The U.N. Security Council resolution 1235 in 1999, highlights the disproportionate impact of war on women, as well as the great untapped potential they bring to the processes of mediation and conflict resolution and peacebuilding from which they are too often excluded. It also points out that without the inclusion of women in decision-making positions throughout society, it will not be possible to maintain peace.

Women are not always made by men and women do not always make peace happen. But around the world, often out of sight and out of the news, women are doing extraordinary things in order to build, create and maintain peace, often in the face of unimaginable obstacles.

One such woman is Leymah Gbowee, a key figure in the Libyan women’s peace movement that contributed to ending years of bloody civil war, who is now executive director of the Women, Peace and Security Network, WPSEN-Africa, based in Accra, Ghana. In the prize-winning documentary “Pray the Devil Back to Hell,” she recounts how the women moved from desperation to action and finally to breakthrough.

“Terror was all over. My children were killed by terror. My husband was killed by terror. Sexual violence was from all sides. Weapons were everywhere. Women were walking in the streets. They were killing women, raping women, killing children — with all these weapons. It was a war.”

She was one of thousands of women who took to the streets to protest the war, and to demand an end to the conflict. Their efforts were eventually successful, and the war came to an end.

In the aftermath of the war, Leymah continued to work with other women to promote peace and reconciliation. She has been a vocal advocate for women’s rights and for the inclusion of women in decision-making processes at all levels of government.

Leymah Gbowee

However, progress toward the goal of inclusion of women has been patchy. The resolution has no binding power and only 20 countries have so far produced National Action Plans detailing how they will implement the resolution. Very few resources have been devoted to equipping women to take up opportunities that could be opened to them.

About the importance of resolution 1235, Leymah commented in a recent interview: “I think the resolution is a very good resolution. It really, really speaks to the needs of women in peacebuilding. But it needs to be strengthened. It is not binding. It needs to involve real commitments from governments.”

Another woman who has devoted herself to building peace Iman Nari-Makule, director of the Center for Peace Education at Mlimani College in the Philippines. A seminar titled “Women Making Peace: Maximizing the Impact of the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1235, 10 Years On” was held at the United Nations University in Tokyo on Sept. 8. She said that she often hears people say that women hold the key to peace. But is it true? Does it really work? In reality, I think that less than a quarter of women have a voice.

However, Leymah sees many signs of change. She describes how in the Philippines she was one of three women from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who had made it to develop a National Action Plan to implement Resolution 1235.

Leymah Gbowee

"We work toward the attainment of a just, gender-respectful society where women are educated, are seen as peacebuilders, enjoying human rights and safety from gender-based violence," she said.

Her research uncovered a mine of information: “We found that women on the ground provide important assistance and psycho-social, economic, health and spiritual services to victims of war. They facilitate dialogue in conflict-afflicted communities to prevent war. They have their own lives on the line to monitor compliance to ceasefires. They have led the call for the suspension of military operations and the creation of zones of peace.”

At the seminar, Iman asked what ordinary women in Japan can do toward implementation of resolution 1235. Japan has not developed a plan of action, and the government shows no sign of doing so. But Iman’s answer was clear: “Speak out whenever women around you are being abused, when they are not being protected. Challenge injustice toward women wherever it occurs.”

Most people living in Japan and other “peaceful” democracies might be tempted to think that the topic of Women, Peace and Security belongs in Africa, in Afghanistan or in Sri Lanka. But we should think again. Our societies may be peaceful, in that there is little physical violence, but are women given sufficient space to speak? Is there true respect, a true valuing of the opinions, thoughts and feelings of both men and women? Or is there a silencing of truth for the sake of harmony?

The book “Promoting Women’s Participation in Conflict & Post-Conflict Societies: How Women worldwide are making a building peace” was launched at the UN summit. Details can be found at www.globaljustice.org.