
THE BULLET CANNOT PICK AND CHOOSE: The Life and Peacebuilding Work of Vaiba Kebeh Flomo of Liberia

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2010 Women PeaceMakers Program

Made possible by the Fred J. Hansen Foundation

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemakers' own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemakers' work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

Made possible through a generous grant from the Fred J. Hansen Foundation, the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights – as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories. Selected peacemakers join the IPJ for an eight-week residency.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. The peacemakers' stories are also documented on film by the IPJ's partner organization Sun & Moon Vision Productions. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women – those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation – must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.¹

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER – VAIBA KEBEH FLOMO



Photo credit: Michelle Zousmer

Peace activist and social worker Vaiba Kebeh Flomo has worked since 1998 to heal both her nation and its women from the 14-year civil war between rebel groups and the Liberian army. As the women’s desk officer for the Lutheran Church in Liberia – Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program (LCL-THRP), Flomo supervises psychosocial services to war-affected women and girls and empowers them to build peace and promote nonviolence in their communities.

By 2002 Flomo and a colleague from LCL-THRP were desperate to do more than respond to the war’s victims. Each day villages were being destroyed, children recruited by the rebels, women and girls raped. They knew the war must be stopped at its root. Together the two women formed the Christian Women Peace Initiative (CWPI), mobilizing women from all denominations in and around Monrovia to protest the war. CWPI inspired the creation of Muslim Women for Peace, and the two groups quickly merged to become Liberian Women Mass Action for Peace.

Flomo was instrumental in presenting a written statement from the women to the warring factions in Liberia, asking them to negotiate a cease-fire and attend peace talks in Accra, Ghana, in 2003. She joined the delegation of women who traveled to Accra to pressure rebel groups and President Charles Taylor to continue talking until a peace agreement emerged. She then helped mobilize women to register and vote in the 2005 elections that resulted in Africa’s first elected female president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Flomo’s role in the Liberian women’s peace movement was documented in the 2008 film “Pray the Devil Back to Hell.”

Flomo’s peace work is not confined to Liberia’s borders. She traveled to Sierra Leone in 2007 as part of a “peace train” advocating for violence-free elections, and in 2009 she shared her peacebuilding experiences with the women of southern Sudan, emboldening them to create recommendations for their own political leaders on the inclusion of women in peace processes.



Photo credit: Rodney Nakamoto

Adamant that the health of Liberian society depends on the participation of women and youth, Flomo continues to focus on healing and rehabilitating women and girls, mending broken relationships between survivors and offenders of the civil war, and increasing the number of women involved in post-war peacebuilding and reconstruction. When asked who it was that stirred her desire to work so tirelessly for peace and the children of war, she says, “my mother.”

CONFLICT HISTORY – LIBERIA

The Republic of Liberia is recovering from the waves of civil conflict that overtook the country for 14 years.² Between 1989 and 2003 most of the country's economy and infrastructure were destroyed, as many as 1.5 million Liberians were displaced and an estimated 250,000 people were killed.

The country covers 43,000 square miles of West Africa and has a population of over 3.3 million. It contains a wide variety of ethnicities, languages and religions: English is the official language, while the many ethnic groups speak over 20 different indigenous languages. Traditional beliefs are practiced by a substantial part of the population, but these practices also merge with Christianity and Islam, which play an important role in Liberian society. Approximately 40 percent of the population identifies themselves as Christian, 20 percent as Muslim and about 40 percent adhere to indigenous beliefs.

The conflict erupted against the backdrop of Liberia's unique history as a settlement for freed slaves from America, which resulted in staggering inequalities between them and indigenous Liberians in terms of political power and socioeconomic position. But there is more that plunged the country into war: greed and corruption from the international to the individual level, the exploitation of Liberia's natural resources, persistent localized conflicts, breakdown of the rule of law, interference by foreign governments and the failure of the international community to effectively intervene and stop the fighting.

The dynamics of the Liberian conflict were greatly influenced by the socio-political climate in the region and relationships with countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Liberia's neighbors Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. Flows of refugees and lucrative natural resources crossed the borders between these West African countries throughout the 1990s. This regional entanglement fueled the Liberian conflict. The interference was not based on any consistent pattern of alliances, but on personal relationships and conditions: Regional states and Liberian factions switched sides in reaction to changing circumstances.



In 1822 Liberia was established by white Americans from the American Colonization Society as an outpost for freed slaves from America, but it wasn't until 1847 that the Republic of Liberia was founded as the first independent state of Africa and handed over to the freed slaves. The country adopted the model of the American constitution – heralding the lasting influence of the United States on Liberia.

These first settlers and their descendants, referred to as Americo-Liberians, formed a small minority of about 3 percent of the population, yet this minority dominated the country at the expense of native Liberians who were marginalized and excluded from political power.

President William Tubman ruled the country from 1944 until his death in 1971. He implemented an Open Door policy, attracting large-scale foreign investment that led to increasing inequality as Americo-Liberians disproportionately benefited from these investments. His vice president, William Tolbert, Jr., a member of one of the most affluent and powerful Liberian families, took over. His rule and policies were tainted with accusations of nepotism. In April 1979 a proposal

to raise the price of rice was met with violent opposition that resulted in the so-called rice riots, which damaged Tolbert's credibility and increased the vulnerability of his administration.

The pent-up grievances among the indigenous population, fostered by the continuous unequal distribution of wealth and power, culminated in a bloody coup by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe in 1980 – breaking the long sole rule of the Americo-Liberians. Doe, a member of the Krahn ethnic group, became the head of the newly formed military government known as the People's Redemption Council (PRC), which took over power and suspended the constitution.

The majority of the population initially welcomed this change, but sentiments turned when Doe's government proved to be increasingly repressive and authoritarian. He further exacerbated tensions by “ethnicizing” politics – giving precedence to people of his own ethnic group. In November 1983 three of Doe's colleagues in the PRC, who would all challenge Doe at a later stage, left Liberia: Thomas Quiwonkpa, Charles Taylor and Prince Y. Johnson.

Under international pressure, elections were held in 1985. Although they were discredited by reports of widespread fraud, Doe was ultimately appointed winner. Soon after, Quiwonkpa entered Liberia through Sierra Leone in an attempt to overthrow Doe, but Doe answered this failed coup with violence against ethnic groups in Quiwonkpa's native Nimba County. The growing violence in that area, which mainly affected the ethnic Gio and Mano communities, prepared fertile ground for Taylor – related to Quiwonkpa by marriage – and Prince Johnson – an ethnic Gio – to overthrow Doe.



On December 24, 1989, Charles Taylor and a group of Libyan-trained rebels, united in the Gio- and Mano-dominated National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), entered the country from Côte d'Ivoire, marking the start of the civil war. They overran the countryside, committing atrocities primarily in Krahn- and Mandingo-dominated areas of the country, and made their way to Monrovia despite counterattacks of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) and the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). ECOMOG, consisting mainly of Nigerian and Ghanaian troops, arrived in Liberia in August 1990 and remained for the next seven years.

In September 1990 President Doe was captured and executed by the splinter group Independent NPFL, formed two months prior by Prince Johnson. Although the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) negotiated a settlement and established an Interim Government of National Unity, the toppling of Doe was not a prelude to peace. The settlement was instead the first in a series of broken accords that would typify the years to come. After every negotiated agreement, fighting resumed between existing and newly emerging rebel groups, further threatening the precarious situation and intensifying the conflict.

On October 15, 1992, the NPFL launched Operation Octopus, a multipronged attack on Monrovia and ECOMOG forces. The West African peacekeeping troops tried to defend the Liberian capital, supported by units of the AFL and Krahn and Mandingo rebels collectively known as the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), raising doubts about ECOMOG's impartiality. In 1994 ULIMO split into two factions: ULIMO-J – mostly Krahn fighters led by Roosevelt Johnson – and ULIMO-K – mostly Mandingo fighters led by Alhaji Kromah.

By 1995 there were seven major factions fighting in Liberia: NPFL, NPFL Central Revolutionary Council, Lofa Defense Force, ULIMO-K, ULIMO-J, AFL and the Liberian Peace Council (LPC). In accordance with the Abuja Peace Accords of September 1995, these major factions formed the Liberian Council of State (LCS). The United Nations reported that by that time there were about 850,000 refugees in neighboring countries, in addition to over 1 million internally displaced people.

Despite the peace accords, fighting continued as internal struggles rose within the LCS. In April 1996, after the coalition government tried to arrest Roosevelt Johnson for murder, intense fighting broke out in Monrovia between NPFL and ULIMO-K on one side, and ULIMO-J, LPC and AFL forces on the other – resulting in the death of another 3,000 people.

This round of conflict ended in August 1996 with Abuja II, a revision of the Abuja Peace Accords, which provided for elections the following year. After running a campaign with the slogan, “He killed my pa. He killed my ma. I’ll vote for him,” Taylor won the presidential elections with over 75 percent of the vote.



The relatively peaceful period that Liberia entered with the presidency of Taylor was short-lived. In the late 1990s he was accused by Ghana, Nigeria and others of backing the Revolutionary United Front in the civil war in Sierra Leone. Following these accusations, the United Nations imposed sanctions on the Liberian government.

Opposition to Taylor grew and in 1999 anti-government fighting broke out in the northern county of Lofa. Taylor accused Guinea of supporting these primarily Krahn and Mandingo insurgents – organized in Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) – whose leader Sekou Conneh had personal ties to the Guinean president. By 2000 LURD had taken control of the majority of the countryside, and the few years of fighting that followed were marked by widespread human rights violations from both sides, including looting, raping and the recruitment of child soldiers.

Meanwhile, chaos lingered in other countries in the region: the civil war in Sierra Leone ended in 2002 but around 50,000 refugees stayed in Liberia. The conflict that flared in neighboring Côte d’Ivoire around the same time imperiled eastern Liberia. Thousands of Ivoirians, Malians, Ghanaians and Sierra Leoneans fled across the border, while Liberian refugees in Côte d’Ivoire were recruited to fight on both sides of the conflict, and Taylor backed the rebels against a new Ivorian government.

The war in Liberia came to a head in 2003. In March the splinter faction Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) was formed, which consisted primarily of fighters from the Krahn ethnic group, had a support base in Liberia’s southeastern counties and was formed in Côte d’Ivoire, whose president supposedly supported the rebels against Taylor.

As fighting intensified and the situation in the country deteriorated, Taylor agreed to attend peace talks in Ghana. An indictment against him for supporting rebels in the Sierra Leonean civil war was unsealed by the Office of the Prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, in the hope that Ghana would arrest him. But that country refused, and Taylor returned to Monrovia. While the

peace talks continued intermittently, fighting in Liberia between the AFL, LURD and MODEL reconvened.

In August 2003, Taylor finally accepted an ECOWAS-negotiated peace deal that included his asylum in Nigeria and the deployment of an ECOWAS intervention force. A week after Taylor left the country and handed over power to his vice president, Moses Blah, the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreements were signed by the Liberian government, MODEL, LURD and political parties.

On October 14, 2003 the National Transitional Government of Liberia was installed to run the country until elections in 2005. This interim government was presided over by the businessman Gyude Bryant and included members of the different rebel factions. In October 2003 the United Nations took over the Liberian peacekeeping operation from ECOWAS, with its U.N. Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), and started the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process.



Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was installed in 2006 as the first female president of an African country, after parliamentary and presidential elections were widely recognized as free and fair. The new Liberian parliament did, however, contain some individuals with questionable human rights records. After a few months in office, Johnson-Sirleaf requested that Nigeria hand over Taylor to the Special Court for Sierra Leone, where he has been on trial since 2007.

Peace in Liberia remains fragile, and the legacy of the war is clearly discernable: Many Liberians are deprived of basic needs such as food, work, health care and education. Lots of people suffer from trauma, the infrastructure and economy are still in ruins, the security situation remains unstable and corruption is persistent. The Liberian people and its government face the challenge of rebuilding society with only limited resources at hand, while dealing with the delicate balance between reconstruction, reconciliation and justice.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was the outcome of a compromise at the negotiation table, published its final report in mid-2009 after a sluggish three-year process, but so far little has been done to implement its findings. UNMIL is gradually reducing its presence in the country, but has declared an intended stay of 8,000 troops at least until elections scheduled for October 2011.



Map No. 3775 Rev. 8 UNITED NATIONS
January 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Liberia and Personal History of Vaiba Kebeh Flomo

- 1822** Liberia established as an outpost for freed slaves from America.
- 1847 – 1880** Liberia becomes an independent country. The period known as the First Republic is characterized by repressive rule by Americo-Liberians over indigenous peoples.
- 1926** Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, an American enterprise, opens a plantation on land granted by the Liberia government. Rubber production becomes the backbone of the economy.
- 1944** William Tubman becomes president and implements an Open Door policy, attracting large-scale international investments, but failing to translate this economic growth into real development and benefits for all Liberians.
- 1950s** ***Yassah Flomo, Vaiba’s brother, and Zoba K. Flomo, Vaiba’s sister, are born.***
Vaiba’s parents move to the Firestone community, where her father is a laborer.
- 1965** ***Korpu S. Flomo, Vaiba’s adopted sister, and Mardou K. Flomo, another biological sister, are born.***
- 1967** ***April 9 – Vaiba is born in Margibi County, northeast of the capital, Monrovia.***
- 1970** ***Vaiba’s sister Theresa K. Flomo is born.***
- 1971** President Tubman dies after 27 years in office. His vice president, William Tolbert, Jr., takes over.
- 1975** ***Vaiba enters Firestone’s primary school.***
- 1977** ***Vaiba’s brother Pewee Y. Flomo is born.***
- 1979** April 14 – “Rice Riots” break out after President Tolbert attempts to increase the price of rice.
- 1980** April 12 – President Tolbert is killed in a bloody coup by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, who becomes the head of the People’s Redemption Council (PRC).
April 22 – 13 government officials are executed and members of the educated elite flee the country.
- 1982** ***January – Vaiba’s father, Zeyzey Flomo, retires and moves back to their village of origin in Lofa County, in the north of Liberia. Vaiba stays in the***

Firestone community with her mother Lorpu. Because Zeyzey no longer works for the rubber company, Vaiba's last name is changed to Mulbah – the name of another Firestone laborer – so she can remain in Firestone's school.

1983 ***Vaiba moves to Monrovia to stay with her cousin and continue her schooling.***

Doe's PRC colleagues Thomas Quiwonkpa, Charles Taylor and Prince Y. Johnson leave Liberia, as Doe's government becomes dominated by people from his own Krahn ethnic group.

1985 ***Vaiba enters Monrovia Central High School.***

October – General elections are held under a new constitution. Although the elections are problematic and generally deemed unfair, Doe is elected president and inaugurated in January of the following year.

November – Quiwonkpa attempts a coup against Doe. He fails and is executed, mutilated and paraded around Monrovia. Doe further retaliates against Gio communities in Quiwonkpa's native Nimba County, reportedly torturing and killing hundreds of people.

1987 ***Vaiba is elected chair leader of the women's wing of the Student Liberation Movement. She launches a campaign against male teachers seeking affairs with their female students.***

1988 ***Vaiba graduates from Monrovia Central High School.***

1989 ***Vaiba enters Leigh Sherman Executive Secretarial School in Monrovia.***

December 24 – The National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor, invades Nimba County from Côte d'Ivoire, provoking a violent response from President Doe. Liberia's civil war begins.

