

Liberian Women and Political Resistance of War:  
Family Influences and Collective Organizing

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## Abstract

Fatigued and enraged by 14 years of political conflict rife with violence targeting women and children, Liberian women formed a transnational network of peace activists that ended civil war in their home in 2003. Numerous grassroots organizations, market women, legal aid workers, and women's rights advocates developed spaces to address multilevel consequences from the war, both leading to and after the peace movement. This ethnographic case study documents the narratives of three activists who engaged in grassroots or formal political spaces that ensured and contributed to peacebuilding in Liberia. I also consulted a key informant who remained in Liberia throughout the conflict and observed the evolution of women's collective efforts towards sociopolitical change during and after the war.

Adding to the literature on movements led by women of African descent in response to political conflict, findings from this study attend to the role of family in activists' stories of war and resistance. The study reveals that key relationships, multigenerational principles embraced, war-related impacts on their broader family systems, formal and informal supports, as well as family-level social and economic circumstances were salient in their reports. This dissertation also details the development processes, collective identities, and strategies employed in the mass action that coalesced for peace in 2003, while disentangling the mass movement into three distinctive spaces and sites of resistance. Results from this study increase specificity and attention to Liberian women's collective labor while radically committing to peace at the nation-state level by resisting the social order imposed by war, division, and Liberia's gendered political arenas. The study has implications on continued attention to the role of families

in social change, as well as strategies to resist political structures that perpetuate conflict and violence against women and children in similar contexts around the world.

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**Chapter 1:**

**Introduction**

## Introduction

The first and second Liberian civil wars lasted from December 1989 until April 2003 and claimed approximately 250,000 lives (Abramowitz, 2010). In the small nation of approximately three million people at the time, a population smaller than the size of present-day Los Angeles, widespread murder, rape, dismemberment, child soldiering, and other atrocities swept the country. Liberia rapidly became known as a “failed state” (Abramowitz) as tensions ran rampant with extensively delayed support from the international community.

Women in Liberia were subjected to gender-based violence and severe inhumanities during the war (Liebling-Kalifani, 2011), which preceded the uprising of hundreds who employed collective strengths, knowledge, resources, and fortitude to dismantle the violent political structure that had operated in Liberia. This coalition, eventually named *The Women of Liberian Mass Action for Peace* applied pressure on political leaders to attend the 2003 peace conference in Accra, then expanded the collective to the Ghana in order to strategically amplify resistance and ensure that warring parties and political leaders signed a final peace accord. After signage, they leveraged momentum by leading disarmament strategies, often acting as mediators between rebel factions (Fuest, 2009), and women’s groups continue to address persisting issues such as rape and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV; Medie, 2013).

The mass action for peace coalition is just one example of a collective action group developed by Liberian women to respond to atrocities and consequences of the war. In fact, the larger coalition that ultimately ended the conflict grew out of existing collectives such as the Liberian Women’s Initiative (LWI) and the Liberian Indigenous

Women's Group (M. Washington, personal communication, October 4 2018). A number of women's organizations emerged during the conflict for a range of purposes, including to increase women's representation in political press, offer skills training, support trauma healing, and to advance reconstruction efforts; that number has increased since 2003 (Fuest, 2009). As leaders and members of these organizations, women collaborated across ethnic and religious line, defying the very tensions that fueled and sustained the war for 14 years. As demonstrated by the growth of women's coalitions at the time, and the accumulation of tactics that led to larger results, success did not lie in one event, but rather within strategic processes of collaboration and resistance.

This study is motivated by their collective achievement of revolution in Liberia in 2003, narrow representation of their labor, and the dearth of studies raising their personal experiences, knowledges, and lived realities at the time. The current study investigated and documented the narratives of three peace activists and advocates who engaged in efforts in grassroots and formal political spaces that protested, marched, rallied, staged strikes, and organized in numerous other ways that successfully ended the political conflict in 2003. This study is intended to resist historical tendencies that dismiss the efforts and accounts of women who remarkably lead or contribute to social and political change, as observed in official accounts of many other movements in Africa and around the world (Disney & Gbowee, 2009).

### **Background and Historical Context of Liberia**

The Republic of Liberia derives its name from the Latin root "free" (*Liber*) and the Celtic suffix "country" (*ia*), which combine and translate to mean "land of the free." The history of Liberia is embedded in its name and directly references the country's

reputation in the historical period surrounding its establishment as a nation-state in 1847. Less than three decades prior, the relationship between Liberia and the United States (U.S.) was cemented in Liberia's social, political, and economic foundations.

Liberia was the first nation where formerly enslaved persons returned to Africa in the 1820's (Dunn-Marcos, Kollahlon, Ngovo, & Russ, 2005; Stratis Health, 2012). The movement to repatriate freed slaves was initiated by the American Colonization Society (ACS), antislavery activists, Black nationalists, Southern slave plantation owners, and former U.S. President James Monroe (Dunn-Marcos et al.; Stratis Health). Comprising three percent of the Liberian population at the time, those who were formerly enslaved became known as Americo-Liberians. Americo-Liberian leaders ruled the Liberian government and economy from its establishment in 1847 until military leader President Samuel K. Doe overthrew the government in 1980 and rallied a campaign promoting indigenous leadership (Dunn-Marcos et al.; Stratis Health). As mentioned, Doe controlled the government until 1989 when Charles Taylor staged militarized resistance and demolition Doe's government, which ultimately commenced the war (Galea et al., 2010; Stepakoff et al., 2006; Swiss et al., 1998). Acquisition and control of natural resources such as gold, timber, rubber, and cocoa influenced both the onset and intensity of the 14-year conflict as nearly half a dozen factions fought to overtake the government in part by gaining control of these resources (Lekskes, van Hooren, & de Beus, 2007; Ross, 2004). Sociocultural inequalities stemming back to the nineteenth century governmental and economic control were perpetuated for more than a century and ethnic tensions eventually fueled what would result in 14 years of violent political conflict (Dunn-Marcos et al.).

**Chapter 2:**  
**Literature Review**

## **The Liberian Civil War**

The conflict in Liberia, formally regarded as the First and Second Liberian Civil Wars, began on December 24, 1989. Prior to its start, however, the country had experienced political violence incited by government officials in a quest for national power and leadership. William Tolbert, who was elected President of Liberia in 1971, was a member of the True Whig Party and descendent of an affluent and influential Americo-Liberian family. In 1980, indigenous and military leader Samuel K. Doe staged a coup to overthrow Tolbert and his administration. Tolbert was executed in his home on April 12, 1980 and 27 members of the True Whig party and affiliates were also killed. Doe and his party took control of the government for the next 10 years, until he too was overthrown. December 24, 1989 marks the day when approximately 150 armed soldiers crossed the border from Côte d'Ivoire (the Ivory Coast) to Nimba County, Liberia, staging a coup on orders from rebel leader Charles Ghankay Taylor (Gberie, 2005).

Taylor took power of the government in 1997 following a temporary a cessation of conflict in 1996 (Momodu, 2017). Fighting erupted again in 1999 when the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) launched a military campaign led by Sekou Conneh, after having been involved in the first civil war against Doe's former government and Taylor's National Patriotic Front ([NPFL], Momodu). The war resulted in approximately 250,000 casualties (Abramowitz, 2010; Atwood et al., 2011; Badger, 2008; Borba et al., 2016; Medeiros, 2007). Liberia rapidly became known as a "failed state" as the country was swept with mass murders, rape, sexual assault, dismemberment, child soldiering, abduction, forced labor, and many other forms of torture (Abramowitz; Liebling-Kalifani et al., 2011). As a result of the war, substantial

rates of substance abuse, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social dysfunction, low educational attainment, malnutrition, suicidal ideation, and serious physical injuries have been recorded in post-conflict Liberia (Johnson et al., 2008; Leskes, van Hooren, & de Beus, 2007; Stepakoff et al., 2006).

Widespread violence coupled with demolition of public infrastructures (e.g., health systems, education systems, government agencies, agricultural production) forced more than one million Liberians out of the country as a means to seek safety and stability (Galea et al., 2010; Leskes, van Hooren, & de Beus, 2007; Stepakoff et al., 2006; Stratis Health, 2012; Venters et al., 2010). The conflict eventually ended in 2003, followed by the country's first democratic election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in 2005. Sirleaf was the first woman elected as Head of State in an African nation, however her legacy was preceded by that of Ruth Sando Fahnbulleh Perry. In 1997, Perry was appointed as the Chairperson of the interim government and led the nation in the nine-month period between the end of the first war and the election later in the year (Bropleh, 2017).

### **Gender and War**

As the African Centre for Constructive Resolution of Disrupts (ACCORD) published in their 2007 report on women in conflict, sexual discrimination is commonly amplified in conflict as “sexual discrimination [becomes] embedded in the overall system of exploitation” (p. 17). How gendered ideologies operate within Liberian cultural systems, institutions, and practices are critical to the current study. Like many conflict settings around the world, gender-based violence (GBV) was a significant feature of violence that started in Nimba County and spread throughout the country.

GBV is commonly used as a weapon of war, as women have historically been targeted and continue to endure extreme gender-based human rights violations such as rape and sexual slavery during war (Manjoo & McRaith, 2011). GBV sustained long-term effects in the lives of Liberian women post-conflict and continues to affect the nation today (Liebling- Kalifani et al., 2011; United Nations Women, 2018). As the two most common forms of GBV, rape is often brutally violent (e.g., gang rape, rape with foreign objects such as knives and guns), and sexual assault may include but is not limited to forced nudity, strip searches, and other publically violent acts (Manjoo & McRaith). Other forms of GBV might include sex trafficking, kidnapping and forced relocation to soldier camps, and forced marriages (Manjoo & McRaith).

In Liberia, GBV such as rape and domestic violence has increased since the end of the civil war, and coerced prostitution and sex trafficking have also been widespread (Liebling-Kalifani et al.). Efforts to respond to GBV through a national action plan launched in 2006 included expanding the definition of rape and increasing the age of consent to 18 years of age, however these efforts are undermined by critical issues such as stigma, fear of rejection, and limited confidence in the justice system, which ultimately hinders reporting (Allen & Devitt, 2012; Liebling-Kalifani et al.). These fears were validated by post-conflict social conditions wherein many women and children were forced to live on the streets and deemed unable to marry as a result of stigma and rejection from their communities (Liebling-Kalifani et al.). Summarized by Liebling-Kalifani and colleagues (2011) “often widowed or abandoned, women were left to shoulder overwhelming responsibilities with little help to ease the burden. They had full responsibility for their children, some having been born as a result of rape during the

conflict” (p. 8). This begins to illustrate the multi-level complexities of GBV and its long-term effects after conflict.

**Gender-based violence perpetuated.** Cultural beliefs surrounding gender do not only fuel GBV during conflict, but also perpetuate violence in families after war (Manjoo & McRaith, 2011). In Liberia, traditional and deeply rooted gender ideals, norms, and practices maintain the social dominance of men and fuel issues such as intimate partner violence (IPV) in families (Allen & Devitt, 2012; Flood & Pease, 2009; Zannettino, 2012). Gendered ideals operate within and between micro- and macro-level institutions, and have negatively affected women’s access to institutional support to cope with violence (Manjoo & McRaith, 2011). To illustrate, ninety-six percent of participants in Allen and Devitt’s (2012) study on IPV in Liberia believed that men had more power than women, and their reflections corroborated the IPV literature by echoing that violence against women within families is fueled by a significant lack of resources and social support for women in financial and legal capacities. The intersection of class and education are also notable in context, as Liberian families with higher socioeconomic statuses – including higher levels of educational attainment – demonstrate less stringent beliefs and practices hinged on gender identity. However, as is common with GBV in both public and private domains, the exact prevalence rates of IPV, sexual violence, and other acts of violence is difficult to confirm given societal lack of support for survivors, and thus confirms IPV as a major concern for Liberian women regardless of class, education, social status, and other social locations alike. As demonstrated, war violence and its effects are relational and systemic, which necessitates its consideration through a systems-based lens. The family system is especially central to the current research.

## **Families and War**

Family systems are comprised of and influenced by the intricately connected emotional and behavioral systems of its members, and conversely, the functioning of individual members influences the dynamics of the entire system (The Bowen Center, 2018). A family-level inquiry is contextually and culturally important as family and kinship represent the most basic structures of social organization in Liberia (Dunn-Marcos, Kollahlon, Ngovo, & Russ, 2005). Given the focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge that exposure to traumatic stress can negatively affect family systems, even if traumatic events are only experienced by one member of the system, as traumatic stress symptoms may interfere with healthy interactions and relationships (McIlwaine & O'Sullivan, 2015; Walsh, 2007). Also notable, families play a central role in coping with traumatic stress (McIlwaine & O'Sullivan; Walsh).

Tracing back to the conflict, it is difficult to separate family systems from the war, as violence was often targeted toward families as units or implicated family life in significant ways. For example, family members were often forced to watch one another endure extreme forms of violence; from physical torture (e.g, mutilation, skin carving, slaughtering pregnant women) to murder, rape, and burying family members alive (Lekskes, van Hooren, & de Beus, 2007; Stepakoff et al.). Survivors have disclosed feeling tortured by the kidnapping of their children. Personal testimonies from Manjoo & McRaith's (2011) study illustrate the suffering of parents who had not heard from their daughters since they were kidnapped by military forces during the war. The concept of family is also complicated within the testimonies of survivors, frequently adolescent

girls, who were abducted and forced to marry and act as sexual and domestic slaves for soldiers. Examples of the relational impacts of the war are unending.

Family structures were also impacted by the conflict, as seen by a considerable increase in female headed households resulting from family disruption and widespread execution of men (Dunn-Marcos, Kolllehlon, Ngovo, & Russ, 2005; Lekskes, van Hooren, & de Beus, 2007). Women-headed households were particularly vulnerable to issues such as poverty, sexual abuse, and other forms of violence post-conflict (Liebling-Kalifani et al., 2011). This begins to highlight the complex relationship between violence, gender, and family life in societies affected by war. For example, in Manjoo & McRaith's (2011) analysis of GBV in conflict and post-conflict settings, they posit that reparations for women survivors of violence is often scarce, and "in many African countries, for example, a lack of acknowledgment of women as heads of households has led to discrimination in resource allocation and inheritance laws" (p. 17). Cultural values around gender implicate war-related crimes, but the intersection of gender and family life also deserves attention given the impacts of related cultural ideals on families before, during, and after political conflicts.

### **Gender and Social Movements**

Kuumba's (2001) analysis of gender and social movements offers relevant considerations for the current study. A gendered analysis of social movements evaluates the social construction of gender as it operates in structures such as political systems and economies, as well as the impact of these systems on individual lives. According to Kuumba, common characteristics of social movements that differ from other types of collective action include a form of structure and organization, a conscious link between

social grievances and action-based rationale, use of non-institutionalized strategies, and generally long-term duration. The range of activist strategies employed by Liberian women is conceptualized herein as types of collective actions mirroring those of social movements. Recognizing that some collectives seek to advance campaigns surrounding specific changes within existing structures, while others employ tactics to transform structures and systems entirely (e.g., convening daily protests to demand signage of a peace agreement), this study employs a broadened scope of what constitutes a movement. As demonstrated by the growth of women's coalitions at the time, and the accumulation of tactics that led to larger results, success did not lie in one event, but rather within strategic processes of collaboration and resistance.

### **Women of African Descent, Political Organizing, and Resistance**

Women of African descent in the diaspora have led freedom struggles and liberation movements around the world, and for many generations have built a 'herstory' rooted in multiple forms of resistance against systems of injustice and violence (Kuumba, 2006). Amplifying the voices, actions and legacies of Black women activists and freedom fighters who have, and continue to resist violence and systemic oppression, is imperative to the literature on social movements. In a study examining the leadership and contributions of Afro-Brazilian women in resistance of housing and land rights issues in Salvador, Perry (2016) asserted, "rarely are black women, especially poor black women, considered leaders of social movements, much less political theorists" (p. 94). This study chiefly centers perspectives and knowledge of political work, resistance efforts, social contributions, and legacies of women activists of African descent. Though this

dissertation cannot do justice to the level of explication deserved, this section will highlight just a few examples from the U.S. and various African countries.

**Examples of political resistance in the U.S.** Black feminist politics is critically tied to Black liberation movements in the U.S. in the 1960's and 1970's, including the Civil Rights, Black Panthers, and Black Nationalism movements (The Combahee River Collective, 1977). The Combahee River Collective was founded and established by Black lesbian feminists with a mission to address and dismantle institutions and engines that perpetuate racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist oppressions. The collective critically highlighted the gaps of mainstream feminism centered in white women's experiences, as well as sexist and homophobic undertones in the civil rights movement as not only exclusive, but substantially inadequate in representing and fighting for the wholeness of their existence and lives as Black lesbian women. The impact of their political work extends to this day, and the Combahee River Collective Statement represents a key collective document in the history of contemporary Black feminism.

In recent history, Black women have organized, founded, and been the executors of social and economic movements that advanced resistance against state-sanctioned violence, racism and Anti-Blackness, and the marginalization of other oppressed groups. Black women's resistance is inherently political, in both manners embraced and those projected (e.g., incarceration of freedom fighters and liberators labelled as "terrorists"; e.g., Angela Davis, Assata Shakur). For instance, in the last decade we have seen and felt, in wide scale, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the "Me Too" movements. After the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013 and the acquittal of his killer, organizers Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometic ushered in a "new era

of Black protest” and co-founded BLM. The movement for black lives is politically and ideologically framed as an intervention to dismantle systems that have historically and perpetually targeted violence, death, and destruction against Black bodies, lives, communities, and opportunities. Led by organizer and activist Tarana Burke, the “Me Too” campaign was founded in 2006 to address the vital need for culturally-informed spaces, conversations, curriculum, and resources for survivors of sexual violence, particularly among Black women and girls, women of color, and low-income survivors (Me Too, 2018). The “Me Too” platform and movement that exists today builds on decades of work by Burke and other long-time organizers prior to its surge in the media in 2018 (Jaffe, 2018).

**Examples of political organizing on the continent.** Black women in Africa have also led revolutions and radically altered social, political, and economic dimensions of societies across the continent. Tripp, Casimiro, Kwesiga, and Mungwa (2009) survey movements organized by women in their book *African Women’s Movements: Transforming Political Landscapes* and expands our understanding of gender, politics, and women as revolutionaries in Africa. I will provide brief examples of movements organized and led by women in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Burundi.

The Aba Women’s War of 1929 was led by women in the Calabar and Owerri provinces of Southeastern Nigeria as an anti-colonial revolt against exploitive policies and excessive powers imposed by British colonial administrators and warrant chiefs (Anoba, 2018). Igbo women protested government plans to impose a tax on market women who supplied food to towns in Southeast Nigeria, and they also opposed the system of direct rule implemented by British colonial administrators to control the

election of warring chiefs, which transformed the position into one that became increasingly oppressive over time (Evans, 2009). Over a two-month period, more than 25,000 women protested in multiple towns, and more than 100 women were either killed or wounded by Colonial police troops during this uprising, which led colonial administrators to suspend the tax plans on market women and redistribute the power of warrant chiefs (Evans).

In Sierra Leone, women peace activists extensively mobilized across class and ethnic locations to facilitate an end to civil war, which lasted in the country from 1991 to 2002. The mass collective in Sierra Leone engaged a range of resistance strategies, including hosting rallies, providing public electoral education and trainings, and pressuring the military government to hold democratic elections (Mama & Ozakawa-Rey, 2012). Women converged from prominent groups such as the Sierra Leone Women's Forum, Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), and the Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace and significantly influenced negotiations that led to the signing of the Lomé Peace Accord in 1999, though peace was officially declared three years later (Mama & Okazawa-Rey).

Women in Burundi established coalitions during more than a decade of civil war and in 1998, intervened in the national peace process (African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes [ACCORD], 2007). They convened from different ethnic backgrounds and engaged the diaspora in order to develop a plan for reconstruction and reconciliation (Njoku, 2014). When initial plans for the Arusha peace process excluded women and civil society organizations, women mobilized internally and also attaining support from the United Nations Development Fund for Women to demand participation

in the negotiations that eventually concluded the war in 2005 (ACCORD). As demonstrated in the brief examples of movements in the U.S., Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Burundi, women of African descent have significantly transformed systems of violence and oppression in contexts in the diaspora.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

### **Intersectional Feminism**

Intersectionality is a theoretical, epistemological, and political concept that emerged from black feminist thought (Crenshaw, 1993). The framework emerged in criticism of social politics that ignore or conflate differences in lived realities tied to interconnected systems that perpetuate racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other social dimensions of the human experience. Crenshaw's critique developed in response to violence against Black women and women of color, and specifically demonstrated the ways in which feminist and antiracist practices ignore the intersecting roles of racism and sexism in women of color's experiences. Intersectionality has sustained significant presence in the academy since it was introduced (Falcon & Nash, 2015). While recognizing the important relationship between dimensions of our social locations (e.g., race, gender, class, education, language), an intersectional framework also acknowledges the ways that social locations situate groups differently within political, economic, and social structures (Crenshaw). This perspective holds relevance to this research, which explored how dimensions of Liberian women's social locations and their structural locations (e.g., access to political knowledge, proximity to economic resources) cooperated to shape their commitments and experiences during and after the war.

### **Transnational Feminism**

Transnational feminism also grew out of critical orientations; namely third-world and women of color feminisms, and asserts that “models of sisterhood that presume white, middle-class feminist subject located in the Global North ignore the meaningful differences between women both locally and globally...” (Nadkarni, 2017, par. 1). A unique focus of transnational feminism is its critique of the nation-state and violence perpetuated in the name of the nation-state, and thus it is also interested in theories and movements that advocate for women’s justice globally (Tripp, 2006). Transnational feminism recognizes the ways that women in the Global South have transformed social, political, and economic forces and ultimately affected the policies of international and transnational organizations such as the United Nations ([UN]; Brenner, 2003; Tripp). Transnational feminism appreciates the broader significance of women’s contributions to global change. The narratives sought in this study are not merely a means to expand existing depictions of the Liberian war and women’s resistance but have the capacity to inform collective action strategies toward revolutionary social-political changes in other contexts with similar social systems and structures.

### **Life Course Perspective**

A life course perspective (LCP) on human development and family science recognizes the family as a microsocial group within macro-level social and historical contexts. According to Bengtson and Allen (1993):

The Life Course Perspective involves a contextual, processual, and dynamic approach to the study of change in the lives of individual family members over time, and of families as social units as they change over historical periods. It thus involves both the micro- and macrosocial levels of analysis.

LCP emphasizes the importance of context, time, process, and meaning in understanding human development over time, and “provides a framework for studying phenomena at the nexus of social pathways, developmental trajectories, and social change” (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003, p. 10). Four basic assumptions of the life course perspective (LCP) apply here in recognition that historical time and place, human agency, timing in lives, and interdependent lives shape human development. These tenets align with and undergird the current study. Chovanec & Benitez (2008) posit that social movements are situated within unique histories, times, and places. Horn (2013) reported in an overview of gender and social movements that:

Time is a critical factor in understanding social movements. Movements may envisage their change and commitment as taking place over a lifetime, or over generations, until the desired changes happen. Movement participation itself can develop over generations, as the children of movement activists and young people born into activist communities often go on to be active themselves in the same movements or in building new movements: ‘There is involvement from children on up. (p. 19).

The latter part of the quote begins to illuminate the relevance of linked lives in narratives of activism and family life, which reflects one of the primary goals of this study. Passy and Giugni (1996) revealed that both formal and informal networks facilitate differential participation in social movements, which again, demonstrates how the role of linked lives in this study topic. This study will also unearth how timing in activists’ lives and their personal agency emerged in proximal and collective spaces during and after the war.

## Researcher Positionality

“Particularly in qualitative research, the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions and biases at the outset of the study. The investigator’s contribution to the research setting can be useful and positive rather than detrimental” (Creswell, 2014, p. 256). Both our emic or “insider” positions, and etic “outsider” perspectives related to research topics at hand are important to acknowledge (Olive, 2014). I align with paradigms that call for researchers to attend to our values, experiences, emic, and etic positions and how our “self of researcher” intimately shapes *what, when, where, and how* we examine phenomena. To this point, my goal is to articulate the ways that my personal background, professional interests, and doctoral research experience shape the current study.

### Personal and Family Background

I propose this dissertation research project from a place of gratitude; with overwhelming respect for the sacrifices made by the generation of women before me. My gratitude stems from an intimately personal space yet transcends to inform my motivations in broader ways. I was born during the early phase of the conflict as the only child to an extremely hard-working single mother. While exposure to political conflict, multiple relocations, and family separation are inherent parts of my personal story, sacrifice and courage are also packed within conscious recollections of this story.

When the second part of the war intensified in the mid 1990’s, my mother, one aunt, and I fled to Côte d’Ivoire. We waited for three years as the conflict ebbed and flowed amidst more than a dozen failed peace agreements, but signs of moving back to Liberia continued to grow slim. Limited opportunities for employment complicated life in

Côte d'Ivoire, leading to an application for my resettlement to the U.S. Within a year of the application, I found myself transitioning to life in Minnesota with my father, as my mother and most critical source of support remained in Côte d'Ivoire and progressed her own attempts to leave. To this day, I can vividly envision my mother's best effort to crack a smile as we unlocked hands at the airport. I can feel the painful exchange of not knowing if or when we would see each other again.

I illustrate this experience in brief to provide context for my *why*. I am continuously reminded of the immense sacrifices made by Liberian women during the war. Whether in private or public domains, these forcibly imposed sacrifices have shaped a generation from individual to societal levels in ways that transcend national borders. My motivation is to celebrate Liberian women, and to do so through this study by seeking and honoring their under-acknowledged histories.

### **Professional Interests**

My professional interests and values are incorporated throughout aspects of this study. To begin, I align with a critical postmodern paradigm and believe that dominant social narratives are based on experiences and knowledges rooted in systemic power and privilege. Epistemologically, I believe that multiple truths can co-exist and I value subjectivity in experiences and interpretations of experiences. My beliefs about what constitutes "truth" and "knowing" shape the research objective, specific aims, proposed study design, collection methods, analytic considerations, and plans for writing and representing the findings.

