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EVALUATING WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND GOVERNANCE: A COMMUNITY DIALOGUE PROCESS IN LIBERIA

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Introduction

One of post-conflict Liberia’s first major tasks in its struggle to rise from a debilitating conflict that in essence spanned more than 20 years, was to implement a transitional justice process. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) formed a significant part of this process, and is one of the major mechanisms meant to help Liberia reconstruct and transform itself from an unequal, conflict ridden society into a full-fledged democracy with the participation of all its diverse inhabitants. The TRC was mandated by the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA), which came about through a hard-won battle with most major warlords at the Accra Peace Conference in 2003.

As part of its mandate to promote national peace, security, unity and reconciliation, the TRC was tasked to investigate and elicit the root causes of the war from 1979 to 2003, to identify the main perpetrators and, most importantly, to produce an extensive report that includes

strong recommendations for the future well-being of the nation, paying special attention to the experiences and needs of the women and children of Liberia. Although the TRC made many efforts to reach communities throughout Liberia, civil society organisations working on the ground reported that some members of the general public – even those based in Monrovia (the capital city of Liberia) – indicated that they were not only unaware of the mandate or value of the TRC process but also did not fully understand the concept of transitional justice and how they could participate in the process.

It is widely understood that the brutal and inhumane conflict impacted on the entire population of Liberia, but

Above: Liberian women, from different counties, pose with some team members following the Bong County dialogue held at the Phebe Hospital compound near Gbarnga.

impacted differently on women, men, boys and girls. It adversely affected the progress of women and girls in Liberia, mainly because sexual violence was widely and indiscriminately used as an instrument of war. Women were repeatedly subjected to rape and gang rapes, including violations perpetrated with various foreign objects. Those who were not brutally murdered experienced and/or witnessed unimaginable acts of sexual brutality, mutilation, cannibalism and torture. This was meted out by all the many warring factions, including fellow civilians and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) peacekeepers. Issues of protection, security, tradition and culture silenced many of these women, and limited their participation in the TRC process as well as in accessing healthcare and other services. Additionally, the opportunity the transitional justice process offered to highlight gender issues had not been exploited to its full capacity. Women were still largely underrepresented in most of the peace processes, and

Planning

The original concept for the project was developed by three Liberian NGO leaders, including the director of the coordinating group (WONGOSOL) and the UNIFEM gender and transitional justice specialist. Conscious that this had not been done before as part of the transitional justice process in any other country, the group was determined not to miss the opportunity to incorporate women's needs and demands more fully into the TRC process. Given some of the criticisms of Liberia's TRC operations, and the fact that it was beginning to draw down and enter the report-writing phase, the time seemed appropriate and critical to offer a civil society-led, independent assessment of the types of recommendations that Liberian women wanted. An initial concept paper, which was shared with donor agencies, quickly garnered support. Financial support was committed by the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), UNIFEM and Urgent Action Aid, with the ICTJ and UNIFEM offering

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Against this background, a consortium of women's organisations under the umbrella of the Women Non-government Organisations (NGO) Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL) – with advice and encouragement from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the TRC gender unit – came together in September 2008 to organise a series of nationwide community dialogue meetings with women. The idea was to evaluate the TRC process from a gender perspective, to discuss seven of the key pillars of transitional justice and to take an in-depth look at community and individual responsibility for healing and transforming Liberian society. The dialogue meetings also aimed to elicit concrete recommendations from Liberian women on the seven transitional justice pillars to inform the TRC final report, and to form a monitoring group on the implementation of these recommendations at the conclusion of the TRC. The term "dialogue", as used here, describes a "frank exchange of ideas for the purpose of meeting in harmony"¹ to encourage women to have open conversations. The meetings were run as a facilitated conversation among the participants, rather than as a series of panel presentations or question-and-answer sessions.

additional technical support throughout the project.

The project document consisted of a series of four community dialogues, one in each of Liberia's four regions – north-western Liberia (Bomi, Gbarpolu and Grand Cape Mount counties), central Liberia (Bong, Lofa and Nimba counties), eastern Liberia (Maryland, Rivergee, Grand Kru and Grand Gedeh counties) and southern Liberia (Montserrado, Grand Bassa, Margibi, Sinoe and Rivercess counties). Approximately 100 women would be convened, representing a diversity of women across all counties in each region, in an easily accessible regional city. WONGOSOL member organisations and TRC coordinators in each of the counties would be called upon to mobilise the women to attend the meetings.

