

# Critical Half

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## Women's Narratives, War, and Peace-Building

“Women Cannot Cry Anymore”:  
Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict

EMIKO NOMA

Women Building Peace:  
The Liberian Women's Peace Movement

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DUSHYANTHI HOOLE

IN THE FIELD: Enacting the Power of Women's Narratives:  
My Journey from Trauma and Silence  
to Become an Agent of Social Change

HONORATA KIZENDE



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*Critical Half* is a bi-annual journal of Women for Women International devoted to the exchange of ideas and insight encountered by practitioners in the fields of gender, development, conflict, and post-conflict reconstruction.

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# CriticalHalf

WOMEN'S NARRATIVES, WAR, AND PEACE-BUILDING

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# Reflections from the Board of Editors

Women tell the stories of their lives—to their children, to their friends and neighbors, to their lovers and husbands. These narratives can teach a lesson, open a dialogue, pass information, share experiences; the ability and the willingness to communicate is one of women’s assets. With their stories, women connect both with other people and with their own inner voices. A narrative can empower both the teller and the audience. While the importance of sharing a personal story may start with introspection and interpersonal bonds, the real power of a narrative is its potential to illuminate a social problem and create social change.

One of the important contributions of women’s movements worldwide has been the sharing of personal narratives that help “name” issues that have previously gone unmentioned. For example, violence against women has always existed, but when victims share their painful stories, the phenomenon can no longer be ignored or compartmentalized. The telling impacts both the speakers and the listeners: battered women recognize that they are not alone, and those who hear the stories, including other battered women themselves, begin noticing commonalities and accepted norms and demanding change. This is not to say that domestic violence has disappeared. Far from it. But it is now recognized for the global social problem that it is. This consciousness raising is only possible when women share their stories. Once the conversation is started and the problem named, the possibilities for social change emerge.

Many stories reveal women as victims, oppressed and beaten down by systems that they did not construct and that hold them powerless. We cannot ignore the horrors of war that are visited upon women and children; we cannot avoid the pain of refugees fleeing their homes after watching loved ones tortured or killed. We have to know the suffering to understand the dynamics of the problem and to be moved to respond.

But hearing only narratives of pain and suffering can lead to feelings of despair and powerlessness. It is critical

that stories of survival, success, and concrete solutions in the face of profound problems are also shared. Stories of women who become heroes under impossible circumstances can uplift and inspire. In addition, if we define ourselves by our problems and our oppressors rather than by our strengths, we lose hope, and chances for change fade. If we only think of women in the context of war, we lose the vision of peace.

Narratives cross borders; they are not static. But there is a challenge in getting stories heard in a way that can foster positive change. We have gone from sharing stories around campfires to the potential for stories to be shared among millions. Television, radio, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet have replaced the village square as sources of information. But the power of the media to distort the realities of everyday life is tremendous. Therefore, a vital step in the creation of a just and peaceful world is the development of a media platform that truthfully disseminates women’s experiences of war and of peace-building.

If a story is heard without distortion, it can resonate by inspiring attentive and compassionate listeners to work with the tools and resources available to create a better world. Citizens in peaceful regions have a responsibility to listen and to pass along the stories that women in conflict regions tell. Funders, academics (especially in women’s studies), and lawmakers are all crucial links in the chain of change.

The links between narratives and social change are complicated. Peace and reconciliation are possible when stories are compelling and the audience is alert, empathetic, and moved to action. Ending conflict is not an impossible dream as long as stories that reflect both the realities of war and the possibilities of peace continue to be heard.

**Dr. Rebecca Reviere**

*Professor of Sociology and Anthropology  
Howard University  
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## In this issue of *Critical Half*

There is a power in telling one's story, a power in allowing raw truth and experience to spill past the protective walls that we all construct for ourselves. Only after these walls have been breached, and our stories echo out beyond our control, can we begin to understand that power. When the women of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda told their stories about the rapes they survived during their countries' wars, the International Criminal Court, for the first time, declared rape to be a war crime. When the Congolese women participating in Women for Women International's program told their stories of war atrocities on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, tens of thousands of people reacted and took action. I remember sitting with Nabito, one of the women featured on that episode of the *Oprah* show. Nabito's story was horrifying, and I choked back the tears as she retold me of the abuse she suffered. I looked at Nabito and asked her what I should do with her story. Normally I tell the world about the injustices that I hear from women survivors of wars. Nabito looked at me and said that I could tell the world, just not her neighbors. I love this response because I believe that it speaks to the courage that is generated by telling one's story.

For years I was scared to tell my own story and my own truth; I feared that once people knew they would think of me differently. But after meeting Nabito, that all changed. I began the painful process of writing my memoir. It was painful not only because I find it very difficult to sit down and write, but because I had to deeply remember the pain I felt when I left my home at 19 years old and what led up to that moment and what came after it. Months later when I traveled the country on my book tour, in city after city and bookstore after bookstore, women would come up to me and share their stories. Once the door is open and a safe space is created, women can emerge from their isolation and secrecy, own their histories, and create their futures.

This issue of *Critical Half* considers the power of women's stories to embolden them to become agents of change and share their plight and triumphs with others who would not otherwise be aware of their circumstances. As discussions of war continue to focus on the front line issues of politics and military strategy, women's stories of survival and courage provide important insights on the true costs of war. The opening article, "Women Cannot Cry Anymore": Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict," shows how women's stories of violent abuse in the midst of war-torn societies can foster peace and

growth. The author, Emiko Noma, illustrates how women participating in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice use their narratives to provide context and understanding of the gender-based violence that has historically been a byproduct of war and to help women rebuild their communities after violent conflict.

The next two articles in this issue discuss how women can use the power of their narratives to transform their identities as victims into active agents for peace-building. "Women Building Peace: The Liberian Women's Peace Movement" provides rich data regarding how women in Liberia used narratives to create peace after Liberia's 1989–2003 conflicts. In this piece, Erica Sewell shares provocative stories that she gathered from in-depth interviews in Monrovia, Liberia, detailing how these women refused to be regarded merely as passive victims and used their life stories to become community leaders helping to create peace after a devastating war. Then, in "Women's Truth Narratives: The Power of Compassionate Listening," Elisabeth Porter discusses how audiences can listen to women's narratives of cruel violence in a manner that affirms their humanity and encourages women to break the silence and begin the process of becoming important social actors fostering peace and positive social change.

Despite the triumphs many women in war-torn and post-conflict societies have experienced through utilizing narratives, too many women still remain silenced. Dushyanthi Hoole explains how Tamil women's narratives continue to be suppressed in "Suppression of Tamil Women's Narratives in Sri Lanka." Hoole speaks to the lack of women's narratives that courageously speak out against dominant groups, contending that Tamil women's stories are often left out of the public sphere or modified to achieve the aims of those with power.

Traditionally, each issue of *Critical Half* closes with a contribution from one of our chapter offices. Given the nature of this issue, we have chosen to feature the story of Honorata Kizende, a graduate of Women for Women International's program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Her deeply moving story, "Enacting the Power of Women's Narratives: My Journey from Trauma and Silence to Become an Agent of Social Change," details how she survived separation from her family, brutal rapes, long travels to safety, and other forms of torment to become a courageous voice against the abuse of women. She explains how her participation in Women for Women International helped her find her

voice and use her narrative to empower other women to break their silence.

It is my hope that this issue of *Critical Half* demonstrates the great power of women telling their stories. Even those of us who have been regarded as victims possess great strength to transform our lives and the lives of those in our communities when we share our stories with others to become agents of change.

To conclude, I would like to thank our Board of Editors: Brenda J. Allen, Jessica Katz Jameson, Anita Nahal, Dr. Rebecca Reviere, and Takirra Winfield. Each Board member provided thoughtful comments to strengthen the articles included in this issue. I am also grateful for the hard work and dedication of our Managing Editor, Cerise L. Glenn, and our Research & Resource Development

Officer, Tobey Goldfarb. The work of our copyeditor Barbara Bares and designer Kristin Hager also contributed greatly to this issue. Finally, I express my sincerest appreciation and gratitude to Women for Women International's supporters, participants, employees, and sponsors. Your active interest in women's lived experiences in war-torn societies around the world makes this publication possible.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ZS', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**Zainab Salbi**

*Founder and CEO*

*Women for Women International*

**WOMEN'S STORIES GO BEYOND HEADLINES TO CAPTURE THE NUANCE OF COMPLEX SITUATIONS** and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narratives of Women PeaceMakers at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice not only provide this understanding but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of a culture of peace, the voices of women—those most affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation—must be recorded, disseminated, and spotlighted. The documentation and sharing of these stories from around the world create communities of listeners, empathizers, and activists across cultures and experiences.

# “Women Cannot Cry Anymore”: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict

EMIKO NOMA

## Introduction

Women’s narratives are tremendously valuable tools for identifying the needs of women during and after periods of violent conflict and, indeed, for transforming conflict itself, but narratives have rarely been harnessed for the pursuit of peace. The narrative genre and the voices it amplifies serve as alternatives to filtered media portrayals and expose the gender-specific ways violence affects women. At the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) at the University of San Diego, the Women PeaceMakers Program documents the stories of women who are not only victims of conflict but are also building peace amid the ruins of their war-torn societies.<sup>1</sup> As detailed explorations of women’s lives before, during, and after conflict, the narratives produced at the IPJ provide context not often found in legal documents used in courts or truth commissions or in the brief vignettes of brutality documented in many reports produced by human rights organizations.

The women who participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program are from conflict-affected regions around the world—in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America. But despite their diverse locales and backgrounds, they demonstrate that a culture of peace is generated through the strength of women’s voices. The stories of these women—written in narrative form by Peace Writers over the course of two months—create community across distances, cultures, and experiences. This article weaves together relevant literature with individual stories of the IPJ Women PeaceMakers to explore how the narrative form can contribute to the understanding of conflict and its transformation into peace.<sup>2</sup>

## Providing Nuance

In an age of sound-bites and 24-hour news coverage, public discourse on issues affecting our communities and world is often “disembodied, abstract, [and] emotionally detached,” according to sociologist William

Gamson.<sup>3</sup> “[Media] can be a facilitator of conflict, if only by editing away facts that do not fit the demands of air time or print space.”<sup>4</sup> Headlines purport to provide all necessary information. Nuance is glossed over. Black-and-white perspectives of current events are nurtured. As such, “words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity,” as the educator Paulo Freire referred to disaffected and detached pedagogy.<sup>5</sup> To remedy this plague of disembodied language, Arundhati Roy, prose writer and antiwar activist, encourages us “to tell stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe.”<sup>6</sup> The narratives of women, who are often marginalized or silenced, can serve as these alternative voices, painting a fuller picture than simplified rhetoric.

