

Consortium on  
Gender, Security & Human Rights



## **A Conversation with Women Peacebuilders**

**Leymah Gbowee  
Shobha Gautam**

**Consortium Lecture  
March 8, 2006  
Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University**

## **A Conversation with Women Peacebuilders: Leymah Gbowee and Shobha Gautam**

**Leymah Gbowee:** The Women in Peacebuilding Program (WIPNET) is a network of women peace builders that are in nine of Liberia's fifteen counties. We have about two thousand members. Our network goal is to enhance the capacity of women in holistic peace building – to have women as trainers, women as researchers, women doing documentation, women involved in all levels of the process of peace building. The last two years I was one of the commissioner-designates for Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). I resigned that position in September of 2005 for personal reasons, and also because I felt I could contribute more to the TRC process by giving it a gender perspective than by sitting as a commissioner, where I had to dance to the tune of the government and those who hired me. This year I am working in Accra, Ghana, as a peacebuilding consultant at the West African Network for Peace Building (WANEP), so I do different work with different women's groups.

Three weeks ago I was in Cote D'Ivoire. The Ivory Coast and other countries in West Africa are currently going through war. I am going home back to my home country, Liberia, as a consultant, (strange how after you leave you go back there as a consultant) to see how I can work with the women's movement there to start a grassroots women's movement in peace building. And then in June I will go to Sudan to serve as the coordinator for a conference on youth peace education, to create a dialogue with the Sudanese youth and women.

I will briefly give you some background on how WIPNET started, and what we have been doing. In 2001 a group of ten women from diverse cultural backgrounds came together in a little room in Accra, Ghana to discuss the role of West African women in formal and informal peace building processes. At the end of the meeting, several key issues relating to women, peace and security in the sub-region were affirmed.

- (1) First, we found that a huge gap existed between the participation of men and women in peace building training at all levels in the region.
- (2) Second, we found that conflict analysis and recommendations for transformation failed to address the specific needs of women, who were often neither represented nor included in these discussions on analysis and prevention.
- (3) Third, we found that the unique skills of female peace practitioners like myself were under-utilized at the time. We worked mostly in male-dominated organizations, and our roles were usually relegated to logistics, and similar things. I remember going to the community to work on a security project, and someone asked my boss, "Is that the cook?" As a woman, no one ever thought that we had anything to contribute. For peace building processes to succeed in West Africa, women needed to be better represented.

(4) Fourth, for peace building processes to succeed in West Africa, women needed not only to be represented, but also to be educated in both theoretical and practical peace building skills.

(5) Fifth, all of the aforementioned needs would only be addressed if a women-only space was created for West African women.

Thus, the Women in Peacebuilding Network was launched to create a functional role for women in peace building as well as to enhance their capacity in holistic peace building.

As regards the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 -- which calls for an increased representation of women at all decision making levels in conflict management and resolution, and for meeting the specific needs of women during armed conflict, as well as for women's needs to be addressed in the development of disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, rehabilitation programs: in 2001, it was news to all of us. Even though it had been passed one year and one month earlier, the women sitting in our room had never heard of 1325. Today it is the key tool for our advocacy work in West Africa.

Liberia is a small country in West Africa with a complicated history. It starts back 1826, with the arrival of the freed slaves from the US. But there were indigenous people there before the freed slaves. So from the word "go," Liberia has been in conflict, a deeply divided country with American Liberians and indigenous Liberians. In 1980 we had our first coup that brought in a native from the indigenous tribe as military leader, and later on as a democratically elected leader – Charles Taylor. For 25 years, from 1980 to 2005, he brought conflict to Liberia.

Women's peace building during this period was through protesting, providing hot meals for the internally displaced, and providing clothes for children; women were never really involved in the formal peace building processes. So in 2003, WIPNET launched a Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign. Our focus was on the cessation of hostilities between the warring parties. At that time, we always liked to give this description of the way we felt: we women had been pushed toward the war, and we were either going through the war, or we had to hit back.

Rape was the toy of war. On a daily basis, women were being raped. Young children were being abducted and sent into the army. Children were taken in the night, the next morning they were taught how to fire an AK-47, and then they went to war the following day! Women were the single heads of the family. Personally, I went through all of that.

As you say, “I’ve been there, done that”; there is nothing about war that I do not know. The war started in 1990, when I was fresh from high school at the age of 17, going to school to be a medical doctor, and everything was uprooted. In 1996, I thought of getting married, and someone said, “How can you get during married during war?” After I got married and was pregnant with my third child, I experienced what they call “exodus,” walking for hours from one distance to the other with bullets flying over your head. Those were the experiences of women, at all levels of society. So we had a campaign, and we advocated for three things – immediate unconditional ceasefire, a fruitful dialogue between the government and the rebels, and the deployment of an intervention force. Our president at the time, Charles Taylor, was against *all three*! He was a sovereign government, and no one would dictate to him. As a matter of fact, he said the coming in of international peacekeepers was “terroristic,” and he would not sit and negotiate with “terrorists”, and there would be no ceasefire because the government was duly elected, and he would fight till the last soldier died. So it was really difficult.

After we were in Accra protesting for three months, we barricaded the Peace Hall [*the main conference hall where the warring parties and other stakeholders were meeting*]. After a while the police came and arrested us. We went through all of that, in the sun, in the rain, to the point that all of the little children in the community knew us as “we-want- peace, no-more-war!” We sang this song, we stood in the rain, but do you think the politicians paid any attention to us, a group of common women, who had never been involved in anything? We sat at the US embassy for hours, and sometimes they would just come out and look at us, and smile and say, “OK, we will see about your issues.” But we never gave up because for us peace builders, our livelihood depends on the peace that we are trying to build. After three months, we got a peace agreement signed in Accra, and when we came back we took that document and used our layman language to set benchmarks: December to April - disarmament; April to May -this; May to June - this; July to August - that. We disseminated that information in all of the rural areas, challenging women, saying that, “You have to be on your toes. Everyday you see these things happening in your community, come to town and let us take it up.”

