a third party called The Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL). This first civil war was brutal and resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, finally ending with a peace accord and the swift election of President Charles Taylor. But little changed under Taylor’s rule, and in 1999 war broke out for the second time, some say with a ferocity that was far greater than in previous years.

The second civil war was marked by increased violence toward civilians, power imbalances, and an ambiguity of combatants. The bulk of rebels were young men and boys and their tactics increasingly included sexual violence, looting of homes and businesses, and forced displacement of villagers. Children were also a target of rape and murder. Wartime was particularly difficult for the boys as they frequently faced the option of joining militia whether he wanted to or not, or being killed. This particular sort of warfare had a devastating impact on the Liberian women but it also served as a strong motivator for building a peace coalition. (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2011, p.1)

Fast-forward to June 4th 2003: President Charles Taylor, the very same man elected to bring stability to Liberia, was indicted for war crimes by Sierra Leone. The charge was brought against him in the midst of the Accra talks. But the significance of this indictment and subsequent ceasefire proved to be purely symbolic. By early August of that year, the death toll rose to 200 people per day. Frustrated and devastated mothers,
sisters, wives, and daughters barricaded the conference room and with linked arms, refused to let anyone leave until a binding agreement had been made. Standing strong against warlords, freedom fighters, politicians, and religious leaders, the women physically pushed these men back through doors and windows as they tried to make their way out of the conference room and back to their luxury hotels. Under the guidance of their leader Leymah Gbowee, the women’s group stated two non-negotiable requests: 1) The peace talks must progress; and 2) It must be a real peace process and “not a circus” (Disney, 2008). One week later, Charles Taylor officially resigned. A week following his resignation, a peace agreement was finally signed (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2011, pp. 6-7).

This was not the beginning or the end of the Liberian women’s peace initiative. It was, however, one of the most significant moments in the history of the civil wars and subsequent reconciliation. This day in August 2003 marked the culmination of profound grief, rage, and resilience. To understand the extraordinary mobilization of what became over 3,000 Liberian women and their allies, this paper maps the process that brought these women together.

Under One God

I always say I was the wrong person for God to be speaking to about bringing the women of the churches together because I wasn’t, like a 100-percent Holy Ghost-filled Christian, doing all of the right things. I was doing everything wrongly. And I felt if God had to speak to someone, it had to be someone perfect (Gbowee, Bill Moyers Journal, 2009).

Like many women living through Liberia’s civil war, Leymah Gbowee, mother of five young children, was struggling to survive. One morning in early 2003, Gbowee said she awoke from a dream in which God spoke to her, telling her to gather the women of Liberia and pray for peace. Heeding the voice, she appealed to the women of her church to unite with other congregations of all denominations. It was not long before Gbowee’s words spread and women from around Monrovia began to hold prayer groups, dialogues, and healing circles. The news of this Christian women’s movement for peace also reached the country’s Muslim population. Asatu Bah Kenneth, a Muslim policewoman who had been inspired by Gbowee’s growing Women in Peace Network (WIPNET), surprised Christian churchgoers when she stood up during a Sunday service and publicly committed to joining the movement. As Kenneth began to mobilize Muslim women, she confronted the resistance of some followers who adamantly rejected women’s involvement in politics (Bill Moyers Journal, 2009). However, her persistence paid off and she eventually received support from the Islamic community with the help of a well-respected and highly supportive Imam. Together, Gbowee and Kenneth’s independent groups formed one united movement that they called Women of Liberian Mass Action for Peace Campaign. This was the first time Liberian Muslim and Christian women had united in such significant numbers towards one cause.

In April 2003, as violence increased in many parts of the country, the band of between 2,000 and 3,000 women made a commitment to gather daily in Monrovia’s fish market, where they prayed, danced, sang, and chanted their simple but powerful demand, “We want Peace! No More War!” (Disney, 2008). When their pleas went unheard, they
implemented a sex ban, refusing to sleep with their husbands until the fighting stopped. It was not long before men, too, started praying for peace (Disney, 2008). Eventually, the women’s protests grew into an appeal to meet with Liberian president Charles Taylor. They wanted their demands to be taken seriously by the president but they were determined not to get involved in what they saw as a superficial and aggressive political battle that neglected the welfare of Liberian people on all sides. They wanted real sustainable peace, pure and simple; a type of peace that could only have been motivated by the very same spiritual roots that brought them together in the first place. Their objective in arranging a meeting with President Taylor was to express this collective desire through a theological ethic of “sin, love, justice, and reconciliation” (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2011, p. 5).

