Negotiating for Life: Liberian Women's Negotiating Skills

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Abstract

In 2003, the Women Peace Building Network (WIPNET) led Liberia out of violent conflict by employing non-violent resistance. A scrutiny of their struggle revealed that they practiced an authentic bottom-up peaceful resistance. First, they abridged the religious differences between themselves. Then, they formed a social network-based organization and derived synergy. They started their struggle at the family level by convincing their spouses to stand for peace and took their battle to the state level by courageously approaching President Charles Taylor to influence him to enter the negotiation process. Further, they transcended national boundaries by following the negotiators to Ghana and pressuring them (including the mediators) to settle. After settlement, they ensured the sustainability of their voice by rallying behind the first female candidate and enabling her to secure victory. This bottom-up approach imparted a valuable lesson of applying negotiation strategy to the peaceful settlement of disputes.

Keywords: Liberian women, negotiation skills, non-violent movements, negotiation
constituencies

Introduction

In 2010, President Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2011, three women shared the Prize: two Liberian women and a Yemeni journalist (Nobel Prize, 2011). One of the Liberian women, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, is famous because she is the first woman African head of state. The second Liberian woman, Ms. Leymah R. Gbowee, was not very popular despite founding and leading the Liberian branch of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET). This organization played a crucial role in Liberia's transition from civil war to a stable nation led by Dr. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Women had a minimal role in international peace negotiations. This fact led the UN Security Council to enact Resolution 1325 in October 2000. The resolution "urges member states to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels" (UN, 2000), including peacebuilding initiatives. Although this resolution is timely, the reality on the ground is different since women remain the most affected victims of conflict and the least represented in peace negotiations. A rare event in Liberia has upended this tradition. In 2003, Liberian women played a crucial role in initiating, facilitating, and settling negotiations among warring factions. What made their role special is the fact that they invited themselves to the negotiation stage.

Before 2005, subsequent civil wars tormented Liberia for about 14 years. There are different arguments regarding the root causes of the conflict. Some of the common ones include identity clashes, corruption, and external plunder (UCDP, 2011; Kugmeh, 2007). The international community and Economic Cooperation of West African States (ECOWAS) made several attempts to soothe these clashes. Until 2003, the conflicting parties made ten peace agreements; however, those agreements were ephemeral. Unlike previous treaties, the deal signed on August 18, 2003 was both unique and effective.

The 2003 peace process embodied several elements that made it quite peculiar. It included several external and internal actors who put so much effort into its ultimate success - the Liberian women represented by the WIPNET amongst the first actors who guided the negotiation process to fruition. By launching a non-violent protest, the women voiced their demand for peace, urging, and finally convincing the warring parties to stop the war and negotiate (Gizelis, 2011). While they explicitly stated their demands, they used several tactics to achieve these demands (Disney, 2008).

In this paper, I discuss the Liberian women's role in the 2003 peace negotiation in depth. More precisely, I identify negotiation strategies and tactics Liberian women employed. The position of Liberian women was unique because they were not included at the negotiation table since they had no stake in the outcome of the parties, and they could not be counted as constituents. However, these women were bystanders and victims of the civil war. I, therefore, investigate 'how' ordinary powerless women can influence a negotiation process from the outside. To address this question, I utilized data from books, journals, newspaper articles and a video documentary on Liberian women's struggle for peace. The paper has five sections. After this introduction part, the second section identifies the primary parties in the conflict, along with their main issues of contention. The third section draws upon theories of negotiation and highlights the core negotiation concepts that are relevant to this paper. The fourth section examines the strategies and tactics adopted by the women and evaluates them in light of the theoretical framework in section three. Finally, I conclude by outlining the core themes and delimitations of this paper in the fifth section.

Conflict Analysis of the 1999-2003 Liberia's Civil War

The first Civil War in Liberia culminated with the election of Charles Taylor as President in 1997. However, Taylor's election did not lead the country out of the ongoing 14-year war; instead, it ushered in a new round of civil war that tormented the people for four more years. Two years after Taylor's election, the Second Liberian Civil War started (UCDP, 2011) which included several parties. The following sections will employ Wehr's (1979) conflict analysis model to identify the parties.