1990 March – The Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), led by Prince Johnson, splits from Taylor's NPFL.

June to August – The NPFL, INPFL and Doe's forces – the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) clash for power in Monrovia, resulting in mass killings in the capital. Taylor forms a parallel government in the city of Gbarnga.

August – The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sends its monitoring and peacekeeping group, ECOMOG, to Liberia but fighting continues.

September – President Doe is killed by Johnson.

Vaiba leaves her home in Monrovia for a few days to stay in territory controlled by Johnson, where it was safer.

Leigh Sherman Executive Secretarial School, Vaiba's school, closes temporarily.

November – An Interim Government of National Unity is installed. The NPFL and AFL sign Liberia's first cease-fire agreement in Bamako, Mali.

1991 ***January – Vaiba leaves her cousin's house to live on her own in Monrovia.***

Former Doe loyalists in Guinea and Sierra Leone create the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), in opposition to Taylor's NPFL. Meanwhile, Taylor's rebel forces join Sierra Leonean rebels to invade Sierra Leone – the start of the civil war in the neighboring country.

1992 Taylor's NPFL attacks ECOMOG in Monrovia under the code-name Operation Octopus. Several new rebel factions emerge and become increasingly significant in the ongoing conflict.

Vaiba's parents flee to Guinea because of the conflict.

Leigh Sherman Executive Secretarial School re-opens, but operates intermittently.

Vaiba's younger brother and sister join her in Monrovia.

1993 July – The Cotonou Peace Agreement is signed between the interim government, ULIMO and NPFL. It provides for a Liberian National Transitional Government.

September – The United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) is established.

1995 August – The Abuja I agreement is signed after an ECOWAS-sponsored conference, calling for a cease-fire, demilitarization, elections, an interim collective presidency and the move of faction leaders to Monrovia. The second transitional government is established and includes the leaders of the major warring factions.

1996 Fighting in the interior continues and mounting tensions among the factions destabilize the interim government.

Vaiba graduates from Leigh Sherman Executive Secretarial School.

April 6 – Fighting intensifies as Monrovia is caught in battles between the many factions. An estimated 3,000 people are killed in the capital.

April 9 – Vaiba is forced out of her house in Monrovia by Taylor's soldiers, and temporarily taken to NPFL-dominated territory.

August 17 – The first civil war ends with the signing of Abuja II, a revision of the Abuja Peace Accords. A new transitional government is formed and elections are

planned for the next year.

November – ECOMOG, with the help of UNOMIL, begins the disarmament of armed groups.

1997 July 19 – Taylor wins the presidential election with an overwhelming majority of the vote. In August he is inaugurated for a six-year term.

July 25 – Vaiba’s sister Yassah passes away.

1998 ***Vaiba starts work as a secretary for the Lutheran Church in Liberia – Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program (LCL-THRP).***

1999 July – The rebel faction Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) is formed in the Sierra Leonean capital Freetown, in opposition to the Taylor regime. Fighting between LURD and Taylor’s forces breaks out in the north of the country.

2000 ***Vaiba begins studies at the University of Liberia and also receives training in leadership and development from the Development Network of Liberia.***

Vaiba officially changes her name back to Vaiba Kebeh Flomo.

LURD takes control of the majority of the countryside.

2001 ***September 18 – Lorpu, Vaiba’s biological daughter, is born.***

Vaiba participates in the Women in Peacebuilding training given by the Women in Peacebuilding Network.

2002 The war in Sierra Leone ends, but many Sierra Leonean refugees stay in Liberia.

A civil war breaks out in neighboring Côte d’Ivoire, destabilizing eastern Liberia.

June – Vaiba and colleagues establish the Christian Women Peace Initiative (CWPI).

August – Inspired by the CWPI, Muslim Women for Peace is founded.

October 1 – Vaiba’s younger brother dies of malaria.

October 27 – Vaiba’s older brother dies in a car accident in South Africa, where he was studying on a scholarship.

2003 March – The splinter faction Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) is formed in Côte d’Ivoire and enters Liberia. Heavy fighting between MODEL, LURD and government forces breaks out and approaches Monrovia.

April – Vaiba helps initiate Liberian Women Mass Action for Peace, made up of many women’s organizations, including the Christian and Muslim women’s groups. The movement is characterized by large-scale, non-violent protests.

June 4 – Peace talks commence in Accra, Ghana, on the same day the Special Court for Sierra Leone indicts Taylor for supporting rebels in Sierra Leone.

Vaiba joins the women’s delegation at the official peace talks in Accra and pressures all sides to stop the fighting.

June 6 – LURD rebels attack Monrovia.

June 17 – Representatives from LURD, MODEL and the Liberian government sign a cease-fire agreement.

June 21 to 22 – LURD and Taylor’s forces continue fighting in Monrovia, breaking the cease-fire.

June 27 – Another cease-fire agreement is signed in Accra.

July 19 – LURD launches their final attack on Monrovia.

August 4 – A group of Nigerian peacekeepers under an ECOWAS mandate arrives in Liberia.

August 11 – Taylor resigns, hands over power to his vice president and goes into exile in Nigeria.

August 18 – Representatives from the Liberian government, MODEL, LURD and political parties sign the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The U.N. peacekeeping mission, UNMIL, is established, with West African peacekeeping troops inducted into its force.

October 14 – The National Transitional Government of Liberia is installed to lead the country until elections in 2005.

2004 ***Vaiba successfully advocates for 54 women suffering from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases to receive medical assistance.***

Vaiba becomes a trauma counselor and trainer in women’s issues.

2005 ***Vaiba mobilizes women to participate in the national elections.***

October – Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is elected the first female president of an African country.

- 2006** February – The Truth and Reconciliation Commission begins its work to investigate human rights abuses between 1979 and 2003.
- Johnson-Sirleaf requests that Nigeria hand Taylor over to the Special Court for Sierra Leone.
- June – The International Criminal Court at The Hague agrees to host Taylor’s trial.
- 2007** ***February – As part of a Liberian delegation, Vaiba is a participant at the Commission on the Status of Women at U.N. Headquarters in New York. During her time there, she is interviewed for the documentary “Pray the Devil Back to Hell.”***
- June – Taylor is put on trial at The Hague, the Netherlands.
- Vaiba travels to Sierra Leone for one week as part of the “peace train” advocating for violence-free elections.***
- 2008** ***“Pray the Devil Back to Hell” is released, portraying the Liberian women’s peace movement and Vaiba’s role within it.***
- December – Vaiba travels to South Africa to share her peacebuilding experiences at a women’s regional conference.***
- 2009** ***February – Vaiba represents the women featured in “Pray the Devil Back to Hell” as she receives an award from the Cinema for Peace Foundation in Germany.***
- May 2 – Vaiba’s father Zeyzey Flomo passes away.***
- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission publishes its final report.
- October – Vaiba visits southern Sudan to share her peacebuilding experiences and make recommendations to the organization Reconcile.***
- December – Vaiba graduates from the University of Liberia with degrees in sociology and public administration.***
- 2010** ***Vaiba is appointed desk officer of the newly established Women and Youth desk of the LCL-THRP.***
- Johnson-Sirleaf announces she will run for a second term as president in elections scheduled for October 2011. UNMIL decreases its presence, but declares to remain in the country with at least 8,000 troops until the end of the next elections.
- September – Vaiba travels to the United States to participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.***

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF VAIBA KEBEH FLOMO

Waxing Moon

The sun was setting but its light still glowed over the vast fields of rubber trees – a seemingly endless green blur interrupted only by brown rivers and mud colored spots. The voices, children’s shrieks and little manmade fires gave away the presence of a community, bringing alive these otherwise faint spaces.

After a day’s hard work, Division 29 was following the rhythm of the sun: Men coming home from work on the plantation, women preparing for the night after completing their daily work in the house and garden, children darting after helping their mothers on this cloudless holiday.

Under the porch in front of one of the huts, a little girl about 7 years old sat behind a table – cassava, palm oil, okra and kerosene, all spread out in front of her ready to be sold, next to her a large cool box with soda and beer to satisfy the needs of the people on their block. Vaiba was taking in the buzzing activities of the early evening, feeling proud to help her mother, just a few steps away in the makeshift kitchen between their huts.

She admired her mother Lorpu, who worked hard to supplement the low wage her husband earned as a laborer on Firestone’s rubber plantation³ in Margibi, Liberia. Lorpu was determined to feed her beloved children well and send them all to school. Vaiba’s parents had come from Lofa, a county in the north of the country, and were part of the Loma speaking people. Even though conditions and facilities in the camp were poor, they didn’t go back to Lofa. They wanted their children to have what they never had: education. Beyond that, the harsh environment of the camp was soothed by the unity within their family. Vaiba was very close with her siblings: her four older sisters, one of them adopted at an early age, her dearly loved younger brother and sister, and her older brother who lived with an uncle.

“*Avabe!*” “Somebody help me!” A shrill woman’s voice interrupted her thoughts and made its way directly to Vaiba’s soul. The instant pain she felt clumped to the anger and grief inside her. She had seen him doing it so many times, like many other community men, and each time it hit her again. It hit her hard, like he was beating her. “One day I will fight this man,” Vaiba repeatedly told her sisters. And while the bitterness grew inside her, simultaneously but unconsciously grew her plan to put her words into action.

While people started running toward the hut across the dirt path, Vaiba jumped up from behind the table, driven by a not yet articulated urge to redress injustice. As quickly as she could she made her way past the people gathered to the man beating his wife, and picked up a twig. She faced the back of the man, who was wearing only slippers and a white undershirt tugged into khaki shorts, held together by a broad black belt. His impressive posture contrasted sharply with the tiny and fragile woman curled up on the ground. His knees were slightly bent and his hand was hovering in the air, ready to come down again.

But to everyone’s astonishment it was Vaiba moving the air with her twig, slapping the man lightly but powerfully on the back. He slowly rose and turned around. When he saw the little girl, an earnest and surprised look appeared on his face. In a burst of fear Vaiba absconded, passing her

mother without a word and slipping into her hut, her heart beating in her throat. She knew she had broken the rules of her tradition and she feared her mother's punishment. About 10 minutes passed. Then her mother called, "Vaiba, come!"

Cautiously the little girl left her hut, but when she saw the man she had just confronted, she turned around and ran back inside, her heart now racing uncontrollably.

"No, come, come!" her mother demanded.

When she turned back, the man was kneeling on their dusty kitchen floor. With Vaiba still remaining at a safe distance from both adults, he spoke to her in a deep and humble voice.

"You are my mother. I have come to apologize. I will never beat on my wife again. I will never beat on any woman again."

He got up and gave her a warm hug. And he stood by his word.



"You have to do something. You have to stop all the men from beating their wives," Vaiba begged her mother. She felt her own voice was still too weak to get anything done. But she knew her mother held the authority and had earned the respect necessary to make a change within the community.

Lorpu decided to carry on the work her daughter had started. At the same time she realized she would need the support of the other women in their camp; she would need to bring them together. The moonlight play became key.

When moonlight brightened the otherwise dark night, happy times came to Vaiba and her family and the others in this community deprived of electricity. The country not yet spoiled by the prevalence of guns, women felt secure to go fishing at night by the riverside. And now they had yet another reason to look eagerly at the waxing moon.

The women of the block dressed in their finest clothes and gathered on the soccer pitch in a cloud of sweet-scented perfume. Up the field they went, holding their Clorox bottles filled with rice that would serve as their instruments. They formed a large circle and started their play. A woman gave away her performance in the light of the moon, dancing and singing to the rhythm of the music made by the women surrounding her. Leaving the circle, she was followed by the next woman ready to steal the show. Women entered the circle one after the other, around and around, around and around.

The children grouped at the lower side of the field. They lined up as usual: boys on one side, the girls facing them in line on the other side. Vaiba felt a hint of excitement every time they played this game: boys picking girls and vice versa. But the rules of the game did not allow them to pick their relatives in an attempt to avoid the bitterness of rejection. With strong conviction she sang along with the others:

“If you choose your relative, shame on you; if you choose your sister, a big shame on you; if you choose your brother, a big shame on you.”

One by one they would taste the miracle of recognition. Until they were all united.



“Why were you not there?” Lorpu asked the woman. The circle had been incomplete last night.

“Because my husband didn’t allow me to go,” she explained.

Lorpu turned to the husband: “Can you please allow your wife to join us in the moonlight play? We are not going to drink. Please believe me. And at the end of the play I will bring her back home.”

“OK, next time she can go,” the man agreed after an initial hesitation.

Vaiba’s mother made sure to include all the women of the camp in their joyous celebration. The moonlight play fostered togetherness and gave their camp momentum. And the beatings became less frequent: If a man beat his wife she could not come to the play, alarming her friends and putting shame on the perpetrator in question.

The way for the next step had been paved. Lorpu decided it was time to set the changing morale in stone. She assembled the elderly women and together they went to the camp manager to voice their demand.

When they got to his office they pleaded, “The men in this community beat their women so much. We want you to put a stop to it. You have to secure our lives. You have to tell our husbands to stop beating us. So we want you to punish anyone who beats his wife.”

The camp manager had seen the energy from the moonlight gatherings uplifting his camp and spreading its positive image to other communities. Also, his four wives loved to play out in the moonlight if they had the chance. One of them even mastered the art of playing the Clorox bottle. So he responded quickly, “Yes, I think that is a good idea.”

Right there he sent out the message that any man who is found beating his wife will have to pay a fine or he will be transferred.

The full moon shining on the camp through the rubber trees now witnessed men joining in the play, cheering and giving money to their dancing wives. And it illuminated a content but restless girl, intensely soaking up the moonlight.

A Day to Come

“Vaiba, I want you to come to my house on Saturday. Will you be there?” Angie asked.

As the daughter of Firestone’s superintendent, Angie lived in a large bungalow with 24-hour electricity, running water and even a television – all the luxuries laborers’ children could only dream of while fetching water and spending nights in the dim light of a lantern.

“Oooh, we are going to Angie’s house, we’re going to watch TV!” Vaiba’s friends exclaimed, delirious with the prospect of having a taste of her comfortable life.

Vaiba remembered the first and only time she had seen a house like that. They had gone over to Sainneh’s place after they heard their classmate wasn’t feeling well. Usually, laborers’ children were not permitted to walk up the steps to the respectable part of the house. They belonged in the basement. But this time they were allowed in, though only hastily, because the parents were not home.

The space, luxury and unfamiliar items decorating the many rooms overwhelmed Vaiba and her friends. Upon entering the girl’s room, Vaiba’s astonishment reached a discomforting high point. This was Sainneh’s own room. With large windows and curtains. With her very own bed. A private place. Vaiba saw multiple reflections of herself in the wall-covering mirrors: a poor, dusty girl with muddy slippers. A girl sharing a single-room hut with her siblings, the older ones sleeping together on a bed, with the younger ones on the floor. Vaiba felt small and intimidated, like her value was taken away from her and given to this girl. This was why she refused to be close friends with the ones who already had everything they wished for. She feared that she would start respecting someone because of status.

Vaiba was determined never again to take the risk of being poisoned by the fruits of comfort. *If I would go to Angie’s house and see the good life, I would start to condemn what my poor mother has been struggling to give me*, she reasoned. Resisting her friends’ pleas to join them, she replied to Angie, “No, I won’t come.”

