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Ending Civil War through Nonviolent Resistance: The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Movement

By Maxwell Adjei¹

Abstract

In 2003, Liberia's President Charles Taylor signed an agreement with two rebel parties to bring an end to the country's fourteen-year civil war. Prior to that, the war had resulted in the death of 250,000 people and the displacement of more than a million. While the signing of the agreement and the subsequent resignation of Mr. Taylor received much of the attention in the local and international media, it is the extremely successful nonviolent campaign by the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace (WLMAP) that deserves critical attention and analysis. So far, not much has been done in terms of research to analyze WLMAP's campaign within a nonviolent action framework. Generally, researchers have sought to highlight the contributions WLMAP made to the Liberian peace process by focusing primarily on their role in peacebuilding². Consequently, an important and specific aspect of WLMAP's activities—their strategic nonviolent struggle—tends to be overlooked in the discussions. To address this limitation, this paper applies Ackerman and Kruegler's (1994) twelve principles of strategic nonviolent conflict as a conceptual framework to analyze WLMAP's strategic nonviolent campaign. The paper also draws attention to some of the unique and important contributions women make to nonviolent movements.

Keywords: Nonviolent movements, Women and peace, Sustainable peace, Local peacebuilding, Africa, Qualitative research

Introduction

“Women of Liberia had been taken to [their] physical, psychological, and spiritual limits such that fighting for peace was their only realistic chance for survival” (Gbowee, 2011, p. 137).

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² While peacebuilding and nonviolent action are similar and share a common goal of pursuing 'just peace' through peaceful means, there are some notable differences between their approaches—and areas of emphasis—when it comes to conflict transformation. For instance, while peacebuilding may prioritize the use of conventional methods such as dialogue and negotiations to mitigate tensions and/or conflicts between adversaries with unequal power relations, nonviolent action may draw on nonconventional methods such as protests and strikes to seek balance in the power relations between such adversaries before any negotiations begin (Dudouet, 2017; Schock, 2005). In focusing on their nonviolent struggle, this paper pays particular attention to the WLMAP's effective use of non-routine and extra-institutional strategies to empower a marginalized group of women to spearhead political change in their country.

In 2003, Liberia's President Charles Taylor signed an agreement with two rebel parties to bring an end to the fourteen-year civil war. The conflict had resulted in the death of 250,000 people and the displacement of more than one million (Fuest, 2009). While the signing of the agreement and the subsequent resignation of Mr. Taylor received much of the attention in the local and international media, it is the extremely successful nonviolent campaign by the *Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace* (WLMAP) that deserves critical attention and analysis. Very much excluded from the formal political processes that led to the signing of the agreement, the impact of WLMAP had been underestimated for years (Disney & Reticker, 2008). However, as I will showcase in this paper, in the final year of the conflict, the nonviolent activities of these women—including rallies, mass demonstrations, sit-ins, sex strikes, blockades, displays of cultural symbols, etc.—were essential in bringing an end to the conflict.

Following decades of sexual brutality, harassment, and torture from soldiers on both sides of the conflict, in April 2003, Leymah Gbowee decided to bring women from her church together to protest the war (Navarro, 2010). Like many women, living through Liberia's civil war, Gbowee, a mother of five young children, was struggling to survive (Ouellet, 2013). Hence, according to her, gathering women to "pray for peace was not just a response to the vision she had received from God," but also an opportunity for them to register their concerns about the limited economic opportunities which had been exacerbated by the conflict (Gbowee, 2011, 122). What started out as a small prayer gathering for these women, however, would soon turn into one of the biggest nonviolent movements in the history of Liberia. So far, no research has applied theoretical nonviolent action framework to WLMAP's campaign in Liberia. Generally, researchers have sought to highlight the contributions these women made to the Liberian peace process by focusing primarily on their role in peacebuilding (Theobald, 2012; Ouellet, 2013; Alaga, 2011). Consequently, an important and specific aspect of WLMAP's activities—their strategic nonviolent struggle—tends to be overlooked or overgeneralized in the discussions.

To address these limitations, this paper examines the nonviolent campaign waged by the WLMAP over a five-month period (April to August) to bring an end to the conflict. Specifically, it applies Ackerman and Kruegler's twelve principles of strategic nonviolent conflict as a framework to analyze the campaign, making assessments about whether it conformed to those principles. As evidenced in the works of Stephan and Chenoweth (2012), Schock (2005), and Edmonds (2006), Ackerman and Kruegler's model remains one of the most popular and comprehensive frameworks to assess nonviolent movements. It allows the researcher to completely take apart the processes that went into the organization and execution of nonviolent campaigns and evaluate how those processes contributed to the success or failure of their strategies and/or tactics. This paper draws on secondary sources and first-hand accounts (autobiographies) of some of the women who were involved in organizing the movement. Overall, this paper is organized into three main sections; first, there will be a background analysis of the campaign, where I will highlight the nonviolent action and strategies of the movement. This will be followed by a point-by-point application of Ackerman and Kruegler's twelve principles, noting how the campaign 'conformed to,' 'partially conformed to,' or 'failed to conform to' each of the principles. Finally, I will conclude with an analysis of how the success of WLMAP's campaign contributes to the nonviolent studies literature, highlighting how other nonviolent action campaigns can learn from their success.

