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Allison M. Prasch

Department of Communication Studies, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA
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Maternal Bodies in Militant Protest: Leymah Gbowee and the Rhetorical Agency of African Motherhood

ALLISON M. PRASCH

Department of Communication Studies, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

This essay analyzes how Leymah Gbowee and other Liberia Mass Action for Peace (LMAP) activists drew on the cultural power of African motherhood to engage in militant protest. Framing the movement as one motivated by a concern for their children, these women employed three specific rhetorical tactics to demand an end to the fourteen-year civil war: (1) repositioning women and children as the war's real victims; (2) threatening to bare their bodies in deliberate public nakedness; and (3) constituting the political agency of ordinary women both in Liberia and around the world. These militant maternal protests positioned the LMAP activists as coherent political agents empowered by their literal and symbolic participation in Liberian performances of African motherhood. Their actions suggest the rhetorical potential of militant maternal protests in countries that exclude women from political involvement.

Keywords Africa, Liberia Mass Action for Peace, Liberian Civil War, peace activism, Nobel Peace Prize, women in politics

On October 7, 2011, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee, and Tawakkol Karman received the Nobel Peace Prize “for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace building work” (Norwegian Nobel Committee). With an eye toward the recent Arab Spring protests in North Africa and the Middle East earlier that year, the Nobel Peace Prize committee expressed their “hope that the prize to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkol Karman will help bring an end to the suppression of women that still occurs in many countries, and to realise the great potential for democracy and peace that women can represent” (Norwegian Nobel Committee). The Nobel Peace Prize committee was not the only organization to recognize the political agency of female activists in 2011. Just two months later, TIME magazine selected “The Protester” as its person of the year and featured an image of a burka-clad figure on the cover of their December 14, 2011 issue (Andersen). However, even with the international attention Johnson Sirleaf, Gbowee, Karman, and other female protestors have received, very little feminist scholarship has been published analyzing the powerful rhetorical strategies these women employed to effect social and political change.1
In this essay, I examine how Liberian peace activist Gbowee and other members of the Liberia Mass Action for Peace (LMAP) movement activated their socially revered status as mothers to constitute their individual and collective political agency. Although Liberian mothers traditionally are shown great respect in their communities, sexual violence against women—particularly mothers—was widespread during the Liberian Civil War. Where mothers once were seen as guardians and “custodians of society,” they became a target to be used and abused (Reticker). And yet, in the face of this widespread violence, Gbowee and the LMAP protestors drew on their traditional maternal powers and framed their demand for peace as one motivated by the need to help their children. Speaking as mothers of the nation, these women used their newfound political agency to act and speak militantly against Charles Taylor and the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel leaders. To illustrate how these women appropriated their maternal powers to effect social and political change, I analyze three specific rhetorical tactics that Gbowee and the LMAP activists employed. First, through private meetings, public protests, sit-ins, and statements before Charles Taylor, the women spoke openly about their abuses and argued that Liberia’s mothers and their children were the real victims of the war, and not the rebel warring factions. Second, they chastised their “sons” for the destruction they had caused and threatened to enact what they saw as the most powerful curse available to African mothers: deliberate public nakedness. Third, Gbowee and the LMAP protestors constituted their Liberian sisters as political agents and compelled many women to vote in a presidential election for the first time. Although many Liberian political leaders were men, Gbowee and the LMAP protestors argued that all women—regardless of ethnic background or social status—had the power not only to effect but also to lead political reform. I also consider how Gbowee utilized television interviews, speeches, and her recent autobiography to extend her rhetoric of motherhood beyond Liberia and call for female political participation around the world.

My analysis relies on two primary texts that require a brief introduction. The first is Reticker’s documentary, titled Pray the Devil Back to Hell. Although Western media outlets briefly covered the escalating Liberian Civil War during this period, they virtually ignored the LMAP protests. Therefore, this film is significant because it utilizes interviews with Gbowee and other activists and extensive home video footage to chronicle the escalating violence in Liberia, the LMAP street protests and sit-ins, the LMAP activists’ meeting with Charles Taylor, and Gbowee’s threat to strip deliberately in public. With such scenes, Pray the Devil Back to Hell helps viewers follow the extraordinary actions of Gbowee and the LMAP protestors as they unfolded in 2003. The second text I draw on is Gbowee’s autobiography, Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War. In this work, published by Beast Books in 2011, Gbowee recounts her experience as a single mother and social worker struggling to raise her children during the Liberian Civil War. Mighty Be Our Powers not only provides additional context for the LMAP movement, but the book’s release provided Gbowee with another platform to champion women’s human rights and challenge Western audiences to support female political activism around the world.

These two texts accomplish their own rhetorical work even as they document the LMAP protests. In Pray the Devil Back to Hell, Gbowee and other LMAP leaders speak from their personal experiences and collective memories to recount the protests in Liberia and Ghana. Similarly, in Mighty Be Our Powers, Gbowee provides
readers with her unique perspective of the Liberian civil war, LMAP activism, and her own political involvement since 2003. As a result, viewers of *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* and readers of *Mighty Be Our Powers* encounter texts that are highly personal and emotional. These texts offer intimate glimpses into the lives of ordinary mothers attempting to cope with an ongoing civil war, political corruption, and systemic violence against women, contributing to their widespread appeal and rhetorical power. Since 2008, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* has been screened in sixty countries on six continents and has been translated into seventeen languages ("Pray the Devil Back to Hell Impact and Outreach"), and Beast Books released a paperback edition of *Mighty Be Our Powers* in 2013. As one of only sixteen women to receive the Nobel Peace Prize since its founding in 1901, Gbowee has used her international platform to encourage other women to demand social equality and gender justice in their own countries ("Female Nobel Peace Prize Laureates"). In the analysis that follows, I approach *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* and *Mighty Be Our Powers* as primary sources that present invaluable firsthand accounts of LMAP's militant maternal protest tactics and as rhetorical artifacts that work persuasively on viewers and readers. Both *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (henceforth *PDBH*) and *Mighty Be Our Powers* (henceforth *MBOP*) challenge a variety of audiences to take individual and collective action as members of a global community dedicated to advancing women’s rights.