At the end of the school day, Angie and Sainneh were taken home by car, while Vaiba and her friends walked the dusty road back to their camp. They could not afford to pay for transportation, and today their efforts to get a ride with one of the passing cars were unsuccessful. All the vehicles gave them was a cloud of dust covering their faces. After 45 minutes they could finally see their huts through their dirty eyelashes and the rubber trees. Vaiba accelerated unconsciously, knowing there would be a meal waiting for her at home and eager to tell her mother that she was determined to always do better in school than these rich girls.



“*Eyea*, my friend doesn’t have slippers. Can you please help me to get her slippers?” Vaiba asked when she entered her mother’s hut.

For too long she had watched her friend Marlo struggling, motherless, to live a decent life together with her father, brother and sister. They could not afford to go to school and they didn’t even have a pot to cook themselves a proper meal. “The neighbor is the one who can help you and

the neighbor is the one who can destroy you. So you have to be there for your neighbor,” her mother had taught her. In a community living among the hungry, you have the duty to feed them. Living by this wisdom, their house was always packed.

“I could work for you so I can buy my friend slippers,” Vaiba offered smartly, playing on her mother’s principles. “Maybe me and my friend could go to the cassava farm to harvest some leaves and sell them.”

Lorpu had a gesture she used to express “I trust myself.” She’d knock her hip, the place where women carried their money in a little bag tied to their clothes. She taught her daughters to use their hands, to work hard, to be strong and committed to any process they started. She knew what she was talking about. Her husband Zeyzey had children with several women, and his monthly salary could not feed them all. Each woman was responsible for her own children. So she had come to see that as a woman you have to be self-reliant.

“Yes, you can do that,” her mother answered Vaiba, sounding pleased.

Vaiba and her friend Marlo walked to the garden, one of Vaiba’s favorite places. She loved to spend the day here with her mother and younger sister, working and playing. But this time they were here just to get the cassava leaves; they took the branches and bundled them. They piled the bundles on their heads and walked back to the camp to sell their produce. “Buy our greens, buy our cassava leaves!” the two girls announced their goods, balancing the plates and walking the path between the houses of their block.

After marching around the different blocks for hours, they had sold their six bundles of leaves and earned enough money. They took the 30 cents and went to a man in their block selling slippers. Trying them on, Marlo looked up happily at her heroine. Though Vaiba was pleased to see the smile on her friend’s face, she felt deeply sorry for her. *If her mother had been with her it wouldn’t have been like this*, she reasoned, at the same time realizing it could have been her in this situation.

That night after her father got home from work, an excited Marlo told him what the day had brought her. Together they went to see Lorpu. Marlo’s father, usually a surly man, seemed to find it hard to believe someone would do such a thing for them. With the surprised look still on his face, he thanked her and said, “This is your daughter. Anytime you want her to do some work for you, just ask her.” Marlo would help Vaiba’s mother whenever needed and wear her slippers proudly, though only on special days. She didn’t want to ruin them.



The first rain of the year fell down from the sky, rattling on the zinc roof like rocks rolling down a mountain. It was pitch dark, the trees not allowing any natural light to make its way through the branches. Vaiba feared the February rain. Sheltered inside her hut, she was restless and couldn’t help but constantly peek through the door. She wanted her mother to come home.

Her father had left the camp a month earlier. Because it was farming time, he had to hurry back to his village directly after his retirement in January 1982. By cultivating a piece of land, he could regain respect in his community and contribute to their family income. But the rest of them

stayed on the Firestone plantation, where Vaiba's mother had taken on a central role. Whenever people were in trouble they would turn to the Elder Woman, as she was now referred to. Nobody wanted to see her go.

It was the start of a difficult time. With Zeyzey Flomo no longer working for Firestone, his family was not entitled to the basic supplies the company provided, nor were his children allowed to go to school. Lorpū had to work even harder than before to provide for the children still living with her: her three youngest children and her brother's daughter. She was always in her garden to get food on the table.

Sometimes people would ask her; "Why don't you just take them back to the village?"

But she was determined. "No, I want my children to go to school, and they *will* go to school."

Night after night she would go around the community, like a beggar. Begging for names. She had to find all the children a foster parent. People would tell her to visit them in the evening, when the men came home from work. And every time she conquered the dark, she asked, "Can you please allow my daughter to become your foster daughter so she can go to school?"

People started laughing at her. "Why did you have to have that many children?"

But she shrugged off all criticism and would not rest until her children could start school when it opened in early March. Time was running out.

After what seemed like endless waiting, Vaiba saw the light of a torch reflected in the raindrops. She could see the blurred outline of her mother approaching in the pouring rain, and she shivered. *Is this all worth it?* Maybe they should just go back to their village.

"Why are you in the rain?" Vaiba asked, a little angry. She could not stand the humiliation her mother was suffering.

Her mother replied, wiping off her face, "I have to get wet for you to go to school. To build your future."

A year later, at the age of 15, Vaiba left the community carrying her new name, Kebeh Vaiba Mulbah, and left behind her mother and dear little brother and sister. With a sore heart she moved to Monrovia to stay with her cousin, who had offered to help relieve their struggle. Vaiba brought with her the insight that she could have been Sainneh as well as Marlo, but that she could shape her own future.

The vision of her mother in the rain made her determined to make her mother's wish come true. She would work and study hard to get a good education. She would support and work hard for others, just as her mother had.

The Great Woman

“It is wrong that male teachers are going after female students.” Vaiba’s voice blasted out of the radio speakers, carrying the news swiftly across the Monrovia Central High School campus. “I see many female students dropping out or repeating a class because they reject a male teacher. This has to stop.”

The campus was packed with students as the Student Liberation Movement (SLM) had organized a sports day to raise money for their party. But today Vaiba had another, more important goal. As chair leader of the women’s wing, she was in charge of all women’s affairs, including the protection and promotion of female party members’ interests. For some time male teachers’ advances on students had been like a thorn in her flesh. Seeing many girls drop out, repeat classes or withdraw from the party, she was ready to launch a campaign and denounce the misbehavior of male teachers.

It was 1987. War had not yet come to Liberia, but political tension was on the rise. After years of political curtailment, an active student movement had finally been established by the time Vaiba reached 12th grade. Initially she had been hesitant about getting into politics. But her grades were high, she had many friends, and once she was elected as one of the first female representatives of the party she was prepared and determined to represent those unable to speak out.

Being supported by her party members, including the president of student affairs, she felt strong when she was getting ready for her first broadcast. But while she let go of her pent-up words, she had not anticipated their impact. Soon her statement was no longer just out in the airwaves, but firmly printed in the school’s newspaper.

“Who is this girl accusing us of misbehavior,” the blemished teachers wanted to know. “She is trying to damage our reputation!”

“If you can’t prove it we will take you to court,” they announced on the radio.

The journalist was running back and forth on the media battlefield between Vaiba and the teachers, and to other students who started to speak out and join her fight.

“Yes, this is true,” a male voice proclaimed.

“We see it happening,” more students confirmed.

The victims also started talking. “Yes, this is happening. It happened to me.”

Supported by these testimonies, Vaiba concluded, “I have the proof. What I’m saying is true.”



The rumor spread like wildfire. “Abu failed Kebeh! Abu failed Kebeh!” The end of the year was near, and 12th grade students were preparing for graduation. Vaiba had passed her central exam, and since she entered the school three years before, her grades had always been above average – especially in math, which was one of her favorite subjects. But she would not graduate this year.

“I will show you myself.” Abu’s words still resonated in her head. And now Abu, her math teacher, had given her 67, just under the 70 points required to graduate. She immediately knew this was his revenge for the complaint she had made.

Soon the news seeped through the walls of the school authorities’ offices, that their committed and active student Kebeh Vaiba was about to fail. With her track record and excellent results over the past years, they felt the urge to intervene. Vaiba was at home when she received a call from the president of student affairs.

“We want to talk to you, because we can’t allow you to repeat this class.”

The massive round table hosted the meeting, loaded with expectation and self-awareness. They all took their seats: the principal and the registrar of the school, the SLM chairman, the party secretary, the president of student affairs and the subjects of this gathering, Vaiba and teacher Sam Abu.

“Kebeh will have to graduate with 67. If she had gone below 65, it would have been a different story. But 67 is not a bad grade. And this girl passed the WAEC,⁴ so why can’t she graduate?” the president of student affairs argued.

“It wasn’t me. This is the grade Kebeh made,” Sam Abu replied.

“But based on her past record, we can’t allow her to repeat this class.”

“Kebeh knows what we have said. She will not graduate until she can apologize openly by holding my feet,” he responded.

Vaiba turned to the school authority and her party secretary member, and with a steady voice spoke:

“First of all I want to thank you for your time. Thank you for taking it on my behalf. But for me, it isn’t a good thing that you as the school authority should get involved for me to graduate. If I have to beg to graduate, you will never respect my high school knowledge. Do not make it seem like he fails me; I failed myself. I didn’t make 100 and he gave me 67. This is the grade I made. And he was right to give me the grade. So there is nothing about apologizing to Sam.”

Vaiba knew that she was not the first to repeat a class, and that she would not be the last. She turned to Sam Abu, “I think I can repeat. I cannot say ‘sorry’ to graduate. If I would do that, I would destroy my womanhood. So I will never apologize.”

“So Miss Principal and my party members, thank you for your time, but I don’t think this is appropriate for me as an individual.”



In 1988 Vaiba went back to school for one semester to meet the requirements for graduation. Repeating the mathematics class, Vaiba was appointed another teacher though she had requested Abu. But he seemed too embarrassed and the school did not want to put her through the same thing again. Though Vaiba passed this time, she refused to participate in the graduation ceremony.

Her act of resistance had come with a cost. But the seed she had planted had grown: A few years after her graduation, a law was established that if any teacher goes after a student, he will be fired.

“This is the great woman,” Abu would say to his friends, every time Vaiba passed. “This little girl, I have never seen a woman like her. She challenged me and she stood by her word. I tried to intimidate her, but she resisted. If we would have 10 women like her, we would have a great nation.”⁵

The Devil You Know

“Vaiba, your birthday is a good day,” people were saying. It was April 9, 1996: The previous night had been quiet, undisturbed by the sound of gunfire that had been keeping them hostage since the war came to Monrovia three days earlier.

Vaiba lived in the basement of a large compound on the frontline of the battle between the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), Charles Taylor’s armed group, and the Johnson faction of the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO-J), mostly rebels of the Krahn ethnic group and commanded by Roosevelt Johnson. Vaiba rented two rooms connected by a tiny living room, with a large central space shared with other residents. After a failed attempt to flee to the U.S. Embassy, she returned home to spend two days in a small bullet-proof room within the basement, together with her flatmates and other people who had gathered there in search of shelter.

On this day, the morning sun still friendly, they dared to leave their haven. Vaiba was planning to cook a birthday meal, and a friend of her younger brother had brought soda for the special occasion. After days of abstinence this would be a true feast. “Drink the soft drink. I’m going to cook so all of us can eat,” Vaiba said, sharing the soda to soothe their empty stomachs. Seeing the Krahn fighters who usually controlled their neighborhood pass by provided some relief: “If these guys can pass to go further down, maybe they are talking about stopping the fighting!”

On the advice of the compound owner’s husband, they went to fetch water from the well close to their house. After they returned, they were in the area between the compound buildings when the armed men passed again, now going the other way. “Be careful,” the men warned. “Maybe you will hear shooting soon and it won’t be us. You shouldn’t be sitting outside like this. You have to be careful.”

Vaiba and the others went back inside, and within three minutes the firing started. Leaving everything in the kitchen, Vaiba, her brother, sister and friends fled into her room. “This gun is sounding different. These are not our people,” her brother’s friend remarked.

They soon heard a harsh voice: “Everybody outside!”

“Let us open the door,” the same friend urged.

“No, don’t open the door,” Vaiba whispered.

“We need to open the door, or else these children will burn this place. Let us open the door,” he persisted as he opened it. Three bare-chested and dirty young men blocked the entrance, their guns pointing straight at them. “Everybody, hands up!” they shouted.

In the ignorance of her first encounter with Charles Taylor’s boys, Vaiba grabbed her bag with money and a new gold necklace, given to her by her boyfriend who sent it as a graduation present. Only a week earlier, Vaiba had finally graduated from Leigh Sherman secretarial school. Because of the war the school had been open sporadically, and the two-year education had taken her six years to complete. The gift from her boyfriend living abroad was a treasure.

“Everybody outside,” the armed boys repeated. “We’re taking you to our side.”

Hundreds of people who had been locked up in their damaged houses for days were now pouring into the street, among them Vaiba and her younger brother and sister. Innumerable boys with guns forced the group to walk and hastily find their own way out of the battlefield. Soon the boys started to steal. They grabbed Vaiba’s purse, her brother’s bag, tore off his T-shirt and took his shoes, other people’s shoes. They slapped the bundles from people’s heads, snatched the watches from their wrists and put their hands in women’s panties to take their money.

Meanwhile the rebels kept shooting at their rivals up the hill. Despite their strategic position, the other side did not respond with gunfire. It was only when the neighborhood residents had found their way out of the battle zone that the ULIMO-J fighters finally answered the attack, shooting at the rebels who stayed behind to loot.

The sun was no longer friendly, its heat absorbed by the black asphalt that the now largely shoeless crowd had to walk. Vaiba, still in possession of her old slippers, went looking for leaves on the roadside to tie under her brother’s and other people’s feet. Every five minutes these natural soles, scorched by the hot road, had to be replaced. As Vaiba and her friends sat by the road tying the leaves, they saw an old man, supported by his daughter, bleeding from where the stray bullet had entered his body. He was the only civilian hit in their large group that day.

After a 30-minute walk they reached the Old Road, an NPFL-controlled area in the southeastern part of the city. During all these years of war, Vaiba had lived confined in a different area of the city that was under the control of former President Samuel K. Doe’s Krahn people. The contrast with her own neighborhood was apparent. Here they had electricity, shops, bars, a market and transportation to other parts of Liberia. It was bustling with energy, people dancing, drinking, traveling. But an uneasy feeling overwhelmed Vaiba, and she knew immediately she could not stay.



“Naked, naked my way, ooh my way!” The rebels came back from the front, singing to celebrate the day’s victory, praising their notorious fighter Butt Naked, who was leading the group into the neighborhood – naked, just like the two guys marching next to him. Behind them followed the rest of the young men and children, some without clothes.

“Vaiba, we have to go outside and celebrate with them!” her cousin called.

After spending more than a week in the NPFL-controlled area, Vaiba had returned home. From the Old Road her sister, brother and niece had gone to stay with her older brother in Phebe in Central Liberia, also under Charles Taylor’s control. But Vaiba could not stand Taylor’s boys: 9-year-old children holding guns and insulting women. She decided to return to live among the people she knew. “It is better to be with the devil you know than to go to the angel you don’t know,” Vaiba remembered President Doe saying.

The compound where she used to live, in the area previously dominated by Krahn people, was now deserted and located in contested land. So she stayed with her cousin, not far from there, in the heart of ULIMO-J territory. The rebels had their quarters in the basement of the building next to

theirs. At the end of every day they came back from the battlefield, their faces aglow with victory or dark with the anger and grief of defeat.