The story of Svetlana Kijejanin of Serbia, Woman PeaceMaker (WPM) from 2006, goes deeper than the headlines of the state-run media during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Serbian media enflamed nationalism and institutionalized Slobodan Milošević’s “language of demagogy and...brazen incitement to violence.”<sup>7</sup> News reports in the Serbian republic left little room for opinions not in keeping with state propaganda. In addition, media from the rest of the former Yugoslavia and the international arena often failed to distinguish between Serbs who supported Milošević and those who vehemently opposed him.

Kijejanin, though “put in the same cage” as Milošević because she was a Serb, exemplified throughout the decade of conflicts that not all Serbs supported the dictator. In her narrative, she recalls a vivid encounter with Sarajevo residents just two years after the end of the siege of that city by Bosnian Serb forces: she was there for a peace conference, but on a walk in town, was identified as a Serb and treated accordingly—screamed at, then intimidated and nearly kidnapped by a war veteran. But Kijejanin resisted the polarizing language of nationalism that consumed many. She worked with refugees and

youth throughout the Yugoslav conflicts regardless of their backgrounds—Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Albanians, Serbs, Roma, and many others.

Violent rhetoric by those in power is employed in many other conflicts, including on the Korean peninsula. In 1996, volatile language spewed from the governments of both North and South Korea when hostile events coincided with floods in the north that caused widespread famine, and the South initially refused to send humanitarian aid. "The fact that the delayed or minimum food aid to North Korea caused enormous suffering in the country was effectively de-emphasized by associating the famine with the natural collapse of an 'evil' and 'flawed' Communist regime instead of with a humanitarian catastrophe."<sup>8</sup> But in direct disregard of the South's excuses, 2003 WPM Hyun-Sook Lee's South Korea-based non-governmental organization (NGO), Women Making Peace, sent aid over the demilitarized zone (DMZ). In helping the "enemy," Lee reiterates in her narrative that "people's power laid a bridge over the DMZ for the first time since the division of Korea."

Media portrayals of the civil war in Sri Lanka, like portrayals of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Korea, lack nuance. The Sri Lanka conflict is primarily seen as a conflict between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the Hindu Tamil minority.<sup>9</sup> But the story of Shreen Abdul Saroor, WPM in 2004, highlights what is overlooked in this simple analysis: she is Muslim and has suffered because of the actions of both Sinhalese and Tamils. Saroor recalls in her narrative how Muslims lived alongside Tamils for generations and were often sympathetic to their grievances against the Sinhalese.<sup>10</sup> But in 1990, Saroor's family and 120,000 other Muslims were forced by Tamil militants to flee their homes in Mannar district. A reflection of history commonly unnoticed, Saroor's narrative captures the complexity of the conflict on her native island.

### Providing Visibility

In addition to facilitating black-and-white approaches to complex issues and situations, the absence of nuance in reports by the mass media also reinforces a "greatly increased distance between those who make the decisions and those who have to suffer them."<sup>11</sup> In the contemporary world, globalization has enabled connections in "real time"—through e-mail, instant messaging, and ease of travel, among other innovations. But the disconnection between the upper echelons of power, where policies are formed, and the people on the ground, particularly women, is stark. Such policies, like the decision to use violence as a means of conflict resolution, fail

to take women's interests or needs into consideration.<sup>12</sup> "In official histories of peoples and nations women have often been invisible—they have been hidden and their stories and activities left untold."<sup>13</sup> The problem is highlighted in the narrative of Mary Ann Arnado, 2005 WPM from Mindanao in the Philippines, when she says, "The women in the conflict areas are invisible...because we have been erased from the statistics and in the entire peace and security process."

The narratives of women, then, give visibility to those disproportionately affected by armed conflict; these stories must be amplified to eliminate the disconnection between the powerful and the powerless to provide understanding of the dynamics of conflict. Many of the vignettes captured in Arnado's narrative vividly depict how women are often "just at the receiving end of what men are doing to the world." In the opening story, Arnado encounters a mother displaced by the fighting. The body of the woman's dead infant son is lying next to her, but she is unable to mourn—the situation in Mindanao, Arnado explains, is so desperate that, essentially, "women cannot cry anymore." In the narrative, Arnado also brings the voice of a grandmother who describes being an evacuee her entire life, of a young girl who cannot harvest her watermelons (the sale of which provides her only income for school because of the war), of a group of displaced women who simply want their ladles back from the army who stole them, and of a mother so traumatized by violence and evacuation that she kills her two children and attempts to take her own life to spare them the devastation of war.

A UN General Assembly report to the Secretary-General in 2006 outlined the myriad forms of gender-based violence that occur during armed conflict, "women experience all forms of physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated by both State and non-State actors," including "murder, unlawful killings, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, abductions, maiming and mutilation, forced recruitment of women combatants, rape, sexual slavery, sexual exploitation, involuntary disappearance, arbitrary detention, forced marriage, forced prostitution, forced abortion, forced pregnancy, and forced sterilization."<sup>14</sup>

Many of the IPJ Women PeaceMakers carry stories—either their own or others'—that elucidate these many varieties of gender-based violence during war. Their "[s]tories put a human face to suffering."<sup>15</sup> WPM Palwasha Kakar from Afghanistan recounts in her 2006 narrative numerous stories of her own and other women's experiences trying to survive under the Taliban and then under the repressive rule of local warlords. There is the

13-year-old girl forced to marry a Talib man, another young girl who was stoned to death for exposing the fact that she was raped, and the story of Rokshana, the woman who tried to escape the brutality of her first husband and his hired armed men by setting herself on fire, a practice known as self-immolation, increasingly common in the country. The 2006 narrative of WPM Shukrije Gashi of Kosovo captures the fear of being raped by Serb paramilitary troops. Gashi also describes an adolescent Albanian girl used as a sex slave, rejected by her family, forced into prostitution, and then trafficked to Europe by the “bosses” who had originally coerced her to work in brothels.

### Documenting Best Practices

But in the narratives from the Women PeaceMakers Program, the litany of the gender-specific ways violence affects women is balanced by the profound actions of women who refuse to remain victims, of women who contribute to the development of their countries and a culture of peace in the world. Puerto Rican peace activist Judith Conde Pacheco writes, “Our untold stories are necessary to organize and process, to recover our identity and to change the visions that some have of the participation of women in the social, political, and economic transformation of society.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in a post-conflict atmosphere, “women’s advances—the survival strategies that kept families alive and communities together—are erased from the historical record.”<sup>17</sup> Women PeaceMakers’ narratives illuminate the expansive possibilities for peacemaking on various levels and continuums, expressing a truism recorded by Schaffer and Smith: “As people...read stories across cultures, they begin to voice, recognize, and bear witness to a diversity of values, experiences, and ways of imagining a just social world and of responding to injustice, inequality, and human suffering.”<sup>18</sup> As one WPM expressed the purpose of documenting her story, “The goal is not to iconize me; it is the sharing of best practices.”<sup>19</sup>

### Community Influence

At the grassroots level, Women PeaceMakers are involved in activities as varied as peace education, community reconciliation efforts, the reintegration of former child soldiers, and the creation of NGOs to build civil society. Sister Pauline Acayo of northern Uganda, 2005 WPM, helped form women peace committees within internally displaced peoples’ camps, providing platforms for women camp leaders to speak to other women and “sensitize” them about human rights. Kijevanin was one of the founding members of Group MOST, the

Association of Cooperation and Mediation, a group of educational psychologists engaged in peace education and democratic development in the former Yugoslavia. Arnado initiated the organization of a local, community-based ceasefire monitoring team in Mindanao, the now well-established Bantay Ceasefire. Acayo, Saroor, and 2004 WPM Christiana Thorpe have all worked extensively with former child soldiers who are attempting to integrate into the communities they were often forced to destroy. The narrative of 2006 WPM Rebecca Joshua Okwaci describes her leadership in establishing several women’s organizations inside and outside Sudan, while the story of Somali WPM in 2003, Zahra Ugas Farah, explains the founding of the Family Economy Rehabilitation Organization to address basic survival issues for the women who were holding their families together during the brutal civil war. Farah states in her narrative, “We were targeting women. Why? Because women are the base of the family and the family is the base of the community.”

### Political Influence

In the political arena, several WPM narratives document the women’s use of the language of international law, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and UN Security Council Resolution 1325, to influence peace processes in significant ways.<sup>20</sup> As a member of civil society, Zahra Ugas Farah participated in the Somali Peace and National Reconciliation Conference in 2000 and was part of the “Sixth Clan” women’s pressure group at the negotiating table, advocating for the recognition of women’s rights. At the second peace conference in 2002, Farah chaired the Leaders Committee, composed of only male faction leaders from various clans.

Luz Méndez, 2004 WPM, had a vital role in the Guatemalan peace process that ended the 36-year civil war. As a member of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, the coalition in opposition to the government and state military forces, Méndez—the only woman at the negotiating table for a time—advocated strongly for the inclusion of gender commitments in the peace accords; her narrative records that by the end of the war in 1996, these provisions were found in five of the agreements.

### International Influence

The women’s movement internationally has both influenced the Women PeaceMakers and been influenced by them. Numerous WPMs at the IPJ point to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing

in 1995 as the impetus for their continued actions for peace. Rebecca Joshua Okwaci used the parallel Beijing NGO Forum as the platform to bring together Sudanese women from both the north and south to draft a declaration of shared principles and a call for peace. Zahra Ugas Farah, Luz Méndez, Hyun-Sook Lee, and Zarina Salamat of Pakistan (WPM 2004) also regard the Beijing NGO Forum as a turning point in their activism, where they witnessed the strength of women working together.

