

Women hold up half the sky:¹ Peace and security lessons from Liberia

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Introduction

The Liberian response to challenges of peace and security is characterised by strong women in leading positions. The current government is led by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first democratically elected woman to hold the presidential office in Liberia and on the continent of Africa. In power since 2006, President Johnson-Sirleaf has come a long way in honouring the promises she made in her inaugural address: 'My Administration shall thus endeavour to give Liberian women prominence in all the affairs of our country. My Administration shall empower Liberian women in all areas of our national life' (AllAfrica

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2008a). Women now hold senior positions in her Cabinet as ministers of foreign affairs, commerce and industry, gender and development, and youth and sports. Several of the Liberian ambassadors abroad are women, including those assigned to Belgium, China, Germany and the Nordic countries, Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa. Domestically, Monrovia has a female mayor, a female inspector-general of the national police force and a female commissioner on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (King-Akerele 2008).

Few countries in the world can boast of such a high level of female presence in their government and civil society. Fewer still can pride themselves on having a democratically elected female state leader. Women's leadership is not however a new phenomenon in Liberian society. The road to peace has been paved with the efforts of Liberian women at all levels to bring about an end to the conflict that has devastated their country. Their peacemaking initiatives, actions and advocacy were instrumental to the Accra Peace Agreement signed in 2003.² It was also the mobilisation of women voters in the presidential election that ensured the victory for Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Through a thoroughly pragmatic approach to political participation, fuelled by sheer determination, women rallied other women to register and cast their votes.

The Liberian accomplishments in the field of women's empowerment and leadership are unique and provide lessons of immense value to post-conflict countries worldwide and to the international community as a whole. This short essay will illustrate this value through a few examples that could greatly contribute to our understanding of international security and peace-building activities.

Implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325

In 2000 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. The resolution calls for the recognition of the impact of armed conflict on women and girls and the different roles they play and it further urges the international community to ensure women's participation at all levels of decision making and peace processes. While the resolution is not binding, the Security Council has recommended that all member states take the necessary steps to implement it at national level. One effective tool is to develop national action plans for its implementation through national policies and programmes.

Liberia is considered by many to be a very interesting case study for the operationalisation of UNSCR 1325. With so many women involved in the peace-building initiatives, together with women who held significant positions throughout the reconstruction process, it is not surprising that women in countries like Sudan, Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan look to Liberia for inspiration and advice.³ While many aspects of the resolution are already incorporated in the national policies and laws

of Liberia, the government is now in the process of developing a national action plan (NAP) for the implementation of UNSCR 1325. Once completed, Liberia could be the first country in Africa, and the first post-conflict country in the world, to have made this commitment to the resolution.

The lessons learned from the Liberian process of drafting an NAP will be of interest to many countries that are experiencing conflict or are in a reconstruction phase after a conflict and/or civil war. It will also be a valuable input to the work done by the UN and other stakeholders in the international community as all current NAPs⁴ are drafted in countries that do not have a recent history of conflict within their borders. While these NAPs are of great importance for peacekeeping activities, the reconstruction process itself is guided from within the country and therefore stands to benefit immensely from the government's commitment to UNSCR 1325.

The building of sustainable peace

The rule of President Johnson-Sirleaf has not gone unnoticed in the international community. Based on the extent of support, ranging from a very successful debt relief campaign to special partnerships⁵ it is clear that many countries have a strong belief in her ability to build sustainable peace in Liberia. Her policies focus on empowerment of her citizens through the reform of the judicial system, free primary education for children and rebuilding Liberia's shattered infrastructure. With a stated commitment to democracy, together with a zero tolerance for corruption, it comes as no surprise that Liberia is becoming the favourite of many a donor.

Liberal values aside, Liberia is also following a path that is in line with current influential thoughts on pragmatic peace building. According to Paul Collier's latest book, *The bottom billion* (Collier 2007), a post-conflict country should receive significant development assistance during the first years of post-conflict reconstruction. It should not invest in its military sector, but rather rely on military guarantees from external actors so that it can instead focus on rebuilding its economic and social sectors to lift itself and its citizens out of debilitating poverty. With Iraq casting shadows on the agenda of military interventions, it is a rather controversial statement to insist on the military presence of external actors.