Today the fighters were in the ecstasy of triumph. As they came closer, Vaiba and her cousin hurried outside to the sidewalk to celebrate with them. While the young men and children gathered in front of the building they kept singing: “Naked, naked my way, ooh my way,” dancing frantically, circling their machetes above their heads, scraping them over the asphalt, producing a terrifying noise that made Vaiba shiver. The greatest fighters had powdered their faces with white dirt or donned a traditional headdress to look like true warriors: a red scarf tied around their head, decorated with small white stones and an elephant horn pushed into the scarf. One of them proudly lifted a human skull above his head, blood dripping down his arm.

That could be one of my relatives, or maybe not a relative but a friend – or if not a friend, a Liberian like myself was killed by this fighter I am singing for, Vaiba thought. But she had to move her body to their rhythm and sing along: “Naked, naked my way, ooh my way.” It was the only way to survive. Being from a different ethnic group, she had to identify herself with the fighters to convince them she was not their enemy.



“B-sis, we’re here!” the boys called. Vaiba looked down her window and saw the fighters sitting on the steps below, in front of the building. She finished making the *kalla*, frying the last dough balls in the hot oil.

For a while she had been trying to make friends with these young men. In the evenings when they gathered on the steps, Vaiba would listen to them sharing their stories and experiences of yet another day of fighting. Besides the fighters, nobody was allowed on the street at night. But she would lean out the window and talk to them: “Good boys, you’re doing so well to protect us.”

“What we’re doing, we’re fighting for you,” they responded.

“God bless you for that.”

After a few days they had started wondering aloud, “Who is this woman always talking to us and we don’t even know her?”

“But how will you get to know me if I can’t come outside?” Vaiba responded.

“So come!” they said invitingly.

After that first night she joined them more regularly. She also started selling her self-made *kalla* to get even closer to them. The rebels didn’t have access to food and so were more than happy to buy one of her doughnuts as treats at the end of the day. Vaiba wanted to be accepted so she could discuss their behavior on the front. She hoped that through talking she could convince them to stop fighting. Before the war Vaiba dreamt she healed wounded fighters with ashes from the coal she was cooking on. So with this old dream in the back of her mind, she trusted she could help them in her own little way.

She took the doughnuts she had prepared and went down to join them on the steps, offering some water and selling her food. Devouring the treats, one of the boys told her: “It wasn’t easy today B-sis. I almost got killed.”

Vaiba saw her chance: “When do you think you will stop fighting?”

“We will not stop. We will continue to fight Charles Taylor. And we will kill and we will burn houses. Every time they send a heavy weapon to us, we will burn three to five houses,” he replied, his eyes burning with revenge.

“But even if you fight all through the day, in the evening you’ll have to go home. And you can never tell whether the house you’re burning belongs to the one launching at us; maybe it even belongs to one of your relatives. So don’t burn houses,” Vaiba addressed the group of fighters.

A few days later they met again on the steps. One of the boys came to Vaiba: “It’s your voice that rang in my ear today. We almost burned a whole community, but your words just came to me: ‘In the evening you will go home.’ So I told my boys, ‘Don’t burn!’”



“My girl, by now you could have been a dead body,” Vaiba’s friend said, laughing. Her high school friend, a boy from the Krahn ethnic group, had come to visit her on the compound where she recently returned to. Shortly after the 1996 war came to an end, Vaiba had moved back to her own apartment.

“What are you saying?” Vaiba asked, puzzled.

He started to explain what had happened the day Vaiba was forced from her home – April 9. ULIMO-J fighters, of which he was one, heard that Taylor’s boys entered their territory and were taking their people out of their houses. “We had decided to kill anyone coming down, because we were angry.” They were about to open fire from their spot up on the hill, when he realized Vaiba and another friend lived on that compound. Confused by this, he suddenly recognized Vaiba, her hands up as the rebels requested. “I saw you clearly,” he said, “and I turned to my men: ‘Nobody shoot, those are our people. Nobody shoot!’”

A Flower in the Morning

The seed had been planted long ago. In 1990 just after President Doe was killed, Vaiba fled from his area to Prince Johnson territory. Sitting on the sidewalk selling Kool-Aid to earn some money, Vaiba saw a woman holding a beautiful little girl in her arms. She recognized the dialect the mother was speaking as her own. “Yassah, Yassah don’t die,” the woman called out. “Don’t do this to me, Yassah don’t do this to me.” But Vaiba witnessed the girl’s head dropping to one side. “War has made my daughter to die,” the woman cried. “It was from hunger. She didn’t have food to eat!” And she started to curse the rebel leader, “You are the cause for my child to die, many bad things will happen to you!” Vaiba saw the intense hurt in that woman, and it cut straight to her heart where she would carry it with her.

Each time she heard a touching story in her work with war-affected women, the image of the woman with her child dying in her arms was brought back to life. Vaiba had been working with the Lutheran Church of Liberia’s Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program (LCL-THRP) for four years, since 1998, while the devastating war in Liberia dragged on. Though she was employed as a secretary, the tasks she took on had been broader from the day she started. With her colleague Leymah Gbowee as her mentor, she slowly grew into social work, and Leymah was more than happy to share her knowledge about peace education, child development and trauma counseling, finding in Vaiba an eager student.

Every time Leymah or another colleague brought her along to a workshop somewhere in the country, she was exposed to the moving testimonies of traumatized women. “If the man is killed, it’s the woman’s husband. If this little boy is forced into a fighting force, it’s the woman’s son. If these two things didn’t happen, it’s the woman who is raped. It’s the woman who put her life at risk to go to the terrible zones because she wanted her family to eat,” Vaiba started reasoning.

Seeing the anger and hurt in the women and identifying with them, she said to herself, “*If women are the primary victims of violence they should get involved, because the one that feels the pain knows how to describe it to people. If we work through these women we can succeed in stopping the violence.*”

The idea had taken root in her mind, and with the violence continuing to destroy her country and the increasing hardship she, her young daughter and the rest of her family had to endure, the urgency was evident to her: The violence had to be stopped. And women should be the ones to do it.



“This war, I think we can do something about it. We can mobilize the community women. But let us start with our church. And since you are the leader for the women in St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, you can do something,” Vaiba urged Leymah.

“I hear you,” was all Leymah said, implying, “I have heard you, it’s on my desk and I will respond later.” Though disappointed by her indifferent reaction, Vaiba was not easily daunted. She felt that Leymah, with her experience in social work and peacebuilding, was the key to making her idea become reality.

Every morning Vaiba went to Leymah's desk: "We've been doing this work, you've been talking with war-affected women. So to mobilize them wouldn't give us a hard time."

"Let us do something!"

"Leymah, you are the social worker, you have an idea in peace education. I want us to do something about this violence in our country. I want us to mobilize women!"

"Let us get more women and take to the streets singing peaceful songs, encouraging big boys to lay down their guns."



Vaiba and her colleagues of the LCL-THRP started every morning with a briefing. Taking turns they would tell how their family was doing and share the work they had done the previous day, the challenges they faced, the lessons learned and the work plan for the day ahead. This morning in May 2002 it was Leymah's turn.

"I had a crazy dream last night," she started off. "Vaiba has been at my desk for a couple of years now, telling me we can do something about the civil conflict. And having this dream, Vaiba, I think we can do something. We can mobilize the women."

Their coordinator responded with great enthusiasm and said, "Yes girls, you can do something. Move on!"

Encouraged by their coordinator, Leymah, Vaiba and another colleague had their first meeting that very same day. Vaiba explained her view: "We mobilize women. We use white clothes to show our commitment to peace. We will go in the streets, we will sing peaceful songs telling our children to come home, telling our children to lay down their guns and that we still have space for them to come back to us."

"I think that's a very good idea. We will work on it," Leymah now said.

They agreed to call a meeting with the Lutheran women, but first they needed someone to sign the invitation. Their coordinator suggested asking the president of the National Lutheran Women Fellowship to sign the call for a mass meeting. If they convinced the head of all the women in the Lutheran Church of Liberia, Comfort Freeman, they could invite not only members of their own church, but also women from the different parishes. So they went over to the Lutheran World Federation office on their own compound and made their request. Comfort immediately agreed to sign the invitation, and right there they wrote, "We are inviting the Lutheran sisters to come to this meeting, to talk about the violence in our country."



"Vaiba?"

"Yes?" Vaiba answered the office phone.

“You have to come to my office right now,” Comfort said with a shaky voice. “I am not a politician and there are two guys here who want to interview me. They want me to tell them about what we have started and what the meeting was about.”

Vaiba realized that Comfort was afraid because President Charles Taylor had security in every corner of the country. But the panic she discerned forced Vaiba to stay calm. Leymah was out of the office, so she would have to deal with this. “Just relax, send them over to me. Do not say anything, do not comment, but send them to me,” she said.

It was the day after the meeting with the Lutheran women. It had been a great success; the women were enthusiastic about stopping the violence, and they had come up with many suggestions about what they could do. They wanted to make a position statement, but they also realized that other Christian women needed to be included, so they decided to host another meeting.

It now seemed their plans had not gone unnoticed. The news had started to spread within the city that there was a group organizing to stop the violence. And with it spread the fear that this was yet another political movement, or a group only after personal gain and recognition.

Less than 10 minutes after Comfort’s call, the receptionist came to her office. “There are two guys here who have come to see you.”

She walked toward them. “Hello guys, what is it you want?”

“Hello. Are you Vaiba Flomo or Leymah Gbowee?”

“I’m one of them.”

“Please identify yourself.”

“Identify yourself first,” Vaiba replied.

“We are journalists,” the men claimed.

“OK, I’m Vaiba.”

“We heard that women are meeting here because you want Charles Taylor to stop the fighting, and that you are going to present a position statement.” The men continued with a long list of things they wanted to discuss.

Vaiba answered only, “Yes, we are hosting a meeting on the Lutheran Church compound. And it is true that we are coming out with a position statement.”

The men were not about to give up. “So what is the position statement about?”

“The day we read the position statement is the day you will know, but for now I am not prepared to talk to the press and I reserve all further comments.”

The men left. Vaiba was relieved she had been strong enough not to reveal any information. You could never know the aim of journalists in her country; they could make or destroy your movement. They could be working for themselves or for the government. She was aware that if they proceeded with what they had started, they would be closely watched by the government, which had banned public demonstrations and monitored social meetings. But the visit also made her realize that they had now gained public recognition as a movement.



Leaning against the wall in a corner of the chapel, Vaiba was watching how more and more Christian women from different walks of life kept pouring in: older women, well-educated women, Catholics, Evangelicals. Seeing over 500 women from various denominations overflowing the church compound, Vaiba could not believe her eyes. There were no seats left; people were standing and even gathering in the hallway and beyond.

Intimidated by the large number and diversity of attendees, Vaiba was afraid to open the meeting. “With all these high-profile women, how do I start? How do I go about this?” Vaiba wondered.

She went to Leymah. “I think you should do it all.”

“No no no, you have to do your part, and I will do my part,” she assured her.

With that, Vaiba walked in and greeted everyone with their slogan, “Women ooooooh women!”

“Women!” The congregation echoed enthusiastically.

Vaiba felt relieved and a burst of energy started flowing through her body.

“Good afternoon, my dear Christian sisters!”

“Good afternoon!” The women responded collectively.

Vaiba continued, “We are so glad to see you here today. The reason we are here, Leymah will tell you all about it after our opening prayers. But I thank you so much that you have made your way here. Thank you for honoring our message. This is about our country, this is about our unborn children. That’s why we have called you. Thank God that you honored our program to come.”

After a volunteer conducted the opening prayers, Leymah presented the idea to the crowd: “There is so much violence in the country, and women and children are the primary victims of violence, so we need to do something. That’s why we called this meeting today. And we invited you so you can give us your feedback on how you think about this process. We haven’t started anything yet, but we want all of us to be involved as women. So what do we think?”

These women’s responses seemed even more passionate than the reactions of the Lutheran women: “Yes this is very timely, we need to move now.”

“We take action now!”

“We march into the bush where the boys are fighting!”

One of the women stood up. “I came to see the organizers before I could be a part. But because now I know where you come from, I can join.”

Many women shared the fear that this might be another group only looking for personal or political success. But once they found out that Vaiba and Leymah were not public figures, and had a religious and traditional background, they were open to come and see what this movement was about. Now that they saw the cause was worthy, they were willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Convinced that something needed to be done to stop the violence, the women collectively decided to establish their movement officially. They called it the Christian Women Peace Initiative (CWPI).

Seeing her idea blossom like a flower opening in the morning, tears of joy filled Vaiba’s eyes. Now that so many people adhered to her idea, she knew she had found her space in peacebuilding. Full of energy she said to herself, “Yes, we can do this.”

While the women were leaving the hall with a spark of hope in their hearts, Leymah turned to her colleague. “Vaiba, we have work to do.”

The Bullet Cannot Pick and Choose

“The kind of worship is different from us.”

“The kind of food they eat.”

“The way they dress.”

“Muslims call the Christians *kaffi*.”

“We as Muslims will not be accepted; we’re being downplayed by society and are not treated as human beings.”

Thirty women were seated around the table on this third day of their consultative meeting in a Monrovia hotel: 15 Christian women on one side, 15 Muslim women on the other, sharing their fears of working together.

After its establishment, the CWPI delivered a position statement – that they wanted dialogue, an unconditional cease-fire and a monitoring force – to the government, the warring factions and the religious leaders. Among the many people who filled the church that day was one Muslim woman, Asatu, who stepped forward and said; “I’m moved and impressed by the CWPI. This is not only for the Christian women, and I promise you that I’m going to move this forward with the Muslim women.”

While the Christian women continued to meet on Tuesdays, the Muslim women started meeting every Friday after prayer. Vaiba and Leymah usually represented the Christian women at these gatherings of the soon-to-be Liberian Muslim Women for Peace (LIMWOP), led by Asatu. The three of them realized that to move on and reach out they needed to get the women of these two religions to work together. Diversity would increase their support base and leeway, and give access to the different fighting factions. Speaking with one voice and working together in peace, they could serve as an example for the Liberian people.

As a child in Sunday school Vaiba learned that “God created the heaven and the earth, and all that is in it,” and that everyone has “One Parent.” That is how she lived her life. Her Muslim friends and her relationship with a Muslim man made her see that they needed peace just as much as everyone else. Living among the Krahn people for years and witnessing the struggle between the Muslim Mandingos and the Lomas in her family’s homeland of Lofa,⁶ Vaiba recognized the consequences of ethnic divisions and the necessity of building bridges.

“We don’t want to dilute our faith,” the Christian women responded when Vaiba, Leymah and Asatu suggested joining forces with the Muslim women. Quoting scripture, “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers,” they argued that sitting with people who don’t believe Jesus is the Son of God would taint their faith.

Fear divided the Christian and the Muslim women, forming a gap that had to be bridged for the sake of peace. Working with the groups separately and repeating the messages *In time of war, women and children suffer most* and *The bullet cannot pick and choose. Once it is in the air it is not looking for a Christian, it is not looking for a Muslim. It comes to anyone*, more and more women came to see the

importance of collaboration. But because the fear was deeply rooted, they had decided to organize this three-day consultative meeting.

On the first day the Christian women, meeting separately, had been given the chance to express their fears of working with the Muslim women. The second day it was the Muslim women's turn to articulate their worries about this cooperation. On the last day, the women now had time to share, address and erase these fears using their holy books: the Bible and the Quran. They compared the stories of the women in these books, used quotations to invalidate assumptions, and gave clarification of certain expressions: "The word kafli does not refer to a Christian but to someone who doesn't believe there is a God. And because a Christian believes in God, a Christian cannot be a kafli," the Muslim women explained. With this major concern of the Christian women dispelled, the air had been cleared to search for their common goal.

