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4 TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF LIBERIA

5
6 DIASPORA PROJECT
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8
9 PUBLIC HEARING
10 HAMLIN UNIVERSITY
11 June 14, 2008
12 St. Paul, Minnesota

13 **TESTIMONY OF**

14 **WOMEN'S PANEL**

15 TRC Commissioners:

16 Chairman Jerome Verdier
17 Vice Chairperson Dede Dolopei
18 Oumu K. Syllah
19 Sheikh Kafumba Konneh
20 Pearl Brown Bull
21 Rev. Gerald B. Coleman
22 John H.T. Stewart
23 Massa Washington

24 Hearing Officer: Pastor John P. Teayah

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1 (The following proceedings were had and made of
2 record, commencing at approximately 3:10 p.m.):

3 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Is this the women's
4 panel? Okay. So, Hearing Officer, they will find their
5 seats. Just move the podium, please. Just drag it back.

6 Why this big entourage? I said I see that our
7 women are over-represented.

8 MS. PARKER: Huh?

9 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: I see an
10 over-representation of our women. Apparently it is a show of
11 force.

12 MS. PARKER: Yeah.

13 UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Adequate representation.

14 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Adequate representation.
15 Thank you.

16 MS. PARKER: That's the right word.

17 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Is there a lead speaker
18 or --

19 MS. PARKER: Yes. I am. Okay.

20 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Ms. Parker, if you
21 choose to sit, it's okay with us. I just wanted to know to
22 whom we would administer the oath.

23 MS. PARKER: I can just stand. (Inaudible)

24 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Okay. You're the head.

25 MS. PARKER: Yeah.

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1 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: We'll administer it to
2 you, and then all the members of the panel can introduce
3 themselves, then we'll proceed.

4 Shall we kindly rise.

5 (Witness Doris Parker was sworn in)

6 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Please be seated.

7 **DORIS PARKER,**

8 having been first duly sworn to tell the truth,
9 testified as follows:

10 **TESTIMONY OF DORIS PARKER**

11 THE WITNESS: Honorable Commissioners of the
12 Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, The Advocates
13 for Human Rights, our guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, my name
14 is Doris Parker, and I'm a cofounder and executive director
15 of the Liberian Women's Initiative of Minnesotan, an
16 organization that was founded in 2003 in the wake of the
17 Liberian civil war or the peak of the Liberian civil war, as
18 an effort by Liberian women in the state of Minnesota to
19 reach out to our fellow Liberian women and our elders in
20 Liberia.

21 Our initial intention was to send relief items,
22 which we did twice, to Liberia, food that was distributed in
23 New Kru Town, West Point, and Sinkor on two different
24 occasions. However, as time went by, we realized that there
25 were pressing needs in our community where we live given the

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1 fact that we had immigrants, Liberians who were being -- who
2 were coming and being resettled in the state of Minnesota and
3 were having problems similar to what was happening in
4 Liberia. Therefore, our focus changed, and we decided to
5 carry out some projects in the state of Minnesota.

6 Two of our major programs that we offer are adult
7 literacy to cater to the needs of our elderly people in the
8 community who are isolated and have minimal or no education,
9 and which makes it very impossible for them to be able to
10 navigate the system, to access resources, so we decided to
11 empower them in this way.

12 The other program we have is a mentoring program
13 called College Bound. We realized that a lot of our young
14 people, especially women, were dropping out of school,
15 getting pregnant, and had no sense of direction or, you know,
16 just not motivated; so we, as women in the community,
17 organized ourselves, and we have this program named College
18 Bound. What it does is we match a junior or a senior high
19 school Liberian girl with a professional Liberian woman in
20 the state of Minnesota to mentor, guide, and help them
21 navigate the system to encourage high school graduation and
22 college enrollment.

23 Our program has graciously been funded by some
24 foundations -- the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, the Otto
25 Brenner Foundation -- and we're very grateful for that. We

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1 also have some wonderful partners that we have worked with,
2 American counterparts: the River of Life Lutheran Church,
3 Brookdale Covenant Church, the Center for Policy Planning and
4 Performance, Leadership Development Empowerment Group, and
5 many other organizations. I may not be able to name --
6 Center for Victims of Torture. These organizations have
7 helped us a lot to look for resources and for us to be
8 successful.

9 We're located in Brooklyn Park, that is highly
10 populated by Liberian, and today I have with me some of our
11 well-known women in the community. I have a panel.

12 I have Ms. Harriet Badio, who is an attorney, and
13 she is going to be talking about domestic violence and the
14 effect of that, the effect of the war on -- relating to
15 domestic violence of women.

16 I have with me Mrs. Georgette Gray, who is going
17 to talk about the effect of the war on youth.

18 I have Ms. Aicha Cooper, Ms. Liberia Minnesota,
19 who is going to talk about the effect of the war on young
20 women, being a young woman herself.

21 I have Mrs. Lynette Gibson, Murray-Gibson, who is
22 also the chair of board of directors for the Liberian Women's
23 Initiative, going to talk about the effect of the war on the
24 elderly.

25 And I also have an elder in our community who is

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1 also our literacy student, Mrs. Tete Cole, who is going to
2 talk about her experience as an elderly Liberian woman.

3 Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you.