In the following sections, I first situate the LMAP protestors’ performance of African motherhood within its broader social and cultural context and then provide a brief history of the conflict in which it was deployed. I then analyze the protests of Gbowee and the LMAP activists to show how these mothers reclaimed their maternal authority while simultaneously extending it into the social and political realm. To conclude, I consider how Gbowee used the example of the LMAP movement in her 2009 address at the Kennedy Foundation and her 2011 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance address to encourage female political participation around the world.

**The Rhetorical Agency of African Motherhood**

In recent years, many scholars have examined the rhetorical power of militant maternal protests (Fabj; Hayden; Kaplan, “Naked Mothers”; Nikolić-Ristanović; Ruddick; Scheper-Hughes; Tibbetts; Tonn; Yeo). Central to these studies is the idea that motherhood affords a special type of agency to women who frame their actions as motivated by maternal concerns. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell defines rhetorical agency as “the capacity to act, that is, to have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one’s community” (3). This capacity for rhetorical action is “communal, social, cooperative, and participatory and, simultaneously, constituted and constrained by the material and symbolic elements of context and culture” (3). Because agency is created by the subject and yet also constrained by material realities, rhetors must negotiate their own subjectivity even as they respond to the particulars of their rhetorical situation. In the case of the LMAP movement, Gbowee and the other protestors claimed their maternity as culturally symbolic grounds for their collective political action. Although they had been targets of sexual violence, these women refused to allow their perpetrators to detract from their maternal agency. Instead, they responded by asserting themselves as biological mothers and as advocates for Liberia’s women and children. This rhetorical process constituted LMAP protesters as powerful political agents while simultaneously reaffirming the sacred role that “mother” plays in Liberian culture.
To fully consider the significance of maternal protest within this context, I now examine how these women built on broader African conceptions of motherhood to constitute their individual and collective agency.

Although the rich diversity of cultures on the African continent cannot be discounted, there are shared intercultural strands that work to position motherhood as the sine qua non of an African woman’s existence. Nigerian feminist Oyeronke Oyewumi explains that many African cultures share the view that “mothers are powerful.” She writes that more than any other role “the most important and enduring identity and name that African women claim for themselves is ‘mother’” ("Family Bonds" 1097). As such, “Mother is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women” and the primary source of their individual agency and empowerment (1096). Even after their children are grown, deep respect is shown to mothers because of their role in bearing children, training them in the morals and customs of the culture, and continuing to nurture, protect, and defend their children into adulthood and beyond. But mothering is not limited to one’s nuclear family or biological children. Instead, African women wield special authority as mothers of the nation and often serve as “mediators, interceders, and negotiators” in their families and the larger community (African Women and Peace Support Group 7). According to Judith Van Allen, “African constructions of women as ‘mothers’ have been sources of power for women to use to protect their own interests as women as well as to protect their children” (qtd. in Moran 58). Because motherhood is revered and “occupies a special place in African cultures and societies,” women can invoke the maternal role “even in extrafamilial situations that call upon these values” (Oyewumi, “Abiyamo” 1). As I will detail, Gbowee and the LMAP protestors returned to this communal function of motherhood to convince Taylor and the LURD rebel leaders to respond to their demands for peace.

Despite the traditional reverence assigned to mothers, they did not escape the widespread sexual violence during the Liberian Civil War that led to women suffering “the brutality of rape, sexual exploitation and abuse, both during and after the conflict had subsided” (United Nations Development Programme 32). A 2005–2006 survey of 1,600 women from ten of Liberia’s fifteen counties reported that 92% of the women interviewed had experienced some form of sexual violence (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [CHAP] 13). A 2007 article in Forced Migration Review documented this sexual violence against women during the Liberian Civil War, noting that “gang rape and multiple reoccurrences of sexual abuse were rampant. Many [women] were raped in front of their families as a sign of victory or ‘conquering’—an ultimate expression of power over the enemy” (Munala 36). Mothers in particular were targeted as objects of sexual assault:

[T]here are numerous reports of fighters moving among the displaced of various areas looking for pregnant women. When they find one, they gamble on the sex of the unborn baby. They then cut the mother’s womb open and pull out the baby to see who won the bet. The mother and baby are thrown to the side of the road, as fighters go looking for their next victim. (Crain, “The Rape of Dinah” 281)

These actions were especially heinous and shocking because, in targeting the maternal body, these fighters not only violated individual women and children but assaulted the very foundations of Liberian society and culture. V. Spike Peterson
writes that in war, “the symbolic realm is elevated to strategic importance: symbols become what’s worth fighting—even dying—for, and the cultural metaphors become weapons in the war” (44). In this instance, the rape of a mother became a literal and symbolic weapon rebels used to terrorize the Liberian population. Peterson argues that “metaphors of nation-as-woman and woman-as-nation suggest how women—as bodies and cultural repositories—become the battleground of group struggles” (44). In viewing the “nation-as-woman and woman-as-nation...the rape of the body/nation not only violates frontiers but disrupts—by planting alien seed or destroying reproductive viability—the maintenance of the community through time” (44). In this instance, when roaming bands of rebels and child-soldiers targeted Liberian mothers for rape, they communicated their utter disregard for the nation as a whole. Violence against the maternal body was inherently symbolic; the rape of a mother signaled the violation and shame of the national community.