So we were constantly at the UN office. If you follow Liberia, you will know that the December 7th disarmament failed miserably. This failure was based on the UN’s failure to get local knowledge on a lot of important issues. As a matter of fact, in consultation with them, we asked them, “Can you get local knowledge?”, and they said no. Our ambassador, a former US General who had just come from Kosovo, said, “Women, don’t worry! I have some experts in the field of DDR [*Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration*] from Kosovo.” So the first day of DDR, we went to the cantonment site where there were 80 young men from different communities to be disarmed. We were standing there, observing the process, and his little boy came up to the table to one of the “experts.” She said, “Which group did you fight with?” He said, “I fought with LURD.” [*Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy*]. And she said, “In which area did you fight?” and he said, “Grand Gedeh.” Now, Grand Gedeh is a county in *eastern* Liberia, and LURD is a group that was in *northern* Liberia – but she processed this little boy and passed him for DDR. When he got to the end of the line, I walked up to her to talk about him. I asked, “Where did he fight?”

and she said, “Grand Gedeh.” “Which group?” “LURD,” she said. “*Expert!?* You don’t know *a thing* about local context! How many young people have you processed?” And when we asked this little boy, he said “I have never fought. My brother gave me his pistol to come and disarm and to collect the money.” It is not a coincidence that of the 30,000 estimated combatants to be disarmed, the UN today has a record of disarming only 19,000 combatants in Liberia.

As we approached the DDR process, we decided we would engage with the UN, and because we were such a pest, they made us a partner with them. So we have been partnering with the UN from 2003 up until today. As we approached the electoral process, we did a Needs Assessment. In the assessment, we said, “women, especially those selling in market areas, had been relatively hard-hit by war. What will interest them in an electoral process?” We went to the National Democratic Institute, we went to our International Republican Institute, we went to UNDP (UN Development Program) and told them of the situation. And they just said, “OK, we have people who have been accredited to do civic and voter education.” Then at the last minute, the UNDP said, “We don’t think we have the ability to carry on such work.” We began to engage with them and at the end of the day they allowed our organization to work in Eastern Liberia. Five days before the end of voter registration, the same UN called us and told us, “We realize that the women in market areas are not registering to vote” And I’m thinking, “Gee, how is this not strange to me? It’s almost as if I’m hearing myself again!”

To register women voters, our organization sent 200 women into 10 communities. In five days, from carrying babies on our backs to singing traditional songs and dancing, to selling in the market, to doing household chores, we registered 7477 women! That is the reason why, coupled with other people’s work, that we got 51% of women registered to vote, and women constituted at least half of the country’s registered voters. So the result that we got in the election [*the election of Africa’s first woman president - Ellen Johson Sirleaf*] should not be strange to anyone, because women were really in the forefront of doing a lot of things.

Five years after UNSC Resolution 1325 and four years after we formed WIPNET, where are we? 1325 still remains mostly ineffective. For advocacy, though, it is evident in our accomplishments in *local* peace building processes. I keep highlighting the word *local* peace building processes because we have not got to a point where they want to use all of the successes to influence policy outside of the local sphere. That is the gap in our work. So now we have developed a specialized training manual to address the field of women in peace situations, in conflict situations, and in post-conflict situations. We have trained 264 women to use the manual in their trainings; we’ve gone from 10 to 624 women over four years. We have functional networks in ten of West Africa’s 16 countries. In Liberia, we are in nine of the 15 counties and 17 towns and villages. We have thousands of women activists across the region – Togo, Cote d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Liberia. These women are ready to make a difference on issues that are important to them. We have a sub-group of grassroots women who aware and are constantly reminding their community members that they are responsible for the peace they have achieved thus far. We have also developed a regional gender policy framework that seeks to mainstream women’s issues. The present security in West Africa creates policy space for dialogue between ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and the Regional Ministers of Gender. You realize that most of our Ministers of

Women's Affairs in West Africa are not aware of Resolution 1325, nor do they know the international protocols on women, peace and security. So we have major challenges in our work.

One challenge that I have highlighted already is how to overcome the gap between policy and the practical work. Another challenge we have is that we need theorization of our experience. We do not have a lot of women in West Africa who have studied formal peace building processes. They can take you into the field and teach you a lot of things, but ask them to come and sit and write down some of the theories they apply and they can't. Finally, a lot of countries in West Africa do not have policy documents on women, peace and security. So in a few weeks, right after I leave here, I will go to Liberia to develop a national agenda on women, peace and security.

In conclusion, women, peace and security is not just an issue for advocacy. It is a way of life for many of us. I can leave my four children and be on a road for months because peace and security, for me, is about their future.

Five years from now, it is my hope that when I come to Boston, or maybe go to Washington, that some of you will be policy makers, and I will not be talking about the challenges in implementing 1325 and the international protocols on women, peace and security. Rather, I will be celebrating the successes of women doing peace, women waging peace, and women, peace and security being an agenda item for national governments.

Thank you.

**Shobha Gautam:** I am Shobha Gautam. I work in Kathmandu as a human rights activist and journalist. I am the president of the Institute of Human Rights Communication Nepal (IHRCN), and the coordinator for Shantimalika (Women's Peace Network). I am an executive member of the Citizen Peace Commission, which is made up of than 300 organizations.

