Women's Agency for Peace in Conflict Times: Case Study of Liberian Women Organisations

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that women suffer disproportionately from conflicts. As a result, gender-inclusive conflict intervention and peacebuilding has become a norm grounded in the idea that women are equally significant contributors and stakeholders in peace processes. This chapter discusses the lived experiences of women's organisations in Liberia to provide a qualitative appraisal of their actions as agents and architects of peace in times of conflict. Drawing insights from Maxine Molyneux's organisational theory, this chapter argues that collective agency by women's organisations creates the appropriate environment for women's empowerment and a platform that allows them to contribute to peacebuilding. Moreover, women's collective agency transcended religious and ethnic lines. Acting together *as women* was more important than doing so along other categories of identity, demonstrating that in this case, religious identity was subservient to gender identity in identifying the mechanisms of governance to bring about peace. The chapter contributes to the women, peace, and security discourses by highlighting the instrumental role women's organisations play in enabling peace through different forms of nonviolent activism. The research builds on focus-group discussions and interview information gathered from women's organisations in Liberia in July 2015.

Keywords: Liberia, Molyneux's organisational theory, Women's agency, Women's organisations, Conflict times, Peace processes

Introduction

Conflicts are generally associated with tensions and dissonances common with human relations and the everyday functionality of society. Usually, humanity and societies' disastrous encounters with violent conflicts have seen both

women and men disproportionately affected as they face different forms of indescribable suffering (United Nations 2002; Massaquoi 2007). Studies that assert this view commonly accentuate that the variance of the effects of conflicts on women and men owes to the gender roles and identities attributed to their maleness or femaleness in their specific social orders.[1] As different as women and men's experiences of conflict are, so too are their political and socio-economic experiences (Medie 2019).

Joyce P. Kaufman and Kristen P. Williams (2013) assert that one noticeable effect of armed conflicts and civil wars on women is their ability to change their gender roles and relations in society by creating an arena for a shift from their traditionally conceived responsibilities to others which are more public and unconventional. That is, the different kinds of encumbrances that conflict imposes on women propel them to embrace diverse roles: as breadwinners for their families and communities, combatants, and most importantly harbingers and architects of peace initiatives that have often influenced the resolution of conflicts (USAID 2007; Kaufman & Williams 2013). Examples of women's changing roles through peace advocacy, politicking, and peace movements abound in South Africa, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, just to mention a few.

Focusing on Liberia as the case in point, this study articulates how Liberia's peace story involved multitudes of women, especially following the self-realisation of their ability to change not only the conflict situation, but the consequences of the conflict for them and for society (Shulika 2016). In more ways than one, women's interventions in the Liberian conflict curtailed to a certain degree its impact on families, communities, and society at large (Alaga 2011; Ouellet 2013). As such, narratives of women's agency for peace in Liberia depict their activism as transcending bottom-up to top-down levels of society and vice versa, with noticeable influence that set into motion the peace talks that led to the resolution of the Liberian conflict.

This chapter advances the discourse of women's agency in times of conflict by appraising the instrumentality of the roles of women's organisations in the pursuit of peace during Liberia's first civil war in 1989 through to the end of the second civil war in 2003. It uses Molyneux's organisational theory

[1] See for instance: Rehn and Sirleaf (2001); Puechguirbal (2004); Massaquoi (2007); Alaga (2010); McCarthy (2011); AusAID (2006); Chang *et al.* (2015).

to probe the 'how and what' motivates women and the agency of women's organisations for peace with the view of contributing to the literature on non-violent activism as well as to the current debates on women, peace, and security in Africa. Questioning how Liberian women commanded such an influence to change the narratives from that of conflict to peace, this paper particularises their rise to the forefront of peace activism as being shaped by their individual and shared experiences of conflict. These experiences, as identified in this paper, inform their approaches to advocacy campaigns, peaceful demonstrations, and dialoguing for the cause of peace.

This paper develops from primary information that was gathered from focus-group discussions and interviews with a purposefully selected number of women's organisations, government, media, and international entities in Liberia in 2015 by the researcher to complete her doctoral project. The overall research population for the project constituted 16 individual participants for the semi-structured interviews, and four focus-group discussions consisting of 45 participants. However, for this paper, only the data from the women's organisations is used. These include primary data from focus-group discussions and interviews with members and representatives of Women NGOs Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL); the National Women's Commission of Liberia (NAWOCAL); the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding and Women in Peacebuilding Network (WANEP/ WIPNET); Liberian Female Law Enforcement Association (LIFLEA); Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET); Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET at grassroots level); and Ganta Concern Women Development Association (Ganta Concern Women). It also includes an interview conducted with a prominent peace activist, Mother Mary Brownell, a founding member of Liberian Women Initiative (LWI). The choice of the organisations owed to their visibly active roles during and in the aftermath of the conflicts in Liberia, as well as to their knowledge of the context and content of women's agency.