With this widespread sexual violence specifically aimed at Liberian mothers, how is it possible that Gbowee and other LMAP activists were able to reactivate their maternal agency to demand an end to the civil war? Put another way, because the degradation of Liberian mothers had become commonplace, how did these women suddenly achieve a special kind of rhetorical agency when they framed their protests as motivated by motherhood? I argue that Gbowee and the LMAP protestors mobilized their traditional maternal powers through militant protest tactics and, in so doing, constituted their status as coherent political agents. Maurice Charland argues that constitutive rhetoric positions its “subjects as historical actors” and “require[s] that its embodied subjects act freely in the social world to affirm their subject position” (141). For Gbowee and other LMAP activists, participation in the LMAP movement reaffirmed their status as mothers even as it constituted them as powerful political actors. Despite the material realities of their situation (particularly the sexual violence many had experienced), these women bravely reasserted their maternal agency by framing their political protest as one motivated by a concern for Liberia’s children. Although Herbert W. Simons defines militant protest as a strategy that uses “direct action techniques and verbal polemics” to “threaten, harass, cajole, disrupt, provoke, intimidate, coerce” those who oppose them, militancy does not necessarily result in physical violence (8). Instead, militant protests most often perform key rhetorical functions and provide avenues for reaffirming individual agency and, by extension, the ability of a larger group to effect social or political change. As Belinda A. Stillion Southard notes,

> Constituting group identity and asserting political agency are particularly significant processes for militant groups who typically lack validation and recognition from the institutions they seek to alter. Thus, as militants resort to nontraditional forms of communication after exhausting traditional means of political persuasion, they engage in the process of validating who they are and making themselves matter. (Militant Citizenship 15)

For militants, protesting constitutes an identity for both the individual and the group. Aggressive, unapologetic social protest strengthens an individual’s sense of political agency and a broader coalition of activists who share similar goals. Thus, when “militants engage in this constitutive process, they are called into valuable being and can then assert their political agency” (Stillion Southard, Militant Citizenship 15–16).
Joining together in militant protest tactics, such as street demonstrations, sit-ins, and threats of deliberate public nakedness, Gbowee and the LMAP protestors reasserted their maternal status and extended their influence into the political realm. Judith Van Allen asserts that combining African conceptions of “powerful mothers” with “appeals to women’s rights” enables women to “enter male-gendered political space...as citizens, activists, and leaders—and potentially transform their societies” by deploying maternity as a “political strategy” that extends their individual and collective agency (qtd. in Moran 58). In constructing Liberia’s children as the real victims of the civil war, these women forwarded a narrative that positioned mothers as legitimate political agents. Ultimately, as Gbowee and the LMAP activists reasserted their maternal agency and their protests performed a constitutive function, enabling the women to enact their political subjectivity in ways previously unimagined. They were no longer targets to be used and abused. Instead, they became powerful political agents empowered through literal and symbolic participation in Liberian performances of African motherhood.

“The Women of Liberia Want Peace! Now!”

When Gbowee and other LMAP activists began their public protests in April 2003, Liberia had been in a state of civil war for fourteen years. In 1989, Taylor invaded Liberia with an army of two hundred men and attacked Monrovia, the capital city (Sirleaf, This Child Will Be Great 169; Cooper; Krauss). Samuel Doe, the president of Liberia, held his ground in Monrovia, beginning an armed conflict between Doe's Liberian Army and Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia. The fighting continued for nine months, ending in Doe's murder. All-out civil war ensued, resulting in the displacement of more than half of the Liberian population by 1991, when Taylor declared himself president of Liberia and appointed a cabinet (“Half of Liberia Displaced”). Writing of this period in her autobiography, future Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf explained, “[T]he major rebel factions splintered into subgroups and rival ethnic factions, creating an alphabet soup of warring forces that looted, raped, and brutalized the land...Liberia fell into balkanized chaos. The dark years had begun” (This Child Will Be Great 206–207). Although the United Nations and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) attempted to send in peacekeeping troops, their efforts failed. Between 1989 and 2003, more than 270,000 people died as a direct result of the conflict (United Nations Development Programme 42). Up to 80% of the rural population was displaced (CHAP 8). Between 1985 and 2003, the national gross national product per capita declined from $1,269 to $163, leaving 76% percent in poverty, of which 52% were in extreme poverty (CHAP 14). In 2007, it was estimated that only 32% of rural households had access to safe drinking water and only 24% could access sanitary facilities (CHAP 11). During this same period, infant mortality was 157 in every 1,000 births, and mortality under age five was 235 per 1,000 births—significantly higher than in other nations in sub-Saharan Africa (CHAP 11). As noted, rape and sexual violence were rampant, and various attempts by the United Nations and ECOWAS to send peacekeeping troops only worsened the problem.6 With even the internationally sanctioned troops encouraging and participating in violent crimes against women, no one could be trusted. In the words of Gbowee, “Death, at one point, was better than life” (Interview with Bill Moyers). As violence escalated between Taylor and the rebel groups, Gbowee and the LMAP activists introduced...
their political protest as an action chiefly motivated by concern for the welfare of their children and the future of Liberia. Although there are many ways in which these women used militant maternal appeals as an avenue of protest, I examine the three most significant tactics by which Gbowee and the LMAP protestors deployed motherhood as a rhetorical strategy: (a) repositioning women and children as the real victims of the civil war through public demonstrations in Monrovia; (b) threatening to bare their bodies in deliberate public nakedness; and (c) constituting the political agency of ordinary women both in Liberia and around the world.

