Abstract

How did a peaceful women’s movement inspire a dramatic change in the midst of a corrupt government? In the wake of the Second Liberian Civil War and the overthrow of Charles Taylor’s corrupt government, numerous changes occurred in Liberia. The post-war shift not only involved an unprecedented transfer of power, but it also transpired on the heels of a women’s movement for peace. The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, led in part by social worker Leymah Gbowee, transformed the political and social landscape of Liberia. This study seeks to illuminate various aspects of the movement’s success and to explore facets of Gbowee’s leadership that inspired the women to engage in the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace and sustain its success. Leymah Gbowee viewed the movement in the context of her larger goal for peace and equality within Liberia and her consequent continuous efforts for justice in Liberia. I argue that Leymah Gbowee’s leadership embodied strategies of nonviolent intervention, nonviolent protest, and social noncooperation that catalyzed the women of Liberia to create a sustainable peace movement. This was done by engaging women of diverse backgrounds, maintaining a forward-looking mentality, and bravely defying the stifling male leadership of the Liberian government.

Introduction

Fifteen years ago, in 2001, Liberia was in the midst of a civil war spanning fourteen years. An oppressive president led the nation and enacted policies and practices that wreaked havoc on its people. Child soldiers were recruited to fight in the civil war and oftentimes forced to commit atrocities against their own family members. By 2005, the President and his administration were ousted, leading to the peaceful election of the first female President in
Africa. How did this radical change in the social and political environment come about? What, or rather who, spurred the reform that pulled Liberia from the depths of corruption and civil war?

While the answer to this question is multifaceted, it can certainly be explained in part by the work of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. This movement, led by social worker Leymah Gbowee, included Liberian women from diverse backgrounds collectively demanding a peaceful transition of power. I contend that through the implementation of nonviolent intervention, nonviolent protest, and social noncooperation, the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace systematically brought about change that impacted the entire country. The use of these strategies was furthered by Leymah Gbowee’s incredible vision and strength.

The Liberian Civil Wars

To fully grasp the magnitude of the movement’s success, it is important to examine the context of its work. From 1989 - 2003, Liberia was in the throes of civil war, with only a brief period of peace spanning from 1996-1999. The conflict began when President Samuel Doe was in power. Doe’s rise to power solidified with his assassination of the previously elected president, William Richard Tolbert Jr, in 1980 (Tuttle 2010). Doe was originally seen as a member of the nonelite class, which made his leadership attractive to some, including future president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Doe’s presidency marked the rise of tribal identities within Liberia, sparking animosity and resentment between tribal factions. Eventually, the conflict and animosity under Doe’s administration grew blatant and egregious. Previous supporters of Doe began to be targeted. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who ran one of Liberia’s largest banks under Doe, was not immune to the abuse. Sirleaf was “arrested twice, threatened with rape and being buried alive”, and as a result, escaped to the United States (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 17). Sirleaf and other angry parties formed the Association for Constitutional Democracy in Liberia (ACDL) to
petition for the United States’ intervention in Doe’s corrupt government, but with the Cold War occurring at the same time, these efforts were futile (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 18). The lack of international aid or intervention opened the gates for a more radical approach to addressing President Doe’s corruption.

Substantial opposition to President Doe’s leadership offered a prime opportunity for dissent and resistance. In 1983, President Doe accused Charles Taylor, then Director of Liberia’s General Services Administration, of embezzling almost one million dollars(Tikkanen 2007). As a result, Taylor fled to the United States where he was jailed. However, Taylor escaped and made his way to Libya. Taylor’s return fueled anger and disillusionment with Doe and primed the atmosphere for resistance to Doe’s administration. On December 24, 1989, the resistance officially began when Charles Taylor led a group of rebels from the Ivory Coast into Liberia. These forces, formally the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) invaded Liberia, bringing substantial violence and destruction in its wake (Dennis 2006).

