

# International Journal of Non-Profit Sector Empowerment

Vol 1, No 1 (2022)

International Journal of Non-Profit Sector Empowerment



## Building Peace from the Bottom Up: The Case of Liberia

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doi: [10.12681/npse.31253](https://doi.org/10.12681/npse.31253)

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Building Peace from the Bottom Up: The Case of Liberia

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## Abstract

Over the last two decades, national and international peacebuilding initiatives have increasingly emphasised the need to include a wider range of actors in post-conflict and peace processes. The importance of developing women's skills and full participation in the peacebuilding sphere has been recognised and promoted by legal norms such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), adopted in 2000. Even though the progress made on women's participation in peacebuilding processes cannot be ignored, the effective implementation of policy frameworks remains limited, especially in conflict and post-conflict countries. In this context, this paper analyses the role of community-based initiatives in empowering local women in peace-making and peacebuilding processes, using the case study of the Second Liberian Civil War (1999-2003) and the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET). This article emphasizes the importance of inclusive peacemaking through a review of Liberian women's peace activism throughout the official talks.

**Keywords:** peacebuilding, women's empowerment, UNSCR 1325, grassroots peace, civil society

## Introduction

In the 1990s, the concept of 'peacebuilding'<sup>1</sup> introduced a new approach to peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction, claiming the inclusion of a wider range of actors including marginalised groups, civil society, women and youth. Since then, national and international norms and programmes raising awareness about the need to develop women's skills in decision-making have been emerging, as the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) in 2000 demonstrated. UNSCR 1325 provides an extensive normative framework recognising the inextricable linkage between peace and gender equality and supporting the full participation of women at all stages of peace processes. In this regard, it is crucial to recognize that inclusive peace efforts do not only possess a normative dimension but also strategic aspects that enable long-term and sustainable peace. Although some progress has been made on women's

<sup>1</sup> Johan Galtung introduced the concept of peacebuilding in 1976, as a mechanism to "remove causes of wars and offer alternatives to war in situations where wars might occur" (Galtung, 1976, p. 298).

participation in peacebuilding processes, the translation of policy frameworks into effective action still faces crucial obstacles, especially in conflict and post-conflict settings in which nationalist discourses are predominant. This article analyses the extent to which grassroots women's organizations, as an expression of civil society, contribute to local women's participation in peacebuilding processes. This paper emphasises the role of women's groups and community-based initiatives to build inclusive, sustainable, and grassroots peace through the case study of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) in Liberia.

Located on the Western coast of Africa, Liberia has a unique history as an independent republic founded in 1847 for freed African American slaves. The country suffered from several consecutive armed conflicts and inter-ethnic contestation provoked by the exclusionary character of the centralised state's governance, the discrimination exerted against the population, and the lack of access to basic services, especially in rural regions (IPTI, 2018). In 1999, the second civil war began and spread across the country. Women and children constituted major targets of armed parties and were recruited into fighting groups, sometimes by force, sometimes voluntarily. Estimations show that between 1989 and 2003, about 250,000 people died, 40,000 women were raped, and 2,000,000 people were displaced (United Nations, 2014; Specht, 2006). The conflict also extended to neighbouring countries such as Sierra Leone and Guinea, increasing regional tensions and instability. After 76 days of talks, the negotiating parties signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), setting up a transitional government from 2003 to 2005, before the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as the first African woman President (IPTI, 2018). Despite the external assistance from the international community during the civil war, Liberia remains nowadays one of the poorest countries in the world with a Human Development Index value of 0.480 in 2019 (UNDP, 2020).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, gender inequalities have only been partially addressed in the post-conflict phase, as the country ranks 156 out of 162 in the Gender Inequality Index (UNDP, 2020). Although improvements have been observed in women's political and economic empowerment, levels of education and health remain low, and the percentages of gender-based violence appear to be among the highest in the world (IPTI, 2018). Although Liberia's peace agreement was formally signed in August 2003, the implementation of peace constitutes an ongoing process that must be constantly consolidated. In this context, the research framework addresses the role of grassroots initiatives in strengthening local women's participation in Liberia's peacebuilding process. The data collected is based on the analysis of official reports, selected academic literature, and several primary in-depth interviews conducted with CSOs' representatives and activists.

