

## Ordinary Women End Extraordinary Violence

The west African nation of Liberia was founded by freed American slaves. The country's coat of arms declares, "The love of liberty brought me here."

However, in the last years of the 20th century and the early years of this one, Liberia was anything but a land of liberty. Drug-fueled militias maimed and killed civilians. Government and rebel forces alike raped with impunity. Hundreds of thousands fled. Others were trapped by the unending violence, unable to flee. As one Liberian woman later remembered, "My children had been hungry and afraid for their entire lives."

In spring 2003, a group of women decided to try to end the conflict once and for all. Dressed all in white, hundreds of them sat by the roadside, on the route taken daily by President Charles Taylor, rebel leader-turned-president. The president's motorcade swept past, slowing down only briefly. But the women returned, day after day. In pouring rain and blazing sunshine alike, they danced and prayed. In the words of Comfort Lamptey, author of a book on the Liberian peace movement of those years, the women were "fighting for the right to be seen, heard, and counted."

Taylor mocked the women for "embarrassing themselves." Still, though, the protests gained momentum. Religious leaders—imams and bishops alike—spoke out in support of the women's demands. Radio stations began reporting sympathetically on the roadside protests. Leymah Gbowee, one of the protest leaders, declared in front of the cameras, "We are taking this stand because we believe tomorrow our children will ask us: 'Mama, what was your role during the crisis?'"

Pressed on all sides, Taylor agreed to talk. He met with the women's leaders in the presidential palace. Peace talks with the warring factions began in Ghana a few weeks later.

It soon became clear, however, that the talks were going nowhere. Even as the warlords basked in the comfort of their luxury hotel, they worked the phones, directing renewed violence at home in the Liberian capital, Monrovia.

The women decided that enough was enough. Determined to focus on the human cost of the war, they barricaded delegates into the room where the talks were taking place. One of the negotiators, Nigerian General Abdulsalami Abubakar, remembered later: "They said that nobody will come out till that peace agreement was signed." As described in the 2008 documentary film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, one warlord tried unsuccessfully to kick his way out of the room. Others tried (and failed) to escape through the windows.

The men with guns agreed to talk seriously at last. A peace deal was struck. Charles Taylor went into exile. International peacekeepers arrived in Monrovia, greeted by cheering crowds. In 2006, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became Liberia's first peacefully elected president, Africa's first woman leader.

Johnson-Sirleaf said: "It was ordinary Liberians who reclaimed the country and demanded peace."

**QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:**

- How did the Liberian women practice solidarity in this example? What was an excellent aim that they were pursuing?
- Would it have been possible to achieve peace in Liberia if the women had not collaborated and worked together to achieve this aim?