



Clockwise, from top left: Jackie Redd; Florence Ballah; women sign petition postcards at an Amnesty International film screening; Mary, from Ganta, Nimba County, joined the fighting forces for revenge



PEACEMAKERS

Former female soldiers from Liberia work for positive change, but will they be forgiven for their transgressions? TEXT: SUSAN MCCLELLAND

With her soft hairdo, warm brown eyes and billowy white pantsuit, Florence Ballah gives off an aura of purity. “I want people to look at me and think of peace,” she says. “Peace, after all, is what I am about now.” No matter how Ballah dresses, though, when many of her neighbours in the small city of Voinjama in northern Liberia look at her, they are reminded of the country’s two brutal civil wars, from 1989 to 1996 and from 1999 to 2003.

At the age of 14, Ballah was abducted by rebels for the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) and raped. For nearly five years, she was taken as a bush bride, or sex slave, by one of the rebel commandos and made to tow ammo for rebel forces. “The commando who took me was crazy,” she says. “He would shoot up the sky with bullets and eat those he killed and drink their blood. If I had been a

strong woman back then, I would have tried to get the commando to stop killing people, but I felt that my only options were obey or die.”

It’s believed that 30 percent of the fighting forces during Liberia’s two conflicts were female. Most joined for survival reasons because, like Ballah, girls and women were the targets of sexual violence. They were also forced to watch atrocities, including the murder of their families. Many took up arms to avoid being killed.

In a 2008 documentary filmed by two-time Academy Award-nominated director Jonathan Stack, Ballah, along with female soldiers in the Liberian conflict, share their stories, breaking the silence in the hope of fostering a better understanding of the plight of Liberian women. Most women who took part in the conflict and their children (many bore their captors’ babies) are now outcasts in Liberia and live in extreme poverty. They are ashamed of the role they played in the war and

seldom speak up. Ballah and her peers talk openly about the violence they committed, their regrets and their goals of contributing positively to their communities. “All of us who were involved in the war live with the unspeakable horror of what we have seen and done,” says Jackie Redd, who is also featured in the film. “We’re ashamed. We want to give back. We want to give our children better futures than we had.”

The documentary, entitled *Women of Liberia: Fighting for Peace*, breaks new ground for Amnesty International, which funded the project and is generally known for spearheading letter-writing campaigns to pressure governments to end human-rights abuses. Through the film (which can be viewed on Amnesty’s website, www.amnestyusa.org), the group hopes to empower victims. “At first, it was very difficult to share my story,” says Redd. “In my culture, women avoid expressing their hopes and fears. But the more I talked, the more women began to tell their stories too—it has helped us unite and heal.”

Redd was 13 when government soldiers in Monrovia abducted her. She eventually escaped, only to discover that her father had been murdered. She joined former Liberian president Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia for the duration of the first war because she had nowhere else to go. During the second war, she joined the government’s elite Anti Terrorist Unit, serving as Taylor’s personal bodyguard at one point. Today, Redd has aspirations of becoming a lawyer and works with the non-profit group Search for Common Ground, raising awareness of women’s legal rights in Monrovia. Redd has an 18-year-old son who was born during the war, and plans on telling him all about how he was conceived. “I had to forgive the man who raped me,” she explains, “and I had to forgive myself for doing what I did in the war because if I didn’t, I would have hatred

NORBERT MAYER (J. REDD, F. BALLAH & M. KESSELEY); DAVID SHELLNUTT

LIBERTY BOUND

Many factions were involved in Liberia’s two civil wars, including former president Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia. All of the groups recruited girls and boys as child soldiers. Taylor, who presided from 1997 to 2003, is now being tried for war crimes and crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands. But the country is still rebounding from his legacy. It’s estimated that more than 200,000 people died during Liberia’s conflicts, and today the country ranks near the bottom of the United Nations’ Human Development Index in terms of poverty.

In 2003, women staged a peaceful sit-in that drew international pressure to push Taylor out of the country. In August 2003, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement—a treaty between the government and the two rebel groups—allowed ex-soldiers to come forward with impunity and receive as much as US\$300 to help reintegrate into society.

False rumours flourished, however, that former combatants had to trade in arms to take part in the program. The result was a burgeoning black-market economy in which commandos gave weapons to their friends and girlfriends and non-combatants bought guns to access the opportunities. At the end of the day, many women were left out of the peace process entirely. Liberian president Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and courageous individuals like Florence Ballah, Jackie Redd and Mickey Kesseley are trying to change this, but they are in need of resources—particularly Western dollars—to support women’s programs.

Two groups these women support are Search for Common Ground (www.sfcg.org) and the National Ex-combatant Peace Initiative Inc. (www.nepiliberia.org). S.M.

in my heart toward my own child. If he had been in the war, he might have done the same things that were done to me. We were all victims.”

Redd, Ballah and fellow former combatant Mickey Kesseley were in Toronto to promote the film to help create awareness about the situation in Liberia and raise money to support the organizations they are now involved with. Ballah, who works as a social worker, would like to become a doctor. Kesseley, who was involved in both wars, is a hairdresser. She encourages micro-banking to help women support themselves through small businesses. Today, many Liberian women who were involved

“I HAD TO FORGIVE THE MAN WHO RAPED ME, AND I HAD TO FORGIVE MYSELF FOR DOING WHAT I DID.”

in the war sleep on the streets or in cemeteries. “They have no hope,” she says, “but I tell them that if I can change, anyone can.”

At one point during the conflict, Kesseley had a dream of peace: She envisioned that the country would have a female president who would help Liberian women. “I saw this woman ending all the madness,” says Kesseley, “and giving us reason to dream again.” In 2005, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected president—the first female elected head of state of any African nation—and she has committed her government to reintegrating combatants and raising the educational and economic standards of women. “In the dream, I thought that if women ruled the world, we wouldn’t have all this bloodshed,” she says. “God answered my prayers, and now I want to do my part.” □



A woman in Bomi who has been plagued with headaches since she was beaten with a rifle butt during the war (above); Mickey Kesseley