Each dialogue was planned to begin with an opening ceremony at which relevant government, the United Nations (UN) and international non-governmental organisations (INGO) representatives, including the county superintendents, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) gender advisors and TRC commissioners would be asked to speak.² Participants would then be divided into four groups of 25 women each, with a mechanism to ensure that the women were separated from their friends and families or community groupings. The goal was not only to create space for women from different counties to get to know each other, but also to allow women to feel free



During the workshop the women practised listening skills by telling stories whilst sitting back-to-back, thus learning to listen without the help of non-verbal cues.

to speak without being inhibited in the presence of family members. The dialogues also aimed to heal divides, and to begin to foster and strengthen reconciliation amongst some of the estranged ethnic groups.

Conversations within each of the break-out groups would be facilitated by a team of three individuals – one facilitator, one documenter and one counsellor for each group. The agenda would open with a discussion of the TRC itself, offering women the opportunity to share personal stories as well as eliciting feedback on the TRC process. The rest of the first and second days would be spent explaining and initiating conversations on the seven key transitional justice issues: truth-telling, reparations, memorialisation, institutional reform, prosecutions, amnesty and reconciliation. At the end of the first day, the project planned to offer more space for women to share their stories and, at the end of the second day, an evening activity would be hosted for the women. The third morning would be spent soliciting recommendations on each of the issues discussed in the previous days, before a closing ceremony. After lunch, the women would depart with enough daylight to travel back to their homes safely. The two technical

advisors to the project, from UNIFEM and ICTJ – and the only non-Liberians on the team – would act as process monitors, observing each group and providing feedback during debriefing sessions that would be held at each meal break and/or as needed.

At the end of the four dialogues, a comprehensive report of the project's main findings and recommendations would be prepared, and a validation meeting would be organised in Monrovia, drawing on many of the mobilisers and participants from each of the dialogues. After the validation meeting, the report would be ceremoniously handed over to the TRC, and the organisations involved in implementing the project would conduct a media and advocacy campaign to publicise the project's findings.

Preparing

In preparing for these dialogues, the coordinating team was conscious about the need to avoid duplication of efforts that would result in wasted resources and fatigue among female participants of these types of events in the counties. Therefore, the first step was to conduct a mini survey of civil society organisations, UN agencies and government ministries to learn what else was being done with regard to community events in these regions and/or on the topics that were on the agenda for discussion. The intent was both to alert partners to the project as well as to ascertain what activities were already being planned in the same areas, so as to avoid overlaps and identify ways to complement existing initiatives where possible. WONGOSOL partnered with member organisations Liberian Women in Media Action Committee (LIWOMAC) and Voice of the Voiceless (VOV) to conduct this survey, in collaboration with the UNIFEM advisor, for a period of one week. The survey team did not find that there would be any overlap at this time, and went ahead with planning.

The coordinating team then brought together a facilitation team made up of four facilitators, four counsellors and four documenters, to implement the dialogues. Three alternate members were added to the team to allow for clashes in scheduling. A skilled and dedicated 15-member team was thus put together from member organisations³ and taken through an intensive preparation workshop facilitated by the UNIFEM advisor, which was designed to accomplish four interconnected goals:

1. build team cohesiveness;
2. acquaint the team with the dialogue agenda and plans;
3. create a guide for the fieldwork to be undertaken in a consistent way; and
4. teach the facilitation team some techniques to build stronger relationships amongst themselves and with the women, and to deal with the trauma they were likely to encounter.

This workshop laid the foundation and set the tone for the dialogues. A transformational learning approach⁴ was used to practice the dialogue process with the team, and for the team members themselves to share and work with their own experiences of the war. They were taught activities to deepen active listening skills, breathing techniques to centre the self in the midst of heightened emotions and teambuilding exercises to bond the group. A field guide was then developed, which outlined in detail the form the dialogues would follow. The team also worked to develop simple language in Liberian English, with which to define the different transitional justice concepts that the project would speak to and seek input on. This language was included in the guide, to help the facilitators explain each concept during the breakout groups.

This workshop proved to be an important milestone in the implementation of this project in that it not only bonded the team very successfully, but it awakened them to their role as facilitators. It helped them to remain cognisant of their state of being, and to take full responsibility for themselves during the dialogue process. Additionally, it helped them to understand that transformation is a process that begins with the self, and this then impacts on others and the context – and that these three processes overlap at all times. It laid the foundation for the way that all interactions occurred in the group: with compassion and understanding, focused on relationship-building and the process of engagement.

Implementing

Once the preparations were complete and funding from ICTJ, OSISA and UNIFEM committed, the mobilisers were set in motion and letters were sent out inviting people to the first dialogue, held in Bomi County.