**Critical feminism in practice.** Critical feminist values guide the overall objective of this research, including privileging the voices of women who endured 14 years of war

and significant human rights violations, then collectively engaged in various acts of resistance to reclaim national peace and rebuild damaged infrastructures resisted exclusion in political spheres in order to rebuild peace and infrastructures in their country. Missing from the literature are in-depth, participant-centered narratives from local women about *how* they resisted political exclusion that historically ignored their voices, *how* collective strategies impacted larger changes, and *how* aspects of their family life acted in relation to their commitments.

Feminist methods supported engaging in this research in a collaborative approach with the women involved to document their lived experiences, while simultaneously engaging in reflexive practices to attend to hierarchical research practices (Oleson, 2017). For example, decisions regarding representation of results were made in consultation with the women in order to privilege their interests around disseminating their narratives. As the principal investigator, resisting processes that could result in exploitation or reinforce social disadvantages of the women involved was a key priority in this study.

**Family systems commitment.** As a family researcher and practitioner, I am committed to systems perspectives in my scholarship and other professional obligations. Attending to families as relational, emotional, and behavioral systems (The Bowen Center, 2018) consistently aligns with the ways that I process and approach issues, including societal issues that appear to operate around rather than within families.

Although not explicated, this belief aligns with a human ecological perspective, which centers the family as a system interdependent with broader natural, human-built, and sociocultural environments (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). My orientation to systems thinking and specific concern with families motivates the centrality of “family” within

the research question. Simultaneous attention to family, gender, and social movements often analyzes the intersections of gender and social movements as they impact family policies and practices (e.g., gay and lesbian rights, abortion rights; e.g., Staggenborg, 1997). My goal of centering the concept of family herein is to advocate that families are relational groups that contribute to broader change by way of daily actions (e.g., emotional and behavioral support, role restructuring, flexibility, family resilience from adversity) that support the efforts of its members(s) in affecting change. I also recognize that aspects of family life that “support” members’ activism may not always be positively regarded, as some family experiences generate internal resistance, and consequently, still motivate collective action toward a social goal. Lastly, I adhere to multiple definitions of families that acknowledge biological, adopted, extended kin, chosen, legally or personally bounded partnerships, and other family configurations.

### **Needs Assessment of the Liberian Community in Minnesota**

Findings from a local Minnesota needs assessment inform this dissertation study. Designed in two phases, the needs assessment examined cultural strengths, individual and relational challenges, and ongoing psychosocial needs of Liberian refugee families in the Twin Cities. Guided by ethnographic and phenomenological principles, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 key informants who were either identified by locals as community leaders, or non-Liberian professionals deeply engaged with families in the community. This was followed by a second phase of facilitating three focus groups (adult women older than 25, adult men older than 25, young adults 18-25) in the community to further assess perceptions of strengths, opportunities, and ongoing needs.

Gender was salient across participants' reflections of resettlement experiences.

Liberian community members reported that a substantial number of women resettled alone with their children, and that once they arrived, many exhibited extremely hard working and industrious behaviors in order to adjust, despite experiencing loss of educational and employment status and being forced into numerous – sometimes three or four – low-paying jobs. These women occupied critical roles in their family, work, and community lives before, during, and after the war, and as reported, continued to work for the survival of their families in the U.S. and in Liberia. Despite their sacrifices across decades and national borders, a dearth of empirical research has explored in-depth, participant-centered narratives of Liberian women's lived experiences, and no studies to date capture the experiences of those who were politically engaged at the critical intersections of their gender identity, family life, and activism. This dissertation research study unearth these nuances and privileges the untold histories of some of the most under-recognized change agents in modern history. Lessons learned from their narratives may also inform other collective action strategies led by women seeking social and political justice in similar contexts around the world.

**Chapter 3:**  
**Study Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to examine, through case study research methods, the lived experiences of Liberian women who were engaged in collective political resistance efforts to end the Liberian civil war in August 2003. The design and methodology of this study will allow for systematic examination of the research questions. However, the goal of this study is not to achieve generalizability in terms of broad applicability of the results, but rather to understand the subjective and under-documented experiences of Liberian women peace activists. The following aims summarize the goals of this study, and also guided the methodology employed: 1) garnering in-depth accounts of war-related and peace-building events from the perspectives of Liberian women who were involved in women-led coalitions during the civil war; 2) understanding and documenting specific strategies that were used by Liberian women to collectively impact social and political change; and 3) examining the intersections of gender, family, and activism in the context of Liberian women's collective resistance of war at the time.

### **Overall Research Design**

This dissertation research study was designed as a qualitative case study guided by principles of ethnography. Qualitative research methods are used to understand informants' lived experiences through their lens, by way of understanding the meanings they attribute to phenomena (Creswell, 2014; Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). Qualitative research produces culturally and contextually specific data and encompasses a diverse range of methodologies to provide insights into issues from the local perspectives of populations of interest (Mack et al., 2005). A qualitative research design was thus ideal to accomplish the goals of the current study. The

methodology selected for this study engages case study methods with principles of critical ethnography to understand the experiences of Liberian women who committed to resistance, from the perspectives of a select number of activists, to gain in-depth insights into areas of focus for the research study.

### **Case Study Methods**

Case studies, a specific qualitative design, are used to develop a detailed analysis of an event, activity, individual or group of individuals, program, or a process (Crowe et al., 2011; Schwandt & Gates, 2018). Case studies rely on multiple methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, document review, and participant observations (Schwandt & Gates). Collecting multiple types of data can shed light on important information that may be missed in traditional interview and observation methods (Creswell, 2014). In the current study, audio recordings from repeated participant interviews and a key informant interview, interview transcripts, notes and memos, review of public and private documents provided by participants, and photos from a site visit comprise the data sources for this case study.

Case studies are commonly used in combination with other methods such as oral histories and ethnographies (Schwandt & Gates). A critical ethnographic approach has been used in combination with case studies to privilege the voices of participants and their interpretations of their experiences, in relation to a variety of other relevant sources of data (e.g., Mahon, 2014; O'Mahony et al., 2012, Madison?). Principles of a critical ethnographic approach specifically informed this case study.

### **Principles of Ethnography**

With a history rooted in cultural anthropology, ethnographies aim to study behavioral patterns, phenomena, and systems of daily life within a specific social group or setting, while centering culture in the analysis (Spradley, 1979). To add, Spradley (1979) posits that the goal of ethnography is to understand lived experiences from a native perspective, and that focus should shift from studying people to learning from people. This case study relies on ethnographic principles throughout the investigation. Processes that were implemented, as they engage ethnographic interviewing and analysis procedures, are described in detail the data analysis section.

**Critical Ethnography Approach.** As a theoretically sound methodology, critical ethnographies are informed by values and methods concerned with emancipation, social justice, and practices that contribute to greater freedom and equity in a particular context (Madison, 2012). By way of inquiry, one of the goals of critical ethnographies is to resist surface representations of experience, disrupt perpetuation of the status quo, and unearth taken-for-granted assumptions about a lived domain. This methodological approach is employed most commonly with studies that engage critical feminist perspectives, critical race analyses, queer theory, or disability inquiries, to name a few examples. Madison (2012) proposes that a critical ethnographer “will use the resources, skills, and privileges available to her to make accessible – to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defense of – the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach” (p. 6). This approach grounds the primary aims of deepening existing portrayals of Liberian women’s activism, and disrupting taken-for-granted assumptions that marginally unearth the roles of gender and family in Liberian women’s peace activism.

## Recruitment and Sampling

In qualitative research, the study design, study objectives, and characteristics of the study population influence recruitment and sampling decisions (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). Recruitment and sampling in the current study was guided by its case study design. Scholarly positions about what constitutes a “case” inherently inform sampling decisions in case study research (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). For example, Swanborn (2010) argues that cases can include one or multiple actors, while Creswell’s (2014) review of qualitative studies approximates four to five participants as a general guide for case study sampling. Acknowledging varying perspectives, while adhering to the current goal of maximizing quality and depth in these interviews, three Liberian women were sought as participants for this study.

Recruitment plans initially focused on targeting women who had resettled after the war and currently lived in the U.S., in addition to the primary criterion of having occupied a role in a political or social coalition that primarily convened to respond to war violence and promote peacebuilding in Liberia. The former criterion was developed for accessibility reasons in order to maximize the opportunity to conduct in-person interviews. However, the recruitment process progressed and led to women who remained in Liberia and Ghana after the war ended, and who were highly qualified to provide rich insights into women-led peacebuilding efforts at the time. This shifted the recruitment plan by engaging activists who did not currently live in the U.S. but would have access to a reliable platform and network in order to conduct virtual interviews.

Snowball sampling strategies, a type of purposive sampling (Mack et al.), were used to identify peace activists who were potentially eligible as participants or could

bridge connections with other activists as willing. These strategies were also used to identify a key informant, a Liberian woman who was not directly involved in mass action spaces but who closely observed the progression of women's collective peacebuilding efforts in Liberia at the time. In all, three participants and one key informant agreed to engage in the current study.

### **Participant Profiles**

**Nohn Rebecca Kidau** was in her early 30's when she joined the fight for peace against the ceaseless violence of the Liberian civil war. Her story begins a few years earlier, however, at the age of 25 as a student and full-time accountant, a mother with two young children, and a wife charged with parenting alone while her husband temporarily traveled to Liberia to take care of his terminally ill uncle. Kidau, nor anyone else, could prepare for what would *not* happen next – her husband's return. It was 1989 and the war had just broken out in Liberia. Violence erupted in Nimba County, where he and his family were from. Simply because of this location, having been a major point of war violence, his life was taken without regard in the midst of other mass executions common during the conflict. Left to take care of her young family at her own tender age, Kidau's life was forever changed by the violent loss of her husband. She references "the emotion of what was happening" and more specifically, the pain she endured as the spark that motivated her to get involved in political resistance. "It was a painful thing. I didn't wish it on anyone, not even my worst enemy", she recalls. She coped with this pain for years as she managed the demands of her personal and family life in the U.S. alone, while also supporting family members seeking refuge away from Liberia. At the start of the second civil war, she ignited the spark she had carried from years of pain and decided that she

“had to do something.” This led to formal plans, individual actions and risks, and networking strategies that would eventually land her in Accra, Ghana as a delegate to the final peace conference that sealed the end of the civil war in Liberia.

**Bernadette Hawa Bropleh** sat in her California home in 2003, restless and consumed by the violence ensuing in Liberia. A single mother with a six-year-old child at the time, she recalls life and work in California with a sense of contentment. “I lived a good life in California. I didn’t do a manual job. I worked in California as a professional. I had a fairly decent life,” she recalls. She had lived in California for 10 years at the point when news stories from CNN, BBC, and personal networks painted stories of a war that she could no longer tolerate from the confines of her life in the U.S. She traded every bit of comfort life offered in California to join the peace movement in Ghana, because the fact of the matter for her was that, true comfort was unattainable the more she received information from people in Liberia and refugee camps about unending turmoil in her country. By July 2003, Bropleh had “closed house” and “left everything behind” to relocate to a one-room place that was “not even a house,” but was near Buduburam, the largest refugee camp for war-affected Liberians and where the majority of women in the mass action coalition resided. Bropleh embraced the sacrifices she made as a necessary part of her contributions, explaining, “then again, it’s about the movement and being there along with the women to make sure that we’re able to portray and project and also speak out with one voice.” That, she did. And there, she stayed. Bropleh remained in Ghana until the end of the peace process, and thereafter moved to Liberia to start a non-profit working to empower young women and groom future activists.

**Una Kumba Thompson** had reached a point of disillusionment about the war and prospects of its cessation when she first learned about attempts to organize a group of women protestors in Ghana. A friend of Thompson's had recently traveled from Liberia with six other women to organize a mass action coalition similar to one that was already formed in Liberia, just in time for the upcoming peace conference in Accra. The seven of them met resistance from the refugee women in Buduburam who were not convinced that they should get involved, for the sake of their protection and uncertainties about who they could trust during a precarious time and in a precarious living situation. After learning about the seven women's intentions and observing her friend's dismay after they had been denied, Thompson quickly contacted her pastor and asked to speak at an upcoming service in order to convene the refugee women after church. She inquired about and validated their perspectives, as well as their reasons for resisting the efforts proposed, acknowledged that she also knew little about the grander plan but felt there was no greater time to resist in mass and asked that they consider joining her to support the movement. Thompson recalls, "I impressed upon them that we should give it a try, and we should put Liberia first." A political scientist by training and an organizer by heart, Thompson mobilized the refugee women, hundreds of whom eventually joined and comprised over 95% of the mass action coalition in Ghana.

**Sundaiway E. Nelson Amegashie** remained in Liberia for the entirety of the civil war. Never taking a step away from the place she called home, her recollections include "horrible and haunting" circumstances during the war, and even an experience of almost losing her own life. Having remained in the context, her recollections also include intimate observations of the emergence of women-led collectives that were developing to

resist the war and its consequences. Amegashie first got involved in work related to women's empowerment when she started working with the National Commission of Women of Liberia (NAWOCOL) from 1998 to 2001 on a project funded by UNICEF to support women and girls affected by abuse. This role sparked her commitment to women's issues, leading next to a human rights position with the Foundation for International Dignity, followed by a position in the human rights and protection section of the United Nations mission in Liberia, human rights officer position with the United Nations station in Liberia, and also a legal counseling position as a lawyer in the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL). She summarizes her work as having placed her in a position to advocate for women and girls whose rights were violated. She was also involved in activities with women's resistance groups, including advocacy, increasing awareness of harmful traditional practices, increasing awareness of women's issues, peacebuilding, and more. Amegashie's life and work situated her in proximity to the actions and commitments of the mass action coalition in Liberia and other spaces of resistance, positioning her as an exceptional key informant for this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Several ethical concerns were considered and addressed prior to data collection. First, approval was received from the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. IRB analysts considered the study methodology, risks and benefits to participants, and transparency of research procedures within the determination and eventual approval of the study. The approval process also ensured that I had completed and received a research ethics certificate that still had an active status, as well as ensured that the methods proposed could be adequately conducted within the

scope of a doctoral dissertation study, with adequate supervision from my doctoral advisor.

The overall research design employed in study was planned in consideration of the ethics of representation. With regard to study aims and procedures, from the very beginning, the topic and goals of the study have concerned expanding existing representations of women's experiences and contributions during the peace process, by engaging stories that have remained in the margins of attention. Ethical considerations informed the recruitment process which eventually expanded to reach women in Liberia, who were equally as qualified to participate in the study as those who had resettled to the U.S. Thus, a criterion that was once selected to strengthen the opportunity for in-person interviews transformed to increase accessibility, on one hand to reach stories and experiences of women who continue to be involved in related efforts today given that they remained in the study contexts, and on the other hand, for women who were interested in sharing their stories to be able to do so despite geographic distance. This required decision-making to ensure communication access and reliability during interviews.

To address potential concerns, an initial plan was developed to purchase credit for participants via calling cards or other networks that could be used to make numerous calls. Upon recruitment, two out of three of the activists, Bernadatte Bropleh and Una Kumba Thompson, lived in Liberia and conversations with each confirmed that they had access to cell phone applications that allowed international calls, free of charge. Each activist confirmed being able to reliably access the applications, though we would need to prepare for and be patient if and when network strength fluctuated during calls.

## **Interview Procedures**

Three semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes were conducted with each participant between July 2019 and November 2019. Interview questions were designed to explore the progression of war and peace related events, how participants make meaning of the relationship between their family experiences and activist commitments, and the salience of gender in contexts of resistance and peacebuilding. Each interview was framed around a primary aspect of the research question, that being activism, gender, or family dynamics. Although each interview had a leading focus, a semi-structured approach allowed for fluid discussion of the intersections between activism, gender, and family dynamics.

A fourth and fifth interview were originally reserved if follow-up discussions were needed to expanded understandings and narratives surrounding participants' experiences, however any clarifications that were needed were addressed in the second and third interview as a means to alleviate arising conflicts of scheduling a fourth and fifth interview. Instead, an additional interview was scheduled with a key informant who resided in Liberia during the peace process and could provide direct observations about women's collective efforts during and after the war. The semi-structured key informant interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was designed for the purpose of consultation to garner perspectives from a Liberian woman with an insider position to the culture, context, and progression of events, but a proximal outsider position to the primary collectives of focus.

Conducting three interviews with each activist and one interview with a key informant resulted in a total of 10 interviews conducted for this study. The first interview

with Nohn Rebecca Kidau was conducted in person at a local library while Kidau was visiting the Twin Cities. All other interviews for the study were completed virtually. Bernadette Bropleh's first interview, as well as Kidau's second and third interview, were conducted via video conferencing platforms. The remaining interviews, including Bropleh's second and third interview, all of Una Kumba Thompson's interviews, and the key informant interview were conducted over the phone via a free international communication platform, which participants already had access to. These various modes of communication were offered as a means to engage with participants as closely as possible, when possible, but within the means they had available at the time of interviews.

Grand tour questions, a type of descriptive questions (Spradley, 1979) were used to get a general sense of "the scene" whether focusing on women's involvement, family, or gendered dynamics during the peace movement. Mini tour questions, or follow-up probes, were then asked to understand specific information related to grand tour questions. The semi-structured nature of these interviews allowed for flexibility around how questions were posed while maintaining the intentions of each question type. Following is a description of the goals, grand tour questions, and mini tour questions planned for each interview.

**Interview 1: Activism.** The first interview centered around understanding the range of strategies employed, barriers encountered, and progress made in women-led peacebuilding collectives. These interviews were set up to learn about the broader landscape of women's collectives engaged in the peace movement at the time, and to understand nuances within the main collectives involved in resistance efforts, from the

perspectives of each activist-participant. An example of the grand tour question planned for the first interview was, “how did you find yourself involved in peacebuilding efforts in Liberia or Ghana at the time?” Mini tour questions included, “So when you got to Ghana, who were you with? How did you eventually join the mass action? How did you integrate into that space of resistance?”

**Interview 2: Gender.** The goal of the second interview was to understand the role of gender in family and collective action spaces at the time, and to unpack its salience during the peacebuilding process. An example of a guiding, grand tour question, was “what did you observe about how gender was salient during the war and peacebuilding efforts?” An example of a mini tour question was, “how did gender inform the motivations or strategies used by the collective you were involved in?” Discussions about the intersections of gender and culture were engaged in all interviews because the salience of gender cuts across contextual boundaries, but this second interview provided a focused discussion of gender at the center of the conversation.

**Interview 3: Family.** The third interview shifted to attend to family systems and explore the role of family dynamics on activists’ experiences at the time. The goal was to unpack how aspects of their family life (e.g., roles, values, relationships, experiences during the war) shaped and impacted their involvement and contributions to sociopolitical change in Liberia. A grand tour question designed to set the stage asked, “What was happening in our family around the time you decided to get involved in peacebuilding?” After learning the basis of their family circumstances, examples of mini tour questions included, “where were you living? What were your obligations in your family at the time? How many kids did you have?” Like the other interviews, this third

interview was designed to center family at the inquiry while discussing intersections with other issues raised during the interview process.

**Key informant interview.** One brief interview was conducted with a key informant in Liberia. The purpose of the key informant interview was to consult around the individual's knowledge of women's collective efforts during and after the civil war. Information that had unearthed from the three interviews with each activist were considered as points to clarify and learn more about from the perspective of the key informant, who was both an insider to the context, culture, war and peace process, and other formal spaces promoting women's empowerment. Both her insider position, and outsider perspective as someone who was proximal to, but not directly involved in mass action spaces, enabled important observations of women's collective resistance.

The key informant interview started with a grand tour question that asked, "Would you let me know how you were involved or close to peacebuilding efforts at the end of the civil war? What were you doing at the time and how were you able to observe what was happening with peacebuilding?" Another question similarly garnered her general perspectives of the movement, asking, "what was your observation of the overall landscape of women-led movements or initiatives for peacebuilding at the time?" Following up on information provided about how organizations formed, an example of a mini tour question posed was "what was your observation of how different organizations were able to work together?"

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Qualitative research involves multiple levels of analysis through procedures that support nuanced understandings of phenomena and accommodate processes

for interpreting knowledge as it emerges and transforms (Creswell, 2014; O'Connor & Gibson, 2003). Culture was central in the conceptualization and development of the current study and would remain central throughout phases of the research. Thus, an analytic method that emphasized this centrality and its role in meaning making would only be appropriate. It was also important to select a framework that would support analysis of multiple sources of data, in alignment with the critical ethnographic case study methods used. As such, Spradley's (1979) Developmental Research Sequence (DRS) guided the research process and analysis strategies in the current study.

**The Developmental Research Sequence (DRS).** The DRS is a 12-step method for conducting and analyzing ethnographic interviews. Analysis through the DRS method is the “systematic examination of something to determine its parts, the relationship among its parts, and their relationship to the whole” (Spradley, 1979, p. 92) while centering participants' cultural knowledge. The DRS allows for analysis of multiple sources of data and was used to interpret data from the interviews, as well as public and private documents relevant to activists' lived experiences. While the DRS was developed in acknowledgment that some steps in ethnographic research are best conducted in sequence (e.g., locating an informant before asking questions), the DRS method is flexible in that all steps may not be used and some may be modified as they fit with the research study. The 12 steps of the DRS are described below and where applicable, the use of each step in the current study is explicated.

1. **Locating an informant** – The first step of the DRS uses purposive sampling strategies to identify informants who fit criteria for participation. Three women were selected as participants for the current study because they fit the criteria of

being female activists directly engaged in grassroots efforts to end the Liberian civil war, execute peacebuilding plans and strategies, and hold responsible parties accountable to sustain peace beyond the signage of a formal accord. By the time each activist joined the movement towards peace in 2003, they occupied multiple roles in their personal, family, work, and community lives while resisting the politics of war and gender simultaneously to fight for peace in Liberia. Each activist was parenting at least one child at their time of engagement and supporting the needs of family members (i.e., parents, siblings, grandparents) who were either living in war zones in Liberia or relocating on a journey for refuge. Spradley (1979) posits that not every informant is a good informant, and the depth and quality of cultural information strengthens the more encultured informants are (i.e., ideally spent at least one year in the cultural scene, current involvement). The Accra Peace Accord conference that participants were involved in lasted for three months, from June until August 2003 and each participant was involved for nearly the entire the process. Nohn Kidau began her advocacy efforts in 2002 while in the U.S., Una Kumba Thompson began to mobilize women to join the mass action in Ghana prior to the conference, and Bernadette Bropleh joined the women in Ghana shortly after the collective was formed. Each activist has maintained formal commitments to continued peacebuilding in their current work and advocacy priorities. For these reasons, among many others, they were ideal informants for the current study.

2. **Interviewing an informant** – Spradley (1979) states that an explicit purpose, the use of ethnographic explanations, and the use of ethnographic questions are the

three most important parts of ethnographic interviewing. Each of the interviews conducted in this study had an *explicit purpose* (i.e., activism, gender, family), and as recommended, that purpose was shared with the activists in order to provide direction for the interview. Describing the goal of the larger scope of the study and/or individual interviews served as a way to set the intentions of the conversation (explicit purpose) but also was an example of *project explanations*, one of five types of ethnographic explanations suggested by Spradley. *Recording explanations* were used to describe the audio recording process, and to acknowledge how notetaking would be used to write down words, phrases, ideas, names, and other items that stuck out during interviews. In one explicit example during an exchange with Bernadette Bropleh about demands made by the collective in Ghana, I expressed interest in her recent statement and responded, “And I’m writing this question down: how do you hold together after the process? Because that seems to be the theme of what you are discussing.” *Native language explanations* involve seeking to understand ways that informants communicate with others in their cultural contexts. I remained alert of cultural references and where unsure, clarified what had been said and the meaning of the reference. Spradley suggests that *interview explanations* be used to describe how the model or flow of an interview will shift, for example, from a friendly conversation to asking informants to demonstrate certain tasks such as sorting cards with terms. Other than explaining the purpose of each interview and how it may feel like a shift, yet still related to previous interview(s), I did not use the interview explanation technique to describe the interview model because all interviews

embodied a similar structure and conversation flow. There are many kinds of ethnographic questions and the last type of explanation, *question explanations* are used to introduce a new question and acknowledge how it differs from question(s) previously asked. *Descriptive*, *structural*, and *contrast questions* were used to explore the activists' political resistance and collective engagement, the progression of peacebuilding and strategies used, and their perspectives on the salience of gender and family dynamics at the time.

3. **Making an ethnographic record** – Making an ethnographic record involves gathering field notes, tape recordings, transcripts, photographs, and other materials relevant to the research study. The ethnographic record for this study includes audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts, notes, reflexive memos, copies of public documents (testimonies, advocacy letters), a private document provided by a key informant, photos, and notes from a 2008 documentary called *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* that tells the story of the civil war and peacekeeping from the vantage point of some key actors mentioned by the 3 activists in this study. The ethnographic record is kept electronically in a password protected database accessible that is accessible to my advisor, Dr. Wieling.
4. **Asking descriptive questions** – Descriptive questions are used to elicit contextual understandings of a cultural setting. Spradley (1979) posits that grand tour questions, a type a descriptive question, “ask for a description of how things usually are” (p. 87) and may take the form of an inquiry such as, “can you describe a typical day during ‘x’?” Mini-tour questions have an identical goal of

establishing an understanding of a contextual setting but inquire about a specific unit of experience in that setting. Drawing from the mini-tour question above regarding a typical day, one might state, “how would you typically end your evenings during ‘x’?” Both grand tour and mini-tour questions were used in the current study. To set the stage during my first interview with Una Kumba Thompson and understand generally how her involvement began, I opened with, “Ms. Thompson, just as a large guiding question, how did you find yourself involved in peacebuilding efforts during the Liberian civil war?” She shared a robust response that set the scene for the context of her life leading to the peacebuilding movement. I thanked her for sharing her background, then followed with mini tour questions that asked, “So I’m curious, at the point when you then got involved, what did that look like? Who did you connect with?” I aimed to understand more specifically how she got steeped into the movement. Descriptive questions were a consistent and imperative part of every interview conducted with the activists in the current study.

5. **Analyzing ethnographic interviews** – The DRS method of analyzing ethnographic interviews departs from linear steps traditionally used in other research designs in that analysis begins shortly after data collection starts. Spradley (1979) suggests analyzing data collected as early as after the first interview, enabling ethnographers to discover other questions to ask in subsequent interviews. The first interview for this study was conducted with Nohn Rebecca Kidau and revealed important information regarding the structures and processes involved in peacebuilding. This first interview served as a foundation for future

inquiries, including with other participants, as the notes taken from this interview helped inform more direct and specific interview questions about the collectives and processes involved. For example, notes from this interview highlighted key differences between three main collective action spaces that women developed to resist the war, two of which were in Ghana and one in Liberia. A dearth of sources chronicling Liberian women's efforts highlights these distinctions. Assessment of the notes taken from the first interview provided important direction for future conversations, as well as for the analysis and representation of results that would honor nuances among the collective spaces.