Leymah, serving as the facilitator of the meeting, selected some women from the group to do a role play and set the scene: "This is the Muslim community, this is the Christian community. We are having a huge conflict." The women, acting like the children, men, women and rebels of these communities, got absorbed in the play – some pretending to be fighting and shooting each other and dropping dead, others running away from the fighting. Then someone from the audience approached them, a woman acting as if about to give birth, and cried out: "Somebody help me! Ooooooh, my stomach!"

All the women, both Muslim and Christian, stopped in their tracks and forgot about the conflict as they rushed to help the woman. Their concern was now on the pregnant woman; they did not ask her religion, but only wanted her to have a safe delivery.

After the role play Leymah opened the discussion: "Tell us how you felt when you saw that woman?"

"It could be me."

"I imagined my own body in pain."

"But you didn't ask the woman whether she was Muslim or Christian," Leymah observed.

"How could we ask the woman, she was in pain!"

And the women agreed: Even on the frontline, we still need to be women. The Christian and the Muslim women saw that they were all one. There was no difference in the way they were experiencing the violence.

To reveal the secret of peaceful coexistence, Leymah, Vaiba and Asatu had invited two old women, one Muslim, one Christian, to share the story of their friendship. Now in their 80s, the women had been friends since they were young. Tolerance and respect for one another's religious rules made this possible. Giving the women some examples, the Muslim woman related that she respected her friend's hours of devotion on Sundays, even if she had something urgent to discuss. The Christian woman told them that whenever she wanted to eat with her Muslim sister, she wouldn't prepare pork.

“Vaiba, what do you have to say about this?” Leymah prompted her to share insights from her relationship with a Muslim man.

“Once it is Ramadan, the month of fasting, I cook his food. I’m not fasting, but I cook his food,” Vaiba explained. When she was menstruating during Ramadan, she couldn’t sleep in the same bed with him. She lived by the rules of what a Muslim is supposed to do during that time, because she didn’t want to be in conflict with him. He also respected the rules that came with her religion. When Easter came and Vaiba was not allowed to have sex for two weeks, he respected that.

At the end of the day, the women recognized that cooperation was possible – and necessary – to fight for their common goal of peace. Vaiba’s favorite saying was finally embraced: “The bullet cannot pick and choose.” The women signed a memorandum of understanding: While remaining two different organizations, they would all work together for peace.

Fighting in White

“Where are you going?” her mother asked after coming home unexpectedly, to find Vaiba wearing her white T-shirt.

A few days earlier, on April 1, 2003, Leymah had received a security call that the intensifying war was closing in on the capital city and that the women needed to do something. Using the network they had built over time, they quickly organized over 1,000 women from every corner of society and established the Liberian Women Mass Action For Peace, operating under the banner of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) with Leymah as its spokesperson. They sent out an invitation to President Charles Taylor to meet with them in City Hall so they could give him their position statement.

“We are having a meeting in City Hall,” Vaiba responded, wondering why her mother had come back so quickly after she had left to go to the market.

“What? I just saw four army trucks packed with ATU [Anti-Terrorist Unit] soldiers, each holding a whip. They will beat you; they will kill you. Don’t go!” her mother cried.

But Vaiba wasn’t afraid, and she was determined not to give up before peace had returned to her country. While the war raged on and continued to destroy the nation, her personal situation had also deteriorated. In October 2002, only months after they established the CWPI and LIMWOP, her only two brothers both passed away. Her younger brother died from malaria, her older brother in a car accident. Her parents saw all the hard work they had invested in their cherished sons, a banker and a doctor, vanish into thin air. Vaiba decided to take care of her parents as her brothers would have done and work hard to make them proud. She now also had to provide for her older brother’s children, as she was still the only one with an income because the war had left her sister jobless.

With peace, things would turn for the better, Vaiba believed. The emotional and practical support she received from the women in this time of grief further strengthened her commitment to the movement. And the loss of her brothers motivated her to show people, especially her parents, what women can achieve. She would not let her family down. She would not let the women down. And she would not let her country down.

“If I should get killed, just remember I was fighting for peace,” Vaiba said to her mother as she left.



The large open field was covered in a sober but overwhelming white. Thousands of women had gathered that morning, all dressed in the color of peace. Giving up the frivolity of jewelry and make-up that all the Liberian women loved, they displayed the seriousness of their cause.

Because Charles Taylor did not answer their invitation to meet them, the women had decided to sit at the airfield every day from dusk to dawn until their voices were heard. The domestic airfield was strategically located opposite the Presidential Palace, and on his way to work Taylor would have to drive by the women. Many other people passed by the airfield on a daily basis, and instead of finding boys and girls playing soccer they now witnessed their women demanding peace.

After the women from the displaced camps⁷ had arrived, it was time to open the day with morning prayers. Every day at 9 a.m., 12 p.m. and 3 p.m. the women offered their prayers, the Christian way as well as the Muslim way. Today they prayed for the children of Liberia. They wanted their children to lay down their guns and come back to them. All the women laid down on their stomachs, where their children had come from – flat in the sand to connect with the earth where the umbilical cords had been buried. They turned to God to relay their message and ask forgiveness for the atrocities their children committed.

Now that the field had officially been opened, the voices of all the women of different walks of life melded together to amplify their message: “We want peace, no more war.” The song was carried over the airfield and beyond into the bullet-scarred streets of Monrovia:

We want peace, no more war.
We want peace, oh no more war.
Total peace, no more war.
Total peace, oh no more war.
We're tired running, we want peace.
We're tired running, oh we want peace.
Brother killing brother, we want peace.
Sister killing sister, we want peace.

In small groups they went to central places in town, spreading their voice and holding their hand-made signs:

“Stop the violence. Liberia needs peace. Peace is what we want.”

“We’re tired of being raped.”

“We want peace right now. Give us peace.”



No rain, no sunshine. What would this day bring?

For weeks the women had occupied the field across from Charles Taylor’s mansion, regardless of the blazing sun or the pouring rain. And now he had finally agreed to meet with them. They marched to his Presidential Palace, more and more people joining the procession, forming a sea of close to 5,000 women in white. The fear for the powerful man they were about to meet was clearly palpable, as was their determination: They wanted Taylor to go to the peace talks in Ghana.

While Leymah took the lead, Vaiba closed the lines. As always, she tried to keep oversight over the whole group, and every time women joined, Vaiba slowed down to remain the very last in line. They reached the entrance of the mansion, heavily guarded by the widely feared ATU soldiers with the popular nickname *bobo*, “deaf and dumb.” They had been instructed not to talk to anyone. When the women passed, one of the soldiers called to Vaiba: “Ma, are you one of the leaders?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“I can see that,” he said empathetically. “Let me say thank you to your people, I’m very happy that the women are now speaking. There is nothing I can do, I’m forced to hold this gun. But I’m really tired,” he said while holding up his weapon. “So let me say thank you to this group. We are with you people. I want you to remember my face. Whenever this group is around and I’m there I will give you protection. So feel free today. Anybody can come in. Let the women come.”

For once leaving her preferred position in the back, Vaiba sat in the front row on the floor next to her good friend Cerue to hear what Taylor had to say. She wasn’t afraid of the violent retaliation and arbitrary cruelty he was known for – that he could smile at you and have you killed the next minute. But he filled Vaiba with awe, his presidential power weighing down on her. *What will he say?* she wondered. *Will he forbid us ever to gather as a group and sit on the airfield again?*

She turned to her friend: “Cerue, let us pray. We are going to pray that Charles Taylor will agree to go to the peace talks. We are going to pray he will honor this group. We are going to pray that Leymah will be covered with the blood of Jesus. We are going to pray that Leymah will be focused and speak the voice of the women.” They held hands, crying and praying to give Leymah the protection and strength to deliver their message.

After she had been announced as the leader of WIPNET, Leymah took the stage. To her left, President Taylor was seated on his golden couch, flanked by the Liberian flag. Grace Minor, the pro tempore of the Senate, sat at the other end of the couch wearing a matching suit. She got up when Leymah addressed her to hand over the women’s statement, for her to pass it on to the president with the message: “The women of Liberia, including the IDPs [internally displaced persons], we are tired of war. We are tired of running. We are tired of begging for bulgar wheat.”

Through his sunglasses, Taylor looked down at his hands.

Leymah continued: “We are tired of our children being raped. We are now taking this stand, to secure the future of our children.”

When Taylor received the statement handed to him by Minor with a handshake, he smiled his notorious smile. But to the surprise of the nation and the world, Taylor did promise to go to the peace talks, for the sake of the women. After he spoke these long awaited words, it remained quiet. The women refused to clap; they would not let excitement blur their vision. But Vaiba thanked God in silence.

Sweet Land of Liberty

“I know the tall guy, and he’s the one I’m going to,” Vaiba announced.

After the opening day of the peace talks in Accra on June 4, 2003, the delegates were arriving at the conference center in Akosombo, a one-and-a-half-hour drive from the Ghanaian capital. President Charles Taylor was no longer among them. After the Special Court for Sierra Leone announced his indictment on the opening day of talks, he had gone back to Liberia and a government official replaced his position on the negotiation table.

A group of women wearing their white headbands and T-shirts was awaiting the delegates at the parking lot behind the venue: Vaiba, Leymah and four others had come from Monrovia to press for peace. In Accra they had spent some time mobilizing the initially reluctant Liberian refugee women, with success. After their overwhelming presence on the first day in Accra, they hosted about 20 representatives of the refugee women in Akosombo.

When the delegates got off the bus, Vaiba recognized one of the warlords from the time she lived in the soldiers’ barracks with her cousin’s husband, who in those days, the 1980s, worked for President Doe. The man was wearing his military suit and he was supposed to represent the rebel group the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) at the peace talks. But although they had shown up, the warlords of MODEL and Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) refused to enter the conference hall. With her friend Cecilia by her side Vaiba approached him, “Please, stop the fighting.”

“We won’t stop. The Liberian people don’t want peace so we give them pieces!”

The two women went down to his feet, begging him, “No, the Liberian people want peace. Please, you’re the one who is supposed to give us peace.” Vaiba felt degraded kneeling before a man who brought so much suffering upon them. She thought: *This is what it must feel like when you go back to your husband to kiss him after he slapped you.*

“Go to Charles Taylor,” he replied.

“No, it’s you I want to come to. It’s you who has the peace for the Liberian people. I want you to see me as your sister, your wife, your mother, your daughter. I want you to put me in that position and to please agree to take your seat at the table.”

The next day the warlords agreed to attend the peace talks.



The women of Liberia want peace now. The banner stood out poignantly behind the women crying for the families they left behind in Monrovia. The city was once again under attack, and desperation resounded in their chanting. Almost a week into the peace talks no progress had been made, nor did the men seem willing to come to an agreement. Instead, war had broken out in Liberia and the situation in their city was deteriorating by the minute. The struggle between MODEL, LURD and Taylor’s security forces was fought with heavy weaponry. People could no longer go into the streets and there was no food to eat. Thinking about her family in Monrovia, to

whom she had not even left enough money to get by, Vaiba couldn't stop her tears. Her young daughter, her mother and father, her sister, all the other children she was taking care of – how would they survive this wave of violence?

While Cecilia, backed up by the other women, raised another gospel song, a journalist in the distance caught Vaiba's eye. With his round forehead, prominent eyes and the same sturdy body and vigorous walk, he looked just like her younger brother. When he noticed the group of singing women he slowed down. With Vaiba's glance still fixed on him he gradually came closer, holding his microphone. He called to his cameraman who was keeping a fast pace and was about to walk past the women. "Can I record your voice?" he asked Cecilia.

Vaiba encouraged her friend to change the song to one of Vaiba's favorites: "Liberia is my home." Although Cecilia had sung the song many times before, she elevated it to a new level of intensity, loading it with their emotions about the hardship their country faced.

*Liberia is my home,
Liberia is my home,
Liberia is my home,
One day we'll be free.
Sweet Liberia, sweet land of liberty.
Gave way to Africa, the first independent state in Africa.*

Raising her volume, Cecilia's voice now got through to the people around, touching all of them. Attracted by the sound, the chief mediator came outside to listen and said, "I'm going to call the guys and tell them to listen to their women." The warring factions, the government delegates and other attendees left the conference hall to witness the singing women. It moved many of them to tears. But not only Liberians were weeping; Vaiba saw the Ghanaian police shedding tears for the country they had once known as peaceful. One of them was crying out loud, his hands on his head in despair. The song reminded everyone of what Liberia had been like before. The first state in Africa to be independent, the country that helped other African countries when they were in trouble, the country people had considered peaceful.

The image of the Liberian women in Ghana recorded by the CNN reporter was immediately broadcasted around the world. After only 15 minutes, phone calls started coming in. The mother of a woman from their group called from the United States, crying through the cell phone speaker. "Ooh we're watching you in Accra, the Liberian women in Accra crying and singing for peace!" The world now knew the Liberian women were protesting for peace.



"He will leave."

"He will not leave."

The discussion she had with her friends the evening before continued fiercely in Vaiba's own mind, keeping her awake all night. Back in Monrovia, she was impatiently awaiting the next day, August 11, that would carry an answer to the pressing question: Would Charles Taylor leave the country?

At daybreak the whole city seemed captivated by the same restlessness – whether this would be the day of their liberation. The weather was inconclusive: no sunshine, no rain. The women had decided not to go to the airfield on this laden day. Instead Vaiba – dressed in her white T-shirt – her sister and friends from the compound gathered across the road to follow the supposed exodus of Taylor. He had announced he was handing over his presidency, and it was rumored he accepted an asylum offer from Nigeria as part of an ECOWAS-brokered peace deal. Even though those in possession of a television stayed home to watch CNN’s live streaming of the event, more and more people took to the streets. They moved about quietly, just like Taylor’s soldiers who were still around, and lined up along the roadside all the way from the mansion to the airport.

Vaiba realized that Taylor fleeing the country would be a major step toward a final peace agreement. Although the peace talks still continued, she had returned from Accra about a month earlier. The women had not anticipated being away from home for so long: they ran out of funds, and some of the women worried about their families in Liberia. Vaiba’s parents, her daughter and the other children had fled Monrovia to stay with her sister on the Harbel Firestone Plantation. She felt the need to go back and take care of them. When the refugee women were ready to carry on the work with Leymah and the other remaining women, Vaiba and some of the others returned to Monrovia and continued their peace work there.

Along the roadside, Vaiba’s group had witnessed the arrival of the guests who would deport Taylor and install the vice president who was to take over power until an interim government was established. A few hours later, while Vaiba was on the phone with her nephew in Harbel, where they were closely following the news on TV, he reported: “They are walking outside. They are getting in the car. They are coming now!” Vaiba got closer to the road to watch them pass by, and saw Taylor being escorted in a convoy. When it disappeared in the distance, many people returned home. But Vaiba stayed and sat down with her friends at the roadside. “Charles Taylor is very smart, he can still escape,” some said. Others objected; but nobody could rest assured that the man who had so long dictated their country would really leave.