The role of religion in the women’s movement was not just about prayers for peace, it was not just about personal healing, it was what gave these women credibility and authority in a male-dominated war. Although Liberia is only 40% Christian (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2011, p. 3), Christianity was the religion in power, a fact of which the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace was very aware. When requests for a meeting with Charles Taylor were ignored, the women strategically applied pressure to pastors, bishops, and priests. These men of God, they believed, were the only members of society who held influence and power that was substantial enough to sway the mind of proud Christian politicians. Under the influence of religious advisors, Taylor agreed to hear Gbowee out. In a moving speech that stayed true to the values of love and justice, the values that formed the heart of her movement, Gbowee made a straightforward appeal for sustainable peace. It is thought that her humble public request to the president was instrumental in convincing Taylor to attend the subsequent peace talks in Ghana (Disney, 2008).

While religion did not officially play a starring role on the Accra agenda, the 300 Liberian, Ghanaian, and Sierra Leonean women who surrounded the conference reported that they knew faith was the only common ground strong enough to generate mutual understanding amongst opposing groups. Religion had been absent in the reconciliation after Liberia’s first civil war (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2010, p. 4), despite the prominent role it played in the country’s communities, history, and politics. The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace had formed under a mutual sense of devotion and commitment to spiritual values. Despite belonging to different faiths and denominations, they were not about to let the institution of religion be neglected when it was needed the most. During lunch and bathroom breaks, Gbowee and her team confronted participants in hallways and sitting areas. No politician or combatant could pass through a single corridor without engaging in a discussion about spiritual ethics of non-violence with one of Gbowee’s allies. The urgency of her mission came to a dramatic crescendo when, upon being threatened by a security guard, Gbowee began undressing, a symbolic gesture that demonstrated the strength of her conviction. This act of an older woman stripping off her clothing in front of men was a traditional means of bringing shame to those who refuse to stop fighting (Schirch & Sewak, 2005, p. 10). It took Gbowee’s commanding actions coupled with the subsequent women’s sit-in, for the efforts of these brave women to finally take effect.
With the talks over and the peace agreement signed, President Taylor’s majority government was replaced with transitional leadership. UN peacekeepers began driving into the country by the truckload. Having learnt from mistakes made after the first civil war, Gbowee and her team knew that their work in ending conflict, maintaining real peace, and rehabilitating citizens from the lasting effects of violence was far from over. They vowed to stay active throughout the ensuing reconciliation process so that history would not repeat itself for a second time. After an unsuccessful attempt by officials to collect weapons safely and without further conflict, the United Nations called in these women to help advise troops because of their experience as civilians participating in the disarmament process after the first civil war (Disney, 2008). They were also instrumental to the vigorous campaigning that led to the election of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa’s first female president.

The influence of Christian and Muslim women’s groups in Liberia’s amity illustrated the important role that women play in these political circumstances. Women made up “53% of the agricultural labor force” (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2011, p. 7) and dominated Liberian entrepreneurship, but they were absent in socio-political decision-making spheres. Sirleaf’s election changed this. She appointed several Muslim and Christian women, some of whom were prominent members of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign, to positions of leadership in the new government (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2011). In doing so, Sirleaf altered an unbalanced political dynamic, both from a gender and a religious perspective. These women of once opposing faiths, divergent communities, and contrasting ideologies were now deeply bound by their experiences of war. Through months of ongoing advocacy, they had united in peace, united in God, and united in trauma. Their contributions to these political circumstances decreased the risk of further conflict (Disney, 2008) and meant that Sirleaf’s plight for women’s rights in Liberia was more adequately represented and addressed at the policy level (Hanna & Alfaro, 2012). Their recent successes include closing the gender gap in primary education and working toward the achievement of several Millennium Development Goals (Hanna & Alfaro, 2012).