“Mama, What Was Your Role?”: Maternal Appeals and Solidarity in Sisterhood

By April 2002, the anti-Taylor rebel groups had gained strength in northern Liberia, and Taylor declared a state of emergency in Monrovia. Gbowee and twenty other women began meeting every Tuesday at noon to pray for peace. Soon other women—both Christians and Muslims—joined the weekly gatherings and agreed to work together to end the violence. It was the first time in Liberian history that Christian and Muslim women had joined together for a common cause (PDBH; MBOP 124–126). For six months, Gbowee and other women visited mosques, churches, and markets to raise awareness about their campaign. Initially, many Liberian women dismissed the idea that they could contribute to the peace-building process. However, in her autobiography, Gbowee recalls arguing that the personal experiences of these women necessitated individual and collective political action, saying, “Why is this your business? You are the one who has been raped by the fighters! Your husband is the one who has been killed. It is your child being forced into the army.” Making the political personal, Gbowee encouraged her Liberian sisters to see their apathy as part of the problem. According to Gbowee, this emphasis on shared personal experiences and maternal concerns convinced these women to join in the peace protests: “Yes…We’ve just been sitting here and people take our children!” they said; “I will join with you” (MBOP 127). During the LMAP protests and in her later account of the movement, Gbowee argued that all Liberian women—regardless of age, class, tribe, or religion—had a role to play in the peace process.

As the violence moved closer to Monrovia and Liberian refugees spilled into five neighboring countries, Gbowee and other organizers planned street demonstrations to demand peace. Taylor issued a statement banning all public protests: “Nobody, n-o-b-o-d-y will get into the street to embarrass my administration!” (PDBH; MBOP 133–135). Ignoring Taylor’s warning, Gbowee and more than 2,000 Liberian women staged a “sit-down” protest in a large soccer field located in the middle of Monrovia on April 14, 2003. The location was strategic: Taylor’s motorcade drove by the field twice a day, and almost every person living in the city passed by as well. Following the biblical character of Esther, the “heroic queen [who stood up] to save her people from extermination” while wearing “sackcloth and ashes,” the women reportedly dressed all in white and wore no makeup or jewelry (PDBH; MBOP 136). Around their waists they tied lappa, a traditional Liberian wrap with great cultural significance. Tying lappa is considered a “sacred and prayerful beginning to a new day,” symbolizing the “encircling of the living and dead family members of [the] immediate and extended family, a statement of the continuity of life” in Liberia (Olukoju 86). In this case, the gesture reemphasized the importance of the LMAP protest to secure a peaceful future for their children and grandchildren. When Taylor’s convoy drove by that morning, the women of the LMAP movement rose, walked to the side of the
road, and held up a huge banner that read, “The Women of Liberia Want Peace! Now!” Throughout the day, the protesters sang: “We want peace, no more war. Our children are dying, we want peace. We are tired of suffering, we want peace. We are tired [of] running, we want peace” (PDBH). The group of women grew in number each day, with mothers, daughters, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, and nieces joining together in the name of peace.

Through their protests, Gbowee and the LMAP protestors reframed the discourse surrounding the Liberian Civil War by shifting the focus from Taylor and the LURD rebel leaders to the women and children suffering from the ongoing conflict. In a 2009 interview with Bill Moyers, Gbowee explained the importance of this focus:

“When we started the protest, the idea was that we needed for the world, for the media, to see that there was another population to this story. There was another side to this story, the women and children that were affected, because all we saw on CNN were footages of fighting and bombing and interviews with Taylor and the rebel leaders. And we wanted them to see that there were victims to all of these glorified media attention that they were giving to these boys with guns. We were the victims.

Because news coverage of the Liberian Civil War focused only on Taylor and the LURD rebels, Gbowee and the LMAP protestors utilized their bodily presence—thousands of mothers protesting in the streets, at the sports field, and in front of the presidential palace—to reinforce the fact that the war was not simply a disagreement rooted in land, money, and political power. Instead, the women represented the war’s true victims as mothers of Liberia and their starving, dying children.

When Taylor finally agreed to meet with the LMAP activists, Gbowee used the opportunity to frame the LMAP movement as a protest motivated by motherhood. In a public statement presented to Taylor, Gbowee said:

The women of Liberia . . . 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?’ (PDBH)

Gbowee spoke on behalf of all mothers gathered at Taylor’s presidential palace and identified their maternity as the driving force behind their actions. As “custodians of society,” Gbowee and the other women conveyed their belief that their children would hold them accountable for what they did—or neglected to do—during the civil war. When Gbowee recalled the meeting with Taylor several years later, she said it stood as “the moment that would determine whether we [would] be free or our children [would] continue their struggle after we’re dead and gone” (Interview with Bill Moyers). At this meeting, Gbowee and the LMAP protestors relied on their maternal status to constitute themselves as legitimate political activists.

Taylor and the LURD rebel leaders responded to the symbolic power Gbowee and other LMAP activists wielded as mothers and agreed to attend peace talks hosted by ECOWAS in Accra, Ghana. According to Gbowee’s account, although
Taylor was sick that day he explained that “[n]o group of people could make me get out of bed but the women of Liberia, who I consider to be my mothers” (MBOP 141). Taylor asked the women to convince the rebels to attend the talks. Two LMAP protestors traveled to Sierra Leone to meet with several rebel leaders and demanded that the men, their “children,” honor their request. Gbowee described the interaction in her autobiography, highlighting once again how the LMAP protestors reaffirmed their socially revered status as mothers. “You are our children!” one said. “We’ve born you! We are tired! We want you to go to Ghana for peace talks! People are dying and you must listen to us!” (MBOP 143). When the rebels tried to ignore them, the women chastised them for their disrespect. One LMAP leader recalled her response to these men: “Your mothers, your sisters have come this far to talk to you,” she said. “If you don’t go to [the] peace talks, don’t you know people will die in Monrovia? And don’t you think you will be guilty for their deaths?” (PDBH).

Reminding these men that the protesters were their “mothers” and “sisters,” the LMAP protestors emphasized a sense of national familial unity and activated the rhetorical power available to them as mothers. Although not related to them by blood, these women spoke to the rebels as mothers and sisters of Liberia. Their language reminded these men of the powerful position mothers held in creating and sustaining the community and nation. According to Gbowee’s account, the men eventually agreed to attend the peace talks because their “mothers” asked them to do so: “Our mothers came all the way from Liberia to talk to us,” they said. “Well, mothers, because of you, we will go” (MBOP 143).

