

## WORKING WITH WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN POST-WAR COUNTRIES: THE LIBERIAN SITUATION

*'I have seen war. I have seen war on land and sea. I have seen blood running from the wounded. I have seen men coughing out their gassed lungs. I have seen the dead in the mud. I have seen cities destroyed. I have seen two hundred limping, exhausted men come out of line - the survivors of a regiment of one thousand that went forward forty-eight hours before. I have seen children starving. I have seen the agony of mothers and wives. I hate war.'* Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 14, 1936.

*'I have moments of terror when I think we might be losing this generation. We have got to bring these young people into active life of the community and make them feel that they are necessary.'* —Eleanor Roosevelt  
May 1934

*'You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face...You must do the thing you think you cannot do.'* —Eleanor Roosevelt, "You Learn by Living," 1960

### INTRODUCTION

How appropriately the above quotations fit our situation in Liberia. The invitation sent me to come to this historic occasion could not have come at a better time than now. The two people, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, whose memory we honour and celebrate were an extraordinary couple, wholly dedicated to the service of humanity. They knew no barriers of color, borders, or status. They give of their human and material resources in the pursuit of peace, human dignity, freedom and material prosperity of people around the globe. Our meeting here today was made possible by and, indeed, underscores the vision of Eleanor Roosevelt for a brighter future for generations to come through sound and innovative higher education—a vision reflected in the founding of this University to enable the poor to gain access to higher education. As we celebrate this vision, we are challenged to continue to work as Eleanor and Franklin did, to extend that vision to many others around the globe.

## **LIFE DURING THE WAR**

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish to speak to you for a short period on the tragedy of Liberia and some of the challenges of the way forward for that country and to ask your support for the Liberian people in meeting these challenges. From December 1989 to early this year, violent conflict engulfed Liberia. More than 200,000 people of that country's population of 3.2 million people were killed during these 15 years, the largest group being non-combatants. Villages, towns and cities across the country were plundered and pillaged of hundreds of millions of dollars of property during this period, and more than a million people displaced internally and as refugees mainly in neighboring countries. In fact, the civil war in Liberia was exported by armed groups into Sierra Leone and southeastern Guinea, creating a sub-regional zone of conflict that affected more than 10 million people in the three countries, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

Like similar tragedies elsewhere, the violent conflict in Liberia brought some of the worst human sufferings ever seen, especially to women and children, the most vulnerable groups. Both men and women faced gruesome murder. As men were recruited or hunted down, wives, female parents and siblings took over the responsibilities of the family, often having to protect their male relatives who had to seek survival by hiding. This change in role also meant that children were also called upon to share family responsibilities as well. Women were now seen playing their female role and that of the male, equally so were the children. It was women who risked their lives during the war amidst bullets and missiles to go in search of food or medicine for their families. They sold and bought whatever they could to keep them and their families alive. They were in the bushes bartering whatever they could.

Children, too, played their part in the war. Majority of them spent most of their time out of school running for their lives with their parents or being used into

forced labour or sexual exploitation (girls as sex slaves) or child soldiers (killing machines), etc. Many of them never re-entered school and have now become men and women. This has contributed to the high rate of illiteracy.

The war, with its many phases, has left behind many challenges and dilemmas. Lives have been shattered and despair and loss of hope have taken over the pleasant past. So many people abandoned everything and left the country to begin a new life and majority of those who remained in the country have been facing the worst of situations, some dying of hunger or diseases or getting killed. There is the problem of brain drain in every sector of the society, which means few people have to do the work of so many.

As a result of the low level of human resources, many of us have had to play many roles or get involved in many activities to help to begin a new dimension. I have been involved in humanitarian work at different levels besides being a lecturer and a lawyer, during and after the war.

### **WHAT IS THE AFTERMATH OF THE WAR?**

- A. High level of illiteracy (about 72% of the population)
- B. Women forced into playing the role they were not prepared for
- C. Serious drug abuse amongst the youths, especially the ex-combatants
- D. Child-labour
- E. Waywardness of children
- F. Moral decadence – prostitution on the high increase.
- G. Hatred and unforgiveness at some levels
- H. Orphans and abandoned children

- I. More single mothers, especially amongst the young women, many of whom found themselves being raped, resulting into unwanted pregnancies: girls who unwillingly accepted the fighters for survival; those who willingly gave themselves to the fighters for material gains; and women whose husbands or children's fathers were killed were left to struggle alone with the children.
- J. Most importantly, a generation or two have lost their value, academically and productively.

With the above and the need to help alleviate the sufferings that have been created by the prolonged war, various organizations have been formed, especially women groups, some of which cater to only women and girls; some to only children; some to women and children in general. Many of these groups have been working really hard to see that life becomes meaningful once more.

I have been through all the phases of the war and saw the human sufferings - this is why I got involved in the work of many of these organizations and have worked in many ways to change the lives of women and children both during and after the war. My involvement has been in various ways, including advocacy.