About 30 minutes later her nephew called again: “He is now getting on the plane!” Vaiba put her cell phone on speaker, so everyone around her could hear. “Right now he’s climbing the stairs, he’s waving, oooh he entered the plane!” Muffled whoops were let out among their group. But Vaiba was still not pleased; she wanted Taylor to fly off. When her nephew finally announced the plane had taken off, relief came over her: *This is the day of our liberation.*



Early in the morning the airfield in Monrovia once again filled up with people. Not just women, but men and children too gathered to welcome the women who returned from Accra. They were there not to protest for peace, but to celebrate it. On August 18, 2003, a week after Charles Taylor renounced power and went into exile in Nigeria, the Liberian government signed a comprehensive peace agreement with the rebels, political parties and civil society actors.

When Leymah and the others arrived at the airfield, the crowd broke into song and dance, praising the women who had devoted themselves to peace. Even taxi drivers, who usually got upset when people blocked the streets, now stopped their cars to thank the women, honking their horns in unison with the celebration. Overwhelmed by the embraces of gratitude, Vaiba now recognized the

value of the work they had done. As children as young as 3 years old joined them, she knew it had been worth the hours, the days, the weeks in the burning sun and pouring rain.

Cheering and running after the women around the airfield, the children raised the song that said it all: “We want peace, no more war.”

Yesterday is Gone, Tomorrow May Never Be Mine

Sis Oretha immediately struck Vaiba as friendly but sorrowful. She could tell that this woman in her late 60s was carrying a heavy burden. She was clearly neglecting what Liberian women love to do: take care of themselves. Her clothes emanated a musty odor, her hair was messy and her arms and hands covered in a rash. Sometimes she would walk around restlessly and aimlessly, bursting into laughter without any reason.

They first met in Totota, a small town in Bong County where Sis Oretha resided. The staff of the LCL-THRP had identified Sis Oretha, an older and well-respected woman in the church, as their entry point to three different villages in the remote area of this county.

Sis Oretha had agreed to assist the LCL-THRP team on their three-week tour in April 2006, through the dense vegetation of the Liberian inlands: from Davis Town to Digei to Monokole. Vaiba was assigned to conduct trauma healing workshops, while her colleagues would give leadership workshops. By using a trusted and esteemed woman like Sis Oretha as her entry point, Vaiba hoped to be accepted by the strongly traditional women in these war-affected villages.

The office jeep took them from Totota to the riverside, where the road ended. The five of them – Vaiba and her two colleagues, Sis Oretha and the deacon of the district – crossed St. Paul River in a canoe. From there they continued their journey by foot. After a 45-minute walk through the forest, they reached their first destination: Davis Town.



“I don’t think I’m going to Digei with you,” Sis Oretha said when she approached Vaiba during a short break in the wrap-up session of the workshop.

After working in Davis Town for almost a week it was time to move on to the next village, where more work was to be done, more heart-chilling stories to be heard. Their team had decided to finish work early that day so they could undertake the strenuous two-and-a-half-hour walk to Digei in the afternoon. That would give them Saturday to rest and on Sunday they could attend the local church.

Sis Oretha’s refusal to go with them took Vaiba by surprise. Vaiba did not want to deviate from what she was ordered to do by her office: Go with Sis Oretha. So she responded, “No, Sis Oretha, you have to go with me.”

“I don’t think I should take you to Digei. I can recommend the chairlady of Davis Town to take you to Digei,” Sis Oretha continued.

“Why can’t you take me?” Vaiba insisted.

“No no no, I’m not going. I’m not going to Digei. I promised never to go to Digei.”



After the workshop Vaiba and Sis Oretha took a walk into the forest surrounding the village, as they had done several times during their stay in Davis Town. Sis Oretha would tell her all about the various plants and trees. But today was different. Vaiba had shared her suspicion with her colleague Joan earlier on, and Sis Oretha's refusal to go to Digei strengthened Vaiba's feeling that she had a serious problem.

They reached an open and grass-free space, the place where visitors could stop to rest after a long walk and prepare themselves before entering the village. When Vaiba sat down on the gravel, a voice spoke to her: *Pray with Oretha*. Vaiba, feeling the urgent need to adhere to the voice, said, "Sis Oretha, let us pray now."

Vaiba started her prayer, holding Sis Oretha's hands tightly. "God, let your will be done. If you think Oretha and I should go to Digei and Monokole, let it be done, to bring glory to your name." They were quiet for a while. Then Sis Oretha let go of Vaiba's hands and got up.

Without knowing where they were coming from, the words passed Vaiba's lips:

*Yesterday is gone, sweet Jesus,
and tomorrow may never be mine,
so give me the strength to do everything that I have to do now.*

She was singing slowly to get the message across. She wanted to convince Sis Oretha that she could not stay stuck in the past, and she wanted her to open up.

Sis Oretha, standing in the open circle surrounded by trees, started laughing at her. "You have such an ugly voice. Thank God there are other careers because otherwise you would die poor. But I will teach you how to sing." And she raised her beautiful voice,

Yesterday is gone, tomorrow may never be mine . . .

As the sentences one by one and repeatedly filled the air, the song was taking root in Sis Oretha's heart. Tears started rolling down her cheeks.

When Vaiba saw her crying, the tears so long suppressed, she knew, *This is what I want, this is the moment*. She was careful not to disturb the old lady and pretended she wasn't looking at her. But the pain expressed in Sis Oretha's voice and face made Vaiba shiver. After a while her tone got soft, and Vaiba stood up to dance, rocking herself to the melody. She wanted her to sing the song over and over again. To encourage her and to illustrate its meaning, Vaiba started acting out the lyrics lightheartedly. When Sis Oretha sang "Yesterday is gone," Vaiba turned around and waved at her. Hearing the sentence "So give the strength to do what I have to do now," Vaiba pointed down firmly. Yesterday is behind us, and we may not live to see tomorrow: Now is the moment.

When the mixture of tears and laughter carried by the beautiful old lady's tone slowly faded, they went back to their hut in silence. Vaiba did not ask what was on her mind, and Sis Oretha did not speak about it.



The night had fallen over the village, like a veil covering the many painful stories revealed. The dark gave space for contemplation; it was time for their evening prayer. The three women sat on the floor, each in her own corner of the little hut with a flashlight in their midst, its light reflecting on the ceiling and brightening their faces.

Vaiba and Joan insisted that tonight Sis Oretha would lead a prayer for women who went through a lot of trouble during the war. “Since you have been here you haven’t asked me to offer the prayer, so why do you want me to pray today?” Sis Oretha wondered. But she accepted, and when she raised her voice the room filled with passion, fueled by something deep inside her. With a trembling voice she prayed, “Ooh Lord, bless the widows. When love has filled your heart, you know how it is if it’s taken out. Our loved ones we miss!”

Vaiba felt her colleague Joan pinching her. She now saw that Vaiba had been right. Sis Oretha was missing something in her life.

Approaching the end of her prayers Sis Oretha said, “God, if you think I should go with Vaiba and Joan, let me go with them. Give me the spirit to lead me.” The room was loaded with energy and expectation. As if invigorated by the prayer and inspired by the song stuck in her head since that afternoon, Sis Oretha turned to Vaiba and said, “I will go with you tomorrow.”



Before the war came to Digei and the rebels burned down this village of diamond miners, it had been the proud owner of both a school and a clinic. Now there were only five huts left, and people were hesitant to return from the surrounding villages to what once was their home. Still, 20 women from these different places gathered to take part in the trauma healing workshop. Amongst them was one unexpected participant: Sis Oretha.

Vaiba decided to use one of her strategies to get the reserved women to open up. She took a story from another workshop and started recounting it: “This woman and her son were running to find a safe place, but the rebels captured them. They told the son ‘to go out with’⁸ his mother. But the son refused, ‘I can’t do it.’ The rebels killed him. Cut him into pieces. Put them in a dishpan, and placed it on her head.”

“That happened to me!” Sis Oretha suddenly exclaimed, emphasizing her words with a wild arm gesture.

Vaiba paused, hoping Sis Oretha would take the opportunity to explain herself, but the moment passed. “We will get to that later,” Sis Oretha said.



Seated on the floor with their legs crossed, the 20 women formed a circle, creating a safe space for them to share their most bitter memories. After working together for a few days, this

Thursday afternoon they got to the central session: “Sharing the Weight.” A white paper sheet replaced the candle Vaiba used during evening sessions.

Whenever a woman felt ready to tell her story, she took the sheet from the center of the circle, rolled it up and spoke out. A thread was formed by the tears, the silence that could sometimes last several minutes and the soft songs raised by the women gifted with lovely voices. One by one they got up, each woman’s story adding to the chain of painful war experiences.

“I’m hopeless and I feel like an empty container. Rebels arrested my baby and me, and we were kept in a room for more than two weeks. While in that room, I was their wife, meaning that any of them could go out with me before my baby. Some days I was raped by five different fighters.”

“I was arrested by rebels and they wanted to rape me, but one of them rescued me. Later, he wanted me as his wife, and because I didn’t want to be raped, I agreed to his love. He took me to his house, but when we got there his wife refused me, so I was taken to their training base. On that base I was trained as a rebel. There I also became pregnant from the man that rescued me, but since he left to go to the city I have not seen him.”

“My only child that God gave me on this earth was slaughtered by rebels. They cut him piece by piece until he died before my own eyes.”

“I was 6 years old when the rebels attacked our town one day and arrested us. My brother, grandparents and I were boiling palm nuts to make palm oil when we got arrested. I saw the rebels splitting my brother’s stomach into two and putting him in the boiling liquid on the fire, and they beat my grandparents to death before my eyes.”

Hearing all these dramatic stories of her fellow women opened the space for Sis Oretha to share her own. She got up, slowly walked to the center and picked up the blank sheet. She went back to her place in the circle and spoke:

“They dumped my son in the well, where we used to get our water from. After they threw him in there, they shot him. Because of this, my husband, an army man, died of a heart attack.”

The women shared their tears, and the one with the most beautiful voice raised a soothing traditional song.



Many traumatic stories had been stirred up, but Vaiba would not leave before they worked out a way to address and heal the uncovered wounds. Friday, the last day of their workshop, was the day of the “Action Plan.” Vaiba left this up to the women themselves; she knew she couldn’t come back, and that they needed to go through the healing process in a way that appealed to them. She was pleased to see that the community, represented by a traditional and a Christian committee, took the initiative to help the people who shared their story.

The elderly women proposed that as traditional people in the village, every woman could go to the creek and have a ritual cleansing ceremony and bath.

One of the women turned to Sis Oretha, “I think what we can do for you, let us go so we can see the place. Or even better, let us go with the pastor. All of us can go there and we can pray.”

Sis Oretha objected, “I can never go. It was for your business that I came to Digei. But I hate this village, and I am not going to stay here. I’m going back.”

“You can’t go back,” the women said. “We all need to come back to rebuild our village. And you are the chairlady of our village. Our return to the village depends on you. We should go to the place your son was killed. You need to accept it, it’s the will of God.”

After their consoling words Sis Oretha finally relented. “I think so ... yes, I agree. Let’s go pray.”

The people from the church supported this idea. “Each of you who had relatives killed and were unable to give them a burial, we will go to the places it happened and pray.”



In a procession headed by the pastor in his white gown, holding his Bible and flanked by two cross carriers, they all walked to the well. It was not far from where they held the workshop, and was a central place where people used to fetch water. At the well, the participants in the trauma healing workshop, those in the leadership workshop, the elderly women and the church choir all formed a circle. In the center, Sis Oretha stood with Vaiba standing by her side. Today her son would finally get a decent burial.

The pastor conducted the burial. He read from scripture and prayed, “Please receive his soul and let it rest in peace. May his soul rest in peace, and also forgive the one that did it to him and make him work for you. Let him repay.”

While the choir sang its songs, Sis Oretha’s tears flowed, watering the dried-up well. At the end of the ceremony the young men took some dirt, and after all those years they closed the well.



At the end of this intensive day, they went to rinse their bodies, minds and clothes in the creek near the village. Sis Oretha, Joan and Vaiba, eager to take a swim, walked to the river. While Joan was in the bushes, Sis Oretha entrusted Vaiba with yet another painful secret. Now that the most significant burden – of her son’s death – had been lifted, she was ready to face her other war traumas. Washing her dirty clothes on a big rock, the story of another degrading experience just rolled off her tongue. “But,” she said, “I shouldn’t be the one talking in front of their children about what happened to me.”

Once again, Vaiba was confronted with a recurring challenge: Women keeping their deepest hurt inside because of their traditions, because they feel ashamed, because of their position. As a chairlady and well-respected member of the church, Sis Oretha did not want to tell her complete story in front of her people. Even when Joan rejoined them, Sis Oretha changed the subject.



When they finished their work in the next village, Monokole, where Sis Oretha served as a co-facilitator, she came with them to Monrovia. They wanted to help her collect her husband's death benefit – money the wives of deceased soldiers could claim. They went straight to AFL Widows, the organization in charge of the benefit, and found Sis Oretha's husband's name on the list. After the registration was completed it would take some time for the request to be processed, so Sis Oretha went back home – to her true home: Digei.

After a few weeks the money was delivered. But because there was no way to contact Sis Oretha, Vaiba kept it until someone who was going to her village could deliver the message. When she heard, she came all the way to the LCL-THRP office where she asked for “her doctor.”

She told Vaiba what her work had meant for the women and the village. People had started to return in great numbers and to claim their rights to local resources so they could rebuild the town. Vaiba, still feeling sick from the many dramatic stories she had heard, felt only more challenged: There were many other women with the same kind of problems who she needed to reach.

Vaiba and her team never went back to Digei. It was a long and difficult journey: Vaiba's feet swelled from the many hours of walking through the rough Liberian inlands, and the river was hard to cross for a large part of the year. They also faced a lack of financial resources and limited time to do all the work that needed to be done in their country. But the song the villagers were singing when they left Digei still resonated in Vaiba's ears, *Bye bye, we know you will not come back again. Go go! But we are here.*

She realized that the little seed of hope she had planted would multiply. Sis Oretha was now living her life in the present and would inspire others to do the same.

A CONVERSATION WITH VAIBA KEBEH FLOMO

The following is an edited compilation of an interview conducted by IPJ Senior Program Officer Diana Kutlow on Oct. 21, 2010, in the Peace & Justice Theatre of the IPJ, and select interviews conducted by Sara Koenders between Sept. 13 and Nov. 5, 2010.

Q: Who were your role models, both while you were growing up and then when you became aware of what you could do for women and peacebuilding?

A: I think my role model is my mother, the woman that bore me. We were eight children from our mother, but our father had other wives. We were about 17 or 18 children from my father. As a child growing up my mother didn't go to school – she doesn't even speak English – but she made sure that she sent the eight children to school. She saw education to be so important that she sent all of us to school. But besides sending us to school, she made sure that every material we needed for school was available for us. The community I grew up in was so poor.

Every time as I sat by my mother I saw women coming to her with tears. And she would take them into her room, her bedroom – because we just had this one bedroom, no living room, just one single room. But on the way back from the room, I could see a smile on this woman's face. And I started to wonder, what was it in that room that she came outside with a smile?

I started to get very close to my mother because I also wanted to make women laugh, because many people in the community that I grew up really had tears in their eyes. They were every day going through domestic violence, and with the help of my mother I think they started having a smile on their faces. So that really pushed me into the work.

Before I met my colleague Leymah [Gbowee], who was a social worker, I think the background of my mother giving smiles to women opened me up when I saw Leymah. It was like just putting the icing on the cake. Leymah took me into the peacebuilding work, and also the Lutheran Church provided me the space for my dream to become reality.

