Chapter 10
Gender and Sustainable Peace

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The cold war saw the collapse of nations and the rapid emergence of deadly civil wars (civil wars—what is so “civil” about these wars?). Communities were shattered and the norms and values that held the fabric of these communities together discarded. From Bosnia to Serbia, Somalia to Rwanda, Liberia to Sierra Leone, the stories were the same; mass murders and rape of women and girls. The conclusions and narratives about most of these wars were that “women and girls bore the greatest brunt” (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002; United Nations, 2000a, 2008, 2011; The World Bank, 2011).

How could this be? Growing up, girls and women regardless of where they come from are socialized to believe that men and boys are stronger and the protector of women and girls that these men who are usually soldiers are trained to defend the defenseless and the most vulnerable in societies. So how did we get to the place where men and boys have turned on the women that they were socialized to protect? Is it that the process was filled with flaws or was characterized with hypocrisy and lacked any form of sincerity?

Well, the abuse of women in these “uncivil” wars led to the emergence of a movement that we doubt was ever imagined by the perpetrators of violence against women: the women’s peace movement.

As the carnage increased on the bodies of the women, they were compelled to start their own revolution a revolution that would see men give up their weapons and give in to the pressure from nonviolent women (Gbowee, 2009). The narratives of wars still have women as victims, women as refugees, sex slaves, victims of increased domestic violence and grieving widows or mothers. However, recent
actions by women have compelled the narratives to be rewritten to take into consideration the inarguable fact that these women are also one of the primary hopes for peace in their various communities. This chapter will examine gender and peace. We will highlight the women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign as an example of how women recently have proven their ability to mobilize, organize and strategize for peace.

Part I

In 2003, 14 years into the Liberian civil war, a group of Liberian women, led by Leymah Gbowee and her collaborators decided that the impact of war on the lives of women and children had become unbearable and that there was a need for something to be done. The women conducted a series of sit-ins and marches aimed at demanding an end to the long civil war there. After many months of strategic and effective organizing, WIPNET (Women in Peacebuilding Network) was born—and the women saw the conflict come to an end. These women were celebrated by their fellow citizens as one of the most important of the many factors that brought about this long-awaited peace (see Ekiyor & Gbowee, 2005; Gbowee, 2009).

Toward the end of their dramatic demonstrations in Ghana, where the peace talks were being held, the women took advantage of a lull in the action to talk about their strategy going forward. “Peace is a process,” were the words of Etweda “Sugars” Cooper, “it is not an event.” She went on to urge the women not to make the mistake so common to many movements for peace—to trust that once the peace agreement was signed their work would be finished.

This forward-looking strategy reflected a core belief for these women that a cessation of shooting is not the same as the achievement of real peace and that only through hard and sustained work would the conditions for genuine peace be attained. Cooper was not just speculating. Her profound advice was the fruit of hard-won experience. After all, it was her leadership in 1996 that contributed to a previous peace deal for Liberia. That deal resulted in a cessation of shooting that was short-lived and unsatisfying to all involved. This in turn led to the election of one of Africa’s most brutal dictators, Charles Taylor, and his leadership in turn resulted in a worsening of the very conditions that had led to the civil war in the first place (see Press, 2011).

The women of WIPNET took Cooper’s advice and redoubled their efforts to build the conditions for peace in their country. The sit-ins and fasts and marches, along with engagement in the implementation of the peace agreement that was signed in Ghana, continued for years. The women vowed not to stop until a fair and honest election was held, with the full participation of all Liberians. It led to the election of a candidate who ran on a platform of experience not charisma, honesty not patronage. This candidate, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, happens to be the first woman fairly elected head of state in Africa; she may be imperfect, but she has done an admirable job in the six-year term she’s had since her election.
We are always bemused by the fact that our spell-check program refuses to recognize the word “peacebuilder.” We do wonder whether we need to let the people at Apple know how far behind the wisdom of African women. The truth is that women across that continent have recognized for decades that peacebuilding is an arduous, demanding and highly skilled occupation, and they have a great deal to teach their counterparts in the developed world about the difference between a lack of shooting and a real, sustainable peace.

But more than this, we have been left to wonder why, over and over again, the stories we hear about nonviolent movements for peace are either led or dominated by women (see Alonso, 1993; Boulding, 2000; Mazurana & McKay, 1999; Tobach, 2008). Could there be a gender component to peacebuilding that we have as yet failed to unpack? And if there is, what do we need to do to bring this untapped asset to bear where conflicts seem intractable and overwhelming? Elise Boulding (2000) points out that women have over time organized transnationally to oppose war, sexism and inequality. She believes that the collective sensibility stems not from some biological commonality but rather from their unique role and knowledge. Women, she argues, can make a distinct contribution to peace making (Lorentzen & Turpin, 1998).

