

women and peacebuilding

(Publicity)

The women are ready, the time is now

The U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 is 10 years old this month. The groundbreaking resolution, adopted Oct. 31, 2000, highlights the disproportionate impact of war on women, as well as the great untapped potential they can bring to processes of mediation, 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.

Wars 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 Liberian 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, WIPSEN-Africa, based in Accra, Ghana. In the prizewinning documentary "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," she recounts how the women moved from desperation to anger and finally to breakthrough:

"It was hell on Earth. My children had been tired and hungry their entire lives. You go to bed and pray that you will have something different the next day. The shooting will stop, the killing will stop, the hunger will stop."

Leymah was already working to lessen

the effects of the conflict on children. Then she dreamed that she should get the women of the church together to pray for peace. Reluctantly at first, she became the leader of a united group of Christian women who then reached out to their Muslim sisters across lines that had traditionally divided Liberian women.

While the women's wish to end the war grew out of visceral, daily pain and the desire to protect their children, loved ones and themselves, they did not only draw on their emotions. They strategized, reading Mahatma Gandhi, reading Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., constantly reviewing their progress after holding daily protests at Monrovia's main fish market. They engaged religious leaders in dialogue, finding allies wherever they could.

Eventually, after long months of tireless protesting, two months of it outside the building in Ghana where the government and rebel factions were supposedly negotiating peace, the women's patience burst. Leymah instructed them to link arms and encircle the building, and not to let the men out until a deal had been reached. When one rebel leader tried to push his way through, Leymah started to deliberately remove her clothes. In her culture it is shameful for a man to see the naked body of his mother. This act of desperation finally made the men wake up to what they were doing.

The former president of Nigeria who was leading the negotiations told the rebel leader to go back inside. "If you were a

real man," he said, "you wouldn't be killing your people." The spell was broken. And not long after, the peace agreement was signed.

When women are excluded from the mainstream dialogue, they become desperate, and often very creative, but more space needs to be made for them in the mainstream processes which attempt to prevent and resolve conflict.

This is one reason why Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury, the then Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the U.N. and a long-term champion of the concept of a culture of peace, first attempted during his presidency of the Security Council in March 2000 to put the issue of women, peace and security on the table.

He recalled: "When I first brought this issue to the Security Council, wide-ranging disinterest, even indifference, was expressed by many, saying that the president was diluting the Council's mandate by trying to bring in a 'soft issue' on its agenda."

He had hoped to adopt a resolution on this issue but in the end he was only able to achieve a Security Council Press Statement issued, symbolically, on March 8, International Women's Day. The statement read: "Members of the Security Council... affirm that the equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts are essential for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security."

Building on this statement, later that year Resolution 1325 was passed, and it has provided a hook on which to hang considerable innovation and many hopes.



Jasmin Nario-Galace



Leymah Gbowee AP/AFL0

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 intend to put it into action. Very few resources have been devoted to equipping women to take up opportunities that could be opened to them.

About the importance of 1325, 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 is Jasmin Nario-Galace, director of the Center for Peace Education at Miriam College in the Philippines. At a seminar titled "Women Making Peace: Maximizing the Impact of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325, 10 Years On" held at the United Nations University in Tokyo on Sept. 8, she said: "I often hear people say that women hold up half the sky. But I ask myself: Do we really? In reality, I think that less than a quarter of women can even reach it."

However, Jasmin sees many signs of change. She described how in the Philippines she was one of three women from nongovernment organizations (NGOs) who took the lead in developing a National Action Plan to implement Resolution 1325.

"We work toward the attainment of a just, gender-respectful society where every Filipino woman is empowered as a peacebuilder, enjoying her human rights and safe from gender-based violence."



Liberian women march for peace during the disarmament of the Movement for Democracy in Liberia rebel faction in April 2004. TIMA A. HETHERINGTON/PANOS

she said.

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

At the seminar Jasmin was asked what ordinary women in Japan can do toward implementation of 1325. Japan has not developed a plan of action and the government shows no sign of doing so. Jasmin's answer was clear: "Speak out whenever women around you are being abused, when they are not being protected. Challenge in justice 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 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?

Leymah stressed: "Usually what the impact of conflict shows is a reflection of the interactions between the genders in

peacetime. So in peacetime, let the women start an analysis of the relationships between men and women. Is there domestic violence? Are there laws and policies to protect women? Are there discriminatory practices? Now is the time for action to address these issues."

Human rights lawyer Mikiko Otani, speaking at the UNU seminar, stated that it is a misunderstanding to think that 1325 has little meaning in Japan. She emphasized the importance of transforming mind-sets and re-evaluating the meaning of peace.

Nanae Kimura, Women's Peace Committee representative of Soka Gakkai, one of the organizers of the event along with Global Action to Prevent War, UNU and the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, summed it up: "We believe this resolution to be relevant to every country and community in the world where the security of women and their families is threatened. In Japan, many women are suffering from verbal and physical domestic violence, discrimination, isolation and bullying. It is vital to build a culture of peace, a way of life that values nonviolence and dialogue. This can be realized through empowering women at the grassroots. This is how we interpret the spirit of Resolution 1325."

The book "Promoting Women's Participation in Conflict & Post-Conflict Societies: How women worldwide are making & building peace" was launched at the UNU seminar. Details can be found at www.globalactionpw.org



The "Women Making Peace" seminar at the United Nations University in Tokyo on Sept. 8 was organized by Soka Gakkai International, Global Action to Prevent War and the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security.