6. **Making a domain analysis** – Domain analysis was the primary procedure used in the current study, and an extensive process was conducted to analyze the data from various sources collected. Domains are top-level categories that include other categories and possess a common feature of meaning. Domain analysis is used to determine the semantic relationships between cultural information by identifying patterns, connections, and themes within and between domains. Under the top-level domains are cover terms, which are categories within each domain, then included terms at the third level, which have a semantic relationship (e.g., a kind of). For example, if time period (e.g., pre-war, wartime, post-conflict) were a domain for this study, family coping might be included as a cover term to organize coping strategies employed across time, then support and restructuring roles might be third-level included terms. After reviewing the first 3 interviews, a preliminary list of keywords that stuck out as meaningful to participants' stories was developed and organized as potential cover terms and included terms within a

preliminary domain structure organized by the focus of each interview. This was developed to assess the fit of activism, gender, and family as high-level categories. Then, all transcripts were reviewed while listening to their corresponding audiotapes and developing a more extensive list of keywords that stuck out and may be considered as cover or included terms later. Ninety-five keywords were identified and revealed ways in which the activists' narratives were ecologically framed, from reflections of their individual and personal experiences, to key dimensions in their families and other proximal relationships, the primary collectives that existed, and broader societal issues/processes that are key to their stories. This categorization better fit to organize data from interviews, and also provided a suitable structure to other sources of data. Spradley (1979) posits that domains should possess a shared quality, which in this study, refers to levels of ecology. The final structure resulted in four domains: Domain I – the personal; Domain II: the familial; Domain III: the collectives; and Domain IV: the societal/contextual.

7. **Asking structural questions** – In the DRS, structural questions are used to understand the basic units informants use to organize cultural knowledge, and enables ethnographers to verify emerging domains. Questions are framed to assess how informants organize this knowledge. During the interviews for the current study, a range of structural questions were posed to understand how participants organized information around activism, family, and gender dynamics within emerging domains. An example of a structural question that clarified the entities involved in the formation of a mass action space asked, “do you

remember what some of the smaller organizations were that led into the mass action?" Another inquiry about how collective spaces were organized asked, "in terms of working together, did anyone have to take on any leadership roles or divvy any commitments or tasks, or was that even a part of the structure of the mass action?" An example of a structural question that focused more on understanding one aspect of the strategies involved asked, "what were some of your demands as a collective?" Aligned with the goals as outlined by Spradley (1979), structural question that were included in the current study enabled me to assess the viability of domains that emerged in the research process.

8. **Making a taxonomic analysis** – A taxonomic analysis is conducted by selecting a specific domain then identifying the hierarchy of terms associated with cover terms in that domain. This process enables ethnographers to attend to select domains of interest in order to examine, in more depth, the relationship between cover terms in a selected domain. Domains that are used for taxonomic analyses may be selected based on suggestions from an informant, theoretical interest, strategic focus on major issues, or larger domains that encompass robust cultural information. Modified taxonomic analyses procedures were used in the current study. All along while identifying keywords that stuck out as meaningful during interviews and testing the organization of keywords as potential cover terms and included terms, a preliminary taxonomy was being constructed. As Spradley (1979) suggests, taxonomic analyses can be selected based on theoretical interest, participant suggestions, or strategic focus on particular issues. I selected the data that would be used for the taxonomic analysis by reviewing the initial spreadsheet

of domains and possible cover terms. I specifically wanted to understand, in more depth, strategic efforts used by the individuals and collectives engaged in the peace process. Because understanding the strategies employed is a major part of the specific aims of the study, I wanted to organize this information with more specificity and thus chose to conduct a taxonomic analysis on “strategic actions toward peace” (domain I) and “mobilizing strategies” for the mass action in Ghana (domain III) due to the volume of data in each. After completing this process, I expanded the included terms one more level then developed the complete and final domain analysis table.

9. **Asking contrast questions** – Contrast questions enable ethnographers to elicit meaning through varying, and sometimes opposing dimensions of cultural knowledge. These types of questions are based on what Spradley (1979) identifies as the contrast principle, or acknowledgement that “the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by finding out how it is different from other symbols” (p. 157). Contrast questions were included throughout the interviews conducted for this study. An example of one question that followed a discussion surrounding observations of gender in peacebuilding contexts clarified, “So the motivations were different. What difference do you feel like women talking to boy soldiers had versus fathers and uncles talking to boy soldiers?” Another example that queried values that shaped current family dynamics asked, “How were they similar or different than the values you grew up being taught?” Contrast questions were useful to determine differences in characteristics, qualities, processes, or

experiences relevant to participants reflections around gender, family, and activism during the peace process.

**10. Making a componential analysis** – Componential analysis allows ethnographers to examine the boundaries of domains and taxonomies. It involves systematically identifying attributes associated with, and excluded from cultural information, and can be achieved by assessing both similarities and contrasts between categories and term. For example, a componential analysis may discover that Bassa and Kru are both ethnic tribes in Liberia, while discovering unique differences between the two groups that represent the boundaries of both cultural categories. A formal componential analysis procedure was not used in the current study as the domain and taxonomic analyses suitably constructed a taxonomy with clear boundaries around data that may have otherwise been selected for a componential analysis. More specifically, boundaries that defined experiences (i.e., formation, goals, strategies) within the three women-led resistance groups were organized in-depth earlier in the research process and had suitably achieved what would have become the goal of a componential analysis to identify attributes associated with each group. Another componential analysis goal of understanding why participants distinguished among included terms within domains was less relevant to the stage of analysis the study had reached.

**11. Discovering cultural themes** – Discovering cultural themes involves identifying complex patterns that organize ways of life in an overarching manner. Cultural themes extend across domains to reflect broader systems of meaning, and these overarching patterns and meanings are where themes and subthemes can

emerge to explain larger truths. Spradley (1979) highlights that prolonged immersion in cultural settings and with data supports discovery of cultural themes. Cultural themes can take on various forms, from cognitive expressions that represent symbols linked to culture; to appearing as folk terms, recurrent sayings, or mottos; to also appearing as relationships connecting different subsystems of culture. A sub-theme in the current study, “Boys and their mom are close” was included within the third domain, “the collectives” to reflect cultural knowledges surrounding gender and parenting, which ultimately informed peacebuilding strategies used to disarm child soldiers.

12. **Writing the ethnography** – Findings from this study are reported with a goal of translating the knowledge gained through general (broadly applicable) and culturally specific language and systems of meaning. The results are written in an attempt to resist objectivist and positivist tones to convey the narratives of the women involved as close to their language and meanings as possible.

The DRS method provides a useful guide for conducting and analyzing ethnographic interviews and various sources of data relevant to studies. This 12-step process offers a framework and guide to decision-making prior to data collection, shortly after data collection begins, in subsequent stages of collection and analysis, and even in the writing process. The DRS method encourages ethnographers to implement procedures as they fit with their respective studies. All steps in the DRS were applied in this study other than componential analyses, which was less useful at the time given the analytic procedures that had been applied and resulted in thematic organization that would have been assessed with a componential analysis. This method was selected given its

alignment with a critical ethnographic case study approach, and the process fit well with the goals and of the current study. The procedures resulted in a deeper understanding of women's collective resistance during the Liberian civil war, from the perspectives of three activists, one key informant, and non-interview sources of data. The results will be represented in a manner that emphasizes the perspectives and privileges the experiences of the women involved through their cultural knowledge.

### **Data Trustworthiness**

Guba and Lincoln's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness is used to evaluate the results of this study. Guba and Lincoln's criteria align with the epistemological position of this study as it critically engages the idea of rigor by suspending traditional standards of objectivity, internal validity, and external validity, and privileges multiple realities and dimensions of meaning-making. Techniques were used to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the current study.

Credibility, one of four evaluation criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), refers to the extent to which the findings reflect multiple truths of participants' narratives. Prolonged engagement, a strategy to enhance credibility, refers to the attempt to spend adequate time observing and learning about a setting or phenomena, can be used to build rapport and relationships, and can enhance orientation to the context of study. To enhance prolonged engagement, the study was designed to engage in multiple interactions with the activists involved in the study. Interviews were conducted between July 2019 and November 2019, and with each participant, a minimum of one week and up to five weeks passed before conducting subsequent interviews. This allowed for time to sit with the data as it was emerging, adequately plan for subsequent interviews, and

begin processing the scope of issues that were raised and their relation to individual activists' experiences or relevance across participants.

Enhancing orientation to the context of the study, a goal of prolonged engagement, was achieved during a trip to Accra, Ghana in August 2019. I spent time at the M Plaza Hotel in Accra, observing the setting of the peace process where each activist in this study convened to resist during the violence in Liberia. I also visited Buduburam refugee camp where the majority of women in the mass action coalition in Ghana resided at the time. This brief visit to Ghana substantially enhanced my orientation to the space and setting of resistance described by the activists during interviews. I drew from this experience an ability to connect more deeply with the stories shared and acquaint with the data in a way that was oriented to space (e.g., the vastness of Buduburam refugee camp), time (e.g., understanding the distance from Buduburam to M Plaza, a journey the women took daily), and place (e.g., witnessing the pristine presence of M Plaza from a distance; a distance that felt both physical and social, as described by participants from the mass action coalition in Ghana).

Triangulation is another technique to establish credibility and involves the collection of multiple sources of data as a means to develop robust knowledge related to the research question. Interview data, notes and memos, public and private documents, and photos comprise the ethnographic record for this study. Rather than using these multiple sources of data as a strategy to validate or verify findings, this technique was implemented to enhance the richness and detail of accounts as various sources illuminate the phenomenon in unique and important ways.

Member checks is the technique of processing developing ideas and emerging findings with participants to ensure that analytic interpretations adequately reflect their accounts. Member checks have been used briefly thus far to check in with participants and inform them about the progress of analysis and the direction that the writing process is taking based on analytic findings. Participants were made aware that they will have an opportunity to conduct a more formal member check as they will receive written parts of the study in order to ensure that the interpretations and conclusions align with their experiences. Peer debriefing was also used to enhance credibility by engaging in scheduled check-ins with my advisor, Dr. Wieling, about the research process and knowledge that was revealing throughout the process.

Dependability, the second evaluation criteria by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is demonstrated by findings that are consistent and could be repeated. External audits, a strategy to enhance dependability, involves another researcher examining the research process and congruences between the data and resulting interpretations. My doctoral research advisor, Dr. Wieling, performed an external audit after data were analyzed. Dr. Wieling evaluated the ethnographic record, data management process, and analysis procedures to ensure that emerging conclusions reflected the data. This process was conducted, not for the purpose of establishing accuracy through a fixed truth, but to ensure methodological rigor in the process of adequately understanding and representing participants' experiences.

Transferability, the third of four evaluation criteria, refers to findings that are rich in detail to the extent that they can be evaluated for relevance in other contexts, though not in the manner of traditional ideas of generalizability. Thick descriptions, a

transferability strategy used to achieve substantial detail in findings, was considered during the interview process by ensuring that questions probed participants' recollection of their experiences from different angles beyond a surface understanding, and that significant gaps in relevant information were queried. During the writing process of the results section, thick descriptions will be included via detailed quotes from participants to illustrate their experiences in detail and directly from their point of view.

Confirmability, the fourth evaluation criteria is the extent to which the study findings represent participants instead of researcher bias and motivations. Confirmability audits, an external audit technique that mirrors the process of enhancing dependability, can also enhance confirmability. In the current study, this process also engaged reflexivity and dialogues with Dr. Wieling about strengths and opportunities surrounding analysis procedures, ideas around preliminary findings, and decisions about translating the findings into writing. Data triangulation is another strategy to enhance confirmability, which was also used in this study to establish credibility, as described earlier. An audit trail refers to records that are developed to demonstrate describe steps taken during the research process. The ethnographic record for this study includes a variety of sources that were adequately tracked by Dr. Wieling while conducting an external audit. Within the ethnographic record are notes and memos that descriptively document the interview data collection process, content and issues that stuck out during each interview, as well as notes with extensive details about procedures used throughout the analysis process. For example, reflexive dialogues with Dr. Wieling after the audit trail was performed influenced decisions about how to represent, in the written narrative, the unique lived

experiences of each activist, and also represent shared experiences thematically at the individual level.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I detailed the methodology of the current study which aimed to investigate the lived experiences of Liberian women who engaged in social and political activism to pressure an end to the civil war in 2003. Case study and ethnographic methods were used to understand how aspects of their family life, activist engagements, and gender operated from personal to societal levels to shape their political resistance in collective spaces. The results of this study are described in the forthcoming chapter. This chapter is intended to represent both the individual journeys of each activist and their experiences in the greater context of peacebuilding efforts and events in 2003, and also to represent the journeys of three coalitions of Liberian women that uniquely contributed to the peace process both before and after the war ended.

**Chapter 4:**

**Activists' Family Life, Conflict, and Resistance**

Despite having very unique journeys that preceded or influenced their political activism, Kidau, Bropleh, and Thompson shared about dynamics in their families, from childhood to adulthood, that were threaded across each of their narratives. The purpose of this chapter is to center the family; to expound on dimensions of life within their relational systems that were thematically consistent across activists' stories of life, war, and resistance. In this chapter, I will begin by highlighting integral family relationships they discussed, then I will delve into the ways they perceived multigenerational family values influencing their life and work. Following, the war's impact on their family systems, including its influence on displacement and transnational family dynamics, will be unpacked. I will then conclude the chapter by focusing on support the activists received at the family-level for their efforts during and after the war, followed by attending to their families' access to social and economic resources that either ameliorated stress within their system or equipped them to commit to their goals.

### **Key Family Relationships**

Throughout their reflections, Kidau, Thompson, and Bropleh reference key relationships with family members who had a lasting influence on their life, from childhood to adulthood. Family members and relationships that were distinctly highlighted are touched on in this section, on one hand to set the foundation for their relational systems in stories to follow, and on the other hand to simply honor the ways they reflected on those who impacted their lives and worldviews. A consistent undertone in the activists' discussions of key family relationships and interactions was that, to various degrees, relatives influenced their approach to life and work, and sometimes this influence notably translated in their responses to the war and peacebuilding.

Kidau began, briefly pointing to her great grandmother's significance and stating, "My mother's father's mother, my great grandma had an impact on me. She was a real kind person, a selfless person." Kidau's mother's family lived in a large village and she grew up watching her great grandmother lead or "take charge" in the village, almost as a community matriarch. "She cared about everybody's child. Everybody. She had this leadership in her somehow...because maybe she was the oldest, she had that leadership in her to try to also train other people's children, just like she was training us." Kidau credited her great grandmother for the strength she maintained into late life, for her role as a caregiver for Kidau and her seven siblings, as well as her impact in the community. She was influenced by her great grandmother's presence and command both within their intimate family and within the community of family within their village.

She was also highly impacted by her relationship with her oldest brother who, as described in her personal introduction, taught her how to read, served as a role model, and inspired her to pursue her education beyond the limits imposed as one of the youngest siblings, and one of the youngest daughters at that. She recalls her childhood family environment as loving and highly supportive, and she credits her parents for providing space to be able to express resistance as a child; a resistance to family and cultural expectations that "no girls [would] go to school." She pushed back against her parents at just 5-years-old in order to learn to read and eventually enroll in school, with the help of her brother. Kidau recognized her parents' capacity to listen to her needs and desires in ways that were far different from other families she grew up near. Their support ultimately confirmed for her that resistance, though frightening, could reap rewards far greater than imagined. We left the reflection there, but the significance was

not lost upon me as I sat with the story of 5-year-old Kidau, but face to face with a woman who is well on her way to achieving a doctorate degree, the highest level of education awarded.

Thompson also highlighted her relationship with her parents as essential. Her mother, who was a member of the Liberian Women's Initiative in its early days, had a special influence on her commitment to work advancing women's rights. Like Kidau, I am sitting with Thompson's reflection of her mother's influence, and of course the brunt of the work she personally carried, as I glance at her novel, "The Woman Shoe: Unshattered Glass" resting on my desk. She referred to her mother as her mentor and someone whose influence has profoundly translated in Thompson's life. As revealed later in the discussion about family values, many of the life lessons Thompson centered in her parenting were principles she was taught in childhood, or simply what she observed in the ways her family operated. Her grandmother was another influential relative and role model she observed. She explained that her grandmother was the family matriarch and her personal hero. She raised Thompson into her adolescence, during which Thompson observed her role as a notable leader in her community. Thompson shared, "My grandmother was a very prominent woman in her village. She was like the voice of the women in the village." Like Kidau, Thompson was also influenced by her grandmother's command and leadership in ways that would mirror her own story decades later.

Bropleh's reflections begin with her parents. "I would like to say I took away a lot from my upbringing as it related to my parents," she disclosed. She reflected on her observations of her parents growing up, particularly that they both displayed a level of compassion for others that solidly comprises her memory of their life and respective

commitments. She described how each of them were “leaders in their own right.”

Bropoleh observed her parents’ leadership in work as her mother was a highly trained registered nurse and her father was a lead medical doctor. As will be expanded on later, their persistence and tenacity, in many ways, influenced how she has approached much of her life and work through the years.

In our discussion of family life and relationships, Bropoleh shared that she grew up in a very large, mixed-faith family with strong multigenerational ties. She, too, connected her observations of her grandmother, who was the only Christian in a polyamorous marriage and a predominantly Muslim-faith household. She raised this to convey a sense of intentionality that was present in her family’s relationships and interactions, offering that they “lived together in harmony” despite differences that could have significantly restricted their cohesion. She expressed pride in the strength of their relationships and explained that she is well connected to her “hundred plus cousins” who, even to this day, “come together once a month” to meet as a family. As I reflected on Bropoleh’s emphasis on the size and mixed-faith status of her family, it dawned on me that the intentionality she observed in her family system was the exact intentionality that would resurface in later life, when the force of the many women she stood with profoundly transformed once they merged from across their social locations and notably, across religious lines.

Bropoleh, Kidau, and Thompson’s reflections begin to demonstrate the various ways they perceived their family relationships as having an influence on them throughout the years.

### **Multigenerational Family Values**

Kidau, Bropoleh, and Thompson were very explicit about how their values shaped their overall approach to life, as well as their engagement in collective resistance of the

war in Liberia. Each of their discussions of family values extended across generations, acknowledging the role of principles that transcended from their family of origin to their procreated family. Not surprising, principles around community and contributing to collective welfare were commonly cited in activists' reflections of salient values in their families, and they also discussed principles that they embraced around developing a grounded inner self.

**“It’s not all about us”:** **Collective welfare.** Ubuntu, a South African concept meaning “I am because we are” captures the essence of values that participants reported as central to their family lives. Thompson connected her resilience, empathy, and capacity to embrace and support others to values she learned during childhood:

So, I think my upbringing, helped me in many ways to deal with adversity, to be accommodating, to empathize, and to be welcoming. To be appreciative of what I have, and to look onto where others are coming from, and to extend a helping hand. Because that's what my mother taught me and she always said, "My home is for everyone." My mother's home was such that, and I think many Liberian homes, whenever anybody walks into their home, there was always food. Nobody was ever a stranger. She went the extra mile and she made me to understand, to appreciate what I had.

Thompson described her mother as her mentor, the person who taught her the importance of simplicity, and who instilled in her that no one is better than the next person. Her mother’s extension of their family home to others and the notion that “nobody was a stranger” translated directly to Thompson’s adult life as she provided direct support to others affected by the war. For a number of years, she and her husband

opened their home to Liberians who were transitioning to refugee centers in the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, or Ghana, and sometimes more than a dozen people stayed with them at a time. She explained the salience of this value in her quest to support people who were displaced, reporting that she and her husband were fortunate to maintain access to income and thus moved from a 4-bedroom to 10-bedroom home in the Ivory Coast in order to accommodate those transitioning. What is also striking about Thompson's nod to the commonality of the "my home is for everyone" mentality is that Kidau shared nearly identical reflections of her childhood, referencing the warmth and invitation of food. She recollected:

My mom used to cook, when she cooked, she would put some away, and I would ask her, 'Who is this one for?' And she said, 'I don't know, but somebody will come.' Somebody will come, and maybe that person would be hungry. Those are the values I'm talking about. Because she doesn't know if anybody is coming but she would put the food away. And when somebody [would] come, food is there. So, I learned from that...caring about people. That's what I learned in my family and childhood life. That it's not only your family that you should care about, you should care about any person who would be hungry and stop by.

Kidau highlighted the centrality of these principles across generations in her family, reporting, "when we were growing up, everybody was family and my mother got some of that from her [mother]." She shared how important it has been for her to lead by example with her two children and teach them that, "It's not all about you, life is not all about ourselves. We should be able to lift other people up, if we are able to do it." She proudly reflected on how her son has planted roots in Liberia and manages a farm there,

more broadly connected to her pride in both children being “connected to Liberia” despite them having been raised in the U.S.

Bropoleh also discussed principles in her family by shedding light across generations. She described her son, who also “loves visiting Liberia,” as compassionate and willing to “share whatever little he has with other people.” She added, “For whatever it's worth, I think he is also looking at the community for the greater good with the understanding that the more people that are successful, the better it is for all of us.” She, like Kidau, noted the important role her mother played in instilling values around community and connectedness. Bropleh made meaning of summers she spent in childhood visiting her mother’s family village in Grand Cape Mount County:

Even though my family was a middle-income family, my mom made sure that every year we went back to her village. Every vacation we went back to my mom's village because she felt that that connection was important.... Again, it goes back to community. My mom felt that even though we live in a city, it was very important for us to connect with our roots.... We spent the whole summer in the village. That really taught us not only humility, but it taught us community living.

I asked Bropleh whether she thought her yearly transition between the city and the village as a child, which she termed “a good mixture,” influenced her decision and aptitude to abruptly transition from life in California to Buduburam refugee camp when she joined the mass action. She replied that she had never thought about it but believes that it could have; that its influence was very likely, while subconscious. Thompson also

learned from her parents, and passed on to her children, the value of connecting to your roots. She shared the essence of this teaching in her family:

Always look back to where you come from, and who needs you. ...When you know who you are, where you come from, and appreciate what you have, you'll be thankful for it. And as you strive to be better and understand, you have empathy for others.

Connecting to “where you come from” is reflected in each activist’s story. In their reflections of these principles, there lies a message founded on community, connectedness, and remembrance of the greater good. Little did they know in their youth just how much these values would translate and lead the charge in their collective resistance of full-scale war in their home. In addition to notions of communal wellbeing, values around the inner self also emerged as important principles in participants’ early and adult lives.

**“What defines you is who you are inside”: The inner self.** Thompson, Kidau, and Bropleh shared several beliefs about developing a grounded and responsible sense of self, which transferred from their childhood to their parenthood, informed their political engagement, and their overall approach to life. Thompson described principles instilled in her family about self-identity and how she taught her children to separate their identity from material things:

It does not define you. What defines you is who you are inside, to be able to have empathy, to be able to stand tall, regardless of where you find yourself. ...And where you will find yourself doesn't define you as a human being. You be the best that you can. It's not the clothes that you wear. It's not the bed that you sleep on.

It's not the car that you drive. It's not where you sit high. ...The person in you is who you are, is what defines you. How you live. How you treat people. How you handle adversity. How you show empathy.

Bropleh taught her children accountability and persistence, which she embraced from her mother:

My mother always made us responsible for our own actions. She was a hard mother, very strict, and always had us understand that you get what you put into it...She would never take no for an answer. It was never okay not to try...She was very focused. I think I took some of that away from her, some of those things, kind of, I would say ...rubbed off on me. You know?

She emphasized being responsible for your own actions and the “get in what you put in” mentality as principles she not only imparts on her children, but also stresses to others. I captured these principles as I envisioned her role within the movement, imagining her conviction to “put in” and encourage others to join the forces, fueled by a determination to see rebel forces held accountable to ceasefire. The activists also connected to religion when discussing principles that were centered in their families. Each grew up in a household that practiced Christianity, and Thompson’s expression that “God was central and continues to be central in our lives” reflected sentiments shared by the others. Their faith was referenced in regard to family life and practices more generally, but it was also underpinned as a source of coping during the war and the movement. With each of the activists’ recollections of principles within their families, values concerning the inner self and those promoting community and the greater good

would not only inform their approaches to advocate for peace in Liberia but would also guide them through difficult periods during the war.

### **War Impacts on Family**

The war had direct impacts on Liberian families, whether they remained at home, were internally displaced, pushed to a neighboring country, or made a continental move. Many families were separated, and some experienced violence targeted explicitly at their relational system. For example, family members were sometimes forced to observe their loved ones endure torture, while others were forced to inflict torturous acts themselves. Violence against families was calculated and especially seen in reports of sexual coercion. As an advocate for women's rights and from her perspective as a legal aid, Sundaiway E. Nelson Amegashie detailed in her report about women's issues how, like most wars, rape was used as a weapon to assert dominance and control in Liberia. She reported that men were sometimes forced to commit sexual violence against their female relatives and many who refused "were killed or tortured trying to protect their family members." Women were abducted as sex slaves by rebel factions, commonly used as cooks or spies, and some were forced to marry soldiers.

The intimate and emotional systems of family relationships and marital relationships were outright invaded. A number of marriages deteriorated as a result of stigma surrounding sexual violence. Gender-based violence was strategically used to physically, structurally, emotionally, and relationally disrupt families and communities. Whether present in Liberia at the time, externally displaced, or in contact with those present or displaced, the war touched many families in one way or another. The activists

in this study shared about challenges and demands the conflict presented in their systems.

