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# Background brief

# "Pray the Devil Back to Hell:"[1] Women's ingenuity in the peace process in Liberia

*Ecoma Alaga*

## INTRODUCTION

Liberia is a country in transition from war to peace. The end of the 14-year war (1989-2003) and the journey towards post-conflict recovery were enabled by the concerted efforts of a myriad of actors operating from different tracks but with a common goal to end the war. The actions of these actors and stakeholders (both indigenous and foreign) broadly involved a variety of peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities that were implemented at local, national, sub-regional, continental and/or international levels. Among these many actors and actions, the active and visible engagement of one group in a structured and targeted initiative immensely contributed to the cessation of hostilities and initiation of the post-conflict recovery process. This group was comprised of the 'Women of Liberia' and their 'Mass Action for Peace Campaign' was the "straw that broke the camel's back" and ushered in Liberia's post-war era.

The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign has been immortalized by the film "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," a documentary account of the peace movement kick started by Liberian women in 2003,[2] with a three-pronged agenda that aimed to bring about a cessation of hostilities, accelerate the peace talks by ensuring that negotiating parties remained at the peace table until a negotiated settlement was reached and achieve a peace

[1] Title of Movie by Abigail Disney, Gini Reticker and Folk Films (2008) on the Liberia Women's Mass Action for Peace Campaign.
[2] United States Institute for Peace (USIP) 2007: *Women's Role in Liberia's Reconstruction* http://www.usip.org/publications/women-s-role-liberia-s-reconstruction

agreement, namely the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).[3] Their action also resulted in the deployment of a regional (ECOWAS)[4] and United Nations peacekeeping intervention.

In the aftermath of the signing of the CPA in August 2003, the women of Liberia under the auspices of the Liberian Women Initiative (LWI) and the Women in Peacebuilding Program (WIPNET) of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) organized a two-day consultative meeting on the CPA. The meeting, which took place in September 2003, "demystified" the CPA[5] and provided the women with a shared understanding of its contents. Eighty women participated in the consultations, and together they set benchmarks and timelines for the implementation of the CPA, based on their expectations of when they wanted to see the different components of the agreement implemented. With this, they monitored the implementation of CPA-related activities as undertaken by both the Government of Liberia and its development partners under the Transitional Government headed by Gyude Bryant from October 2003 to January 2006.

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The women kept up the momentum of their Mass Action for Peace Campaign by engaging in a number of targeted activities in the transitional period, particularly by assisting with Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and with the electoral process.[6] On the basis of their benchmarks and timelines, they engaged and later partnered with the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to ensure the DDR program was effective. For example, they organized a number of awareness-raising and sensitization programs aimed at encouraging combatants to disarm. Their involvement was perceived to be genuine and neutral. They were trusted and had the confidence of combatants and locals alike; consequently, a number of combatants felt more confident to disarm to the women than to the UNMIL and National Commission on DDR.

In 2005, the women embarked on a nationwide voter and civic education campaign that was primarily aimed at encouraging women to participate in the voter registration process, given the prevailing political lethargy at the time. In five days, they got over

[3] Schirch, L and Sewak, M. (2005) *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding* in GPPAC, The Role of Civil Society in the Prevention of Armed Conflicts: An Integrated Program of Research, Discussion and Network Building. A Publication of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict.
[4] ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States deployed its Standby Force, then call a Monitoring Group: ECOMOG.
[5] Leymah Gbowee. (2009) *Effecting Change through Women's Activism in Liberia* in IDS Bulletin Volume 40, No 2, March 2009, *Transforming Security and Development in an Unequal World*.
[6] Ekiyor, T. and Gbowee, L., (2005) *Women's Peace Activism in West Africa: The WIPNET Experience*, in People Building Peace II.

5,000 women to register.[7] During the run-off elections between Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and George Weah, the women of Liberia mobilized in support of the former.[8] This paid off with her successful election in 2005 by a 59% vote, as compared to George Weah's 40%,[9] and her inauguration as President of the Republic of Liberia in January 2006. President Sirleaf's success at the polls and her subsequent inauguration was (and still is) a milestone, not only for the women of Liberia but for all the women of Africa. It is widely accepted as another direct outcome of the historic initiative by the women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign.

It is worth noting that the Mass Action for Peace Campaign was not a mere happenstance. Rather it was a direct outcome of a series of training initiatives on the October 2000 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, in which a few women leaders in Liberia participated under the auspices of the Women in Peacebuilding Network of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding. The WIPNET program was launched in 2001,[10] and the core of its work revolved around mobilizing women from across West Africa for peace and building the capacity of a critical mass of these women as agents of peace.[11] The program designed and developed a handbook called the 'Community Women in Peacebuilding Training Manual,'[12] which formed the core of its training and to which UNSCR 1325 is central. The trained women returned to their respective countries, including Liberia, to set up national chapters of WIPNET and replicate the training received.[13]

It was the women of WIPNET Liberia and the Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET),[14] whose members, like WIPNET, had received training on UNSCR 1325, who initiated the Mass Action for Peace Campaign. The impetus for this 'peace activism,' as it is popularly referred to by WIPNET,[15] was derived from the knowledge that UNSCR 1325 recognizes the role of women as agents of peace and mandates their full and active participation in conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery processes. Inspired and equipped by this training, the women of Liberia actually commenced their work on community peacebuilding and reconciliation in 2002, when the national chapter of WIPNET was formed in Liberia.[16] However, they retained a

[7] Ibid: Ekiyor, T. and Gbowee, L.
[8] Adams, M. (2008) Critical Perspectives on Gender and Politics: Liberia's Election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Women's Executive Leadership in Africa. Cambridge Journal. Volume 4: Issue 3.
[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellen_Johnson_Sirleaf
[10] African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2004/awdf_2004.pdf
[11] WANEP: www.wanep.org
[12] West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (2001) Community Women in Peacebuilding Training Manual.
[13] WANEP: Women in Peacebuilding
http://www.wanepnigeria.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=35&Itemid=59
[14] International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect. The Role of Women in the RtoP Framework
http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/index.php/women-and-conflict
[15] WANEP (2010) Report of the 6th Regional Conference for Women in Peacebuilding Program (WIPNET); *10 Years of Domesticating UNSCR 1325 and Women's Participation in Peace Processes – An Appraisal of National Efforts in West Africa*.
http://www.wanep.org/wanep/attachments/article/156/cp_wipnet_conf_july2010_en.pdf
[16] Peace Direct. Insight on Conflict: West Africa Network for Peacebuilding Liberia
http://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/liberia/peacebuilding-organisations/wanep/

low profile and their work was little known until 2003, when they launched the Mass Action for Peace Campaign.