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<sup>2</sup> The full report is available at: [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr\\_theme/country-notes/LBR.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/LBR.pdf)

## 1. The Role of CSOs in Liberia's Peace Process

Liberia's peace negotiations involved various actors, including the conflict parties and their representatives, political parties, civil society organisations (CSOs), and ECOWAS. The three negotiating parties were represented by the leaders of MODEL, LURD, and the Liberian Government. Besides, 18 political parties and six civil society organisations had an observer status (United Nations, 2003). Women participated in the peace negotiations in several ways, as formal observers through the Mano-River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET) and as informal participants, through unofficial consultations and mass-mobilization in the form of the Women's Mass Action for Peace led by the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET).

### *The Mano-River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET)*

Created in 2000, MARWOPNET was considered a formal peace organisation, covering conflicts in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. After the ceasefire in June 2003, the organisation took part in the peace negotiations as a formal observer, along with other civil society organisations and political parties, including the Unity Party led by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (IPTI, 2018). In total, 17% of the signatories to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) were women (UN Women, 2012). MARWOPNET had a considerable influence during the peace talks and participated in the nomination of the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson of the transitional government. The organisation also actively supported the creation of a Ministry of Gender in the transitional government (IPTI, 2018).

### *The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace led by WIPNET*

WIPNET was established in 2001 by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)<sup>3</sup>, an organisation supporting peace and advocating gender equality. Although WIPNET did not have a formal role in the peace process, their work and initiatives largely influenced the negotiations. The Mass Action Campaign started before the peace talks, directed toward ending the war in the country and pressuring the conflict parties to enhance dialogue. Liberian women of all classes participated in the Mass Action, spreading the message, "*we want peace, no more war*". Dressing in white, women were protesting for peace in the streets, promoting inter-faith dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and praying together for peace. During the peace talks, they travelled to Accra, where they pressured the conflict parties to finalise the peace agreement (Gbowee, 2009). After about six weeks of talks, over 200 Liberian women staged a sit-in at the entrance of the conference hall, locking arms to block the exit of delegates and demanding that the leaders of warring factions sign the peace

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, see <http://wanep.org>

agreement to put an end to the hostility. During the sit-in, the women also demanded that no Liberian delegate would be allowed to leave the conference room for any reason until the agreement was signed (Gbowee, 2009, p. 51).

The women participating in the Mass Action stood for peace in their society and had a fundamental role in the peace process. WIPNET was also formally invited to have a seat as an observer during the official negotiation process (IPTI, 2018). The Women Mass Action for Peace communicated a strong message through direct actions, dressing in white and organising symbolic protests in several locations in Liberia and across the region. After the peace agreement, the network kept meeting at the fish market in Monrovia, especially during sensitive times such as before elections. Their direct actions quickly caught media attention, increasing their presence and credibility<sup>4</sup>. In 2011, Leymah Gbowee, the leader of WIPNET, won the Nobel Peace Prize for her leadership and commitment to ending the conflict in Liberia.

### *Civil society consultations*

During the peace negotiations, CSOs were involved through informal consultations with the mediators and conflict parties (IPTI, 2018). Women's organisations were considered influential actors in the talks and often managed to enter into informal dialogue with members of conflict parties. After the agreement, the organisations that had an observer status discussed the provisions informally with cross-section women. MARWOPNET, the Liberia Women Initiative (LWI), and WIPNET organised an inclusive meeting in Monrovia to translate the provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and discuss it with local women within communities (IPTI, 2018). Similar initiatives were undertaken by WIPNET during the 2005 elections, including helping market women to register for voting and providing them with childcare and transportation to go to vote (Gbowee, 2009).