I would like to start by briefly introducing Nepal. Nepal is a landlocked country in South Asia situated between the two larger countries, India and China. In the past, the identity of Nepal was that of a small, peaceful country, with Mt. Everest and the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. But now, the global identity is that of a country suffering from its political conflict. Fundamental rights, democratic rights, the right to freedom and expression, and right to free movement are thwarted by King Gyanendra.

Since February 1, 2005, this has been the scenario. After King Gyanendra took power, all Scandinavian countries suspended their financial support to Nepal. NGOs like mine are suffering, but we are being helped by Canadian organizations. The United Nations is playing by the rules with the King and the political parties. The United States is frustrated by the presence of Maoists – the US is always afraid of the Communists. Now, the seven political parties and the Maoists are allying with the UN to restore the democracy and human rights. The US ambassador says this is an unnatural alliance, and the King and the seven political parties should be the ones making the alliance to restore the democracy, not the Maoists. The US is forcing this idea. India wants to continue benefiting from Nepal's internal fighting,

which gives India the ability to play with the King's rule – India is playing with all of the people of Nepal. Pakistan and China are somewhat supportive of the King and thus, he is getting power from the U.S., and then from India, China and Pakistan. That is why the King is ruling now.

I shall now give you an idea of the sequence of events leading to the King's rule. In 1990, the "Jan Andolan" (People's) Movement forced the monarchy to create a multi-party democracy system. In 1991, one new constitution was written, but it did not include equal rights for women and indigenous groups. The democratic government did not satisfy the social and political needs of the Nepalese people, and fell into corruption. In 1996, the para-military Maoist movement began, demanding and putting these political and social points forward. This started a civil war. Over 11 years, more than 14,000 people were killed. More than 500,000 people are internally displaced. Thousands of young people migrated out of fear and threats. Hundreds of women have been raped, and thousands of women were forced into prostitution for their livelihood. More than 500 children have been killed, and thousands of children have been traumatized and face psychological problems. In February 2005, King Gyanendra sacked the democratic government, took over the executive power of the country and curtailed the fundamental rights of the people. The Nepalese people lost their right to the freedom of expression and freedom of movement. Nepalese women also lost many of their rights.

Since the establishment of IHRCN (Institute of Human Rights Communication Nepal), one of our aims has been to protect the rights of women and children during the conflict. We started conflict prevention, especially involving women in the peace process using the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Since then, IHRCN has been involved in the mediation and negotiation process, involving women at the grass roots level, providing human rights training to the security forces and the Maoists on protecting the rights of women and children during the conflict.

In 2003, Shantimalika, a national women's peace coalition, was created to help implement UNSC Resolution 1325 at all levels of the peace process, from the grassroots to the international level. In August 2005, Shantimalika conducted the first international women's peace conference. The group invited women from all over the country and created a peace dialogue, including outreach to the conflicting parties. At Shantimalika, we have a plan to make a nation-wide movement for peace, from the grassroots to the national level. We want to be a part of Nepal's conflict resolution and post-conflict situation. We hope to involve women in peace, politics and parliament, so that our leaders and peacemakers will be aware of the Nepalese women's situation.

IHRCN supports the women's peace movement and the inclusion of women from grassroots to international levels in all kind of processes relating to Resolution 1325. We can use Resolution 1325 as a tool for many of the aspects of conflict that pertain to women. We worked on translating Resolution 1325 in simple, familiar language, so that it could be implemented in all levels, paying special attention to the issues it addresses and the national programs and provisions we have in place to address these issues. We have made Nepali case studies, too, which are in the final stages, but have not yet been published.

NGO staff people are being threatened by the Maoists and the security forces when they go to the villages. For someone like me, it is not difficult to go to the village, because I have provided training to the security forces and Maoists, and I can deal with them. Most people are afraid of them, though, because they are threatened and warned not to enter the villages. In 2002, during the state of emergency, I remember an incident where a bus stopped in front of the security barracks, and one of the security forces went inside the bus and started threatening the people. One woman started crying, and told him “You have no right to touch my body, you can look me over, but you have no right to check my body.” The man from the security force replied, “I have the right to detain you here for two hours.” And then he took her out into the barracks. For two hours, the bus was there, and no passenger spoke out. She came back after two hours; she was crying, did not say anything, and just sat down, and the bus drove away. I felt as though *I* was raped by the security forces; I was naked in front of them. When I discussed that, I became fed up. I came to Kathmandu and published the article, and after seven days, I got threatened by the security forces. They demanded, “How has this news been published in the newspaper?” and “Please don’t give news like this, it will damage the image of the security forces.” Many people pleaded with me, and they asked me to be careful because I could be arrested by the security forces and they could make me disappear. But nothing happened because I had not done any wrong, because it was a real event.

Later, I went to the security forces and they told me they were disappointed with me. I asked them why they gave that statement against the article, and they blamed me for publishing the article without asking the security forces anything. I asked them how they were in any way accessible? I said, “I love this country, and I love the people, and they deserve to know the real situation. You are the security forces, you have an obligation to protect women, not to destroy their lives. So by publishing that article, I am not blaming the whole security force, I am blaming the person who has violated that woman’s rights. Instead of punishing him, you tell me that I published a false article?” And then they said, “Please Shobhaji, leave us, next time, please do bring an application and we will punish such offenders.” Later, I was on good terms with them, and I asked them many questions about the security forces and explained things to them, and they began to believe what I was saying. We need to have the courage to do that. Most women cannot do that because they are afraid of being arrested, and cannot go to the villages. Many NGO staff in Nepal have no protection and have faced threats while working in the current conflict.