This chapter is also enriched by secondary data, which mostly comprises desktop reviews of journal articles, books, research papers, newspaper and magazine articles and media reports, and policy briefs, theses, and reliable and verifiable information available on the internet. Moreover, and for the purpose of providing a nuanced perspective of women's experiences and agency for peace during the Liberian conflicts and beyond, this paper relies on information from documentaries like *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*. Likewise, it draws upon insights on the experiences of Liberian women from seminar talks and discus-

sions delivered by peace activist Leymah Gbowee, and from the scholarly works of authors like Erica Sewell (2007), Ilzina Lelde (2011), and Ali Mari Tripp (2015).

Both the primary and secondary data were analysed using the methods of content analysis and narrative/discourse analysis of the role of women as agents and architects of peace in conflict times. Content analysis constitutes a very important part of the qualitative research approach and is used to construe meaning from the context of the data text, be it primary or secondary (Hsieh & Shannon 2005:1277). Thus, this data analysis method was distinctly used to appraise existing literature and the information gathered from the focus groups and interviews focusing on the role of women in Liberia's peacebuilding architecture. Narrative and discourse analyses were also used to recount the experiences of women in building agency. In presenting the data, participants are cited using their organisations' acronyms, except for Mary Brownell who is mentioned by name. Participants from focus group discussions are simply cited as Focus-Group participants.

Molyneux's Organisational Perspective and Women's Organisations in Liberia

Maxine Molyneux's organisational theory on women's movements and collective actions provides a useful framework for understanding what instigates women's agency and the formation of women's organisations, including in conflict times. Generally, women's organisations, whether grassroots, national or regional, are voluntary by nature and are often established with the purpose of promoting, piloting, and overseeing issues pertaining to women's welfare and gender equality (Kumar 2000). The formation of women's organisations during and especially in the aftermath of conflicts owes to several factors, including, among others:

i. The consequences of conflicts which often destabilise and transform the order of socio-economic, political and security functioning of society, and in turn enhance and foster the participation of women in public affairs;

ii. Women's need to promote feminist agendas because of their disenchant-

ment with political leaders and parties that promise to support gender equal policies and opportunities, yet fail to deliver;

iii. Peacebuilding processes by governments taking on democratic principles often create public platforms for the autonomous materialisation, establishment, and exemplification of women's organisations; and

iv. The operationalisation of international bodies through NGOs to foster policies on women's empowerment and gender equality, and promote the establishment of efficient civil society institutions, which in turn inspire the development of women's organisations (Kumar 2000: v).

Peacebuilding, especially in societies transitioning from war to peace, tends to unlock unique windows of opportunity for the establishment of women's organisations. Theorizing this, Molyneux (2001:3) asserts that women's movements or organisations entail the exercise of collective action in search of socio-political goals and rejoinders to common challenges, especially in the milieu of modern state emergence and economic change. Through collective action, women generally can mandate political, social, and economic transformation, as well as demand accountability from public institutions. In view thereof, Maria Butler, Abigail Ruane and Madhuri Sastry (2015:17) aver that, given women's agency for sustainable peace, justice and equality, the processes of peace and averting conflicts necessitate the contributions of women's organisations. More so, the display of women's agency through women's movements is significant in impacting and advancing women's rights in the realm of state affairs (Molyneux 2000).

In the case of Liberia, women's collective agency was comprised of approaches and initiatives that targeted direct and indirect management of the drivers of civil wars and their enabling factors. It also transcended women's individual agency and organised women's resolve to emasculate the gendered nature of the Liberian conflicts for the purpose of peace, with women's organisations rising to the task. For example, NAWOCOL and LWI were among the first women's organisations to be founded in the early years of Liberia's conflict in 1991 and 1994, respectively (NAWOCOL 2015; Mother Mary Brownell 2015). Mother Brownell, a founding member of LWI as agreed by most of the research participants, states that the establishment of LWI represented a historic context for the upsurge of women's organisations and women rising for peace in Liberia following the outbreak of the first civil war. This

view has also been asserted, for instance, in the works of Ali Mari Tripp (2015), Robert Press (2010), Erica Sewell (2007) and William Massaquoi (2007). To this end, the founding of LWI was fundamental in remodelling women for carving new political agency as peace advocates and architects through the fora of women's movements in the latter years of the conflict in Liberia.