**“We were never at rest”: Impacts in the home.** Like many families at the time, the activists’ families experienced significant losses and strains as a result of the war. The conflict had only recently begun when Kidau received word that her husband was killed by armed forces that had ambushed his hometown. He was on temporary visit to take care of his terminally ill uncle, and on the day he was set to return, his uncle died. He postponed his flight and remained with family. This was 1989. In Nimba County. “And he wasn't even one of those people that they were looking for. But because he's from Nimba, that's why he was killed,” Kidau explained the significance of her husband being a native to both the initial epicenter and origin site of the conflict. In her mid-20s at the time with two young children, the death of Kidau’s husband transformed her family structure and every aspect of their life together, and the agony she endured would transform her priorities both within and outside of the family. She described the pain she felt as something she would never wish on her worst enemy, explaining, “Not even the man who killed my husband. I couldn't even wish that kind of pain on him.” As Kidau’s story conveys, the pain of the war and its direct impact on families living outside of Liberia’s national borders reverberated just as quickly as the war began.

Thompson shared that although her immediate family was not directly in the midst of the fighting, at the least, Liberia was always a topic of conversation in their home and at its extent, they absorbed direct effects of the conflict. For many years, while living in nearby countries, Thompson and her family offered their home as a place of

refuge and accommodated families that were displaced and in transition to various locations. She detailed:

Before my participation during the peace process... our home was oftentimes a place of refuge, a transit point for many Liberians who were not residing on a camp, but who were in transit to different countries; going onto the U.S. or moving onto other European or African countries. ... Many Liberians, friends and family could pass through, stop over, get a few days, get themselves situated, and then off they'd go to wherever they were. So, our home was central.... So plus or minuses, Liberia was always a conversation in our home, because there was always someone knocking at the door, someone needing us to pick them up, someone needing a place to stay. And we had to be shifting our positions, or making way, making rooms available to accommodate friends. And so Liberia was in our home. The crisis, we experienced it. The frustration, the pain, and the price. We worried about families. We had to share what we had. And our home was never empty.

Despite geographic removal from the war, their accommodation of those in transition drew them closer to the impacts of the conflict. Thompson's family not only absorbed many stories, tears, and fears endured by their compatriots, but also managed the inherent stressors of expanding their family system's boundaries. The idea of boundaries also emerges in activists' stories of war-related impacts, from a geographic perspective, as they each managed transnational family issues that were intensified as a result of the conflict.

**Family relocations and transnational dynamics.** One in three Liberians were forcibly displaced between 1989 and 2003. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement makes several mentions of protections and assistance for “internally displaced persons, refugees, and returnees” as the magnitude of geographic disruptions was unignorable. Thompson, Bropleh, and Kidau shared how their families experienced multiple relocations, and also discussed how they navigated transnational family dynamics.

Kidau shared that her parents, siblings, and other family members in Liberia were displaced from their family farm and forced to relocate more than once. She explained, “I was in touch with them. And then when the war broke off, I had to make sure that I had enough to share some with them because they were in refugee camps.” They went from Liberia to the Ivory Coast, and when fighting spilled into the Ivory Coast, they relocated to Guinea. Kidau supported both she and her husband’s families through each of their transitions. She explained that her children were just old enough to work when they insisted on finding jobs to support her as she held up three families, two of which were living in separate refugee camps. Kidau praised her children for their early sense of responsibility and connection to family as they supported with what little they could when they began working.

Most of Bropleh’s immediate family had lived in the U.S. for more than 25 years by the time she uprooted life in California, but she, like many others throughout the war, worried constantly about family members who were not able to leave Liberia. “I couldn’t get in touch with some of my family members,” she stated as she began to explain the disconcertment she experienced and observed among other women in the

mass action coalition. “Well the biggest challenge was we didn't really know what was happening to our family members in Liberia,” she continued:

Because the communication was very very limited. You know, we were very very concerned because we didn't know what was happening. So, I think that was the biggest challenge through the whole thing. That we didn't know what was happening in Liberia, and when we did hear a little about what was happening, it had to do with outbursts of fighting in different areas.

As fighting proliferated, displacement rampantly matched and many people went missing. Thompson, too, shared that some of her siblings were separated and went missing during the war, eventually reuniting with their relatives years later. She described her family's situation, “They were affected. Everyone was displaced. My father died, he died somewhere in Lofa [county], and I never saw him, he died.” Not long after her father's death, her family was again devastated by Thompson's grandmother death, which they believe resulted from the stress of their journey to refuge. Thompson continued:

So, my mother, the whole family, about 20 of my aunties, my sisters, everybody, my family...probably 20 or 25 found their way to Sierra Leone in a village. And when they arrived there, they arrived with nothing. They had nothing. Nothing.

Thompson also maintained a strong connection with her family and also provided support as they navigated their transitions. As demonstrated, each of the activists dealt with stressors or demands stemming from the displacement of their relatives, although Thompson's immediate family was also directly impacted by forced removals. She was in graduate school in the U.S. while her husband was in Liberia with their children when

the conflict erupted. Her plans to return home were diverted when her husband insisted that they could no longer stay in Liberia. She recounted the start of her family's journey, which eventually led to multiple relocations

We lived in different African countries. ...The first [relocation] was in Sierra Leone, from Liberia to Sierra Leone. That was the first entry point when we thought that the war was just going to be for like three months, four months, and then we'd go back home. I was in the U.S. doing my masters in graduate school, so they [husband and children] went onto Sierra Leone, and I joined them, but we never came back to Liberia. From there, my husband was transferred to Ivory Coast, where we moved. It was very difficult socially, mentally, psychologically. It took a toll on us from Sierra Leone to Ivory Coast...

Thompson elaborated on the challenges they faced adjusting to the Ivorian context, including navigating language and cultural barriers and enduring discrimination, as she recalled feeling like they were treated as inferiors while living in Abidjan. Her family later moved to South Africa and Togo for approximately three years before heading to Ghana. Thompson highlighted that her plan had always been to go to Liberia after leaving the U.S. and it was difficult to get re-routed. Every move, beginning with Sierra Leone, drew hesitation and although South Africa and Togo were described as times of respite, she heavily grieved the situation in Liberia and what seemed like a likely inability to go back. The only way she and her family would return home, like many others, was if the fighting came to a full stop; a final and sustainable stop. In hindsight, this ultimately enhances the eventual reward of achieving – and directly contributing to – political rest in Liberia. Thompson, Bropleh, and Kidau all

returned to Liberia after the peace conference ended in Accra. Of course, many families were not in a position to do so, but the end of the war meant that the subset of families who desired to and were able to could return to Liberia without fear of abuse, injury, or death.

Highlighting ways that the return was difficult for families, given the destruction that had torn infrastructure and communities apart, Kidau shared the example of her family who were all able to return after the war, but lost their entire farm. As she stated about rebel forces, “They broke down everything, the rice farm, they took everything. My parents went to the refugee camp, so we didn't know what happened to the farm after that, but when the war was over that's when they went back.” Bropleh briefly acknowledged her own experience repatriating. She began “When we moved to Liberia, we had nothing. We moved here just with our carry-on luggage. We actually came with nothing at all.” As she continued, she highlighted that adjusting back to the context came with its own challenges as she had not lived in Liberia for many years after having resettled in California. Her time in Ghana, however, critically powered her decision to move back to Liberia after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in order to fulfill her mission. Thompson and Kidau shared similar sentiments about how their time in Ghana fueled their return to Liberia. As we discussed their efforts during and after the peace process we conversed about how vital family-level support was to their individual missions.

### **Family Support of Personal Efforts**

Each activist highlighted distinct ways they felt their families supported their work and efforts, and to begin, Bropleh and Kidau acknowledged their families' apprehension about their involvement in political resistance. Bropleh expressed:

My family was a little...other than my mom who was 100% supportive, other people were really afraid for my life because they knew that Liberia was very dangerous during that time. They also knew that when you speak out, you're considered an enemy of the state.

It took time for her family to get "onboard" with her decision, and as she recalled, many "thought it was crazy" that she left her comfort zone in California to immerse in a context entangled with the war. "Most of it was just about safety," she concluded. Kidau shared similar reflections of her family's support. They experienced a duality between favoring her resistance as "they themselves were feeling the war, [and] they wanted it to end" while they also feared for Kidau's personal safety. She continued, raising their overt concerns:

They were happy about it, but they were also afraid that something would happen to me. ...Because of the man that I was fighting against, a very dangerous man. They were concerned, but [did] not push back per se. ...I know they were praying for me. In my presence they would say that, 'Go on and do this,' but I wonder sometimes whether they really wanted me to do it or they were so nervous about what would happen to me. ...They would hold back tears and still support.

Bropleh and Thompson expressed their gratitude for support they received in the form of direct assistance while they were supporting efforts behind the war. When

Bropleh explained that the community at Buduburam refugee camp felt like kin and shared about the caregiving support she received from while engaging in the mass action:

Well, strangely enough, the people from Liberia that settled in the refugee camp in Ghana were almost like family. They actually bonded together. ... There was a young man there that came around when we first got there, and he would take my son out to play soccer and stuff like that. I just trusted him. You know? I just trusted him and left my son with him and a group of other people that were in the refugee camp not too far from where we lived.

Eventually, Bropleh decided to send her son back to the U.S. with her sister, who cared for him for 10 years until he left for college. She cherishes her sister's support and talked about how much she appreciated her willingness to raise her son during pivotal years while she was in Liberia. She also commended her sister for contributing to her continued efforts to provide basic resources for children in Liberia once she grew more aware and connected to Bropleh's work outside of the peace process. She reported about her sister:

[My sister] supports 50 children in Liberia that she's never seen. ... She's responsible for their education and all of that on a yearly basis and she's never even met these people and I don't know if she will ever meet them. Through the process that we were doing she decided that she wanted to contribute also and she started first by having holiday parties and stuff like that and it turned into something bigger where now she's supporting 50 young children. She's sending them clothes, books, toys. You know? Different little things at different intervals.

Despite apprehension and fear around the risks of her resistance at the beginning, Bropleh explained that like her sister, the rest of her family “came onboard” after some time, especially once they realized she was “in for the long haul.”

Thompson also reported that her family received external support to manage household labor. She reported that they “were blessed to always have domestic help” which increased capacity to focus on efforts outside of the home. Her children managed their chores, including maintaining their personal space, and others who lived with them may have offered to support with household duties if they chose, but Thompson reported that it wasn’t necessary since they had domestic help. She highlighted, “having that order of things helped me to also avoid a lot of confusion within the home as people came and went.” Recognizing that support was drawn from an external source in this example, given their family’s circumstances, this family-level support allowed Thompson and her husband to preserve a sense of “normalcy” in the way their home functioned, which was repeatedly raised as a priority for Thompson.

Kidau referred to the moral support she received from her children as key during her time of resistance. They strongly encouraged her to pursue her efforts. She reflected, “They were proud of me. ...I thought they were going to say, ‘Oh no, our dad died in Liberia, we don't want you to go to Liberia.’ No, they didn't do that.” She recalls them cheering her on when she left for Liberia to serve in the transitional government, explaining that they told her to “go” and would say things like, “make sure that peace is seen.” “If I had to fly to wherever the peace was, they would always say, ‘Mom, go ahead. Go ahead,’” she continued. She not only recounted how generous their support was but also pondered its immense impact on her pursuit. She explained that they had

conversations about her involvement and if they had expressed reservations about the risks, she would explain her purpose and that “we all have to be brave for what we are passionate about.” She concluded that, ultimately, she would have refrained or shifted her work had their concerns for her safety overpowered their encouragement. Kidau expressed, “I go so much support” in a heartened tone that mirrored each of the activists’ reflections about how support at the family level stimulated their efforts during and after the war. In addition to moral and tangible support offered from relatives and others that invested assistance, several factors related to their social and economic positions shaped important aspects of the activists’ personal and familial situation, and ultimately tied back to their efforts at the time.

### **Family Social and Economic Circumstances**

In different ways, Kidau, Bropleh, and Thompson highlighted how their family’s access to social and economic resources played a role in their efforts during and after the war. Regarding social circumstances, one thing they all shared was the ability to separate their children from the context of the war, whether prior to, during, or after the conflict. Kidau’s first child was born in Liberia, and by the time the second one was born, they had moved to the U.S. Bropleh, who carried her son with her to Ghana when she joined the mass action, explained that after they left Ghana for Liberia, she knew she needed to stay and commit to peacebuilding efforts but also came to the conclusion that she would need to send her son back to the U.S. She acknowledged that simply due to her son being an American citizen, they had access to “options” that were not afforded to other Liberians at the time; privileges that could remove him from the context while she continued her work in Liberia’s precarious post-conflict environment. Bropleh detailed:

It was very tough. I still now reflect on it and I don't really know if that was the right move that I made, but because of how tense it was in Liberia, I didn't think that it was really safe for him to be here. You know, he didn't bargain to be in this environment that was so dysfunctional. It was something that I decided I wanted to do, and I didn't think it was fair to him to have to live through my dream or through my initiative when he had options. That's where options come in again. You know, if some of the people here had options, some of the Liberians, some of the Liberian women, some of the Liberian children, if they had options, I think things would be a lot better off for them. In my son's case, he's an American citizen, he was born in the U.S. He had the option of being in Liberia or being in the U.S. Me, as a mother, felt that at that point he was better off living in the U.S. because I couldn't provide all his basic needs.

As Bropleh emphasizes the importance of options, she described her son's American citizenship as a privilege that allowed her to ensure her son's safety and security, as well as his access to resources to aid his development. While extremely challenging to cope with their separation, she highlighted that the mere "option" they had in turn allowed her to continue working steadfastly in her purpose. The link between social benefits and economic circumstances commonly emerged in participant reports.

Thompson's husband and children were forced to leave Liberia at the beginning of the conflict, and as expanded on earlier, thereafter their family home served as a place of refuge for Liberians in transition. This is notable here because their ability to secure adequate, spacious, and standard housing through multiple relocations reflects the immense value of having access to resources, particularly as this access was rare to the

vast majority of Liberians who were displaced at the time. When I asked her about general family circumstances, she began to explain, “Well, before that time, among so many families, mine was privileged. My family was very privileged to have been outside of the war situation. And we were comfortable.” Thompson credited the stability of her husband’s position at reputable banking institution as their primary source of relative comfort, socially and economically speaking. Even in the several places they relocated, they maintained a positive social standing among the Liberian community present. Take for example their time living near Buduburam, Thompson states, “though we lived in Ghana, we didn't have a status of refugees, but we worked with the community. We were highly respected.” She and her family were well connected to Bethel Church, the local place of worship for Liberians in the camp. Thompson leveraged their social resources, mainly their relationships and trusted reputation, to convene the refugee women for the upcoming movement. As demonstrated, their social and financial circumstances played an important role in their capacity to offer support during the war and to commit in ways that would shift the movement further.

As I discussed the upcoming movement with Kidau, she too, raised the importance of economic resources in her ability to hone in on her political work in Liberia. By the time she began to establish the Movement for Democratic Change in Liberia (MDCL) in 2001, Kidau worked at the land-grant institution in her home state and had access to employer-sponsored benefits that she utilized both personally, and to convene strategic efforts. She stated in an appreciative tone, “The University of Minnesota has so much benefits working there.” She specifically talked about her access

to paid-time-off, which allowed her to travel to the extent that she needed without jeopardizing her income and work status.

The use of paid-time-off to travel may seem relatively uncomplicated, but the significance here is that for Kidau, the value culminated to helping end the war. She used her time to educate, cultivate relationships, strategize interventions, and mobilize bipartisan support from policy members across the U.S., while also connecting with international stakeholders – including members of the UN Security Council – who would eventually contribute to concerted peacebuilding efforts. In addition to personal benefits, she used her institutional resources at the University of Minnesota to host the first-ever conference sponsored by MDCL, where she invited partners and allies to discuss means of intervention in Liberia.

Kidau made a connection between her family life and her ability to access and utilize institutional benefits and resources. She reported by the time she began investing heavily into peacebuilding work, her children were well into adulthood and in her words, “would take care of themselves.” She noted this because it was a shift from her former demands as a single mother raising and financially supporting her children as well as two other families transnationally (she and her late husband’s families). Their autonomy shifted her demands as a parent, which Kidau attributes to her added capacity to devote the time, flexibility, and resources she accrued predominantly towards ending the Liberia’s political conflict.

### **Conclusion**

As a whole, participants’ stories about the conflict and resistance intertwined with key dimensions of family life; dimensions that stemmed from their upbringing to their

life as adults. From essential relationships, to values that they translated from their childhood to parenthood, the Thompson, Kidau, and Bropleh's approach to life and work were notably influenced by dynamics across multiple generations in their family system. During and after the war, they worked arduously to manage demands and stressors in their immediate system, as well as those impacting their relatives who were displaced and unable to work. They also highlighted the value of family-level support they received during these periods and acknowledged the role of their access to social and economic resources on their family life and political work at the time.

My gratitude to these women for "letting me in" to their family life extends beyond words, but I cannot conclude this chapter without expressing even the fraction of appreciation I am able to articulate. I asked each of them to walk me through parts of their journeys within their relational systems, from childhood to adulthood. We weaved through the highs of life as they were observing their familial mentors during their youth and absorbing lessons they would carry into adulthood, parenthood, and their political efforts. We trudged through recollections of the lows of significant losses, deaths, and separations induced by the very conflict they chose to combat. These are their stories, they hold the keys to unearth these moments, and they hold the power to share their stories. To be trusted with their stories of family-level pain and sacrifice, and of personal commitment and triumph, was a gift I do not take for granted. I am forever grateful.

**Chapter 5:**

**Women-led Collective Action Spaces**

I don't know what would have happened. Because the role they played, all the attention of the international community, without the women doing what they did...the role that we each played. Without that, I don't know where we would have been now.

– Nohn Rebecca Kidau

So most women I think in their own spaces were taking various initiatives or lobbying and meeting different people in their own space. Not being recognized as peace builders. Not being recognized as key persons to help bring the war to an end. But they mobilized themselves and they used their connections, they used their contacts, they used their relations to begin the conversation. I think that led, over the time from mobilizing at that level until it came into 2003 where you saw a grassroots mass movement.

– Una Kumba Thompson

And again, it goes together with collective action. Because if everybody holds together and they stand on one point and they see it through it usually yields results... So it was really done in-sync. Both in Liberia and in Ghana where the peace talks were going on.

– Bernadette Hawa Bropleh

Women's organizations worked assiduously to bring warring parties to the negotiating table so that the country might achieve peace. They brought peace to the war-torn country and continue to sustain the fragile peace Liberians enjoy today, through their joint efforts.

– Sundaiway E. Nelson Amegashie

## The Grand Collective

Published sources sometimes credit women for “pressuring” and “contributing” to cessation of the conflict. Through this investigation and in-depth inquiry into a few individual and collective stories of resistance, I confidently assert that women indeed *ended* the war in their homeland. To be clear, without the women of Liberia, from wherever they emerged to wherever they stood, from the villages to the city, from the first to the second war, fighting would have carried on to an undeterminable cease date. Women stood the test of innumerable barriers designed to violate their presence, mute their spirits, and shut down their voices. The war was always a matter of life and death, and when resistance was realized as a matter in the same, shifts in smaller spaces turned into movements in larger arenas.

The development of a women’s movement to end the Liberian civil war was devised and enacted in stages, many of those stages having preceded 2003, the year when attention was finally paid to their relentless efforts and demands. Herein, the grand collective refers to the greater body of women and women-led grassroots organizations that worked tirelessly to socially and politically resist the war and its consequences, from earlier stages of the conflict to later development of the mass movement.

Acknowledgement of the grand collective recognizes that women from many backgrounds and spaces – formal or informal – and organizations with many goals intended to help Liberia cease and heal from the conflict, put forth energy in ways that are unknown or underrecognized. The movement was diasporic. Women traveled from near and far to join the fight, including some who relocated from the U.S. and Europe. As

Kidau highlighted, women in the diaspora also worked with stakeholders in international communities and at the UN to raise awareness and put an end to the conflict.

The bulk of this chapter will detail findings about the three main collectives involved in efforts to combat the civil war: 1) a mass action coalition based in Liberia, which was the first group to emerge; 2) a mass action coalition based in Ghana, which expanded and reinforced the efforts that had begun in Liberia; and 3) a group of women who, by demand, represented the interests of women and peace organizations as participants inside of the peace talks in Accra. The chapter will begin by highlighting the spaces occupied in tandem, or outside of the three primary collective spaces of focus, because as confirmed by the sentiments of the activists I spoke with, the stories of the movement's success cannot be told without appreciating the many roles that were played across time and contexts. The grand collective is also an ode to the women who began, drew closer to, or continued with political resistance after the final accord was signed to ensure that peace maintained in Liberia.

### **Building the Grand Collective**

The development of the grand collective is important to understand, as numerous grassroots women's organizations that began efforts long before 2003 provided foundational spaces, conversations, and relationships that transformed into the larger collective of peace fighters. Amegashie, who observed the formation of the powerful landscape of women's peace organizations recounted how women were targeted as sex slaves and lost their children to the violence of the war, whether killed or recruited as soldiers. She asserted, "they decided to take a stand because they were being affected in so many ways. So, they took a stand. They took a stand like, 'we have to do something. If

we don't, we will all perish.” Each activist in their respective interviews also echoed a sense of revelation that seemed to spark the emergence of women's efforts in different spaces. Thompson detailed some realizations that fueled the mass coalition's emergence and need for solidarity:

Wherever you were, that the message now had to move from sitting in an office space or in a small gathering...that we had to take this beyond a smaller group.

We have women in the different displaced areas. We had to get every woman involved to see that this situation is no longer a few sitting and discussing because we're not going anywhere. We are not the signatories. We are not the ones who fly when they're calling these meetings all over in the different countries, they're not calling us. No matter what we're doing here the war keeps going and going and going.

According to Amegashie, organizations began to emerge and over time, new groups would follow to offer a space where women might have felt a better fit or sense of belonging. Although various spaces developed, as reported, many intended to operate as pressure groups on warlords and thus needed to work in collaboration and consideration of one another. When I followed up with Amegashie about her observations of the surge of women-led resistance groups and how they worked together, she detailed:

I think that they were able to work together because they realized that even though they

were in different women groups, they had to do something to stop the war. They had to do so, because whatever affected one woman, affected all of them. So, they had to unite as one, you know, and hold the bull by the horn. They might not have

liked each other but they had to do something. What kept them going was the commitment to themselves, to each other and the commitment towards peace and reconciliation. How did people survive? It was strictly women's doing...

I also inquired with Kidau about how numerous spaces emerged in relation to the growing body of resistance, how women decided where they best fit within the landscape of organizations. She responded, "I don't think there was a formal meeting for us to say, 'okay, you play this role, or you play that role.' People just played the role they felt comfortable playing. The passion that they had." I sat with her response, processing its deviation from what I expected in terms of distinguishing organizational roles at the time, and even now as I write I wonder how the landscape of women-led networks and groups concerned with the same objective actually created boundless opportunities to join the fight from whichever space and corner felt personally aligned. Most spaces had the same larger goal, and women, regardless of where they landed, could work towards that goal.

#### **The landscape of smaller peacekeeping networks and their key organizers.**

Many peacekeeping networks and community organizations were formed before and around the time of the 2003 movement. Reports from Amegashie, Thompson, Kidau, Bropleh, and public and private records revealed that numerous grassroots organizations were developed to directly respond to the conflict and its effects in Liberia. Women-led networks that were revealed in this study, as well as key organizers that led the development of these networks, are listed and recognized as follows:

- ***The Liberian Women's Initiative:*** credited as one of the earliest organizations that organized to fight for Liberians women's rights and participation in political spaces to immediately end the war; headed by the late Mary Brownell, widely

known as “Ma Mary.” Having emerged in early phases of action, they devised strategies to try to convince warring party members to settle their disputes and lay down their weapons, long before the mass action had formed.

- ***Mano River Women’s Peace Network (MARWOPNET)***: established as a regional peacekeeping network with standings in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea and began to devise strategies after numerous peace talks had failed. MARWOPNET developed a high-profile presence as a network and for their efforts in the region. They were invited and sent women as representatives to the peace talks. They held discussions with elected officials in the region, including the President of Guinea, to bring attention to the situation in Liberia. They even initiated a discussion with Charles Taylor, former Liberian President and warring faction leader. Along with organization members like Ma Mary Brownell, Ruth Caesar, and Amelia Ward, head of MARWOPNET at the time, Theresa Leigh Sherman, was designated to sign the final peace accord on behalf of the women of Liberia.
- ***The Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET)***: a program developed under the umbrella of the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) to train women in peacebuilding. WIPNET recruited and supported women in becoming peacebuilding advocates, mediators, trainers, and educators. Leymah Gbowee, a key organizer and peace activist, was trained by WANEP and led the mobilization of women in the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace through her work with WIPNET.

- ***The Association of Female Lawyers (AFELL)***: established in 1994 to advocate for the rights of women, children, and indigent persons. AFELL continues to provide awareness and aim to shift public opinions on laws grounded in gender-based exclusions and violations (e.g., Inheritance Law). They provide legal aid, representation, and counseling for women, girls, and indigent persons and are credited for their formalization of a new Rape Law in Liberia, which expanded the legal definition of rape and pushed for accountability of sexual assault crimes in the justice system.
- ***The Liberian Muslim Women's Organization***: founded with inspiration from WIPNET by Asatu Bah Kenneth, President of the Liberian Female Law Enforcement Association. The organization was formed to mobilize Liberian Muslim women to join efforts with Christian women who were organizing to increase awareness about the growing collective resistance group at local churches in the city, while Kenneth's organization aimed to mobilize women at mosques. Many women joined the Liberian Muslim Women's organization and coalesced to comprise a significant portion of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement in Liberia in 2003.
- ***The National Commission of Women of Liberia (NAWOCOL)***: developed in 1994 to support women and girls who survived abuse and violence during the civil war. NAWOCOL established a mission to provide psychosocial counseling, medical services, and life skills training to women and girls, and later provided micro-credit loans to market women and others disadvantaged by economic and social systems in Liberia. Amegashie, who was deeply involved with

NAWOCOL, reflected on the counseling approach they took where they would “talk to people who were victims of the war, who sustained some injuries during the war, to bring them together to share their story.” They provided space for storytelling then, and as reported, continue to follow up on their efforts with women affected by the war.