The organization I am with is implementing peace training for women all over South Asia, not only in Nepal. We are holding a South Asian peace forum among grassroots women from all over South Asia and on the international level. If we cannot make links internationally, I fear we might not be successful. We are working towards the involvement of civil society and women in peace building commissions, and the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 in all of the member states. I hope that someday you all will be the diplomats who link countries together to create an international community. You can share your knowledge of a country’s situation with the UN and make a difference to that country, save people’s lives, and protect the lives of women.

## **Questions and Discussion**

**Q:** Do you think Liberia's recent election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as president is going to have an actual positive effect in terms of women's participation in peace building? What do you see as the biggest challenges to peace building, now that the conflict is over?

**LG:** In terms of women's participation, the one thing I realized from all of the celebration of Ellen's election is that women have seen this as a big, big breakthrough. We had a huge delegation of women from Africa for the inauguration, and we had a women's forum where we all agreed that Ellen's success will determine the level at which African women will participate in government in the future. While we were happy about her election, we decided that was up to us to help make her presidency work. From the level of civil society in Liberia, there is a constant engagement with the government to ensure that that 30 percent representation of women is met. This representation is difficult to achieve because we don't have enough women with political backgrounds. I understand that Ellen had a meeting with few people the other day and they were saying, "We're not getting there because we don't have the quality." But for the first time in the history of our country, we have several women Cabinet Ministers. Our Justice Minister is a woman, our Finance Minister is a woman. So they will lead the way for us. And hopefully it is going to trickle down, not just in Liberia, but throughout Africa.

In terms of women's participation at the level of the village – we realize that one of the key challenges in the post-conflict era is the way people -- especially men,-- suffer from amnesia about the role that women played during conflict and in the transitional period. So what we are trying to do is see how we can continue treating these women, and getting them involved at all levels. One of the ideas was the peace-huts; we built 17 peace huts in nine of those fifteen counties. We have set up these committees that will work with local community decision makers on issues involving women, peace and security. Now women can play the same role in their work with combatants as they did during the conflict. At one point in time, the women went to the combatants and told them, "You have to come back to the communities to contribute your quota. But you cannot come back with hair like that – rastafari hanging like that. You look like guerrillas." So, one day I was sitting in my office and a group of women came in, and I asked them, "What have you been up to?" and they said, "We've been cutting hair." And I said, "Cutting hair?" And they said, "Yes, we have these hundreds of fighters and we are shaving their beards and cutting their hair and telling them they have to go back to town." And the men respected these women because the women had a link to the combatants. We do not want to lose that link, because it is easy for people to forget. So the first task we want to give these peace committees is to work with ex-combatants to start speaking the language of reconciliation. If community members see that these ex-combatants are still interested in everything, they will continue to involve them in the decision making process.

Fifteen thousand peacekeepers arrived in 2003, and it was a welcome relief for us. We were so desperate that anyone with guns, other than our own young men, was welcome. But after six years – I don't want to say it's been all bad – but we have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in West Africa. We now actually have young girls walking the street at night, offering sex. For an African society, that is strange. And then we also have imported sex;

South East Asian women and women from other parts of Africa that are brought in to service the peacekeepers. But it is better than the days of war in terms of human rights abuses and the abuses of women. One of the best things that happened to the nation was the Gender Office in the peacekeeping mission -- the women's movements have a link to it and we can go there to complain about issues.

If you ask me, the next time you bring in 15,000 peacekeepers, they should all be African, especially from within our West African context. We would be okay with that, because they understand our culture. Our West African peacekeepers were more open to our peace building initiatives than peacekeepers from Asia and other parts of the world, because in their context, peace is still a very militarized thing. But for West African peacekeepers, we have cultural practices. When men go to war, the women have to touch them to ensure victory – those practices help us. So some will say that they have plans to send NATO troops into Sudan, or there is some lobbying going on for NATO troops to go to Sudan, and I'm think, "Oh My God. I wish NATO would take that money and invest it in African peacekeepers to go into Sudan because we understand each other."

**Q:** Just to pick up on that, could you say a little more about the role of men and whether the inclusion of women in peace building has affected gender relationships in the society more generally? Secondly, could you speak a bit about women as combatants, and whether that creates some sort of challenge?

**LG:** Men. Prior to the conflict, they were the ones in charge. During the conflict, they were the ones under the bed!

Men were targeted by combatants on both ends. Those who refused to join either fighting force had to stay indoors. So at the community level, you find that we women did most of the work, and that the men hid all through the process. In 2003, when all hell broke loose, and Taylor was really suppressing, all the men could say every morning when we sat in our protest was, "Mothers, thank you for building peace. Don't give up, our future depends on you." That's the kind of role they played. When the transitional process came, they started coming out of their shells, and by the time we had elections they were saying, "What is it that you people want?" We said we wanted to get 30% for women in the electoral reform law. "Thirty per cent? We'll give you 15%! What 1325? We don't know any 1325, we don't know of this, we don't know of that." That is the kind of relationship we have with men.

Since Ellen won the elections, it has been even more difficult. I walked down the street the day after they announced Ellen's victory and I was just chatting with my friend and this guy came up to me and said, "If your father died right now, could you pick the body up?" And I said, "What?" He repeated, "Can you pick the body up? I'm asking you! You all go around with this silly smile on your face because a woman has won. But you all... you filthy pain of the men in this country!" And I thought, "Oh my God..." I called the Minister of Gender and said, "Sister, I think we have trouble." The next thing you know, you are going to hear, "Oh, now that they have the president there, we don't have to support them anymore! We can sleep

with them, three at a time, four at time...and just let them loose, because power is in their favor". So we anticipate that kind of thing. In some corners, there is really serious dissatisfaction. And that is why we are fighting to ensure that Ellen's presidency works.