Background

In early 2003, Liberia's second civil war had escalated. The ruling National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor had come under intense fire from the armed opposition party, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). After managing to hold on to power through violence and suppression for over fourteen years, Charles Taylor seemed to be facing the biggest challenge to his presidency. Within a few days of launching their attacks, LURD, with key support from the government of Guinea, had taken over many cities in northern Liberia and was making inroads into the capital, Monrovia. However, determined not to be outdone by a highly motivated and violent opposition, Mr. Taylor doubled down on his rhetoric, declaring that his men were ready to "fight street to street, house to house, until they defeat [the rebels] ... [they] will fight to the last...and never desert the city" (Disney & Reticker, 2008). For the three million citizens of Liberia, this entrenched position of Charles Taylor meant that there was no end in sight for the civil war which had largely brought economic and social activity to a halt in their country. While the consequences of the war spared only a few Liberians, women bore the overwhelming brunt of the violence (Tavaana, n.d.). For the most part, women and girls were subjected to various forms of sexual abuse, rape, and torture (Theobald, 2012). Apart from that, women were frequently abducted and abused as forced laborers or coerced into marrying the armed combatants. Those women who escaped were left with the task of caring for children and the elderly in the face of horrific conditions, with some witnessing their loved ones (husbands and children) being murdered or forcibly recruited into the army (Kieh, 2013, p. 7).

Engulfed in a cycle of violence and with no hope for a better future, a group of Liberian women, under the leadership of Leymah Gbowee, came together to form the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace (WLMAP) to demand an immediate end to the conflict. Initially, Gbowee, a Christian social worker with the Lutheran Church, had intended the organization to include a small group of Christian women who would meet regularly to pray for peace. However, when word about their meetings spread through the community, one Muslim policewoman, Asatu Bah Kenneth, became highly impressed with the women's vision and volunteered to mobilize Muslim women to join the movement. Following initial concerns that having Muslims in their ranks would "dilute" their faith, the Christian women ultimately resolved that because "bullets don't pick and choose between Christian and Muslim women," it would be in their interests to work together for peace (Disney & Reticker, 2008). More importantly, having a unified front of Christian and Muslim women would send a clear message to the people of Liberia that neither the government forces (predominantly Christian) nor LURD (predominantly Muslim) were fighting for their religious interests. While addressing WLMAP for the first time, Gbowee declared that "in the past we were silent, but after being killed, raped, dehumanized, and infected with diseases...war has taught us that the future lies in saying *no* to violence and *yes* to peace!" (Gbowee, 2011, p. 135). For the thousands of the women gathered, this impassioned speech by Gbowee—more than any ethnic or religious affinities—represented their level of frustration with the conflict and the extent to which they were willing to commit to bring peace to their country.

Although WLMAP was not the first women's movement to engage in peace related activities in Liberia, it was the first to initiate a more coordinated, systematic, and sustained nonviolent campaign to bring peace to the country (Alaga, 2011). Prior to mobilizing women for WLMAP, Gbowee and other Liberian women had undergone numerous training workshops on nonviolent action organized by the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) in Ghana and Liberia. These workshops were essential in helping them to have a better understanding of the conflict dynamics while increasing

their awareness on how to use nonviolent strategies to pursue peaceful transformation at the national level. Though these workshops were important in reaching many women in Monrovia, Gbowee and her team realized that in order to successfully mobilize women in the country, more education was needed at the grassroots level. Hence, as Gbowee recalls,

“[for] three days a week [in the next] six months, we went to the mosques on Fridays, to the markets on Saturdays, and to two churches every Sunday to educate women on [nonviolence] while ... delivering a simple message: Liberian women, awake for peace!” (Gbowee, 2011, p. 126).

In addition to these engagements at the grassroots level, they handed out flyers and images depicting women as heroines and rescuers who possessed the ability to bring an end to Liberia’s conflict. After several months of the education and confidence building programs, WLMAP was ready to move to the next stage of their nonviolent action.

WLMAP’s Strategic Use of Nonviolent Action

Following several months of training and internal discussions, in April 2003, WLMAP finally decided to make their first public statement on the conflict. In the statement, they condemned both sides for their use of violence and persistent abuse of women and children (Gbowee, 2011). In the view of Gbowee (2011), the decision to make such a statement before beginning any other WLMAP activities was strategic: it sent a clear signal to President Taylor and the LURD that their “demands were nonpartisan” and completely free from the influences of both sides in the conflict (p. 135). They stated,

“In simple and clear terms, we made three demands in the statement: [for] the government and the rebels to declare an immediate and unconditional ceasefire; [for] the government and the rebels to begin peace talks; [and finally, for] an international intervention force to be deployed to Liberia” (Gbowee, 2011, p. 135).

Achieving these three demands became the central goal for all subsequent nonviolent actions taken by the WLMAP. In defiance of President Taylor’s ban on public marches, WLMAP staged its first mass protest at Monrovia’s fish market, a location that would make the president see them on his daily commute to the office. While using radio and printed flyers to spread word about the protest, Gbowee and her team encouraged women to show up for the protests in white clothing and without any jewelry or makeup. For them, this would send a signal about their serious commitment to peace and unrelenting desire to remain independent of either side of the conflict (Disney & Reticker, 2008). Heeding to their calls on the radio, over 2,500 women from different social backgrounds, clad in white T-shirts, showed up daily for the sit-in protests which took place over the next several weeks (Theobald, 2012). In each of the gatherings the women would sit, dance, and sing for peace while displaying placards and banners with messages such as “The women of Liberia want peace now,” “We are tired,” “We want peace, no more war” etc. (Navarro, 2010).