The Mass Action for Peace Campaign was thus a direct outcome of a combination of factors; namely the utility of UNSCR 1325, the capacity building and education of women in peacebuilding, and a demonstration of ingenuity. The formula was simple. Trained women plus an opportunity equals results. Their tools were just as basic. Women were mobilized from all segments of Liberian society and the diaspora on the basis of a common denominator: 'womanhood'. They leveraged their agency and networks to implement a historic non-violent action with clearly defined objectives, and their strength was in their sheer numbers.

Today, the women of Liberia serve as an example to women and communities all around the world. In Liberia, their work in bringing about peace and electing a female president continues to generate positive results for the women and people of Liberia. They have also, to some extent, reversed the common trend that women tend to be "relegated to the background in the aftermath of wars and armed conflicts in spite of their active participation in bringing conflicts to a halt, especially during formal peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction processes."[17]

This is happening because, under the Presidency of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, priority has (and continues to be) given to issues pertaining to women's empowerment, leadership, participation and protection. Despite new and emerging challenges, the Government of Liberia and its development partners have undertaken a number of steps to increase the representation and participation of women in political leadership and empower particularly rural and market women. In addition, the government has made efforts to prevent the recurrence of and respond to violence against women, including through the enactment of laws, adoption of different policies, and establishment of pro-women structures. Notable achievements in this regard include, but are not limited to, the incorporation of gender and women's rights perspectives as a cross-cutting issue in all national development strategies, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), the enactment of a rape law and an inheritance law which guarantee women the right to property and widowhood bequest, the adoption of policies on sexual and reproductive rights, a civil service code to ensure conducive workplace environments, and action plans on sexual and gender-based violence. Two draft policies calling for 20 and 30 per cent representation of women in the security sector and in governance, political parties and other institutions respectively are currently before parliament for approval and passage into law.[18]

[17] At the Pan African Women's Conference for Peace and Non-violence organized by UNESCO (Zanzibar, 1999), women from 53 African countries issued the Zanzibar Declaration, regretting the fact that peace negotiations were male-dominated, regardless of women's efforts and initiatives to resolve conflicts and promote peace on the continent, notably through consensus-building and dialogue (UNESCO, 2003).

[18] UNMIL OGA: Gender Mainstreaming in Peacekeeping Operations Liberia (2003-2009) Best Practices Report.

A number of training institutions have also been established to further build women's capacities in peace-building, conflict mediation and leadership, including the Angie Brooks International Centre, the Chief Suakoko Centre, the James A. A. Pierre Institute, and the National Rural Women Structure (including rural women's peace committees).[19] Women have been appointed to key positions in the judiciary as well as in different ministries, departments and agencies. They constitute 12.5% of parliament, as compared to the 5.3% and 7.8% held in the 2005 and 2001-2004 parliaments.[20] In addition, a women's radio station (the Liberia Women's Democracy Radio),[21] a criminal court for sexual violence, and women and child protection units in the Liberian National Police have been established.

While these gains in women's participation, representation and the consideration of their concerns, especially in the political and economic spheres, in post-conflict Liberia are attributable in part to the gains of the mass action for peace campaign, they are also acknowledged to be an outcome of the political will of the President. This raises fundamental questions about the sustainability of these gains. Nonetheless, the mass action for peace campaign remains an example from which women in other regions of Africa and on other continents can draw lessons. This paper provides some reflections on the lessons learned from the mass action for peace campaign, with a view to proffering policy and programmatic recommendations that could be utilized by organizations, governments and women's groups working on issues relating to women's political participation in conflict and peacebuilding environments.

The paper in its first section begins with an overview of the two phases of the Liberian civil war, so as to provide contextual background for the emergence of the mass action for peace campaign. In the second section, it presents an overview of the mass action for peace campaign, which is a narrative of the historic peace movement of the women of Liberia. It provides a vivid highlight of the processes, strategies and actions undertaken during the campaign. The details of the campaign can be viewed further in the film 'Pray the Devil Back to Hell.' The third section is an analysis of the mass action for peace campaign. This section highlights the lessons learned, both positive and negative, to illustrate the linkages between the campaign and UNSCR 1325 as well as depict possible models that can be replicated by and with women in other countries. The fourth and final part is the concluding section that includes a list of recommendations for different actors and stakeholders working to promote women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes.

## CONTEXT

This section is structured in two parts. The first is an account of what is now popularly referred to as the first phase of the Liberian civil war, which took place in 1989 to 1997.

[19] WIPSEN Africa Report: www.wipsen-africa.org
[20] Alaga, E. (2010) Regional Mapping of the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 in the Mano River Union. A Femmes Africa Solidarite: Unpublished Research.
[21] Kiawu, A (Deputy Minister) Paper Presentation at Regional Forum on 10th Anniversary of UNSCR 1325 in Dakar, 2010.

The second part is an account of the second phase of the Liberian civil war, which took place from 1999 to 2003, and a brief introduction of the women's peace movement that emerged towards the end of this phase of the war and whose activism took place within the framework of the mass action for peace campaign.