- ***The Movement for Democratic Change in Liberia (MDCL)***: entity developed to promote a democratic change of power in Liberia through election. Nohn Rebecca Kidau launched MDCL with five other organizers as a diaspora organization. Kidau was elected as the President of the Minnesota-based MDCL in 2003 and led its charge in advocating for social and political civility in Liberia. MDCL hosted two conferences in the U.S. in 2001 (Minnesota) and 2002 (Maryland) to convene political stakeholders and develop specific intervention recommendations about how to remove Charles Taylor from Liberia. In 2002, MDCL lobbied the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions on the timber industry in Liberia, a major economic fuel to the armed conflict. Kidau represented MDCL at the peace talks from June to August 2003, and a few months later in October, provided a testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives on the situation in Liberia with ongoing recommendations for sustaining peace and democracy.
- ***The Centre for Liberian Assistance***: an organization created by Liberian women in California in 1995 to raise money and collect resources – clothing, food, and other goods – for Liberian children who were orphaned by the war. In 2002, the organization established a more permanent sponsorship program to facilitate

assistance for children in displaced centers in Liberia and Sierra Leone, as well as refugee children at Buduburam refugee camp. Bernadette Hawa Bropleh served as the Executive Director of the Centre for Liberian Assistance and oversaw its efforts to ensure that children who were displaced directly benefited from the resources collected, and received access to basic rights such as a proper education.

- ***Women of Liberia Peace Network (WOLPNET)***: established by the refugee women involved in the mass action coalition in Ghana, as the movement was ending, as a means to sustain peacekeeping accountability after the accord was signed. Una Kumba Thompson incorporated the organization in 2003 and served as its head for nearly 10 years thereafter. She recalled the motivations they had as refugee women to establish WOLPNET, “We are refugees. We’re not going back. So how can we continue to influence? How can we continue to have a voice? This process” They asked critical questions, drawing from their experience in the coalition. Thompson continued, “This process has taught us a lot. We have gone through a lot. We can no longer afford to be silent. How do we do that in a foreign country? How do we do this as women and refugee women?” This is how WOLPNET began and held a firm stance in post-conflict accountability.

**Movement towards a movement.** The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace is the name formally coined by the coalition that developed in 2003 to stage protests, sit-ins, and mediate Liberia’s peace process. In addition to acknowledging that this grand collective coalesced as a product of women’s peacekeeping efforts in formal and informal spaces prior to 2003, I also argue that disentangling the story of this collective is an imperative effort to resist erasure of contributions and to promote recognition that has yet

to be properly shared. Disentangling the story is not a matter of opposing the very unity that fueled Liberian women's revolutionary accomplishments, but to precisely expand existing accounts of these women's efforts by distinguishing the unique spaces occupied in service of the grand 2003 movement. More voices should be heard, more stories should be shared, and more contributors should be honored. This dissertation cannot do justice to the vast number of stories and experiences untold, but the results explicated below begin to provide detail about how the movement emerged and evolved in distinct spaces of resistance as a part of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace.

The results of this study reveal that in 2003, three groups of Liberian women achieved peace through their activism, social, and political work. To reiterate, these groups include: 1) the first mass action coalition that formed in Liberia; 2) the mass action coalition that was built in Ghana to sustain and enlarge existing efforts; and 3) a group of women delegates who demanded entry into the peace talks in Accra. The goals, developmental journeys, identity-making processes, and commitments in these spaces – some shared and many unshared – will be articulated to honor the strategic resistance and political work of each group. The section below begins by explaining the emergence of the collective in Liberia, then moves to describe the emergence of counterpart efforts in Ghana, and then ends by honoring what was learned about the delegates who participated in the talks.

### **Mass Action for Peace in Liberia**

The mass resistance coalition that formed in response to the war in 2003 started in Liberia. As Kidau explained, "In Liberia there were pockets of women who started on their own who had to bring themselves together and say, "How can we bring an end to

the crisis? We're sitting. Nobody is asking us. And so, the women internally just began to gather themselves." The coalition developed clear goals in line with the larger objective of ending the war and they were intentional that their identity aligned with their goals.

Several goals guided women's collective actions in Liberia, in service of their main objective of ending the conflict in their homeland. One of their main goals was to convince members of warring parties, including the former president, to attend the upcoming peace negotiations in Accra. This goal was significant given that warring faction leaders had become disengaged with negotiations and the broader community had become disillusioned by the grim reality that more than a dozen peace agreements had failed since 1989. Another goal they embraced was to try to disarm children who had been recruited to fight the war. In Bropleh's words, who explained this commitment from a place of solidarity, "We [the women in Liberia] were not really getting through to the warlords so the other strategy was to try to talk to the young fighters." They took on this goal to compound their efforts and reach their objective from different angles.

**A trailblazing peace force: Development and collective identity.** The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace launched under the direction of WIPNET in 2001. Again, WIPNET was specifically concerned with training women as peacebuilding advocates, educators, mediators, and trainers. According to the umbrella organization WANEP (2013), "Under the WIPNET programme, WANEP promotes mainstreaming gender perspective into peacebuilding and conflict prevention frameworks at the community, national and regional level" (par. 1). As it concerned their group identity, women were in agreement that they did not want to be seen as politicians and wanted nothing to do with the regard surrounding political identity at the time. They knew the

nature of their work was very much political in terms of resistance efforts and strategies, but their identity was hinged on peace and is thus why WIPNET's peacebuilding frame was a fitting umbrella and guide for their collective efforts.

*Transcending boundaries.* Desperation about the war and recognition that progress would require unified efforts led women to join forces from their respective groups. However, it was not only critical to suspend organizational boundaries, they also needed to collaborate across their social, economic, religious, and ethnic locations to pursue their larger objective. The reconstruction of boundaries is significant, especially in context, as it represented direct opposition of the very tensions that fueled the war they were working to end. This suspension of boundaries became central to their identity as a collective. The convergence of religious-based efforts and engagement of women from different socioeconomic positions were particularly strengths that had pronounced shifts on the movement.

Bropleh reflected on the suppression of religious lines in Liberia, stating, "when the women decided that they were going to have this mass action and do the sit-ins, there were no boundaries. There was no religion involved. There was nothing involved. Everybody was one, which was really dynamic." She continued later, "they realized that this was not a Christian or Muslim thing. This was more like something that we all had to pitch in to make sure that it worked." As prayer was embraced by each collective, they incorporated space for each group to either open or close convenings with a religious prayer. This collaboration across religious groups was its own act of resistance, while division and lack of trust ruled the social order in Liberia's warring context.

The convergence of women from different social and economic backgrounds is celebrated as a key factor in the success of the mass action. “Market women” specifically, or those who closed down their markets to join the efforts – many of whom did not complete formal education – comprised a significant portion of the coalition and saw the movement from its inception to post-conflict periods. Amegashie described these women as the backbone of the movement in Liberia, explaining:

While the educated women were with the men representing the women in the forefront, they were in the background. I mean the indigenous women. They were like the backbone (the silent majority), and the educated women from different organizations were in the forefront with the men at different conferences.

From her perspective, Bropleh also explained the essential presence of market women in the mass action coalition:

Regardless of how many bachelors or masters or PhDs we had, we could not have done the movement without the masses. So I would like to say that it was really the market women who really made it happen. Because there were so many of them.... Yeah. There were so many of them. I would definitely venture to say they were at least even 90% of the group. They were the mass. They were....Both Ghana and in Liberia. Both Ghana and Liberia.

Discussions with participants confirmed that the development and collective identity of the coalition in Liberia set a precedence for collective resistance that would soon emerge in Ghana, building a transnational network of Liberian women activists. Although they shared common interests and one major objective, commitments and strategies to achieve the larger goal emerged in unique ways with each coalition. The

lengths the women in Liberia went to demonstrated that they would stop at nothing to terminate the killing field that engulfed their communities.

**“They Took the Rain and Sun for Us”: Strategies and Commitments in Liberia.** When the coalition in Liberia learned that there would be another peace conference in Ghana in 2003, they employed numerous strategies as a collective to move Liberia towards accomplished peace. They staged sit-ins, marches, prayer rallies, protests, a sex strike, mediation techniques, and the power of relationships (both theirs, in solidarity; and relationships with other stakeholders) to combat violence in the country. One of their first commitments was to ensure that former President Charles Taylor attended the upcoming peace conference in Accra, which was a significant priority given that word had traveled about his plans to disregard the negotiations. They also intended to ensure that other warring party members attended the proceedings in Accra. Thompson, who was living in Ghana at the time, recalled quickly realizing the intentions of the collective that had formed in Liberia, “So when you checked, there was a huge...there was a movement, a sit-in in Liberia that I wasn’t aware of, asking for Taylor to leave or for the war to come to an end. So, when that movement was going on that was called the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace.” In order to garner attention towards the growing movement, the coalition chose distinct sites in the capital city of Monrovia to stage daily sit-ins that Charles Taylor, other political figures, and the general public could not ignore.

***Key sites of resistance and a distinct presence.*** Hundreds of women gathered daily to protest along the roads of the main airfield near Roberts International Airport, and fish market in the heart of the city. This location was chosen because it is proximal to

the former president's home and is situated along his route from his home to the presidential office, which guaranteed that his daily routine would include seeing them and hearing their voices. Bropleh reflected on women's commitments to denouncing the war in direct sight of the president, "The women [in Liberia] would sit-in at the fish market. All the women would close up their markets and they would sit-in at the fish market in front of where the president's motorcade would pass." At this site, they showed up everyday in large numbers to stage sit-ins during which they vocally protested and held up signs displaying brief and legible statements like, "We want peace, no more war!" and "We are tired, we want peace!"

This site of resistance was not only for the attention of the president and other political figures, but to raise the attention of the general public and eventually the international community. The airfield is on a large plot of land that sits on a main road visible to anyone traveling to and from the capital. Amegashie described the setting she often witnessed and sometimes visited to express solidarity:

They have an airstrip somewhere in Monrovia, they would always be there. Sun or rain, they would be there at that particular spot and the place is sooo visible that once we are going downtown Monrovia or going to Paynesville where you would have to take the car to go to RIA which is the national airport, you would see them. So they were at a spot that was so visible that nobody could miss them.

Kidau, who sat inside the peace talks in Accra, also described the conspicuous nature of the collective in Liberia, "Everybody who is passing on the boulevard to go to St. Paul or to Monrovia would see this group of women sitting there in the sun or in the

rain.” With a sense of gratitude that was shared among the other participants, Kidau explained, “They sat there for days and days. It was raining and the sun was shining on them...They took the sun and rain for us,” she shared, “they did their part. And their part was very powerful too. They were visible and it was powerful.” Reference to the rain and sun women endured was raised to illustrate their persistence and commitment to showing up and remaining visible in solidarity.

Each participant reflected on the presence and visibility of the women during sit-ins as profound. Their visibility was also marked by their commitment to dress in all white, with lapas or traditional Liberian cloths wrapped around their waste. They wore all-white headwraps as crowns to distinguish themselves and raise attention. Dressing uniformly, they also committed to not wearing makeup, leaning on their goal to present in the purest form of themselves physically and in solidarity. When the women marched along the streets, singing and chanting their demands to end the war, others would see them and join the coalition to march together and add their voices to the protest. Women began traveling from outside of Monrovia to come support the coalition in the capital city. As the presence of the collective strengthened and more women grew committed to the movement, the movement in turn drew closer to their personal lives and routines. Their personal spaces became sites of resistance.

*Sex strike.* Tactics used by the collective expanded to not only demand the attention politicians, but to also demand the attention of their partners. This is where the famous sex strike first enters the story of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. On a large scale, many women insisted that they would refrain from having sex with their partners until the war stopped. Kidau reflected on the pressure that women began to apply

in their personal and intimate lives, explaining, “Pressure was on from every corner. Even you come home to your wife, she’s pressuring you. She’s refusing to have sex with you. So they had that portion, too, pressuring the men.” In the words of Leymah Gbowee in *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, she explained “we were so desperate, we were going to have a sex strike.” Some women reported, according to Gbowee, that their husbands began to pray with them because “the end of the war meant enjoyment.”

Delving into this strategy and trying to understand such a decision at a collective level, I inquired about what the sex strike meant for women and the greater collective. In her second interview while reflecting on turning points, Bernadette Bropleh began to explain the strategy first used by the women in Liberia, explaining “And then another pivotal point too was when the women decided that they were going to put on a sex strike. And that was if the men didn’t come together and clean up their act, that women were not going to have sex until things were settled.” As echoed by other women telling the story of the strike, they decided as a group that this was a part of the control many of them had as women and they would use it to explain to their husbands why the struggle for peace was so critical.

*From chants, to statements, to Accra.* As demonstrated, the coalition in Liberia protested through the use of chants, songs, prayers, and signs projecting their demands during marches and sit-ins staged in Liberia in 2003. They insisted that the leaders of the country be held accountable to show up and actively engage in the forthcoming peace conference and would shift the strategy and tune of their message however they needed to, to make sure they were heard. Market women showed up in masses to demonstration sites and continued to show up consistently while a smaller branch of the collective began

to ensure their demands were landing directly on the tables of warring faction leaders. On April 23, 2003, hundreds of women gathered at the presidential office to present a statement to Charles Taylor on behalf of WIPNET. They sat, held hands tightly, and displayed profound courage while embracing the real fears of speaking out about the government to its leader whose ego itself could order their killing in seconds. Leymah Gbowee was called to the podium atop the courtyard to read the collective's position statement, oscillating between the president, other political officials, and her peace activist counterparts:

We ask the honorable Pro Tem of the Senate, being women, and being in line with our cause, to kindly present this statement to his Excellency, Dr. Charles Taylor with this message: That the women of Liberia, including IDPs, we are tired of war. We are tired of running. We are tired of begging for bulgar wheat. We are tired of our children being raped. We are now taking this stand to secure the future of our children because we believe as custodians of tomorrow, our children will ask us "mama, what was your role during the crisis?" Kindly convey this to the president of Liberia. Thank you.

As Taylor sat atop a sea of women in the courtyard, this moment is regarded as a pivotal moment in which he recognized that popular support was on the women's side. The former president of Liberia agreed to attend the peace talks set to take place in Ghana. The success of this major goal was made possible by the collective voices of the women who were present in distinct sites along his route, day-in and day-out, and those who showed up in masses to reinforce their position at the presidential office in late April. Having convinced the president, they spread this commitment to other warring

party members and sent a few women to Sierra Leone to convince leaders in other factions to attend the talks as well. They used their relationships to do so. Asatu Bah Kenneth, who mobilized Liberian Muslim women into the movement, was former schoolmates with one of the rebel leaders and thus was one of the leaders who led to charge to Sierra Leone to bring other parties to the negotiation table.

After successfully convincing warring parties to attend the upcoming conference in Accra, women's intentions in Liberia needed to shift with the progress that had been achieved. It wasn't over. Their commitment now spread to hold parties accountable to actively participate in the upcoming negotiations. To do so, a small subset of the Liberia-based coalition traveled to Ghana prior to the conference in order to maintain the momentum already built and not lose direct eye-sight and connection with warring faction leaders who would be traveling to Accra for the conference. As Kidau precisely summarized, "They used their strategy well. And they followed the peace talk to Ghana." The collective resistance built in Liberia blazed a trail for what would become a transnational mass of Liberian women peace activists.

### **Mass Action for Peace in Ghana**

The coalition that formed in Ghana transcended the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace to a new territory, eventually occupying space right outside the doors of the peace conference to ensure accountability and integrity in the process and resist any actions that obstructed the main objective. Among the objectives of the coalition in Ghana were ensuring that women were represented at the table when the peace talks began, ensuring the conference progressed past warring factions' preoccupation with political power and ended in a formally signed agreement, and lastly, ensuring that

suitable plans were put in place to support long-term peacebuilding in Liberia. With the leadership of women like Una Kumba Thompson, who mobilized the refugee women that overwhelmingly comprised the coalition in Ghana, and the fortitude of women like Bernadette Hawa Bropleh, who suspended or terminated life in the U.S. and other countries to stand in solidarity, the Women of Liberia Mass Action for peace transformed in power after reaching Ghana.

“Enough is enough” is a sentiment that encompasses the fatigue, anger, and spark that led many Liberian women to participate in peacebuilding across contexts and settings. According to the participants in this study, the same can be said for those who assembled in Ghana. Thompson reflected on the sense of fatigue expressed by many women she spoke with at the time, describing from a position in which she shared this fatigue, “We’ve had enough. We can no longer tolerate. We can no longer live like this, to be abused, to be victimized, to be raped. And our children are all over without a place, and no fathers in the home.” The lived realities and consequences of the war were deeply wounding. While collective action did not and could not cure many of these wounds, convening in resistance of atrocities committed in their homeland, and also convening to re-garner protection of their bodies, their children, and their families were observed as substantial sources of motivation to join the fight against the war. Standing in solidarity in Accra would require its own developmental process, however, and this process would not be void of challenge.

**Development and Collective Identity.** Several women were selected to travel from Liberia to Ghana and transfer the movement directly to the doors of the peace conference. As Thompson reflected during our first interview together:

There were seven women who were tasked with the responsibility to go over to Ghana and mobilize the refugee women and to carry on the very same peace sit-ins that had been going on in Liberia. The seven women, they came in to mobilize the women, because they wanted a huge sit-in. They wanted a huge number of women to be present at the peace conference at the meeting of the heads of states.

Mobilizing Liberian refugee women was the first step towards developing the mass action coalition in Ghana. This step was essential. It was the only way to develop a collective with strength in numbers because the majority of Liberian women who lived in Ghana at the time had relocated to Buduburam refugee camp at some point during the conflict. Given the context and insecurities in an unfamiliar environment, at a precarious time for Liberians much less, the development and convening of the collective was nothing short of a challenge.

*Refugee women in Buduburam.* Women who had been displaced from Liberia and relocated to Buduburam refugee camp eventually comprised more than 95% of the mass action coalition in Ghana. Forming this collective however, required patience, an understanding of the refugee situation in Ghana, and creation of space for new leadership aware of the context. This is where the work of Una Kumba Thompson came in, both timely and invaluable.

Thompson learned about the seven women's attempts to mobilize the refugee women and was informed that the refugee women had refused to participate. At that point, the women from Liberia had been in Ghana for one week and were becoming discouraged about the outlook of spreading the movement, and time was of the essence with the conference quickly approaching. Thompson organized a meeting with the

refugee women at Bethel Church and listened to their frustrations about how they had been approached and why they had denied participation. This led to what Thomson termed as negotiations. She recounted, "...after we had that meeting on that Sunday afternoon, we arranged for another meeting in the evening...That whole evening it was like one...it was a complete, what you would call, negotiation. Which, I had no idea. This was our own negotiations going on there."

A few women gathered on Buduburam refugee camp to discuss the discord that had prevented the refugee women from merging with those who had traveled from Liberia, which ultimately hindered their collaboration on efforts to advance peace in Liberia. They met in the evening for several hours. As late as 11pm, they were processing in the dark amid the light of a few burning candles. Thompson recalled, "I think we were about seven to eight women discussing what had happened." They processed the refugee women's disappointment about how they were approached, and their feelings that they were only being summoned to stand in numbers rather than as participants in organizing and having a legitimate voice in the movement, even though they were most familiar with the context and would be most affected by any consequences imposed. As Thompson stated, "The women could have been arrested because they were refugees. We didn't know, politically, how it would be interpreted. So, their personal safety was at risk." She explained, "After hours of understanding where they were coming from...like I said, we had a negotiation for almost five, six hours of discussion....We finally agreed." She continued, "That was the agreement that night, and that was the beginning of a movement of sit-ins of women in Ghana." Thompson later summarized her sense of realizations that fueled the refugee women's participation:

Without any concrete direction, but just following our instincts and standing up and saying, ‘Okay, we have to do something. We have to be heard. We don’t have the guns. We don’t have the power to negotiate. We are not sitting with the presidents and the powers that be. But we’re going to come forth and be heard in whatever space we find ourselves.’ I think that was the most powerful.

As demonstrated, negotiations began long before the peace conference began and they were integral even to the women’s process of developing the collective in Ghana. They aired issues that had impeded on the group’s initial merge. The refugee women then made it clear what would be necessary to move forward as one, in protest of the war, especially in an unfamiliar refugee context that was far different than the context, environment, and systems in Liberia. Hundreds of refugee women eventually comprised the overwhelming majority of the collective in Ghana. After this developmental milestone, the process of building the collective advanced, and the identity of the women as a group transcended their refugee status to honor the many backgrounds, perspectives, knowledges, and skills women would bring to the table to support the larger movement.

*Women from all walks of life.* Despite the majority of the women in Ghana sharing a geopolitical position as refugees in Ghana, in the words of Bernadette Hawa Bropleh, “the mass action was really not a fixed group of women, it was Liberian women from all walks of life coming together to create the mass action.” Bropleh described the coalition consisting of a “spectrum of women” who assembled, including “market women, professional women, student leaders, NGO workers” and more. Similar to the coalition in Liberia, market women, or those with fewer years of formal education and relatively lower economic statuses – many of whom re-established their markets in the

refugee camp – occupied a significant presence in the collective. Some women who assembled were affiliated with peace organizations and networks, while many joined individually, as Bropleh highlighted, because “they wanted to be a part and raise their voices as well.”

To organize the collective efforts of women who had traveled from Liberia, relocated from overseas, and those who lived in Ghana prior to the conference, a central organization would need to guide the efforts and strategies of the collective as the movement grew. Given its recognition as an established peacekeeping entity, as well as its guidance of the movement that was already built in Liberia, WIPNET continued to oversee significant aspects of the movement in Accra. Establishing solidarity was imperative to the group in Ghana, particularly as this collective took seriously the responsibility of monitoring the progress of upcoming talks. Any resistance enacted would need to be strategically unified in order to have a boisterous impact on a derailing process.

Like their counterparts in Liberia, the presence and visibility of the women in Ghana was profound and many who observed their collective action, like Nohn Rebecca Kidau, refer to them as a “powerful pressure group.” The coalition in Ghana embraced this part of their identity which had coined them as *the* pressure group in Accra. Thompson referred to their group as “foot soldiers” and acknowledged an ‘aha’ moment when it struck her that the collective she led to mobilize had become “the face of the women of Liberia.” In what had become a transnational network of Liberian women peace activists – as efforts in Liberia continued to strengthen – the commitments,

strategies, and collective actions of the mass action coalition in Ghana now became critical to see the peace process through, legitimately and comprehensively.

**“It Really Took A lot of Willpower”: Strategies and Commitments in Ghana.**

In many ways, the commitments and resistance strategies of the collective in Ghana were inspired by the movement in Liberia, but changes in the context, timing, and events that were transpiring in turn inspired new ways to apply collective pressure in Ghana. With more than 200 women who gathered at M Plaza daily, like the coalition in Liberia, the women in Ghana had a profound collective presence that was noticed by others, like Kidau, as “conspicuous” and “powerful.” To outsiders, especially conference participants, it appeared as though the women never left the site because they were present every day, from sunrise before the conference began to sundown until as late as 9pm. Some reportedly wondered whether they slept near the grounds surrounding M Plaza because of how much they occupied the site. While describing their conspicuous presence, Kidau stated, “They were very very committed and they were...you come to the conference in the morning, and they're there. It's almost like they would sleep there... I think at some point they were going home, but then we would come back in the morning” and they would be there. Bropleh explained, “We wanted the warlords to see us there, present, in front of the building before the meeting started.”

*Committing to the struggle.* Routine-setting played an important role in the collective’s ability to consistently commit to daily resistance. They set a specific gathering time and meeting location and organized buses to transport all of the women on a two-hour ride from Buduburam refugee camp to M Plaza. According to Thompson and Bropleh, discretion was critical in early days and they exercised caution when they began

to gather in order to protect the refugee women from backlash. Thompson organized for the women to meet at her school, which was just off of the refugee camp. She described their approach:

So we agreed that those women had to go in every area quietly and signal to women. And they were seeking out 200 women for the first trip. It was like a secret, carrying out a secret mission... We'd tell people quietly, 'by 4:00 in the morning, put on your trousers, tie a lapa around you, walk in twos, and go straight up to my school. Do not walk in groups before we call attention to the camp management. So you walk by twos, 4:00 in the morning, and then go up as far – maybe it was like a 10, 15-minute walk to my school – and everybody congregate there.'... And we used the bus that used to take the kids to school. And we arranged for the bus to meet the women on my property at 5:00 in the morning to make the first trip. We had to devise so many strategies to protect the women.

They spent all day at M Plaza, typically left at around 8pm or 9pm, arrived back at Buduburam two hours later, ate, slept for a few hours, and congregated the next morning at 5am to head back to the site at M Plaza. This summarizes the mass action's daily routine. The demands of this routine cannot be understated as the commitment became just as much an emotional challenge as it was physically challenging. As Bropleh recalled, "it really took a lot of will power" to continue committing to the struggle as the process went on. Thompson reflected on how little sleep they received, stating "Emotions were high. We were desperate. We were tired, because we were starting to congregate about 4:00, 5:00 in the morning. So, emotions were very high. But actually, we were very, very, very persistent." This reflects the tone that all participants expressed while

sharing about the mass action's commitment to collective resistance, the struggles that came with their commitment, and yet, their grit to maintain their stake in peacebuilding in Liberia.

Like the coalition in Liberia, Kidau also acknowledged the persistence of the coalition in Ghana with regard to them sitting in the sun and the rain. She used some humor to emphasize her observations of their commitment, highlighting "They were patient. They sat in the sun, whether it's raining, whether the sun is shining. You know Liberians are afraid of rain [laughter]. They will run to the car to avoid rain [laughter]. But they sat in the rain. They sat in the rain." The theme of them sitting in the sun and rain is underscored by the reality that they endured a season of both heatwaves and heavy downpours that could not alter their commitment to ending Liberia's 14-year season of war. Like their counterparts in Liberia, they staged sit-ins, staged a sex strike, used prayer, chanted and held banners with "We want peace, no more war!" and other statements alike, among other strategies commonly seen in other spaces of political resistance and protest. From their unique position in Accra however, new strategies would be devised to apply pressure on the process and lead to critical turning points in the movement.

*Moving in closer: Increasing pressure.* As the conference went on and progress stalled at points along the way, the coalition observed a sense of joviality experienced by participating warring party members and decided that pressure needed to increase. They sat on the outskirts of M Plaza for over a month before drawing in closer. Bropleh illustrated their view from across the street in front of the hotel, "We'd see them come out during breakfast. They'd come out laughing and go eat breakfast. You'd see them eating

lunch. They would come out, sit under the umbrella, order all of these lavish meals.”