Some WPMs took their national experiences to the international arena, creating a global community of women peace activists and sharing best practices. Méndez in particular shared lessons from her native Guatemala, which could then be adapted by her audiences for application in new cultural contexts. Her story narrates her journeys around the globe speaking on women's involvement in peace processes. Méndez recalls a trip to Burundi: "When [the women] talked about sexual violence, I recalled the horrible episodes of sexual violence in Guatemala during the armed conflict. When they spoke about their desire to have better political representation in the future government, I recalled the same discussions and efforts taking place in Guatemala." She "realized [her] experience could be useful." As Gamson notes, "Storytelling promotes empathy across different social locations."<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

"No matter how small this is, it is important to me. I had been dreaming of documenting my story. I have had a dramatic life. I felt it was time to tell my story; it may become faint in the face of constant change," stated one WPM upon the conclusion of her participation in the WPM program.<sup>22</sup> Amidst the constant change in a fast-paced, globalizing world, media sound-bites alien to nuance, the chasm between the developers of powerful policies and those affected by them—women's narratives strike a different chord in the contemporary world, exposing, shouting, reminding, wailing, exemplifying, or sometimes merely whispering new ways of being amid violence. They prove James Baldwin true when he said, "When circumstances are made real by another testimony, it becomes possible to envision change."<sup>23</sup> Particularly when those voices are of women who have suffered because of war but have become peacemakers rebuilding their communities, or are of women who are "just ordinary people" doing extraordinary things, the possibility of transforming violent conflict into sustainable peace appears ever closer.<sup>24</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Women PeaceMakers Program celebrated its fifth year in the fall of 2007. The program is made possible by the Fred J. Hansen Foundation.
- 2 The narratives of all the Women PeaceMakers referenced in this article can be found at [http://peace.sandiego.edu/programs/women\\_narrative.html](http://peace.sandiego.edu/programs/women_narrative.html). The narratives are composed by selected Peace Writers who interview the WPMs over the course of two months and work in conjunction with them during the documentation process. The IPJ thanks all of its Peace Writers and specifically those who documented the stories referred to herein: Jackee Batanda, Donna Chung, Sarah Cross, Carmen Dyck, Heather Farrell, Kathleen Hughart, Whitney McIntyre, Allison Meeks, Emiko Noma, Susan Van Schoonhoven, and Maia Woodward.
- 3 Gamson, 2002: 188.
- 4 Rehn and Johnson-Sirleaf, 2002:103.
- 5 Freire, 2000: 142.
- 6 Roy, 2003: 112.
- 7 Thompson, 1999: 53.
- 8 Aaltola, 1999: 375.
- 9 See Reuters AlertNet's crisis profile of Sri Lanka: [http://www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/LK\\_CON.htm?v=in\\_detail](http://www.alertnet.org/db/crisisprofiles/LK_CON.htm?v=in_detail), BBC News Country Profile of Sri Lanka: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/country\\_profiles/1168427.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/country_profiles/1168427.stm).
- 10 According to a 2006 report of the International Crisis Group, Muslims make up 7.3 percent of the population, while Tamils make up 12.7 percent and Sinhalese 74 percent.
- 11 Roy, 2003: 112.
- 12 Civilians, most of them women and their children, are 75 percent of the casualties in contemporary armed conflicts. See Rehn and Johnson-Sirleaf, 2002. There are no solid, undisputed statistics on gender-based violence against women and girls during armed conflict. Underreporting, the political interests of governments or armed groups, and the fact that the methodology and collection of data on "sexual violence against women during war is in its relative infancy" are some factors contributing to the lack of reliable statistics. (IRIN, 2007: 12).
- 13 Baksh et al., 2005: 28-9.
- 14 United Nations, In-Depth Study, 2006: 44.
- 15 Schaffer and Smith, 2004: 3.
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- 19 Private interview with WPM.
- 20 Article 7 of CEDAW reads, "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country...." UNSC Resolution 1325 reaffirms "the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and stress[es] the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution...."
- 21 Gamson, 2002: 189.
- 22 Private interview with WPM.
- 23 Baldwin quoted in Krysl, 1991.
- 24 Arnado during a public discussion at the IPJ in November 2005. When asked by an audience member how she finds the strength to do the kind of work she does during violent situations, Arnado responded that women peacemakers are "just ordinary people," that you do not have to be extraordinary to do this kind of work.

DURING WAR, IT IS OFTEN THE WOMEN WHO ARE PERCEIVED AS THE VICTIMS WHILE MEN ARE BOTH THE WARRIORS and, later, the peacemakers. This article, through narratives of women leaders, participants and observers, describes the Liberian women's peace movement at the end of the 20th century and the meaningful role it played in bringing peace to the war-torn nation of Liberia. It also demonstrates that the Liberian women broke out of stereotypical roles as victims and became agents of social transformation. They became involved in all aspects of the peace process to create a better Liberia—one free of violence. The conflict in Liberia makes a strong case for women to be recognized by the international community for their roles as peacemakers.

# Women Building Peace: The Liberian Women's Peace Movement

ERICA K. SEWELL

## Introduction

For well over a decade, Liberia was trapped in a continuous cycle of violence. The country was thrown into a state of despair as the socio-economic conditions deteriorated during the first phase of the civil war, which lasted from 1989 to 1997. It was not long before the second round of violence erupted in 1999, which continued until 2003. Throughout both phases of the civil war, human rights abuses were extensive and no one was safe, regardless of their age or gender. Rape was common, and by 2003 it was estimated that over 150,000 people had been killed and half of the country's 3 million citizens displaced.<sup>1</sup>

In most wars, gender roles are strictly defined: women and children are seen as the victims, while men are viewed as both the perpetrators of violence and the peacemakers. Statistically, women and children constitute 80 percent of all refugees and displaced people.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to these stereotypes, the women of Liberia played a significant role in reducing violence during their country's civil war. After the first shot was fired, it was the women who reached out to others through humanitarian aid distribution. They risked their lives in the name of peace and demanded a voice at the final negotiations.

This paper examines the conditions that led to change in the Liberian women's societal roles and is based on personal interviews with many of the movement's leaders, participants, and observers by the author in Monrovia, Liberia during December 2006 and January 2007. The women shared their stories retrospectively and explained how the peace movement evolved and the effect that it had on the peace process. The time period for the narratives is the start of the Liberian civil war on December 24, 1989 to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on August 18, 2003, signaling the end of the war.

## Methodology

The study upon which this article is based was designed as an analytical enhanced case study. Twenty in-depth, structured interviews were conducted with participants of the Liberian women's peace movement, observers of the Liberian women's peace movement, staff members of international organizations in Liberia, and a member of the current Liberian government. Before arriving in Liberia, the author acquired interview participant names and contact information through literature searches and the websites of numerous organizations. In addition, once in Liberia, the method of "snowball sampling" was used to find interview participants. "Snowball sampling" relies on referrals from initial interview participants to generate additional interview participants. The data were analyzed and coded according to emerging themes in the interviews, such as the women's humanitarian, advocacy, and political activities.

## Seeds of the Women's Peace Movement

The Liberian women's peace movement evolved in response to the horrendous societal conditions and indiscriminate violence that the war produced. Martha, a participant of the women's movement, recalled the horrors of the war:

The war came without anyone knowing what it really meant. During the war everyone started looking for places to hide. My sister lost her older son. We don't know if he is dead or alive. Women did not get support during the war. Women were sex slaves to warlords, lost their children and were treated like nothing during the war. Soldiers could just take women as wives. Women couldn't refuse because the soldiers had the guns.<sup>3</sup>

Victoria, a leader in the women's movement, commented on the abuse that women endured during the war:

Some of the things that were happening [during the war] were so barbaric that people don't want to talk about them. I mean the rebels would look at a pregnant woman and say "that is a boy or no that is girl. Okay let's find out." Then they would walk up to a pregnant woman and rip her stomach open, take the baby out and cut the umbilical cord from the woman and leave her to die. Then they would cut the baby's head off and use it to play ping pong. Forget the woman that they have just cut open. These were the type of things that were happening during the war and it was an everyday thing.<sup>4</sup>

The widespread sexual and physical abuse that the women endured is a factor that propelled the movement forward. The women's peace movement took on a new dimension with the formation of the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI) on February 4, 1994. Before LWI, women were engaged in relief efforts, advocacy and other organizations—such as the Association of Women in Action, Abused Women and Girls Project, Women's Development Association, and the Rural Women's Association—but LWI became the front for women's advocacy and political activities.

Mary Brownell, founder and former president of LWI, articulated her reasons for founding LWI:

During this time I decided that women could play a more meaningful role by making our presence felt and voices heard. From there I called a few women together and told them that we need to organize a pressure group. We organized a pressure group to put pressure on different factions to stop killing our children, husbands, raping our women and all of that. Even though they may have had the guns, we could use our initiative and our mouths and we could perform such actions like demonstrating in the streets and meeting the warlords one-on-one to express how we felt about things.<sup>5</sup>

The question then becomes: what were the underlying causes that served as a catalyst for the women's involvement in the movement? Ruth Cesar, former member of Liberia's House of Representatives and active member of LWI and the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), elaborated on the conditions:

It [the movement] started off as the right to survive. We said, "enough was enough." Women saw their children, their husbands being killed and slaughtered. They saw their relatives dying. We ourselves were struggling and internally displaced persons but we have a natural-born instinct to

protect the family, to protect our children, when our families are in danger, our lives are also in danger; it was just to survive, to protect the family. The women had to come together to see how to stop the war and to advocate against it. The women were brave enough to seek out the fighting parties, meet church leaders, and international peacekeepers. To meet them to say enough is enough and we want the war to stop.<sup>6</sup>

It is apparent that the women carried out different strategies, and Mary Brownell spoke of the danger of the situation:

We tried to carry our activities outside of Monrovia and when we got to the Po River Bridge there were armed fighters on the bridge. I got out of the bus thinking that when they saw me, a big woman, they would let us pass. They walked up to me and said, "What do you want?" I said, "We are going to Bomi Hills." The boy had the audacity to say, "If you and your women don't get back in your buses and leave I will spray you all." With that they put their guns in position and they said, "Get off the bridge." So we had to get back in our buses, reverse, and head back to Monrovia.<sup>7</sup>

Mary Brownell emphasized that the women carried out a variety of activities under difficult circumstances, risking their lives for peace.

### Entering the Political Arena

The next dynamic was the transition from victims to leaders. Sister Mary Laurene, administrator at Stella Maris Polytechnic University located in Monrovia, remarked that, "The mobilization of women seemed to strengthen as the women gained more recognition and support."<sup>8</sup> There was also a noticeable drive that propelled the movement forward, and according to Sister Mary Laurene:

The women did not wait to be invited to the peace conferences. They went because they knew that their children's lives, their husbands' lives, their country, and all of these things were at stake so they went. They could have sat back and waited for an invitation but they went uninvited instead. And they went paying their own fares, driving their own cars, or paying for their own gasoline or diesel. They went on their own.<sup>9</sup>

Jeanette Ebba-Davidson, former chair and second vice president of the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia stated, "The women became more empowered and began to take on new activities and fight for peace on

a variety of platforms.”<sup>10</sup> Both Sister Mary Laurene and Jeanette Ebba-Davidson emphasized that the women’s self-empowerment and recognition not only encouraged more women to participate but strengthened the movement.

