

UNIFEM PANEL ON DDRR
March 9, 2005, CSW BEIJING + 10

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure for me to have been invited to serve on this panel, to share the experiences of a group of committed and dedicated women of the Mass Action for Peace under the banner of WIPNET. (I would like to thank UNIFEM for the opportunity to participate in such a unique panel I am humble by it.)

The process of disarming the over 35,000 combatants that participated in the 14years civil war was expected to commence on December 7, 2003. The process was being led by the UN Mission in Liberia, preparatory meetings and consultation had been held in and outside for Liberia for the successful implementation of the process. "Experts" on the process of DDRR from Kosvo and Sierra Leone were being imported into Liberia. Proposals from women's groups and organizations to the newly established National Commission on DDRR and the mission were rejected as we were not "Experts" in the field of DDRR and that the process was highly militarized. In essence "women your protest and other form of non violent protest actions were great but we think its time to go back home and take care of the kids".

December 7, failed and in our opinion the process failed due to several factors.

1. Lack of local community members involvement
2. Poor and uncoordinated planning on the part of the mission and other UN agencies
3. The importation of "assumed" best practices from the DDRR process in Sierra Leone and other parts.
4. Unclear information on the process and steps of DDRR

These factors were highlighted in a press release one day after the failed process. Women mobilized, made contact with the generals begin to push for their voices to be heard.

The driving force behind what we did on that day was due to these hard facts that we had been living with for the last fourteen years.

1. That we are the ones that bear the greatest brunt during conflict
2. That the UN and other humanitarian agencies would be flown out immediately when the situation turn messy. An example of this was when chopper flew staff of the UN and other aid agencies from Camp Schefellin to Monrovia, while locals had to find a way of getting out.
3. That the very UN and other international actors were saying that was Liberia's "Last Chance" and we as women were determined to ensure that we made the best of our last chance.

2 days later, WIPNET was called in by the Mission to help calm the boys in camp Scheffelin. The mission said they could pay for only 20 women to go in and work, we volunteered over 55, 55 of them were on the ground whilst several others monitor cell phones and linked with generals and government officials as the women encountered problems at the site.

It was the most challenging 3 days of our work but as women we were determined to make it work as this would change the mindset about us and turn a new but historical page in Liberia. This also was the beginning of our partnership with the mission in information dissemination on the DDRR process.

The work we did with the mission was with several challenges.

1. Logistics – most of the areas we visited had to be done along with members of the mission, however, the number of women that were allowed to go was restricted to only two at the time and they were allotted 5 minutes to speak. We therefore decided if the process of information dissemination was to be effective we had to organize our own trips in rebel held areas and spend quality time with community members explaining the process properly. We didn't have any vehicles and funding the only thing we had was the will power to make the DDRR in our country work.
2. Engaging Peacekeepers from those highly patriarchal zones. For peacekeepers from those areas it was unheard of for women to be in the frontline of DDRR.

We also made some gains during the process.

1. We were recognized and respected by the combatants and community members.
2. Female combatants after encountering us could comfortably turn out for disarmament.
3. We made the best out of our last chance by putting the process back on course.

The women of Liberia under the banner of the women in peacebuilding network (WIPNET) had the will power; fate created the space, what of those countries that women have the will power but fate might not give them the space?

How can we ensure that ideas or assumed best practices from the Liberian experience are not imported to Sudan or cote d' Ivoire?

How can we ensure that the UN engages locals in the process of DDRR?

How can we ensure that the special talents and skills of women are recognized as invaluable in the process and should not be wasted?

Recommendations would be fitting for this process unfortunately; I am not going to give any because I think the answers/ recommendations are in the evaluations and lessons learned of those failed DDRR processes and should be reviewed and utilized.

I would however conclude by urging my sisters in countries that are about to go through the process of DDRR to get involve and don't leave it to the experts alone. Create your space; remember that it is up to you to make it work.

I thank you.