While the choice of the fish market as the location for the protests was strategically made to draw President Taylor’s attention and, perhaps, encourage him to stop and listen to their concerns, each day he drove past the women without stopping or giving them any recognition; “The president simply didn’t see any reason to talk to us” (Gbowee, 2011, p. 138). Determined not

to back away from their demands, the women decided to gather outside the Parliament when news emerged that President Taylor was on his way to address the Parliamentarians. There too, the president failed to acknowledge them. At this point, they decided that the only way they could draw his attention was to do something dramatic.

“We realized that there was no need for us to be passive in our protests anymore...President Taylor had effectively quelled protests in the past and would do the same to our movement if we did not actively confront him” (Disney & Reticker, 2008).

Hence, ignoring the pouring rain, the women decided to occupy the parking lot so that no one could get in or out of the Parliament. Enraged by this action, the Speaker of Parliament ordered security guards to use any means necessary to remove the women from the parking lot. As Gbowee (2011) recalls, “we learned that the guards had been told to severely flog us [if we did not leave the parking lot]” (p. 135). However, impressed with the level of attention they had already received in the media and from top political actors, including President Taylor himself, the women retreated from the parking lot and returned to the fish market to continue their protests. Still, they continued to press on their demand to meet with President Taylor (Gbowee, 2011, p. 137).

About a week after their protests at the Parliament, the Speaker came to meet with the women at the fish market. While this visit was the first by a high-level official in Taylor’s administration, it was a testament to the increasing attention and visibility for the women at the higher levels of government. However, uncertain about the message the Speaker had for the group, the leaders of the movement opted to have a discussion with him rather than allow him to directly address the crowd. In what turned out to be a message delivery rather than a discussion, the Speaker informed the women that President Taylor had heard their requests for a meeting and was willing to meet them at the Executive Mansion (official residence and workplace for the president) on April 23rd (Gbowee, 2011). Remaining cautious about the motivation behind President Taylor’s sudden decision to grant them a hearing, the leaders of the movement organized a meeting to carefully map out strategies on how they would approach the meeting. First, for their message to be concise and clear, they decided that only one person, Leymah Gbowee, would address the president. Second, for them to maintain their independent and nonpartisan reputation, they agreed that they would reject any gifts and donations from the president (Gbowee, 2011). As the day for the meeting approached, the women continued their mobilization efforts through their communication channels and the distribution of flyers. On April 23rd, as early as six o’clock in the morning, a large crowd of women had gathered on the premises of the Executive Mansion, holding hands and praying for the strength of their leaders, especially Leymah, as she prepared to address the president (Disney & Reticker, 2008). When the time came for her to deliver the message, Leymah repeated WLMAP’s calls for an end to the conflict, declaring that:

“the women of Liberia, including the IDPs (internally displaced people), are tired of war. We are tired of running. We are tired of begging for bulgur 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 society, tomorrow our children will ask us, ‘Mama, what was your role during the crisis?’” (Gbowee, 2011, p. 141).

Without showing much emotion, President Taylor received the women's petition and promised his readiness for a ceasefire and talks with the rebels, while challenging them to extend similar calls to the opposition. Not relenting on their successful meeting with the president, the women began to assess other possible ways they could bring more pressure to both sides of the conflict. Their goal was to come up with nonviolent strategies that could possibly draw international attention and raise the costs for both sides of the conflict in such a way that they would seriously consider the possibility of a ceasefire and peace talks (Gbowee, 2011). After long deliberations, the women decided that they would go on a sex strike, denying their partners sexual intimacy until the war had ended;

“We said to the women that one way or the other you have power as a woman, and that power is to deny your man sex...and ask him to do anything in his power to put a stop to the war” (Gbowee, 2011, p. 147).

Seeing men as the main perpetrators of the violence, the women felt that if they were to withhold sex, their partners would join them in demanding an end to the conflict (Navarro, 2010). To prevent their husbands from forcibly having sex with them, they set up “safe” spaces where they could stay and sleep together. After some initial setbacks, this strategy seemed to be effective as “many men began to pray with their wives and demand an end to the conflict...more importantly, the sex strike gave the campaign extremely valuable media attention outside of Liberia” (Gbowee, 2011, p. 147). Following the successes with the sex strike and President Taylor's meeting, the women turned their attention to the rebels, demanding that they too agree to attend the peace talks. Upon hearing that the warlords were meeting at a hotel in a neighboring country, Sierra Leone, a delegation of the women traveled to the country. On their arrival, the delegation was able to arrange a private meeting with the warlords and get them to commit to attending the peace talks, which had been scheduled to take place in Accra, Ghana.