Day One

The first day was far more intense and traumatic than had been anticipated. Many more women had arrived to participate than were expected, and this put quite a strain on the accommodation, the catering and the venue facilities. As the process began, Group D had to be split into two groups, because it was just too large to facilitate a genuine conversation between the participants. The groups began with getting to know each other and finding partners and pairs, but it soon became evident that the women really wanted to use the space to tell their stories. The field team met during the lunch break and had a quick debrief. They had not anticipated that this would happen and had in fact, on the contrary, thought that the women would be reluctant to tell their stories of the wars. The team decided then to allow the process to evolve, and to hold the space open for the women to tell their stories in whichever way they wanted, even privately with the counsellors outside the rooms. The team also decided to swap roles when necessary, since the burden of listening and feedback was too much for one person to manage all day.



GETTY IMAGES

Dancing allowed the women the opportunity and space to celebrate each other.

The success of this method was noted in the feedback from the women, who “felt” the genuine concern and support from the team. They said they had felt cared for and listened to, and that the team had modelled the behaviour that they were wanting from the participants. The entire day was spent with the team focused on active listening, and the women poured out their hurt, shame, guilt, terror and sorrow that the events of the war had triggered. The stories were very hard to hear, and team members found themselves becoming quite emotional, sometimes sobbing with the women and even needing to leave the room to sob quietly outside. The stories were graphic and gruesome, but the women needed to voice them in order to participate fully. There were horrific stories about being raped with blades, being gang raped, being forced to witness children and other family members being beheaded and killed, and being forced to participate in various sickening acts. The stories went on late into the night.

Day Two

After the stories of the first day, the mood on the second day was surprising. The sombre women of the

previous day had transformed into an energetic group that was ready to discuss transitional justice and ways forward towards recreating their communities and healing the nation. The women willingly came forward in the focus groups with suggestions, ideas and comments about the pillars of transitional justice, about how they wanted their communities to be and what they thought they could do about it. This went on the entire day, and a rich set of recommendations were collected for the TRC report, including suggestions for reparations, memorialisation and reconciliation.

Day Three

This day ended on a high note with the midday meal, and with the women singing and dancing, expressing their joy at the chance to participate in a way that was honouring and which valued their contributions. An unexpected outcome of the process was that women spontaneously started making individual commitments for what they would do when they went back to their communities as peacebuilders. Group evaluations confirmed that the women had benefited a great deal from the process, and the only dissatisfaction they expressed involved some of the logistical arrangements.

Learning

There was much learning, both substantive and process related, that occurred from and through the dialogues.

Process

The first dialogue in Bomi County set the tone for the next three dialogues, and a number of lessons from the first process were incorporated into a revised agenda. The group discussions at the next and all subsequent meetings began with an open space for storytelling, which lasted the entire first day. Time was allocated on the third day for the women to develop group action plans and to make individual commitments. A more flexible agenda was created to allow and encourage the women to intersperse recommendations and storytelling into the middle of the transitional justice conversations, whenever they felt moved to share. A final social event in the form of a dance was also included, at the end of the second day, to help lift the mood and provide the women with the space to celebrate each other. Logistical changes were made to improve the flow of the dialogues: a dedicated logistics person was identified to travel with the team in order to free the facilitators to focus on the discussions; a childminder was hired in each location to free the participants with babies and young children from needing to focus on childcare; and the documenters were asked to record the stories and biographical data of the women telling them more rigorously. For the last two dialogues, a pre- and post-dialogue questionnaire was handed out to monitor and evaluate what knowledge women had gained from the process.

Though the dialogues were all run in more or less the same style and format, each meeting had its own character. In Bong County, the women were all lodged in the same

compound: nursing school dormitories that were vacant during a school break. This allowed for more group cohesion and a wonderful continuation of sharing and bonding into the evenings, though it kept the women isolated from the community to which they had travelled. In the rest of the dialogues, women were hosted by families in the area, and they reported that they were pleased to have made new contacts and friends from a different part of Liberia. In Grand Bassa County, the meeting rooms were spread across a large public space, and so the women within each break-out group seemed to bond more with each other because they were separated from their friends with whom they had travelled. In Riverge County, the dialogue agenda was condensed into two days, with the logistics shifted to the morning of the third day. This created an atmosphere of focus and efficiency, and was a natural evolution for the team because it was the last of the dialogues and, by that point, they were very comfortable with the material and process.