“*I’m Going to Strip Naked*”: Deliberate Public Nakedness as Militant Protest

Although LMAP’s sit-in reportedly motivated Taylor and the rebel warlords to attend peace talks, words alone were insufficient to produce political change. Faced with apathy from both sides, Gbowee threatened to use the most culturally symbolic form of protest available to her: deliberate public nakedness. In this moment, Gbowee’s suggestion that she would bare her body in front of all the men gathered at the peace talks signaled both her desperation and her determination. Gbowee’s action also reaffirmed the powerful role mothers held in Liberian society even as it co-opted the pattern of sexual violence during the civil war. To fully understand the symbolic nature of Gbowee’s threat, however, the context of her action is important.

Peace talks between Taylor and the rebel leaders began in Accra, Ghana, on June 4, 2003. Gbowee and a group of LMAP protestors held daily sit-ins outside the ECOWAS meeting house to remind the men of Liberia’s women and children. “We are their conscience, sitting out here,” Gbowee said in a news interview. “We are calling to their conscience to do the right thing. And the right thing now is to give the Liberian women and their children the peace that they so desperately need” (PDBH). Still dressed in white, the women held signs and sang songs they had used in Monrovia: “Our children are dying, we want peace.” Two weeks after the peace talks began, on June 16, 2003, the parties reached a cease-fire arrangement that included a transitional government without Taylor’s involvement (MBOP 156–157). However, Taylor quickly rescinded this agreement, and rebel forces launched three separate attacks on Monrovia (Ackerman). The raping, looting, and killing was so rampant that the incidents became known throughout Liberia as World Wars I, II, and III (PDBH; MBOP 157). When a rebel leader felt his demands were not being met, he would direct one of his delegates to order more attacks on Monrovia. “Everyone
at the negotiating table would then watch on live television as murder and mayhem ensued until the warring parties granted the warlord what he wanted” (Ackerman 84). Famine spread throughout the region, and without access to clean water, a cholera epidemic began (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Despite the mass chaos in their home country, the rebel leaders and representatives of Taylor’s delegation refused to come to any settlement. Instead, Gbowee and other LMAP protestors recalled that the men enjoyed plush accommodations and boasted about the powerful positions they would receive in Liberia’s new government (PDBH). One LURD representative said the peace talks did not matter; instead, the rebels would “kill everyone in Monrovia, then go back with their own women and replenish the population” (MBOP 158). In later interviews and her autobiography, Gbowee expressed her desperation. “Every institution I’d been taught was there to protect the people had proved evil and corrupt; everything I valued had collapsed. These negotiations had been my last hope, but they were crashing, too” (MBOP 162).

To motivate action from Taylor’s delegation and the LURD leadership, on July 21, Gbowee and the other LMAP protestors entered the ECOWAS building, linked arms, and sat down outside the conference room where the peace talks were being held. According to Gbowee’s account, when the security guards threatened to arrest her for “obstructing justice,” she replied, “‘Ok, I’m going to make it very, very easy for you to arrest me.’ I took off my hair tie. And they were looking at me. I said, ‘I’m going to strip naked’” (Interview with Bill Moyers; PDBH). By suggesting she would bare her body in front of the assembly, Gbowee threatened to enact the most powerful curse available to African women: deliberate public nakedness. In her memoir, Gbowee explained the cultural significance of this act:

In Africa, it’s a terrible curse to see a married or elderly woman deliberately bare herself. If a mother is really, really upset with a child, she might take out her breast and slap it, and he’s cursed. For this group of men to see a woman naked would be almost like a death sentence. Men are born through women’s vaginas, and it’s as if by exposing ourselves, we say, “We now take back the life we gave you.” (MBOP 162)

At this moment, Gbowee deployed her maternal body in militant protest. In threatening to strip deliberately, she drew upon a traditional power afforded to Liberian mothers.7 Deliberate public nakedness before a male assembly symbolized utter desperation. “At that moment for me, the worst was stripping naked and letting them know that there was no more degradation, there was no more humiliation that we could feel as women of Liberia,” she recalled. “There was no more pain that we could feel for our children” (Linden). But Gbowee’s threat communicated more than desperation; it was especially impactful because it co-opted the systemic sexual violence against mothers and their children. Where rebel leaders had targeted the maternal body as a symbol to be used and abused, Gbowee summoned the traditional powers associated with deliberate public nakedness and threatened to emasculate all of the men in her presence. Gbowee’s action worked to reclaim the maternal body from the rapists; if the men responsible for the raping and killing were going to see her naked, it would be on her terms, not theirs. In threatening to bare her body publically, Gbowee implied that she would take back the life that she, a mother of Liberia, had given to the men. Suddenly, Gbowee and the LMAP protestors were no longer targets of sexual violence. Instead, they became
powerful political agents who forced the men—their perpetrators—to stop their raping, looting, and killing.

After Gbowee’s threat, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, the former president of Nigeria and mediator of the peace talks, chastised the warlords for their actions. “If you were a real man,” he said to one, “you wouldn’t be killing your people. But because you are not a real man, that is why these women will treat you like boys. I dare you to leave this hall until we have negotiated a peace with these women” (PDBH; MBOP 162–163). Abubakar’s rebuke revealed how Gbowee’s action subtly shifted the negotiating power from Taylor’s representatives and the rebel leaders to the LMAP protestors gathered outside the hall. Because just the threat of deliberately baring the maternal body emasculated the warlords, Gbowee and the LMAP activists now had the upper hand. In that moment, the men were no longer negotiating with each other; they were negotiating with the LMAP activists instead. Gbowee and the other protestors agreed to leave the hall if Taylor’s representatives and the rebel leaders would participate actively in the meetings. The peace negotiations made significant progress and the parties reached a ceasefire agreement. On August 4, just over two weeks after Gbowee’s threat, West African peacekeeping troops arrived in Liberia. On August 11, Taylor resigned and fled to exile in Nigeria. Three days later, the rebels retreated from Monrovia, and U.S. troops arrived to support the African peacekeepers. A transitional government was formed, with an interim president appointed until formal presidential elections could be held in October 2005. The LMAP activists were hailed as peacemakers throughout Monrovia. In her autobiography, Gbowee recalled the welcome she and other LMAP protestors received upon their return from Ghana. A crowd gathered at the airport to meet them. “These were the peace women,” they said. “These were the women who did great work. Thank you, mothers. Thank you” (MBOP 164). Through their protests, these women not only helped to bring peace to Liberia but also created new avenues for female political agency and played a key role in electing the first African female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