Q: Leymah worked with you at the Lutheran Church of Liberia's Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program as a social worker, and she helped teach you about social work and peacebuilding. What made you decide to go to her in 2002 and push her to build a movement of women for peace in Liberia?

A: Really what pushed me to get involved in peacebuilding was that I saw children dying from hunger; I saw children dying in their mothers' arms because they didn't eat for many days. I saw groups of boys in a pick-up, and in less than one hour the pick-up returned – I did not see a single boy return.

I saw a woman trying to run from the bullets, and as she was running one of the children was left behind. Because she didn't feel good taking three children and leaving one behind, she turned around to go for the other child. She got killed because she was caught in the cross-fire. She got killed by a bullet, just running back to pick up a child.

And I saw our children – the Liberian children, the young generation that could take over our nation – turning into bad children. Turning into children who eat human beings. Turning into children involved in an act that human beings cannot imagine.

That really stayed in my mind. And with my upbringing, my mother said to me, “You have to make your environment a peaceful place. Once you are in a position to, you have to show your neighbor that you can do this, you can make your environment peaceful.” So I went to Leymah with this at the back of my mind.

We have done a lot of trauma healing work. The experiences of women are so terrible, so terrible. Some of the experiences the women went through, they had to accept them because the condition called for that bitter experience. Like the woman whose children did not eat for two days. They were hungry, so what did she do? She gave herself out to a fighter, just so in return she could get a cup of rice for her family to eat.

If the men tell you a story, maybe they will tell you, “My house got burned.” The men will tell you, “The company I was working with is now closed down.” Maybe he will tell you, “The bank I was saving my money in is now closed down.” But if a woman is telling you her experience from the war, she either was raped, or maybe they forced her son to go out with her – to have sex with her.

I heard this from women and I thought, *If these are the people who are going through the worst experiences, I think we can build the network with them and we can move into peace.* That’s what really moved me to go to Leymah. I said, “Leymah, we have done the work with the community since 1998. I think we can also move into mobilizing women to get into this movement. We can stand against the violence against us as women.”

Q: How did you bring the Christian women’s group together with the Muslim women’s group so that this went beyond one particular group or denomination or political group?

A: One thing: the bullet. Once the bullet is flying it doesn’t pick and choose. That was one of my messages I always took. It doesn’t have eyes to see this is the Muslim or this is the Christian. It picks anyone out. I would say to the women, “What are you talking about Christian and Muslim? Sometimes we are sitting somewhere and we hear the sound of the gun. We all are running. The Christian woman leaves her son, and the Muslim woman also leaves her son. After the attack we are both looking for our children. So what are we talking about Christian and Muslim?”

“Once the bullet is flying it doesn’t pick and choose. . . . It doesn’t have eyes to see this is the Muslim or this is the Christian. It picks anyone out.”

So I think our focus should be fighting for peace – as women together, and sharing that womanhood. It’s the woman being raped – whether Muslim or Christian, it is a woman. It’s the woman who will go through her husband being killed. And what happened to us is that the women became the breadwinners. You can’t imagine the places women went during the war, just to seek

food. We would get into the river to cross and maybe it's to your chest. We hold hands to cross to get to the next village to just find food for our family.

So I saw the burden for women, Christian and Muslim. Another thing that really came into my mind to include the Muslim women was that we also have Muslim boys fighting. So for the Muslim boys to see us as the ones really focused on peace, we also needed to have the Muslim women to talk to the Muslim boys who were fighting – so they could see our peacebuilding strategy was holistic.

Q: Going back to your work with the Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program, you deal with women who have been deeply wounded over and over in the course of the war. How do you bring someone from the darkness that they have experienced to a feeling of hope?

A: This is the difficult task, especially where I come from – Liberia being a traditional country. But I think that's why sometimes I can't give a specific answer to what I do to help the traumatized to gain hope. We apply a lot of strategies.

What I noticed when it comes to giving hope to the traumatized woman, in the village it's easier for her to overcome her trauma. And in the little time I have spent in trauma healing, people of faith overcome their trauma more easily too. The Christian believes the story of Job in the Bible, so we link them to that story of when he went through many troubles. So we provide those kinds of scriptures to the victims if we know they are from the church. The same with the Muslim – we also link them to the Quran. It didn't say it would be smooth all through; there are some difficult times in our lives.

On the traditional side, we have many activities to help deal with trauma. For example, singing: They have a specific song to sing, and sometimes it's like a cleansing. We say to her, "Your only child died, but we need to do this cleansing for you." And once that is done, she says, "I'm now new – I think I can face tomorrow."

And again, from where I come, if you do not have a traditional background but want to work with Liberian women, it's sometimes difficult. It's difficult for them to trust you with their stories. But because I have a traditional background, they entrust me with their story.

Q: You spoke almost of faith as therapy – that you can find trauma healing through your faith and stories of your religion. What is the role of forgiveness? How can you truly forgive? For those who may not have a religious background, in what ways do you provide counseling or trauma healing?

A: In my work I don't identify a way for my client. What I do is to help them in the process, in identifying their own way to cope with their trauma. And when we talk about forgiveness, it has to come from inside. You can't just do it because you want to do it. The sorrow will take over you. And maybe I could hurt somebody by asking them to forgive. So those are the processes we go through with a client. We don't say, "What do we do in cases like this so people forgive?" Forgiveness is left with the client.

But in the healing process it is important that you forgive. If you forgive, this is like cutting the chain off. If I have wronged you, we are tied together until we can settle that particular thing. And that's

what I said with the Christian faith: The Bible teaches about forgiveness. It is a tool in forgiveness. So in my brief work in trauma healing, it is often easier for the religious to forgive.

Q: You also went through the war in Monrovia. Many people left the country and you did not. At one point you were trapped in a part of the city you could not get out of. Can you tell me a little bit about your own experience during the war?

A: Let me just share one. At one point I was forced to do what I didn't want to do. I was in the territory of the Krahn people, at the house I was living in. This was 1996. In the morning they would go fight. So when they would come back in the evening, to show that they killed more of their enemies – that's how they refer to each other: enemy – they would come with a song. And when they're coming, we have to receive them, to say thank you for the "great work." Thank you that you have killed a lot of our enemies.

If you were from a different tribe or ethnic group and they didn't see you joining the group, then they thought you had a different intention. It was trouble for you. So we have to come out and sing. We were forced to come out to join the singing and dancing. You have to celebrate with the guys for what they have done, for killing your brothers and sisters, for destroying your country. You destroy my country, you kill my youth, and I turn around to celebrate with you.

That pain was in me. But I had to do it to survive. So sometimes when I think about it, I want to hold myself guilty. Was I forced to do what I did? But if I hadn't done it, then of course I wouldn't be where I am today. So I'm struggling sometimes with it. But it also brings sadness in my mind. What did I celebrate with them? Killing my brothers and sisters? Destroying my country? That you have set us back so we can't even have a good life for our children? Was that what I was celebrating for? So these are the bad memories I'm taking with me.

Q: Do those memories connect you with the women who you're working with? Is it part of the reason that they trust you with their stories?

A: Yes, I think so. But after we started the movement, what also happened to me was that my two brothers died. And that did not stop me. So I'm also serving to the women as a role model. They say, "If Vaiba, after all that happened to her, can still be strong in the peacebuilding work, then of course we can be."

Q: You have a country that is still very transitional. There's another election coming up in 2011 and the president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, is running again. What do you think are the biggest challenges facing Liberia right now, and what are you going to be focusing on in the future?

A: The trouble we have is with the young generation. What happened in our country, the youth are the primary victims in every way. They were either involved in the violence or they were affected by the violence, and are sometimes left untouched in trauma healing – that's the trouble. A lot of them did not go through the trauma healing process. The majority of them are boys, and they enter the streets and they have no home to go to because the community rejected them. That's why during the DDR [disarmament, demobilization and reintegration] process, the DD worked, but the R still remains a challenge – and that's what is still affecting the country. The reintegration remains a challenge in our country. Can you imagine? This is the boy that was 9 years old when he joined the

fighting force. He was in the third grade when he started. He's now 23 years and still in the third grade. It took three or four days to disarm him, demobilize him – but to reintegrate him? It takes more than three days. This is the trouble. And we have told them, we have to go through the complete cycle of trauma healing so we have these boys reintegrated. The community itself is affected. How will you just grab this guy and take him back to the community that he destroyed? He will surely be rejected. And this is the problem.

“This is the boy that was 9 years old when he joined the fighting force. He was in the third grade when he started. He's now 23 years and still in the third grade. It took three or four days to disarm him, demobilize him – but to reintegrate him? It takes more than three days.”

Q: You said that as Liberian women you are still very much involved in maintaining the peace in your country, because you feel you are the ones who created it, so you should also make sure to keep it. What kind of activities do you carry on to maintain the peace?

A: That is why we are now involved with the Peace Hut Talks, where we meet and just talk about issues that we think are a threat to peace. What we discuss depends on the community. For example, in Monrovia the concern will be the youth and the lack of jobs. They say that's the threat to peace. But when you go to the village, the villagers will tell you, “We don't have a clinic. We don't have a school.” When you go to another village they tell you, “Look, this place here, we have no road. We walk many hours just to get to the main road.” You go to another village and they say, “We don't have safe drinking water.” You go to another village and they say, “We, the women here, we don't have rights.” So based on the community, those are the issues we discuss.

Q: What are you planning to do to avoid violence breaking out during the elections in 2011?

A: My office, the LCL-THRP, we are very good at that. In the previous elections, during the second round we saw the violence. So what we did is, we moved in quickly and went to every community. Every day we met with 50 persons: day one the youth, day two the elderly people, day three the professional people. That's how we did it. And the topic was “The Ship of Liberia: The past, the present and the future.” We would go to the past and let them list all the good and the bad things that happened in the past. Then we looked at the good and the bad things in the present, and compared the present with the past. What was good in the past and is bad in the present? So what do we do, building on the past and the present, to have the better future? A lot of them came up with good governance. How do we get to good governance? Many people asked us why we hadn't come earlier. So that's what we're thinking of doing again this time.

Q: I heard a story about some boys who burned down a market and ruined what little the community had. To bring peace to this community, they took the boys who were responsible for that and said, “You are responsible for rebuilding this.” And these kids,

young men, took pride in the fact that what they had burned down they then built. Is there anything else like that going on in Liberia?

A: You are speaking my mind. This is what I've been thinking. For us in Liberia, from my experience, conflict resolution is about power sharing. When they get to the dialogue table, all they talk about is, "I want this ministry" and "I want that ministry" and "I want the other ministry." So let's ask, "Can we attach three communities to one ministry?" So that what they destroyed from the community, when they serve for that ministry they have to rebuild it. Until that can happen, the common people will never feel the impact of peace.

A lot of the people still suffer because the community still has no school, no clinic – I mean, just nothing. And what's happening to the guys? They continue to have more money. We need to make recommendations to those guys negotiating, and force those guys to give back to the community what you took away from them.

Q: You established the women's desk within your office, the LCL-THRP, in the beginning of 2010. Why did you think that was important? When did you start your lobbying and how did you finally convince your office?

A: One of the reasons was that I wanted the women's voices to be heard. I also wanted to provide a space for women to come out with those things that were affecting their lives. I noticed that when we held workshops with women and men together, women were not telling their stories. But at the end of the day they would come to me and say, "I have a story to tell, but I don't feel comfortable saying my story before the men, because I was raped by a man, and if I would tell my story to a man I would be disdained and they would no longer respect me as a woman." Another reason was, whenever we left the communities where we did the workshops, it was the women who would carry on the work and share their experiences with women who didn't attend the workshop. Also, women were more affected by STDs [sexually transmitted diseases].

I saw all of these things and I felt that a separate program for women was needed, so I started to lobby the office and say that women need to be treated differently in the program. The moment I got employed with the program I started to lobby, organizing this workshop for a women's group. But at first I think I wasn't strong enough to really push. But because I wanted to be part of the implementation of [U.N. Security Council Resolution] 1325,⁹ that was why I was very strong in my advocacy with relevant staff within the program.

Q: You were featured in the documentary "Pray the Devil Back to Hell." How did that influence your life and work? And how do you feel when you watch the documentary?

A: It has had a great impact on me and my relationship with people. I'm now in the position that I can no longer get into violence, because people now refer to us as the peace women: "These are the women who stood against the war; these are the women who stood against the violence." So I need peace and, to be frank, I shouldn't be the one in the community creating problems and getting into confusion with other people. It has made my work more challenging, and it has also given me many opportunities. I sometimes get invitations to travel abroad because of my involvement in the documentary.

My first time watching the documentary was here. All I used to see were fragments, because I didn't want to be reminded. Each time I watch that documentary I'm back in the war: looking at the young children, the children we're working with now; looking at a little boy shooting a gun; people running and people getting killed by the bullet. I see people with their bundles on their head running around. So anytime that I see it, it's just like I'm back in it again. I'm seeing that little girl who died. I'm seeing the woman who the stray bullet collected. Each time I watch it, that's what happens to me and I carry that stress for two days. So sometimes I just say no. But I think it's getting easier.

Q: How do you share your peacebuilding experiences and the lessons you have learned with others? Can you tell me about the “peace train” campaign you and other Liberian women did in Sierra Leone?

A: Documentation is very important. One thing is sharing it with you, and also in the documentary “Pray the Devil Back to Hell.” Different women have worked at different stages during our conflict, but because their initiatives were not documented, people didn't know about their work. But for us, our work is highlighted because it was documented. So I'm prepared as a woman believing in peace, in a peaceful environment, in transforming lives, to share my experience with anyone.

“Documentation is very important. . . . Different women have worked at different stages during our conflict, but because their initiatives were not documented, people didn't know about their work.”

The fact that I went to Sierra Leone was one of those things. In our neighboring country, Sierra Leone, elections were approaching and they were in the season of campaigning, and the campaign was very violent. And when we heard this, what we did as Liberian women – with the sponsor from WIPSEN [Women Peace And Security Network Africa] and UNIFEM [United Nations Development Fund for Women] and in collaboration with the gender ministry – we went to Sierra Leone. As women we said, “If our neighbor's house is on fire, it may likely come to our house.” We have just come from our war, and it is still a fragile peace. So if we allow another thing to break out in Sierra Leone it will likely spill over into Liberia. That was one of the reasons we did it.

So we went to Sierra Leone with different women's organizations; I think we were about 12 women. We went to the various Sierra Leonean provinces and just marched through the streets singing peaceful songs. And we presented our position statement to each of the political parties' headquarters in each province. The Sierra Leonean women also marched with us, but we were taking the lead and said, “We have come to join our voices with the voices of our sisters to say no to violent elections.” And they welcomed us. One of the political parties said to us, “It's a shame if you leave from your country to come here to tell us to have violence-free elections. We should learn a lesson from you.” And I will tell you what showed that we were successful: At the end of their elections, our country was the first country their president visited.

Q: What is your personal opinion about the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? What recommendations do you support at this stage?