Your other question was on female combatants. In terms of all the peace building initiatives we have done, that is our biggest failure. I think even we women have helped to increase the stigma of female combatants. Our peace building initiatives never really targeted them. When we went into communities, we did far more work with male combatants than with female combatants. Out of all of the nine counties and seventeen towns and villages we work in, there were only two women combatants that we actually had contact with, and it was because they were there with the men and we could not overlook them. In one town, the general of the entire town was a woman, so we had to deal with her. In another town, the girls were saying to the men, "We will all remain here and we will be disarmed together." That is how they interacted with them. Most of the female combatants did not go through the process of DDR, because of they feared they would be stigmatized. They disappeared into thin air by the time the process started. One woman actually shaved off her eye brows and all of her hair and went to the neighboring country, Guinea. There was a rumor that if you went to be disarmed, they would take your picture and there would never be a chance of you getting married and having a family, and no opportunities to go to school. Most of these girls wanted a clean record, away from that life. They turned in their weapons and went away.

**SG:** It is very difficult, too, in Nepal. Most of the men in the villages are either forced to join the Maoists, or to flee to other places outside of the country. Only children under age 16 and the older women and men remain in the villages, working there. With the young men gone, those remaining must do tasks like plowing the fields and thatching roofs, which used to be shared by everybody.

The Nepalese security forces often rape women, and to take revenge, many of these women join the Maoists; they become combatants fighting against the security forces. In the militia there are so many levels; 40% of those with the Maoist group are women, the squad level has around 30% women, and in higher the level there is only 15% women. So even though women's participation is 40 % overall, the decision making level is far less female. They have given very few positions to women in the policymaking level in their party. When we meet the party leaders, we always complain to them: you are using women as fighters, and not giving them positions as decision makers.

**LG:** To implement any policy it is constantly important that you have some direction. In bridging the gap between conflict and post-conflict, I think we need to have a two-pronged approach: the first is to ensure that all women are trained in the skills and in the theoretical aspects of peace building. The second is that those of us who understand a bit about the issues, and are able to apply some of the theoretical practices, need to now stop globe-traveling and sit down and really focus on what those policy issues are that we want to get worked out.

Two years ago, the Economic Committee of West African States (ECOWAS) set up a gender

unit. The gender unit is just starting *this* year and still does not have a budget. ECOWAS has received a lot of funding to develop an early warning system for conflicts in West Africa. They are working on the technical aspects of setting up “hubs”; the Liberian hub would be linked to the Ghanaian hub, and allow them both gather information on their shared network. But for a regional organization that has a gender unit, there is no gender dimension to this Early Warning Conflict Prevention Center! In our last discussion with ECOWAS, our liaison officer from civil society who is there said, “You know, I have to be very careful when I bring up these issues because I don’t want them to think I’m too woman-friendly and it will offend the men!” So if we could really sit and down and start engaging in these kinds of issues, and be one step ahead of them, as soon as we hear that they are developing an early warning system – if we had that opportunity again – we could start developing policy thinkers and start lobbying at the levels of our government and at the levels of ECOWAS for the inclusion of women’s issues.

The UN is now developing a Peacebuilding Commission, but they are still in discussion about infusing a gender dimension into it. It is really shocking, sickening and difficult that this organization that passed 1325 is having so much difficulty incorporating women’s issues. But on the local and national levels, we really need those who have some idea to sit down and focus on where we want to go in terms of development of policies. I think that this would help to bridge the gap the different levels of policy, and that is the reason why we have taken our first step in developing our national agenda on women, peace and security. Hopefully we can use it as something that we can take across West Africa, go to Sierra Leone and say, “Develop something like this.” Our government formally has four pillars of peace building, but there is no gender dimension at all. The UN has seven pillars, and there is no “gender” word in there. So we are hoping that once we develop our agenda, we can also go to the government and say “Can you use the women, peace and security session as a sub-foundation or foundation for one of these pillars for peace building?” In discussion with our Minister of Gender and Development, she said, “That is more than welcome, because we are limited in terms of women, peace and security.”

**Q:** Could you tell a bit more about what the function of women is – what kind of relationships women could create with the government to change the leadership’s position?

**SG:** In Nepal’s democratic period, there was one minister, the Water Resource Minister, who came crying, saying that she could not continue working in the government because of the channel of corruption in the bureaucracy there. She found it too difficult to try to fight against such a system, so she left her position. But leaving that position was not the solution of good governance. What happened after that? The situation did not change, and the king took over the position. The king was trying to blame the political parties for the problems of the government, and then take them over. We were also not aware of this and did not point out to the politicians their mistakes, which encouraged the king to take over the rule from the political parties. There was ample evidence of corruption in multiple ministries, but this one women minister resigned while the others were following the system.

**Carol Cohn:** You both work with *women*, building capacity, trying to get women from local peace processes into the formal, national peace making and reconstruction processes, and you

both deal with Ministers of *Gender*, and international communities which talk about *gender* and security. In your own experience, does the word “gender” get you anything you want, or would you rather say “women”? Is “gender” a useful word for you, or more just a word you need to adopt and use in certain contexts? Do you think the word “gender” helps or hurts your causes?