The outbreak of the second civil war in Liberia proved the above perspective to be correct. Apparently, the undesirable ramifications of the first civil war, which pulled women together, also provided the basis for women's mobilisation for the cause of peace during the second civil war (WANEP/ WIPENT 2015). Once again, the flip side and irony of conflict, which Kumar (2000) identifies as one of the many reasons for women organising, was that it provided women with the opportunity to embrace and further expand their agency for peace. Developing the motivational platform that had been initiated by LWI for women to unremittingly unite and work for peace at every level of society, a regional women's organisation, MARWOPNET, was founded by women from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea in 2000 (MARWOPNET 2015). Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) in Liberia was also launched in 2001 by a regional peacebuilding organisation known as West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and through joint efforts, WANEP facilitates most of its initiatives through its WIPNET program Under the coordination of Leymah Gbowee, WIPNET (2015) consists of women from all walks, classes, groups, ethnic and religious backgrounds – Christians and Muslims alike.

This collective of Liberian women in pursuit of peace developed from women's experiences of conflict. In Molyneux's (1985; 2001) writings on women's movements, allusion is made to the importance of women's specific experiences as well as their gender interests/goals as strategic in the exercise of their agency and the formation of movements. Thus, Molyneux (2001) emphasizes that women's movements and their interests are best addressed through collective efforts or actions. In concurrence, Butler *et al.* (2015) maintain that the involvement of women's movements or organisations is an unquestionable element in the construction of women's agency and efforts to prevent/resolve conflicts and contribute to sustainable peace processes.

Women's Agency for Peace in Liberia: Narratives and Strategies

Using analytical narratives, this section discusses the contribution of women's organisations to Liberia's peace history as it unfolded from the outbreak of the first conflict in 1989 through to 2003 when the second civil war ended. The section begins with an understanding of the term agency. Agency, according to the World Bank Report (2011), refers to either an individual or a group's proclivity to make effective decisions, undertake operative actions, and transform them into expected or desirable outcomes. Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins (2016) broadly perceive women's agency as another form of empowerment, whereby women are inclined to make choices and use resources to achieve desired outcomes.

Women's agency in the context of this paper is demarcated as their ability to take advantage of the challenges and opportunities presented by conflict (and even post-conflict) situations to position themselves as decision-makers, participants, contributors, and architects of change. There is quite substantive evidence on the brunt of conflict that women bear and how their conflict experiences inform their agency for peace. Within a shifting landscape of conflict, women are often propelled to rethink their roles and build their collective agency in efforts to meaningfully influence an end to conflict and bring about peace. The construction of women's agency and strategies during the conflict years in Liberia embodied the formulae of non-violence resistance (NAWOCOL, WONGOSOL, LIFLEA 2015). Some of the strategies included peaceful demonstrations; advocacy campaigns and protests; addressing the humanitarian needs of the displaced people and the communities; lobbying and networking with other civil society institutions and organisations; keeping vigils and praying for peace; community awareness initiatives; attending conferences and peace talks; negotiating platforms for peace talks; sex strikes; and entreating rebels to surrender their arms.

Interestingly, Erica K. Sewell (2007) and Press (2010) also assert in their studies that women used non-violent public demonstrations, civil disobedience, and gathering for vigils and prayer crusades as strategies to amplify their quest for peace during conflict times in Liberia. According to Lindora Howard-Diawara and Lena Cummings (2006) and Tavaana Institute (2014), other approaches used by women include empowering grassroots and marginalized women and initiating platforms for conversations between rebel

groups and divided conflicting communities, among others. Noting that these strategies employed by women's organisations tend to overlap and intersect across the different organisations, this paper delimits them under the three categorisations of advocacy campaigns; peaceful demonstrations; and attending conferences/dialogues and peace talks.

Advocacy Campaigns

Advocacy is an expansive term involving diverse activities that are undertaken either by an individual or organisation(s) in representation of a person or a cause (CAFOD 2014:2). It also entails actions to communicate opinions with the aim of influencing transformation or outcomes from the situation or people at which the action is directed. Interviews with participants in the women's organisations show that most of their agency for peace and activism started with mobilising for an end to the Liberian conflicts and the restoration of peace.

In most conflict societies where women especially seek a permanent role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, advocacy as well as practical interventions have been prime strategies. Advocacy, in other words, is a kind of action in conflict situations and on conflict issues. Conflict-sensitive advocacy can also be adopted as an approach to manage and prevent the causes and consequences of conflict, while capitalizing on the end goal of peace (CAFOD 2014). To attain this goal, Liberian women's organisations at national, grassroots, and regional levels had to engage in multi-tiered advocacy campaigns (WANEP/ WIPENT, LIFLEA, Mary Brownell, NAWACOL 2015). These, among others, included raising awareness, networking with both faith-based and civil society organisations, and lobbying and entreating leaders and rebels to dialogue and disarm. Recapping from discussions with WIPNET and Ganta Concern Women Focus Group participants (2015) at grassroots levels, a generic point belaboured in their narratives was,

> As rural women of Liberia, we felt that at the beginning of the conflicts there was quietness on the situation, especially seeing as Bong County and Nimba County were not only the entry points of the insurgents in the outbreak of the first civil war, but also borne the severe brunt of both conflicts. We saw first-hand the horrific effects of the conflicts in our lives and on our families and people. We became conscious of the need to advocate around the issues and effects of the conflicts. Being concerned women and mothers, we created awareness by grouping, visiting households and talking to

> men and women, and boys and girls alike to rise and protect their own, especially from sexually violations. Having lost our livelihoods, we would come together informally as women and discuss how we could feed and sustain our families. Ideas about establishing and empowering small business initiatives emerged from informal chats.