Much of the work of these Liberian women is captured in a documentary film one of us produced in 2008 called Pray the Devil Back to Hell. During production of that film I (AD) had the opportunity to interview one of the warlords for his point of view about the peace talks. Sadly, I could not persuade him to give me the same interview on camera, although what he said has stayed with me; it seemed to hold the key to this question of whether peace has anything to do with gender.

As I started the interview and it became clear to him what the conversation would be about, he laughed derisively about the subject of the women in white, the members at WIPNET, and said, “Those women? Those women were nothing—they were only our conscience.” It was an intriguing statement, and I pressed on.

Further into the interview, I asked him why, in a conflict during which there was so much rape as to leave little doubt as to the low regard in which a woman’s bodily integrity is held by the combatants—in fact, as many as half of the adult women in his country had been raped—why it was that one woman threatening to strip naked could bring this gathering to such an abrupt, crashing stop. He answered me with contempt, as though the question was insultingly simple. He said, “Because they were our mothers.” I pressed him further, and he added, “You have to imagine what would drive your mother to do such a thing, to strip, to offer to cast off her last shred of dignity like that. When they did that there was not one man in that room who did not ask himself, no matter what he had done during the conflict, ‘What have I done to bring us to this place?’”

There is something in the idea of the mother’s voice that had a special significance. It is the mother’s voice, after all, that is in almost every culture and almost every individual life the first voice of love, of compassion and civilization. More than this, it is the first voice to say, “Share your toys. Don’t hit. Be kind.” (United Nations, 2000b).

The environment at peace talks convened by international actors is almost the same no matter what the conflict is like or where the talks take place. The gathering is
usually a generic hotel meeting room. There is plenty of food and drink on hand and in many cases it is the first comfortable bed the combatants have slept in for months.

There is also a code of behavior common to all these meetings and a particular set of unwritten rules about who will matter and who will not. The people in a position to negotiate are generally there because they have shot their way there or because they sit at a high enough level of a government or civil society that they could shoot their way there (either literally or metaphorically) if they so chose. What is prized is power and authority and seriousness. What is deemed unserious is anything that displays weakness or compromise or emotion. Women, therefore, generally enter talks like these at an enormous disadvantage (Kolb & Coolidge, 1988). And the men who dominate them do so by wrapping themselves tightly in the trappings and signifiers of substance and authority.

The idea that a mother’s voice could somehow penetrate those trappings and signifiers, that it could cause all these men, whose primary and even only currency is force, to stop and ask themselves about their own personal accountability in the problem is a phenomenon worth analyzing.

There is always the problem when one talks about gender and peace, of the war-like woman. There is always the specter raised of the Margaret Thatchers, the Golda Meirs, the Indira Gandhis. In fact under some circumstances women can be far more violent than men can be. It is of course not for nothing that we all can list the same four or five names—that in itself is proof enough that they are the exceptions that prove the rule. But even so, it is not necessary to prove that all women are peaceful in order to make a case for the special relationship women have to peace.

It is also not necessary to argue that women are better, or gentler, or nicer than men. This would be a ridiculous and childish point of view that would yield neither constructive answers nor meaningful dialogue. Women have also been enthusiastic cheerleaders and enablers of conflict, from Coriolanus’ mother, who exhorts him to “come back with your shield, or upon it,” to Joan of Arc, to the wives of the janjaweed in modern-day Darfur, who sing bone-chilling songs of vengeance to stir their men’s passions in the run-up to a raid.

But it would also be childish and counterproductive to pretend that there is not a gender dimension to violence and aggression. And it would be ridiculous indeed not to acknowledge that war is, in and of itself, the single most gendered activity in human history (see Goldstein, 2001). To argue that men do not do the vast majority of aggressing is simply a waste of our time.

The reasons for this difference are complex and the result of many factors—a thoroughly unparsable mix of genetics, evolution, habit, expectation, acculturation and even just a simple lack of creativity; as Betty Reardon (1993) has remarked, “the failure to achieve Peace is in essence a failure of the imagination.” But the fact of the matter is that in almost every social arrangement on earth, it falls to women to attend to the lion’s share of the matters that constitute daily life. Women bring in the living, carry out the dead, attend to the sick and the disabled, look to the care, feeding, teaching and disciplining of the young; they make homes liveable; they transmit lore and values. It is the day-to-day tasks of living that fall to women, and peace is the single most important precondition to their success.
Women have a special relationship to peace because peace is necessary for them to do what they need to do in a culture. And whether that relationship is on the second X chromosome or in the way we raise our girls and boys to adulthood, it hardly matters. Women fight for peace because peace is what they must have to do their jobs.