**SG:** In Nepal, we are working toward “gender.” “Gender” is a sophisticated word and is familiar everywhere, but gendered policies are not implemented in Nepal, even though the government has established a gender unit in every ministry. They are not aware themselves of what “gender” is, and even though the media has used the term “gender,” they are not aware of what “gender” is. They write about *women’s issues* and then call it “gender.” “Gender” and “women” are different. “Gender” gives the analysis of power between men and women, but people always use “gender” to simply mean “women.” “Gender” has overlooked women’s issues and been used as a fashionable word.

**LG:** When people first developed that word “gender,” it was, in my opinion, in order to hide the feminist work. Because a lot of people were unfriendly to feminists, it was easier to say “I’m a gender activist.” In essence, you are hiding that you are a women’s activist. What I have come to understand is that in a lot of the lobbying of our transitional government, as soon as we hear the word “gender,” we know that you are hiding the issue of *women*. The first thing they tell you is, “so we have men there, there is a gender dimension to it.” I have also come to realize that if we are going to succeed, we need to stop hiding. Call a spade a spade. You are advocating for a space *for women*, you are advocating for women’s issues to be brought to the table. Because actually if you look at it in terms of the decision makers in the world, it is *women’s issues*, not *gender issues*, that have been overlooked. Women are the ones who are marginalized. Women are the ones who are affected. So for me, in my work, I don’t hide the fact that I am woman- friendly. In everything that I say and do, I am in favor of women, because there *is* this gap. Until we come close to closing that gap – that men and women are in different worlds – we cannot use “gender” to hide what we are actually thinking.

My 13-year-old son says, “In this house a man never wins.” When he was younger he did not understand that his mother was a feminist, or women’s activist. I said, “Josh, can you go and swim?” “No that’s a girl’s sport,” he answered. I said, “*Now*, you will swim!” -- just because he said that! At eight one morning he said, “This weekend I need to sleep later. Why shouldn’t I sleep longer when you have the girls to help?” “*Now*,” I said, you wake up at 6 AM!” That is why he says, “A man can never win in this house.” I tell him that *you* have it easy in life and if you are not sensitive to the fact that there are women’s issues, I have failed in my profession, and all of the advocacy and activism that I have done out there is for nothing. Once, he came home from school and said, “We talked about professions, and I said my mother is a peace builder, and my teacher said, ‘She isn’t a housewife?’ and I said ,’No.’” I told him, “I am going to write your teacher a letter, a feminist letter!”

Our work is women’s issues. In Africa they don’t want to hear “gender.” Policy makers are sympathetic to the word “woman,” because they remember how well their mothers took care of them. “Gender” will just tick them off. That is my personal opinion. I do not use “gender”; first, I use “women.”

**Q:** In most developing countries, there is a certain elite class of women who are taken to represent all the women in the country – even when we talk about progressive policy. The movement is still trapped by the elitist cycle, where sometimes women’s groups stop being involved, because the women in the political scene are either wives, or nieces, or daughters of highly political people. Are there any policies or enlightening thoughts that you have in trying to address these issues?

**LG:** Well, this afternoon someone asked me “How long have you been in this field?”, and I said, “Five years.” And she said, “From what I have read about you, it seems like you’ve been in this movement for twenty years.” It has actually been only five years since I got into the women’s movement in Liberia. And five years ago it was exactly as you described. Women who had not worked to gain any recognition got invited to all of the state functions. As a matter of fact, President Taylor had a beautiful way of calling it – “eminent women.” They got invited to all of the state functions and then he said, “You see, the women are here. They are represented.” But these were his aunts and cousins, who were married to past leaders, and they were “eminent women” or women’s leaders because they were born in that kind of setting. And when someone like me from Central Liberia, a little village, got in that movement, there was a lot of resistance to my presence. Our Minister of Gender is also from a little village in Northern Liberia. So a group of us “local” girls had come in and said, “We are here, we are activists, we want to join this movement!” The first thing these elite women thought was that we wanted to take their space. So for the first two years, it was a battle. We had to keep reminding ourselves that we did not want to do what these women had done. We need them to get to where we want to go. But when we get there we will have a completely different message from what they have been preaching thus far. So after five years, we have come to that clear understanding that you are *there*, we are *here*.

We looked behind us recently and saw that we did not have any younger women to continue our work after us. I have been an activist for nine years plus now. It is time for me to sit down and do some writing. But I still need someone who can be fiery enough to stand in front of the leader and say “You must disarm your dogs!” So we are trying to see how we can bring those young women on board.

What I also know after three years of grassroots mobilization is that there is a complete tilt in the status quo. Of all of the women who ran for positions in the Parliament in Liberia, it was the elitist women who had the most success. There are only two local women, the senior and junior senators from Montserrado, who do not come from a high social background. As a matter of fact, the senior senator lived in a little room just like this. It was just the other day that she moved out. She had never traveled prior to her becoming senator. Local women went out there and said “We are voting for our own.” And that is why Ellen, as much as she is from the elite class, recognizes the fact that she is where she is today because a group of women decided to put her there. So her first project is to address the issues of the local market women. There has definitely been a shift, and that shift can only come when you empower women at the grassroots level. You mobilize them and tell them that it is *you* that is making it happen.