Parties, causes, and effects

The second Liberian civil war included primary and secondary parties. According to Wehr (1979), major parties are the central actors in a conflict believed to sustain conflicting interests. On the other hand, secondary parties pertain to people who are not directly involved in a conflict, but the conflict affects them. Wehr (1979) also noted cases where secondary parties could evolve to being primary parties. In this case, there were three principal actors. These were the ruling party (National Patriotic Party-NPP), and the two rebel groups (Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy-LURD and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia-MODEL) according to UCDP.

Essentially, the ruling party (NPP) is also an amalgam of former rebel fighters keeping a bad domestic and international reputation. This was due to the rampant corruption, human rights abuse records, involvement in cross border conflicts, and illicit trade of arms and resources. The other primary party was the LURD created by the supporters of former Liberian dictator Samuel Doe. The group organized itself in Guinea and then waged an all-out civil war in 1999. The main goal of this group was to remove Charles Taylor from power (Brabazon, 2003). MODEL was the third anti-NPP rebel group founded in Ivory Coast in early 2003 (Sherman, 2011). Civilians were the secondary parties in this conflict. However, some were also actively engaged in the conflict as protesters, which qualify them as primary parties. In this sense, the Liberian women (WIPNET) gradually evolved from a secondary to major party.

Issues

The primary point of contention was the control of power and natural resources. Both the elites and the poor demanded a fair share. The conflict in Liberia dated back to its foundation as a free state due to high tensions between new settlers from the U.S. and indigenous people (Dupuy & Detzel, 2008; Sawyer, 2005; Souare, 2010). However, there were also external factors that were exacerbating the reoccurrence of civil war, including imposed international peaceful settlements, power-sharing among rebels, and negligence of the needs of civilians (Boas, 2009; Call, 2010; Mehler, 2009). At the end of the first Liberian War, the NPP was in a greater position of power and wealth. The masses elected its leader Charles Taylor for fear that he might use his resources to destabilize the country (UCDP, 2011; Kugmeh, 2007).

Positions and interests

In negotiation, positions are preconditions that the parties *say* they want. This is a stand taken by the parties about what should or must happen; however, it has nothing to do with what they wanted out of the negotiation. In Liberia's 1999-2003 civil war, the civilians and three major parties to the

conflict had divergent positions. For the rebels, peace in Liberia was possible only when the leader of NPP – President Charles Tayler stepped down from power. Both rebel groups indicated this position as a precondition to come to a negotiated settlement.

On the contrary, the NPP, particularly the president, had a strong position to keep the presidential power (Hayner, 2007). The third parties, mainly the women civilian's position, was a cessation of the war and peaceful settlement of the conflict. All of these positions contradict, and it was difficult for parties to negotiate on these positions.

Unlike positions, interests are based on what the parties *want*. In other words, interests are the underlining reasons why they are fighting. The interests of the two rebel groups were that they wanted to share power, yet they cannot take power by force (Hayner, 2007); hence, they need to stop fighting and negotiate. To negotiate, the rebels had to deal with NPP leader, Charles Taylor, who wanted a cease-fire and to run for election in 2005. Third parties, mainly civilians, wanted peace because their day to day life was at stake.

Theoretical Framework

Negotiation theories

Negotiations are one way of resolving conflicts between groups with different positions and wants. Most civil wars that don't lead to one wining faction are resolved through negotiations and mediations. These negotiations, while they include the main conflicting parties, do not include different groups who will be affected by the outcome of the negotiations. Negotiation theories explain these parties, their role, and the effect of negotiations. The following section examines these concepts.