From Nonviolent Struggle to Negotiated Settlement

After successfully getting both parties to commit to a ceasefire and peace talks, WLMAP moved the next phase of its demands which was to ensure that the parties do not just ‘talk’ peace but reach an agreement that would permanently end the conflict. Inspired by their progress to this point, the women decided to continue their nonviolent campaign in Ghana as the peace talks continued. However, constrained by the lack of funds, they could only send a small team of representatives to the peace talks. Upon arrival in Ghana, the seven-member delegation effectively mobilized about 500 Liberian refugee women living in both the Buduburam camp and other Ghanaian communities to join their protests (Alaga, 2011). In addition, they also used the larger WIPNET-WANEP network to leverage support from Liberian women seeking refuge in countries such as Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Côte D'Ivoire, while encouraging them to initiate nonviolent campaigns in their respective countries. Hence, the movement had not only grown in numerical strength in Ghana, but it had also become international in its scope and membership. On June 4, as the peace talks began, a large crowd of Liberian women clad in white T-shirts gathered at the venue, singing and holding placards to show their support for the process, while frequently engaging with the media (especially BBC and the Ghanaian media) to court the support of the international community. As the talks progressed, the women continued to engage in informal discussions with both parties, urging them on to demonstrate genuine commitment to the process.

They also communicated frequently with their counterparts back home in Liberia, providing and obtaining information that was useful for moving their activities forward (Alaga, 2011).

In a shocking turn of events, during the negotiations President Taylor was indicted for war crimes by the UN-Special Court for Sierra Leone. To avoid his arrest in Ghana, Taylor hurriedly fled back to Liberia, leaving his men behind for the negotiations. With the shock of Taylor's indictment and the renewal of violent clashes in Liberia, the negotiations were postponed for four days. When the negotiations resumed, both parties hardened their stance, becoming less conciliatory and tolerant of each other's position: "the members of LURD insisted that Taylor, 'an indicted criminal,' had [no option but] to go; Taylor's representatives maintained that it was 'ridiculous' to expect a ['democratically elected'] president to abdicate" (Gbowee, 2011, p. 155). In what seemed to Gbowee (2011) like an unending circus, the negotiators for both parties would go back and forth with superfluous demands without making progress on the material parts of the agreement. Back in Liberia, the civil war had intensely reemerged near the capital city, with missiles hitting the US embassy and many other places which had been previously marked as safe zones in the conflict. Having less regard for the escalated conflict and the stalled negotiations, the warlords continued to enjoy their "vacation" in Ghana at the expense of the international community (Gbowee, 2010). Agitated with the lack of progress and the poor commitment toward the negotiations, the women stormed the building where the negotiations were taking place, blocking the entrance to the meeting room with their bodies and declaring that "no one will come out of this place until a peace agreement is signed" (Gbowee, 2011, p. 161). When the guards came to remove them, Gbowee threatened to strip naked, fully aware that in Africa it is a curse for a woman to deliberately bare herself. Faced with the dilemma of allowing the women to continue holding the negotiators hostage or having them strip naked due to their forced removal, the guards opted for the former. In fact, when some negotiators tried to escape the room through the back windows, the guards informed the women of it and asked them to send some of their members to block the windows (Disney & Reticker, 2008).

After more than an hour of negotiations with the chief mediator of the peace talks, General Abdulsalami Abubakar (former president of Nigeria), the women agreed to stop their blockade of the negotiating room, while receiving assurances that they would be allowed to return to the entrance if discussions did not proceed as they expected.

"Whereas the Liberian war did not end on the day [the women] blocked the hall, it surely marked the beginning of the end. The atmosphere at the peace talks changed from circus-like to somber...and the talks proceeded without further delay" (Gbowee, 2011, p. 163).

A few days after the incident, international peacekeeping troops arrived in Liberia to crowds of women and children weeping and cheering along the streets. On August 11, three weeks after the blockade, President Taylor announced his resignation and agreed to go into exile in Nigeria. A day after that, the terms for the agreement were announced and the peace talks eventually suspended. A few more troops, UN Peacekeeping forces (UNMIL), joined the international forces in Liberia and began to coordinate the peacebuilding process with the support of a transitional government. Having achieved their goals, the women returned to Liberia. Upon arrival, they were met with heroic chants of joy and a rendition of their then popular song, "we want peace, no more war!" (Disney & Reticker, 2008). For the next two years, the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace would actively engage in various processes to promote democracy in the country (such as voter

education and registration), while mobilizing and campaigning for the successful election of Liberia's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who would go on to share the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize with Leymah Gbowee.

Applying Twelve Strategic Principles for Nonviolent Conflict

Ackerman and Kruegler (1994) provide twelve principles of strategic nonviolent conflict as a conceptual framework to assess the success or failure of nonviolent movements. Informed by the literature on military strategy, and especially by Clausewitz's writings on military strategy, the twelve principles aim to provide broad guidelines on how nonviolent campaigns can effectively use tactics and strategies to be successful. While acknowledging the contextual differences in each nonviolent campaign, Ackerman and Kruegler argue that movements that conform to these principles generally tend to be successful. The case of WLMAP offers additional support to Ackerman and Kreugler's argument. As demonstrated below, WLMAP's conformance to almost all the twelve principles was instrumental in the success of their nonviolent campaign.

Principle 1: Formulate Functional Objectives

Ackerman and Kruegler (1994) identify the existence of functional objectives as the first strategic principle for nonviolent movements. They argue that "all competent strategy derives from objectives that are well chosen, defined, and understood" (p. 24). Hence, movements must always begin their campaigns with the setting of objectives. In addition, the set objectives must be specific and achievable within a reasonable time frame. In this case, WLMAP conformed to this principle. From the very beginning, the movement articulated three main objectives: that the contention goes to a quick, unconditional ceasefire, that the government and rebel forces agree to peace talks, and that international intervention forces be deployed to Liberia (Gbowee, 2011). Apart from being chronologically sound and realistic, these objectives were very specific and easily understood by both members of the movement and the conflicting parties.

In setting their demands, WLMAP also ensured that neither the government forces nor the rebels could impugn the objectivity of their campaign. As a result, they cautiously committed to a non-partisan message, constantly reminding both parties that their principal objective was for peace to prevail in Liberia. Having such impartial objectives was also essential for the movement to attract the broad participation of women from diverse groups in the country (Lind, 2016). In addition, as Ouellet (2013) notes, despite being specific and easily understood, WLMAP's objectives were not too narrow to restrict the use of certain types of nonviolent strategies. The movement's objectives were specific, yet very broad, to allow the use of a diverse range of nonviolent strategies.

Principle 2: Develop Organizational Strength

This principle involves a movement's ability to develop the capacities needed to effectively respond to the challenges they will face in their protests. It includes the capacity of movements to be able to "respond swiftly and intelligently to changing conditions and have sufficient authority and credibility to make its decisions operational" (Ackerman & Kreugler, 1994, p. 27). Without the flexibility to make such prompt decisions and alternate between the use of different tactics and strategies, nonviolent movements are less likely to succeed. WLMAP conformed to this principle. To allow flexibility and swift decision-making, the movement instituted a seven-member decision-making body headed by Leymah Gbowee. The members of the committee, who stayed together in

a hotel throughout the campaign, met regularly to assess the progress of the movement and devise new strategies to be more effective (Gbowee, 2011). During critical moments of the campaign, the committee was able to make quick decisions which ultimately resulted in the success of the campaign. An example is the spontaneous decision to block the negotiation room after realizing that their regular sit-in protests at the peace talks had been less effective (Disney & Reticker, 2008).

Beside the core group of leaders, WLMAP benefitted from a very informed and dedicated group of women who had been exposed to the benefits of using nonviolent strategies to pursue change in a country. The nonviolent action training workshops that Gbowee and her team had organized were instrumental in increasing conflict awareness among the women and improving the general effectiveness of WLMAP's mobilization effort. Another organizational strength of WLMAP was in its broad-based membership and grassroots-oriented nonviolent campaign. The movement was very much conscious of the fact that the success of the campaign was due in large part to excellent grassroots organization. As a result, much of their mobilization efforts were targeted at ensuring the participation of women at the grassroots. They effectively used women's "collective experiences of the war, as characterized by the loss of family and property, rape and abuse, and displacement," as a mobilization strategy (Alaga, 2011, p. 4).

Principle 3: Secure Access to Critical Material Resources

For this principle, Ackerman and Kruegler suggest that movements must be willing and able to secure access to critical material resources that are necessary for the sustenance of the campaign (e.g., food, water, clothing, medical supplies etc.). In addition, they note that having access to useful resources such as communication channels and transportation can be vital for movements to succeed. WLMAP conformed to this principle. Through their partnership with local and international organizations, including churches and mosques, WLMAP was able to provide most of the material needs of the protestors. For instance, women who did not have white clothing at the time of joining the movement were given white T-shirts provided by WIPNET (Gbowee, 2011). Also, the movement was able to organize daily transportation for protestors who did not have the means of transportation to the protest venue (Alaga, 2011).

Another key resource WLMAP secured in their campaign was their access to the public. Due to President Taylor's tight control over the local media, the movement was only able to rely on a Catholic radio station, Radio Veritas, to broadcast information about their protests and nonviolent strategies (Lind, 2016). However, not to be discouraged by this limitation, WLMAP established several unofficial communication channels within churches, mosques, and marketplaces through which they could disseminate information about their campaign and upcoming protests (Gbowee, 2011).

Principle 4: Cultivate External Assistance

Ackerman and Kreugler argue that cultivating external assistance can be important for the success of nonviolent movements. In their view, having "external parties launch sanctions against a violent protagonist...or directly attack them within the zone of conflict" can be instrumental in making nonviolent movements successful. WLMAP was very successful in its attempts to cultivate external existence. Using creative strategies such as the sex strike and the blockade, the movement was able to draw international attention to the conflict. Apart from that, members of WLMAP also picketed the offices of the United Nations and other international organizations to demand international attention and intervention in the conflict. As Gbowee recalls one of those protests, "one morning, in the pouring rain, we stood barefoot outside the United Nations compound in

Mamba Point, where a diplomatic coalition of representatives was holding a meeting... [desperately waiting so we could] hand them our position papers” (Gbowee, 2011, p. 150). These efforts were instrumental in soliciting broad international condemnation for the warring parties, and especially President Taylor.

Another key outside support for WLMAP came from Liberian women in the diaspora. For example, as seen during the peace talks, WLMAP was able to mobilize about 500 Liberian refugee women living in Ghana for their protests (Alaga, 2011). The movement also mobilized Liberian women in countries such as Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Côte D’Ivoire to begin nonviolent protests in their respective countries; “at one point, fifteen groups of women in nine different countries were wearing white and demanding peace in solidarity with the women of Liberia” (Gbowee, 2011, p. 144). These external mobilization efforts were extremely effective in putting pressure on the warring parties and making the movement successful.

Principle 5: Expand the Repertoire of Sanctions

This principle involves the ability of movements to utilize a variety of nonviolent actions and strategies for their campaign; “The ideal situation for [movements] is one in which they can deliver on demand as many different sanctions as possible or desirable” (Ackerman & Kruegler, 2011, p. 34). WLMAP conformed to this principle. The movement used a variety of nonviolent strategies including sex strikes, sit-ins, official channels (letters, petitions, position papers), unofficial communication channels, blockades, prayer and worship, marches, vigils singing, dancing, among many others to conduct their campaign. They were adequately versatile in their use of nonviolent sanctions.

The decision by the women to block access to the Parliament after several of their protests at the fish market had been ignored by President Taylor is one example of how WLMAP shifted between tactics and combined a variety of strategies to achieve their objectives. Whenever it mattered, the women also used their cultural role as mothers to pursue their strategic purposes. For instance, during their calls for a meeting with President Taylor and the LURD, the women constantly framed the meeting as an “opportunity for Liberian mothers to have a talk with their children” (Disney & Reticker, 2008). After meeting with WLMAP, President Taylor also acknowledged this maternal ‘influence’ of WLMAP when he stated that, “no group of people could make me get out of [my sick] bed but the women of Liberia, who I consider to be my mothers” (Gbowee, 2011, 141).

Principle 6: Attack the Opponents’ Strategy for Consolidating Control

During a nonviolent campaign, regimes attempt to consolidate their control over society using various strategies such as intimidation, threats, or commands. This principle recommends movements to directly attack the means of control of an opponent. Thus, movements should pursue strategies that alienate opponents from their “pillars of support” (Helvey, 2004). While the inclusive nature of WLMAP—having both Christian and Muslim women come together for the protests—attacked the government and rebel forces’ strategy of using religion to recruit forces and justify their violence, this principle was largely inoperative in the case of the movement. For the most part of the campaign, WLMAP’s strategies were targeted at the main perpetrators of the conflict instead of their limited bases of support.

Principle 7: Mute the Impact of the Opponents Violent Weapons

Nonviolent movements always face the threat of violent repression by opponents. The actual use of violent repression against protestors “can [however] cause devastating damage and quickly diminish the material base from which nonviolent conflict is being waged” (Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994, p. 38). Hence, this principle recommends that movements adopt a variety of tactics (such as good intelligence gathering, defensive dispersion, preparing for the worst etc.) to reduce the impact of an opponent’s violence. In addition, movements can also use strategies to enhance the chances of backfire for an opponent’s repression (Sharp, 1973; Kurtz & Smithey, 2018). The success of the WLMAP came while operating under one of the most violent and repressive regimes in the history of Liberia (Press, 2015). Among many others, the movement’s strict conformance to nonviolent action and their decision to remain non-partisan were vital in overcoming violent repression (Alaga, 2011).

The women learned to dramatize repressive attacks to create conditions for backfire. For example, when they were threatened with violence while they were protesting at the parking lot of the Parliament, they preemptively began wailing and crying to draw the attention of the media (Gbowee, 2011). Drawing this attention, in their view, was necessary to create a dilemma for the security guards who would not like to be seen as abusing their mothers for protesting. In a similar move, during the peace talks in Ghana, the women created a cultural dilemma for security guards when they began stripping naked after they were threatened with arrests for blocking the entrance to the negotiation room. The women were fully aware that faced with the choice between their arrest (and stripping naked) and allowing them to continue their protests, the guards would choose the latter to avoid the ‘curses’ associated with the former.

Principle 8: Alienate Opponents from Expected Bases of Support

When oppression and violence are inevitable, the best way movements can protect themselves is through increasing the cost of using violence (Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994, p. 40). This principle suggests that one-way movements can increase the cost of violence is to use strategies that alienate opponents from as many of their usual or expected sources of support as possible. WLMAP conformed to this principle. The movement was able to capitalize on their traditional role as mothers to win the hearts and minds of many people who viewed them as having no agency in the efforts to bring peace to the country; “Many people [especially men] began to say that if the women are protesting for peace, what excuse do I have no to be doing something to end the conflict” (Disney & Reticker, 2008). WLMAP was also successful in causing defections—albeit covert—from officials in Taylor’s administration. One of the defectors, Grace Minor, president of the senate, provided monetary support for the movement, while attending some of their candlelight vigils behind a veil (Gbowee, 2001, p. 149). Apart from Minor, the movement received several secret contributions from government officials and businessmen who were publicly aligned with President Taylor (Gbowee, 2011).

Also, when it became clear that the government of Guinea was providing logistical support to the opposition party, LURD, the women presented a petition to the Embassy of Guinea, calling on the government to support their efforts to bring peace to their country (Alaga, 2011). The decision by the women to picket the offices of international organizations like the UN and ECOWAS were also intended to alienate the parties from their external bases of support.

Principle 9: Maintain Nonviolent Discipline

For this principle, Ackerman and Kruegler (1994) recommend that movements maintain their nonviolent discipline when faced with repression. However, they argue, maintaining nonviolent discipline is “neither an arbitrary nor primarily a moralistic choice,” it requires the clear use of strategy (p. 42). Movements must, therefore, train participants on the need for them to consciously choose nonviolence over violence while actively resisting oppression. WLMAP conformed to this principle. Throughout the campaign, the women remained committed to nonviolence. As seen in their response to the stalled negotiations during the peace talks, whenever they were frustrated with the turn of events or threatened with the use of violence, the women resorted to nonviolent strategies. The decision by the leadership of the movement to organize several nonviolence training workshops ahead of the campaign played an important role in this regard. Most of the protestors had been exposed to ideas on how they could use their vulnerabilities as women in the Liberian context to their advantage (Gbowee, 2011). Hence, instead of violently responding to threats of violence against them, they would constantly use “their roles as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters to reemphasize the peaceful and nonthreatening [nature of their campaign]” (Lind, 2016, p. 15).

Principle 10: Assess Events and Options in Light of Levels of Strategic Decision Making

Nonviolent movements must assess the outcomes of their strategies to inform their decision on how to proceed with their protest (Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994). This principle is concerned with the interplay between a movement’s broad strategic goals and its tactical execution. It suggests that movements “constantly adjust their strategies in light of real events and relative perceptions of strength” (ibid., p. 47). WLMAP conformed to this principle. Over the course of the campaign, the movement carefully developed tactical responses to the specific threats they faced. All their tactical choices also seemed to be consistent with their broad strategic goals and policy. The decision to protest at the Parliament after their initial protests had been ignored, for example, suggests that the group was constantly assessing the impact of their strategies and making the necessary adjustments to be more effective.

The movement also did not hesitate to form alliances with other groups and organizations whenever it served their broad strategic goals. They were constantly seeking new partners in the execution of their campaign (Gbowee, 2011). For example, when their initial efforts to get through to the president and the leadership of LURD appeared to be unsuccessful, they decided to expand their efforts by drawing on the support of Liberian religious authorities. Specifically, they used the support of Muslim leaders (*imams*) and church clergy members to pressure both parties for a meeting (Ouellet, 2013).

Principle 11. Adjust Offensive and Defensive Operations According to the Relative Vulnerabilities of the Protagonists

This principle suggests that movements should be aware of the offensive and defensive components of their strategy and adjust them according to the relative vulnerabilities of the opponents. Ackerman and Kruegler (1994) note that while offensive actions undermine an opponent's ability to stay in the fight, defensive actions protect a movement’s own ability to continue the fight (p. 48). Movements should, therefore, be informed on how they could switch tactics and strategies to overcome their vulnerabilities while taking advantage of those of the opponent. WLMAP conformed to this principle. The movement’s dualistic use of their motherly status in the Liberian context is a clear example of conformance to the principle. On the one hand,

when on the offensive, the women used their status to demand that both the government and rebel forces grant them hearing because, as their mothers, they deserved the right to be treated with respect and attention. On the other hand, the women used their status to defend themselves from repression by drawing on popular conceptions of their weaknesses and the vulnerabilities they face as women. The protests at Parliament also demonstrated the effective use of offensive and defensive strategies by the movement. The decision to occupy the parking lot and block access to the Parliament was a clear offensive move by the women. On the contrary, the decision to withdraw from the parking lot after being threatened with violence was a defensive tactic to prevent an early scare for the movement's participants (Gbowee, 2011).

Principle 12: Sustain Continuity between Sanctions, Mechanisms, and Objectives

Ackerman and Kreugler's (1994) suggest that movements must match their nonviolent strategies to the expectations of the post-campaign period. Thus, the group must decide whether the desired outcome of the protest would be for the conversion of the opponent; reaching a settlement with the opponent; coercing the opponent to relinquish authority; or a complete disintegration of the opponent in a way that they no longer exist in the post-campaign period. In their view, making this decision would serve as an important guide for a movement's choice of strategies during their campaign. The goal of WLMAP can be best characterized as one of coercion and accommodation. The movement was determined to force both parties to come to a sort of power-sharing arrangement that would mandate them to retreat their forces and to allow for peace to prevail in Liberia;

“At the end of the day, that was what the war was about for [both parties]; [power and the control of resources] ... One warlord, for instance, said that he wouldn't stop fighting unless he was guaranteed a lucrative job afterward” (Gbowee, 2011, p. 158).

Hence, getting the parties to come to an agreement on how the country's resources would be governed became an essential part of WLMAP's initial campaign. During the peace talks, the women would 'shuttle' between the government and rebel forces in an effort to convince them to find common grounds on their disagreements (Alaga, 2011). The dynamics however changed after President Taylor's indictment and with the mounting international pressure for his arrest. The movement and the mediators used the opportunity to demand for President Taylor's resignation and constitute a transitional government made up of officials from his administration and members of the opposition. For the transition team to be effective and the post-campaign period to be stable, there needed to be some form of accommodation and willingness of the entire population to move beyond the divisive tendencies of the past. Hence, the movement channeled its effort to the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process, actively campaigning to ensure that the needs (economic, psychological, political) of the ex-combatants were adequately taken care of while being reintegrated into the community (Gbowee, 2011). Evidently, with the shift from nonviolent campaign to post-conflict reconstruction, the movement sustained continuity between their nonviolent action and their objectives for the post-campaign period.

Analysis: Lessons for Nonviolent Movements

For a long time, women have been depicted as victims of conflict in need of rescue (Adjei, 2019; Shepherd, 2016; Anderlini, 2007). While it may be true that women bear the brunt of violence in times of conflict, they must not be seen as weak, disengaged individuals always in need of men's protection, but, rather, as active agents who can act in certain ways to bring change and transformation to conflict-ridden societies (Adjei, 2019). In Liberia, the activities of WLMAP demonstrates that women possess the skills and agency needed to lead peacebuilding processes in their country. More importantly, the success of WLMAP's effort to end Liberia's conflict is a strong example of how nonviolent direct action can lead to substantial change. The campaign by WLMAP, as shown above, stands out as an effective use of nonviolent strategies to pursue a set of clearly defined goals and objectives. Despite facing many social, political, cultural, and economic challenges, WLMAP remained committed to a nonviolent discipline, refusing any urges to be violent in their campaign. In the nonviolent action literature, the need for protestors to maintain nonviolent discipline in the face of challenges and serious repression has been emphasized as an important factor in determining the success of campaigns (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008; Schock, 2005). The women of Liberia's strong commitment to nonviolence certainly played an instrumental role in their successful campaign.

In addition to maintaining nonviolent discipline, the movement framed their campaign message in ways that attracted a diverse group of women, ranging from Muslims to Christians, educated elites to illiterates, among others. Principe (2017) argues that effectively framing the campaign message in ways that "bring together citizens with a diverse range of experiences, skills, and know-how, as well as overlapping social identities" (p. 3) is crucial for the purposes of nonviolent campaigns; for one, it helps to attract broad participation, which is essential for the success of any nonviolent movement (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2012; Schock, 2005). Also, diversity in participation gives a campaign access to new knowledge and resources, aiding in the development of new tactics while building resilience (Schock, as cited in Principe, 2017). Throughout the campaign, WLMAP emphasized that their goal was for peace, not to support President Taylor or the rebels in their quest to win power. This nonpartisan approach to their campaign afforded them a high level of credibility from both sides of the conflict, while allowing them to maintain an open channel of communication with both sides. As Cevallos (2001) shows in his analysis of the *Otpor* protests in Serbia, maintaining a nonpartisan stance can be useful for nonviolent movements operating in highly polarized communities. Additionally, the women employed creative strategies (such as setting up "safe" spaces) to reduce the likelihood of repression against them. Whenever they were faced with repression, they effectively used the media, both domestic and international, to draw attention to themselves and increase the chances of backfire (Martin, 2007; Kurtz & Smithey, 2018). An example is their decision to preemptively cry (to draw the attention of the media) when they were threatened with violence at the parking lot of the Parliament.

Another important part of WLMAP's campaign is the diverse use of nonviolent strategies. The movement effectively combined a broad set of nonviolent strategies throughout the execution of their campaign. They resorted to sit-ins, vigils, marches, writing petitions, prayer, fasting, sex strikes, blockades, singing, among others. As Tufekci (2017) argues that having such an eclectic mix of nonviolent strategies is essential for nonviolent movements to overcome the threat of a "tactical freeze" and be more likely to succeed. In addition to their diverse use of strategies, WLMAP purposefully created a collective identity for the campaign. The women wore white T-shirts and headscarves, removed their jewelry, formed and sang new songs, and danced in ways

that portrayed a collective and united front. One could not tell the difference between a Christian and Muslim woman, for instance, once they were in the field protesting (Disney, 2008). Having such a collective identity is very important for the success of nonviolent campaigns (Smithey, 2009). Despite growing in membership and recognition, WLMAP continued to form alliances with other organizations, both male and female, whenever those alliances would help them achieve their objectives. For instance, as Ouellet (2013) notes, they successfully used their relationship with pastors and the clergy to pressure President Taylor into a meeting when their initial requests for a meeting were ignored. Forming such networks and alliances can as well be essential for the success of nonviolent movements (Sheehan & Speck, 2014).

For far too long, a detailed analysis of the nonviolent strategies of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace has been lacking. The disconnect between the fields of conflict resolution and nonviolent studies has led to a situation where most of the analysis of the campaign have mainly focused on its contributions to the conflict resolution literature and much less on how it relates to the nonviolent studies literature. References to the movement's sustained nonviolent campaign to bring an end to Liberia's conflict have been made only in passing to illustrate how locals, and especially women, can creatively contribute to peacebuilding processes. This study applies a theoretical framework from the nonviolent studies literature—Ackerman and Kruegler's twelve strategic principles of nonviolent conflict—to mainly assess the nonviolent strategies of the movement. The assessment offers many useful insights and credible support to the discussions in the nonviolent studies literature. This case demonstrates that the success of nonviolent movements results from the creative combination of nonviolent tactics and strategies. It also emphasizes the importance for movements to clearly articulate their goals, skillfully frame their issues, effectively build networks to broaden their influence, and strategically find ways to strengthen their base while weakening that of their opponents. In addition, the case establishes the agency of women in nonviolent protests and the effectiveness of using popular misconceptions about women's agency—i.e., women are weak and incapable—to a movement's advantage. More so, the case demonstrates the importance of educating protestors ahead of a campaign to broaden their understanding of the conflict dynamics and make them adequately informed on the need to maintain a nonviolent discipline throughout the campaign—both of which are important for the success of a campaign. The analysis reveals that nonviolent strategists around the world have a lot to learn from WLMAP's successful campaign to end to Liberia's fourteen-year conflict.

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