**SG:** I would like to speak to this from a South Asian perspective. In 1910 Clara Jet Kin started the women's in the US – but the gender movement didn't start until the 1990s. In between 1910 to 1990 there were many new feminist movements in South Asia. When feminism became negatively associated with radical women, feminists started to use the “gender” word to hide their radical images from the society. I agree with Leymah, that elite women continue to be the women in power. There are women leaders in South Asia, who were and are in the position of prime ministers and presidents, and they always come from the elite and ruling class in their countries. In any other kind of women's movements – in Nepal, in Pakistan, in India or any other place – the women who are getting a chance to study in higher level and in the boarding schools are always from the elite classes. They are making most of the decisions in most of the areas that have to do with women's rights. And grassroots women are always left behind. For example, I, myself, am from a grassroots, remote area. So when I came to Kathmandu and got a chance to get involved in women rights sector, it was very difficult for me to come over with them. I have faced so many language and knowledge barriers because of the lack of educational and training facilities in rural areas. Now I am here. I am not an elite woman. But those grassroots women who are working in the villages, they never have a chance. That is the point. We need to give grassroots women the chance to involve and develop the network between the grassroots, regional and international levels. But it is not being done. I tried many times, and I asked UNIFEM to conduct one visible program inviting grassroots women working on peace. These women have a lot of experience in the South Asian region, and it would make good networking. But what happened? UNIFEM continued to work more with elite women. That is the problem. We have to fight with the elite groups and raise the issue of grassroots women. That is our duty.

**LG:** Just to come back to what Shobha said, my colleague always said, “Let your work speak for itself.” I remember that in 2003 the Liberian government was looking for delegates to go to a peace conference. Can you imagine a peace conference that is trying to remove Charles Taylor from power, and Taylor is the one recommending which women should go? Do you think we were on that list? They did not know us. The archbishop of our Catholic church was one of our biggest supporters. He is big human rights defender. He went to the UN and told them, “I think these local women should be at that table.” The UN director looked in his eyes and said, “I don't know these people, we don't know their level of credibility.” The archbishop said, “Do you think I would give you a group of people who protect the interest of rebels and not the people?” And he answered, “No.” We did not know about that conversation until after the peace talks, when this UN ambassador came to me and said, “I am here to apologize.” And I said, “Why ambassador?” “Because you all should have been at the table -- but we did not know you, we didn't know your work.” Just from the three months of press coverage of our work during the peace talks, he had learned that we were actually working for the people. Because we sat and protested *everyday*, and we developed a document of how we felt the peace talks and agreements should go -- so it was not as if we were illiterate women sitting down there! At the end of the day we showed them that we knew exactly how we wanted to see a transitional Liberia -- something they never took into consideration, because the women delegates who *were* at the table were wining and dining with the rest of the people and they did not want to disrupt the status quo. So, yes, it is always sanctioned at that level. The marginalization of women that you talk about starts from up there, and is reinforced by the government, and comes down to the

local level. Women start seeing themselves as not being able to do anything. But that grassroots level mobilization – once it starts, it is almost a revolution! No one can quench the fire.

**SG:** Presently some women *are* coming in and getting positions, which is very good. But the thing is that all seven political parties have boycotted elections. Small parties partook in the election, and less than 20% of the population voted – and those votes were cast by security forces. So women some women were elected, which is very good, but it is very difficult to say that they came in the position using their democratic rights. It is unclear how long these women will be able to maintain their positions, as a result.

**Q:** What would you suggest as ways for other women’s movements to find success? What training does your own movement need to help it to look forward and continue finding success?

**LG:** Well the first thing you have to do is to identify your issues. Why are you mobilizing? Are you mobilizing around, say, the war in Iraq, and how to stop your brothers from being sent off to Iraq? (Of course, these are just hypothetical questions that I am asking; I don’t want to get my visa removed!) Once you have an issue and that issue catches on and touches everyone, you now try to sell it to different groups of people. In our work, the media really helped. We engaged the media on a daily basis for almost one year. There was not one day when you opened a newspaper and did not see what the women were doing. But the media attention came because we had such a focus on what we were doing. The international community began to buy into what we were doing, because they saw as an issue of concern. When all the big people were invited to Liberia in 2003 – there was an international contact group for Liberia headed by Sweden, the US, and different groups – they went to this meeting and they had Liberian women there. But they were women that Charles Taylor had sent. We stood across the road, it was pouring cats and dogs, but we had our position paper hidden in our clothes. And we had two really saucy young women and as soon as the Ambassador from Sweden came out, one of them said to me, “Boss, I am going across the street.” And I said, “What about the soldiers!?” She said, “I am going!” So I asked, “What are you going to do?” and she said, “I will take this, put it in that guy’s hand and say ‘Read this!’” She ran clean across the street, and when this guy was getting in his car she tapped him on his shoulder. The security guards were coming and he said, “Wait, what?” She said, “Look across the street. See this whole group of women? *This* is what we want.” He took that document and sent it to every other member on his contact list. Even though they did not do what they should have -- which would have been having us at the table -- at the end of the day, they knew that we were serious.

It wasn’t any one thing that got us recognition, but a combination of persistence, perseverance and sticking to the same issue was critical. You cannot take ten issues, especially if you have a small movement. It does not work to say, “I’m tackling the war in Iraq,” “I’m tackling the mango trade,” “I’m tackling abortion,” “I am tackling this and that.” Try something that everyone in society is really concerned about, and once your group is established, you can slip in another agenda item. Because when we started we did not anticipate moving into the political process. But when people gained confidence in the work that we did, we slipped in

DDR. After DDR, we slipped in voter registration, after that we slipped in the political participation of women. What are we slipping in now? The policy document. Next thing, we will say to the President, “can you appoint one of us as Commissioner for Peace and Security for Women in Liberia?” So, at the end of the day, when that credibility is there, there is no way that anyone can ignore you. Right now we can go to the UN and say, “This is what is happening and we need redress on this.” And because we have been successful in advocating for smaller things, and we have been able to build such a big network of activists and advocates, it slips in.