**First Phase of the Liberian Civil War (1989 – 1997)**

The underlying causes of the civil war in Liberia date back to the founding of the country. Liberia was ruled by an Americo-Liberian[22] oligarchy since its foundation in the mid-1900s.[23] Despite a long history of social and political exclusion, the country enjoyed relative stability until 1979, when a riot broke out following an increase in rice prices from $22 to $30 per 100 pounds of parboiled rice.[24] Liberia's military force, law enforcement agents and foreign troops from neighboring Guinea played a crucial role in this bloody riot, which claimed the lives of 40 people and caused many more injuries.[25] Tensions increased throughout 1979, as the riots drew attention to, and sparked hostilities arising from, other deep-rooted structural concerns, which the government led by President Tolbert had inherited from the 27 year rule of President William Tubman (1944-1971).[26]

The root causes of the conflict included economic disparity; violations of human rights; ethnic hatred and rivalry; corruption; mass illiteracy; a skewed system of land tenure, acquisition and distribution; poverty; exclusion and marginalization; and the over-centralization of power. Tensions arising from these socio-political and economic challenges heightened in 1980, resulting in the assassination of President Tolbert and the seizing of power by a group of non-commissioned officers led by Thomas Quiwonkpa, Thomas Weh-Syen, Samuel Doe, Harrison Dahn, Harrison Pennue and Nelson Toe.[27] The junta was called the People's Redemption Council (PRC) and headed by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe.[28] The composition of its leadership reflected the ethnic character of the conflict at the time, as a majority of its members were from eastern Liberia -- mainly from the Gio and Khran ethnic groups.[29]

As stated in the report of the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Diaspora Project (2009),[30] President Doe's regime (1980-1990) was characterized by increased tensions and human rights violations, including arbitrary killings, arrests, detention, beatings and dismissal, particularly of academic staff and students. Intellectual events were banned in 1982 on the grounds that these gatherings were being used to breed

[22] The term Americo-Liberian refers to free blacks who migrated from the United States to Liberia.
[23] WIPSEN-Africa (2010) Summary of the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report.
[24] Ibid, WIPSEN-Africa (2010).
[25] Tellewoyan, J. (2005) *"The Years the Locusts Have Eaten: Liberia 1816-2004" a Comprehensive History of Liberia*, Replica Books Publications.
[26] Advocates for Human Rights. Background on Liberia and the Conflict. www.theadvocateforhumanrights.org
[27] Huband, M. (1998), *The Liberian Civil War*, Frank Cass publisher.
[28] Levitt, J. (2005) The evolution of deadly Conflict in Liberia: from 'Paternalitarianism' to State Collapse.
[29] Ibid: Huband (1998).
[30] The Advocates for Human Rights (2009): A House with Two Rooms: Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia Diaspora Project, Chapter Five; http://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Final_Report.html

socialism. Doe's regime was also characterized by the drafting and approval of a new constitution for the Second Republic; attempted counter coups; corruption; tribalism and ethnic cleansing (targeted at the Gio ethnic group); an increase in gender-based crimes, especially the rape of women; the destruction of infrastructure; ineffective public institutions; the deterioration of the rule of law; nepotism; economic hardship and mass displacement.[31] The 1985 general elections, which were intended to return Liberia to civilian rule, were rigged in favor of Samuel Doe and his National Democratic Party of Liberia and Doe was inaugurated President of Liberia in January 6, 1986.[32] Three years later, in 1989, civil war erupted when an insurgent group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor, invaded the country from neighboring Ivory Coast.[33]

The turmoil in the country did not abate with the invasion of the Taylor-led force, which claimed its incursion was aimed at addressing the ills and abuses of President Doe's dictatorial regime.[34] Rather, the NPFL committed massive human rights violations against the Liberian People and its own foot soldiers. In addition, it abducted and/or enlisted hundreds of child soldiers (including young women) and killed hundreds of unarmed civilians. The country's security apparatus, including the Armed Forces, Executive Mansion Guard, Special Anti-Terrorist Unit, National Police Force, and Special Security Service, among others, was engaged in perpetuating crimes and violence against the citizenry.[35] By 1990, the situation in Liberia had become very onerous, especially with the proliferation of rebel groups that were engaged in dreadful acts against citizens, which led to a huge humanitarian crisis with a high level of human rights abuses. Consequently, the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was deployed under the aegis of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to intervene in the crisis.[36]

Different members of the international community (at global, continental and regional levels) undertook a number of activities to resolve the crisis, including facilitating the adoption of several peace agreements that were later reneged upon by the NPFL.[37] As noted in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report,[38] this first happened in 1992, when the NPFL reneged on the Yamoussoukro IV Accord and launched a major assault on the capital city, Monrovia. Following this, a series of peace initiatives were launched in 1993, and in July 1993 the Cotonou Peace Agreement was signed between

[31] The Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2009). Volume II: Consolidated Final Report. http://www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final/volume-two_layout-1.pdf
[32] E-Notes. Genocide and Crimes against Humanity: Liberia. http://www.enotes.com/genocide-encyclopedia/liberia
[33] Global Security. Liberia – First Civil War – 1989 – 1996. http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/liberia-1989.htm
[34] US Department of State. Background Note – Liberia. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/6618.htm
[35] WIPSEN-Africa. Summary Report of the Liberia TRC Report.
[36] Adebajo, A. and Rashid, I. (Editors) 2004. West Africa's Security Challenges: Building Peace in a Troubled Region. A Project of the International Peace Academy. Lynne Rienner Publisher, Inc. USA.
[37] The Perspective. Taylor's Liberia Army: "Papay Doc's Tonton Macoutes"? http://www.theperspective.org/restructuring.html
[38] The Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2009). Volume II: Consolidated Final Report. http://www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final/volume-two_layout-1.pdf

the rebel leaders and the Interim Government of National Unity.[39] The agreement called for a new interim government (called the Liberia National Transitional Government), a ceasefire and the demobilization of forces.[40] A United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) was established to monitor the implementation of the agreement.[41] In September 1993, the Akosombo Accord was signed to supplement the Cotonou Accord.[42] However, this did not bring an end to the crisis.