The agency of women's organisations was also characterised by collaborative advocacy. This form of advocacy, especially at the national level, entailed networking with religious institutions and other civil society organisations in Liberia – like the Council of Chiefs, the Inter-Faith Mediation Council, the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, and the Muslim Women Federation. These bodies, as noted by Mary Brownell and other research participants, were concerned with the future of Liberia as the challenges of conflict mounted. They were also engaged in various efforts to minimise the conflict and drive negotiations to peace processes. Therefore, engaging in collaborative advocacy was for Brownell (as the then leader of LWI) a prioritisation of their advocacy for peace endeavours to magnetise a massive support base, develop, and coordinate strategies that would better influence affirmative and constructive responses for their cause. Furthermore, complementing advocacy campaigns were accomplished through NAWOCOL's community awareness programmes, as highlighted below (NAWOCOL 2015),

> Using the emergency arm of our organisation, 'Women in Action for Good Will', we identified women who were most affected by the war and had lost all or almost everything. Given the tribal inclination of the war, our activities involved bringing women from different tribal groupings, especially women whose tribes were primary targets of the conflicts, like the Krahn tribe from which the assassinated President Samuel K. Doe hailed, the Gio, Mano and Mandingo tribes. We rallied around individuals and institutions, advocating, and raising consciousness to support and provide relief and basic services for these women. We held several formal and informal gatherings and sermonized the message of forgiveness and reconciliation, and our target was working with women from communities where tensions and strained relationships were high. Our awareness messages echoed 'let bygones be bygones, let's work on forgetting and forgiving, let's pull our energy together to live as sisters and brothers and move ahead in building our communities ...'. As women seeking to empower women

> and to build peace, urging this consciousness for individuals and the communities to reconcile was and remain for us the only way through which peace and progress could occur.

Molyneux's organisational theory underlines the importance of collective actions for a shared goal, while also noting the diversity of experiences and interests that propel organisations to engage in activism. Hence, understanding women's organised agency in conflict times requires examining both the cause and the people that their strategizing aims to influence, as well as the desired outcome. While there may be a common goal, it is important to note that the goal is achieved using distinctive components of the same or different approaches. NAWOCOL (2015) specifies that the ability of most Liberian women's organisations to advocate their cause and reach a broad spectrum of the society during the conflict times, is owed to mechanisms for placing women at the centre and valuing them as vital instruments of positive transformation.

Across the continuum of participants interviewed, it was noticeable that the precise use of lobbying to influence political leaders was one of the important advocacy strategies employed by women's organisations during the conflict. With specific reference to the second civil war and its dire national and regional impacts, MARWOPNET lobbied and got the presidents of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea to convene since some factors triggering the conflict in Liberia were rooted in these participating countries (MARWOPNET 2015). Inspired by this strategy, women realised that the only way to peace was through petitioning and influencing the positions of the leaders to resolve the cross-border crisis. Viewing this strategy as a joint regional effort, MARWOPNET referred to the organisation's records and explained,

> The lobbying exercise was led by Mother Mary Brownell and Ruth Perry, who presented the women's concerns about the plight of the children and citizenry of Liberia suffering because of the gruesome conflict. We petitioned with the leaders to give heed to them as their mothers and sisters, and finally convinced the presidents of these three countries to attend the regional peace dialogues that convened in Rabat, Morocco in March 2002.

It is important to acknowledge that women's ability to sway the perception of their leaders is also indicative of their resolve to communicate their cause in a manner that captures the attention of some of the decision makers. This lobbying agency is described by Christopher E. Miller (2011:6) as a 'communicative process', which may or may not trigger political or policy considerations in every circumstance. In the case of Liberia, the lobbying by MARWOPNET indubitably propelled the platform for dialogue. Furthermore, participants from women's organisations enunciated that their exercise of the lobbying mechanism also included soliciting and entreating rebels, since ensuring inclusivity in conflict resolution processes was for them an imperative for the ultimate outcome of peace. Recapitulating her experience of the first civil war, Mother Mary Brownell recounted,

> In our numerous efforts for peace, we tried to and, in some instances, solicited the audience of militants and leaders alike. For example, about ninety of us women of LWI gathered at some point and travelled to Bomi County to dialogue with the warlords. More than halfway to the Bomi Hills, we were stopped by armed militants at the Po River Bridge who refused us further entry to the militant camps. However, this did not derail our purpose for peace because we continued to plot the course to engage conflict parties to dialogue and to end the hostilities for the sake of peace.