**SG:** Rebel groups, governments, and the international community always say they are trying to protect the political rights of the people, but they continue to allow the violation of the rights of the women. That is the real issue all over the country and all over the world. Not only in Nepal, not only in Liberia, not only in Pakistan -- this is the situation everywhere. These governments have to recognize the women who are facing real problems and what kind of problems they are facing. Then international groups can intervene and support them. We can create a chain from international to grassroots level, or vice versa, to protect women’s rights, women’s human rights and political or civil rights.

**CC:** I want to pull together a few different pieces of our discussion. Leymah, you have talked about the importance of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf succeeding in Liberia, the impact that that success will have on women throughout West Africa, and therefore, the importance of the women’s movement figuring out ways to help her succeed. We were talking earlier about the problem that women very often only get into office by playing the political game. And even if they came into office with the support of women, very often they forget about women once they are there.. So, how do you think we can ensure that, on one hand, women’s interests can continue to be on women leaders’ agenda; and on the other hand, that these women succeed in what they are doing? Too many times, since “success” is defined by the (men’s) system they are moving into, “success” means ignoring women’s interests.

**LG:** That question was the theme of the last round of our elections – the second round where Ellen had to go against George Weah. For every group that came to lobby women at the community level to vote for Ellen, the question was asked – how sure are we that women will continue to be an issue for her after she is elected? One of the women answered, “I can not guarantee that to you, but I *can* guarantee that we will demonstrate like hell if she forgets us.”

I believe that the women’s movement cannot afford at this point to start sending out a divided signal. So, we should have a constructive engagement. What I realized in my work with civil society was that they would only label your work as effective or credible if you were in the newspaper or on the radio condemning the government. Then they would say “This civil society organization is really strong, it is really working.” In Africa, this is what happens. During the transitional period, one of the main ways we engaged the government was by booking appointments and bringing them a list of things they had forgotten to do and saying, “This is where we are; how can we address this?” In Ellen’s case, it will also be good for us to continue remind her that we brought her here, and these are the issues that we want to talk about and to tackle. I see that as the lead way.

How do we get the women's movement to not simply become agitated when it feels that the issues are not being dealt with? I believe that we need to focus and organize to the point where we have key documents, and can take them to the Minister of Gender, meet with her personally and say, these things are happening. We also know that there are some regional women's groups that she listens to, so we can take our ideas to them as well and say, this is happening. So, at the end of the day, we don't get the men laughing at us. That is one of the methods we are employing, beyond the demonstrations and placards and all of those things. Otherwise, our government will be a signal to the rest of the world, "You cannot elect another woman; see how she is treating the women out there." As much as possible we need to protect our interests, and we need to work from inside-out, and not from outside-in.

**SG:** That is true. Women are always being used and are not getting any positions when an opportunity arises. This is happening all over. We did research for three months on women leaders in major political parties. Our results showed that women are not getting positions because of social and economic discrimination. So now we are planning to involve women from the grassroots level. We have made a common agreement with all major political parties to have women get positions at all levels. We have had a public signature campaign, and with that agreement we are planning to go to the grassroots level and involve women in politics. We will give them training, socialize them in the society, give them strong positions in the villages, and include them in politics at every level. Human rights awareness is the best type of awareness to teach women; education is compulsory. There is no other option. We need to teach human rights awareness in addition to basic education, because I have seen that educated women are not always aware. Awareness and education are different. We need to increase awareness among women at the grassroots level. Then we can make a movement, together with the support of the men, to make everyone aware of the discrimination that women face. We really have to play a very strong role from the grassroots level.

Coming back to your earlier question, gender analysis need to be done, but it should not be implemented only on the name of "women". It should be implemented on a gender basis. Gender can show the position of women in the society and show inequalities in social rights and economic status. I have seen many women from developed countries that are exercising sexual rights, but do not have equal rights in politics and development. Having sexual rights does not mean that women have equal rights in all areas. All women should come forward together to demand rights in addition to sexual rights. Because we are not sexual objects – we are equal to men in every sector.

### Biography

**Leymah Gbowee** (Liberia) is the Coordinator for Women in Peacebuilding Network/West African Women for Peacebuilding WIPNET/WANEP) and has served as the Commissioner-designate for the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Leymah has developed and facilitated workshops on Trauma Counseling, Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding and demonstrates a lifelong commitment to social justice and sustainable development for community transformation. She recently served as a presenter for UNIFEM's "Women and the DDDR (disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation) Process" at the United Nations. Leymah also served as a resource person for the Liberian Women and DDDR Centre for Conflict Resolution in Cape Town, South Africa.

**Shobha Gautam** (Nepal) is a journalist and women's rights activist who has written extensively on the situation of women in conflict and has been advocating for the rights of women for the past twenty-two years. She is President of the Institute of Human Rights Communication in Nepal (IHRICON), Vice President of the Beyond Beijing Committee, Coordinator of Shantimalika (Women's Networking for Peace) and Executive Member of Nepal's Citizen Peace Commission. Shobha has worked with the South Asia Women's Institute for Peace Studies as well as with International Alert as a National Consultant on "UN Security Council Resolution 1325: Women, Peace and Security in Nepal." In 2005, Shobha received the "Krishna Mohan- Nudup Peace Award" for playing a leading role in raising awareness of the role of women in carrying out good governance and peace work in Nepal. She also received an Honorary Award from the Om Jaya Shree Krishna Driving Institute, Nepal and Peace Foundation, for raising awareness of women rights issues as a freelance journalist.