The violence continued amidst further coup attempts and resulted in the signing of another agreement in Accra in 1994.[43] The significant aspect of this agreement was that it incorporated other rebel groups not included in the Akosombo Agreement. In 1995, the Abuja Accord was signed; it established a Council of State to administer the country and organize national elections.[44] A supplementary agreement to the Abuja Accord was signed in August 1996 and Ruth Perry became the head of the Liberian National Transitional Government.[45] In 1997, general elections were conducted and Charles Taylor was inaugurated President,[46] bringing an end to the first phase of the civil war.

**The 'New War' and the Emergence of a New Movement**

President Taylor's regime was characterized by undemocratic practices, human rights violations and corruption. The flagrant abuse of citizens became more worrisome following the withdrawal of ECOMOG and the transformation of Taylor's warlords into the Liberian Army, called the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). There was also a proliferation of private security agencies, as erstwhile rebel groups transformed themselves into these outfits. The opposition to Taylor's regime gained momentum as the abuse of citizens and corruption increased. In 2000, an attack was launched on Taylor's undemocratic regime by a rebel movement called Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), which was headed by Sekou Conneh. In 2003, LURD joined forces with the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), an offshoot of LURD, to demand the resignation of President Taylor. The emergence of these rebel groups ignited the second civil war, which had devastating effects on civilians, including mass killings; looting; abductions; arbitrary arrest, torture and detention; displacement; and the repression of human rights. Women were specifically targeted with rape and other forms of sexual violence. They were abducted and violated as they searched for food, cared for

[39] The Liberian Tragedy. "The Years The Locusts Have Eaten: Liberia 1816-2004" http://mysite.verizon.net/jkesst/Civilwar.html
http://www.usip.org/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/liberia_07251993.pdf
[40] USIP (2003) Peace Agreement Digital Collection. Liberia (Cotonou) Agreement.
[41] UN. Liberia: UNOMIL Background. http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unomilFT.htm
[42] Conciliation Resources. Akosombo Agreement. http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/liberia/akosombo-agreement.php
[43] UN. Liberia. http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unomilFT.htm
[44] Amnesty International. Liberia: A New Peace Agreement – An Opportunity to Introduce Human Rights Protection. http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR34/001/1995/en
[45] Relief Web. http://reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/0/b8b9a9e617fe89c6c12563a0004ac980?OpenDocument&Click=
[46] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberian_general_election,_1997

the sick and elderly, or fled for safety. Additionally, they were recruited into the rebel movements either voluntarily or by coercion.[47]

However, it is imperative to state that women were not only affected as victims. Their roles were multifaceted and, as various scholars and practitioners have noted, can be categorized into three subsets: as victims, perpetrators, and agents of change.[48] First as victims, women, like men, were tortured, arbitrarily arrested and detained, wounded, killed, malnourished, displaced, mutilated, abducted to join the fighting forces, and denied basic services due to the breakdown in service delivery and infrastructure. The death of male relatives amplified their burden of care, as evident by the increase in the number of households headed by women. Their gender roles as care-givers further saddled them with the responsibility of caring for the wounded, aged and sick. With the use of sexual violence as a tactic of war, women were specifically targets of rape, gang rape, forced marriage, and sexual slavery. In a number of instances, these resulted in forced/unwanted pregnancies and/or infection with HIV/AIDS, compounding the challenges women had to deal with after the war.

As perpetrators, women took on non-traditional gender roles that were erstwhile classified as exclusively roles for men. They fought alongside men; served as commanders in militia and rebel groups; acted as advisers, emissaries, spies and informants for different warring factions; provided shelter to the fighting forces; aided in the enlisting of combatants; and were involved in arms deals or facilitated the transportation of arms across borders. As stated in the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation report (2009), women also engaged in economic crimes related to the exploitation of natural resources and corruption in public institutions to finance and equip armed groups.

As agents of change (or of peace), the wars enabled, ushered in and leveraged the agency of women. Women and women's groups engaged in a variety of peacebuilding, trauma counseling, reconciliation and social healing activities, particularly at the community level.[49] They gained prominence in 2003, when they mobilized to launch and implement the Liberia Women Mass Action for Peace Campaign, the new movement for peace, which is the focus of the subsequent section. It is worth noting, however, that the mass action for peace campaign largely hinged on the principles enshrined in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security of 2000, which underscores women's indispensable role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, especially in conflict and post-conflict environments. This is because the group that initiated the mass action for peace campaign was comprised of women who had received training on women in peacebuilding and UNSCR 1325 in 2001, and who believed that UNSCR 1325 could serve to advance their objectives. As history now records, this paid off with a successful mass action for peace campaign that not only contributed to a

[47] Meredeth Turshen and Clotilde Twagiramariya (1998) What Women Do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa. Zed Books.
[48] Alaga, E. (2010) Regional Mapping of the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 in the Mano River Union. Femmes Africa Solidarite (FAS) unpublished report.
[49] Badmus, I. (2009) Explaining Women's Roles in the West African Tragic Triplet: Sierra Leone, Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire in Comparative Perspective. Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences, Vol. 1, No 3, 808-839.

ceasefire in the short-term, but also to the longer-term expansion of political spaces for women's participation and leadership, ultimately resulting in the election of a woman to the highest political office in the country.