The impact of women's activism was directly translated in their representation in the transitional government, especially through the creation of several commissions and processes of consultation. In the National Transitional Legislative Assembly, civil society actors were given seven seats out of 76 and a Ministry of Gender was established (United Nations, 2003). Several inclusive commissions were to be led by CSOs and women activists based on the principle of gender balance, as set out in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (United Nations, 2003). For instance, in the Ministry of Gender, no more than three out of five commissioners could be of the same gender (Republic of Liberia, 2006).

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<sup>4</sup> Several documentaries and movies such as *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* were realised based on women's experience in Liberia and documenting the Mass Action Campaign.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was appointed as head of the Governance Reform Commission established by the CPA, renamed as Governance Commission in 2007, directed to address the governance reform challenges (IPTI, 2018). Besides, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act specified the need to include women's experiences, to condemn gender-based violations, and establish quotas on commissioners (TRC, 2009).

### *Favourable Factors to Women's Participation*

Several studies have demonstrated a correlation between women's participation and the nature of conflict. According to Nilsson and Svensson, "*women's organizations are much more frequently involved in peace-making efforts in armed conflicts over governmental power*" (2020, p. 4). In the case of Liberia, women's advocacy and influence as peacemakers during the negotiations were enabled by several factors. In fact, women were already involved in the early stages of the conflict as peace activists through informal initiatives, peaceful marches, and protests. This long-lasting involvement favoured positive attitudes from the armed parties and mediators toward women's actions (IPTI, 2018). Despite the patriarchal traditions, women peace activists were esteemed by mediators. Essentialist assumptions considering women as mothers, wives, and sisters, being naturally more peaceful, helped them somehow to access conflict parties by reaffirming their traditional societal roles, rather than threatening those (IPTI, 2018).

Another factor that favoured women's influence was the successful coalition-building among CSOs such as MARWOPNET and WIPNET<sup>5</sup>. Although both organisations had distinct strategies and did not have an easy relationship from the beginning, their cooperation increased during the negotiations. MARWOPNET gave briefings and support to WIPNET, and WIPNET would pressure the conflict parties (IPTI, 2018). Both organisations worked together in the creation of a forum for women to discuss the talks and they finalised the 'Golden Tulip Declaration of Liberian Women Attending the Peace Talks'<sup>6</sup>, outlining women's demands to address their concerns. MARWOPNET and WIPNET continued to work together after the signature of the peace agreement, although class divisions and fragmentation began to reappear. WIPNET received significant public support especially due to its grassroots character. It was considered as an inclusive organisation, uniting various social classes,

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<sup>5</sup> In "Better Together? Civil Society Coordination during Peace Negotiations" (2002), Desirée Nilsson and Nathanael Eschmann have generalized this finding through their analysis of Guatemala and El-Salvador.

<sup>6</sup> *The Golden Tulip Declaration of Liberian Women Attending the Peace Talks in Accra, Accra, Ghana, 15 March 2003*. Available at:  
[https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/rep\\_goldentulipdeclarationliberianwomenpeacetalks\\_representvariouslibwomensorg\\_2003\\_0.pdf](https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/rep_goldentulipdeclarationliberianwomenpeacetalks_representvariouslibwomensorg_2003_0.pdf)



religions, political sections, and identities, including refugees and displaced persons (Gbowee, 2009). Although MARWOPNET's members did not have the same societal support, they were also respected within Liberian society and political parties, especially because of the membership of elders' women such as Mary Brownell, Chairperson of the Liberian Widows Initiative (LWI) (IPTI, 2018). However, members of MARWOPNET were mainly seen as coming from the elite of Monrovia. Several other groups, such as the Concerned Women of Liberia, the Federation of Liberian Women, the Christian Health Association of Liberia (CHAL) were directly working with women from communities, organising training and workshops on conflict resolution and capacity-building (Moran & Pitcher, 2004).

Globally, women's work to build peace in Liberia was respected and considered to have a positive impact on welfare among households and communities, for instance through the reconstruction of local schools and infrastructures (Justino et al., 2018). Women's organisations had also an important role in strengthening community engagement and reducing conflicts locally and at the national level, through mediation training initiatives with livelihoods.