Audiences: constituents and bystanders

Lewicki et al. (2006) classified audiences into two categories. These are constituents and bystanders. Constituents are individuals or group/s who appoint others to negotiate on their behalf. On the other hand, bystanders include individuals or group/s that despite having a stake in the negotiation outcome are excluded from it. According to scholars, one group may assume both roles simultaneously. Audiences perceived as impartial could bring forth a big difference in the negotiation process and outcome. Their mode of relationship with the negotiation team may be direct (constituents) or indirect (bystanders). In some cases, Lewicki et al. (2006) say that this relationship could slow down decision-making. Besides, the negotiator could face a negotiator dilemma, which is satisfying the demands of his constituency while making a concession.

Power

Depending on the context, power has different meanings. Lewicki et al. (2006) defined power as "capabilities negotiators can assemble to give themselves an advantage or increase the probability of achieving their objectives" (p. 183). This definition indicates why power is useful in negotiation. Power could have different forms. It is up to the negotiator to use it for his advantage. *Power over* implies dependence of the coerced party. *Power with* embodies concepts of sharing and cooperation. Once a negotiator has identified the need for the power and its effect on his negotiating position, then the person can make use of it.

Journal of Living Together (2019) Volume 6, Issue 1

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Use of threat

Threat is a tactic commonly applied in a distributive negotiation type. It entails forcing the other party to comply with one's concession for fear of punishment. In other words, it exercises the "if-then" statement, which explicitly draws the consequence to non-compliance (Brett, 2001). For a threat to be effective, it should fulfill two criteria (Lewicki et al., 2006). First, it is crucial to communicate the terms of compliance and the consequence of non-compliance. Second and most importantly, it needs to be credible. If a threat lacks credibility, then there is no reason for the other party to comply (Lewicki et al., 2006). In a circumstance where one party is unwilling to make concessions, power, and interest-based strategic approaches are quite effective. Threat could help in bringing the other party to comply with the demand and understand what is at stake (Lewicke et al., 2006).

Emotions and context

In a dispute, it is natural for the parties to fail to separate the issues from the person. This is very common in situations where a claim is either rejected or considered as legitimate and right (Brett, 2001). These elements of negotiation could only work when the negotiators have a separate audience who are affected by the outcome of the single negotiator. However, what will happen to the negotiators with an audience who have made themselves visible as constituents during the process but with a legitimate reason to be a constituent? In international peace settlement negotiations, the conflicting parties are negotiating on behalf of the civilians (invisible constituents). Hence, this makes the emotion of attacking opponents as enemies. This is salient when all the negotiating parties equally consider the constituents' demands as high stake interests.

As a result, this will have a significant impact on the negotiation context and the outcome. In the Liberian 2003 peace negotiation, these elements existed throughout the negotiation process. The next section assesses how women became proactive constituencies and the impact it had on the peace negotiation process.

The Negotiation Process

Pre-negotiation: The women

As members of the community at large, the Liberian women assumed several roles during the conflict. Although some women took part in the civil war, most of them stayed at home and cared for their family and children (Badmus, 2009; Fuest, 2008). Others fled to neighboring countries. Among those who stayed at home, some activists sparked the initiative to wage peace against the civil war (Boateng, 2010). The movement for peace started by a handful of women who work in an NGO called West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) (Gbowee, 2009). They organized a regional network called women in peacebuilding network (WIPNET) which has a Liberian branch. This branch aimed to voice the demand of many women and Liberian civilians openly and peacefully.

In 2003, the Liberian civil war reached its apex. The rebels surrounded Monrovia. Despite this and international pressure for negotiation, Charles Taylor rejected the call for negotiation. Under the WIPNET banner, the Liberian women made a decisive effort to convince Taylor to seat at the negotiation table. What could they possibly have done to change his mind? This is a good starting point to assess women's role in untangling the pre-negotiation impasse.

The push from different directions

Taylor's refusal to come to a peace table became intolerable for the ECOWAS, the AU, the Liberian Inter-religious Council, and the women. These parties had a stake in resolving the conflict peacefully. Most importantly, the women wanted to lead normal lives. This urge led them to confront Charles Taylor and rebel groups directly to halt the civil war unconditionally (Gbowee, 2009). Before they reached this fit of courage and influence, they applied several tactics to concentrate their voice at one point and command attention. This required passing several obstacles. First, they bridged the religious differences between them. They identified the most influential women from both the Muslim and Christian sects. It did not take these women long to recognize their common interest. The answer to the question, "Does a bullet know a Christian from a Muslim?" was evident to them (Ekiyor & Gbowee, 2005). This unity brought critical mass in forging web-like strength. As a result, it bestowed their campaign popular support from all women despite their religious backgrounds.