Content

Some broad determinations about the experiences of Liberian women during the conflict, based on the anecdotal evidence and stories shared by the women, can be made. Their recommendations and suggestions for the transitional justice mechanisms were recorded and summarised.

Violations Suffered by Liberian Women

The most common violation recounted by the women was the killing of innocent family or community members. The killings were often witnessed by the women directly and, in many cases, happened in very gruesome ways. There seemed to be a gendered pattern to the killings, with male children and adults being more frequently murdered than their female counterparts. There are likely many reasons for this, but several women who indicated that they had come close to being killed, also said that they had been spared because of some recognition of their role and value as women. For example, one woman from the dialogue in Buchanan revealed that, as a soldier was about to kill her, another soldier intervened, saying: "You see all the children the woman got? Who will take care of them?" Another woman said she was spared because one of the rebels said: "Leave the woman; we are all born from women."

Rape or gang rape was reported by women in every break-out group in all four dialogues. Statistics from other sources suggest that nearly 80% of Liberian women have experienced some form of sexual violation⁵, and these findings are corroborated by the stories the women shared with the project team. Several women told of other women and girls who had died as a result of rape. The rape or gang rape survivors revealed that they are living with the long-term side effects of these rapes, including health problems and economic difficulties.

Additionally, the women shared many stories about their homes being destroyed – often through fire – during the course of the conflict. The other most frequent violation that the women experienced was being captured or conscripted

and subsequently forced to act as porters, sex slaves and/or bush wives for different fighting factions. This seemed to be a systematic practice of all the fighting factions.

It is also worth mentioning that, in the immediate wake of killings, there seemed to be a frequent – though not regular – pattern of cannibalism and forced cannibalism. There were several stories of hearts being cut out and eaten by fighters, but also of women being forced to cook and/or eat parts of their dead loved ones.

Women and men were, of course, victims of a wide variety of other abuses. These included wounds inflicted by bullets, cutlasses, razor blades and other implements. Pregnant women who were killed, then had their babies cut out following “bets” made by the fighters about the sex of the baby. A few women in each dialogue had been handicapped as a result of the war – either made blind or having lost the use of their legs, arms or hands. They additionally talked about the humiliations that they suffered at the hands of different fighters. Many of the women had been separated from family members, including children, and still did not know the fate or whereabouts of some of their loved ones.

Comments and Recommendations from the Women

TRC. Many of the women reported that they had not heard of or did not fully understand what the TRC was all about. These comments were from the women who had not participated in the statement taking. Those who knew about it, but who did not participate, said they did not want to speak for fear of all their hurt coming out in public. Others were scared of being victimised by the ex-combatants who lived in their villages and towns. Some of the women felt that participating in the TRC was a waste of time, since it would not return their lost family members to them and because they believed that many of the warlords were lying to the TRC about their participation in the war. Those who did participate said they felt that the TRC would help to bring peace.

Truth-telling. There was general support for truth-telling, with many women saying that it would lead to community healing, bring unity and help them to forgive one another and rebuild their lives and a new Liberia. They also felt that it would bring individual healing, release frustration and worry and clear consciences if done in the way the dialogues were being held. This was important, because they felt safe and free to speak in this forum. They indicated that holding onto “bad feelings” and memories was not good, and they talked of how they could teach this to their churches, family members and children. They raised many concerns that truth-telling did not seem to be happening consistently at the public level and through the TRC.

Memorialisation. The women in all the counties wanted some sort of monument to be built to remember the dead, with some wanting the names of the affected people recorded on it. Some suggested that it be done at county borders or at the sites of major massacres. There was a strong request for a day of mourning from all the groups, with some suggestions that it take the form of rituals, festivals or feasts.

Prosecutions and Amnesty. There was some support for the establishment of a war crimes court, but broader consensus on the need to hold the warlords or heads of fighting factions accountable for their part in the wars. There were some who said that punishing anyone was of no use, because it could not bring back the dead or that it may cause more conflict, but the voices for some sort of accountability were louder and many. Many felt that there should be jail time, hard labour or community reparations like rebuilding the homes they were responsible for destroying. They also suggested that the properties and bank accounts of these warlords should be seized and used for development in the communities they violated. The women felt strongly that the government of Liberia should only consider conditional amnesty for those who told the whole truth, who showed authentic remorse and who asked for forgiveness. There was universal support for total amnesty for child soldiers, and pardons for those who could prove that they had been forced into fighting against their will.