The NPFL, under the leadership of Charles Taylor, savagely terrorized civilians on their way to take Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. It is estimated that thousands of innocent Liberian civilians were murdered by the NPFL (Pike). Liberians fled their homes upon hearing that the NPFL was near. Entire villages were pillaged and looted. Women were raped and children were recruited to fight for the rebels, oftentimes being forced to harm and kill their own relatives. Taylor’s forces were “terrifyingly wild and unpredictable, and their commanders kept them high on cane-spirit alcohol, marijuana and speed” (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 45). These men were merciless to those they encountered, leaving thousands of Liberians dead and many more forced to flee as refugees.
In response to the NPFL’s aggression, several other factions formed in protest. By 1995, there were seven different factions fighting in the civil war, with the NPFL as the main faction (Pike 4). That same year, a peace agreement was reached via the Abuja Accord, followed by a brief period of peace. After the first civil war, the country was left to rebuild after seven years of grueling war. With haphazard demobilization and disarmament plans, the post-war efforts were extremely fragile (Klay Kieh 2009, 7). Conditions became ripe for another corrupt government to rise to power. The armed rebel group, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), gained traction and began launching attacks throughout Liberia. LURD consisted of a group of corrupt warlords who, supported by the government of Guinea, invaded Liberia as a direct response to Charles Taylor’s leadership. In 1997, Charles Taylor was elected President of Liberia, with an overwhelming majority of the votes (Tikkanen 2007). Taylor’s continued oppressive policies and support for outside rebel factions sparked significant unrest and discontent within Liberia (Hayner 2007, 6). LURD’s main objective was to remove Charles Taylor from power. Resultantly, as Taylor’s presidency continued, the violence between LURD and Taylor’s forces escalated. Taylor recruited children and mobilized them to fight for his government. Terror and violence continued to permeate Liberia and, in 2003, Taylor was formally indicted for war crimes and gross human rights violations by the Special Court for Sierra Leone, a UN-sponsored war crimes tribunal (Tikkanen 2007). During the period of the second Liberian Civil War, Taylor’s forces and the LURD fought each other for control of the Liberian government. However, this struggle extended far beyond the warring factions to affect civilians.

**Leymah Gbowee and the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace**
While political strife and turmoil continued to proliferate around Liberia, little attention was paid to the civil rights of its citizens. In particular, the Liberian women and children bore the brunt of the civil rights abuses; a phenomenon that extended beyond Liberia. According to the 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325, “civilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those affected by armed conflict” (“Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (Security Council Resolution 1325”)). This Resolution stressed the necessity of involving women in peacekeeping efforts and treating them as equals throughout the process. At a time when the international community began to formally recognize the importance of involving women in peacekeeping efforts, a group of women in Liberia were mobilizing to promote peace within their country. This task was not simple; at this point in Liberian history, women were extremely vulnerable. Women and girls were raped and sexually harassed, and abductions were common (“How the Women of Liberia Fought for Peace and Won”).

In 2001, female members of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) came together to form the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET). WIPNET was created with “the aim of building the capacity of women to enhance their roles in peacebuilding and post conflict reconstruction in West Africa” (WANEP 2013). WIPNET began with approximately twenty women in regular attendance, and by 2003, a network of over 500 women attended the WIPNET meetings (“How the Women of Liberia Fought for Peace and Won”). Led by Leymah Gbowee, a social worker from central Liberia, the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace was formed in 2003 by women in WIPNET. A survivor of childhood abuse at the hands of her father, Gbowee spent her early years dedicated to providing care to those traumatized by the horrors of the civil war (Gbowee and Mithers 2011). Under Gbowee’s leadership, the women began to organize peacebuilding efforts, identifying a three-pronged goal: “that the conflict come
to an immediate, unconditional ceasefire, that peace talks take place between the government and rebel forces, and that international intervention forces be deployed to Liberia” (“How the Women of Liberia Fought for Peace and Won”).

The women began to take action by gathering at a centrally located fish market. There, they prayed and sang for many hours. The women also wore all white as a symbol of peace and purity (Disney 2007). They also instituted a sex strike, which prompted their husbands, partners, and males in general to advocate on behalf of the movement. In April 2003, Charles Taylor agreed to listen to the women. This became an event involving 2,000 of the women sitting in front of the executive building while Gbowee and other leaders spoke with Taylor. Upon seeing the sheer numbers of women and experiencing sustained pressure from WIPNET, Taylor agreed to attend peace talks in Ghana (“How the Women of Liberia Fought for Peace and Won”). The women also convinced leaders from the rebel forces to attend the peace talks, with the continued goal of creating sustainable peace for Liberia.

Though the Mass Action for Peace women were successful in prompting Taylor and the rebel forces to engage in peace talks in Ghana, they soon realized that the men were actually using the “talks” as an opportunity for vacation (Disney 2007). The men approached the work with a laissez-faire attitude, which infuriated the women. Mass Action for Peace mobilized once again to stage a sit-in at the peace talks. The women blockaded the doors and demanded the chief mediator of the peace talks meet with them and agree to establish a peace agreement (“How the Women of Liberia Fought for Peace and Won”). When the guards became angered by this demand, Gbowee threatened to strip naked. The guards were instantly mortified and backed down, as they insisted that seeing Gbowee strip would be akin to seeing their mother strip, which would be unacceptable out of respect (Disney 2007). After the peace talks concluded, Taylor was
exiled to Nigeria. UN peacekeeping forces came to Liberia, thus marking the successful accomplishment of all three of the Mass Action for Peace’s goals for the movement. A transitional government for Liberia was established, paving the way for a new election in 2005. During these elections, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected President, making her the first female president in Africa.