So what the women accomplished in Liberia may be remarkable, but it is also understandable. It has also been done in many other times and places, most often without having been noted in official accounts of the events. A historical example of such action by African women is the infamous Aba Women’s Riot in October of 1929, when the women of Aba in Eastern Nigeria demonstrated against high taxes and low prices of Nigerian export. This is one of the most poignant examples in West Africa of women using their numerical strength, ability to mobilize and traditional role to advocate for inclusion an issue affecting their lives (Ekiyor & Gbowee, 2005; Gbowee, 2009).

But there is a sudden new interest in the relationship of gender to peace on the part of the international community, as expressed in the remarkable United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (United Nations, 2000a). This resolution, passed in 2000 by the UN Security Council was the first time that this august body had ever weighed in on a matter related to women (which puts the ratio of mainstream to gender-conscious resolutions at that time to a mind-blowing 1,324:1). The resolution required that women be involved in all peace negotiations and post-conflict rebuilding strategies at all levels in all conflicts going forward.

As remarkable a resolution as 1325 is, it has remained devilishly difficult to implement. In fact, the resolution had no teeth—it required no mandates, no funding and no deliverables, and the sad truth is that in the 10 years since its adoption—fanfare and mutual back-patting notwithstanding—the percentage of women signatories to peace agreements has actually dropped from a puny 4% down to 2%—a result that is enormously discouraging (UNIFEM, 2010; United Nations, 2010; Iwilade, 2011).

The reasons generally invoked for this lack of women’s involvement in peace talks have not changed since the early days of the resolution and sound remarkably like the excuses heard by the women’s movement since time immemorial for the lack of women in art galleries, literary canons and political offices. They range from “not enough women are interested” to “not enough women are qualified.” And they hold no more water now than they did when we first heard them.

The truth is that women, when they come to deliberative bodies in full force and are supported in bringing all of themselves to the process, rather than forced to “chameleon” their way into getting along with the existing dynamic, tend to bust through frozen dynamics and represent the interests of the people not involved in conflicts who are primarily just trying to go about the business of living their lives. A recent study cites the fact that in most cases, women make better representatives for their constituencies even in such hidebound institutions as the Congress of the United States (Swers, 2002). And the Harvard Business Review has shown that when women reach a level of “critical mass” in deliberative bodies (that mass is generally reached at around 30–35%) the bodies tend to make decisions more quickly, more efficiently and tend to deadlock less frequently.
We need to find a way to stop the persistent and institutional forgetting that undercuts and undervalues the efforts of women to assert the interests of the living over all other values and to cut through the ceremonies of a Politics that privileges only force.

Not long ago, one of us spoke to a friend who was conducting research on lab rats and the relationship of aggression to stress. What she’d found was that about half of the rats, after being subjected to enormous stress, tended to aggress no matter whether their self interest was served by that stress, or not. The other half tended to hang back. Their demeanor, she said, seemed almost depressive. Her research followed the ones that were aggressing, to understand the aggressive impulse better, on the theory that understanding the aggressive rats would help to offer ideas to better prevent them from aggressing.

We have too long erred in the direction of conceiving of peace as the absence of conflict—of peaceful behavior as the absence of aggression. But lately we are coming to see that peace is in fact a distinctive set of circumstances ill-understood and at least as complex as those that lead to conflict. And among these circumstances, surely the gender dimension, the tendency to not resort to aggression, is the least understood, the least plumbed for wisdom. After all, if we want to understand peace in all its complexity, shouldn’t we also spend some time looking at those who most consistently wage it?

And so it is necessary to return to the women of Liberia, who so courageously laid their own lives on the line (and recent events in Ivory Coast show all too well how dangerous their protests were) in the name of non-violent resistance and peace building. When these women took up the challenge of peace as a “process,” not an event, they gave us an important starting point for a new analytics of the systems that constitute a state of not-war. More than this, we need to do a better job of “connecting the dots” for men and women living in the arms-producing nations. While wars may not be making their way to the door-steps of families in these countries, the exorbitant expenditures on militarism that these nations make is almost always to the detriment of women and children regardless of nationality. Were the dots to be better connected, who only knows the kind of movement women of the Global North could command and how much might change for all women.

References


