

S

Of International Women's Day in Liberia 24-25 March 2000 Theme: "Women Waging Peace" Town Hall, Gbarnga, Bong County Republic Of Liberia.

Your Excellency First Lady of the Republic of Liberia
Your Excellency Madam Ruth Sando Perry
Honorable Senator Myrtle Gibson
Honorable Members of the Legislature
Honorable Ministers
Officials of Government Here Present
Members of the Fourth Estate
Honorable Superintendent
Distinguished Community Elders
Ladies And Gentlemen

I am delighted and honored to be part of this auspicious occasion of the celebration of the first International Women's Day to be held in Liberia, and on behalf of the United Nations System in Liberia and myself, I lend our full support to this important celebration.

I would also like to seize this opportunity to encourage all stakeholders who are present here today, to use this day as one of reflection on the UN declared International theme and that of your symposium: "Women Waging Peace".

Ladies and Gentlemen

African countries today are facing a range of threats that jeopardize peace and development such as overpopulation, deterioration of the environment, poverty and social disintegration. These threats are further compounded by ever-increasing outbreaks of violence and armed conflict, perpetuated by the intolerance and inability of different ethnic groups to live together.

Within this fragile environment, most of these countries are struggling to achieve sustainable development and restore peace. However, waging peace is a very complex task, especially for women who have been marginalized for many centuries. Many of these threats stem from human beings themselves and the solutions therefore lie within our grasp. Society as a whole needs to work together to develop positive attitudes towards peace, democracy and tolerance.

As we enter the third millennium, the great challenge to humanity remains the same, namely, how to replace the culture of war with the culture of peace. In this regard, I would like to emphasize today the importance of women as peacemakers in society.

Many global conferences have been held over the last two decades on promoting equal rights for men and women and the elimination of discrimination based on gender, the most notable of which is the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995. Influenced by the outcomes of these conferences, many women have started to perceive themselves in a new light, as essential agents of change, development and peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen

A culture of peace means behaving peacefully, non-violently every day. It means sharing feelings, beliefs and thoughts with one another. It implies an attitude of tolerance, openness to others. Women have many of these unique values and characteristics, within their role as a mother, that make them essential agents of peace.

Let us take a few moments to consider a few of these.

- It is well known that women have traditionally played a positive role in conflict resolution and peace building within their communities and homes.
- In their role of mother, women have the advantage of molding their children at a very impressionable age, teaching them to love everyone irrespective of ethnicity, religion, race, gender or class. In so doing, they can help to reduce the number of child soldiers involved in conflicts around the world.
- Women do not seek power for power's sake but rather to improve the human condition. They are therefore sincere, honest and transparent in their efforts to attain peace without having any underlying motives.
- Women have patience and tolerance and are not easily angered.
- As head of the household in many African countries, women are responsible and trustworthy. For example, in some countries in Southern Africa, most of the men go to work in the South Africa mines and the women are the ones responsible for the household.
- Women play an important role in economic activities and support of the rural home, with important decision-making power.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The role of women in waging peace is a crucial one, both in Africa and particularly in Liberia. Although many of women's perspectives, experience and capacities as peace-builders have remained largely ignored and under-utilized outside the local context, they are starting to speak out and take action in the area of conflict resolution and peace building.

There are many local, national, regional and sub-regional women's groups that are actively advocating peace and non-violent resolution of conflict.

The Pan-African Women's Conference on a Culture of Peace, organized by UNESCO and held in Zanzibar in May 1999, brought together some 300 African women leaders, politicians with experience in peace-building, gender and peace researchers, educators, national and community based peace activists, media professionals and information brokers committed to peace and non-violence, gathered together to voice concerns, compare experiences, exchange ideas, prioritize strategies and coordinate actions for conflict resolution and peace building. The conference focused on the impact of violent conflicts in Africa, the role of women in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peace building in Africa and capacity building for a culture of peace in Africa.

