

United Nations Security Council
Arria Formula Meeting on the Role of Women in Peace Consolidation
Leymah Gbowee, WIPNET, Liberia
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Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I would like to thank members of the Security Council and UNIFEM for the opportunity to be part of this meeting. My presentation will address three points: the role of women in the Liberian peace process, the challenges in implementing SCR 1325 and a possible role for the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Fund in peace consolidation in Liberia.

The words of the great African-American Slave Freedom Fighter, Harriet Tubman **“If you are tired keep going, if you are hungry keep going, if you are scared keep going, if you want a taste of freedom, keep going”** have been the theme and the driving force for the peacebuilding work of the Liberian women.

The pain of the war seemed to be never ending; we lived in constant fear of what the next day would bring. For us as women there was always the unspoken question of who would be abducted next to warm the bed of an over drugged militia or government soldier.

We were tired, frustrated and had been pushed so far to the wall that we only had two options: yield to the pain and trauma till it sucked us in or fight back. We chose the latter. Unlike the men of our society who had driven us so far back with their violent expression of anger, we decided we would use a non – violent expression of the deep-seated anger that we felt at our humiliation.

This was the beginning of the famous “Women of Liberia Mass action for Peace campaign”. I must state that this campaign would not have been possible had there not been women in the earlier days of the war that began advocacy for women’s involvement in the peace process.

Our campaign took on the practical aspect of engaging the leaders and perpetrators of violence and tyrannical rule. We held vigils, begged the combatants to lay down their guns and petitioned the Head of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to convene peace talks from Sierra Leone, to Gambia, to Cote d’Ivoire, to Benin, to Nigeria and Ghana.

At the talks, especially in Accra, Ghana, we were the conscience and the human face mediating the adversarial demands of male warlords. We sat in the sun and rain with our children at the site of the talks singing and sometimes crying for reason; we formed bodily barricades to prevent the parties at the table from leaving when the negotiations got rough, heated, and irrational. In the end our unprecedented struggle for justice, peace, and security paid off with peace.

UNSCR 1325 was the basis of our work and the hope that the leaders would heed to our demands and include us.

Our general assumption was, giving that the UN was leading the process, that women's needs and involvement in all of the processes would be considered, especially since we had resolution SCR 1325 and there was also a clause in the peace agreement considering the needs of women and girls that were part of the fighting forces.

We would soon realize that as much as our role in ending the violence was laudable, SCR 1325 paragraph 8 (which calls for the involvement of women in the implementation of peace agreements and DDRR processes) would be swallowed up in the sea of bureaucracies and doing things the "old boys" way and that the assumption in itself was a mistake that we as women would learn to never make.

Let me give an example. On 19 September 2003, the Security Council passed resolution 1509, which established UNMIL and tasked it with incorporating a gender perspective into its activities in accordance with Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Resolution 1509 also requested that UNMIL develop a DDRR Action Plan that pays "particular attention to the needs of child combatants and women."

The mandate and scope of UNMIL marked significant progress as compared to other missions in terms of recognizing the need for separate facilities and services for women, girls, boys and men in the DDRR process. The DDRR Action Plan that UNMIL created at the request of the Security Council and with the assistance of UNIFEM, UNICEF, UNDP, UNHCR, WFP, WHO and others included special arrangements for female combatants.

According to the Action Plan, "female combatants [were to] be placed in separate interim care centres in the cantonment sites, where they [were to] receive special assistance in such areas as reproductive health, counselling, training on women's rights and sexual trauma support. Their reintegration activities [were to] also include educational programs."

In line with their mandate the UN Mission in Liberia was leading this process and consultations had been held in and outside of Liberia for the successful implementation of the process. "Experts" on the process of DDRR from Kosovo and Sierra Leone were being imported into Liberia. Proposals from women's groups and organizations to the newly established National Commission on DDRR and the mission were rejected as we were not considered to be "Experts" in the field of DDRR and also the process was highly militarized. In essence we were told "women your protest and other form of non-violent actions were great but we think its time to go back home and take care of the kids".

Unfortunately, violence had to erupt for days in December of 2003 during the failed DDR process, for someone to recognise that maybe we could make "our children behave".

Only then WIPNET was called in by UNMIL to go into the camps to talk to the combatants and calm the situation. First, we had to explain the DDR process to them especially around incentives making sure that they were fully informed and engaged in the process. WIPNET and the UN then developed an adequate communication and dissemination method to ensure that the combatants had a clear understanding of the entire process.

So where was the Gender Advisor in all of this? Even though she had been appointed months before, she was still going through the process of documentation in New York. When she finally arrived a few months later, her hands were tied, as her office did not have a budget for programs and there was no coordination with the UNCT. (Commend her)

As women there are key questions that we asked ourselves about SCR 1325 as it relates to the actual peacekeeping operations on the ground. As big and mighty as 1325 may seem, is it a toothless bulldog, or a robot without a battery or source of energy. Do members of the UN missions suffer amnesia about this important resolution purposely or it is not known amongst them?

The newly established PBC like the adoption of SCR 1325 again has raised the hopes of women especially those affected by conflict that addressing the challenges of women's involvement and engagement in peacemaking and peacebuilding will be prioritized.

The work of the PBC must draw on the expertise of local women's groups and build on their on-going initiatives. It is also important for the PBC to draw on local knowledge that is context-specific and not rely only on lessons learned and good practices from other post-conflict countries. It is time to translate the rhetorical commitment to a nationally owned peacebuilding process into a reality with support to home-grown programs. This is the only way to ensure the sustainability and the success of the peacebuilding process. In preparation for the possible engagement of the PBC with Liberia, the UNCT should work with civil society organizations to establish a national committee on peacebuilding link the work at the community level with national and international processes.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

We recognise the importance of the resolution and its potential for making a difference; we also recognize the role we women have in making it work. But we also know that in order for SCR 1325 to achieve its desired result, the UNSC must endeavour to do the following:

1. Ensure through consultation with other UN agencies that deliberate efforts be made to include women at the negotiation table not as observer but as parties to the conflict. This will ensure that the needs and roles of women will be clearly addressed in peace agreements, and not only as "a cross cutting issue".

2. Ensure that UN agencies increase their investment in peacebuilding and related training for women's groups. 1325 can only work at the community level if there is a vibrant women's movement that is issue-based and not donor-driven.
3. Hold governments accountable for the implementation of 1325 and set benchmarks to measure visible results.

In addition, the PBC should institute a formal mechanism to ensure that the knowledge and the expertise of women's groups are recognized and are central to the Commissions work.

Distinguished member of this body, the quest for peace and security for women in conflict areas is not a choice but a necessity, it is not a job but a way of life, it is not political agenda it is daily agenda for survival, it is our social security plan that ensures our babies live to see their 2, 3rd and maybe sixth birthdays.

UNSCR 1325 is a manifestation of the struggle and advocacy of women years ago, while we celebrate another year of its existence, our plea to you is to strengthen it, as this would ensure that a little girl or boy in Darfur will live to celebrate the 20th anniversary of 1325.

I thank you and look forward to your questions and comments.