

Why Empowering Women Could End Genocide and War

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I am a cultural anthropologist and international lawyer. I also come from the lineage of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Anthropologists are supposed to believe that all human behavior is cultural, that we learn everything from our cultures. But we don't. We learn a lot from our cultures because we are dependent on symbols and language. But there are some things hard-wired into us, such as the structures that make language possible, as Noam Chomsky showed; the developmental stages that turn babies into adults, as Piaget discovered; the desire for sex that gives us pleasure and ensures the continuity of humanity.

Other, darker structures are wired into us that have cursed the human race with war and genocide from the beginning of time: ethnocentrism, aggression, territoriality, the need for control and domination.

As my parents and my wife have taught me, we are not all born the same. We come in two models: men and women. We learn gender through culture. But we are born into two kinds of bodies. Men and women also have at least two kinds of minds.

Consider this fact: in the entire history of the human race, not one genocide or war has ever been planned by women. That cannot be an accident. Political scientists might say there is an intervening variable: women have been excluded from political power. But there have been many powerful queens. With one possible exception, the mad queen of Madagascar, Ranavalona, not one has ever planned a war or genocide.

Women have certainly participated in genocide planned by men – Nazi death camp guards, Young Maoist women's brigades, district leaders in Cambodia. But it is men who plan and perpetrate genocide.

Anthropologists study other primates besides humans, and that is not comforting. In all species of higher primates, including gorillas and chimpanzees, when a male takes over the harem of an older silverback, the first thing he does is hunt down and kill all the offspring of the older male. That is literally “geno” cide.

Females don't do that. They adopt orphaned babies into their own families. Women give and protect life. They raise and teach the young. Thank God, they also love and nurture men. Why hasn't anybody noticed this extraordinary fact? Half of the world's human beings do not plan or lead wars or genocides.

If men have needs to dominate and commit violence caused by hard-wiring in their brains or their hormones, we need to be carefully taught.

The world would be better off if women were educated and empowered culturally, religiously, and politically. Women could direct public policies against war and genocide. That is certainly true in Rwanda, Sweden, and the few other countries where women have been liberated from the dead shackles of the patriarchal past. A good example is Liberia.

Leemah Gbowee, a fish seller in Monrovia, Liberia had a strange dream one night. She dreamed that the market women of Monrovia should begin each week with an hour of prayer for peace in Liberia, a country then torn apart by civil war between Charles Taylor's government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Both sides cut off arms and hands, raped women, conscripted child soldiers and turned them into killers on drugs— they committed every war crime. She told her dream to a Muslim friend who also sold fish in the market, and they began the weekly prayer meetings in the fish market. More and more women joined until five thousand women were praying every week. Charles Taylor's entourage drove blithely by in their Mercedes limousines.

Then Leemah Gbowee and the other women demanded a meeting with Charles Taylor and with the leaders of the RUF. When they met them, the women demanded an immediate ceasefire and negotiations to end the war. Both sides agreed. Talks began in Accra, Ghana.

But the women didn't trust the men to make peace. They pooled their nickels and quarters, rented buses, and went to Accra themselves. They slept outside, sometimes in the rain, while the

men slept in four-star hotels. The talks between the men, led by a former Nigerian President, went nowhere.

Finally, fed up, the women walked into the building where the talks were underway and sat down in the hallways. The Ghanaian police threatened to arrest them. One of the senior women said she would make it easy for them by removing all her clothes. (One of the most humiliating things that can happen to a man in Ghana is for a grandmother to disrobe in front of him.) The police backed off.

The Nigerian ex-President told the men that if they didn't come to agreement in three days, he would turn the talks over to the women. The agreement they reached exiled Charles Taylor to Nigeria.

Peace returned to Liberia and in the next election, with the women's crucial votes, Dr. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the first woman elected President of an African country.

Leymah Gbowee, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and the Yemeni woman human rights activist, Tawakkul Karman won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. Charles Taylor was tried for his crimes, convicted, and will spend the rest of his life in prison.

To end genocide, it will take love that transcends all boundaries—that allows us to feel the suffering of people in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains of Sudan.

To end genocide, it will take justice that tries the serial killers that now lead Sudan.

Never lose hope in the power of love. Because love is God's force personally expressed.

Never lose faith in the power of justice. Because justice is God's force socially expressed.

With love and justice, together women and men can end genocide.

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