Ali Mari Tripp (2015) also captures women's struggles for peace and shared experiences in Liberia to include their joint efforts with community leaders to entreat combatants. As stated by Tripp (2015:97-98),

> Women talked to their brothers and sons fighting in the conflict in their various languages to put down the guns. They took food to warring factions and made attempts to persuade them from fighting. They carried to them different items, including white chickens – which was a replacement of white doves, an emblem of peace; kola nuts, which reminded the fighters that women gave them life; and palm branches, which embodied the welcoming of Jesus to Jericho, meaning they are welcome to disarm and return home.

From the above discussion, it is understood that advocacy around the Liberian conflict situations was a strategy rooted in the establishment of women's organisations and within their everyday works. In effect, women were committed to exposing the devastating effects of the conflicts on women and society at large, advocating change, and ensuring that women's voices were heard. In addition to taking on the responsibility for maintaining peace, women's agency also included the strategy of peaceful demonstrations, as evidenced by primary and secondary literature.

Peaceful Demonstrations

Demonstrations can either be non-violent or violent. While largely regarded as a public activity, they can also be private, depending on the intended cause or target group to be influenced. Focusing on the element of peaceful demonstrations, this study underscores that they are a form of non-violent resistance activism by a group or groups of people asserting a standpoint on public issues, and in the context of this study, a method of popular politicking especially in situations of conflict. Explaining this exercise, Eric J. Hobsbawm (2003:73) defines mass demonstration as 'participation in a collective activity involving bodily experience, intense emotion, and physical action – like marching, chanting slogans, singing – through which the merger of the individual in the mass, which is the essence of the collective experience, finds expression at a time of great public exaltation'. Drawing responses from the two focus-group discussions, participants affirmed that peaceful demonstrations were one of the widely used mechanisms associated with women's organised agency for peace to navigate the conflict space, negotiate an environment of peace and stability, and address the victimization and marginalization of women caused by the conflict situation. Speaking of this approach in the light of LWI activism, Brownell (2015) articulates,

> In deliberating strategies to end the Liberian conflict, we the women demonstrated peacefully. Engaging this action, we paraded, rallied, and demonstrated in front of embassies, government offices and on streets to ensure our predicaments as women fighting for peace echoed to all parties concerned. Also, we were always at the picketing lines with placards and banners that carried different messages for peace. Our voices echoed even as we marched up to the stations and the

> quarters of the warlords chanting 'we want peace not war; we are your mothers and sisters; stop the fighting, the rape of our girls, the killing of our children, sisters, brothers and husbands and let peace reign'.

Generally, the act of demonstration can include sit-in strikes, picketing, sex strikes, marches, stripping naked to protest, and rallies. These forms of popular activism are not ephemeral and are often employed in the fight for different causes, spanning the political, economic, social, and developmental. Analysis of women's agency and approaches in relation to their search for peace in Liberia draw attention to the narratives orchestrated by women, including that of overcoming religious differences, while they peacefully demonstrated during the civil wars in Liberia. For example, WIPNET's strategy capitalized on the numerical potency of women (WANEP/ WIPENT 2015). Diawara and Cummings (2006) and the Tavaana Institute (2014) state that this numeric advantage had an enormous empowering impact. Accordingly, recognition of their numerical advantage also assisted interreligious mobilizing, and served as a dependable conduit through which women could partake and influence peace and decision-making to end the civil war (WANEP/ WIPENT 2015). For example, Marshall *et al.* (2011:7) note that one of WIPNET's appealing catchphrases that was used during their demonstrations and gatherings was, 'Does the bullet know a Christian from a Muslim?' According to WANEP/ WIPENT (2015), these distinctive slogans were used by many women in protests and demonstrations to promote their togetherness for a cause that transcended religious differences.

