

Out of the Shadows: The Peace Women

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The heart of a mother is a deep abyss at the bottom of which you will always find forgiveness.

~Honoré de Balzac



Some of the women having some fun during a break

Women have long made their contributions to the sanctity of the family, abiding over their homes with a quiet, moral authority. Mothers are characterized by putting others' needs before their own and instilling the values of civility, charity and compassion in their children – but perhaps those same qualities hold the promise for humanity in these troubled times. Nowhere is that point illustrated more beautifully than in troubled Liberia where the women are stepping out of the shadows to bring hope and peace to their people.

Wearing white

The Second Civil War in Liberia brought with it the horrors and mayhem of all war. The violence was so prevalent that there were no guarantees that loved ones who had left home in the morning would return that night. With no end in sight to the torment, the women of Liberia took action. They banded together, Christian and Muslim alike, and took a stand for peace by issuing this statement of intent:

“In the past we were silent, but after being dehumanized and infected with diseases, and watching our children and families destroyed, war has taught us that the future lies in saying NO to violence and YES to peace! We will not relent until peace prevails.”

Embarking on what could have been a death sentence, the determined women donned bright white T-shirts and head-scarves and marched into the warzone. But instead of becoming further casualties of an already bloody situation, something remarkable happened. The fighting temporarily stopped, their message was heard, and the first seeds of rationality were planted in a tense and destructive political climate. The country’s leaders found that the women’s calm demeanors were an asset in difficult negotiations and enabled more civilized communication.

As a result, the Peace Women were instrumental in bringing an end to the civil war and the exile of alleged warlord Charles Taylor in 2003.

The fabric of society

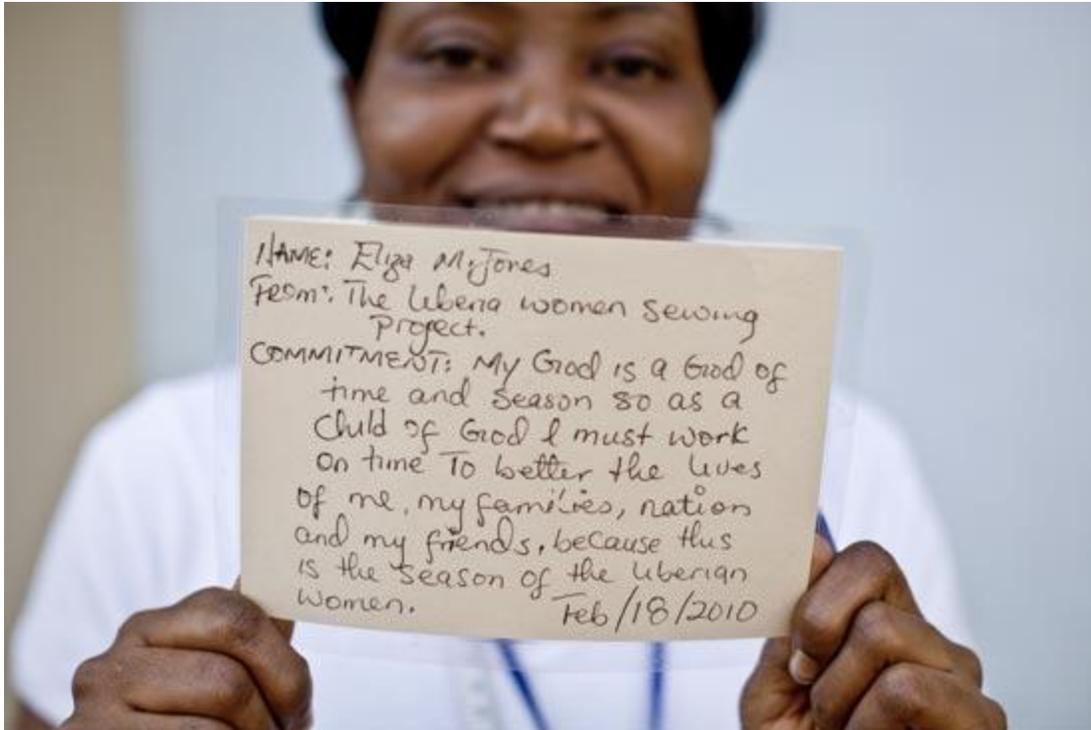
Since that time, the Peace Women’s political efforts have begun to blossom into something more substantial and long-lasting by catapulting Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf to the role of Liberia’s first African female head of state. However, there’s still much work to be done. With unemployment and poverty rates both around 80%, the citizens of Liberia are in need of a means by which to flourish.

Threads of hope

Enter an American organization named *Liberty and Justice*, founded by Chid Liberty and Adam Butlein. Born in Liberia, Liberty and his family were forced to flee to the United States as refugees during the war, making him intimately familiar with the plight of Liberia’s people. Together, Liberty and Butlein, two resourceful men, created a program designed to educate, employ and empower Liberian workers. This is quite a task considering that many Liberians have never had any semblance of a traditional job nor the understanding of what goes along with that. Yet Butlein says the citizens of Liberia are eager for opportunities. “There’s a strong quality of accomplishing the unimaginable in each and every one.”

To meet their needs, Butlein and Liberty created the first ever Fair-Trade certified garment factory in Africa. They not only train and employ workers, but ultimately give each a piece of the company as well. Their first endeavor? Making white T-shirts as homage to the brave women who wore them to symbolize peace while protesting the civil war.

“The Right-to-Work” program not only provides these women with much needed income, but also returns their dignity and hopes for a better life.



Vision statement during Alignment

Training consists of six courses that cover all aspects of the worker mindset.

Alignment – Creates a sense of personal responsibility in the worker and provides inspiration to commit to an outstanding future.

Working Assets – Teaches basic money management and an approach to building family assets. Participants open individual bank accounts and their contributions are matched dollar for dollar the first year by the *Liberian Women's Community Development Fund*.

Basic Apparel Production – Trains them on how to sew and operate commercial sewing machines.

Advanced Apparel Production – Attendees become skilled at operating advanced apparel manufacturing equipment. Also teaches skills such as marking, plotting, pattern-making, screen-printing and distressing.

Management and Leadership – (optional) Designed for workers committed to leading a team of colleagues – teaches strategies for effective communication.

Strategy and Entrepreneurship – (optional) Designed for workers committed to managing their own businesses upon completing their service with the Liberian Women's Sewing Project.

The program boasts an impressive 100% employment rate for participants and adheres to strict labor laws. Workers earn \$100 a month, receive health benefits and are given incentive programs such as large bags of rice with which to feed their families.



One of the sewing lines

Although the training is extensive, the women's goals are strikingly simple. One worker revealed she was feeding 17 people a day with the earnings and rice rations that her job provided. "Another worker told us that because of the money we have paid her so far, she's able to bring her child home from a displaced persons camp in a neighboring country. I can't imagine knowing that I had a child that was stuck in a displaced persons camp and I simply did not have the money to bring them home. It is remarkable," Butlein said in a PIM interview.

Liberty and justice

From ending the violence to rebuilding their broken society, the inner fortitude of Liberia's women is providing a lifeline for this war-torn nation. Their story confirms what most of us have suspected in our hearts all along – that the strength and purity of a mother's love has the power to change the world.

How to get involved

To buy a T-shirt, find out more about this amazing organization or donate to the cause, please visit www.libertyandjustice.com.

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