## THE LIBERIAN WOMEN'S MASS ACTION FOR PEACE CAMPAIGN

The women of Liberia actually undertook a number of peace related activities as far back as the first phase of the civil war in the early 1990s.[50] Their actions at the time were, however, ad hoc, largely uncoordinated and fragmented, and mostly limited to public marches, picketing and the observation of peace talks.[51] This continued in the initial years of the second civil war, until 2003, when women became completely exasperated with the situation and decided to take more coordinated and systematic action with clearly defined objectives. This resulted in the launch of a Women's Peace Activism project by a core group of four women from the Women in Peacebuilding Network Program of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WIPNET-WANEP).[52] They drew inspiration from and partnered with groups like the Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET) and the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI), who had previously undertaken similar action, albeit on a small scale. The peace activism project had two main aims: to challenge patriarchal power relations that excluded women from official peace talks, and to encourage parties to the peace process to recognize the important and legitimate role of women as actors/partners in the peace process.

As the implementation of peace agreements failed several times amidst a rising humanitarian crisis and the intensification of the war, the Women's Peace Activism project took on a different dimension, culminating in the mass action for peace campaign that was launched in the first quarter of 2003. As the name implies, the Liberia Women Mass Action for Peace Campaign was a broad-based mass movement of Liberian women from all sectors and levels of Liberian society. Its strength was in its numbers, and its strategies were grassroots-based[53] and specific to the Liberian context. Women were mobilized on the basis of their common denominator of 'womanhood' which, in traditional African society, is an identity for people who are born female and share similar life experiences relating to their physiology and gender roles of being mothers and wives. They used this to appeal to their collective experience of the war as characterized by the loss of family and property, rape and abuse, and displacement.

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[50] Critical Half (2007) Women's Narratives, War and Peacebuilding. Bi-Annual Journal of Women for Women International. Volume 5, Number 2.

[51] World Movement for Democracy. Profile of the Mano River Women's Peace Network. http://www.wmd.org/resources/whats-being-done/ngo-participation-peace-negotiations/profile-mano-river-womens-peace-network

[52] The Scavenger. Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign. http://www.thescavenger.net/people/women-of-liberias-mass-action-for-peace-37462.html

[53] Pedersen, J., (2008) "In the Rain and in the Sun: Women in Peacebuilding in Liberia" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the ISA's 49th ANNUAL CONVENTION, BRIDGING MULTIPLE DIVIDES, Hilton San Francisco, SAN FRANCISCO, CA, USA Online* <PDF>. 2011-03-12 from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p253135_index.html

On this basis, women were drawn into the campaign irrespective of their social status; this was significant for leveling the playing field. They mobilized as sisters, wives, mothers, grandmothers, daughters and aunts. By word of mouth in offices, schools, hospitals, churches, mosques, parliament, the marketplace, streams, homes and other shared spaces, women were drawn to join the campaign. They came as doctors, lawyers, parliamentarians, market women, Muslim women, Christian women, educated women, uneducated women, rural women, urban women, disabled women, executives, students, internally displaced women, young women and girls, and security officers. These women were mobilized from all communes, including Monrovia and the different counties.

Their approach was non-violent and mainly employed the traditional sit-in as a tool, with their messages written in a clear and concise manner on placards, which they held out conspicuously. They also employed the sex strike as a tool,[54] thereby using their biological attributes to demand change. Beyond these acts, the women monitored the situation on a daily basis and met in the evenings to discuss and strategize on the situation. They networked both locally and globally by linking up with their counterparts across Liberia and in the Diaspora.

Once they had a critical number (and this number grew daily), the women in Monrovia collectively identified a strategic location where their sit-ins would take place. Similarly, the groups in the different counties also identified suitable locations where their sit-ins would be based. In Monrovia, the Sinkor Airfield[55] was identified as a primary location, and the women sat there for days, weeks and months; in the rain and in the sun;[56] in the mornings, at noon and at night; against all the odds. They were resolute in their resolve to bring an end to the war, which they explicitly captured in their message of 'End the War; No More War; We Want Peace, Now!' In addition, they prayed, sang, and communicated continuously with their counterparts in the various counties by cellular phones. From time to time, they sent emissaries to the counties to encourage the women out there to keep up the struggle, and they likewise received visits from the women's groups in the counties. They quickly learned the importance of engaging and utilizing the media to their advantage, and it was through such engagements that the international community became aware of the human toll of the civil war and the counter actions being undertaken by the women.

While at the airfield, the women also initiated dialogue with different stakeholders such as bishops, imams, Members of Parliament, and representatives of the international community, including the United Nations, the Embassy of Guinea Conakry, and the International Contact Group on Liberia. They also reached out to Liberian refugee women in neighboring Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as to different peacebuilding organizations, calling for their support in mounting pressure on the government and

[54] The Daily Beast. http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-04-05/its-time-to-end-africas-mass-rape-tragedy/#
[55] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monrovia
[56] Jennifer Pedersen (2008) *In the Rain and In the Sun: Women in Peacebuilding in Liberia*. Paper presented at the ISA conference in USA.

rebels to end the war. At one point, the women also engaged in shuttle mediation between the rebels and the government.

As their diplomacy and mediation work grew, it became apparent that the women needed to appoint a spokesperson for the group. This was imperative because different groups and organizations were involved in the mass action for peace campaign and each had their own leaders. The keys groups were WIPNET-WANEP, LWI, MARWOPNET, the Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia (AFELL), the Moslem Women Association and the Christian Women Association. WIPNET-WANEP was selected to lead the campaign and Leymah Gbowee, the National Coordinator of WIPNET at the time, was appointed as the spokesperson for the campaign. The choice of WIPNET-WANEP was simply based on their prior role in envisioning and implementing the Women's Peace Activism project, which was the 'mother-project' that initiated the mass action for peace campaign.

In addition to appointing a leader, the women decided to dress in a similar manner as a way of identifying themselves as members of the campaign. Consequently, they agreed to wear white T-shirts that were inscribed with peace messages over identical 'lappas,' an African traditional mode of dressing that entails draping a large piece of cloth over the torso. They wore this outfit with their heads covered and without any makeup or jewelry. They also issued themselves identification cards, which had their names and photos. Over time, they were indeed identified by their signature outfit and came to be known as the 'peace women in white T-shirts.'