Women and religion also played fundamental roles in community healing processes. The atrocities that were plaguing women each day needed to be forgiven in order for them to survive on a psychological and emotional level. In post-war Liberia, forgiveness was just as important to the personal healing of women as it was to the rehabilitation of their communities. Many women were moved to forgive because of the roles they played in grassroots rebuilding efforts. For instance, in her work with the rehabilitation of child soldiers, Gbowee was able to see perpetrators of extreme violence such as rape and murder as human beings who were victims of war like she was. This perspective was taken up by other Liberian women who felt that forgiveness should be granted where it was due. Most believed that “the government of Liberia should ... consider conditional amnesty for those who told the whole truth, who showed authentic remorse, and who asked for forgiveness” (Goodfriend & Pillay, 2009, p. 15).

Generating and receiving empathy were stages in the healing process that were crucial in establishing peace for women on both interpersonal and national levels. One of
the ways in which this was done was through storytelling. In September 2008, UNIFEM and the TRC came together to engage Liberian women in a series of dialogues. Their aim was to “evaluate the TRC process from a gender perspective” (Goodfriend & Pillay, 2009, p. 11). Although it was unintentional, bringing these 100 women together in a safe and neutral setting created a kind of ritual space in which they felt open to share personal experiences of conflict. This unplanned process unburdened these women of the grief and pain that can accompany experiences of severe trauma, as illustrated by the following perspective:

A transformational learning approach was used to practice the dialogue process with the team, and for the team members themselves to share and work with their own experiences of the war. They were taught activities to deepen active listening skills, breathing techniques to centre the self in the midst of heightened emotions and teambuilding exercises to bond the group. (Goodfriend & Pillay, 2009, p. 13)

Participants all reported feeling lighter the next day, and more prepared to participate in other stages of the reconciliation process, including planning for a more peaceful future. Through truth-telling, these women “transformed into an energetic group that was ready to discuss transitional justice and ways forward towards recreating their communities” (Goodfriend & Pillay, 2009, p. 14).

But seeing the “thou” in another did not always come so willingly. Women who worked as nurses or teachers reportedly struggled to associate with men and children who had participated in horrific acts of violence. If they continued to see these individuals as inhumane, reconciliation and sustainable peace would never be a reality for Liberia. Elizabeth Sele Mulbah, Executive Director of Christian Health Association of Liberia (CHAL), recognized the role that religion could play in helping to transform some of these deeply rooted perceptions. She established a healing and reconciliation department within her organization that engaged religious leaders in healing processes with professional women. Mulbah wrote of this effort:

We wanted nurses to be able to relate to their patients [often soldiers and abusers] despite of whatever relationship they had outside. If we didn’t do that, patients would be afraid to go to the hospitals, for the nurses they met would be seen as enemies. We wanted the same thing done for teachers, so that ... they would go back to the classroom, able to relate to students and teachers. Religious people should not condemn people; there is always a reason why people behave the way they do. So we wanted to work with the religious leaders to enable them to use their skills in religious reconciliation to bring people around. (Mulbah, 2004, p. 78)

**Women and Indigenous Spirituality**

While Christianity and Islam were prominent in the women’s peace movement and subsequent healing, the majority of the Liberian population, about 45%, practices forms of Indigenous spirituality (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2011, p.
2). These religious differences overlap with social and class differences between Liberians and Americo-Liberians, the descendants of free-born and enslaved African Americans who settled in Liberia towards the conclusion of the slave trade; a division that contributed to severe inequality and civil strife for decades prior to the break out of war. Veronika Fuest (2009) has alluded to the fact that rural women, who are more likely to practice indigenous spirituality, were equally represented in various women’s movements in the country but there is little mention of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace making intentional efforts to reach out to this demographic. However, some traditional reconciliation processes were used by The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). One approach that generated support was a process that takes place in what is known as Palava huts. These are spaces that are traditionally used to settle disputes on a familial or community level. Since the end of the second civil war, they have been “embraced as a way to improve community dialogue” (Ramer, 2010, p. 18) in regards to small-scale community crimes. Another interesting Indigenous approach, which is important to mainstreaming gender in all issues of war and peace, is Poro and Sande, which are described in the following excerpt:

Poro members are males initiated in the traditional animistic rituals and Sande is the female equivalent. The leaders of these societies are thought to have supernatural powers and therefore garner not only respect, but power in influencing previously combative factions. (Ramer, 2010, p. 20)

Elders of these councils are involved in the TRC as part of its ‘Traditional Advisory Council’ (Ramer, 2010, p. 10).

Elizabeth Mulbah (2004) thought that retributions should have been paid to communities in traditional ways. She explained that a wrongdoer could present a chicken or a cow through a middleman to the village chief. After consulting with elders, the chief would officially accept this gift and split it amongst the community, signifying the end to a disagreement. Mulbah also wrote about the potential of a traditional demobilization of soldiers. This process would involve former combatants in symbolically handing power back to the village chief to acknowledge that the war is over. Ideally, this process would also include the return of children or goods stolen from the village. When the chief accepts this offering, the war officially comes to an end and power is restored to rightful hands (Mulbah, 2004).

One of the reasons that traditional approaches like these were perhaps neglected is that each ethnic group in Liberia follows different forms of spirituality under a set of unique practices (Mulbah, 2004). Employing one practice over another might have caused additional strife and inequality. Still, for the large, and mostly rural, population of Liberian women who follow traditional customs and religions, the importance of including these traditions in the peace process must not be forgotten. Considering the long history of ethnic friction in Liberia, non-Christian and non-Muslim women risk being further marginalized which would make real peace impossible. Collaboration and reconciliation between women of all faiths and spiritual practices is fundamental to the process.
Conclusion

“Women’s involvement in peacebuilding is as old as their experience in violence” (Schirch & Sewak, 2005, p.1). The profound impact women had on the conclusion of Liberia’s civil war and its ensuing reconciliation is just one example of why there is such an urgent need for a critical, gendered understanding of women’s involvement in matters of war and peace. Peace is so often defined as an absence of war, but this perception is neither accurate nor sustainable from the perspective of oppressed members of any given society. For most women in Gbowee’s position, the deconstruction of a peaceful environment begins long before widespread civil war, and lasts far beyond UN mandated peace talks. Understanding conflict through the lens of citizens who are consistently pushed to the margins is essential for the evolution of an authentic reconciliation process.

Gbowee and her group understood that sustainable peace needed to include a transformation of the roots of structural violence. Such a shift is what can eventually lead to what Schirch and Sewak (2005) have termed “positive peace”, a peace that includes “social justice, gender equity, economic equality, and ecological balance with an emphasis on human relationships” (p. 15).

The reason religion can be such an influential and compatible framework in which to ground reconciliation processes is that most spiritual ethics of non-violence abide by the very same principles as those of positive peace. It is not surprising then that Gbowee and her group found direction in their faith. They simultaneously uncovered religion’s power as a tool for establishing common ground with political factions, one that was mutually understood as a source of authority and credibility amongst otherwise conflicting groups.

The more practical function that religion plays in women’s personal, communal, and national healing should not be underestimated. In Liberia, it has acted as a driving force, a model for forgiveness, and a vehicle for healing. Spirituality is often avoided within international discourses on peace out of a fear that it will cause more division than unity. However, the women of Liberia demonstrated that religion can help motivate and restore communities through a force greater than many others. By integrating more spiritually based models for peace, women were equipped to holistically move through individual, interpersonal, and national levels of healing and reconciliation.

In the movie Pray the Devil Back to Hell (2008), Gbowee declares that “peace is a process, not an event.” Similarly, violence must be seen as an ongoing and intentional course of action, not an isolated incident. A deliberate and concerted effort to establish leadership that is equally representative of the spiritual and physical priorities of all members of society is paramount to establishing non-violence and restoring communities to a position where they are less vulnerable to repetitive and unresolved conflict.
References


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