“Unite in Sisterhood”: Expanding Female Political Agency Around the World

Once the peace agreement was reached, Gbowee extended the rhetorical metaphor of motherhood, linking it to sisterhood to activate female political agency both within Liberia and around the world. As the 2005 Liberian presidential election neared, she and other LMAP protestors sought to involve their Liberian sisters in the political process. “It was now time to build on what we had done so that in the future women’s concerns wouldn’t be pushed aside and we’d be full partners in running our communities,” Gbowee recalled (MBOP 168). Because Liberian women did not earn the right to vote until 1947, many still considered politics to be outside their domain.8 “The main obstacle is tradition,” one woman commented. “We are raised to believe that politics are for men and that women should remain in the background” (Polgreen, “Many Liberian Women”). However, the success of the LMAP protests demonstrated that Liberian women were more than qualified to lead political reform. Gbowee and other LMAP activists organized voter registration campaigns and sent volunteers to persuade the women to participate, arguing that Liberian women from all walks of life—tribal women, refugees, market women struggling to provide for their children, and Liberia’s socioeconomic elite—could effect political change. In an interview with Africa Today, Gbowee explained that
the success of the LMAP protests proved that women’s voices mattered. “For the first time in history, women are at the forefront of the elections,” she said. “Towards the end of hostilities, Liberian women protested for peace and that’s when the foundation was laid for women to play a more active role” (“Girl Power”).

By the time voter registration closed, Gbowee reported that the “peace women” had helped increase female voter registration from 15% to 51% in just five days (MBOP 182–83). Catarina Fabiansson, a United Nations representative stationed in Monrovia who worked in post-crisis elections in Afghanistan and East Timor, was impressed with this turnout: “Something I find remarkable here is the number of women who have registered to vote…. I think what we’re seeing is the dedication of women to the peace-building process” (“Girl Power”). This dramatic increase in female voter registration was about more than vote tallies. Instead, it signaled a monumental shift in how Liberian women understood their own political agency in Liberia’s developing democracy (MBOP 181–85; Bauer; Polgreen, “Many Liberian Women”). “We have just begun to realize that we cannot leave our future just to men,” one female voter said. “We must have our role, too” (Polgreen, “Many Liberian Women”). According to turnout statistics from the National Elections Commission of Liberia, 71.1% of literate females and 68.9% of illiterate females voted in the October election; in the November runoff contest between George Weah and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, 69.9% of literate females and 50.4% of illiterate females cast their ballots (Republic of Liberia National Elections Commission, “Turnout” 23). Overall, the commission reported that literate females “had the highest turnout in both elections” (Republic of Liberia National Elections Commission, “Turnout” 2). Johnson Sirleaf won the Liberian presidential election with 59% of the vote (Republic of Liberia National Elections Commission, “National Tally”). In her inaugural address, Johnson Sirleaf acknowledged the “powerful voice of women of all walks of life whose votes significantly contributed” to her victory. 

After the Liberian presidential elections, Gbowee expanded her focus to empowering women across the African continent and around the world. In 2006, she founded the Women Peace and Security Network Africa (WIPSEN-Africa), an organization dedicated to promoting “women’s strategic participation and leadership in peace and security governance in Africa” with several other LMAP activists. Gbowee began to speak on issues of women and peace building on the international stage, addressing the United Nations Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security in 2006 (“Press Conference on Women and Peace and Security”). In April 2008, five years after the LMAP protests, Reticker’s Pray the Devil Back to Hell premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and received the Best Documentary Feature award (“Pray the Devil Back to Hell Awards”). The film’s debut led to Gbowee’s appearances on numerous U.S. news programs, including the Bill Moyers Journal and The Colbert Report (Gbowee, “Interview with Bill Moyers”; Gbowee, “Interview with Stephen Colbert”). These various public appearances allowed Gbowee to bring her rhetoric of motherhood and sisterhood onto an international stage.

In 2009, the Kennedy Library Foundation awarded the Blue Ribbon Peace Award to “Leymah Gbowee and the Women of Liberia” for “pushing for peace and paving the way for democracy after years of violent conflict in their country.” In her acceptance speech at the Kennedy Library, she asked the audience to

imagine a mother leaving her baby half dead by the roadside because she can’t stand to see that child die of hunger. Close your eyes and imagine
a mother brutally raped and several objects inserted into her private. Close your eyes and imagine a group of fighters with guns, betting on the sex of the child of a pregnant woman, and in order to find out who wins the bet, cutting her and taking the child out.

In these examples, Gbowee emphasized the impact the Liberian Civil War had on women, particularly mothers. However, she also used the atrocities of the Liberian Civil War to represent the injustices faced by women globally. Gbowee described her award as a “call to action” for women to speak out and “constructively interfere in the lives of women [and] children when the men are so preoccupied with taking power and taking it violently.” Gbowee said that the recognition also emboldened women to “step out of our safe space[s]…our boundaries…our poor homes” so that women in Sudan, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Bronx, and Brooklyn could “keep walking until peace, justice, and the rights of women is not a dream” (Gbowee, “Acceptance Speech”).