The women created a platform through their advocacy and political activism that helped to propel the movement forward. They made their plight known to the Economic Community of West African States leaders, US agencies, United Nations (UN) agencies, and the US Embassy in Liberia. The founding of LWI advanced the women’s movement by creating various platforms for the women’s voices as the movement began to strengthen. As a result, several groups focusing on peace, such as Women in Peacebuilding Network and MARWOPNET, emerged.

The women attended the peace conferences uninvited and presented position papers and resolutions. Mary Brownell commented on the women’s attendance at the peace conferences: “The women attended all of the peace conferences; we were never invited but we made our way there. They would say, ‘You are here again?’ I would say ‘Anywhere you men go I will follow you until you decide to put the guns down and stop fighting.’”<sup>11</sup> Clara d’Almeida, who is active in the women’s peace movement and is the current director of the Cedar Medical Clinic in Monrovia, stated:

During the war people were not concerned about what was happening with the most vulnerable people, the women and the children. Nobody cared about it. Nobody talked about it until the Liberian women decided that we were going to Abuja to talk to the Organization of African Unity to tell them that they should do something to help and bring these warlords to town because it was the women and children who were dying. It was not the everyday fighting, the war and all that stuff. The women and children were being raped; they were dying from starvation, from diseases, and dying from every other thing you could ever think of. But yet nobody was concerned about that. Everybody was only concerned about the guns and the fire. Stop the fighting, stop the shooting, but we have concerns, we the women. We went to Abuja and it was unprecedented for a group or individual to go when they are not on the calendar for that event and address the event but Theresa Leigh-Sherman [MARWOPNET president] addressed the Organization of African Unity and for the first time they heard what was really happening.<sup>12</sup>

Mary and Clara emphasized that although women were excluded from the formal decision-making pro-

cess, they made their own way to conferences so that the women’s voices would be heard, which illustrated the women’s shift to agents of social transformation.

The women drew attention to their plight through nonviolent methods such as demonstrations, sit-ins, and mass prayer campaigns. The women would demonstrate in the street even though the government had banned demonstrations. Cerue Garlo, program assistant for the Women’s Nongovernmental Organizations (NGO) Secretariat of Liberia, stated: “In April of 2003 [the women] marched from the city hall to the executive mansion and went with a drafted statement. [President Charles] Taylor said that he was not prepared to see the women. After a week of sitting and praying (both Muslim and Christian women), Taylor agreed to meet.”<sup>13</sup> When the women finally met with President Taylor they encouraged him to go to the peace talks in Accra, Ghana and agree to the ceasefire. Then the women spoke with other parties involved, such as the warlords, to encourage them also to attend the peace talks.

### **International and Intergroup Collaboration**

Support from the international community was a vital component of the women’s success. The international community provided women’s organizations with financial resources and conducted training workshops, which helped not only to fund the work of the women but also to increase their capacity. Organizations that provided capacity-building resources included the UN, the UN Development Fund for Women, Catholic Relief Services, and the National Endowment for Democracy. The women’s organizations, through their advocacy and political activism, developed an extensive network with the international community and were able to communicate directly with heads of state and UN personnel.

Another important aspect of the women’s peace movement was the high level of collaboration among the women’s groups. For example, in 1998 the Women’s NGO Secretariat was formed as an umbrella organization. Because the women actively supported each other’s activities, they created a stronger presence whether demonstrating in the capital or praying in the airfield for an end to the war. The women’s mobilization for peace occurred both locally and regionally because they knew that if there was going to be peace in Liberia, the leaders in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone had to open the lines of communication and work to dispel mistrust. This goal was addressed by MARWOPNET, an organization whose membership includes women from Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone.

According to Amelia Ward, Liberia’s former minister of planning and current MARWOPNET/Liberia focal

person, MARWOPNET was formed so that women could “take the initiative to try to break the ice and take away the distrust among the three countries through MARWOPNET because as women, if we came together, we could easily persuade our men and children to let peace prevail and take away these bad feelings.”<sup>14</sup> Ward reflected on MARWOPNET’s activities in getting the presidents of Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia to meet:

The women addressed the concerns and demands when they met with the presidents. President Conte of Guinea was the hardest person [to convince]. He had made it clear that he never wanted anything to do with the President of Liberia. People [other groups] had already tried to persuade him and he would not listen, but we were determined to meet with him and expected a very difficult time. When the women went to see him they talked about why they went to see him and what it meant for the three countries. As women we explained to him that we are your mothers and sisters. Look at us, we are your mothers, your sisters, your people are suffering; your mothers are dying; your children are dying. We came as mothers to you. He said that it was the first time that he saw sincerity in appealing to him and felt convinced so he said anything you want me to do I will do it.<sup>15</sup>

When the women were finally able to convince all three leaders to meet in Morocco for regional peace talks in March 2002, they were given only observer status, once again illustrating the challenges and barriers they encountered.

### Women Demand Peace

When the peace talks began in Accra, Ghana on June 4, 2003, which eventually led to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on August 18, 2003, representatives from several women’s organizations attended at their own expense although, once more, they were not officially invited. Ruth Cesar commented on the women’s active role in Accra: “First we went and lobbied with the organizers for representation. We were allowed two representatives and two observers in the hall. We held meetings every day during the negotiations and we came up with our position papers. We wrote exactly what we wanted to see and gave those documents to the negotiators and warring parties.”<sup>16</sup>

MARWOPNET was the official organization chosen to represent the women, and Theresa Leigh-Sher-

man, MARWOPNET president, signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Not only did the women in Accra lobby and produce position papers, but Leigh-Sherman stated that, “When the parties refused to sign the cease-fire agreement, the women sat in front of the door and would not let them leave. Everybody was locked in and that eventually led to the signing of the agreement.”<sup>17</sup> The women’s vital role in Accra demonstrated that the women had become leaders. As a result, MARWOPNET was honored with the 2003 United Nations Prize in the field of Human Rights, which was a major milestone because it recognized that women can be essential and important actors in the peacebuilding process.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The activism and successes of the Liberian women’s peace movement illustrate that women can be more than victims during times of war or strife and instead can be agents of social change. Through the movement, women were able to mobilize and become empowered, which in turn led to the creation of a powerful voice and the opening of the women’s political space. This culminated in the 2005 election of Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa’s first female head of state.

The examination of implications of the Liberian women’s movement offers several insights and recommendations to those who work in the field of conflict analysis and resolution:

- 1) In future conflicts, the international community must support women’s peacebuilding organizations and their efforts. The women’s capabilities as agents of social transformation must also be recognized.
- 2) If women play a stronger role in formal peace negotiations, there is a greater possibility that gender equality will be a part of the resulting accord, strengthening women’s role in post-conflict reconstruction.
- 3) Gender mainstreaming is essential to ensure that the leadership gains that the women made during war are not lost after the peace agreement has been signed.
- 4) Women should have the same access as men to opportunities for education and training so that if and when a conflict does arise, women are ready to lead.

It is apparent that during conflicts, particularly those that are internal to a country, women, through their desire for preservation of themselves and their families, become agents of social transformation thereby enhanc-

ing the peacebuilding process. By using the women's shared cultural values, a unified force for peace can be developed as an important part of conflict resolution. The Liberian women who shared their stories of triumph and sorrow with me have now become important voices far beyond the Liberian women's peace movement; they are now a voice for peace.

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## ENDNOTES

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- 4 Anonymous, personal interview with author in Monrovia, January 5, 2007.
- 5 Mary Brownell, personal interview with author in Monrovia, December 29, 2006.
- 6 Ruth Cesar, personal interview with author in Monrovia, January 5, 2007.
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- 8 Sister Mary Laurene, personal interview with author in Monrovia, January 2, 2007.
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- 10 Jeanette Ebba-Davidson, personal interview with author in Monrovia, January 4, 2007.
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- 14 Amelia Ward, personal interview with author in Monrovia, January 3, 2007.
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**THIS ARTICLE FOCUSES ON STORIES FROM THE LIVES OF WOMEN AFFECTED BY CONFLICT.** It explains that articulating truth narratives is important for women who have been traumatized to promote healing and the search for justice. While story-telling is crucial, the quality of the listening also is vital. Compassionate responses to truth narratives are important to peacebuilding. Compassionate listening takes seriously the need to respond meaningfully to the hurt, pain, and shame that emerge from women's truth narratives. Narratives testified at post-conflict truth commissions are provided as examples.

# Women's Truth Narratives: The Power of Compassionate Listening

ELISABETH PORTER

## Introduction

Many conflicts result from a clash of differences—differences of religious beliefs, ethnicity, ideology, access to resources, and interpretations of history—regarding what went on before the conflict, during the conflict, and in the less violent or post-conflict periods. This paper stresses how incredibly important it is to talk through differences, to tell personal and group stories, and to compare perspectives to try to understand others' views of the past. This article begins by defining “truth narratives” and explaining why sharing truth narratives is important for women who have been traumatized. It clarifies that while telling stories is crucial, the quality of the listening also is vital. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that compassionate responses to truth narratives contribute to building peace. It does so because compassionate listening takes seriously the need to respond meaningfully to the realities of hurt, pain, and shame that emerge from women's truth narratives. The paper examines obstacles to truth narratives and explores gender-specific concerns in truth commissions set up in some post-conflict societies.

The dangers of dogmatic truth abound. What is the truth behind war rape or men dominating peace negotiation processes? Whose version of truth is reliable or trustworthy? Can we talk about processes that “contribute to truth (rather than establishing the truth)?”<sup>1</sup> Judge Mahomed in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) distinguished between forensic factual truth that can be verified; documented, social truth that emerges through communal experiences; and personal truth, which is the “truth of wounded memories.”<sup>2</sup> This article concentrates on the personal truth of rape and the exclusion, marginalization, injustice, and silencing that is experienced by women from conflict zones.

For the purpose of this article, “truth narratives” are stories about people's lives as they understand them. Others may interpret the “truth” of these “narratives” differently, but everyone has the right to tell her own story. This paper refers specifically to the truth narratives of women

who have suffered personal pain during violent conflict, who have experienced the trauma of war-rape, loss of loved ones, maiming, and damaged self-dignity. For such women, as Gayatri Spivak expresses it, “autobiography is a wound where the blood of history does not dry.”<sup>3</sup> Truth narratives need to be told, or wounds fester and healing stultifies. Some narratives are so horrifying they can only be told to one's self, in quiet musings or angry howls. Other stories are told to mothers, aunts, sisters, friends, or community peacebuilders.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, narratives have been used as “evidence” at truth commissions.