Do non-violent demonstrations entice warring factions to consider mediation and activate women's access in peace processes? Both historic and contemporary perspectives hold that this assertion is to a degree true, in that such strategies, when used by women to navigate the conflict space at informal levels, have in many instances served as the blueprint for finding the middle ground in conflict resolution processes (Amedzrator 2014:3). Drawing from women's experiences in Liberia, the narratives hold that after the successful lobbying and meeting of leaders in Morocco in 2002, the conflict landscape in Liberia worsened by 2003. Not only did this drive women to further marshal and strengthen their struggle for peace, but also resulted in the launch of the non-violent campaign for peace in March 2003 under the WIPNET Women of

Liberia Mass Action for Peace[2] movement. Drawing from Molyneux's organisational theory, the exercise of collective action to address common challenges and interests (Molyneux 2001; 1985) can in this case be taken to mean that the debut of the Mass Action for Peace Movement represents significant women's agency in seeking the shared goal of peace. This sentiment is captured as follows in Leymah Gbowee (2011),

> By 2003, we were fade up with the war, the abuse, our daughters being raped, our children being recruited as child soldiers and the ills of Taylor. So, a group of community women gathered and decided enough is enough. For us, the price of seating was getting higher than the price of getting involved. We had been pushed so far back that we had to decide to step out and leave a legacy. We had seen the worst that awaken the power in us. Daily we protested at embassies, picketing, sending letters, using media forums to fight for peace, gathering at the marketplace to demonstrate and pray. In desperation, we added the sex strike…and uttered severally 'if I should get killed, just remember that I was fighting for peace.'

From the participants' responses, it is also important to note that praying as a method of peaceful demonstration was and remains an active form of protest. According to WIPNET (2015) and WANEP/ WIPENT (2015), praying paved the way for women to further define their identity as religious? holders of human and civil rights, and as architects of peace. It also brought together women and men as well as people from numerous backgrounds to actively participate in praying and fasting for peace.

Moreover, the Mass Action for Peace activism heightened the empowerment of women at all levels of society. At the grassroots level, to be specific, Focus Group participants discussed how the Mass Action kindled women's agency to seize the opportunity and unwaveringly partake in the struggle for peace. This assertion was in line with one of Gbowee's (2013) session narratives which attest that,

[2] The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace was a combination of different groups like WIPNET-WANEP, LWI, MARWOPNET, the Muslim Women Association and the Christian Women Association, and the Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia (AFELL), among others (Alaga 2011:23).

> Women from the grassroots rose to the struggle and in three months of our campaign, we had over ten thousand women in fifteen locations in Liberia supporting the cause and saying, 'No to war and Yes to peace'. The power we saw in ourselves as women from all backgrounds of life, especially from the rural and grassroots setting – 'the market women and the peace women in white T-shirt' as we were popularly known; is something – an experience and a benefaction that cannot be described. With this massive support base, we were also able to send some of our women to Ghana to rally our fellow refugee women residing in there. This was just before the 2003 defining peace talks. And when the talks eventually commenced, we the women with the support of other women from the region held our placards and chanted outside the meeting venue.

There is a significant body of literature on the wide range of strategies employed by women's organisations in Liberia (Tripp 2015; Gbowee 2011, Alaga 2011; Massaquoi 2007). Focusing on the sex strike as one of the demonstration mechanisms, Disney and Reticker (2009) in the documentary *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, elucidate that it was an exercise of power and reason whereby Christian and Muslim women alike agreed to refuse their men sexual pleasure. This exercise served to authenticate women's seriousness for the peace cause and appeal to the men to also take responsibility for their part in the conflict and join the struggle for peace. As others have noted, the sex boycott is a form of nonviolent protest and resistance that dates to ancient times (De Romilly 1985:87). Women, most especially, have continued to use it in the contemporary era to bring about an end to social injustices; advocate their cause; and propel decision makers and leaders to take seriously addressing political, socio-economic and security challenges that confront women and often society at large. The Liberian experience indicates that this strike did encourage men to join alongside women in the struggle for peace, as they were cognizant that an end to the conflict also meant an end to the abstinence (Disney & Reticker 2009).

A convergence of considerations from participating women's organisations indicates that the act of stripping naked also constituted another form of peaceful demonstration by Liberian women. Stripping naked is a non-violent mechanism where nakedness is used as an unlikely instrument of power

to protest perceptible injustices (Tamale 2016; Prasch 2015). What is more, the body of a woman is said to signify motherhood as a 'producer and reproducer' of both genders in society, as well as a caregiver and upholder of culture and nationhood (Tamale 2016:20). Therefore, for men to publicly see the nakedness that symbolized motherhood was/is to repudiate that life (Prasch 2015: 195-196). Narratives of the Liberian experience convey that during one of the impasses at the 2003 peace negotiations in Accra, Ghana, Liberian women threatened to strip bare if a negotiated settlement for peace was not achieved. Moreover, undressing as an act denoted that the women were willing to sacrifice their own dignity to humiliate the delegates, if delegates did not bow to the weightiness of their request for peace (*Pray the Devil Back to Hell*). In Liberia, as in other African cultures, tradition dictates that a mother or an elder woman's deliberate stripping in public as a sign of protest in front of men, especially those young enough to be their sons, was/is purportedly a curse to the men (Prasch 2015; Tamale 2016).