Their messages were more robust and comprehensive as they met with different stakeholders. They were different from but complementary to their simplistic airfield messages. The messages called for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, the deployment of an intervention force, a commitment from the warring parties to engage in peace talks for a negotiated settlement, and for all Liberians to say 'never again' to violence and wars.[57] At the time, their demands seemed unfeasible. This was because, as Gbowee noted, "our president at the time, Charles Taylor, was against *all three*! He was a sovereign government, and no one would dictate to him. As a matter of fact, he said the arrival of international peacekeepers would be 'terroristic,' and he would not sit and negotiate with 'terrorists,' and therefore there would be no ceasefire because the government was duly elected, and he would fight till the last soldier died."[58]

When the peace talks finally commenced in Ghana in 2003, the women were keen on staging their campaign at the venue of the peace talks. They were, however, constrained by the lack of funds. Using their network base, they finally did secure some funding through the support of the broader WIPNET-WANEP network in Accra, but this was grossly inadequate for moving significant numbers of the campaigners to Ghana. It was

[57] Leymah Gbowee (2009) *Effecting Change through Women's Activism in Liberia* in IDS Bulletin Volume 40, No 2, March 2009, *Transforming Security and Development in an Unequal World*.
[58] The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights (2006). A Conversation With Women Peacebuilders: Leymah Gbowee and Shobha Gautam. The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University .

thus decided that the campaign would continue in Liberia as usual, while a small team of representatives comprising seven women representing different groups would leave for Ghana and mobilize Liberian refugee and other civil society women there to join the movement and stage the campaign at the venue of the peace talks. Upon arrival in Ghana, the women mobilized Liberian refugee women living in both the Bududuram camp and other Ghanaian communities. The women also used the larger WIPNET-WANEP network to leverage support from women's groups in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea Conakry, and they, too, joined the campaign by undertaking different actions in their respective countries.

The movement thus gained in numerical strength, and sit-ins were organized at the venues of the peace talks in both Akosombo and Accra. As the talks progressed, the women engaged informally with the different parties, calling for a demonstration of their genuine commitment to the process. The women communicated frequently with the leadership of the campaign, giving and obtaining information that was vital for moving their activities forward. The media also became an ally in Ghana, as the women quickly learned the benefits of engaging the media in their campaign. Again, they made headlines as they sat on the lawns of the conference centre and hotel for days, weeks and months with their white T-shirts, uniform lappas and messages of 'No More War; We Want Peace.'

When the peace talks reached an impasse in late July 2003, the women were irked and decided to seize the venue of the peace talks. This was a spontaneous reaction to events on that momentous day and it was made possible because the movement had a clear leadership and built-in flexibility, which enabled them to respond to issues as they arose. As the parties at the peace table threatened to leave the hall, the women swiftly looped arms to form a barricade with their bodies;[59] thus preventing any entry into or exit from the hall by the parties, mediators, and even staffers. Attempts by security operatives to dismantle the barricade were rebuffed with a threat to undress, an act that is perceived as having mystical implications of bad luck in traditional African societies.

At this stage, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, a former Head of State of Nigeria and lead mediator,[60] was forced to meet with the women, who expressed their displeasure at what they perceived to be a lack of commitment to the peace talks. They emphasized that no one would be allowed to leave the room unless a commitment was made to advance the process. This was indeed a watershed moment for the women and the campaign. The talks resumed with vigor, and the women were invited to send in two representatives to the security and political committees. In addition, the different negotiating parties informally consulted them, and two weeks later, the CPA was signed, bringing an end to the civil war and ushering in the transitional government. Clearly, the women of Liberia had demonstrated that non-violence was a more powerful force than violence.

[59] Zangar, M. (2003) At Peace Talks, Women Barricade Conference Hall to Protest Carnage in Monrovia. The Perspective: Atlanta, Georgia.
[60] http://mobile.ghanaweb.com/wap/article.php?ID=38842

The mass action for peace campaign, however, did not end with this achievement. Given the failure of past peace agreements, the women did not want to take any chances. They refused to settle for 'negative' peace (the mere absence of war), and therefore decided to accompany the implementation of the peace agreement. They continued to engage with different stakeholders who had a role to play in the CPA implementation process, including the transitional government, the United States Embassy, and the UN Mission. In September 2003, they organized a two-day consultative meeting to set benchmarks and timelines for the implementation of the CPA. As Gbowee noted "we took that document and used our layman language to set benchmarks: December to April - disarmament; April to May - this; May to June - this; July to August - that. We disseminated that information in all of the rural areas, challenging women, saying that, 'You have to be on your toes. Everyday you see these things happening in your community, come to town and let us take it up.' "[61]

With this self-assigned watchdog role, the women engaged the UN Mission in the DDR process. They were particularly interested in the plight of child soldiers and visited communities and disarmament sites to convince child soldiers and other combatants to hand in their weapons. They were perceived as neutral and credible impartial arbiters, thus gaining the trust and confidence of combatants and communities alike. The UN Mission (UNOMIL) formally commissioned the women to undertake sensitization campaigns on the DDR program at the community level. As part of this process, the women escorted combatants to the cantonment sites to be disarmed and in some cases collected the guns from the combatants who, for fear of reprisal or stigmatization, preferred to disarm to the women. The women also initiated a cleansing ritual in which ex-combatants, particularly former child soldiers, were reintegrated back into their communities. This involved the symbolic dressing of former child soldiers in white outfits, clasping of hands, singing and marching in long files as they were escorted back home by their mothers, aunts, sisters, grandmothers, and cousins.[62] When dissatisfied with the DDR process, the ex-combatants preferred to express their grievances to the women who, in turn, approached the UN Mission, the transitional government, and the National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) for remedies. This happened, for example, when the ex-combatants voiced concerns over delays in the disbursement of packages, which were to be given out upon disarmament in exchange for the guns.