## Importance of Truth Narratives

Participation in the truth narrative process is important for a range of reasons, primarily to gain deeper understandings of different perceptions of history and to seek justice and healing on both the personal and community levels. Such participation for women is significant because women often keep quiet and internalize their pain. The idea that storytelling has the potential to transform hostile relationships sounds straightforward. However, in societies marked by stark discord, where mistrust has complex historical roots, being open to listening to different narratives is charged with fear of the unknown. “In conflict situations, protagonists usually are keen to talk. Speech comes readily. Learning to listen is difficult.”<sup>5</sup> Within violent societies, there is limited space to share life stories with those who are significantly different.

Sometimes, the experiential basis of narratives is truly horrific, so women choose to evade truth because its horrors are so painful. This is why listening is so important. Listening is relational; it immediately sets the framework for openness to the other. When we are talking about radical political disagreements, listening is constituent in figuring out workable options to political progress. However, this article talks about personal trauma with its “paradoxical claim that the experience of trauma is beyond language.”<sup>6</sup> Even when women-only spaces are provided for truth-telling, words might tumble out quietly

or angrily, incoherently or lucidly, in a stutter or a torrent of emotion, or somewhere in between. In such spaces, careful listening is active, it attends to the physical and mental state of the speaker and listens for nuance, tone, and emotion. Without such listening, stories remain untold or fall on deaf ears, the truth is not incorporated into history, and pleas for understanding and justice go unheeded. Compassionate listening plays a significant role in peacebuilding.

### Compassionate Peacebuilding

The notion of peacebuilding<sup>7</sup> is broad and “involves all processes that build positive relationships, heal wounds, reconcile antagonistic differences, restore esteem, respect rights, meet basic needs, enhance equality, instil feelings of security, empower moral agency and are democratic, inclusive and just.”<sup>8</sup> An important challenge of peacebuilding lies in responding to the legacies of human rights abuses and human suffering. Dealing with memory and truth is part of this challenge. We cannot change the past, but we have choices in how we remember it and what we do with it. “History is not memory, but divergent rememberings, shaped in culturally specific ways.”<sup>9</sup>

There is restorative potential in truth narratives when accompanied by compassionate listening. Without it, responses can be harsh, devoid of mercy. Compassionate listening to truth narratives plays a crucial role in peacebuilding because it is part of the process of healing wounds, restoring esteem, and empowering agency. Philosopher Lawrence Blum categorizes compassion as an altruistic virtue, a regard for the well-being of others. Blum explains that such compassion involves an “imaginative dwelling on the condition of the other person.”<sup>10</sup> This entails visualizing what the other person, given his or her “character, beliefs, and values is undergoing, rather than what we ourselves would feel in a similar situation.”<sup>11</sup> Certainly, there are limits to the extent we can identify with others. While some of us watch television accounts of deaths in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Uganda, and elsewhere, others feel the direct pain of losing loved ones. Whereas empathetic persons identify with others’ emotions, compassionate persons feel pain and respond appropriately. (Compassion extends empathy, it goes beyond merely understanding others’ pain to feeling a moral responsibility to act to lessen the pain.) As feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick explains, the compassionate person is “pained by the other’s pain, and . . . acts to relieve the other’s suffering.”<sup>12</sup> This does not obligate the listener to share the suffering. Indeed, Martha Nussbaum maintains that compassion involves empathetic identification, where “one is always aware of one’s own separateness from the sufferer.”<sup>13</sup>

Compassionate responsibility takes seriously the urgency to respond to the plight of others. Yet, “it is not care alone or a particular relationship of care that enables compassionate responsibility, but a merging of a compassionate drive with a search for justice, equality, and rights.”<sup>14</sup> This drive is crucial to peacebuilding. The need to tell one’s narrative often stems from an urgency to realize justice, equality, and rights.

Despite the severity of the victim’s tale, attentive listening by peacebuilders confirms the agency of the storyteller. As agents, survivors of horror generally intuitively know their needs even if in the moment of telling their stories they cannot articulate their fears or hopes clearly. “Listening assumes a willingness to accept that others’ stories affect one’s life.”<sup>15</sup> This is part of accepting compassionate responsibility towards those who suffer. A challenge for peacebuilders is to foster the healing processes in victims to empower their agency as survivors.

Choice marks moral agency. Some survivors cannot face past atrocities and try to forget; others want to remember so they will never forget. Others are silenced or choose to remain silent. A few confess to atrocities committed, others deny their actions. In Northern Ireland, a Healing Through Remembering project emphasizes that remembering is significant when it leads to positive changes, and “there is no single solution to dealing with the past.”<sup>16</sup> Peacebuilders attend to the needs of those who suffer by listening to the poignant cries for help within the range of truths heard. The Madres of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina are mothers and grandmothers who walked around a plaza in Buenos Aires every Thursday for years in symbolic recognition of their children abducted, tortured, and killed by the government during the “Dirty War” of 1976–1983.<sup>17</sup> Their walk was a reminder that although their loved ones cannot be replaced, they expected the government to acknowledge the children’s disappearances and deaths, demonstrating that rage is one way to deal with the truth of the past.

### Obstacles to Truth Narratives

Silence is part of truth. The reasons why many women maintain silence are complex. Sometimes, there are political reasons that pressure people to withhold the truth. Other times, choosing silence may be preferable to the stigma of public identification. Even at the Special Women’s Hearings at the South African TRC, silencing was profound.

In more ways than one, it was easier to keep silent. Female Premiers, Ministers, businesswomen – kept silent. Some of them had been tortured, some of them raped. One of them gave birth in jail in front of a horde of laughing, jeering wardens. All of them are formidable

women. Yet they did not come forward. They did not speak.<sup>18</sup>

Compassionate listening includes understanding that the reasons why women keep silent are unique to each person. For others, silence is not a choice but a form of control or internalized repression. Such silencing is an obstacle to truth narratives. For example, Elena, a leader of a Mayan women's organization, explains the danger of talking when there is fear of being taken as a guerrilla, and thus fear of being killed, and says: "In this situation one had to remain quiet, one could not say what one felt, what one thought, like one was sleeping. One's conscience was sleeping...it was dangerous to speak for the security of one's own life."<sup>19</sup> Bina D'Costa works with non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh and writes of survivors of gender-based violence during and after the independence war of Bangladesh. She found it hard to find survivors who were willing to speak because the shame and humiliation remained and to speak meant being ostracized by their communities. She "learned that the enduring reality of war and survival after the war was articulated not only in women's uttered words, but also in those pregnant pauses during the conversations."<sup>20</sup> Choice and silencing are complex.<sup>21</sup>

### Gender-Specific Concerns with Truth Commissions

Telling the truth of one's narrative requires a safe place in which the story can be told. "The most common abuses under-reported to truth commissions are those suffered by women, as indeed are those least prosecuted."<sup>22</sup> Truth commissions create opportunities for the public recording of violations and suffering. Since 1974, there have been 24 truth commissions: commissions have occurred in Argentina, Bolivia, Chad, Chile, East Timor, Ecuador, El Salvador, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti, Nepal, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Serbia and Montenegro (former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Uruguay, and Zimbabwe.<sup>23</sup> Despite the different histories of the conflict in each nation, each commission sought to create safe structures for truth narratives to be told.

One of the clearest needs for gender-specific sensitivities in truth commissions is accountability for war rape.<sup>24</sup> The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia "explicitly identifies rape as a crime against humanity," but in 1998, it chose to "punish rape crimes as a form of torture."<sup>25</sup> Rape was included as a crime against humanity in the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), but there were no early indictments. The landmark Akayesu case came about when Judge Navanethem Pillay, the only woman judge on

the ICTR Trial Chamber, pursued her inquiry with two women called to testify to other crimes. This 1998 decision was "the first international conviction for genocide, the first judgment to recognize rape and sexual violence as constitutive acts of genocide."<sup>26</sup> After the Akayesu case, the Foa judgment of 2001 in the former Yugoslavia set a further precedent in international criminal law in prosecuting rape as a crime against humanity. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, an independent court, used narratives as a last resort to try serious crimes of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. It has codified crimes of sexual and gender violence as part of the jurisdiction of the Court.<sup>27</sup>

The importance of telling truth narratives lies not only in exposing the horrors of abusive violence, but also in releasing the debilitating potential of shame. Fiona Ross presents a moving account of what it means to bear witness to the truth. She questions conventional ways of attending to suffering, where for example, testimonies in the South African TRC were recorded as data or factual truths rather than as deeply felt personal "narratives of pain."<sup>28</sup> Bearing witness is a form of compassionate listening, since it absorbs the multiple layers of intricate hurt that make the personal agony of a truth narrative. Ross argues that "the communication of pain rests on words, gestures, and silences"<sup>29</sup> and requires responses. Such responses are intrinsic to the compassionate responsibility so necessary for peacebuilding.

Silence, when chosen, can be recognized as a meaningful aspect of truth. Ross warns against "the equation of speaking subject with healed subject."<sup>30</sup> It is in the careful discerning of compassionate listening that truth commissioners, community groups, gender and development practitioners, and peacebuilders acknowledge the lack of words, the frozen body stares, the anxious gestures, and the suppressed cries. There can be integrity in wilful silence, as part of a process toward spiritual recovery. A World Bank study of Peru, Sierra Leone, and South Africa recognizes the need to address gender in truth commissions. It shows that women affected by silence do not always seek prosecution as a required form of justice. Rather, justice typically is linked to adequate education, health services, and housing, so "many women who became pregnant after rape would rather have the perpetrator bear the costs of raising the child than go to jail."<sup>31</sup>

Yasmin Sooka was a Commissioner on the TRCs for South Africa and Sierra Leone. She explains the key ways that truth commissions can address women's empowerment,<sup>32</sup> such as giving attention to rape and sexual enslavement, assisting in restoring status, and providing material support of victims who face ostracism. Women survivors are empowered when included in participatory

processes of dispute resolution, peace negotiations, and law reform, and when there are gender-specific components to reparations and rehabilitation programs.