**Literature Review**

Current literature covering the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace emphasizes the gendered aspect of the movement and the importance of its inclusive tactics. My research explores the theoretical and contextual aspects of the movement’s success. To analyze the actions and sustainability of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement, I turn to theoretical approaches. Social Movement Theory, which strives to explain the conditions upon which social movements are built and mobilized, will provide the bedrock from which other theories were conceptualized. Analyzing roots of collective action is instrumental for developing a complex understanding of the movement itself. Social Movement Theory, overall, is a good starting point in connecting Leymah Gbowee and the Liberian women with other social theories. While current literature focuses primarily on the gendered component of social mobilization within the Liberian women’s movement, I also focus on different theories of society and mobilization, such as Mass Society Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory.

Mass Society Theory, formally developed by sociologist William Kornhauser in 1959, asserts that marginalized people within a society, or people who are not part of the political and social elite, are more likely to be drawn to movements against the political elite. This theory emphasizes a society where “both elites and non-elites lack social insulation; that is, when elites are accessible to direct intervention by non-elites, and when non-elites are available for direct
mobilization by elites” (Buechler 2013). While this is only a small facet of the theory itself, I believe it helps explain why women were enthusiastic in joining the movement, especially Muslim women. Under Charles Taylor’s oppressive regime, these women were egregiously neglected in society, which gave them an added incentive to band together in the movement. Mass Society Theory has been traditionally used to explain extremist movements against fascist and dictatorial governments. However, when analyzed in connection to the Liberian women and Leymah Gbowee, I believe this theory helps explain the reason many women became passionately involved in the movement.

Yet another theory of social movements that is pertinent to this research is the Resource Mobilization Theory. As the name suggests, this theory focuses on a movement’s ability to gain traction within a population and acquire the resources necessary to sustain its momentum. This theory emphasizes the timeliness of the goals, resources, and actions of any particular movement, building upon the McCarthy-Zald theory of entrepreneurial mobilization and Tilly’s polity theory (Jenkins 1983). A facet of Social Movement Theory, Resource Mobilization Theory affirms social movements as legitimate parts of political society. This theory emphasizes the necessity of capitalizing on opportunities as they are presented, especially political, economic and social opportunities (Jenkins 1983). In the case of Leymah Gbowee and the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, the main resource for the movement was the sheer number of women who joined. This mass, of course, was strengthened through the support of males as a direct result of the sex strike. The Resource Mobilization Theory also asserts that the organization of the movement itself can supersede the importance of resources within the movement (Jenkins 1983). Above all, movements need to have a strong backbone of organization. I analyze this theory and how it intersects with the trajectory of the Women of
Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement. From the early sit-in protests in the market to the accountability protests in Ghana, I believe the Resource Mobilization Theory applies to many steps of the movement.

While a deeper understanding of the movement itself is certainly crucial in this analysis, I contend that to fully grasp the success and trajectory of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace another perspective is necessary. The composition and formation of the group was unique and deserves its own analysis. To better comprehend the gravity of the group itself, I turn to the principles of strategic nonviolent resistance. Developed by Maria Stephan and Erika Chenoweth, the theory of nonviolent civil resistance as a strategy to achieve success for a movement is highly introspective. Nonviolent resistance is defined as a “civilian-based method used to wage conflict through social, psychological, economic, and political means without threat or use of violence” (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). It requires that key members of a movement analyze the goals and techniques of the movement to determine how it can be most successful within a political and social climate. Overall, non-violent campaigns are more successful than movements involving violence (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). Stephan and Chenoweth postulate two reasons for this trend. First, “a campaign’s commitment to nonviolent methods enhances its domestic and international legitimacy and encourages more broad-based participation in the resistance, which translates into increased pressure being brought to bear on the target.” (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008, 9) Secondly, if regime violence is brought against a nonviolent movement, it is “more likely to backfire against the regime” (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008, 9). This theory places an emphasis on the innovation of nonviolent struggles occurring outside of the conventional political sphere. Stephan and Chenoweth highlight the importance of a strategic nonviolent movement achieving its goals through “widespread noncooperation and defiance”,
which I will show fits perfectly with the methods of Leymah Gbowee and the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). The idea of strategic nonviolence also connects Gene Sharp and his 198 Methods of Nonviolent Action. While the Liberian utilize several strategies on the list, I analyze three strategies in particular that are embodied by the Liberian women: nonviolent intervention, nonviolent protest, and social noncooperation.

Methods
The intersection of these social movement theories provides a previously missing component to current literature. Thus far, literature has focused on the specifics of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. There is not a large body of studies about the Liberian Civil War or the movement for peace. To fill this gap, I methodically analyzed the current literature about Leymah Gbowee and the Women of Liberia Mass Action of Peace, Charles Taylor and the Second Liberian Civil War, and applied theories that may explain the trajectory of the movement. I have reviewed firsthand accounts from Leymah Gbowee about the movement, including her memoir, the documentary Pray the Devil Back to Hell, and several interviews in which she discusses her inspiration and tactics behind the sustained movement for peace. I have also examined literature detailing the political and social environment of Liberia during the civil wars to gain a better understanding of the context in which the movement took place. After studying information about the movement itself, I sought out social movement theories that would best correlate with the events and tactics used by the Liberian women. I found that Mass Society Theory, Resource Mobilization Theory, and Identity Politics present significant connections to the movement. While existing literature describes the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace in the cultural and political context, there is no existing literature that analyzes
the actions within the movement according to theoretical approaches. I will connect the theoretical aspect with the tangible experiences of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace.

Analysis

The success and value of Leymah Gbowee’s leadership and the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace is undeniable. When analyzed within the theoretical framework of Mass Society Theory, Resource Mobilization Theory, and the theory of strategic nonviolence, it is possible to gain a deeper appreciation for the intricacies of the movement. To begin, I examine Mass Society Theory and its relation to the Mass Action for Peace. Mass Society Theory primarily addresses groups who are not within the political or social elite. This is essentially exactly what the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace did; they engaged women, who were systematically oppressed and disrespected (Coleman et. al, 2012). Leymah Gbowee reached a turning point in her quest for justice when she realized that the anger and frustration felt by the women she encountered in her work as a social worker were not solely war related. She held a talking session with women during her work with Trauma Healing that lasted until 3 am. She discovered that many of the problems the women talked about were not directly related to the war; these concerns started long before the war and involved oppression of some sort they had encountered in society, such as an abusive husband (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 105). The Mass Action for Peace movement emphasized the gendered aspect of armed conflict. When conflict arises, the women and children bear the brunt of the brutality (“Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (Security Council Resolution 1325)”). Mass Society Theory helps explain why the women were so eager to mobilize in favor of the movement. After being mistreated and oppressed for so long, they were more likely to stand up in solidarity to support
other women. Mass Society Theory also offers an explanation for why the movement, as a primarily female endeavor, was successful.

WIPNET and the Women of Liberia Mass Action of Peace were also unique in their approach to inclusivity. They differed from a previously established group advocating for women’s rights within Liberia, the Liberian Women’s Initiative (LWI). Whereas the LWI were more exclusive and elitist, Gbowee wanted to ensure that the new movement would be as inclusive as possible. For example, the LWI was comprised of a group of women from primarily educated and elite backgrounds. Gbowee also found them to be somewhat territorial of their movement. Gbowee shared her thoughts in her memoir, saying, “I thought their exclusiveness had really restricted what they were able to accomplish. Worse, the more established they became, the more insular they got, shutting out new voices. I wanted to avoid that mistake.” (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 123-124).

The Mass Action for Peace involved Muslim women in the movement as well, which was crucial to their success. For example, Asatu, prominent women involved in the movement was Muslim. At the first meeting of the Mass Action for Peace when introducing herself, Atasu expressed the fact that she was the only Muslim in the church at the time. Instead of excluding her, the other women celebrated her diversity of faith (Gbowee and Mithers 2011). A key component to the movement is the inclusion of members of the Liberian Muslim Women’s Organization (“How the Women of Liberia Fought for Peace and Won”). During a 2015 interview, Leymah Gbowee also credited much of the movement’s success to the diverse backgrounds of the women who were involved (Goodman 2015). In her acceptance of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, Gbowee reiterated the importance of inclusivity in the movement (Leymah Gbowee- Nobel Lecture). Also included members of the Liberian Muslim Women’s
Organization (“How the Women of Liberia Fought for Peace and Won”). It is important to note that while Mass Society Theory is helpful in the analysis of some aspects of movement, the theory is more commonly used to explain extremist movements against fascist or dictatorial governments (Buechler 2013). The theory is also commonly employed to study radical movements. While the Mass Action for Peace was certainly revolutionary in its strategies and tactics, it was not radical to the point of violence.