### *Obstacles to Women's Influence*

Despite the efforts made by women and the support received, several factors have constrained their influence in the peace process. Cultural and social barriers constitute important obstacles to women's participation in peacebuilding processes, especially due to the prevalence of men in decision-making activities. In Liberia, men largely associate women with housewives and mothers' roles (Justino et al., 2018). A study conducted by the International Institute of Social Studies observes that essentialist assumptions about women are more important where percentages of domestic violence are higher. In the report, a key informant stated that *"after the conflict, men and women are doing things equally. Women are trying to get to the same level as men, both economically and politically... However, men continue to dominate women, through domestic violence and sexual abuse"* (Justino et al., 2018, p. 919).

The fact that women and men often do not understand peace the same way constitutes an obstacle to women's engagement in peacebuilding initiatives. While most men understand peace as the absence of war within the community, women mainly consider peace through access to basic needs, education, the absence of violence at home, and the unity inside and outside the family (Justino et al., 2018). This gap of understanding can lead to further conflict as it prevents basic community issues from being addressed. The authors argue that the absence of conflict, or 'negative peace', could relapse into

conflict if people's basic needs, or 'positive peace', including freedoms and basic services, are not guaranteed and strengthened (Justino et al., 2018, p. 922). In this regard, a Liberian activist expressed:

*"You know, peace is not necessarily the silence of the guns. If from this morning until 5 pm this evening I am not able to feed my child, I am not at peace. If I am not able to send my child to school, I am not at peace. Those are different basic things. That is one peace that people can start".<sup>7</sup>*

Economic obstacles were also significantly influencing women's involvement in the peace process. Several studies reported the limited access to funding and resources for women's organisations, especially in peacebuilding activities that require long-term community engagement (Justino et al., 2018). Most women who participated in the negotiations came from the elite or received international funding to cover travelling costs (IPTI, 2018). In contrast, civil society groups without an official status were not able to afford to stay during the entire length of the talks. For instance, WIPNET relied on members' donations and very limited internal funding (IPTI, 2018). Additionally, the lack of employment opportunities, low levels of education and patriarchal traditions excluding women economically constitute factors influencing their peace work and engagement within the community (Justino et al., 2018). In this context, the influence of civil society organisations in peace processes and the multiple ways in which women are involved during wartime should be recognised by donors and governments. If conflict settings can create opportunities to transform gender stereotypes, international donors should contribute to the real needs of local communities during and after the war (Moran & Pitcher, 2004).

Another important challenge arose from the heterogeneity of women's groups. Formal organisations were usually led by elites of educated women often distant from rural communities. The language gap between rural and elite women fragilized rural women's inclusion in peacebuilding initiatives (Moran & Pitcher, 2004). After the peace agreement, the heterogeneity of social classes increased and weakened women's participation. For example, WIPNET was said to represent all Liberians, with over 5000 members coming from all ranges of society, from rural to urban settings (IPTI, 2018). Mass protests were organised through collective decisions, including all voices and participants. Although MARWOPNET and LWI were invited to take part in several initiatives, both organisations showed little involvement and rarely participated (IPTI, 2018). Members of MARWOPNET and LWI were often criticised for being from the elite and *"having wine and dined with armed parties in their roles as official delegates"* (IPTI, 2018, p. 12). Although this was denied by members and activists,

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with a member of Liberian Women Empowerment Network (LIWEN), April 3, 2021.



fragmentation among women's organisations made it difficult to agree on actions and decisions. After the peace negotiations, most members of WIPNET returned to their previous lives, while members of MARWOPNET and LWI were appointed to governmental positions in the transitional government (IPTI, 2018). Although President Sirleaf appointed Leymah Gbowee as head of the Peace and Reconciliation Commission in 2011, she stopped one year later due to corruption issues.