The South African TRC is enlightening with regard to women's truth narratives. "More than half of the statements received by the Commission were made by women."<sup>33</sup> However, "the Commission established statistically that when women came to testify to the Commission they almost always told the story of what had happened to somebody else."<sup>34</sup> The Special Women's Hearings with all-women panels were instituted to create a safe place for women's truth narratives. Feelings of safety confirm human security. Antje Krog, journalist and poet, writes poignantly of these women's voices:

She is sitting behind a microphone, dressed in beret or kopdoek and her Sunday best. Everyone recognizes her. Truth has become Woman. Her voice, distorted behind a rough hand, has undetermined Man as the source of truth. And yet. Nobody knows her. The truth and the illusion of truth as we have never known them.<sup>35</sup>

When Krog asks, "Does truth have a gender?,"<sup>36</sup> her accounts disturb; they tell of the dehumanization of those raped, imprisoned, and unable to wash when menstruating. Thenjiwe Mthintso, Chair of the Gender Commission, in the opening speech in the Special Women's Hearings said, "As women speak, they speak for us who are too cowardly to speak. They speak for us who are too owned by pain to speak. . . . Even now, despite the general terms in which I have chosen to speak, I feel exposed and distraught."<sup>37</sup> Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a member of the Human Rights Violations Committee, suggests that women were purposely incorporating "the relational elements of public testimony" where "women take on the onus of speaking out in order to engage on behalf of others."<sup>38</sup> Marcella Naidoo, Regional Director of the TRC in Cape Town talked of the gentleness of their teamwork as a form of caring, as "women's ethos of care."<sup>39</sup> This is significant. Empathy and compassion often are seen as qualities of weakness that provide excuses to exclude women from peace negotiations. Hence, it is incredibly important to listen to the defense of compassion from women with wide experience in the hard fight against apartheid.

## Conclusion

Truth narratives should provide restorative power to self-dignity. As Martha Minow puts it, "when the work of knowing and telling the story has come to an end, the trauma then belongs to the past, the survivors can face

the work of building a future."<sup>40</sup> This article suggests that a consequence of truth narratives is that the listening implicates peacebuilders and, thus, in bearing "witness to the testimony, the responsibility for finding justice is shared."<sup>41</sup>

Listening to stories should be part of the everyday life of peacebuilders. Peacebuilders include practitioners from all fields who foster peaceful relationships and processes and create just structures. Truth matters, yet in the silences, different truths can be discerned. Further research is needed to understand the nature of different truths and the different responses to justice. More research is warranted on documenting "constructive storytelling," which "builds understanding and awareness, and fosters voice."<sup>42</sup> Peacebuilders potentially play a significant role in listening compassionately and in discerning different truths because, in doing so, opportunities to respond meaningfully to the cries for help that are implicit in such narratives emerge. Compassionate responsibility to truth involves sensitive responses to personal narratives. These responses build respectful relationships that meet individual needs, contribute to healing wounds of the past, and help people move towards a peaceful future.

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- 8 Ibid., 34.
- 9 Cockburn, *The Line. Women, Partition and the Gender Order in Cyprus*, 89.
- 10 Blum, "Compassion," 509.
- 11 Ibid., 510.
- 12 Ruddick, "From Maternal Thinking to Peace Politics," 152.
- 13 Nussbaum, "Compassion: The basic social emotion," 35.
- 14 Porter, "Can Politics Practice Compassion?" 108.
- 15 Ibid., 114.
- 16 Healing Through Remembering Project, *The Report of the Healing Through Remembering Project*, 38.
- 17 Their final March of Resistance was on January 26, 2006, as they acknowledge the current government is not indifferent to the fate of those missing. They march now for other social causes.
- 18 Krog, "Locked into Loss and Silence. Testimonies of Gender and Violence at the South African Truth Commission," 205.
- 19 In Stern, *Naming Security – Constructing Identity*, 92.
- 20 D'Costa, "Marginalized identity: New frontiers of research for international relations?" 148.
- 21 Muslim women who wear the hijab willingly do not feel silenced, but where the burqa is required, it may be a form of silencing.
- 22 UNRISD, *Gender Equality. Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, 248.
- 23 The text of these commissions can be found on the website of the United States Institute of Peace, [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org).
- 24 UNRISD, *Gender Equality. Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, 248.
- 25 Strumpen-Darrie, "Rape".
- 26 Copelon, "Gender Crimes as War Crimes: Integrating Crimes against Women into International Criminal Law," 227.
- 27 Evidence off gender-based crimes as crimes against humanity has been submitted against militia leaders and senior rebel commanders in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 2003 and in Uganda, 2005 and in 2007, against a Government Official in Darfur.
- 28 Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 14.
- 29 Ibid., 49.
- 30 Ibid., 165.
- 31 Mantilla, *Gender, Justice, and Truth Commissions*, 28.
- 32 Sooka, 2006 in World Bank, *Gender, Justice, and Truth Commissions*, 177–178.
- 33 Gobodo-Madikizela, with Ross, and Mills, *Women's Contribution to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, vii.
- 34 Tutu, *op.cit.*, 182.
- 35 Krog, *op.cit.*, 56.
- 36 Ibid., 178.
- 37 In Ibid., 178–179.
- 38 Gobodo-Madikizela, *op.cit.*, viii.
- 39 In Ibid., 11.
- 40 Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 67.
- 41 McKay, "Gender Justice and Reconciliation," 564.
- 42 Senehi, "Constructive Storytelling," 45.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Bell, Campbell, and Ní Aoláin, "Justice Discourses in Transition," 316.
- 2 Mahomed in Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 33.
- 3 Spivak in Gilmore, "Autobiography's Wounds," 99.
- 4 In a Tanzanian camp for Rwandan refugees, the "women cured their insomnia by telling the stories of the atrocities they had experienced to a 'story tree'," Senehi, "Constructive Storytelling," 52.
- 5 Porter, "Risks and Responsibilities."
- 6 Gilmore, "Autobiography's Wounds," 102.
- 7 See a full development of this in Porter, *Peacebuilding: Women in International Perspective*.

**THE TAMILS OF SRI LANKA HAVE BEEN ENTANGLED IN A RUTH-  
LESS CIVIL WAR FOR 30 YEARS** and have been continuously facing state terror aimed at claiming their traditional areas. In addition, their freedom of expression has become greatly limited. Attendant upon such social conditions, there is an extreme paucity of narratives, oral or written, in the public domain to attract outside attention and intervention. The circumstances and dissemination of three selected Tamil women's narratives illustrate how suppressing women's voices contributes to their threatened status.

# Suppression of Tamil Women's Narratives in Sri Lanka

DUSHYANTHI HOOLE

## Introduction

Sri Lanka, home to Sinhalese- and Tamil-speaking peoples, has been called “the site of the world’s longest running” civil war.<sup>1</sup> The protracted conflict is complicated by, on the one hand, religiously rooted racism which denies the humanity of the other and, on the other hand, a culture of revenge and belief by militants that separation is the only solution. The number of Tamils in the island has diminished by half in the last 50 years.<sup>2</sup> Today, the minority-Tamils are listed as one of the most threatened<sup>3</sup> ethnic groups in the world. This article briefly reviews the history of Sri Lanka’s conflict and the characteristics of the Tamil society and, using examples, discusses how Tamil women’s narratives are silenced and prevented from attracting solidarity and support.

## History of the Conflict

In 1796, the British conquered the separate Tamil and Sinhalese kingdoms on the island and ruled them as a unitary state. In 1948, at the end of colonial rule, Tamils were 22 percent of the entire population. Half of the Tamils were denied citizenship and the Sinhalese thereby obtained full control of Parliament and State-sponsored settlement of traditional Tamil areas began. In 1956, Sinhalese was declared the official language, and in 1972, Buddhism was afforded foremost religious status under a new Constitution that took away clauses enshrining equality. In time, Sinhalese settlements in Tamil areas were backed by state terror, and the resultant frequent displacement and loss of life and property spawned a youth movement which took up arms following a state-backed program in 1983.

Attempts at a ceasefire, with some efforts at peace-building, between 2002 and 2005 failed and violence has resumed and been continually escalating. A few foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were able, however, to penetrate the Tamil areas when the highway into the areas was open during the attempted ceasefire.

Since the NGOs operate with governmental registration, they rarely risk taking actions that might displease the government. Thus, the impact of the NGOs has been neither equitable nor significant. Since many Sinhalese are suspicious of foreign donors, humanitarian personnel working with Tamils face risk.<sup>4</sup>

State-sponsored Buddhist institutions and some universities<sup>5</sup> resist the introduction of a human rights paradigm (which will be explained in further detail below), viewing it as an extension of Western missionary efforts before independence. Besides, the research capacity of the universities is very low.<sup>6</sup> The Tamils themselves have attempted very little analysis of their own situation. Though there is gender parity in education, inequitable allocation of resources has caused nearly half the students in the cultural capital of the Tamils, Jaffna, to drop out.<sup>7</sup> Writings by Tamils are, therefore, generally not firsthand but from interest groups abroad far removed from the actual scenario and are mainly propaganda. The few narratives that have emerged are not in ready circulation because possessing a Tamil manuscript could be construed as treasonous. Similarly, Tamil films and documentaries<sup>8</sup> are not locally made and, as a consequence, do not capture the reality of the situation.

The prevailing “Prevention of Terrorism Act,”<sup>9</sup> under which any suspect can be arrested, punished, tortured or “disappeared” with impunity, furthers the suppression of Tamil narratives. Many fear making any negative comment about the Tamil militant group that could be construed as treason by that group and by their powerful civilian supporters. One survival tactic, therefore, is to never express an opinion on any matter in public.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, public discourse in any form is at a standstill among the non-politicized Tamil sections.

## Tamil Society

As is common in Sri Lanka, Tamil society is matriarchal and predominantly matrilineal. Real property is

passed down the female line, and an elaborate system of kinship and marriage rules reduces the number of marriages.<sup>11</sup> The honor of the family depends on the chastity of its women, including their conformity to marriage rules, and on the education of its men to command a high dowry. The men's role is to protect and safeguard this system emphasizing the woman's ritual purity but not the man's. According to the Hindu religion many Tamils practice, the norm for a Tamil woman is that "her father protects her in her childhood, her husband in her youth and her sons in her old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (Laws of Manu, IX.3). Thus, her status is lower in society and she is excluded from decision-making, often even regarding her own marriage. Caste is sanctioned by religion, and revenge for the violation of women is extolled in Hindu epics. These factors reinforce a strange matriarchy where religion puts the man in charge of managing property but unable to displace his wife who owns the property and is pivotal in the home.

