

Improving Liberia's Transitional Justice Process by Engaging Women

Written by Michelle Page with input from Cerue Garlo and Marpue Speare

Transitional justice processes strive to reform cultures of impunity and to re-establish rule of law. Temporary courts and commissions give victims a sense of justice and initiate the longer-term process of individual and communal psychological healing. Often, these institutions provide a means for both victims and perpetrators to acknowledge crimes committed.

Crimes of war are more likely to be addressed during transitional justice efforts when women contribute. Women link official processes to communities and often provide information about crimes. They have knowledge of the distinct, complex violations of rights women suffer that can significantly inform truth commission mandates, judicial opinions, reparations schemes, and proposals for policy reform. Temporary courts and commissions function better when women are included throughout. Witnesses speak more freely to female judges. Male defense attorneys speak more respectfully to female witnesses. When a female judge presides, courts are more gender sensitive and provide more sophisticated witness protection. Moving women to actively participate in consolidating peace ensures that their voices, concerns, and needs are recognized and addressed.

In Liberia, following the 2003 resolution of two decades of violent conflict, a consortium of organizations under the umbrella of the Women NGO's Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL) facilitated a series of regional women-only dialogues around the country to ensure that local women were involved in the transitional justice process.

Mobilizing Women to Engage in the Transitional Justice Process

As part of its mandate to promote national peace, security, unity and reconciliation, Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2009 released a multi-volume report that documented the experiences of Liberians from 1979 to late 2003, and recommended measures for the future well-being of the nation.

To ensure that the experiences and suggestions of grassroots women in different parts of the country were reflected in the TRC documents, from October 2008 to June 2009, under the leadership of Cerue Garlo and Marpue Speare, WONGOSOL organized a series of community meetings that engaged more than 500 women from Liberia's 15 counties.

Prior to the community meetings, WONGOSOL and its member organizations sponsored a three-day workshop to orient themselves to transitional justice processes, share personal experiences, and prepare to speak with Liberian women affected by conflict.

During each regional meeting, participants were divided into smaller groups in order to ensure each woman individual attention. The women participants represented different villages and communities and throughout the program were encouraged to forge new relationships.

For the dialogues, organizers created teams consisting of a facilitator, a note taker, and a psychosocial counselor; and involved coordinators from the TRC. WONGOSOL also invited key stakeholders in each county, including superintendents, UN agencies, local authorities, and commissioners, to participate, increasing the legitimacy of



*At a community meeting in Grand Bassa County in Bachanna City, women worked in small groups to develop recommendations for presentation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
Photo credit: Cerue Konah Garlo, Women NGO's Secretariat of Liberia.*



Community meetings included representatives from different communities. Photo credit: Cerue Konah Garlo, Women NGO's Secretariat of Liberia.

the process for the women and helping ensure their participation. These stakeholders publicly affirmed the importance of poor and marginalized women having a voice.

Following the dialogue series, WONGOSOL organized a validation workshop with women from the various regions to discuss the findings. Recommendations from the community meetings were presented to the TRC, the Liberian government, and other partners. WONGOSOL also plans other follow-up activities, such as a medical referral program for women.¹

Members of the international community and local county officials supported these efforts. WONGOSOL received financial support from the International Center for Transitional Justice, Open Society Initiative for West Africa, UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and Urgent Action Fund. ICTJ and UNIFEM also provided technical support.

The program had important results for women. The dialogues:

- Guaranteed that Liberian women provided input into the TRC final report through the development of recommendations and formation of a civil society monitoring group to ensure implementation of the recommendations.²
- Provided a safe and open environment for participants to share stories of war and traumatic experiences and to discuss key issues affecting their communities.
- Enabled women to reunite with family members following extended conflict-driven separation.
- Contributed to the final report of the TRC including findings on the impact of the conflict on women and children.
- Contributed to the final report of the TRC including recommendations for reparations to communities and individuals, especially women and children.

Replicating Successful Experiences Engaging Women in Transitional Justice Dialogues

Key to Success: Ensure that grassroots women are heard and their stories documented.

→ **Recommendation:** Work with truth and reconciliation commissions and other formal transitional justice mechanisms to ensure that truth commission mandates, judicial opinions, and reparation schemes are written, interpreted, and implemented to consider the violations of rights and other injuries women suffer.

→ **Recommendation:** Reach out broadly to identify rural women affected by the conflict. Collaborate with domestic civil society organizations and international non-governmental organizations that have experience working with conflict-affected women and have knowledge of key networks and local organizations to identify participants.

→ **Recommendation:** Ensure that women participants in transitional justice dialogues represent diverse communities, and diverse ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds.

1 *Community Dialogue and Reconciliation Meetings: Evaluating and Re-Enforcing Women's Participation in Transitional Justice and Governance.* WONGOSOL.

2 *DDR and Transitional Justice in Liberia.* International Center for Transitional Justice. <<http://www.ictj.org/en/research/projects/ddr/country-cases/2381.html>>.

- Key to Success:** Give each participant equal opportunity to share her stories and cope with any emotional or physical reactions.
- **Recommendation:** At the beginning of the dialogue or program, divide participants into smaller groups of 25 women total to ensure that each person receives comparable attention.
 - **Recommendation:** Ensure that each group is provided with at least one facilitator and one note taker.
 - **Recommendation:** Involve experts in psychosocial healing to ensure that participants are given a “safe space” to communicate, and attention and support following testimony.
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- Key to Success:** Create a structure for transitional justice programs and projects that allows participants flexibility.
- **Recommendation:** Build free time into the agenda for participants so that they can decompress during an emotionally taxing process.
 - **Recommendation:** Allow participants to move freely among small groups if they are uncomfortable with other participants or facilitators.
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- Key to Success:** Enable participants to forge relationships and bonds; they should get to know and respect each other as individuals.
- **Recommendation:** At the beginning of the transitional justice dialogue, organize informal meals or gatherings to enable participants to form a relationship or bond with at least one other participant.
 - **Recommendation:** Create sessions on the agenda for participants to exchange stories and information about their backgrounds.
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- Key to Success:** Make sure participants are introduced to different communities so they are able to appreciate common experiences across divides, whether geographic, ethnic, or religious.
- **Recommendation:** When organizing a transitional justice dialogue do not reserve a hostel, dormitory, or hotel for participants to stay in. Instead, plan to have them stay with host families in the various communities they visit.
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Key to Success: Follow up after the transitional justice dialogue to discuss findings. → **Recommendation:** Organize a validation workshop with women participants and other women in the community from the various regions in the country and other major stakeholders to discuss findings from the dialogue.

Key to Success: Ensure channels for communication with national-level processes prior to the dialogues. → **Recommendation:** Develop key allies and foster support for local reconciliation efforts with members of TRCs and other transitional justice bodies.