Overall, in the 1990s, the West Africa region suffered from intensified intra-state conflicts as witnessed in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau. Violence over ethnicity, land, resources, or religious purposes were predominant in the region, threatening democratic consolidation and peace in most of the West African countries (WANEP, 2017).<sup>8</sup> The context of terror left by the massive destruction and atrocities committed urged to build stable peace across the region through the integration of people's voices and civic associations. The next section of this paper further analyses the 'Peace Hut' initiative led by WIPNET, an inclusive and bottom-up mechanism for peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

## **2. Building Grassroots Peace through the 'Peace Hut' Initiative**

Over the years, a consensus has emerged in the academic literature regarding the need to include all levels in peace processes. Nevertheless, there are divergent ideas about when grassroots actors should be involved. Following the view of Lederach (1997), we emphasize the need to consider local actors and strengthen grassroots initiatives all along the process.

In 1998, the West Africa Peace Network (WANEP) emerged to enhance civil society and grassroots initiatives to build peace in the West Africa region. The network was launched by Sam Gbaydee Doe (Liberia) and Emmanuel Habuka Bombande (Ghana), two students from the Eastern Mennonite University, Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) in Virginia, USA. The main goals behind the establishment of WANEP were to build a local peace culture, strengthen the peacebuilding capacity of local institutions and practitioners, and prevent the rise of new conflicts through prevention mechanisms (WANEP, 2008). The bottom-up approach to peacebuilding used by WANEP enables a better representation of local realities in articulation with communities. The organisation's ability to strengthen local peacebuilders has been facilitated through training, workshops and thematic programmes on conflict prevention and peacebuilding, such as the non-violence and peace education (NAPE) program; the West Africa Early & Response Network (WARN); and the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) program (WANEP, 2017).

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the peace and security context in West Africa, see the book: West Africa Network for Peacebuilding. (2017). *Strides and Strains of Civil Society Organizations in West Africa: The WANEP Story*. Accra, Ghana.

The Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) was launched in 2001, based on the perspective that inclusive and effective peace must include women's voices. The network emphasises the need to create spaces and platforms for women to strengthen their peacebuilding capacity through community mobilisation. It aims at enhancing grassroots women's voice, especially in security and peace issues (WANEP, 2017). Over the years, WIPNET gained credibility through its peace efforts and the training of more than 3000 individual women in peacebuilding and leadership (WANEP, 2017). Based on real-life experiences, the network has generated specific solutions to local challenges. Several women's organisations have also benefited from WIPNET's capacity-building initiatives on peacebuilding practices. For instance, the Annual Women in Peacebuilding course launched at the West Africa Peacebuilding Institute (WAPI) in 2003 constitutes an important contribution of WIPNET that has reached male and female participants worldwide. In parallel, the Annual Women in Peacebuilding Regional Conference organised by WIPNET has enabled women around the world to analyse national efforts on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), and formulate recommendations for further implementation (WANEP, 2017). Moreover, WIPNET initiated the Voices of Women Radio program, active in most of the West Africa region, providing rural women with the opportunity to participate in public life and be heard within their communities. The organisation also translated UNSCR 1325 and other international legal frameworks into local languages to raise awareness of women's rights among rural communities (WANEP, 2008). After several years of violent conflict, reconciliation was recognised as a major challenge for Liberia's reconstruction. The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia<sup>9</sup> acknowledges the need to establish a "*tool for peacebuilding, healing and national reconciliation at both the national and district levels [...] to provide victims a public venue to confront perpetrators living in their communities to hasten reintegration and reconciliation and community-based atonement*" (TRC, 2009, p. 76).

In this context, this paper analyses the 'Peace Hut' mechanism, a central strategy at the community level to enhance peace, dialogue and national reconciliation.

### *The 'Peace Hut' Initiative*

The Peace Hut initiative was launched by Liberian women as a grassroots alternative to create a conflict-resolution and peacebuilding mechanism. This project is based on the traditional 'Palava

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<sup>9</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRC). (2009). *Final Report, Volume I: Findings and Determinations*. Available at [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/3B6FC3916E4E18C6492575EF00259DB6-Full\\_Report\\_1.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/3B6FC3916E4E18C6492575EF00259DB6-Full_Report_1.pdf)

Hut'<sup>10</sup> system of justice and conflict-management used for centuries by indigenous communities in rural Liberia (Danso, 2016). In the Peace Hut, the accused, the victim, and the local leader participate together in the process of reconciliation to find a consensus and a fair solution to the dispute (Relief Web, 2012). The Peace Huts also aim at deconstructing patriarchal practices used in the traditional 'Palava' system. This grassroots mechanism constitutes a space for women, youths, and men to meet, listen, be heard, and find win-win solutions for civil disputes, independently from the courts. It serves to mediate local conflicts and issues and act as a watchdog to the judicial and police systems (UN Women, 2019).