Two years later, Johnson Sirleaf, Gbowee, and Karman, a Yemeni peace activist, were awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. In her acceptance address, Gbowee recounted how she and her sisters used their “pains, broken bodies and scarred emotions to confront the injustices and terror of our nation…we stood under the rain and the sun with our children to tell the world the stories of the other side of the conflict.” She continued:

We succeeded when no one thought we would, we were the conscience of the ones who had lost their consciences in their quest for power and political positions. We represented the soul of the nation. No one would have prepared my sisters and I for today—that our struggle would go down in the history of this world. Rather when confronting warlords we did so because we felt it was our moral duty to stand as mothers and gird our waist, to fight the demons of war in order to protect the lives of our children, their land, and their future. (“Nobel Lecture”)

Eight years after the movement, Gbowee described the LMAP protests as motivated by motherhood. The women of Liberia—ordinary mothers, sisters, daughters, and grandmothers—succeeded not because of their political prowess or military might but because of their shared commitment to their children.

After reflecting on the political agency the LMAP activists found in and through their motherhood, Gbowee noted that there were “many examples globally of such struggles by women” and said that the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize was not just a recognition of female political activism in Liberia and Yemen. Instead, Gbowee argued that it honored “the struggles of grassroots women…in Egypt, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, Tunisia, in Palestine and Israel, and in every troubled corner of the world” (“Nobel Lecture”). Here Gbowee linked the LMAP movement to other protests and argued that these activists were united across borders, nations, and languages by the realization that ordinary women could effect political change. She praised specific “giants in women’s continued struggle to be free and equal” from Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, and Afghanistan for their courage in the face of gender violence and sexual abuse. “[T]his prize is a tribute to your
cry for justice, freedom, and equality,” she said, and “could not have come at a better time than this.” She continued:

It has come at a time when in many societies where women used to be the silent victims and objects of men’s powers, women are throwing down the walls of repressive traditions with the invincible power of non-violence. Women are using their broken bodies from hunger, poverty, desperation and destitution to stare down the barrel of the gun. This prize has come at a time when ordinary mothers are no longer begging for peace, but demanding peace, justice, equality and inclusion in political decision-making. (“Nobel Lecture”)

Here Gbowee highlighted the symbolic potential of “ordinary mothers” and the female body. She argued that all women—not just her Liberian sisters—could transform their status from victims of sexual violence to powerful political agents. Gbowee noted that although women in Liberia and other countries had been arrested, tortured, and raped, they used their bodies to “stare down the barrel of the gun” and demand gender justice. Furthermore, she called on “women of Liberia and sisterhood across West Africa” and “women in Asia, the Middle East, and the World” to follow the example set by these brave women and “unite in sisterhood to turn our tears into triumph, our despair into determination and our fear into fortitude.” Motherhood and sisterhood now transcended borders and nations in Gbowee’s rhetoric. By uniting women across geographical and cultural boundaries, she expanded the scope of the LMAP movement beyond one person or group; it now encompassed the struggle for women’s human rights worldwide.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the militant, unapologetic protests of Leymah Gbowee and the LMAP activists demonstrate the rhetorical power of African motherhood. These women employed the powerful cultural symbols associated with motherhood to advance their goals and, in so doing, opened new avenues for female political agency in Liberia. As mothers and “custodians of society,” the LMAP protestors utilized street protests, sit-ins, and Gbowee’s threat to publicly bare her body to extend their maternal powers to the political sphere (PDBH). These militant maternal protests constituted the LMAP activists as political agents empowered by their literal and symbolic participation as Liberian mothers. As Gbowee argued in her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance address, the LMAP movement extended beyond Liberia’s geographical borders, inspiring women around the world to claim their political agency—many for the first time. Gbowee’s award and speech illustrate why feminist rhetorical scholars should not overlook militant protests by women in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This study advances our understanding of militancy as a rhetorical strategy and documents how feminist activists have used militant social protest to effect political change. This project also demonstrates that “mother” can be a powerful symbol around which to build an effective rhetorical strategy, one that has the ability to convert women from objects of violence to political agents.

Similar militant protests are ongoing and deserve closer examination by feminist rhetorical scholars. During the 2011 Arab Spring, thousands of Yemeni women burned their veils to protest President Saleh’s use of violence to stop antigovernment
demonstrations. According to Bedouin customs, burning one’s garments in a public setting is an appeal to elder tribesmen for help. During the protest, the women distributed leaflets that read: “This is a plea from the free women of Yemen; here we burn our makrama in front of the world to witness the massacres carried by the tyrant Saleh” (Hartmann). In Tunisia, political activist Lina Ben Mhenni documented protests on her blog and deliberately included pictures of herself at rallies with male protestors. Tawakkol Karman, the Yemeni protester who shared the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize with Gbowee and Johnson Sirleaf, camped out for months in front of Sana’a University, demanding that the president resign. “Defying their stereotype as victims of oppressive patriarchies,” The Economist wrote, “Arab women have made their presence a defining feature of the Arab Spring” (“Now Is the Time”). Combining their bodily presence with symbolic acts, these women found strategic ways to protest in and through traditional feminine roles.

In Syria, women have joined the protests against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, participating in women’s demonstrations or gathering in groups behind male protestors, although many men have expressed concern about their wives or daughters being shot or raped if captured. But Syrian women allied with the opposition have pushed their men to go out and protest. One woman, when asked if she worried about the political activism of her three sons, responded: “My sons are not more valuable than other people. If every mother is afraid, then nobody will come out and our revolution will fail” (Al Jazeera staff). Although this woman herself was not protesting in public, she expressed how Syrian mothers found their own avenue for political agency: sending their sons to protest on their behalf.