Development. The women asked for connecting roads between the towns and the counties to be built, especially from the farms to the markets. All the women asked for building materials to be subsidised, so that they could rebuild their homes themselves. They also asked for better access to microcredit, especially agrocredit, to support agricultural businesses. They pleaded for the decentralisation of facilities from Monrovia to the counties in the form of schools, hospitals, vocational training, clinics and universities or branches of the University of Liberia.

Reparations. The women also requested free healthcare for all women who had been violated sexually and otherwise. Widows, the disabled and other victims needed to be recognised and empowered to take care of themselves. All Liberians who were in the war were in need of psychosocial support, and they felt that this could be done at the community level using different methods, including traditional methods of support such as women traditional healers for counselling or reconciliation, and cleansing rituals.

Institutional Reform. The participants called for more women to be included in the security sector (army and police), and that just the presence of women would help in

the reform of these institutions. The practice of bribing officials must be stopped, and strong measures taken against anyone caught accepting bribes. The women felt that this could happen if there was protection for the “whistle blowers”. They also indicated that no warlords or anyone with a record of corruption or abuse should be allowed into a government or official position.

Reconciliation. Community-level reconciliation, through the use of various traditional forums to encourage communities to discuss reconciliation and resolve old disputes, was recommended. The women suggested the use of “palava huts” (round tables or indabas) and other regular community meetings to do this, under the leadership of county officials or local leaders. A national suggestion was that the government should establish a national programme to promote community reconciliation, and that peacebuilding skills should be taught in schools.

Throughout the process, the project team also heard some very uplifting and encouraging reports. Women not only shared what they had suffered, but also the ways in which they had tried to overcome some of their problems. They told of courageous acts to rescue their and others’ children, and of survival. Leadership, cooperation and community were emphasised. In many of the groups, women also pledged to support those among them who wanted to run for community and county political positions. In one of the dialogues, two sisters who had not seen each other for nearly 20 years were also unexpectedly reunited.

Concluding

Though each dialogue did suffer from its own particular challenges – usually relating to disbursal of transportation allowances or other logistical issues – the women were overwhelmingly positive in evaluating the dialogues. Across the country, women consistently communicated the same things to the facilitation team:

- they welcomed the opportunity to share their stories in a compassionate environment – after which they felt “lighter”;
- they appreciated that the team had taken the concepts “to their level”, and that conversations had been in Liberian English, with interpreters identified for those women who felt more comfortable in their indigenous language;
- they were grateful to have built new and lasting friendships with women from other parts of the country – particularly through the practice of pairing women early in the breakout groups, in a way that they might not have from a more traditional workshop format; and
- they felt confident that this was the beginning of a longer-term healing and reconciliation process.

However, they also emphasised that, though the experience had been a good one for them, they hoped that

this was not a once-off event or process. They stressed the need for follow-up to take place, and their desire to see the final product of the entire process in the form of some kind of accessible report. They also asked for help in meeting some of their immediate needs. The dialogues concluded with a commitment from the team to ensure that some follow-up would indeed take place in the near future.

The team has recognised this dialogue process as being a replicable model for community mobilisation and transformation that can be adapted as a framework for almost any type of content. Its focus on relationship-building, using transformational tools rather than an emphasis on content dissemination or extraction, made this a unique process for the Liberian context. The intentional flexibility and continuous feedback system allowed an organic flow that reached out to people at their level of comfort and understanding. There is great interest and motivation to increase capacity for this transformational community peacebuilding approach, and to continue to use it for the follow-up process and for other initiatives. **A**

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Endnotes

- 1 The Free Dictionary (online), Available at: <www.thefreedictionary.com/dialogue> Accessed in May 2009.
- 2 Opening ceremonies are a common feature of Liberian events and, while they are often time-consuming, they are an important ritual, especially at the community level, for credibility and symbolic support. They complement traditional rituals, which allow space for leaders and dignitaries to express that whatever is about to take place is occurring with their knowledge and encouragement.
- 3 Liberian Women in Media Action Group, Voice of the Voiceless, Aiding Disadvantaged Women and Girls, Society for Women Against Aids in Africa, Security Sector Working Group, Muslim Women for Peace and Development, Women Care Initiative, Women in Peacebuilding Network, the TRC and Wongosol staff.
- 4 This approach was developed by the Kairos Foundation’s More to Life Programme (<www.moretolife.org>). Anu Pillay is a student of this programme and a licenced More to Life coach.
- 5 This is a generalisation from the monthly statistics presented by Medicin Sans Frontiers and other service providers that are partners to the Joint Programme on Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV) in the Ministry of Gender in Liberia, and which are currently coordinating and collecting data on SGBV in Liberia.