The initiative was born during Liberia's civil war but only became active in 2006, directed toward women's empowerment, community-healing, reintegration of former combatants, and reconciliation among Liberians. The three first Peace Huts were officially built in 2011 in the Lofa, Nimba and Bong counties. In the long-term, the goal was to build a Peace Hut in all Liberian counties. Several partnerships were established with decision-making institutions and leaders to increase the effectiveness and impact of these local structures on conflict-resolution matters (UN Women, 2019). In 2019, there were 38 active Peace Huts registered across Liberia, working to reduce gender-based violence, spread peace education among communities and mobilise during elections or other important issues (UN Women, 2019).

The Peace Huts support and employ a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding and reconciliation, always promoting the voices of women, youths, and former combatants in the process. Members of the Peace Huts have taken part in trainings, retreats, and workshops to foster their skills in peace-making and mediation, using mindfulness to achieve social change within communities. According to this practice, mindfulness meditation enables activists to connect with their inner-peace and be oriented toward reconciliation, conflict resolution and recovery from past sufferings in the post-war context.<sup>11</sup> The Peace Hut mechanism has been internationally acknowledged and has received support from the United Nations and international donors. In 2012, UN Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supported the Peace Huts with the inclusion of an economic empowerment programme. The objective was to enable groups of women to build their own project, such as opening a bakery or a shop and running it as a small collective business (Relief Web, 2012). The testimony of a rural woman from Weala in the Margibi County confirmed that the trainings supported by UN

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<sup>10</sup> The traditional 'Palava Hut' system constitutes a transitional justice mechanism at the community level. It serves at solving disputes through prosecutions, truth-telling, and reconciliation rituals. However, this traditional mechanism uses customary and patriarchal practices often discriminatory to women.

<sup>11</sup> For more information, see <https://earthtreasurevase.org/liberia-peacebuilding-project/>

Women have enabled her to start selling peanuts with less than 5,00 US\$ (500,00 LD\$). She was quickly able to expand to other products and to open her shop. This opportunity gave her the possibility to afford education for her children and care for the whole family. The women from Weala expressed that the project positively impacted their lives and future prospects (Front Page Africa, 2018).

In 2013, the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund launched a programme in Liberia to support several projects in the country's transition to a stable and peaceful democracy. The "Community-based Conflict Management – Women as Peace-Makers and Nation Builders" programme aimed at strengthening women's participation at all levels of decision-making processes and raising awareness of UNSCR 1325 through the Peace Hut mechanism. In partnership with UN Women, the Ministry of Gender and Development, the Development Education Network (DEN), and the Rights and Rice Foundation (RRF), a budget of US\$1,000,000 was dedicated to the realisation of the project, targeting women, men, girls and boys in twenty-two communities across five counties of Liberia (Nordic Consulting Group, 2017). The final report of the programme registered lower levels of domestic violence, higher percentages of women's participation and improved relationships with local police and security forces (Nordic Consulting Group, 2017). In 2016, 22 Peace Huts were established (of which 17 were renovated), and more than 3000 women received trainings in peacebuilding and leadership. About 300 men and boys were also trained on gender equality. A network of men was established to enhance their engagement against gender-based violence in communities (Nordic Consulting Group, 2017). However, high poverty levels and lack of educational opportunities significantly limit women's empowerment in Liberia. In the scope of the project, several trainings and teaching methods had to be readjusted for illiterate participants. The final report also confirmed the importance of enhancing cooperation with women's civil society organisations and community-based structures to implement UNSCR 1325 and organise women's empowerment in rural areas (Nordic Consulting Group, 2017). A Liberian lawyer and CSO representative expresses:

*"With women's empowerment, you see the zest in women, you see them wanting to be somebody, but for a good number, they may not be educated enough. They do not have the means, the finances, to be able to do what they want to do or to get involved in some kind of businesses".<sup>12</sup>*

Thus, initiatives on the Women, Peace, and Security agenda in Liberia should be increasingly linked to traditional and grassroots structures to implement effective measures on the ground. In 2019, the Peace Hut initiative became officially registered as a Community-Based Organisation (CBO), playing

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with a Liberian lawyer and CSO representative, April 3, 2021.

an instrumental role in Liberia's peacebuilding process (UN Women, 2019). The women running these local spaces mediate community-level issues and empower women through educational and economic opportunities. According to Erica Lawson, Professor of Women's Studies and Feminist Research at Western University, the Peace Hut significantly contribute to raising awareness among Liberian women and girls on their rights, especially under the framework of UNSCR 1325. The Peace Hut appear as a crucial instrument to educate women on the legal norms that support their participation at all stages of peace processes (Lawson, 2017).

Besides, several Peace Huts established partnerships with the Liberian National Police (LNP) to strengthen crime prevention against women. In the town of Weala, the police distributed mobile phones to several Peace Hut women to report cases of violence. A free hotline was opened for these women to alert the police when needed. Women received instructions to use mobile phones and to improve safety in the town. According to the Commanding Police Officer of Weala, the Peace Hut women "are stopping the violence before it happens" and are increasingly efficient in their peace work (Relief Web, 2012). Initially, the Peace Huts constituted spaces almost exclusively for women who had suffered trauma during the war. Over time, these platforms expanded to include men and boys and address a large range of social issues. Despite gender equality and women's rights, the Peace Hut women address health issues, especially during the 2014 Ebola outbreak and the current COVID-19 pandemic. The national radio program called "Conversations Under the Peace Hut" contributes to the diffusion of important information on health measures, prevention, and good manners to adopt, while always promoting a culture of peace within society.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, traditional spaces for reconciliation constitute safe structures for rural women and men to solve community-level conflicts and address women, peace and security issues (Peace Women, 2012). Thanks to the support of UN Women, this initiative has significantly strengthened women's role in maintaining peace within communities. Women have gained credibility and trust by being actively engaged at the grassroots level, in collaboration with local leaders and security forces (Peace Women, 2012). Nowadays, Liberian women continue to fight for their rights and pressure the government for change, especially through local activism. The maintenance of sustainable peace in the country tightly depends on the collaboration between the Liberian government and local actors, including the Peace Hut women and other civil society initiatives.

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<sup>13</sup> For more information, see <https://earthtreasurevase.org/liberia-peacebuilding-project/>

## Conclusion

The women's movement largely contributed to the establishment and consolidation of peace in Liberia. At the community level, women mediated conflicts and engaged in women's rights activism. Through campaigns, trainings, and other peacebuilding activities, women influenced the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and other legal frameworks on women, peace and security. However, local women's organisations engaging in peacebuilding remain constrained by cultural, social, and economic barriers, making it difficult to plan long-term projects and create effective change. In this regard, gender inequalities affecting all sectors of Liberian society pose a real challenge to women's involvement in decision-making processes. Several analyses of the Liberian case have emphasised that local organisations have created peace zones through spiritual activities, dances, and rituals, to strengthen cohesion, mediation, and reconciliation mechanisms (Moran & Pitcher, 2004). However, although bottom-up and grassroots initiatives are essential in conflict resolution, they are insufficiently acknowledged and often left behind in post-conflict reconstruction processes. Several other examples such as Colombia and Burundi also demonstrated that despite the inclusiveness of the peace process, women tend to return to their previous socioeconomic status in the post-conflict period. In this context, this paper stresses the importance of multi-level collaboration and partnerships between civil society and decision-making structures. Ending conflict and bringing peace are complex processes that result from the contributions of local activism, political leaders' commitments, and the engagement of third parties. Engaging together is fundamental to foster the implementation of national frameworks at the local level and establish positive and sustainable change within communities.

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