Frustration sparked among the group as they observed warring parties embrace the luxuries afforded during the process. Most women remained distant, as reported, but some women approached warlords during mealtimes and ultimately opened a line of communication between the coalition and warring factions. While this was a strategy of its own, it also allowed the women to become proximal to mealtime discussions among faction members, which reportedly heavily focused on government positions and statuses the faction leaders felt they deserved in the administration. Once they became proximal to these conversations, collective frustration grew among the women who were simultaneously watching participants embrace the slow-moving process as they enjoyed the accommodations offered as participants. After several weeks of observing what started to feel like a “fun fare,” the coalition decided to physically draw in closer to M Plaza. Bropleh detailed this process:

So the women watched that for a whole month. And it got to the point where we were like ‘this is going anywhere, and we need to do something. We can't just be talking.’ Somebody would come out and sit under the umbrella and two or three women would go there and sit there with them and sometimes they would offer you lunch. And then they would just shoot the breeze. And we were like ‘no this isn't it. This isn't what this is about.’ We were not going to just let them turn this into a fun fare. We needed to engage them on another level and if they kind of listened, then we needed to take some action. And that's why little by little...about one month into it we decided that instead of sitting on the outskirts we could come out and sit under the umbrellas. And I think we sat there for another two

weeks under the umbrellas. We still didn't have the courage to go into the hall. I mean, we were not invited into the hall. You know, we were never invited into the hall so after one month on the outskirts, another 2-3 under the umbrella, we just braved the storm and decided we were going to sit in front of the door.

The evolution of them drawing in closer and eventually positioning themselves at the door of the meetings inspired pivotal turnings point in the process. New strategies, planned and unplanned, would amount to surface the voices of coalition women inside of the conference space. Their resistance would soon close in, disturbing the peace at the negotiations in Accra, in order to achieve a more pressing need for peace more than 900 miles away in Liberia.

*Closing in: Blocking exits and waging threats.* The coalition recognized that they would need to develop additional measures to increase pressure on the talks. For several women who were involved in strategic capacities on behalf of the refugee women, the process of closing in fueled one of the most recognized moments of political resistance and turning points during the conference. On a holiday during the conference, meetings at M Plaza were not held but rather than using this time to rest, Thompson and several others met at her school to process their frustrations around a need for more urgency, and to devise collective plans of action that would radically shift the energy of the talks. She delineated the planning process:

So, we selected a few of us... all this time, we had no training. Nobody was guiding us...It was there that we decided that the warlords, the participants were actually having a very good time...they were being well taken care of, and we were fed up with that. So it was actually at my school with 15 of us refugee

women, we came up with a strategy that the next time we go to the plaza, we should lock them up... That we should wear our trousers under our lapas, because there could be a possibility they could drag us to jail. So we did all of that planning in there.

This plan resonated with the women who met and decided that they needed to stage a drastic move in order for warlords and other participants to listen and take seriously their demand to achieve a written agreement. They decided to assess the surroundings at M Plaza, specifically near the hall, to make sure no one other than Liberians and conference participants were present, before moving forward. Between this meeting and the next conference day, information about the plan leaked and the group decided to postpone their plan. The time soon came, and within a matter of days, Thompson recalls sitting on the floor among the women and passing along faint whispers that, "This is the day." They sat near the doors of the hall and waited for an optimal opportunity to strike. Thompson illustrated the moments leading to the infamous lockdown she had been selected to lead:

We didn't say anything. We watched, we observed. Leymah went on to Abubakar to talk with the some of the peacemakers, and they all were coming in to the hall. When they got into the hall, they observed, they got to talking and everything. Once we noticed that only Liberians were left in the hall, in a split second... It was very scary. We were very scared. I was scared... I just got up and ran to the door, and everybody saw. I said, "Lock up, lock up, lock up!" And everybody formed a chain so that if they should drag any one person, all of us

would be dragged together. So, we hooked our arms together, and we ran, and we sat before the door.

As reported, they were nervous, even scared; they didn't know the repercussions of their actions; and even conceived the possibility of being dragged away or taken to jail. Bropleh explained that their collective courage had strengthened after weeks of observing from afar, followed by weeks of closing in on M Plaza. Courage then met with desperation about the situation in Liberia and frustrations with how warring parties continued to approach the process, which culminated into one of the defining moments of the movement as they took the process by storm, into their own hands. Bropleh described the setting from her perspective, and the human chain she, Thompson, and at least 200 other women formed around M Plaza:

We blocked the entire building, not only the entryway. Because there were front entrances...then we sent a few women to the window, so now we had women at all the windows and all the entrances. So, there was no way out... We had them in there for hours, we didn't leave there until I would like to say maybe around 9pm... they were in there. So, they had to start putting things down on paper after that... They realized that we were serious.

Kidau, who was inside of the meeting room with other conference participants, recalled the power and energy that erupted in the conference space in these moments. General Abubakar, the former Nigerian President and mediator for the conference, went inside to explain what was transpiring. She explained, "He came and told us that the women had locked the door. They wanted us to achieve peace right now. If we don't achieve peace, they would not open the door for us to get outside." The women

demanded that they would remain in their positions until some form of an agreement was put in writing.

Chaos followed as some men reportedly attempted to escape through windows, which they quickly learned were barred close. Media attention drew closer as the situation intensified. Bropleh sat directly outside of the door and was frontline when men inside began to push the door vigorously in order to leave. This chaos produced another pivotal turning point. Bropleh observed as four or five women, along with Leymah Gbowee, started to undress themselves as another radical attempt to make it clear that they were not backing down. Amegashie reflected on the relationality of the moment in line with the women's stance at the time, asserting, "You will not be happy to see a sister or your wife or your mother being naked, so you people have to do something."

Amegashie alluded to the role of culture, which Bropleh emphasized when I inquired further about the gravity of this particular act of resistance. She explained that there is a cultural taboo around men seeing their mothers naked, particularly if they intentionally undress themselves, to the extent that some may even view it as a curse. Amegashie reported that this strategy "brought the men to their senses." This demonstration was its own act of resistance; a resistance of culture steeped in patriarchy, which in and of itself, was very much political. Bropleh recounted the reactions of the mediator and other men she observed while at the center of this scene. "The mediator said, 'we cannot allow our mothers to start stripping'...this was something they couldn't let happen. It was like, 'we cannot demean our mothers... So that evening they were able to start making some decisions, with women at the table contributing to those decisions.'"

Their actions were taken heed to, and their collective demands were finally acknowledged. As Kidau highlighted from her insider perspective, these last moments were revolutionary and completely shifted the process. While reflecting on their threats of nudity, she credited the coalition women, stating, “And I know those little pieces of work that happened came together to make us achieve the peace that we achieve.” Not only was an agreement written, but within 48 hours the comprehensive Accra Peace Accord was signed after more than 70 days of deliberation. Their feat was profound. To understand the totality of the movement and the grand contributions of women, it is necessary to also take a look inside of the peace talks and acknowledge the revolutionary resistance of the few Liberian women who were selected as conference delegates, as they carried the movement from the streets to the negotiation tables.

### **Women Delegates to the Peace Talks**

Before the conference began in 2003, Liberian women had formulated and projected demands they felt were necessary to maintain accountability during the conference proceedings. A major priority was that women be included as participants and that their voices be heard inside of the peace talks. The activists in this study recalled a sense of “commotion” around this demand during pivotal moments of resistance in Akosombo – the city where former peace talks were held – from all women, including those who would remain “on the ground” insisting that they had representation inside the talks. Senior officials of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) who were present in Akosombo coordinated the participatory body, including eventually sending official invitations to women’s organizations that would send representatives to participate in the talks.

As a delegate, when I asked Kidau how the demand to be admitted transpired, she responded, “By the time we were at the peace talk, women had already manifested themselves as a participant in the peace talk. We were inside.” A spirit of conviction was felt as she spoke about “being inside” even before they were accredited. Her reflection of this pre-conference assurance felt like a nod to women’s demands, and a confidence that from individual organizations to the larger body, they would ensure that a group of them were able to translate their protests and collective resistance to physical representation, right at the negotiation tables. Thompson highlighted the criticality of women’s involvement in the peace conference:

And when that happened it did something as compared to the several meetings that were held without the faces of women, without the faces of Liberian women, without the voices of the women in that manner that would bring some attention that, ‘Hey, we too. We are not only victims, but we too have a voice. We have to determine the way our country goes. We have a voice to determine how we live, and enough is enough.’

**Development and collective identity.** Similar to their counterparts who protested outside of the conference, their goal was to hold the peace process accountable by shifting the conversation from its predominant focus on negotiations of power, privilege, and money (i.e., who would obtain positions in the government) to a conversation centered on the turmoil that had deteriorating the nation-state and its population for 14 years. Their attention to these issues and potential derailment became central to their identity as they made it indisputably clear what they were there to achieve. They established themselves as delegates concerned with the real issues that affected the lives

of everyday people, as well as the social and political integrity of Liberia. They also established themselves as stakeholders in the long-term peacebuilding process, setting the expectation for their continued involvement in Liberia's sociopolitical situation long after an accord was signed.

Nohn Rebecca Kidau recalled sitting among four other women who were accredited to the conference. While one participant, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, represented a political party, other women delegates hailed from grassroots and civil society organizations. Kidau was accredited to represent the Movement for Democratic Change in Liberia (MDCL), the organization she helped develop and led to ensure that a democratic transition of power followed the peace accord. Kidau reported that MDCL was recognized as an entity representing Liberian organizations in the diaspora. The Liberian chapter of the Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET) was also granted admission and represented by leaders, Theresa Leigh-Sherman and the late Ma Mary Brownell. The Association of Female Lawyers in Liberian (AFELL) also had a delegate attend the talks.

From outside perspectives, as shared by Bropleh, the women who were selected as delegates were not only leaders of their organizations, but also regarded in some ways as "more mature women" who had the experience, language, and attunement to complex issues that would be addressed at the negotiation tables with heads of nations. While reflecting on identity, Kidau flashed back to memories of walking among the mass action coalition outside of M Plaza Hotel as they protested and demanded progress be achieved. "Outside, the women were...you know when we were passing going on, they were talking, "You better achieve that peace!" As they chanted recognized statements like,

“We want peace, no more war!” Kidau reported that even though she knew the mass action was chanting directly to warring party members, she absorbed these words in her identity as a delegate, explaining, “We were the face of the people that were out there who were telling us constantly to ‘achieve this peace.’ We were representing them in there. I felt so...all these people that we’re passing, the children that we see, are the ones we are representing.” The weight of representation was felt, but from her perspective, this weight fueled their participation, commitments, and strategies to ensure that the conflict in Liberia ended.

**Strategies and commitments.** As a delegate, Kidau explained that the work of the few women who were accredited to the talks began before the conference. Like herself, other delegates had followed the previous talks very closely from their positions as advocates, organizers, strategists, and mediators. In brief, as she stated, “we went to these meetings, organizing or traveling all over the place to beg people to come and intervene in Liberia.” While Kidau’s political work involved informing policymakers in the U.S. about the situation in Liberia and proposing intervention strategies, other women delegates’ political work occurred in nearby countries like Guinea and Sierra Leone, impressing upon stakeholders the need to support peacebuilding efforts as neighbors to Liberia. AFELL was committed to working in Liberia, and thus, the group of women delegates came into the conference with multinational political experiences, knowledges, relationships that informed how they navigated their involvement.

Delegates’ political work converged in June 2003 when the conference in Accra began. During a two-month conference period, they attended every meeting held at M Plaza Hotel to achieve an agreement between the Government of Liberia, the Liberians

United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), and other political parties involved in the fighting in Liberia. During these meetings, Kidau explained that women delegates had “no go zones” or topics they decided to intervene on if they deviated away from the larger goal of protecting the citizens and streets of Liberia.

*“No go zone”: Status and power.* Women delegates’ first and primary “no go zone” related to negotiations of political positions. While discussing barriers they experienced inside of the talks, Kidau recalled, “There was a time the warring parties were demanding that when we form a transitional government, they wanted somebody from their warring parties to be the head. That was the ‘no go’ zone for us and for the international community. So we said no. We cannot do that. We cannot reward you.” Kidau explained this issue as one of the major points of contention in the negotiations, and as expected, much pushback came from warring party members who felt they had fought for their rights to provide administrative leadership in Liberia. She described one of many personal interactions with a warring party member who, while validating the violence as contributing to the peace process, expressed anger about the shift in conversations

So, we had seen these 3 types of positions and including the international community, nobody wanted to give it to the warring party. Oh, [warring party member] got mad at me. He said, ‘you people were sitting down there, we were fighting, if we didn't fight, we would not be here. And now y'all want to take our position.’

Kidau and other delegates’ responses to these sentiments were precise and unwavering, simply that the need for peace in Liberia had nothing to do with jobs or

political positions, but had everything to do with restoring safety, peace, healing, and growth in the country. As many who sat outside of the peace conference recognized, Bropleh stated, “Women were looking more at saving the state or making sure that the country wasn’t in chaos.” Every participant in this study highlighted that for years on end, at every negotiation held before Accra, a solid peace agreement was hindered by warring parties’ preoccupation with securing positions, status, and power, thus women delegates’ in-time resistance of this preoccupation proved critical in a space that had historically allowed such conversations to derail the progress and legitimacy of a ceasefire agreement.

**“No go zone”: Taylor indictment.** Another “no go zone” related to misaligned focus on the indictment of Charles Taylor. Conversations about the progress of the proceedings revealed that at the beginning of the conference, there were heavy disagreements about the role that Charles Taylor’s indictment from Sierra Leone had on the peace process for Liberia. Clarification on this point was necessary and required getting all delegates on the same page in order to advance the process, which was reportedly challenging given participants’ differential positions, relation to, and opinion about Taylor and his administration. Women delegates’ voices were critical here as they contested this derailment, backed by their long-term and in-depth attunement to the situation in Liberia and knowledge about the indictment in relation to the political situation in Liberia. Kidau reported that she and other delegates had to separate the indictment from the process at hand, clarifying this separation both with women in the mass action and with other conference participants.

This issue came to a head during a meeting that the conference mediator had called outside of regular proceedings. Like many others who were reportedly inquiring at the time, Kidau reported the mediator's concerns, "He asked us, 'why is it that you don't want...your people want to indict your president and you are, you are sitting here at the peace table? Why don't you tell the people to remove the indictment against Charles Taylor so that we can go on with our peace talk?'" Kidau was stunned. She described her reaction and response

It hit me like a stone. I'm like, what is he talking about? I was the first to raise my hand. I raised my hand, he recognized me, I said "how dare you say that?" I said, "we are not here because of the indictment of Charles Taylor, we are here to make peace among ourselves. Charles Taylor is indicted because..."...the same thing I told the women...I said "he's indicted because he took his ruthlessness across the border to Sierra Leone. That is why is he indicted. We have no fish to fry in it." Before I could finish, Ma Mary has raised her hand. Mary Brownell...she even gave it to him harder than I did. I was like wow!

This situation demonstrates the role women delegates played as informants and educators about political processes that were ensuing in other national contexts they had worked within and become familiar with. Their political work informed their resistance of this misaligned focus on Charles Taylor's indictment during the conference, and also fueled action to ensure that this issue would not continue to derail the process. Securing additional external intervention was necessary to ensure the conference did not follow this misaligned concern. For Kidau, her political work significantly contributed to securing this need. She explained

So, from there I wrote the people of the organization I was running...the movement for democratic change. I said, 'bombard the UN security council. This is what they are saying here, they want the indictment to be removed from Charles Taylor before anything can happen. Before we can go on with the peace talks. We are at a stand still.' I sent that to my contact at the state department. I sent it to the congress people that I had been working with. I sent it to all these members so they could call the UN security council and the state department and say, 'this is what is happening in Ghana at the peace talks.'

She and other delegates' follow-through and resistance of indictment misconceptions accomplished a pivotal turning point in the process. The mediator's announcement filled a packed room during a regularly scheduled conference meeting, "The UN Security Council is here." Reportedly only traveling without two of its members, thirteen members of the security council arrived in Accra to intervene the process, corroborating what the women delegates had professed by insisting that "the peace talk has nothing to do with the indictment" and impressing upon the participatory body, "You have to achieve peace among yourselves here. The indictment is off the table." "Music to my ears" encompasses the feeling that overcame Kidau during this pivotal meeting as the announcement reflected the collective resistance she and other women delegates had expressed. The moment also represented the power of their political mediation and intervention capacities as they continued to engage their respective networks. The peace process continued after thereafter without the distraction of indictment.

*Securing a written agreement.* Two months of participating, monitoring the progress, and intervening in negotiations meant strategically working with political and warring faction members to build consensus, both inside and outside of formal proceedings. Women delegates developed working relationships with participants across political lines and to the benefit of the peace process, at times they played the role of informant or mediator between parties. Kidau described an example of this when she was asked by the mediator to substantiate decisions that were leading towards a final accord, in conversation with a warring party member. She described her approach when she addressed him, almost as peers in leadership and as Liberians, explaining “He was the spokesperson for his warring party. So I said, ‘well, the mediator sent me to talk to you, Liberian to Liberian.’” She explained to him the structure of the transitional government, and what it meant that the legislature would be unicameral rather than including a senate and a house, unlike the previous government structure. This moment and others alike illustrate what every participant in this study acknowledged. That is, the labor of women delegates not only existed in official spaces, but also impacted important moments outside of formal meetings that bridged understanding and the need to “get everyone on the same page” in order to capitalize on momentum towards a resolution.

The process of achieving a written resolution, shared by the numerous conflicting parties involved, was an evolution of its own. In a testimony to the Committee on International Relations in the U.S. House of Representatives, on behalf of the MDCL, the dissention between the warring and political parties and the evolution of an agreement across party lines during the proceedings

In Accra, Ghana, there were initially the group of eight, (“G-8”) political parties, (those who were independent of Mr. Taylor), and a group of nine, (“G-9”) political parties (those who were basically in Taylor’s pocket). The “G-8s” seemed more objective and tended to work well with the civil society. Both the G-8s and the civil society worked with all warring parties to bring all the opposition political parties together. The “G-9ers”, of course, worked alongside the ruling party and the Government of Liberia. Their moods changed with what was happening in Monrovia. When Taylor seemed weak, they would soften their position, but when he seemed strong, they would become unwilling to cooperate with the rest of us. We managed to reduce G-9 to G-3 and increased G-8 to G-14 at one time. Then finally, all 17 opposition political parties came together, even though the bond was very fragile.

This bond led to the eventual signage of an accord that included all parties involved in peace negotiations, but its fragility was underscored within the apprehensive inclusion of a government structure that would allow some conflicting party members to serve in the interim government. This outcome was a significant compromise to women’s demand that warring parties be excluded from the transitional government. Kidau shared her sentiments about this part of the outcome, “Well, like you will read in my statement, my testimony to the Committee on International Affairs, is that it was not a perfect peace talk. It was not a perfect output. But it was necessary. It was a step towards peace in Liberia.” Other participants shared these sentiments, that although not perfectly aligned with the transitional process envisioned, the resolution achieved presented the best

opportunity for Liberia to maintain ceasefire and achieve peace that it had not experienced for nearly 14 years.

The presence and participation of women delegates in the peace conference was profound. Like their counterparts who protested in Liberia and Ghana, women's existence, resistance, and political labor in formal and informal spaces they occupied during the conference pushed the conversation towards peace. The demands of hundreds of Liberian women who had been protesting for several months strategically landed on the peace table through the voices and resistance of women delegates accredited to the talks. These delegates' political labor pivoted stalled aspects of the process, including clearing distractions and misconceptions that clouded the route to a resolution. Having begun their work long before the 2003 conference started, they saw the process through its entirety in Ghana until the final comprehensive Accra Peace Accord was signed on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Negotiations resulted in all parties compromising, and for women and many international leaders, this compromise was most pronounced in the final proposed structure of the interim government. As Kidau reported however, the fragility of this resolution fueled her and other women's commitments to overseeing and engaging in the transitional process in Liberia, until late 2005 when their organizing and mobilizing led to formal elections and a democratic transition of power in Liberia. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who participated in the conference, became the first female head of state in Africa because of the political work of women delegates, peace activists, and countless women unrecognized for their pivotal contributions to peace and democracy in Liberia.

### **Challenges and Obstacles: From Development to Sustainability**

The collectives' achievements were not met without challenges and obstacles throughout the movement. Discussing some of the most poignant issues the activists experienced or observed revealed that obstacles arose in numerous phases before, during, and after the peace process. As activists in the mass action coalition in Ghana, Una Kumba Thompson and Bernadette Hawa Bropleh detailed the majority of insights about obstacles encountered by their coalition throughout the movement, from issues that needed to be addressed related to the context to post-conflict sustainability of collective efforts.

**Addressing contextual issues.** One of the main developmental challenges of transitioning the mass action from Liberia to Ghana included addressing conflicts that hindered the refugee women from joining the movement when it was initially proposed in Ghana. Much of this was due to misunderstandings around the ways that context would need to influence resistance, and the consequences that could be imposed on refugee women for participating. Thompson explained this concern, "We had never done this before, and it just crept on us like that. So we didn't know which way it would go. The women could have been arrested because they were refugees. We didn't know, politically, how it would be interpreted. So their personal safety was at risk." While they were not seeking permission, they did not know whether they would be breaking any camp rules and did not know the extent of potential consequences. Thompson explained how they tried to safeguard during early days:

So the only way we could do that, to participate was to say, okay, so we sneak out of the campgrounds, walk by twos, walk up to my private property...not to walk

in groups, and to leave early morning hours when everybody was asleep, and use different routes to get to the meeting place.

Understanding and responding to the context in the development stage set the precedence for continued awareness of the context in Ghana. Contextual awareness and the ability to predict and mitigate risks was not as possible to get ahead of in private domains as it was in public domains. Numerous women were reported to have endured mistreatment and intimate abuse from their partners. Thompson described this as one of the biggest challenges confronted along the way. Thompson learned from several of the cases she was informed about that many of these women's partners were associated with Taylor's administration, some as ex-combatants, and as reported, this affiliation was news to those who confided in her. With a tone of regret, Thompson reflected on the challenging reality that their ability to build safeguards and target support for women who were at risk of intimate partner abuse did not match their ability to mitigate potential community-level issues. The limited reach women had on one another's private circumstances solidified the importance of continuing to approach the movement with caution and consideration of both contextual circumstances that could be influenced, as well as circumstances that heightened individual women's risks and vulnerabilities in private spaces.

**Collective sacrifices.** Bropleh explained that one of the most poignant challenges she recalls from the peace movement in Ghana concerned how often women sacrificed eating. She detailed:

You know, and most of the women sat there for days without eating. It was really a major sacrifice. We would bring sacks of water and we would drink water until

in the evening until we'd go back to the camps and then we would eat. We couldn't afford the food at M Plaza. We couldn't afford the food at M Plaza, so we weren't really eating. You know, maybe Cala our local donut that people would fry on the side of the road, we would eat that. Or people who were able to pack food overnight and bring it along with them. But there was no real eating as such. No. Yea, there was no real eating.

The significance of this sacrifice cannot be understated when juxtaposed with the experience they observed warlords basking in as conference participants and hotel guests. Bropleh went on:

Yea, it was a major sacrifice. It was a major sacrifice. And meanwhile the warlords were eating 3 meals a day. They were in there bickering and eating 3 meals a day. You know, while we were out there. They didn't care. They were sleeping in M Plaza which is one of the most expensive hotels...at least during that time. Sleeping under air conditioning and all of that and we were sleeping under mosquitos at the refugee camp.

The nod to warring party members bickering demonstrates the frustration women outside of the peace talks felt in regard to stalled negotiations about jobs, power, and status in the government. Sacrificing meals while enduring stalls in the process during long days – early mornings and late nights – produced a challenging and tense situation for the women. Thompson highlighted, “And for us to be together for months...5:00 in the morning... We had meetings. We had quarrels. There were fights. There was confusion. And we celebrated. And yeah, so for me it was a moment of solidarity.” As identified, conflict was an inherent part of the challenge of existing, moving, and resisting

as a group, but hundreds of women committed daily to all aspects of the struggle. While the grand collective achieved its commitment to see Liberia through the peace process and implementation of post-conflict peacebuilding plans (including electing Ellen Johnson Sirleaf into office), several factors compromised the sustainability of women's collective political involvement and resistance.

**Sustainability of efforts and the collective.** Finances were among the more tangible issues that impeded long-term efforts of women-led collectives. Funding shortages compromised the sustainability of peacekeeping organizations that existed prior to the 2003 movement. Amegashie raised this as one of the first obstacles impacting pre-existing peacebuilding spaces led by women, explaining “Yeah, they couldn't do most of the things they wanted to do because they did not have the funds to do those things.”

A peaceful and democratic transition of power in Liberia was made possible by the grand collective, regardless of whether they labored in Liberia, Ghana, or other locations. Unfortunately, however, many of the spaces that housed grassroots efforts prior to the mass action were dismantled due to limited funding. Both Thompson and Bropleh shared that momentum dissipated and that progress that is continuing to be sought may have been achieved by now, provided collective energy sustained. Thompson shared an example, “We've been fighting for almost 12, 15 years for affirmative action, for equal representation, for that to be back, for a bill to be passed. We have not succeeded in doing that.” She clarified, however, that progress that is yet to be made should not undermine the important gains that have been consolidated in addressing female genital mutilation, violence, rape, and other gender-based atrocities.

Bropleh shared another perspective on financial challenges, tying in obstacles around women's representation in government and politics. She highlighted that gendered financial inequities perpetuate inequitable political representation, explaining that lack of systemic shifts in Liberian women's financial capital positioned a political career in distant reach for most, including the majority of those who committed to daily political resistance towards peace.

The reality that countless women from near and far in physical distance and in their social locations, successfully ended war in their home country, represents one of the most critical collective feats of Liberian women. However, much of the story of these women remains untold as existing narratives recognize only a few contributors, and work has not been done to unearth the voices and experiences of the many ordinary, everyday women who the movement would not have been successful without. Celebration of this important collective feat is reportedly dimmed among many women, and much can be achieved to more deeply recognize the contributions of the hundreds of who advocated and fought for peace, from Liberia to Ghana and other sites of resistance. This challenge will sustain until more questions are asked, more women are consulted, and more perspectives are written. This dissertation is a small step in broadening recognition and acknowledging that there is a mass collection of unheard stories inherent to Liberian women's transformation of war and politics in their homeland in 2003.