With Sri Lanka at war, however, men regularly join the militants or migrate for safety and employment. Owing to male death/migration, the male-to-female ratio has been estimated to be as low as 1:8, making many young women family heads. Tamil women greatly outnumber men and bear a disproportionate share of responsibility. Traditional values of their matriarchal society are threatened because vast tracts of land and much property have been taken over by the Sinhalese depriving Tamils of their dowries and livelihood. Threats to the family's honor, including rapes, frequently also occur in the process. Heavy losses and damage to property have also occurred due to years of aerial bombings.

Although there is significant unemployment, Tamil women fear leaving their territory. Further, educated Tamil men are scarce, thereby increasing dowry demands. Roles traditionally reserved for the father, husband or brother are increasingly performed by the militants in their absence. Dependence of Tamil civilians on the militants has increased. Adherence to cultural norms in dress and behavior is enforced on Tamil women by the militants.<sup>12</sup> The Tamil community has been diagnosed by experts as suffering from collective trauma.

### Circumstances of the Narratives

Few Tamil narratives exist, fewer still by women. The narratives transition from the collective to the individual, indicating the increasing threat to freedom of association and expression and fear. The narratives are problematic, for they must remain anonymous. Further, women's stories are often written by the Western educated and only vernacular narratives relating to themes considered

significant in the West receive attention. Two specialized collections of narratives produced during the ceasefire period dealt only with the integration of militant women<sup>13</sup> and refugee widows. A human rights group that is the recipient of the Martin Ennals Award for 2007, aiming at accountability from the parties at war, has included summary narratives in its online reports in English.<sup>14</sup>

There are, however, many problems associated with this work: (a) the narratives are confidential, (b) access to the Internet is scarce and English proficiency is extremely low in the Tamil areas, (c) selective printings from this work favorable to the Sinhalese appear occasionally in the South undermining the narratives' credibility among Tamil youth, and (d) the authors are working underground following death threats and face a slander campaign with attacks that include charges of drug smuggling, being traitors in the pay of the government, and accepting prostitutes from the government. Nationalist Tamil organizations, such as the New York Tamil Sangam, freely publish the slanders knowing that writers from Sri Lanka do not have the means to sue in New York.

### The Use of Narratives in a Human Rights Framework

Personal narratives are a powerful strategy for voicing concerns over social issues. They are used as primary or secondary sources of evidence of suffering, as a participatory tool in rights-based research and education, and in peace-building in post-conflict societies. Thus, the suppression of narratives by terror is considered a significant denial of rights. A human rights framework is used for analysis here because the subjects of the narratives set forth below (with altered names) identified with the belief that "it is... the best discourse available for the nonviolent transformation of society and the vindication of the rights of individuals" in the Sri Lankan context. In this context, "human rights framework" means a paradigm of governance whereby states guarantee the enforcement of all human rights conventions based on the ideals of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Further, human rights are recognized as providing a holistic framework for social justice and have been employed as an effective probe for the measurement of non-enjoyment of fundamental rights.

Three narratives of Tamil women are discussed chronologically below. They are unique and important in that they were written based on direct testimony from affected individuals collected during support group meetings or court hearings and written by academics. The works were collected over a long time through conversations with the affected persons and contacts with foreign

and Sri Lankan rights-based groups including a translator. The selected examples below show how both collective and individual narratives that arose as part of the process of exercising economic, social, cultural and civic rights were suppressed by the very same groups claiming to serve those most affected by Sri Lanka's civil war.

### **Tangam's Narrative**

One of the first narratives by a woman to appear among the Tamils in Jaffna was by Tangam in 1987 when the Indian Peace Keeping Force (expelled in March 1990) began its operations. She was a single mother and a medical doctor and in late 1982 had helped the militants with medical aid. Tangam's women patients included victims of rape, war-related injuries, and mental distress. They were often from the socially marginalized groups within the Tamils that formed the bulk of the Tamil militancy. Women and children were very vulnerable in the hands of security forces. To explore and address their problems collectively, Tangam formed a women's group and wrote a collection of their narratives to serve as case studies. Her work could not be published in Sri Lanka at the time because the President of Sri Lanka (controlling the South) and the Tamil militants (controlling the North-East) had made common cause against the Indians. Tangam, being an academic with access to national and international networks, sent an English version of her writings abroad. As the Internet was not available in Sri Lanka then, and both telephone services and electricity were generally cut in Jaffna until 1995, her stories had to be handwritten or typed and carried out of the country. One associate attempting to smuggle a narrative to Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, was killed for it (as testified by his wife to Human Rights Watch).

Tangam was murdered in Jaffna in 1989 and then labeled a "loose woman." This was intended not only to make her appear worthy of her punishment but also to discredit her for challenging cultural stereotypes. She had lived without her husband, was publicly outspoken, and worked closely with male activists—all acts that were unusual for Tamil society. Her support group soon lost many members to both fear and the blockade of Jaffna from 1990 associated with the departure of the Indian Peace Keeping Force. Her works in manuscript form would be published only posthumously in the US.<sup>15</sup> Few bookstores even in Colombo were willing to sell it: the premier bookshop, Lake House, sold the book only after redacting negative references to the President in each copy. As the narratives were a collection of common scenarios, misplaced revenge due to mistaken identity was a serious possibility. Tangam's work was translated into

Tamil and Sinhalese 10 years later, when that President had long been assassinated, and gained wide currency. This shows not only the importance of vernacular writings, but that suppressed narratives cannot be suppressed forever.

### **Mani's Narrative**

The personal narrative of Mani, a mathematics lecturer, depicts the climate of terror Tamil women face in the Sinhalese areas and the exploitation of Tamil women's narratives by a Tamil nationalist. Her research work required travel. In the process she was arrested five times between 1995 and 1996 by the police on suspicion of being a terrorist in different parts of the country and finally kept in prison in 1996.<sup>16</sup> Her identity card issued from Jaffna was confiscated by the police. (Anyone without an identity card is presumed to be a terrorist and is detained during midnight arrests.) The day her brother reported this incident to the press, police officers searched his house, questioned his domestic aide, and left a severe warning with his wife.

The plight of Tamil women gained worldwide currency when the British Refugee Council reprinted Mani's article. Mani and her husband left the country within a few days of the publication. However, the story was stolen by a newsmagazine operated by a New York Tamil Association, which is hostile to human rights when violations are by Tamil militants. Its version of Mani's narrative doubled the time she spent incarcerated and claimed that she was searched naked as men watched. In Sri Lanka, where verbal sexual harassment against women is not accepted as an offense, the doctored version would subject her to loss of respect. When a correction was requested, a member of the editorial committee said that they can issue a statement saying that "her family says that Mani was well looked after in prison," which would put her at risk with the militant group in Jaffna and diminish her and her family before the Tamil public. The original narrative exists abroad even 10 years after its first appearance as many, both men and women, seeking asylum, request and obtain copies.

### **Ponni's Narrative**

The third narrative is that of Ponni, which appeared in parts in the English language newspapers between 2005 and 2006. Once an academic in the country's only university system, her services had been wrongfully terminated (as determined separately by the courts, the Parliamentary Ombudsman and the Human Rights Commission<sup>17</sup>). Further, she had openly worked for the inclusion of women in the natural and physical sciences, taught hu-

man rights, and filed an action against the university for demanding that women using the pool dress in what the female students overwhelmingly felt was culturally unacceptable swimwear because they considered the specified swimwear too revealing.

While fighting her case legally, Ponni worked for two international NGOs (INGOs). One of them had advertised for a "rights minded" person to work in education. Her project proposal at the first INGO included the only Tamil province (which had been excluded from such national studies and census because of the war) and two other provinces. Funding for the Tamil area, however, was delayed and was finally granted on the condition that it be a minor study funded by monies leftover from the year's budget.

The findings of the study, based partly on personal narratives, jeopardized the government's position that areas in the Sinhalese South were the most marginalized and in need of massive aid. Many Tamil parents were willing to go to court with their collective narratives as evidence to ask for the minimum facilities for their children's schools. Ponni was not allowed to write or contribute to the final report, and her contract with the organization was not renewed. The research was published a year later by people who had no connection to the study and excluded the names of the researchers. The publication omitted critical findings clearly indicating ethnic disparities, apparently to avoid difficulties in working with the government. Ponni was not invited to the book release attended by donors and education dignitaries.

The second INGO advertised to work with the "poorest of the poor," and Ponni was hired as the Rights Specialist. She was requested to write two narratives of girls for an internationally published book of war narratives, but from the Sinhalese border areas only. This INGO had official, paid advisors from political parties that spoke against the interests and even existence of the Tamil people living in Sri Lanka. Though the actual "poorest of the poor" lived in refugee camps and elsewhere in the Tamil areas in the North and East, these areas were systematically excluded from this INGO's areas of operation. Even tsunami relief was not granted, though a country donor verbally protested. Statements of need were written without any research. The heads of both well-respected British institutions, foreigners on assignments, did not have much understanding of the local situation or its ethical implications. Ponni voiced her concerns and was switched to part-time work, which she declined, reporting the matter to the head office.

Ponni's story illustrates the consequences of sharing Tamil stories or correcting the context of inaccurate

narratives in circulation. Women are afraid of the consequences of whistle-blowing in their organizations, and suppress other women's and children's narratives, as well as internal narratives out of the fear of losing a high paying job with an INGO. Despite these circumstances, Tamil women's narratives have inspired and challenged the thinking of women living in a conservative society. They helped in forming links with groups promoting peace nationally and internationally by explaining and publicizing their situation. They attest to a work, promoting peace, achieved by involving both ethnic groups.

## Conclusion

Narratives are invaluable to the safety of marginalized people who are deliberately kept isolated by those in power. Narratives facilitate the empowerment of those affected and help to identify and assess needs and human rights violations. They serve as research material for peace-building and grant proposals and are windows to the situation within for the outside world. Yet narratives of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka are few and far apart.

In the case of threatened communities, therefore, the reason for a lack of narratives should be identified and the dissemination of narratives facilitated. With respect to the Tamils, international pressure should be applied to force the repeal Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act. It suppresses Tamil voices and threatens Tamils' existence. Networking with local and international interest groups with established credibility is also necessary to provide a credible source of narratives. Lacking such measures, true narratives can not surface and the marginalization of the Tamils of Sri Lanka, especially women and children who have little influence to begin with, will continue unknown to the outside world.