It is noteworthy that non-violent protests and peaceful demonstrations, particularly those organised by women groups in Liberia, gained widespread support and prominence on a national, regional, and international levels. While such movements and rallies against wars are often said to begin in small peace activist groups, the phenomenon was quite different in the case of the Liberian second civil war because of the mass action by women. In conjunction with other conflict situations, women's agency for peace in Liberia also took on the strategy of attending conferences and peace talks.

Attending Conferences/ Dialogues and Peace Talks

Historical as well as contemporary conflict and peace discourse recognises the strategy of organised caucuses as one of the mechanisms used by women to create an empowering environment for their engagement and participation in influencing efforts at peace negotiations. Across the spectrum of research participants in Liberia, narratives of advocating meetings and dialogues, attending conference and peace talks, were recounted as being part of the recurring strategies used by women in their organisations' struggle for peace. Women secured and shaped the dynamics of peace negotiation processes to end the Liberian civil wars as per several participants' narratives. Accounts by NAWACOL and Brownell (2015) summarize that, in efforts to navigate the conflict space and influence an arena of peace, the women of Liberia developed

a culture of consensus building, organised meetings, and attending peace negotiations even under observers' status. Elaborating on this, Brownell recounts,

> One of our many strategies for peace and for our voices to be heard as women of Liberia, involved efforts to attend conferences and peace talks. Hence, each time conferences that focused on Liberia in any African region were organised, we mobilized and sought support to purchase travel tickets and attend the talks, even though we were never invited. Encouragingly, our support came from men and women alike. In one incident, we the women of LWI arrived Accra, Ghana in 1994 for one of such conferences and were told – 'this war is not for women', and our response was … but we bear the brunt of it … so it is also women's war. We were not deterred and at last were allowed entry under the status observers only. According to the warlords, we were supposed to remain quiet, but then they kept referring to us, asking our opinions on the deliberations and decisions of the meeting. This was remarkable and most signified that we the women of Liberia were making progress in our quest for peace. Following from this, we made our presence felt in all the peace conferences … and this was irrespective of the fact that we received no official invitations to attend these events. Our mission was not to relent in our peace efforts until the guns were silent.

Assembling for conferences and dialogues is one of the many ways through which women's involvement in peace processes occur (LIFLEA 2015). Speaking of the importance of conferences and dialogues WONGOSOL (2015) asserts that the 1995 United Nations Women Conference in Beijing gave the Liberian Women a voice of motivation, and a consciousness to strive on and work as a united force. The medium of meetings as a necessary approach used by women builds on the fact that through such fora, women could brainstorm; share and analyse their experiences; draw on different propositions; and work together to accomplish the peace cause. Lelde (2011:18) acknowledges that women's activism for peace in Liberia also includes requests to engage President Charles Taylor in dialogue and streaming to the parliament with demands for a space for conversation to be granted. Accordingly, the audience with President Taylor in April 2003 was noted by participants as a significant moment in women's struggle for peace in Liberia.

Women came out in their numbers, dressed in white for the meeting, and in the statement presented through their leader Leymah Gbowee, they patently stated,

> We, the women of Liberia, including the IDPs, are tired of war, we are tired of running, tired of begging for bulgur wheat, we are tired of our children being raped. We are now taking this stand to secure the future of our children because we believe we are custodians of our society and tomorrow our children will ask us: 'Mama, what was your role during the crisis' (*Pray the Devil Back to Hell* 2009).

Tripp (2015:99) describes this pronouncement as market women's open and justifiable demand for the immediate ceasefire and peaceful dialogue between the government and warring factions. Several reports and documents detail how President Taylor challenged the women to locate rebels and bring them on board to dialogue, as his precondition to participate in peace talks and ceasefire agreements. Research by Sewell (2007:17), Lelde (2011:18), and the Tavaana Institute (2014:10) maintains that women took on this challenge, went across borders to Sierra Leone, and convinced the rebels to come on board. This was the breakthrough in women's activism for the resolution of the conflict and peace that set the space for the Accra-Ghana peace talks that commenced on 4 June 2003. As observed by this study, the strategy of women meeting with Taylor and the warlords served as an indicator to the world that there is power in the voices of women, which not even the gendered nature of the conflict and patriarchal display of society could suppress. This also reverberated the message that the women of Liberian were indeed tired of the killings and unrest; and having taken these significant strides to do the inconceivable simply meant they would do it again. This position was severally reasserted by the research participants and by Gbowee (2011; and 2013) as articulated in these data excerpts:

> WIPNET attended peace talks in Accra, Ghana in June 2003. The talks which were to last for two weeks, lasted for 3 months. We the women remained resolute in our mission to ensure the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Liberia, despite President Charles Taylor abandoning the peace dialogue and his delegation in Ghana to return to Liberia. We collaborated with our women counterparts in Ghana and other women organisations like MARWOPNET and

> WONGOSOL. The impasse of the peace dialogues coupled with the news that the conflict had taken a turn for the worst, and a missile had landed in the American compound in Liberia where the displaced people were being housed, was the defining moment for us WIPNET women. Provoked by this news, Leymah articulates – 'I went into the hall and told the women to lock arms for we are putting this venue under siege and must ensure that no food or water is served, and no factions, mediators and negotiators live until a peace agreement is reached and signed. Accused of impeding justice, the security forces came to arrest me and threatened to make it easy for them, ready to strip naked. But as I pulled off my scarf, they immediately retreated.' What followed two weeks later was the pronouncement and the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on 18 August 2003, and the appointment of Gyde Bryant to chair the Transitional Government of Liberia.