**Chapter 6:**

**Sociopolitical Context and Women's Collective Resistance**

So when we ask ourselves in Liberia what role gender played, it played the role of power. When you look at gender and you see it, it lays as the power relations. Basically that. Power relations and how society perceives and sees women as compared to men who have the power, who determine the livelihood of a people, who are the decision makers? Who are those ones that pick up the gun and decide and say, "who wants to govern?" Who are the ones that have the governing power within our state, within our country? They're men.

- Una Kumba Thompson

Because women were targeted as sex slaves... Their husbands were being killed, their children were being killed or being recruited as child soldiers and they themselves were targeted as sex slaves and those who refused were killed or punished.

- Sundaiway E. Nelson Amegashie

It took so long for them to pass The Gender Equity Bill and that was a reason why. Because we didn't have a lot of men voting for the issues. ...So that's coming up again and we're hoping that we get some women in, in 2023.

- Bernadette Hawa Bropleh

And for us to come to elections, women were ready. We were ready to carry a woman. But they weren't ready.

- Nohn Rebecca Kidau

Understanding the societal conditions and milieu that Liberian women's political work existed in offers important perspective around their contributions to sociopolitical change in Liberia. In this chapter, I draw on participants' insights centered on gender to explain important contexts relevant to women's experiences and labor during and after the civil war. I begin by describing the conflict period and participants' reports regarding sex, gender, and war, then explain their perspectives of other important war-related contexts surrounding women's resistance. The chapter then leads into participants' accounts surrounding gender and politics in Liberia. Historical notions concerning gender and politics, the evolution of women in governance, legacies resulting from women's collective political work, and ongoing systemic challenges that constitute the main foci of the second half of this chapter.

### **Contextualizing the Conflict and Women's Resistance**

Women's resistance during and after the war targeted systems and practices that perpetuated destruction in families and communities. Women's collective political work, as discussed by the activists in this study, largely reported human rights violations inflicted upon women and children. As is common in war, sexual and gender-based violence was prevalent during the conflict. Participants shared insights about sexual and gender-based violence, which revealed assaults women not only navigated in large scale during the war but also combated to through collective actions. As the activists discussed resistance, they also shared their knowledge of other social conditions that offer perspective around women-led interventions.

**Sexual and gender-based violence.** As reflected in her opening quote, Amegashie discussed the practice of enslavement, more specifically how women were captured and forced to serve rebel forces as cooks and spies, and most commonly for sex. Sex was weaponized in all contexts, and in reports of captivity, it was especially used to assert control and disempower women who were forced into servitude. Amegashie highlighted this common form of coercion in her report on women's issues when she succinctly pointed out that, "Sexual slavery was common. Women and girls were taken by combatants as sex slaves." She expanded:

During the war, women were faced with many challenges and human rights abuses, such as rape, being forcibly recruited into the armed factions and used as sex slaves. Brutal and organized acts of sexual violence were committed against a considerable number of Liberian women throughout the years of the civil war.

One did not have to be a member of a particular tribe or be accused of belonging to certain groups to become bush wives or sex slaves...

The tail of her quote illuminates the widespread and boundless infliction of rape and sexual violence during the war. Girls as young as pre-adolescence were subjected to this abuse. While vastly underreported due to stigma and a frail judicial system, Bropleh offered her knowledge of numbers recorded in the current system, stating "There are already 1,000 girls on the docket that were raped."

Across multiple contexts of family and social life sexual violence was used to subjugate young girls and women, destroy families, and desecrate communities. Sexual trauma translated in the post-conflict era as violence was perpetuated against women by partners, family members, and community members. Participants' reports attested to the

gender-based assaults and exploitation women endured in large scale and the palpable effects of these assaults on society. Women in the mass action coalition were resisting a war that in many ways was designed to reduce their existence and value to a matter of sexual objectivity.

Kidau reported that the limitless rape of women and abuse of children surged women's efforts in collective spaces. She explained:

Initially, women were quiet, they were silent. So, when things got out of hands, when they were killing and raping women. And they were killing, using our children as child soldiers to fight in the war, [then] women decided to stand up.

Kidau's comment mirrors Amegashie's assertion that, "they decided to take a stand because they were being affected in so many ways. Their husbands were being killed, their children were being killed or being recruited as child soldiers." Both of their reports also mirror Thompson's perspective on women and children's vulnerabilities during war. She was reflecting on the importance of a gendered perspective in government and policy when she stated:

...who suffers the most in any crisis are women and children...who suffers the most when bad policies have been made, when you go to war? Who are the most victimized? The women and children. But who started the war? Where does it begin?

Participants' accounts begin to illuminate the ways that sex and gender operated within the conflict in Liberia. This information provides context about the violence women were strategizing to end in 2003, as well as assaults they would mobilize to outlaw in the post-conflict era.

**Contextualizing resistance: Solidarity amid insecurities.** Factors related to social and political conditions in Liberia offer additional context and demonstrate the significance of women's efforts. By highlighting two specific issues that were raised around camaraderie and community relations, as well the second most common cause of death, participants affirmed that camaraderie was limited during the conflict as ethnic tensions rose and distrust dominated the social environment. Thompson stated, "And particularly when we also learned in Liberia that the neighbors were the ones...you know, there was no neighborliness in war. Everybody was against everybody. Everybody was against everybody." Amid widespread tensions and distrust, the mass action addressed related strains that hindered their developmental process. They resisted the social order that was underpinned by the war, in route to eventually dismantle the conflict. The act of standing in solidarity, alone, was very much political.

Hunger arose as another social condition, and a source of major insecurity to health and life at the time, to illustrate the gravity of women's labor at home and at sites of resistance. During our second interview, Kidau pointed out that "Women were risking their lives to go and look for food to bring home." This was raised by the other participants as well, who confirmed that it was common practice for men to remain in hiding in order to avoid public executions targeting men at random. Conveying the contextual relevance and severity of food insecurities, Amegashie detailed in her report:

Starvation was common during the civil war and was the second common factor which contributed to many deaths. Many people left their homes without food and personal belongings. Because of the situation, many people were deprived of

basic necessities, as a result, many people, especially children became malnourished which later resulted to their death.

Pondering Amegashie's statements along with Kidau's reflection of women's responsibility of securing food for their families amid widespread food insecurities, I was instantly reminded of Bropleh's perspectives of similar challenges at the collective level when she insisted that hunger was among the biggest tests women stood while demonstrating against the war (see Chapter 5). The significance of food scarcity should not be ignored within stories of the grand collective. In large scale, women not only acted as primary or sole household providers, navigating a warring environment in which they, too, were subjected to severe harm. But also, after 14 years of surviving the most common causes of death, hundreds of peace activists in both Ghana and Liberia committed to daily grassroots demands that taxed their physical and emotional energy amid ongoing food scarcity and observable hunger. The image of their fortitude and reports of their fatigue, for me, became more vivid as I re-imaged scenes of women's resistance, particularly reports illustrating how they directly witnessed or learned – for those in Liberia – about warring parties' routines of feasting, arguing, and repeating for more than 70 days while being accommodated during the peace conference. Reports of their fatigue sunk in as I observed the contextual relevance of food scarcity, its role in the war, and its emergence in peacebuilding spaces.

*Resisting the exploitation of children.* The use of children to fight the conflict was discussed as one of the main tactics that diminished women's tolerance of the violence observed. Child soldiering fueled some of the earliest strategic convenings of women

who worked to resist the tactic. Bropleh explained the context and relayed her knowledge of priorities among some of the mass action members in Liberia:

People who fought were not really soldiers, these were soldiers that they took from the different villages and different towns and different hamlets that they brought together, so the responsibility of the women that we left in Liberia was for them to try to disarm their children. You know, that was their responsibility to talk to their children to try to disarm them.

In different spaces before the movement launched, women's organizations aimed to intervene in the recruitment of child soldiers. Kidau discussed an organization she worked with in early days, reporting that their goal was:

...to stop our young children from going, allowing themselves to be used by people who are killing people because of their personal interests. And of course, they did. Being used as child soldier, carrying guns that were bigger than themselves, taller than themselves. That is heartbreaking.

She reported that their strategy, among others', was undermined and the tactic eventually spread. By the time larger efforts were rising, Bropleh estimated that "about 90% of the people who fought the war were child soldiers. Because the warlords, they didn't really fight. They were just giving instructions to children, to young men." Many who fought were under the influence of substances provided by faction leaders, and those recruited were adolescents or even pre-adolescent. Understanding the general age and developmental makeup of rebel armies, as well as understanding added barriers to persuading children against the fighting (i.e., intoxication) reveals the gravity of child

soldiering as a social issue that erupted, as well as the layers complicating intervention of the tactic.

In *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, Leymah Gbowee mournfully stated, “Money, greed, power, whatever fueled the war...nothing justified what they did to the children of Liberia.” Children were severely misused and harmed during the war. In various ways, participants described the effects of the war on youth as having amplified the grand collective’s commitment to securing peace, at the very least, for the sake of posterity.

### **Gender and Politics in Liberia**

The activists in this study highlighted a range of social and political issues to convey the intersections of gender and politics in Liberia. Thompson acknowledged the historical separation of women and governance in the country, stating, “If you go back to the history before that war, women were not so politically active. It was considered a dangerous field, being a political person.” She reflected on a personal encounter with this narrative in her family and began by offering context:

Before the war, or even during, women were not political actors. They were not party chairs. Anyone who was seen to be involved in any act of politics was... yeah, so I studied political science. My parents called a meeting to dissuade me from studying political science because it was not a domain for women. ...So, you can imagine growing up in this kind of a society with that thinking...

Thompson connected her perspective to the peace process, and the reason why we “didn’t see women” involved until 2003. The only woman who held a political seat in the government at the time was Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. “Power and politics was not the face of women in Liberia. So, it was only understandable that in all of the political plays and

the crisis women were at the back,” Thompson highlighted. The political scene in the government would change, for some time, after the peace accord was finalized, and other important contributions would result from women’s political work in 2003 and later.

**Legacies of women’s collective action.** Liberian women achieved significant milestones after the conflict period. From mobilizing and shaping the outcome of the next presidential election, to changing laws governing the consequences of sex and gender-based crimes, to training a new generation of activists and advocates, the contributions of the grand collective reverberate socially and politically. Every participant offered important insights about issues and systems that were transformed as a result of women’s collective work. “I think we’ve come a long way...we’ve made some very, very good strides,” Thompson reported. She continued:

We've been able to raise, to put our voices together around key issues. Women's equal participation and representation in governance. Addressing female genital mutilation has been our collective voice. Ending violence against women, particularly rape, has continued to be high [priority]. So, on key social issues and governance issues we galvanize our voices collectively.

As Thompson’s reflections began to illuminate, collective action spaces continue to prioritize issues concerning women’s rights. Bropleh and Amegashie shared their personal observations of spaces and organizations that have remained focused on training women in leadership and advocacy. Amegashie has observed ongoing collective momentum in a county in the western region of the country. She explained:

Like in Grand Bassa they still got a few groups there that are trying to build the peace that we have sustained by raising awareness of women issues around the

county and by even going the extra mile to even get elected officials to see women's issues as being human rights issues.

She also shared contextual knowledge that some women-led organizations have shifted their focus to provide training in basic life skills and promote women's economic empowerment. After leaving Ghana, Bropleh established a non-profit to work with and train young women as leaders and advocates in spaces they occupy. She reported that she continues her work today and reflected on what she referred to as a shifting culture:

Well right now, we are working along the same lines, we are very active in Liberia with activism. And now what we have done is shifted a little. Instead of doing it with older women, now we are working with younger women because we feel that if you start to mold and grow with young girls earlier, it can lead to something better, as far as being able to break down barriers. ...Now, with a new wave of things happening, we have a lot of young female activists in Liberia that are making strides.

She expressed excitement about the promise she is observing among the young women she works with. Bropleh continued later:

I mean, now we have oh so many young women I can't begin to name them. I mean ooh we have just a whole group that have sparked up and they are doing so well. You know, they're doing really well. I see more and more young women coming to the fore front. Like the women that we work with are taking on issues. We work in villages so we have some women now that are town chiefs, we have young women now that are student council leaders.

Bropleh concluded again that leadership and collective action continues to be centered and enlivened in her workspace. Even group practices observed in the 2003 movement are embraced in her organization's approach. She explained that they continue to embrace meetings with a multi-faith approach, clarifying that if they open a meeting with prayer from one religion, they close the meeting with prayer from another. Reflecting protesting strategies in 2003, she also revealed that women organized protests during recent by-elections when they learned that a candidate was potentially stripped of votes in her local county. Bropleh, Thompson, and Amegashie's reports demonstrate some of the issues women's organizations continue to address in Liberia.

*Sexual violence legislation.* Participants also discussed advances in the response to rape and sexual violence. Amegashie reported that by 2005, AFELL and advocates invested in the legal response to sexual assault successfully established a court dedicated to processing rape crimes, and also established the Rape Amendment Act to modify the Penal Code of 1976 (Chapter 14, Section 14.70 and 14.71). Amegashie, who worked with AFELL as a legal advocate, reported that the new law expands the definitions of sexual assault. In addition, it outlines several levels of consequences, and inspired by prevalence during the war, adds specific verbiage to address gang rape and its legal repercussions as a first-degree felony. Both Thompson and Amegashie highlighted the passage of the Rape Amendment Act as a significant advancement, but also acknowledged that obstacles have hindered enforcement of the law. Due to the overwhelming number of cases, coupled with the war's effect on a weakened criminal prosecution system, justice intended by the RAA has been limited. Amegashie outlined in her report:

Many cases that should be prioritized and adjudicated in the formal justice system stay longer in the pre-trial stage more often than they should. Most of them stay in the preliminary hearing stage without ever reaching trial... There are backlog of rape cases transfer from lower courts such as magisterial courts.

Among factors contributing to inefficiencies, she reported that lack of equipment, trained personnel, court facilities, and even the social attitudes of court staff contribute to inadequate implementation of the law. Despite these challenges, in a few ways, awareness around sexual assault and repercussions was raised as an important legacy of women's collective action. Amegashie detailed during our conversation:

I would say that women are more aware of their rights now than they were four years back... Due to a lot of factors. The war years, the different international NGOs that came and the awareness raising that they did for them. The experience during the war years, and up to date, has taught them that, that they're not just floor mats or punching bags for men but they are development partners to men. So, they are more aware of their rights. I mean things that they could not say before to their partners, they are brave now to say it. So, the war, even though it was bad, some things made them to be even stronger, psychologically and mentally to be able to deal with issues that affected them. All the years before, they could leave it with men to handle it for them.

Thompson also reflected on similar observations that "women are more conscious, society is more aware that indeed, women's voices are... you know, you can no longer stop them." Each participant conveyed a sense of change, or a shifting culture like Bropleh referenced earlier, undergirding attention to women's issues. As Amegashie

also explained, in spaces sustaining collective action, women's rights are increasingly understood and defended as human rights issues. Advocates and women-led groups have engaged legislation to address and prevent sexual and gender-based issues from the conflict. While discussing gender and politics, the presence and leadership of Liberian women in post-conflict political governance was also raised as an important shift from the historical separation of women and politics.

**Women's Post-conflict Representation in Politics.** To understand the imperative role women played during the 2005 political race, which will be expanded on later in the chapter, we can and arguably should look back at the peace talks in Accra in 2003. The significance of their collective work is embedded in reports about women's historical lack of representation in politics and layered by observations of ongoing reluctance to elect a woman as Head of State, even after women secured peace and security in Liberia. As a delegate, Kidau offered robust insights about the process of transitioning leadership after the peace accord was signed. She began by recollecting meetings she participated in to select members of the transitional government, primarily focusing on the appointment of the interim chairperson. There was reportedly much debate among warring party members who insisted that Liberia could only achieve social, political, and economic rehabilitation with a man as Head of State. She reflected on the root of their arguments and acknowledged her own reaction:

...they [had] destroyed the country. So, they felt that a woman cannot do it. They felt that women cannot do it. Somebody has to come in...a man has to come in and get it up to a certain level before a woman can come in. But during the war,

women were the ones who were finding food for men. ...And they came to power, now they want to say women are weak when they were hiding?

I thought about Kidau's question and started to peel back its layers. It resonated not only as her in-the-moment reaction to warring parties' sentiments, but also as a reaction to the historical moment and its significance as they sat and discussed long overdue peace in Liberia; a conversation that advanced further than it had in over a decade as a result of women's political prowess. Referencing them hiding was also an ode to the risks women took to find food during the war so that their partners and other male relatives would not be subjected to random public executions. Their collective work and resistance defined the very moments leading to Liberia's ability to advance towards social, political, and economic rehabilitation. This resonated as the undertone of Kidau's perplexity as she contemplated how women's suitability could be questioned in the determination of leadership.

I learned that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's name was submitted along with two other nominees for the interim position as chairperson. As the leader was appointed among delegates in the peace talks, warring parties' presence reportedly had a notable impact on the outcome. Bropleh recounted her knowledge of the deliberations, having sat with the mass action outside of the peace talks:

It was a vote. Once it came up to the fact that they had to put somebody for interim until they could decide what was happening, she wanted to become the interim President, but they voted her out. Because of the men being more in the room, she was voted out of that position.

Charles Gyude Bryant was appointed to lead the transitional government. The interim administration, however, still represents a shift in women's representation in political spaces, compared to the era before and during the conflict. Sirleaf and several others were appointed to oversee and lead government ministries in the interim period until elections were held in late 2005 and the new administration came into power in 2006. Kidau had personal insights about the transitional government as she, too, accepted a position that would enable her to continue holding parties accountable to the agreement they signed in Accra. She began to explain their presence throughout the cabinet:

A lot of women were in the transitional government. ...It was good. I think it's one of the reasons why, besides the presence of the UN forces on the ground, the women being in the government was also a real asset to what we were trying to do. ...Some were heading the commissions, some of them were ministers, some of them were directors, they were deputy ministers. I was deputy minister in the transitional government. A minister of state.

One of Kidau's priorities, which she reported sharing with other women in office at the time, was to monitor the administration's adherence to the terms of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and to step in when demands were made that were outside of the signed accord. This interim period was critical to sustaining ceasefire in Liberia, and Kidau concluded that women "stood up," "worked hard," and were essential to successful governance during the transitional period. Women as a whole would remain essential in the country's next political phase, as evidenced by their collective investments during the presidential race in 2005.

*Ensuring democratic transition of power in 2005.* Understanding the background around gender and political representation, and particularly starting at the peace talks given the role of patriarchy in Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's nomination loss emphasizes the critical role of grassroots efforts on her path to the presidency. The activists shared their recollections of how women came from counties near and far to educate people about the elections and encourage their political engagement. Thompson shared that even the coalition in Ghana remained heavily engaged:

From that process in Accra, I think the refugee women, to have Madam Ellen Sirleaf elected as President the women had a lot to do with that. And I can tell you the first 2006 elections, the refugee women, Madam Sirleaf was constantly in touch with those women on the camp. To the point where, though they were not in the country to vote, they were calling their relatives and friends to vote for a woman. The dynamics changed and they felt that, this time around, let us have a woman.

In 2006, the election exceeded historical voting records. "Nation-wide it was like the vote was shaken by women," Kidau shared. Sirleaf's journey to the presidential office, especially during campaign season, was not unmet with challenges. Sirleaf was taunted while she was in the race. As Kidau recalled, "Men cursed her up, they did all kinds of things. ... they put panties up, they put tomato on panties and said that was her menstruating. They insulted her, yelled at her, did all kinds of things. But she was strong." She also had the force of women on her side as she faced more evocative versions of the scrutiny she encountered back in 2003. With their collective strengths and

the momentum sustained from thousands of Liberian women's political resistance, they helped Sirleaf secure 12 years as Head of State from 2006 to 2018.

Kidau's assertion that, "Women from every corner came together for Ellen and for other women, too" was evidenced by Thompson's recollections of how invested refugee women in Ghana were during the race. Thompson explained that when Ellen was elected, she was approached by refugee women in Buduburam who wanted to attend Sirleaf's forthcoming inauguration. Thompson helped organized airfare for more than 20 women to travel from Accra to Monrovia to witness not only the event, but the history that they made.

"It was something," Thompson closed as she remembered Inauguration Day in January 2006 and women's presence. "It was something," this phrase of few words seemed to carry much meaning, and also aligned with the undertone of sentiments shared by each participant regarding the significance of this political moment for women. The era that followed was characterized by important achievements by women's collective action, as demonstrated in the legacies described above. This time, however, is also characterized by loss of momentous supports of women's efforts, including representation in governance and other issues that have stifled change for women at a systemic level.

### **Setbacks and Challenges**

Participants acknowledged that disappointments have also intertwined with the evolution of women's political representation in Liberia. Thompson reported that the vote for women has struggled to sustain since the previous administration, stating, "We have not succeeded in maintaining the numbers of women when we started from in 2006

where we had almost 16 women in the legislature. That number has dropped tremendously, and it continues to drop over the years.” She explained that women’s organizations petitioned for affirmative action that would sustainably increase women’s representation, but the petition was not implemented during Sirleaf’s administration.

Thompson continued, offering more perspective:

So, we've made some gains in certain social areas. But when it comes to governance where there is really a need for women to be in elected spaces... and women do not have the resources. Women are not the ones who are involved in political parties. Women are still trying to navigate and find themselves within the political realm. ...We are struggling to make that happen. We have a low representation of women in the legislature. Of over 100 and almost 70 right now we only have maybe about five women if I'm not mistaken.

Bropleh, who also discussed the breakdown of the current legislature and imbalanced representation, expressed “So of course every time there's a vote, we always lose out.” She also shared her disappointments about the Gender Equity Bill, which was proposed but not passed during the Sirleaf administration. She reported that a “He for She” strategy was proposed in alignment with the African Union protocol, which outlined steps countries could take to increase women’s representation in government, through an affirmative action framework. Bropleh shared, “So that’s coming up again and we're hoping that we get some women in, in 2023. Because we'll have to go for referendum and all that stuff before it actually becomes a law.” As revealed, women’s political participation stands as a continuous goal requiring structural change, and one of the main approaches currently engaged involves legislative amendments.

Another setback hindering political equality relates to gendered financial disparities. Similar to reports described in Chapter 5 about financial hindrances at the collective level, from a societal perspective, financial disempowerment among women systematically and perpetually excludes Liberian women from formal political spaces. Amegashie summarized her observations of how access to financial and other resources have stifled women's participation in elected governance, stating precisely, "you have to be able to spend money when it comes to campaigns and other things to be able to get elected, and most of them don't have that." During our second conversation, Bropleh highlighted that it was election season in Liberia and began to reflect on long-standing financial disparities between men than women, explaining:

Like now we're in the political season. I think you're aware. And I think gender has a lot to do too with equity. Like how do they give women the space? Because men are always financially able more financially able than women. So, of course when it comes to political space the men are always dominating. And it's an old, old adage.

Bropleh shared more insights about specific impediments of limited financial power, drawing on her experience lobbying and proposing the passage of bills in the legislature:

You need to lobby with people in parliament. And if you don't have the bargaining power, it's going to be difficult. You take people to lunch. You're not going to talk to them in their office. You have to take them to lunch where it requires money. If you're taking other women from your group, you have to transport them there. That requires money. If you going to put an ad in the

newspaper, you have to pay for the ad in the newspaper. So, it all boils down to women not being financially stable...

Individual barriers to accessing financial resources reproduce gender exclusion in policy arenas. The layers of gender, finances, and politics are demonstrated when coupled with reports about financial disparities that hindered the sustenance of women's organizations (i.e., limited receipt of peacebuilding funds). Participants' reflections of representation, exclusion, and financial barriers connect to their broader concerns that systemic change to improve the daily life of everyday Liberian women has been limited. As they conveyed, much work is left to be done, but they acknowledged the resistance occupied in 2003 as a blueprint for ongoing efforts to advance women's rights while Liberia continues to rebuild from 14 years of conflict.

### **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I articulated the activists' insights about social, political, and economic issues to contextualize women's resistance and contributions during and after the Liberian civil war. The role of gender was centered throughout to simultaneously discuss its complex influences on long-established systems, institutions, and processes that have shaped both women's experiences and their resistance in Liberia.

The activists in this study discussed the intersections of gender, sex, and war in Liberia, focusing on tactics intended to degrade women and children. They discussed the evolution of women's participation in governance and their involvement in post-conflict politics. They delved into specific legacies stemming from women's political work, such as legal advocates' establishment of a court to try rape crimes and the amendment of sexual assault definitions in the penal code. The significance of women's role during the

2005 presidential election was deepened by participants' insights contextualizing the historical and present-day relationship between gender and politics in Liberia. Challenges surrounding the sustenance of women's representation in legislature were raised to convey participants' explanations of setbacks that have arose concerning gender equality and governance in Liberia since 2006 when the new era of democracy was born in Liberia.

This chapter ultimately demonstrates that women's political work and collective resistance were embedded within complex social, political, and economic systems that compounded their battle towards lasting peace and security in Liberia. Attending to context illuminates the significance of women's efforts, resistance strategies, and reconstruction work, particularly as perspectives are centered about gender and its operation as a system of ideologies and tools that have maintained the marginality and oppression of women in Liberia, including in the post-conflict era. However, as discussed, women's political work leading to and during the 2003 peace movement left a significant imprint on the modern history of women's advocacy, politics, and resistance in Liberia.

**Chapter 7:**

**Discussion**

The findings of this study were presented at multiple levels to convey individual and family-level narratives of the activists interviewed, as well as collective-level and contextual accounts and observations relevant to their stories of war and resistance. Chapter four included reports of family circumstances and relational dynamics that provided insights into the activists' personal lives from childhood to adulthood, as relevant to their stories. Chapter five detailed the activists' and key informant's insights about collective efforts that ultimately ended the conflict, and also disentangled the mass movement to honor specific coalition spaces and their contributions while also acknowledging the rising of the grand collective as countless women contributed to peacebuilding before, during, and after the 2003 era. To understand a broader perspective of women's political work, resistance efforts, challenges, and contributions, chapter six included participants' insights about gendered social, political, and economic issues surrounding the conflict and women's collective resistance.