The mass action for peace campaign, as Gbowee noted, "did not end with the technical demilitarizing of society."[63] In order to sustain the gains made and avert reversals, the women expanded the mass action for peace campaign to include a focus on women's political leadership. Their experience of the mass action for peace campaign had made them realize the importance of political power and will and its implications for

[61] The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights (2006). A Conversation With Women Peacebuilders: Leymah Gbowee and Shobha Gautam. The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University.
[62] Fuest, V. (2010). Contested Inclusions: Pitfalls of NGO Peace-Building Activities in Liberia, in Africa Spectrum, 45, 2, 3-33.
[63] Leymah Gbowee (2009) *Effecting Change through Women's Activism in Liberia* in IDS Bulletin Volume 40, No 2, March 2009, *Transforming Security and Development in an Unequal World*.

consolidating the gains of the campaign. Thus, they began to mobilize for the 2005 general elections. Again, their message was clear, simple and concise, calling for an increased representation of women in political leadership at all levels.

Their campaign began with a nationwide survey to assess the level of women's preparedness for the electoral and political processes. They were dismayed with the findings of the survey, which highlighted the political lethargic among Liberians in general and showed that women had not registered on the voters' lists in significant numbers. Consequently, in May 2005, they launched a "massive voter registration campaign that was primarily targeted at women."[64] Two hundred women were deployed in teams of 20 to the ten counties to encourage women to register. To facilitate this, the women volunteered to baby sit, undertake domestic chores, and assist with selling at the market. Five days later, they had registered 7,477 women,[65] bringing the total number of registered female voters to 51%. The women then mobilized support for Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who ran in the run-off elections against George Weah[66] and was elected as President of the Republic of Liberia in November 2005. She acknowledged the contribution of the women of Liberia during her inauguration, when she stated "... Liberian women were galvanized – and demonstrated unmatched passion, enthusiasm, and support for my candidacy. They stood with me; they defended me; they worked with me; they prayed for me. The same can be said for the women throughout Africa. I want to here and now, gratefully acknowledge the powerful voice of women of all walks of life."[67]

## CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE MASS ACTION FOR PEACE CAMPAIGN

The Liberia Women's Mass Action for Peace Campaign presents a number of pertinent lessons that can be applied to other contexts. In this section, the paper highlights a number of best practices and lessons learned that could potentially benefit women and other actors working on conflict and peace issues in other contexts. These are discussed as successes, challenges, and observed trends.

### The Successes of the Liberia Women Mass Action for Peace Campaign

The Liberia Women Mass Action for Peace Campaign recorded a number of successes, including achieving its set objectives and being a prototype of a non-violent resistance movement. Specific successes include the following: first, it demonstrated the principle of local ownership, which is vital for sustaining momentum. After achieving their three core objectives, it was this sense of ownership of the campaign/process that made the women expand the project to address other new/emerging concerns vis-à-vis DDR and electoral processes.

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[64] Ibid.
[65] The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights (2006). A Conversation With Women Peacebuilders: Leymah Gbowee and Shobha Gautam. The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University.
[66] http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/ironladies/presidency.html
[67] President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (2006). Excerpts from Inaugural Speech on Femmes Africa Solidarities (FAS) website http://www.fasngo.org/ellen-johnson-sirleaf.html

Second, the campaign leveraged women's agency. It must be noted that there were different organizations involved in the campaign. They had to work on their individual organizational programs whilst working simultaneously on the campaign. This facilitated movement building, networking and partnership building among local women's groups. Strategic partnership building as depicted by the mass action for peace campaign is essential for success and complements local ownership. As the Liberian experience shows, the women might have been unable to effectively implement the campaign if they had not had the support of other actors and stakeholders, both local and external.

Third, the campaign was central in bringing a human face to the crisis. Before the launch of the mass action for peace campaign, the humanitarian toll of the crisis was largely ignored. More focus was on the activities of the warring parties, both state and rebels, and on military issues. Post-war, this was significant for changing the age-old approach to governance and security, resulting in the increased acceptance of the human security paradigm, to which the needs and concerns of women was central.

Fourth, the campaign was itself a forum for learning. A couple of basic skills were employed, some of which many women's groups involved in the campaign still use to advance their institutional work. These include skills in advocacy, non-violence, working with the media, teambuilding and stakeholder mapping. Thus, the campaign was useful for building and/or strengthening local capacities.

Fifth, the mass action for peace campaign empowered representatives of different women's groups, both minority and majority. Women were mobilized and recruited into the campaign from Christian and Moslem women's associations, older and younger women's networks, rural and urban area, refugee and internally displaced women, etc. This recruitment strategy was essential for representing the interests and eliciting the buy-in of different women's groups, responding to the heterogeneous and pluralistic character of the Liberian women's movement.

Sixth, the mass action and the subsequent election of the female president have generated political will. This has been demonstrated in diverse ways through different actions to reduce inequalities and prioritize women's empowerment, leadership, and protection in the post-war era. However, this raises fundamental questions about whether these post-war gains for women would have occurred if the circumstances had been different, and what types of action would have been needed to secure the requisite political will to effect such change. The campaign holds some answers to this question. It showed that women's peace activism is highly political and is about achieving political and other change for women. Consequently, the participation of women in post-war reconstruction structures and processes, as per UNSCR 1325, is crucial. Not all post-war countries will emerge with a female president as in Liberia; nonetheless, women's groups must be supported to remain central to these processes.

Seventh, the leadership and general membership of the mass action for peace campaign displayed a high level of accountability and transparency, which was essential for building trust and confidence in both members and the larger society. For instance, there

was daily communication and feedback between movement members in the centre (Monrovia) and the counties. Even while in Accra, the women constantly liaised with the women back home to report developments and obtain feedback on the next steps. Similarly, they gained the trust of ex-combatants, who in some cases preferred to disarm or express their grievances to the women.