## **EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

In order for women to fully understand the importance of their role and the development and proper use of their potentials, they need to be trained and this training can be academic, technical or vocational. Majority of the women in Liberia are illiterate and live in rural settings, even though they are trained traditionally, there is a need to encourage and ensure that women receive basic training in order to improve on the traditional methods of work and life.

It is very important to let them understand that they need to improve on the traditional methods that they have been using to be able to meet the challenges of today's realities. Show them what to do and let them do it themselves. One of the most important things that one must understand in working with women and women groups, which is a serious lesson, is that you should learn to listen to them and allow them to unfold what they believe would help life become better for them following the many years of war.

We have been assisting in providing some support for training women and girls in the area of advocacy and skills training (home economics, tie and dye, etc.) to enable them support themselves and their families. However, there are shortcomings in these training programs due to the lack of equipment and materials (sewing machines, chemical, utensils, etc.).

We have been working closely with many women and women groups, studying their situation and believe that certain things need to be put in place to strengthen them which include micro-credit. The women have the potential and are prepared to work, but they have no means to secure loan to establish themselves.

#### **a. RURAL/INDIGENOUS WOMEN**

There is a true saying that "the African woman is always busy working, trying to bring out the best for her family. She is the first to wake up very early in the morning and last to go to bed at night."

Our work has been with women who are either displaced or those who are not displaced but are indigent due to the war. The prolonged war has caused so many of the citizens to be displaced from the leeward counties or rural areas to

Monrovia and its suburbs. These women arrived at various times during the war. They were accompanied by their families/relatives which included husbands, children, aged parents, etc. Whatever the case was, whether alone or accompanied, these people found themselves, in many instances, walking 10 to 500 miles in search of safety. Some of them were fortunate to find and live with

relatives, but there were others who had no one and had to end up in displaced centers, where life is very unbearable. Sanitary condition is bad; structures for accommodation are very poor; majority of the children do not have any clothing or footwear; educational facilities are inadequate, if they are available; there is inadequate supply of food for the displaced in general; and medical care is low, which makes death rate very high in the camps.

It can be noted that most of these women lived in the rural areas on farming and could even produce and sell their crops to support their children who were in school, including college/university. They are frustrated over not being able to produce their own food or live in their own homes, most of which are now damaged or completely destroyed. Most of them are now anxiously waiting for the completion of disarmament and their repatriation to their original homes. Some of them have even gone back home where there is the presence of some peacekeepers, even though it is still not quite safe for them.

#### **b. THE DISPLACED FROM LOFA COUNTY**

Lofa County is the largest county in Liberia, which is my county of origin and where my mother and most of my relatives lived prior to the war. Besides being empty, every infrastructure (hospitals, schools, homes) was either badly damaged or completely destroyed. The county headquarter and all of its five district headquarters have virtually grown into forest. Almost 98.5% of the

population is displaced and the few persons who are now venturing back home, are faced with serious problems of hunger, starvation, disease and rape by some of the fighters who still remain there.

Woman – Child Alert (WOCHA), a non-governmental, non-political and not-for-profit organization, was founded in 1997 to assist women and children in difficult circumstances. WOCHA has assisted some of these Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) with clothing, blankets, foodstuff, needed drugs, educational materials, etc., but again due to the lack of funds to purchase more materials the program could not continue. Most of the children that we have been catering to are those who are displaced with their parents either in displaced camps or in some homes, for whom we provide educational materials (pencils, pens, notebooks, etc.) and a few pieces of wearing. Most of these IDPs have no income and they find it extremely difficult to support themselves and their families. There are also children living with their parents who have become destitute, thus lacking the basic necessities (proper shelter, adequate food, funds for school (books, uniforms, etc.)). Many of them are now in the streets for various reasons. The challenge is to get these kids off the streets, but the dilemma is the lack of materials to keep them busy as an alternative to the street life.

Even though the Government of Liberia, in collaboration with UNICEF, declared in early November 2003 free and compulsory primary education for all children, it is yet to take the necessary or appropriate steps to make this a reality.

**a. UNIVERSITY OF LIBERIA**

The situation at the University has virtually remained deplorable, with high level of damage/destruction or looting of the facilities. It stands at the moment bare of

equipment, furniture, etc. It also has a serious problem of payment of salaries of employees, both faculty and staff. Working condition remains uncondusive, with nothing to work with – lecturers have to improvise on many occasions (providing our own paper, chalk, etc.) to enable them present their lectures. The salaries are very low - that is, professors earned between \$75 and \$125 per month, which is not paid on time, ranging from 6 to 18 months, if it is paid or may never be paid at all.

The lack of textbooks, library services, etc. has made learning very stringent for the students. This means that they have to rely on handouts provided by some of their professors, which sometimes are more expensive than the tuition/fees. This financial constraint has caused many of the students, especially the females, to drop out.