Liberia is still host to a significant number of UN peacekeeping soldiers. The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has some 15 000 soldiers based in Liberia, five years after the peace agreement has been signed. Although reductions have been announced, it is foreseen that almost 10 000 soldiers will still be based in Liberia in 2010 (AllAfrica 2008b). The Liberian experience of seven years with significant external military assistance will provide valuable insights into the debate on successful policies of peace building and post-conflict reconstruction.

International Colloquium

The International Colloquium on Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security was initiated to celebrate President Johnson-Sirleaf's three years in office and to acknowledge the accomplishments of Liberian women leaders. Coinciding with International Women's Day, the Colloquium will be convened in Monrovia in March 2009 by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and President Tarja Halonen of Finland.

The Colloquium has the following goals⁶

- To empower women to be more effective leaders by linking with them with their peers from around the world and sharing best practices
- To support the implementation of UNSCR 1325
- To help achieve the Millennium Development Goal 3 on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women
- To demonstrate the clear gender dimensions of climate change, and create mechanisms for women to influence and shape climate change adaptation financing, strategies and programmes

The Colloquium promises to be an exceptional event with attendance of women leaders from all over the world. The overall framework of the event is the UNSCR 1325 and its emphasis on women's leadership and empowerment at all levels of society. It further aims to capitalise on the experiences of Liberian women in the peacemaking process, through Track II diplomacy and advocacy efforts. This information is to be synthesised into workshops and other learning tools for empowerment of women in conflict and post-conflict countries. An implementation mechanism, the Angie Brooks International Center, will be created to ensure sustainability and progressive follow-up after the event.

The interest and support for the Colloquium has been remarkable and in March 2009, Liberia will be firmly established as a leader of peace building, spearheading activities and knowledge sharing on women, peace and security.

Liberia as a case study for human security

The human security perspective, as conceptualised in the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report, differs from the traditional security perspective in numerous ways. The level of analysis shifts from the state to the individual, making it a people-centred security approach. While universally relevant, this security approach must

be context specific to accurately reflect people's everyday security concerns. This necessitates a participatory approach to the formulation of a security agenda. The security threats are not only of a military nature, but instead encompass disease, poverty and environmental destruction with no hierarchical order of high v low politics. As a consequence, the means of ensuring security range from protection to empowerment and capacity building.⁷

The Liberian Ministry of Gender and Development, in collaboration with the UN system and other key partners, called for a five-day National Women's Conference in Monrovia in May 2008. The aim was to create a National Action Plan to advance women's rights in Liberian peace building, recovery and development. This action plan is the result of the voices of 350 women who came from across the country to attend the conference. The identified priorities ranged from the national security sector, to economic empowerment, education and capacity building. The plan, which covers the period from June 2008 until June 2011, will also feed into the International Colloquium and its projects. It is an ambitious plan with a very concrete approach: clear objectives, monitoring indicators and committed partners who will help to see this come to fruition.

This is an example of a truly participatory approach to formulating a security agenda. Lessons abound for countries worldwide!

Conclusion

Liberia has made remarkable progress in the period after the Accra Peace Agreement, and especially since 2006 under the rule of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. The peace is still in its infancy, however, and the country is still fragile. Much needs to be done to ensure stability and sustainable peace, many efforts have to be taken by the Liberian government and its citizens, and much support must be given by the international community. The road so far is a remarkable one; full of lessons learned that needs to be shared with other African nations as well as internationally.

To quote a colleague and friend of mine, Karen Barnes from International Alert: 'women want a piece of the peace'. In Liberia they have it. I will wait with great anticipation to see what they will continue to do with it and what remarkable progress they will achieve.

Notes

1 Chinese proverb

2 For examples of their struggle, visit www.marwopnet.org, read African Women and Peace Support Group (2004) and view the documentary feature by Reticker and Disney (2008) (winner as best documentary in 2008 at the Tribeca film festival).

- 3 The author had the privilege of being present at an international conference on the implementation of UNSCR 1325, where women's organisations from countries affected by conflict shared best practice. The Liberian Minister of Gender and Development, Honorable Vabah Gayflor, was a keynote speaker who provided much guidance and inspiration to all participants.
- 4 Countries that have developed a national action plan for the implementation of UNSC 1325 include Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Iceland, Austria, the United Kingdom and most recently Finland.
- 5 Denmark has committed US \$22 million to Liberia as a part of their MDG 3 campaign. See http://www.emansion.gov.lr/press.php?news_id=693.
- 6 Taken from a working document established by the Agenda Committee for the International Colloquium.
- 7 For further elaboration on this, see Svensson (2007).

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