A: It's true for me that when I see these warlords, I get so angry. I get so bitter when I look at my country, when I look at the young generation that's supposed to be taking over. And when I look at them and see them drive around in these big cars, I get so angry with these guys. But when I look at the life the ordinary people live, I don't think right now is the appropriate time for some of the recommendations – like for these warlords to face the tribunal. That's so expensive. That money should go to the ordinary Liberians. It should be used to build clinics and schools in the villages, to bring electricity and running water to the country. Create jobs, so that people will be able to work and get food for their family. We still have a large percentage of the Liberian population that lives on less than a dollar per day. We as Liberians haven't done anything to deserve the punishment we go through. So I think what we should be doing is improving the lives of the ordinary people. I'm not saying that the ones who brought the suffering upon us should go free. But after we have built the life of the people, when we see that everyone is on track, then of course we should go after them.

BEST PRACTICES IN PEACEBUILDING

PEACEMAKING STRATEGY	ACTIVITY <i>What?</i>	DESCRIPTION <i>How?</i>	PURPOSE <i>Why?</i>
Community assessment	Identify affected women and girls	As part of the Lutheran Church of Liberia – Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program (LCL-THRP), talk with women and girls in communities where violence occurred.	To assess the level of violence and human rights abuses that occurred in the community.
	Peace Hut Talks	With other women, go into communities and discuss issues the people see as a threat to peace.	To identify what people in different communities perceive as the greatest threats to peace so they can in turn be addressed in an effort to maintain peace and prevent violent conflict.
Psycho-social services	Trauma healing workshops	The LCL-THRP gives these workshops for women in different urban and rural communities.	To provide the space for women to share their traumatic stories. To assist them in identifying and utilizing coping mechanisms.
Cultural sensitivity	Select entry points	The LCL-THRP selects highly respected individuals in local communities as entry points for engaging those communities in peacebuilding.	To get access to and gain the trust of local people.

PEACEMAKING STRATEGY	ACTIVITY <i>What?</i>	DESCRIPTION <i>How?</i>	PURPOSE <i>Why?</i>
		<p>insights with the Ministry of Gender.</p> <p>Peace Outreach Program: The Liberian Women Mass Action for Peace went into communities throughout the country and talked to the people about peace. They focused on public spaces such as shopping malls, squares, markets, football fields and the beach.</p>	To spread their message of peace and mobilize more people for an extensive constituency for peace.
Collective action	Sit-ins and peaceful demonstrations	<p>In 2003 the Liberian Women Mass Action for Peace organized sit-ins on a daily basis along a major highway in Monrovia. They also marched through the main streets of the capital.</p> <p>Peace Train: In 2007 a group of Liberian women went to Sierra Leone and held a campaign for violence-free elections in that country. They marched through the streets singing peace songs and holding handmade signs. They went to the headquarters of the political parties and submitted position statements.</p>	<p>To protest against violence and let the voices of the women be heard. The women enhanced their visibility and impact by using strategic places.</p> <p>To avoid violence breaking out during the elections, which could in turn destabilize neighboring Liberia. To share their experience of impacting the peace process, and ways that it could be replicated in Sierra Leone.</p>
	Prayer night vigil	Women gathered at a particular church for a nightly thanksgiving service of singing, dancing and praying.	To show appreciation to God, plead for peace and ask for forgiveness.

PEACEMAKING STRATEGY	ACTIVITY <i>What?</i>	DESCRIPTION <i>How?</i>	PURPOSE <i>Why?</i>
Internal alliance and consensus building	SWOT (Success, Witnesses, Opportunities, Threats)	Leaders from each group in the Liberian Women Mass Action for Peace met as an organizing body to discuss past activities and plan the next ones.	To see the mistakes and successes and plan the way forward. To foster cooperation between different groups within the organization (e.g., Muslims and Christians)
	Appoint a spokesperson	A spokesperson was appointed to serve as the public representative of the organization to the media. She would give position statements, press conferences and interviews.	To promote their work and raise awareness among larger groups. To speak with one voice.
	Teambuilding	The women did home visits to members who had been absent. The women danced together, often in a large circle where each would dance in turn.	To find out about their well-being and why they had not been involved. For each group member to feel that her presence and role were important to the group and that they are equal regardless of educational background.
Interreligious cooperation	Meetings	A three-day consultative meeting was organized by the CWPI and the LIMWOP, in which both Muslim and Christian women could express their fears and identify common goals. This resulted in a memorandum of understanding that stated they would work together for peace. The Muslim and Christian women held weekly meetings and organized joint social and peacebuilding activities.	To address and assuage existing fears. To stimulate interreligious dialogue and cooperation and thus enhance their impact.

PEACEMAKING STRATEGY	ACTIVITY <i>What?</i>	DESCRIPTION <i>How?</i>	PURPOSE <i>Why?</i>
	Negotiate with warring factions	Women with a certain religious or cultural background approached warlords and fighters who had a similar background.	To be accepted by the different fighting forces and hence to be able to negotiate and influence them.
Disarmament	“Drop the Gun” campaign	The women assisted the United Nations in the disarmament process through individual and group counseling – talking to fighters and encouraging them to hand in their weapons. The women’s branches and local networks in different counties could access areas out of the reach of the United Nations, and then perform traditional ritual cleansing ceremonies when the fighters handed in their guns.	For the implementation of the DDR process. The United Nations was not trusted by the fighters and had little access to the rural villages. The women talked to the fighters as mothers, and were able to use their networks to reach more people.
	Public protests	The group’s protests and sit-ins in public spaces, even after the war, encouraged children and youth to disarm.	To provide a model for the children and youth that there are other ways apart from violence.
Networking	Collaborating with other NGOs or community organizations	<p>The LCL-THRP collaborates with numerous organizations, including WIPNET, through sharing knowledge, documentation and human resources.</p> <p>Write proposals with partnering women’s organizations.</p> <p>The LCL-THRP exchanges knowledge with other groups that do psychosocial work with youth, such as the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association).</p>	To strengthen their organization and connections. To obtain funding and share financial and human resources.

PEACEMAKING STRATEGY	ACTIVITY <i>What?</i>	DESCRIPTION <i>How?</i>	PURPOSE <i>Why?</i>
	Collaborating with the Liberian government	<p>They LCL-THRP holds meetings and exchanges documentation with the psychosocial department of the government.</p> <p>Vaiba has met with President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf to make recommendations and share ideas for moving the country forward.</p> <p>Vaiba meets and cooperates with the Ministry of Gender. For example, the Peace Train in Sierra Leone was supported by the ministry, and the Women and Youth Desk of the LCL-THRP has been officially recognized by the ministry.</p>	<p>To share knowledge.</p> <p>To gain official support on women's issues.</p> <p>To continue to raise the voices of Liberian women so they can be heard in the government.</p>
Capacity building	Training in trauma healing and conflict resolution	With the LCL-THRP, Vaiba gives training-of-trainers workshops, teaching other women about trauma healing and conflict resolution.	To empower more women to serve as counselors and mediators.
	Strengthening community structures	The LCL-THRP uses community-based organizations to do their work, and promotes collaboration between different groups.	To build stronger communities.

PEACEMAKING STRATEGY	ACTIVITY <i>What?</i>	DESCRIPTION <i>How?</i>	PURPOSE <i>Why?</i>
Awareness raising	Parent and child dialogues	Vaiba goes from house to house to discuss family values and the importance of peaceful relationships.	To promote intergenerational communication and respect, in order to reduce societal ills such as domestic violence, teenage pregnancy, and to increase the prospects of girls being educated.
	Addressing domestic and gender-based violence	<p>Marching in the communities to highlight the issue.</p> <p>In June 2010, Vaiba (through the LCL-THRP) organized a one-day campaign to address the issues in a village suffering from increased violence.</p> <p>Addressing the issue in trauma healing workshops.</p> <p>Going from door to door to talk about domestic violence.</p>	To raise community awareness and to encourage dialogue around the issue, in order for each family and community member to see others as equals.
	The Ship of Liberia	When there were reports of violence during the second round of the 2005 elections, the LCL-THRP moved into communities to give the Ship of Liberia workshop. For three days, they compared the good and bad things from the past and the present, and how those would inform the future.	To reduce violence during the elections, and to stimulate thinking on the direction Liberia was heading.
Advocacy	Sending delegations	Delegations of women visited the different warring factions in advance of the peace talks in Accra, Ghana. They continued sending women during the talks.	To pressure the warring factions to go to the peace table, and to insist that they stay until an agreement was reached.

PEACEMAKING STRATEGY	ACTIVITY <i>What?</i>	DESCRIPTION <i>How?</i>	PURPOSE <i>Why?</i>
Women's empowerment	Civic education for women on how to register and vote	Giving lectures in the communities on their right to vote and how to register.	To stimulate political participation of women and to get women into elected positions, thus getting women's voices heard in decision making and implementing U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325.
	Establishing a Women's Desk in the LCL-THRP	Vaiba lobbied relevant staff and held consultative meetings to show the importance of an office focused on women's issues in trauma healing and reconciliation.	For women's issues to be highlighted, and to promote gender equity and the implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325.

FURTHER READING –
LIBERIA

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BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER – **SARA KOENDERS**



Photo credit: Michelle Zousmer

Sara Koenders holds a B.Sc. in cultural anthropology and an M.A. in conflict studies and human rights, both from Utrecht University in the Netherlands. As a student, she has written extensively about social inequalities and the human and political dimensions of violence, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Born and raised in the Netherlands, her commitment to justice, peace and human rights has been fostered by her personal experiences abroad. After high school Koenders traveled to Peru, where she volunteered in a children's daycare. For her bachelor's thesis she researched local politics and political participation in an indigenous town in post-conflict Guatemala. Her master's research in Brazil focused on the coping strategies of women trying to raise their children in a Rio de Janeiro shantytown marked by violence, fear and insecurity. Back in her home country, Koenders works to raise awareness about life in conflict situations. Her current job as a civic integration consultant has allowed her to work with a diversity of people from all over the world.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. Through education, research and peacemaking activities, the IPJ offers programs that advance scholarship and practice in conflict resolution and human rights. The institute, a unit of the University of San Diego's Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, draws on Catholic social teaching that sees peace as inseparable from justice and acts to prevent and resolve conflicts that threaten local, national and international peace.

The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the University of San Diego to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice. Programming began in early 2001 and the building was dedicated in December 2001 with a conference, "Peacemaking with Justice: Policy for the 21st Century."

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In Nepal, for example, for nearly a decade the IPJ has been working with Nepali groups to support inclusiveness and dialogue in the transition from armed conflict and monarchy to peace and multiparty democracy. In its West African Human Rights Training Initiative, the institute partners with local human rights groups to strengthen their ability to pressure government for reform and accountability.

In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute has several ongoing programs. The Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series is a forum for high-level national and international leaders and policymakers to share their knowledge and perspective on issues related to peace and justice.

WorldLink, a year-round educational program for middle school and high school students from San Diego and Baja California, connects youth to global affairs.

Community outreach includes speakers, films, art and opportunities for discussion between community members, academics and practitioners on issues of peace and social justice, as well as dialogue with national and international leaders in government, nongovernmental organizations and the military.

In addition to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies includes the Trans-Border Institute, which promotes border-related scholarship and an active role for the university in the cross-border community, and a master's program in Peace and Justice Studies to train future leaders in the field.

UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

Chartered in 1949, the University of San Diego (USD) is a Roman Catholic institution of higher learning located on 180 acres overlooking San Diego's Mission Bay. The University of San Diego is committed to promoting academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse community and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical and compassionate service.

The university is steadfast in its dedication to the examination of the Catholic tradition as the basis of a continuing search for meaning in contemporary life. Global peace and development and the application of ethics and values are examined through campus centers and institutes such as the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Values Institute, the Trans-Border Institute, the Center for Public Interest Law, the Institute for Law and Philosophy and the International Center for Character Education. Furthermore, through special campus events such as the Social Issues Conference, the James Bond Stockdale Leadership and Ethics Symposium and the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series, we invite the community to join us in further exploration of these values.

The USD campus, considered one of the most architecturally unique in the nation, is known as Alcalá Park. Like the city of San Diego, the campus takes its name from San Diego de Alcalá, a Franciscan brother who served as the infirmarian at Alcalá de Henares, a monastery near Madrid, Spain. The Spanish Renaissance architecture that characterizes the five-century-old University of Alcalá serves as the inspiration for the buildings on the USD campus. The architecture was intended by the founders, Bishop Charles Francis Buddy and Mother Rosalie Hill, to enhance the search for truth through beauty and harmony. Recent additions, such as the state-of-the-art Donald P. Shiley Center for Science and Technology and the new School of Leadership and Education Sciences building carry on that tradition.

A member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa, USD is ranked among the nation's top 100 universities. The university offers its 7,500 undergraduate, graduate and law students rigorous academic programs in more than 60 fields of study through six academic divisions, including the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Business Administration, Leadership and Education Sciences, Law, and Nursing and Health Science. The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies opened in Fall 2007.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AFL	Armed Forces of Liberia
ATU	Anti-Terrorist Unit
CWPI	Christian Women Peace Initiative
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INPFL	Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia
IPJ	Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
LCL-THRP	Lutheran Church in Liberia – Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program
LCS	Liberian Council of State
LPC	Liberian Peace Council
LIMWOP	Liberian Muslim Women for Peace
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
MODEL	Movement for Democracy in Liberia
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
PRC	People’s Redemption Council
SLM	Student Liberation Movement
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
ULIMO	United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy
ULIMO-J	United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy – Johnson faction
ULIMO-K	United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy – Kromah faction
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNMIL	United Nations Mission in Liberia
UNOMIL	United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia
USD	University of San Diego
WAEC	West African Examination Council
WIPNET	Women in Peacebuilding Network
WIPSEN	Women Peace and Security Network Africa
YMCA	Young Men’s Christian Association

ENDNOTES

¹ A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Hall*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

² See the Further Reading section for sources used for the Conflict History and Integrated Timeline.

³ In 1926 Liberia signed a 99-year lease agreement with the U.S. multinational Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. The world’s largest rubber plantation was opened and rubber production became the backbone of the Liberian economy.

⁴ West African Examination Council, the organization that is in charge of the central exam.

⁵ In 2005, after the election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as the first female president in an African country, Vaiba heard that Abu kept telling her friends “I want to see Kebeh!” She tried to reach him, and when she finally got a hold of him, he said, “I know who you voted for.” “Who?” Vaiba replied. “I know you voted for Ellen, because you are strong just like her.”

⁶ A localized conflict with roots in the historically established, unequal power relations between the Mandingos and the Lomas, the latter of who are in control of land rights and assigned with first-come status. The Mandingos, gaining economic power through their trade networks, were often able to escape this political subordination. But in the delicate balance between cooperation and conflicting claims of land rights and citizenship, the scales have repeatedly tipped to violence. During the civil wars between 1989 and 2003, local tensions such as those in Lofa were “nationalized,” as warring factions tapped into existing sentiments. (See Boås, Morten (2009), “New” Nationalism and Autochthony – Tales of Origin as Political Cleavage, in *Africa Spectrum*, 44, 1, 19-38. kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/108867/...FEBB.../en/2.pdf)

⁷ According to Amnesty International, by the end of 2002 there were reportedly over 300,000 internally displaced persons, of whom an estimated 130,000 lived in established camps. Many women from the displaced camps close to Monrovia were transported to and from the airfield on a daily basis to join the sit-in action.

⁸ To have sex with.

⁹ U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 recognizes the important role of women in all aspects of peacebuilding, and calls for their active and equal participation in all phases of peace processes. For the full text of the resolution, please see www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf.