

**Keynote Address by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**  
**On “Liberian Women’s Involvement in Peacemaking and Peacebuilding”**  
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**Consolidating a Future in Peace**  
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President [Terje] Rød-Larsen and Members of the Institute;  
Distinguished Guests;  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I welcome the opportunity to visit IPI once again, at your kind invitation, and I will talk about consolidating the peace but with a different dimension. I would like to talk about the role of Liberian women in peacemaking and peacebuilding, and the invaluable contributions they have made as meaningful actors in the peace processes in our region.

Some ten years ago, the former Defense Minister of Finland, Elisabeth Rehn, and I were commissioned by UNIFEM to document the effects of conflict on women and the role of women in peacekeeping. We travelled to Bosnia and Colombia and Cambodia, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, East Timor.

Despite the diversity in tradition, culture and level of development, the voices of the women, captured in our published documentary, “Women, War, Peace,” were the same: sexual exploitation, public service discrimination, peace crusaders, and political exclusion when the war comes to an end.

The Liberian experience is no different, although significant changes regarding the role of women are under way in all countries across the globe.

**WOMEN’S INVOLVEMENT IN PEACEMAKING**

When the civil war erupted in Liberia in 1990, Liberian women initially concerned themselves with relief efforts, identifying with displaced people in centers across the country. By 1994, when all semblance of civility disappeared, killings intensified, and women became the victims, a group of women organized themselves into a pressure group, called the Liberia Women Initiative (LWI), concluding that they needed to do more than simply provide relief. They needed to use whatever strength they had to help to restore the peace in our country.

The Initiative brought together women of all faiths, through the Interfaith Mediation Council, and women of different ethnic and interest groups. In February 1994, the Liberia Women Initiative called a mass meeting of women, the only criterion for joining being a commitment to peace and the unity of our country. Women turned out in the thousands.

Thereafter, they staged peaceful demonstrations, admonishing the warlords that they wanted peace, not war; that if anybody wanted to rule the country, they should go to the ballot box and not resort to the gun. Promises of peace made to them were quickly broken, and the fighting raged on.

The women's advocacy group advanced their initiatives, their networks transcending national borders, reaching out to Liberians in the Diaspora to keep the issue of peace in Liberia on the agenda of the U.S., Europe and African countries.

Unsolicited but undeterred, the women continued their crusade to the various Liberian peace conferences, ending in Accra, in 2003, where they were invited to participate, as observers. As a result of their determination, ultimately every decision made by warlords was referred to the women for their views.

Many of you may have seen the documentary, "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," which chronicles the interfaith, female-led journey for peace in Liberia and which earned our compatriot, Leymah Gbowee, the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

In the 1997 elections, in which I was a candidate, women mobilized and spread out to every county to undertake civic education and inform people of their rights. They returned with reports that there was no level playing field, and they predicted, correctly, that the people would vote for my opponent out of fear. Nevertheless, their advocacy continued unabated and, after Accra, through the Transitional Government, resulting in my election in 2005.

Liberia today is enjoying its ninth year of uninterrupted peace, and has now turned its attention, through the women, from peacemaking to peacebuilding, by strengthening mechanisms to ensure that peace continues to prevail not only in Liberia, but in our neighborhood, the Mano River Union Basin; in our region, the sixteen ECOWAS countries; and in our continent, all countries of the African Union.

## **WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING**

The role of Liberian women has similarly evolved from peacemaking into peacebuilding. This peacebuilding role was facilitated by institutional frameworks such as the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), comprising peace activists from Sierra Leone, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia; the West African Network for Peace Building (WANEP), which has established strong national networks in every ECOWAS Member State – its

Liberia partner is the Women in Peace Building Network (WIPNET-Liberia); and the Angie Brooks International Centre for Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security (ABIC).

MARWOPNET was established through the instrumentality of a Geneva-based women's advocacy group, Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS), which brought together women from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, at a meeting in Abuja, in 2000. Once unified, the women were instrumental in opening up dialogue among the leaders of their respective countries. In 2003, MARWOPNET was awarded the United Nations Prize for Human Rights by the General Assembly, in recognition of its outstanding achievement in promoting human rights and peace.

Today, MARWOPNET's Liberia Chapter is reaching out to the women of la Côte d'Ivoire, in efforts to mediate the conflict there. They are also engaged in the humanitarian situation of the Ivoirian refugees by providing food and shelter.

WANEP/WIPNET promotes gender mainstreaming in peace-building and conflict-prevention frameworks at the community, national and regional levels. Between 2001 and 2003, they organized collaborative peace-building training workshops for a network of women peace-builders from nine of Liberia's 15 counties. Another initiative involving Liberian women is the Women Peace and Security Network Africa (WIPSEN-Africa), based in Ghana, and headed by Liberian Laureate, Leymah Gbowee.

Considering the vital role which women have and continue to play, our Government supports several mechanisms and initiatives to empower them and enhance their peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts.

Among them is the Angie Brooks International Centre for Women's Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security – an outcome of the 2009 International Women's Colloquium, which brought together over 800 international and more than 2,000 domestic women to advocate for a greater role for women.

The success of the initiative of another advocacy group, Gender Is My Agenda Campaign (GIMAC), is a recent one that has won the approval of the African Union at the Summit in January. It seeks to adopt the Women Situation Room as a "best practice" and the Angie Brooks Centre continues to champion this initiative in all elections in Africa. The Summit also endorsed the Empowerment of Women in Agriculture (EWAG), an advocacy group for support for women farmers. I serve as a "Champion" for both of these initiatives.

Liberia is engaged with the UN Peacebuilding Commission and strongly supports all of those efforts made on behalf of the women, among them, the Women Situation Room, which monitored the Liberian elections of 2011; which monitored the Senegal elections this year; and also is now in the process of monitoring the elections in Sierra Leone.

Women continue to play a major role in the efforts for peace. Women continue to be those peace builders; continue to promote the environment that enables all citizens to search for peace, to maintain peace and to use the security that peace brings to be able to join in the processes of development that will touch the lives and change the condition of humankind.

Thank you.