The adoption of the "Zanzibar Declaration on Women and a Culture of Peace", marked the launch of a "Pan-African women's peace movement to stop violent conflicts and war". Participants stated in this Declaration that they "commit ourselves to promote non-violent means of conflict resolutions and African values for a culture of peace". In particular, the Declaration notes that "African women demand governments, the OAU and the United Nations System to take prompt and effective action to enforce equitable representation of women in peace negotiations, conflict prevention and resolution".

The UNDP Human Development Report of 1995 notes that women's traditional public invisibility allows them to become political actors in peace movements. For example, in Europe, most of the participants in peace marches and demonstrations during the 1970s and 1980s were women. In Columbia, Latin America, many young men and women, known as "soldiers of peace" are very vocal and active in pursuing peace and reconciliation in their country that has been torn by war for many years.

The traditional role of women in society is also one of neutrality, where they remain behind the scenes and outside of any conflict. This has, in fact, given women a strong voice in the area of conflict resolution.

As the saying goes "behind every successful man is a strong woman". Similarly, one could also say that behind every successful peace process in Africa are effective women peacemakers. For example, three of the UN agencies working for towards the achievement of peace and development, namely UNICEF,

WFP and UNHCR, are headed by powerful women with a strong voice and a keen determination towards the promotion of peace and reconciliation.

Ladies and Gentlemen

In conclusion, I wish to highlight the following points that I would like you to consider as you seek to empower women and strengthen their role in conflict prevention and resolution and peace building.

1. Efforts to move towards a culture of peace must be founded in education. Closing the education gap between men and women is, therefore, a prerequisite for achieving the changes of attitudes and mind sets on which peace depends. As Dr. Aggrey, the Ghanian Scholar, said at the start of the century: *“when you teach a man you teach an individual, when you teach a woman you teach the whole of society.*
2. Given women’s skills, insights and experiences in areas such as conflict resolution, cross-cultural dialogue and the redressing of socio-economic injustices, they should be fully integrated in democratic processes, in particular at the level of decision-making. The UNDP Human Development Report of 1995 notes that, although women constitute half the electorate, they hold only 10% of the seats in the worlds’ parliaments and 6% in national cabinets. Given that women, as key peacemakers, have significant contributions to make to the political process, there is an urgent need to increase their participation in political leadership, at both local and national levels. Legislative action should be taken to ensure affirmative action on women’s access to political and decision-making positions.
3. There is a need to actively advocate for and promote the role of women in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peace building. This could involve, among others, the identifying and prioritizing the needs of women, strengthening the capacity of women leaders at the community level, reinforcing women’s economic power and decision-making, strengthening women’s role as mediators and strengthening the capacities of women refugees and displaced persons to participate in peace negotiations and conflict resolution.
4. Women can be empowered by providing access to quality information and knowledge that is directly or indirectly related to peace and security in the region, in order to facilitate their initiatives. Furthermore, women should be encouraged to document and disseminate success stories and best practices in the areas of peace building, conflict prevention and resolution. This type of information could be particularly useful for informing political decision-makers on the importance of women’s contribution to peace.

By joining forces and including everyone in this endeavor - from ordinary people in the community to high-level decision makers - we can achieve our goal of a culture of peace. The UN system, with renewed dedication and partnership, is committed to this goal. I also urge each one of you, in celebrating this year’s International Women’s Day, to share together the rich diversity of ideas and experiences, which will lead to the development of a successful one-year peace campaign.

As we look to the future, may I end with a quote from the UNESCO Statement on Women’s Contribution to a Culture of Peace, 1995:

“Only together, women and men in parity and partnership, can we overcome obstacles and inertia, silence and frustration and ensure the insight, political will, creative thinking and concrete actions needed for a global transition from the culture of violence to a culture of peace”.

Once again, I would like to thank you for inviting me to this momentous occasion and I wish you meaningful and fruitful deliberations on the way forward towards achieving a culture of peace in Liberia.

Thank you.