The future of women’s rights around the world is uncertain, however. Political regimes in many countries still make it difficult for women to be recognized as activists and peacemakers. Despite the ousting of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, female activists who camped in the streets were subjected to “virginity testing” by Egyptian troops. “I wished to die 600 times,” one victim of the testing said (Zoepf). Libyan women worry about their rights to political participation under a new government. “We need to implement women’s rights clearly into a constitution,” said one. “We should not just watch what is going on in our country, we have to work and participate actively in building the future for our children, because, unfortunately, our men didn’t do very well in the past” (Mekhennet). The example of Gbowee and the Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement showcases how women can find political agency in the roles traditionally afforded them. Instead of resorting to physical violence—by far the most politically powerful strategy up to that point during the civil war—Gbowee and the LMAP protestors drew upon their socially revered status as mothers to denounce Charles Taylor, the rebel forces, and the general ineptitude of men in solving the national crisis. Their rhetorical action offers scholars the opportunity to reconsider how motherhood can constitute women as powerful agents of change.

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Notes

1. Important exceptions include Moran’s “Our Mothers Have Spoken” and Stillion Southard’s “‘Can a Woman President Effect Feminist Change?’”

2. The film was produced by philanthropist Abigail Disney, the grandniece of Walt Disney, who learned of the LMAP movement while in Liberia with a delegation from Harvard University’s Women and Public Policy Program. Surprised that major news sources had not covered the story, Disney approached Gbowee with the idea of the documentary in 2006 (Conley). Although she agreed to talk briefly with “these two white girls [Disney and director Gini Reticker],” Gbowee thought little would come of the meeting, later stating that she wondered if the film would consist of “animated cartoon characters.” Over time, however, Disney and Reticker convinced Gbowee that they wanted to document the extraordinary actions of the LMAP protestors precisely because Western media outlets had ignored the protests. “We realized there was a reason for that, right?” Disney later recounted. “The women had been defined out of the frame. So we decided to put them back where they belonged” (Brown).

3. Although Gbowee’s small publisher could not afford a cross-country book tour, Barnes & Noble chairman Leonard Riggio offered to finance one with personal funds after meeting Gbowee at a luncheon in New York City. Captivated by Gbowee’s story, Riggio volunteered to help her “get her message out” and “talk about the struggle for peace and social justice in Africa” (Bosman). After the book’s release in September, Gbowee traveled to eight U.S. cities to use her experience to emphasize the vital role women play in peace building and social change (Hoffman).

4. In her important study of labor organizer Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, Mari Boor Tonn documents how “maternal roles were particularly apt rhetorical strategies for female labor union agitators because agitation and mothering often share two essential dimensions: nurturing and militancy” (2). Although Tonn’s essay focuses on one specific case study, it advances a broader framework for understanding how motherhood and militancy can effect political and social change. As such, “militant motherhood” can take on many forms, with mothers acting on behalf of their biological children or, like “Mother” Jones, women adopting a maternal persona to advocate for the oppressed. Regardless of whether women speak and act on behalf of their biological offspring or as guardians of a larger community, militant maternal protests follow “a long line of women activists” in the United States and around the world (Hayden 196; Fabj; Tibbetts; Kaplan, “Naked Mothers”; Jetter, Orleck, and Taylor). Although some scholars have expressed concerns over labeling these types of protest as maternal (thus reifying gender inequalities and oppression of women within the family structure) it is clear that the rhetorical strategy of “militant motherhood” has been successful (York; Kaplan, “Woman as Caretaker”). Moreover, as Sara Hayden notes, although there is a “potential for maternal politics to be strategically ineffective and to reinforce problematic gender norms,” this does not mean that all such appeals lead to such ends (198). Instead, I argue that militant maternal appeals not only offer women a unique way to enter certain political discourses but can also provide the most symbolically strategic avenue of protest in certain situations. The example of Gbowee and the women of Liberia illustrates this claim.

5. According to Oyewumi, “Centering African experiences of motherhood reveals that motherhood is not merely an earthly institution: it is pregestational, presocial, prenatal, postnatal, and lifelong” (“Abiyamo” 3). Moreover, these familial ties “link the mother to the child and connect all children of the same mother in bonds that are conceived as natural and unbreakable” (“Family Bonds” 1097).

6. Explaining how African troops sent by ECOWAS contributed to the sexual violence, Kenneth Cain wrote: “While I was in Liberia, peacekeeping forces were also responsible for sexual violence. In 1996, my colleagues and I investigated—and confirmed—reports of child prostitution. In one instance, an ECOMOG contingent in the city of Buchanan was trading rice for sex with 9- and 10-year-old girls from a nearby displaced persons camp. Then a contingent from another ECOMOG country arrived. Its soldiers offered the girls more rice and a little money. So the girls started frequenting that camp. Soon thereafter, the bodies of young girls started appearing along the path that led to the newcomers’ camp. The girls had been decapitated and their heads inserted in between their legs. According to
the United Nations security officer who investigated the deaths, this was a message to the girls that it wouldn’t be worth it to frequent the newcomers for the sake of a little extra rice. And these are our peacekeepers of choice in Liberia today” (“Send in the Marines”).

7. This method of protest is not new, and other mothers have resorted to public stripping in other situations. See Kaplan, “Naked Mothers” on the Aba Women’s War of 1929, Tibbitts on the 1992 hunger strike of Kenyan mothers, and Eames on the cultural symbolism of deliberate public nakedness.

8. Several scholars have noted that Liberia has a long history of female political leaders, including the first female president of a national African university and women serving in “ministerial positions, judgeships and other positions of power, both elected and appointed, since at least the 1960s” (Moran, “Our Mothers Have Spoken” 59; Moran and Pitcher). Although some women were involved in political leadership prior to 2005, many Liberian women did not see themselves as legitimate political agents and refrained from political participation. My analysis reveals how Gbowee and other LMAP activists convinced ordinary women that they had an important role to play in the 2005 presidential election. See Bauer; “Girl Power”; Polgreen.

9. For more information on Johnson Sirleaf’s election, see “Two Women Lead the Way”; Bauer; Cooper; Dukulé; Polgreen and Rohter; Stillion Southard, “‘Can a Woman President Effect Feminist Change?’”.

Works Cited