Seeing the desperate need of female students to obtain tertiary education, we, the University of Liberia Women Association (ULWA), successfully solicited and received funding from Winrock International based in Virginia, USA, which is responsible for the Education for Democracy and Development Initiatives and Ambassadors' Girls' Scholarship Program (EDDI-AGSP), to assist the students. This organization provided funding which covered tuition/fees, books and transportation for the girls (between 95 and 200) from 2001 to 2003, but has since ceased, because we were informed that the U.S. Government could no longer support tertiary education.

The scholarship program helped to encourage more girls to move to agriculture, science, medical and teachers' education, even though girls in Business and Social Sciences and Humanities were also accepted. It further encouraged more female students to enter the University. The cost to keep a student in school at the University is about \$150.00 per semester.

In February 2003, Winrock also provided funds for the establishment of a resource center at the University of Liberia aimed at encouraging the girls to undertake research activities to cater to the needs of the students. It was equipped with more than 450 books of various titles, a set of television and video recorder, 6 computers with accessories, including 4 printers. Some funding from Winrock was used to purchase some of the items, while some of the items and all of the books were among the materials solicited and sent by Dr. Allida M. Black as gift to the University. Unfortunately, the center, like the rest of the University, was completely vandalized during the war in 2003, thus leaving it stripped of everything, including fixtures from the wall.

Negotiations and plans were also underway for the construction of a demonstration school at the University (Nursery-Elementary school) for use by students of Teachers College for practice teaching. Children that were expected to benefit from this project are the indigent and wayward.

All of these failed due to the war in June-August 2003, when the resource center was completely looted along with all other facilities at the University.

#### **b. OTHERS**

We have been involved in HIV/AIDS awareness campaign and training and providing counseling to affected women. However, there is a need to train more people to carry out the work.

#### **LEGAL AID**

We have been involved in gender-based sensitive - that is the protection of the rights of women and children and indigent persons and child rights advocacy,

especially problems of juvenile delinquency, child labour and handling cases involving serious human rights violations, including rape, battered women, and tortured victims.

The high rate of rape in the country has become a major concern not only to women but also to men. It is now prevalent and has engulfed the displaced centers and cluster neighbourhoods. At the moment we are handling some of the worst cases of rape ever seen in Liberia.

## **CONCLUSION**

In concluding, it can be noted here that it is a Herculean task to work with women and children following a long period of war and it involves a lot of patience and perseverance. We have given you an outline of the problems that the civil war has brought to Liberia and our own efforts and sacrifice in trying to solve some of them, which are important but inadequate and not been easy.

War brings so many changes and problems, including despair, destitution, destruction, prostitution, etc. These are some of the vices that the people we honour and remember today, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, fought against. We who love and respect their memory should follow their footsteps in opposing wars and anything that would destroy the human race. Today, as we close this lecture, let us think about the works of our honorees and what they stood for. Let us emulate their good example to have a world free of war. We will honour them when we show love, compassion and care for the innocent children around the world .and the women who toil day and night to bring laughter to the faces of other people.

The women of Liberia are resilient people and very potential. No amount of trouble will cause them to easily give up life – they need your help to help them move forward. We request your assistance in providing materials for formal education or skills training for the women and children for sustenance. We know that when women are empowered through education or skills training, they can become agents of positive change for their families and communities. They can help fight terrorism, promote democracy and a peaceful global village.

Healthcare is also a major issue and when women's health is taken care of, they can help make the society a better place to live.

Our work in Liberia is hard and crucial – we are at the crossroads – unless we work with concerted efforts, the people of Liberia will continue to experience trouble. Our leaders have failed us in every way – we do not depend on them, but on God and then our friends, like you. The people of Liberia, especially the children, deserve a decent and workable future which no one should continuously tamper or abrogate.

Whilst we agree that our country remains within the perimeter of war, with numerous problems, we are optimistic that soon and very soon we will see the light at the end of the tunnel, with your help and that of all of our friends and partners in progress.

It is my desire and prayer that as the country becomes more accessible, I will work along with other people to provide educational facilities and materials for the children who will be returning to their counties to begin life. We are doing all we can to train the women who have no formal education some basic skills that will sustain them and their families.

Finally, on behalf of the Liberian people, I pray to God and appeal to the people of the world, especially the people of the United States, to do one favour for us – that is, not to allow any war mongers and their families to use your soil as a haven, from where they can launch their destruction on their people. Let them be brought to justice either in this country or sent home to face justice. The way forward for a peaceful Liberia demands an end to impunity. Reconciliation must come with justice.

Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt would have supported this appeal and the wider appeal for support of the Liberian people. Freedom can only be sustained by individuals and communities that are empowered. Empowerment comes with education and opportunities and these can only be realized in an environment of peace and security. These are all consistent with the best values of this country and the best tendencies of its people.

Thank you.