Once the women were united, the next step was including the men. Each woman took home an assignment of convincing her spouse to stand for the cause. Noting the possibility of negativity, they made sex-strike against them for two years (Gbowee, Interview, 2011). This was not easy for most women in the rural areas because uttering the word itself, leave alone openly practicing it, was a taboo. The implications on the patriarchic family relation were also dangerous. Hence, they needed to provide a reason that can co-opt the men into their nonviolent strike. Thus, they co-opted them by stating that the Holy Book (the Bible and Kuran) did not allow intercourse during a time of fasting and praying for peace (Ekiyor & Gbowee, 2005). These tactics have two meanings. First, the women used their gendered role to solicit their partner's voices to the mass action. On a second note, however, this tactic pushed them to endorse and reinforce the discriminatory gender roles the Liberian society has given them. Nevertheless, taking the context they were in their tactic is justifiable as the *Best Alternative Negotiated Agreement* (BATNA). Moreover, this tactic is also a hardball tactic, which is context-specific.

Once they secured unity, support, and cohesion at the family level, they marched to the streets and confronted the real perpetrators. However, they had to orchestrate a peaceful protest meticulously in a way that does not provoke the parties to violence. The first step was choosing a premise. They choose a street corner where the Liberian leader drives through to work every morning. This allowed them to send non-verbal message repeatedly. Their white shirts and peace chants penetrated the limited attention span of the president. Gradually, their repeated appearance in the streets paid off slowly. The president invited them to his palace compound and agreed to negotiate. This taught them the value of perseverance (Pollock, 2007; Press, 2010).

The cost of war

Toward the end of the civil war, both LURD and MODEL advanced to the capital city of Liberia. According to Hayner (2007), this scenario was very challenging for both the rebels and the government. For the rebels, it will make them responsible for forcible regime change and hence make their action illegal. Besides, the forceful regime change was feared; it would create a vacuum in the leadership. On the other hand, for Charles Taylor, it will be a significant loss. Hence, accepting a peace negotiation was a necessity for both parties, and they agreed to resolve the conflict peacefully in 2003 (Hayner, 2007).

During the negotiation

Although twenty-one parties involved sat at the negotiation table, as mentioned earlier, the main parties were only three (NPP, LURD, and MODEL). Charles Taylor created the rest to gain the upper hand in the negotiation. Several participants took part as audiences and international observers (the US government delegates, for example). Women from Monrovia and Liberian refugee in Ghana were also actively engaged in the peace process. These women, organized under the WIPNET, were making their presence noticed by showing up every single day of the peace negotiation (Hayner, 2007). Their main goal was to voice what they demand from this negotiation, posting signs of their plea. What could be their statues?

Their presence was not through an invitation or delegation from either the negotiators or mediators. They made themselves part of the negotiation process, and as a result, many unexpected events unfolded throughout the process. Seven women delegates of the mass movement traveled to Accra, Ghana to follow the peace talks. These women mobilized the Liberian refugees in Ghana to accompany them to the peace negotiation (Gbowee, 2009). There were over 200 women dressed in white t-shirts and holding placards which state: "We want peace no more war," since day one of the peace talks (Pollock, 2007).

Tactics of the women

The women, wishing the conflict would end soon, pushed the signing of peace agreement and continued their non-violent protest relentlessly. Contrary to their wish, the parties could not reach a negotiated settlement within six weeks. This created frustration and anger because of what was happening to their families and friends back in Liberia. The civil war still was taking the lives of many innocent civilians every single day while the negotiation was taking place. To their dismay, the parties were falling into deadlocks on issues that were not relevant to the governed. These issues were mainly about power and wealth sharing (who gets the power and wealth of Liberia) (Disney, 2008).