**Challenges for the Liberia Women Mass Action for Peace Campaign**

In spite of the above-listed successes and the obvious achievements of the mass action for peace campaign, a number of challenges were encountered, some obvious and others more subtle. First, the campaign was largely constrained by inadequate resources. Funding was a major constraint and, although the women were highly resourceful, it revealed how too often women's concerns and activities are unbudgeted and under-supported by donors. Understandably, Liberia was in a crisis, and thus the government was incapable of resourcing such action; however, it is important that donors and other strategic partners make rapid and flexible funding available to women's groups in such complex and emergency situations.

Second, the campaign exposed some of the gender gaps that exist within conflict resolution, peace and security processes, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Women are often largely excluded from these processes, as was evident in the Liberian peace process. Neither party included women in their delegations to the peace talks and, in spite of the daily presence of women at the venue of the talks, neither the negotiating parties nor the mediators deemed it appropriate to formally consult and/or engage the women until they seized the hall. As stipulated in UNSCR 1325, it is important to ensure the "inclusion of measures to support and promote local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution in the agenda of actors responsible for negotiating and implementing peace agreements."[68] It is also essential to provide these negotiators and mediators with technical assistance on gender. Gender advisors, especially from stakeholder countries and/or institutions, should be deployed rapidly to assist negotiation and mediation teams so as to avoid the exclusion of women and their concerns from the peace talks and their outcomes.

Third, violence against women, both structural and physical, remained a big challenge for the women. The standoff at the peace talks demonstrates this point. Had the women been at the peace table, the seizure of the hall might have been unwarranted in the first place. The seizure of the hall was thus an avenue for voicing and expressing their dissatisfaction with a process that had originally shut them out.

**Observed Trends in the Liberia Women Mass Action for Peace Campaign**

A number of trends emerged from the experience of the Liberia Women Mass Action for Peace Campaign that are worth highlighting. First, information sharing, training and education are central to women's empowerment in peace and security. Traditionally, women are excluded from peace and security processes in Africa and, despite their growing involvement in such processes, discrimination still exists. It is therefore crucial that women themselves are the drivers of the change they envisage and that they are

[68] United Nations Security Council Resolution: S/Res/1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security.

adequately informed to make choices as well as identify and maximize opportunities. Perhaps, if the core leaders of WIPNET and MARWOPNET had not known UNSCR 1325 and how best to apply it, the campaign would not have attained the level of success it did. Thus, information and access to existing policy frameworks are essential and different mechanisms can be employed to disseminate information on such policy or legal frameworks.

Second, given the plurality of women's groups with competing agendas, it is important that women have a shared and collective agenda that then defines their work within coalitions and/or networks. A number of highly visible women's groups and networks have become extinct because of their inability to manage internal differences. This implies a focus on movement and institution building, each of which has its own focus and priorities. The experience of the mass action for peace campaign in identifying a common denominator and shared objectives illustrates this point.

Third, the campaign highlighted some of the fundamental assumptions associated with femininity and masculinity with respect to the attribution of pacifist and hard-line positions to women and men. This bifurcation of roles between women and men based on their gender roles can sometimes be counter-productive. When the women referenced their status as mothers, wives, daughters, aunts and sisters, they essentially sought to portray themselves as primarily peace-loving and caring. Women need to be aware that this could be counterproductive so that they can weigh their options before employing a particular strategy.

Fourth, local ownership of the campaign fostered sustainability. Throughout the period of the campaign, the women raised most of the funds themselves. As a matter of fact, the campaign might have long ended without this self-resourcing, given that donor support was hard to come by and inadequate at the time. This level of dedication by the women confirms the words of Mazurana and McKay, who have noted that "local women are prepared to work and wait longer for results than many donor-imposed project deadlines."[69]

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The Liberian Women Mass Action for Peace Campaign demonstrates the important role of women in peace and post conflict reconstruction processes. It also illustrates that even where formal engagement mechanisms are lacking, women's groups can engage by using alternative entry points and opportunities. In order to identify these entry points and opportunities, however, women need to be trained, have access to information (including to policy frameworks that can serve as advocacy tools), build networks and partnerships, and engage the, usually male, gatekeepers of peace processes. To achieve this, more proactive measures are recommended.

[69] Dyan Mazurana et Susan McKay, (1999). Women and Peacebuilding. Essay published in Canada by Rights & Democracy.

Governments, strategic partners, the international community and other actors involved in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery processes will need to support a variety of interventions that could serve to promote such an agenda. Helpful measures include training and education; facilitating peer learning and exchange; supporting the development of relevant policies, including the development of national action plans on UNSCR 1325; mapping existing local capacities of women's groups; building capacities of women in specialized areas such as mediation; and supporting indigenous women's peacebuilding activities. Extensive and frequent consultations with women's groups and institutions are key to generating and prioritizing options. Mediators and other technical personnel involved in peace processes should either receive training on gender or be provided with support on gender issues. Women's issues must be factored into all event, activity, project and program planning and must be backed up with adequate budgetary allocations.

In addition, affirmative action measures can also increase the participation of women at all levels in formal peace processes. Affirmative action should be applied to all programmatic responses initiated by different local and external actors. The aim is to eliminate existing stereotypes and build a culture that is enabling to women's participation in peace and security structures and processes. Such measures are being employed in Liberia within the security sector and in the political/electoral process.

Support for the media is also essential as media groups can be important allies in public campaigns aimed at promoting women's participation. The Liberian women employed this strategy during the mass action of peace campaign and it remains an appropriate medium for raising awareness and mobilizing support at different levels. The women's radio station in post-war Liberia effectively serves this purpose.

Non-women led and focused peace and security institutions must also be targeted. This is essential because these structures are still dominated by men and often take a mere tokenistic stance on women's issues. Along with other interventions, gender awareness raising activities should be implemented in broader peace and security organizations at local, national and regional levels. Where possible, bilateral and multilateral partnerships should explicitly make this a requirement for their support/partnership.

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