In addition to Mass Society Theory, Resource Mobilization Theory also provides insight into the success of the Mass Action for Peace. The principle resource throughout the movement was the women who participated. Without the high participation rate, the movement would not have gained as much traction or attention throughout its cycle. I argue that due to the critical nature of the women themselves as resources, it is impossible to analyze the movement solely in terms of material resources. At WIPNET’s conception, they had less than 50 women. Their primary goal was mobilizing other women. They set forth a goal of mobilizing and training at least twenty women from their country of origin to to expand the membership and reach of the group. As Gbowee recalls in her memoir, “In five years, there would be a hundred and every region would have an activist prepared to come forward” (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 117). The extraordinary mobilizing strategies employed through WIPNET translated to the work of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace when it came time to mobilize women for their own cause.

Inclusivity was also a crucial component to the movement when analyzed from a Resource Mobilization Theory perspective. Gbowee and the women of Liberia inspired women from different backgrounds. Asatu, a member of WIPNET, pledged to mobilize Muslim women as well for the peacebuilding cause. Gbowee remembers Asatu saying, “We’re all serving the
same God. This is not only for the Christian women… We will all work together to bring peace in Liberia” (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 125). Asatu also acted as a spy and gave them inside information from the government (Disney 2007). This proved to be instrumental as the women decided where to protest and provided helpful connections from within the government. Additionally, the Mass Action for Peace was able to gain traction with media. The Catholic radio station in Monrovia, Radio Veritas, took notice of the movement and began broadcasting information (Disney 2007). As a result, information about the movement spread faster and more women were presumably able to mobilize. Mobilization efforts were extremely effective; at one point, fifteen groups of women in nine different countries were wearing white and demanding peace in solidarity with the women of Liberia (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 144). This international attention also manifested itself when the peace talks were occurring in Accra, Ghana. Some members of the international community threatened to cut funding to the Liberian government if the peace talks did not go through (“How the Women of Liberia Fought for Peace and Won”). African peacekeeping forces in Monrovia were also joined by American peacekeepers as the peace talks ended, signifying a new level of international mobilization (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 164).

Chenoweth and Stephan’s concept of strategic nonviolence played a crucial role in the movement’s success. I assert the strategic nonviolence, coupled with key components of Gene Sharp’s Methods of Nonviolent Action, enabled the success of the movement. The three elements of Sharp’s theory that I find most applicable to this movement are nonviolent protest, social noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention. As a form of nonviolent protest, the women wore shirts that said “We want peace- no more war!” to show their solidarity with the movement (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 164). While the movement was intentionally kept apolitical, its end
goal of peace guided the protests. The Lysistratian sex strike technique that the women used was a blatant form of social noncooperation. The support of their male counterparts was instrumental in gaining momentum and pressuring Taylor and the rebels into the peace talks. The women employed nonviolent intervention when they staged the sit-ins in front of the executive mansion and fish markets. Perhaps the most powerful nonviolent intervention technique came when the women conducted the sit-in at the peace talks and blockaded the men from leaving without a concrete agreement.

In general, much of the strategic non-violence stemmed from gendered conceptions of females within Liberian society. They focused on their roles as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters “in order to emphasize a peaceful and nonthreatening stereotype of women” (“How the Women of Liberia Fought for Peace and Won”). Pray the Devil Back to Hell depicts the women wearing white clothes with their hair tied back to symbolize purity and peace (Disney 2007). In general, the women used the societal respect for mothers already inherent within Liberian culture. Upon meeting Leymah Gbowee to hear the Mass Action for Peace’s demands, he said, “‘No group of people could make me get out of bed but the women of Liberia, who I consider to be my mothers’” (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 141). The women of Liberia were able to use their femininity, which had previously been used against them in society, to bring an entire nation to peace.

For the purposes of further research, I recommend analysis of Resource Mobilization Theory and the economic elements of the movement. While I focused primarily on the political and social elements of Mass Action for Peace, I believe it would be beneficial to also examine the sources of funding for the movement and how these funds were used and distributed.

Conclusion
Leymah Gbowee and the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace are truly inspiring. Though the movement itself has concluded, its legacy continues to permeate subsequent movements. The Women Peace and Security Network Africa (WIPSEN) was founded, in part by Leymah Gbowee, with the goal of further empowering women in peacebuilding efforts. In 2011, Leymah Gbowee won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. After experiencing the horrific leadership of Charles Taylor and Samuel Doe, Leymah Gbowee came to the conclusion that Liberia needed a leader who “advocated peace, but with vision and strength” (Gbowee and Mithers 2011, 107). I am confident that Gbowee provided that essential leadership to the women in Liberia, empowering the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace to mobilize for sustainable peace and change.
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