From the extract, it is worth noting that the intersection of women's organised strategies in their pursuit of peace was strategic and extremely significant for the eventual resolution of the conflict. More so, their peace advocacies and crusades were backed by clergy and Imams alike and broadcast by the Catholic radio station – Radio Veritas, the BBC and CNN news outlets (Tavaana Institute 2014:9; Tripp 2015:99). As was the case with LWI, WIPNET was accorded an observer status during the peace negotiations in Accra in 2003. However, some of the outcomes of women's activism during the first civil war include the appointment of one of the women's Muslim activists – Ruth Sando Perry – in 1996 to oversee the National Transitional Government's legislative and presidential elections that took place in 1997. Apparently, this success was symptomatic of the significant strides that women's organisational agency and strategies were contributing towards ending the conflict.

It should be noted that earlier actions and resolve to influence peace negotiations provided LWI the platform to collaborate with organisations in the ECOWAS region (Brownell 2015). Through their collaboration, they laid the groundwork for women's agency by advocating for their involvement and participation at formal peace dialogues and decision-making at all levels. One of the conspicuous yields of this endeavour, as stated by Massaquoi (2007:78-79) and Tripp (2015:100) was that women delegates selected from the Liberian

subdivision of MARWOPNET and headed by Sando Perry and Theresa Leigh-Sherman to honour ECOWAS' invitation were able to secure seats at the Accra negotiating tables. As representatives of the wider women body during the peace dialogues, MARWOPNET was ultimately endorsed as an official signatory to the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreements (Marshall & Hayward 2011:7; Tripp 2015:100). For its interventionist strategies, acclaimed regional peacebuilding role at all levels of society and agents of socio-political change, MARWOPNET received the distinguished United Nations Award for Human Rights in 2003 (Sewell 2007:18; Massaquoi 2007:73).

The Accra peace agreement signalled the official end of Liberia's 14 years of civil war and was welcomed as a milestone achievement by many, especially women. The agreement happened just a few months into WIPNET's non-violent mass campaign for peace, and the message 'we want peace', which had resonated throughout women's pursuit of peace in Liberia, was achieved. Following the 2003 peace deal, therefore, women did not just settle for the sheer ideology of peace as the absence of war but took upon themselves the responsibility of consulting with the stakeholders on their various roles in the implementation of the Accra agreement (Alaga 2011). To this end, women sustained their activities, conceived operationalisation time frames, and encouraged fellow women, especially from the grassroots and rural Liberia, not to relent in their efforts at ensuring the sustainability of the peace they had worked so hard to achieve.

Conclusion

The excerpts and analyses of women's organisations' agency and strategies in this paper contextualise the role of women's organisations as indispensable in the resolution of the Liberian conflict. The review of primary and secondary data established that women's roles as peace agents and architects often build from their experiences of conflict. Women's groups, as stated previously, crossed religious divides, such that both (male) Christian and Muslim religious leaders and religious news, radio, and television outlets followed the lead of the women. As such, women's experiences during the Liberian conflicts went beyond accounts of war and their plight therewith to embody actions for positive change in the conflict situations. Likewise, women's experiences transcended their individual agency and displayed organised resolve towards exercising and showing collective agency for peace under different networks

of women's organisations. Further appraising women's agency and approaches to peace, the paper drew insights from Maxine Molyneux's organisational theoretical perspective. Drawing insight from this theory, it was established that the proliferation of women's organisations in conflict areas is strategically important for ensuring that women's voices are heard as they promote peace and coming together under the aegis of women's organisations creates an ideal environment for women's empowerment and platform to engage in collective actions. In the case of Liberia, this collective action by women's organisations signified a struggle for the rights of women to take up leading roles, to become politically active and participate in decision-making processes. On whether women's agency for equal seats at the decision-making table and as political leaders has been attained in the event of post-conflict, is a topic for another research study that is currently in progress. However, scholarship as well as narratives from research participants indicate that unequal power relations in the conduct and participation in decision-making processes between men and women remain a sore reality for women, despite the visibly influential roles they played in bringing about peace in Liberia.

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