I learned a vast amount of information from the women I spoke with during this study, which as a whole or even from different angles, could lead this discussion section in many directions. The direction I will take in this chapter is guided by the aims of the study. One of the goals of this study was to contribute to the literature on women-led social movements by attending to the relevance of family dynamics and characteristics in activists' commitments, and stories of resistance. This study extends beyond the war's impact on family systems and centers families as agents of socialization and thus, potential agents or influencers of social change, considering activists' family relational experiences over their life course. I explored the characteristics of family mentors and role models, essential relationships, multigenerational principles, and will begin the

discussion section by attending to these and other dimensions of family life that emerged in the participants' stories of conflict and activism. I will end the chapter by attending to the legacies of women's political work, and implications of this study on research and practice. Discussions throughout will link to life course perspectives and other tenets and findings in the literature on gender and social movements.

### **Summary of Findings**

The activists in this study personally committed to spaces of collective resistance in 2003 that achieved peace and security in Liberia, and each relocated to Liberia after the conflict to ensure that peace was sustained for the long term. They each reported ways that, from childhood to adulthood, their family relationships, values, conflict experiences, support, and socioeconomic circumstances shaped their lives and work. Elders, particularly matriarchs, were essential within their stories, as were their parents who demonstrated personal qualities that influenced their approaches to leadership and resistance. Each shared important ways their children, as adults, have been impacted by aspects of their commitment to Liberia, or to community in general. Multigenerational family values and teachings from childhood that were reinforced as parents included both communal values and principles around developing a healthy and grounded sense of self. From a "my home is for everyone" mentality and other principles promoting collective welfare, to those encouraging self-accountability, and persistence, influences from activists' family systems emerged in each of their stories of conflict, resistance, and reconstruction in Liberia.

The war significantly shifted the circumstances in their broader family systems, and each participant was affected directly or indirectly from explicit modes of violence

that harmed, killed, or displaced family members who were in Liberia during the conflict.

War-related events encountered by those in the midst of the violence directly altered the daily demands of the women I spoke with. Transnational dynamics were central to their lived realities as each discussed memories of family members seeking refuge in different countries near Liberia, as well as the worries and responsibilities that came with their forced relocations. The activists in this study also discussed family in terms of support they received from their relatives around their efforts, acknowledging their family members' early hesitance around their engagement, the evolution of loved ones' support, and the value of direct assistance. Their families' social and economic circumstances were also highlighted as impactful to their access and ability to commit to their political work to the extent, and in the specific ways that they were able to dedicate time, space, and other resources to their resistance efforts and other avenues of support offered.

The interviews in this study revealed that important spaces emerged prior to 2003 that inspired the foundation of women's collective resistance of the civil war. The grand collective of women extends beyond the 2003 period and should acknowledge that thousands of Liberian women existed in resistance spaces before the larger movement convened. Participants in this study shared the stories of their political work within the larger narrative of women's efforts.

### **Linked Lives, Worldviews, and Political Work**

The life course principle of linked lives is demonstrated consistently and profoundly in activists' personal narratives. In the words of Passy and Giugni (2001) in their study on social networks and participation in social movements. "both formal and informal networks have a socialization function that facilitates strong involvement in

social movements.” They referred to family members, friends, and acquaintances as informal networks that influence activism. In a number of ways, family and close personal networks were threaded throughout participants’ narratives in this study.

Activists’ relationships with family members were essential. Each woman highlighted their grandmother, or great-grandmother in one case, as key influences in their life, and all of their grandmothers shared identities as matriarchs and key traits of leadership. They conveyed their family narratives through their matrilineal ties and conveyed a level of authority, reliability, and intentionality in their (great)grandmothers’ image and presence in their families and communities.

Each activist discussed important ways their parents either set an example or provided a foundation for leadership and resistance. From displaying leadership at work, in village and other community settings, to parents’ provision of space for resistance or direct participation in grassroots organizations, participants confirmed that they embraced important and relevant qualities from their parents. Another consistent theme in their stories of parenthood revealed ways that their labor and commitments during and after the conflict influenced their own children. They showed pride in their children’s love for Liberia and attention to community, and that pride seemed amplified by the reality that their children were either not born in the U.S. or left Liberia at early ages. In their study exploring intergenerational learning in social movements, Chovanec and Benitez (2008) discussed socialization in families as operating to demonstrate political consciousness and help children become attuned to social structures, social issues, and the relationship between family and society, and the implications for beliefs and actions. Connected to this is the role of family values, which emerged in important ways in this study.

The role of family values was important to understand in this study, as principles communicated and demonstrated within intimate relational systems have direct implications on society, including the perpetuation or disruption of status quos. In her articulation of family bonds and attention to African notes on feminist epistemologies, Oyewumi (2000) shared, “Family talk, if not family values, is everywhere. The rhetoric of family values has been useful in legitimizing oppression as well as in mounting oppositional movements against it” (p. 1093). For the activists in this study, principles discussed within their families primarily surrounded two themes: contributing to collective welfare and attending to developing a grounded and responsible sense of self.

Each activist, in their own narrations, revealed ways that their families of origin shared values around welcoming and supporting others; around operating in community and considering not only your personal wellness, but the wellness of those in community. Principles that were transmitted through activists’ linked lives undergirded their stories of supporting family in-country or displaced from Liberia during the war, as well as their stories of collective peace-fighting in Ghana and peace-keeping in Liberia’s post-conflict period. They took the future of their home into their hands, as other women in Africa and around the world have to secure peace in their homes. Chovanec and Benitez (2008) found that, among women anti-dictatorship activists in Chile during the Pinochet regime, even for those who were not socialized among activists in their home environment, “seeds were sown in their early learning of values related to fairness, dignity, and community” (p. 49). Linking back to their findings about intergenerational socialization of critical social consciousness, their study revealed that communitarian values and humanist principles were specifically developed at a young age among activists

(Chovanec & Benitez). Not only does this discussion of values stem back to ideas surrounding child socialization, but other theories relevant to the field of family science can also explain the interactional patterns observed in this study. One example, symbolic interactionism theory posits that norms, or shared meanings, are developed through interactions, and suggests that those values that are enacted through behavior (e.g., accommodating community) are observed and reinforced in family systems (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Aligned with what Oyewumi (2000) also suggests, the stories of the activists in this study demonstrate the capacity for shared meanings in family systems to translate into efforts in service of society and direct contribution to sociopolitical change.

Research findings linking activism, political participation, and socioeconomic access have been mixed. Isaksson (2014) examined the role of individual resources in political participation in Africa. In contrary to Western democracies where individual resources skew the distribution of political participation and power, data from more than 27,000 participants in 20 African democracies revealed that individual resources had low explanatory power in political participation. Findings from the current study add to this body of literature, as the vast majority of the mass action coalition in Liberia and Ghana were occupied and carried through by women with little formal education and limited economic resources. Focusing on education as a socioeconomic indicator, Kuenzi (2006) examined the role of formal and non-formal education on political participation among women in Senegal and found that nonformal education was a stronger predictor of political and community participation. Several political behaviors were associated with nonformal education, including civic engagement and voting, community involvement and leadership, and levels of political participation in rural Senegalese women.

## Agency, Relationships, and Strategy for Change

A life course perspective on human agency is also reflected in some of teaching activists discussed relating to personal accountability and responsibility. They each embraced an understanding of their positions in society, and Liberian society specifically, as agents of change and as persons with capacities to respond to the conflict through political means. The idea that they were not only acted upon by the conflict but could in turn act upon it and incite change at a national level offers insight about personal agency. This agency, while individual, is also tied to social and economic access that promoted their ability and capacity to respond in the ways they selected and deemed necessary. Their economic circumstances (e.g., stable employment, employment benefits, capacity to uproot and relocate) and social access (e.g., status and leadership, relationships with policy stakeholders) combined to influence their perceptions of and use of personal agency to respond to the war in various spaces.

In many ways, women used their relational networks and social capital to advance their personal and group agendas. They engaged their proximal relationships in protest and advocacy by using sex as a tool of resistance. Sex strikes have been used as a form of protest among women around the world and recorded as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Lister, 2019). For the mass action coalitions in Liberia and Ghana and other women employing this strategy, sex strikes have been effective when used in conjunction with other forms of protest and resistance, and while reclaiming body and personal power, they have especially been effective in drawing attention to the cause behind movements (Lister). This tactic is designed to have direct impacts on intimate relations with a goal of externally shifting social circumstances.

Drawing back to the use of their networks and social capital, the power of relationships was also seen through stories of recruitment, particularly in coalition development towards solidarity in Ghana, a context that required additional layers of trust and in-group protection. This study revealed that threats to developing the second wave of the mass action coalition were remedied by social relationships that were accessed and essential to mobilize women from Buduburam refugee camp, address areas of dissention, and center the presence and voices of Liberian women in Ghana. As demonstrated, the strategies used to establish a unified force involved relational work. Their relational work also involved identity work.

The choices the mass action women made around embracing an apolitical identity were an important demonstration of agency. They made active decisions about distancing from such identity while still engaging in political work because of the historical perpetuation of conflict associated with political groups in Liberia. However, what is also important to this naming and affiliation decision, was their ability to embrace active force, both physically and vocally, to tip defining moments during the movement.

While this discussion on human agency solely focuses on ways that choices were both offered and perceivably accessible, this begs the question of ways that the activists' political participation may have felt like there wasn't much choice. It is possible that the drive to engage felt like a matter of necessity, waning a perception of full agency. Future studies would benefit from disentangling agency as a multidimensional concept in narratives of activism during and after political conflict. However, from what emerged in this study, activists' commitments and sacrifices not only reflects their personal agency, but also inherently reflects their belief that Liberia was a space both worthy and capable

of change. This notion is reflected in existing research. Isoke (2011) expounded on Black women's relationship to space, place, and community in the context of resistance and explained that from the perspectives of the women activists who mobilized to combat historical injustices in Newark's Central Ward, Newark represented more than just its challenges and debts to the systemic wellbeing of Black people and families in the city. Newark represented an intimate space that could be transformed. Like the women in Liberia who fought for the health, peace, and security of a country that many perceived, and continue to perceive, as having a gloomy national future, it is important to understand their commitment to the land as a radical act of love for Liberia, and also a rejection of negative social perceptions of Liberia's future and worth as a nation-state in development.

### **Time and Place: Emphasis on Context and Culture**

Life course perspective principles emphasizing context – namely time and place – emerged in important ways in this study. In fact, conversations about values pointed back to the salience of context and culture in the activists' and other women's political work and responses to ameliorate the effects of the war. Principles of community were a pillar in value systems activists grew up with, through family culture and broader culture in Liberia's pre-conflict social environment. Thus, with the shift in trust and relationality during the conflict period and the labor of rebuilding community post-conflict, the salience of activists' commitments to such principles is emphasized. The life course perspective recognizes that historical time and place are central contexts in which human experience is organized. In this study, the historical time encompassed a shifting of norms away from collectivism and puts into perspective the ways in which women's

convergence from individual spaces and small groups of organizers into a large-scale unit, in itself represented an opposition to the status quo during the war. The importance of place emerged as each site of resistance – Liberia and Ghana – required nuanced tactics to develop a collective force in service of the solidarity needed to enact familiar and new resistance strategies in each location.

Within a discussion of context, culture is also important to unpack. In the activists' descriptions of collective-level efforts and strategies towards change, culture was used as a tool of resistance. That is, women in the mass action coalitions employed tactics that contradicted typically unobstructed pre-war and wartime social norms, particularly those which are gendered. The war in Liberia was in large part a war on gender, as sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination characterized much of the conflict. Thus, taking an anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist approach was critical to resist the interlocking systems of violence and oppression the conflict operated on. Dismantling the conflict structure meant defying cultural norms and expectations regarding sex in marriage and relationships at an intimate level, and also defying traditional beliefs around a woman's decision to display her body. As reported in the results section, some men believe it is a curse to see your mother or mother figures intentionally undress, and thus the use of this tactic (i.e., women beginning to undress themselves at M Plaza Hotel) at the height of tensions in Accra was a powerful display of cultural resistance. The peace accord was signed within days of this demonstration among others in this pivotal and radical moment. These stories of resistance align with research framing and acknowledging cultural resistance as political. As Kuumba (2006) stated about political modes of resistance among women of African descent, "The multiple and varied

expressions of African women's resistance includes the political and transformational uses of cultural practices, even those with seemingly patriarchal undertones" (p. 112). This study adds to the literature demonstrating how women in Africa and the diaspora challenge oppressive and violent institutions by outwardly opposing and transforming the use of traditional cultural systems and beliefs.

The role of context was also salient in participants' accounts of multiple relocations impacting their family and a significant portion of Liberia's population. This emphasizes the geopolitical nature of these narratives, from the family to societal levels. While the literature on conflict and forced displacement is extensive and represents important parts of the stories that emerged in this study, the narratives herein also demonstrate a sense of agency that was both accessible and embraced by the activists in service of their commitment to sociopolitical change.

Their stories of physical movement also emphasize the transnational nature of their grand uprising. The movement was an act of resistance against the historical power of nation-state boundaries to protest a conflict that had cross-national impacts. Activists' relocations led to their enactment of political strategies in real time and space, at a specific site of resistance during the peace conference, followed by their relocation to Liberia to ensure that peace was not merely a signature. Building on the term "homeplace" coined by bell hooks (1990), Isoke (2011) developed a theory of political homemaking which proposes a concept around "selling-in", and this concept is particularly relevant here. As one of three modes of political homemaking, selling in "is comprised of dedicating one's professional and community life to the uplift, revitalization, and transformation of the city" (Isoke, p. 119). Like women represented in

this study on Newark, the activists I spoke with were insistent that Liberia was “home” despite each having lived outside of the country prior to their political involvement in 2003. The notion of movement discussed, specifically their decision to physically uproot and move to Liberia after the peace conference in order to sustain their commitments in-country, underscores the relevance of context and place in their narratives of resistance.

### **The Political Work and Legacies of Liberian Women**

Women’s political work leading to, during, and after the mass peace movement yielded important sociocultural and political changes in post-conflict Liberia. While important legislative and social advancements have been made, much more work remains to advance the lives of women systemically and sustainably, including decreasing gender gaps in access to economic and political capital in Liberia, as well as ensuring justice and accountability for gender-based human rights violations endured during the war. While conversations with participants highlighted several examples of critical shifts in the post-conflict era, exploring setbacks in this era landed in dialogues about women’s lack of representation in governance today, despite the grand collective having paved the way the first elected female President and a cabinet of several women elected to lead ministries. While formal political participation is one indicator of achievement and room for representational increase, the literature on women-led social and political change offers much more evaluative space from which political achievements can be judged. That is, studies have documented in numerous ways how and why formal political seats are not the end-all-be-all as it concerns defining and occupying political space. Studies examining structural changes sustained by women in social movements in Africa reveal a need to place formal and national-level politics within a spectrum of achievable

outcomes. Chovanec and Benitez's (2008) study of women anti-dictator activists in Chile affirmed that political and social movement participation can inspire post-conflict work with important capacities for social change, outside of the mainstream realm of formal politics. They explained what they learned from the women in their study

While most women of the second generation in Arica were no longer actively engaged in political parties or social movements in 2002, they maintained enduring ties of solidarity, commitment to a persistent set of beliefs and values, and socially relevant careers. None of these women had rejected the orientation or social consciousness that developed in their families and/or through their social movement involvement. (p. 50)

Women who participated in the Chilean movement continued to realize their societal commitments through their work as educators with a hope of influencing the next generations, counselors who worked with youth and families coping with substance abuse and violence, as well as feminist activists and community organizers (Chovanec & Benitez, 2008). Gouws and Coetzee (2019) also demystify formal political achievement and draw attention to risks that arise when women's issues are adopted in national policy initiatives. They refer to gender machinery structures, or the formalization of policy issues in government ministries, many of which have resulted in "ghettoising women's issues and make it easier for male-dominated governments to marginalise women's issues" (p. 2). Gouws and Coetzee (2019) affirm the legacies of feminist activism during transitions to democracy, and also caution emphases on gender equity agendas tied to governmental structures. This research is relevant to this study as it offers another lens to view Liberian women's achievements outside of formal political spheres.

## Implications

The results of this study contribute to the literature on social movements by attending to ways that family relationships, systemic circumstances, transmission of principles, and other relational dynamics emerge in three Liberian women activists' narratives of war and activism. The body of literature linking family systems with social activism is limited, and more research can attend to the impact of roles, identities, family culture, and other dimensions of intimate relational systems on grassroots organizing, political engagement, and other forms of collective community work to dismantle violence sanctioned by the state. This study highlights the family as a support structure and distinguishes unique ways that family positively fueled activists' approaches to life and political work.

While this study began to uncover ways that family apprehension emerged in terms of support, future studies may benefit from exploring how additional elements of family life act as pushback to political resistance. This could further illuminate activists' use of personal agency and demonstrate how those committed to social and political change navigate their value systems and personal actions to impact justice and social change, when their beliefs, conviction, and actions differ from family members in their intimate relational network. This not only has implications for future studies with Liberian women but can add to social movement and women-led political resistance studies around the world.

This study was designed to expand existing portrayals of processes, intentions, motivations, routines, challenges, and triumphs of the mass action coalition that began in Liberia and transformed to Ghana. The results herein add to the nuances of an important

part of Liberian history and emphasize the milieu that surrounded women's collective efforts, which offers important context around their contributions to history and necessary change. This piece of history can be transformative and may have implications on future generations of activists and advocates in Liberia, merely by documenting and archiving social movement processes and strategies employed by the mass action coalition. Adding to political narratives centering women's voices, intentions, commitments, and strategic changes disrupts the body of literature primarily focused on men's involvement in war and political reform. Research on socialization and social movements would suggest that a foundation for future resistance is available and the long-term implications of expanding and detailing women's efforts will emerge in the works of next-generation movements; and those works are not discontinuous or isolated from previous uprisings. Chovanec and Benitez (2008) discussed this implication as they refuted the "'immaculate conception' view of social movements which assumes that new 'waves' of activism emerge spontaneously and are largely unconnected to previous waves and movements."

These stories engage dimensions of stress, grief, resilience, and family systemic shifts and demands. While centered in this study, the narratives of triumph and political advancements are not detached from accounts of profound fatigue from labor and care provided across ecosystem levels. It is important to attend to the "superwoman" myth in the literature on gender and social movements and attend to socially engendered politics of care. Relevant to this study, the "strong black woman" trope reinforces deeply racist and sexist ideologies about Black women's capacities to endure pain and adversity while preserving self and others at any cost (Springer, 2002). This narrative reinforces systems and practices that mistreat, violate, and neglect Black women's physical, emotional, and

psychological health and safety around the world. Recognizing complexities within the lived experiences uncovered in this study is essential, as to not reduce women's activism to narratives of mere victory unchallenged by persistent stressors and labors, particularly as structural inequalities were simultaneously reinforced by oppressive systems during the conflict and resistance era.

Given the inherent nature of stories of grief, stress, loss, and resilience in the narratives described, the findings of this study have clinical implications. The results suggest that spaces would be useful to process the multiple and complex dimensions of activism against a violent and gendered war that required cultural resistance in critical tipping points while perpetuating and amplifying women's cross-dimensional labors. Processing should also leverage the coping resources and personal strengths exhibited by activists to honor their resilience, acknowledge their capacities, and appreciate the relationship between their personhood and positive contributions to their social world.

Based on their work positioning families as agents of democracy and change (Doherty & Carroll, 2002) and as the founder of Citizens Therapists for Democracy, Doherty delivered a keynote address at the 2017 Psychotherapy Networker encouraging therapists to expand our view of clients as not just the presenting problems that brought them into therapy, but also as people with passions and commitments to social issues and collective causes with societal implications. This type of therapeutic practice, acknowledging and seeking to understand the person or family unit as contributing members of society and broader social issues, has important connections with this study and any clinical work that may involve working with women like the activists I spoke with in this study. Additionally, storytelling is another form of processing that emerged in

findings from the needs assessment in the local Liberian community, and holds relevance here. Community storytelling was identified by community members as an opportunity to foster dialogue about community history. Storytelling has been used as a technique to process historical trauma (e.g., Charbonneau-Dahlen, Lowe, & Morris, 2016) and I argue that expanding existing narratives of Liberian women's collective resistance could be additionally accomplished in oral history spaces that act as both therapeutic and culturally-historically informative.

This study sets a foundation to continue collecting narratives from women in the mass action coalition to get deeper understandings of what it took to resist, from varying perspectives, including speaking with market women. The women in this study were relatively economically privileged compared to the majority of those who occupied the mass action space in particular. Garnering market women's stories and understanding their reflections of political resistance is critical to understanding the story of the collective, as numbers would show, they largely *were* the collective. Their wisdoms should not be separated from stories told about the era of the peace movement in Liberia.

### **Conclusions**

The objective of this study was to privilege the individual narratives of Liberian women peace activists and unearth subjugated stories about their engagement, successes, legacies, and obstacles in the context of their combat for peace. The larger body of Liberian women that labored prior to the 2003 movement set a foundation from which three primary spaces of resistance would develop in 2003, from Monrovia to Accra, to end 14 years of war after several peace agreements without their input and strategies failed. A range of demonstrations, from protests, marches, rallies, and sex strikes were

employed to garner attention from warring parties and hold them accountable to the full extent of the peace process. Repeated interviews with three activists involved in efforts in Accra revealed that key aspects of family life, circumstances, and relationality that emerged in their experiences during the war and their shaped their decisions, strategies, and capacities to respond to the conflict. Future studies will expand these narratives by engaging with additional women, seeking to understand market women's stories and perspectives, and targeting continued exploration of dimensions of family life that directly, indirectly, intensely, or subtly shaped women's activism.

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## Appendix A:

### Complete Domain Analysis Table

Domain	Category	Theme	Sub-theme
Domain I: Personal	Personal life	Life before Accra	
		Interests, education, and work	
	Activism	Present life	
		Driving forces	
		Personal convictions	
Personal networks and mobilizing	BHB strategic actions toward peace	Uprooted Supported Food assistance Directed	
	NRK strategic actions toward peace	Lobbied Held conference Campaigned Informed Advocated: MDCL	
Domain II: Familial	Family circumstances	UKT strategic actions toward peace	Intervened Mobilized Connected Lead
		Personal successes and turning points	
		Stress and coping	
	Family processes	Childhood	
		Social, economic, financial life	
Family relationships	War impacts		
	Relocations		
	Transnational dynamics		
	Parenting; dynamics with children		
	Roles and responsibilities		
	Values		
	Support		
	Key family relationships		

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 Other proximal relationships
 

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Domain III: Collectives	Mass action in Liberia	Goals and motivations Development and collective identity Strategies and commitments	
	Mass action in Ghana	Goals and motivations Development and collective identity Strategies and commitments	
	Peace talk delegates	Goals and motivations Development and collective identity Strategies and commitments	
	Grand collective of women	Other peacekeeping networks Other key organizers	
	The peace process	Gender and the peace process Turning points Challenges and obstacles	Boys and their moms are close
	Domain IV: Contextual	War context	Conflict in Liberia Child soldiers Refugee settings
	Ending the conflict	Peace process progression Key local and international connections Post-war Liberia: Progress and setbacks	Observations of warring parties
	Gender	Gender in Liberian society	Gender and family Legacies of women's collective action Women and politics

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**Appendix B:**

Participant Consent to Use Names

(Included separately in the pages to follow)

**CONSENT TO INCLUDE NAME IN RESEARCH STUDY**

Liberian Women's Victory:  
Examining Gender, Family, and Collective Action

You were invited to participate in a research study of Liberian women's activism during the Liberian civil war. The objective of this study is to systematically explore and document the narratives of Liberian women who engaged in political resistance, social activism, and peace-building efforts during the Liberian civil war. You were included as a participant given your in-depth involvement in political resistance and peacebuilding efforts led by women in Liberia and/or Ghana at the time.

This study is being conducted by Lekie Dwanyen, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Wieling, Professor and Couple and Family Therapy Program Director in the Human Development and Family Studies Department at the University of Georgia.

You agreed to participate in this study in a voluntary manner. Your engagement has been highly insightful and unearthed key information about women-led resistance efforts to end the civil war and rebuild peace in Liberia from the early 2000s and on. The case study design of the study enables the written results to remain as close to your personal experiences as possible. You have verbally discussed with Lekie Dwanyen your willingness to have your name formally acknowledged and included in written reports of the study.

You will have an opportunity to review written results of the dissertation and discuss with Lekie Dwanyen modifications to the narrative before the document is finalized.

**Your signature below indicates your written consent to formally acknowledge and include your name in written results of the case study.**



**Sundaiway E. Nelson Amegashie**  
*Name*

**May 14, 2020**  
*Date*

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may contact the researcher of this study with any questions at [dwany003@umn.edu](mailto:dwany003@umn.edu) or 763-843-9353. Dr. Wieling, the advisor on this project, can be reached at [ewieling@uga.edu](mailto:ewieling@uga.edu).

**CONSENT TO INCLUDE NAME IN RESEARCH STUDY**

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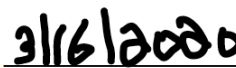
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\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name*



\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

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Liberian Women's Victory:  
Examining Gender, Family, and Collective Action

You were invited to participate in a research study of Liberian women's activism during the Liberian civil war. The objective of this study is to systematically explore and document the narratives of Liberian women who engaged in political resistance, social activism, and peacebuilding efforts during the Liberian civil war. You were included as a participant given your in-depth involvement in political resistance and peacebuilding efforts led by women in Liberia and/or Ghana at the time.

This study is being conducted by Lekie Dwanyen, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Wieling, Professor and Couple and Family Therapy Program Director in the Human Development and Family Studies Department at the University of Georgia.

You agreed to participate in this study in a voluntary manner. Your engagement has been highly insightful and unearthed key information about women-led resistance efforts to end the civil war and rebuild peace in Liberia from the early 2000s and on. The case study design of the study enables the written results to remain as close to your personal experiences as possible. You have verbally discussed with Lekie Dwanyen your willingness to have your name formally acknowledged and included in written reports of the study.

You will have an opportunity to review written results of the dissertation and discuss with Lekie Dwanyen modifications to the narrative before the document is finalized.

**Your signature below indicates your written consent to formally acknowledge and include your name in written results of the case study.**

*Bernadette Hawa Brophy*

June 16, 2020

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Name*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may contact the researcher of this study with any questions at [dwany003@umn.edu](mailto:dwany003@umn.edu) or 763-843-9353. Dr. Wieling, the advisor on this project, can be reached at [ewieling@uga.edu](mailto:ewieling@uga.edu).

**CONSENT TO INCLUDE NAME IN RESEARCH STUDY**

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Lina Kumba Thompson  
Name

March 2020  
Date

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