Later on, they signed the cease-fire agreement with a clause that stated the exclusion of Charles Taylor from the election. However, the ceasefire was not effective right away. Despite several impasses, the women made everyday appearance sending a clear message to the negotiators and the international community. Their main message was that women demand an unconditional ceasefire and a lasting peace with no delay. This created its own context for the negotiation process. Initially, the women were there as bystanders from the negotiating parties viewpoint because they were considered the outsiders who had no stake in the negotiation. For instance, one of the five women who was involved in the negotiation process representing the conflicting parties told the women not to expect her "to sit on the ground and eat lunch with them" (Morgan, 2011).

The women who were trying to show the parties what their needs were, who did not have any rights to get information about the peace process, stayed for six weeks. As time went by, they realized their place as bystanders was taking them nowhere but changing the issue back home into crisis. This was because of the violence that was still going on in Liberia, causing death and insecurity for the civilians they represented. Hence, their demand needed a timely response while the parties were only negotiating about power and wealth sharing. This had nothing to do with what the people of Liberia, specifically people at the grassroots (who had no say either on the peace negotiation or in the civil war) needed most at that specific time. Once they realized their nonviolent movement as bystanders were not making any difference, they decided to use another tactic.

Blockage as power over

Once the women saw that the parties were wasting a lot of time, they protested their discontentment by forming a body chain and blocking the negotiators from getting out of the conference hall. Their commitment was to force them to sign the peace deal. However, this commitment of not moving away from the doors was not good enough to threaten the negotiators to comply with the demands of the women. Hence, the response was, "you need to move because you are obstructing justice" (PBS, 2008). This was a turning point for the women's leader, who became so emotional and started to challenge them right upfront. Her response was filled with threat.

Threat

The women's leader, disappointed by the response they received from the authorities, made a short statement that she will undress if they fail to reach an agreement. This statement could seem very lame because it indicates the powerlessness of women. However, their weaknesses which include being women, illiterate, and weak made a significant impact on their negotiating capability or source of power. This power enabled them to have a good bargaining position or commitment to seek out what they are expecting of the negotiation. Besides, this statement was a threat because it had all the three elements of an effective threat in negotiations. In this case, the women's stance was specific in that they demanded there is an issue that needed prior attention, which is the peace of the Liberians. This targeted the overall negotiation process. Moreover, the statement was credible, and at the same time, it has a consequence. The consequence was culturally specific that they all believed it is inappropriate to let mothers undress in public.

As a result, the mediators approached and asked the women's leader Leymah to take part in the negotiation and add other women (Disney, 2008). However, the leader refused to be co-opted by this offer. As a result, this opened a venue for them to be constituents for both negotiating parties. As they were neutral, constituents for all parties were coming and asking them their say. This, in reverse, created a negotiator's dilemma, which in this case was not difficult to reconcile the needs of their common constituents with the concessions they have to make in the negotiation.

Conclusion

The 2003 Liberian peace settlement ended the 14-year-long civil war. Several parties participated in the peace process, mainly top-level leaders. This settlement, like many other international peace negotiations, did not include women from the grassroots. Hence, the issues on the peace table did not include the demands of many Liberians. Contrary to this, Liberian women played a significant role in staging the negotiation to the final enactment of the peace accord. This was possible through a coordinated nonviolent movement assembled under a Liberian branch of a regional network called women in peacebuilding network (WIPNET).

These women used several negotiation tactics, which allowed them to have a status of proactive constituents from mere bystanders. Their relationship with the negotiating parties was neutral, and this allowed them to be a constituent for both negotiating parties. While this was good for bringing the conflicting parties to work on their shared interests, it changed the whole negotiation context because the negotiators had to make sure they were addressing the demands of their common constituent. Thus, this

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explains the uniqueness of the Liberian negotiation process. Further research is needed to thoroughly explore the *pros and cons* of this negotiation model and identify how to apply it to similar conflict situations in other countries.

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