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## IN THE FIELD

*This section traditionally highlights a perspective from one of Women for Women International's chapter offices. In this issue, we are proud to feature an article by Honorata Kizende, a graduate of Women for Women International's program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She has now joined the staff as a trainer, and helps other women in Congo to make their journey from victim to survivor to active citizen. Her story is a compelling example of the power of women's narratives to advance peace-building and reconciliation efforts in the wake of violent conflict.*

# Enacting the Power of Women's Narratives: My Journey from Trauma and Silence to Become an Agent of Social Change

HONORATA KIZENDE<sup>1</sup>

## A Few Words About Me

I am 55 years old. I have five children. I was once married, but I'm single now. For many years, I was the director of a technical institute for girls, Lycee Amani, in Shabunda in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where I was born, raised and educated. In addition to being the director of the school, I was also a business-woman. I sold various items that were not easily available in my community, such as batteries, soap, salt, skin lotion, detergent, and gas. Merchants would come from Bukavu to Shabunda with these products. Depending on how much money I had, I would purchase some goods from these merchants. Then, I would travel for about 50 kilometers with the commodities to a mining zone, where I knew I could get a good price for them.

## The Day That Changed My Life Forever

The DRC has been entangled in a regional conflict since 1996. One weekend in October 2001, as I waited to be paid for the goods I had sold, a conflict among various rebel groups erupted. There was shooting from many directions; it was total confusion. Many of the men fled the area. The people who stayed were mostly the elderly, women and children. Before I knew it, 11 other women and I were surrounded by more military men than I could count. Almost immediately, the men began dividing us women among themselves. They started hitting us as we tried to defend ourselves from their aggression. They hit me on the lip. I was bleeding. As I circled my tongue around my mouth to spit out the blood that was flowing, I felt my tongue directly on my gums instead of my teeth. I had lost four of my bottom teeth. I was already on the ground when the men came over me. They stretched

out my legs and arms in a cross like position. They then took turns one by one raping me until each had had his chance debasing me.

When they were finished, and for the next year, the men took me and the 11 other women with them to every village they went to. They would loot the village and we women were forced, like mules, to carry their stolen goods. When they were done raiding villages for the day, they would bring us to their camp in the middle of the forest. It was there that I was subjugated as a sex slave for over a year. I did not belong to one person; I was for the use of everyone and anyone who needed me.

## My Arduous Path to Freedom

More than a year later, the camp was attacked by another rebel group. This caused much chaos. I, along with some of the other women captives, took the opportunity to escape. As we were traveling, we came through a small community of internally displaced people. This place was called Miagati, named for the village these people had come from. They welcomed us and we established relations with our new hosts. However, we were uncertain of the security or when this newly established village might be attacked. After about two weeks of being in Miagati, a few of us decided to make the long trip to Bukavu.

It took us two months to arrive in Bukavu. The travel was interrupted by stops on the way. We must have traveled about 250 miles. We spent the day walking under the sun, and sleeping at night outside under the stars, the moon, or the rain. We ate whatever we could find on the way. I had only one piece of cloth that was wrapped around me that I wore the whole time. My feet were swollen. I had lost weight. I arrived in Bukavu in March

2003. Several of my old colleagues from Shabunda were now living in Bukavu. They did not even recognize me at first. They organized a small welcome party for me. They found a little house for me. That is where I started living the life of an internally displaced person.

The ongoing troubles and instability back home forced my five children to come to Bukavu to seek refuge as I had done and we were reunited. Unfortunately, my husband had decided to stay in Shabunda. As of today, I have not heard from him. But I have learned since that he has taken another wife.

### **Traumatized Again as Spoils of War**

In Bukavu, I started living a life that was more or less normal for some time. Then, in May 2004, another war broke out. We locked ourselves in my friend Anna's house. Anna was there with her three children and I was with my five children. The insurgents arrived and banged the door down. They found us hiding inside and asked us for telephones. Since we did not have phones, they took all that they could find in the house. Afterward, they asked us to show them where we were hiding our husbands. We told them that we did not have husbands. They said that we were women and we must have husbands. We told them that the two of us did not have husbands. They replied, "Today you will have husbands." I knew exactly what they meant by that. We told them that we were too old for them. They slapped us and at that point I started to relive the horror of 2001. They started violently taking off our clothes. They raped us. My daughter, who was with me at the time and was pregnant, was also raped.

After it was clear that the violence had ceased for the time being, we came back to the house. I fell gravely ill. I was bleeding incessantly. I lost a lot of blood. A woman from a local association came to our neighborhood to identify which houses were affected during the war. Of course, we did not want to declare ourselves considering the shame that comes with being a rape victim, but the neighbors showed her our house. The woman saw my state and that of my daughter, so I could not deny it. She took us to an international organization that gave me a coupon to get treatment at Panzi Hospital—a hospital especially for rape victims.

### **Overcoming Fear and Trauma: The Path to Recovery**

After a month, I had healed from the bleeding. But, emotionally, I had a long way to go. I no longer had a home because the owner of the house where I was staying kicked me out. He said that I brought bad luck everywhere I go, that I am bad luck. When you look at

my life and what I have been through, how could you think otherwise?

My life was torn between welfare and misfortune. The level of misfortune pushed me to think that I will no longer be happy in life and I became discouraged and even disoriented. Whenever I thought about my humiliation in the forest by unknown men who repeatedly and wildly raped me every day, I was mentally distressed and could not even sleep at night. I had nightmares. I needed somebody to whom I could confide for a psychological release, but I did not trust anybody. I thought that if I told my story to someone, she or he would spread my story to the whole community and I would be more stigmatized.

I felt overloaded and decided to talk to other people about what happened to me. After I had shared my experience with other rape survivors, I felt some psychological and mental release. We gathered with other isolated rape victims for mutual solace and comfort.

In June 2004, I enrolled in the Women for Women International Sponsorship Program. My participation in this program brought something new to my life as I extended the network of support. I could regularly meet other women to exchange our experiences. The first time I told my full story to anyone was in a letter to my sponsor. That was the first time that I found someone who was sincerely interested in me. I told my sponsor all of these details because she was another woman. She treated me with humanity and respect and expressed an interest in me and who I am despite my situation. She was willing to listen. It is one thing to have been through what I have been through, but to have no one acknowledge your pain enhances that pain threefold. To suffer in silence is the greatest kind of suffering. My sponsor's willingness to recognize my humanity gave a voice to my distress and meaning to my pain.

Participating in Women for Women International's program and confiding in my sponsor dared me to hope, to aspire for a better life, to dream of having a house, to have peace and security, to reclaim my life with the same resilience as before, to regain my dignity and dynamism. If not a director of a school, I wanted to be someone of importance, someone of value again. Upon completing the Sponsorship Program, I began to work as a trainer in the program.

### **Sharing My Story and Empowering Other Women**

My path from school headmistress in my home village in Shabunda, to suffering through 18 months of sexual slavery in the forest, to becoming a trainer

in Women for Women International's Sponsorship Program is an illustration that nothing is impossible to anyone who believes in herself. Of the women that I train, there are rape survivors who used to be shy and timid, but when I share my experience with them, they start to come closer to me and reveal what they went through. Of these women, there are four rape victims who used to live in isolation because they seemed not to be accepted by the other group members. They tell me that hearing my story helps them. I tell them that they can do the same. When they talk about what happened to them, they can help other women heal, too. I tell them they need to see brighter things in the future and that there is a need to unite to prevent the reoccurrence of the same situation.

I know that several of my fellow Congolese women might have suffered more than I did and are desperate and think that this is the end of life. I respond, "Not at all." I believe that my story helps them overcome their negative thoughts and regain courage to prepare a better future.

### **My Call to Action: End the Rape and Abuse of Women**

As a group member in the Women for Women International Sponsorship Program, I received skills through my trainer who told us that we are all equal despite our individual differences. We lived as a family and developed mutual trust—we became sisters helping each other. Thanks to being a Women for Women International program participant, I was given a place to speak out and use my voice to reveal to the whole world what happens to women in wars. I gave my own testimony and spoke about what I experienced in the forest. I thought that if I continued keeping silent, nobody would speak about it and that the situation would remain status quo. I was a model to other women who noticed my courage to speak out about my own experience in denouncing the situation.

Through my testimony, I publicly denounced rape against women. This message grasped the attention of local, national and international leaders who took steps to stop the rape of women. This is one of the steps in the peace process. On many occasions, especially on the March 8, 2005, International Women's Day, I made speeches about hardships suffered by Eastern Congo

women. The first speech was in front of the Governor of our Province and United Nations staff. Later, commissions were created to fight rape perpetration.

In August 2005, I was appointed by the South Kivu Civil Society as the representative of rape victims to participate in the Worldwide Women's Demonstration for Humanity in the North Kivu province where I gave my testimony. This ceremony was an opportunity for us to meet and exchange stories with Rwandan women's associations about the consequences of war, and together we regretted what happened and had a common view that we should use our voices to denounce sexual violence against women at all levels. Government representatives invited to this ceremony made speeches in which they expressed their commitment to fight sexual violence. Later that year, I was recommended to the Independent Electoral Commission which hired me to help with the elections that took place in our country in December 2006.

### **Why I Continue to Tell My Story**

I want the international community to sensitize rape perpetrators to awaken their awareness about the misfortune and hardships they create for people and to remind them that they are human beings like the women they rape. I want each government to make provisions to end violence against women. Justice in each country should punish rape perpetrators because once some are punished, the others will be afraid and change their behavior.

All the women around the world should continue speaking out whenever their rights are abused. We should speak about it because our speeches might have an impact. The DRC Constitution is considering sanctions for rape perpetrators to be jailed for 20 years. We should not keep silent. I ask all women all over the world to be courageous and speak out about whatever happens to them. If we do that, we will contribute to the ongoing mission of ending violence against women. We are of great value, and the world will recognize it only if we are united in denouncing evil. To stay silent is itself a form of violence against women.

### **ENDNOTE**

1. This article was written with the help of Tobey Goldfarb, Research & Resource Development Officer at Women for Women International, and Cerise L. Glenn, Managing Editor of *Critical Half*.

## ABOUT WOMEN FOR WOMEN INTERNATIONAL

Since 1993, Women for Women International has provided women survivors of war, civil strife, and other conflicts with tools and resources to move from crisis and poverty to stability and self-sufficiency, thereby promoting viable civil societies. The organization provides services that aim to address participants' short-term economic needs while enhancing and building their capacity to create long-term economic solutions. In the process, participants also receive intensive training in women's economic, social, and political roles and value in society. This strategy stems from Women for Women International's conviction that economic solutions are not sustainable unless they are paired with active participation in social and political discourse.



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