4 (Applause)

5 **STATEMENT BY GEORGETTE GIBSON GRAY**

6 THE WITNESS: Members of the TRC, Ladies and
7 Gentlemen, I know throughout the week we've heard testimony
8 saying -- from a lot of different people within our community
9 and outside of our community. Today is not -- basically, we
10 are not testifying. We are speaking about real-life issues
11 that we are faced with as a result of the war. And I'm going
12 to be talking to you about some of the challenges we are
13 facing within our own community here.

14 My name is Georgette Gibson Gray, and I'm a victim
15 of the war as well, and I believe that every Liberian is in
16 one way or the other. My 12-year-old brother was taken away
17 from Codwell (phonetic) and ended up in Nimba for many years.
18 In 1990 he was taken away. We haven't found him yet. But
19 that's not the issue today.

20 My 21-year-old sister died suddenly in 2000, and I
21 attribute that to the result of the war, simply because she
22 could not get the medical attention she needed. She was at a
23 graduation ceremony and passed out, and no taxi wanted to
24 take her because she was bleeding profusely, because they
25 didn't want their car messed up. So it took them up to 25

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1 minutes to get her to the Redemption Hospital. And she went
2 to the Redemption Hospital. It took another 25, 30 minutes
3 for a doctor to see her. At that time she was bleeding.

4 When the doctor finally got to see her, they said,
5 well -- he said to her, to the family, "I can't do anything.
6 I need to take her to JFK." It took them another 25 minutes
7 plus to organize their ambulance to take her to JFK.

8 The ambulance finally arrived at JFK, and in the
9 ambulance, a physician or a doctor or somebody came out to
10 the ambulance and said -- he held her hands, looked at her,
11 and said, "But this girl is dead. You'll just take her to
12 the morgue."

13 So she left her home that morning going to a
14 graduation, and she ended up at the morgue without medical
15 attention. That's something the war did to my family.

16 While in Liberia, I had the opportunity to talk to
17 a lot of young women there, because we encountered some of
18 the women that were young girls that I couldn't recognize
19 anymore because most of them had -- they were 18, 19 years
20 old, 20, 21, and they were mothers to three children, four
21 children. Most of them didn't even know the fathers of those
22 children. They were toddlers when the war started, and over
23 a 14-year period they have become adults overnight, being
24 mothers to children that they themselves don't have direction
25 to lead. And that's our future. That's the future of

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1 Liberia.

2 In Minnesota today we have a lot of challenges.
3 I'm also a member of the Liberian organization. I'm on the
4 board of directors and have worked with the community
5 actively since 1997. Some of the challenges that we're faced
6 with in our community, our children are coming from Liberia
7 into this experience. They've gone through the Liberian
8 civil war. They were kids when they started off. They have
9 no foundation for education. They come here at 9, 10 years
10 old, maybe some of them 14. According to the American
11 system, we have to put them in classes according to their
12 age. They are put in these classes, and they cannot read
13 basic first-grade books. We have been faced with that
14 because our future, the future of Liberia, the children, the
15 young women, we -- the American system will push them through
16 school because they're growing older each year, but they're
17 not going to graduate from high school, because at the end of
18 the day, they won't be able to take their final exams to make
19 it through high school or to get to college. That's a whole
20 generation of Liberians that this war have affected, and
21 that's our future. That's the future of Liberia.

22 The young women in our community, some of the
23 challenges -- and Aicha will talk, go into depth -- go into
24 depth with that, about that. They lack direction,
25 motivation. We saw that in Liberia. The young women don't

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1 have hope. They've lost all their hopes from running from
2 one place to another, from seeing their dreams shattered
3 along the way. Every time there was a peace accord signed,
4 the hope that there was peace coming to Liberia, and then
5 when we look, we're fighting again. They've lost that.

6 Our vision or my personal vision is to see that in
7 Liberia we empower the young women to continue schooling.
8 They cannot go back to basic education. We cannot get them
9 in first grade. They are 18, 19, 20, 25 years old, and we
10 cannot put them back in third grade. One recommendation I
11 would like to make to your panel -- or to your organization
12 is that we establish schools that will cater to that
13 generation. And I'm talking about trade schools, I'm talking
14 about schools that will empower them, help them to learn
15 specific skills, basic skills, instead of thinking or
16 believing that they can be -- they can go back to school to
17 learn a basic education.

18 I have only five minutes, and I'm out of time, but
19 that's my thing. We are faced with challenges in our
20 community, and our future is Liberia and the youth. The
21 young women that are supposed to lead our country tomorrow do
22 not have the skills they need to lead us to the future.

23 Thank you.

24 (Applause)

25

STATEMENT BY AICHA COOPER

1
2 THE WITNESS: Greetings, Commissioners, The
3 Advocates for Human Rights of Minnesota, Fellow Audience
4 Members. My name is Aicha Cooper. I am the current Miss
5 Minnesota Liberia. I'm also a young woman who has been
6 affected by the war in Liberia. And I am here today just to
7 flash a little brief light on how women feel -- young women
8 feel in America after the civil war in Liberia.

9 I will go ahead and just say that young women --
10 women in general, we do have internal scars. We go each day
11 to day living with these testimonies, experiences, and all
12 that we went through in the war. And I think that I should
13 just commend the TRC, and you guys, our partners, for taking
14 up such initiative to allow women like ourselves to flight
15 us -- briefly express what we went through.

16 I was about 10 years old in 1995 or 1996, and a
17 war broke out in Liberia. And prior to that occurrence of
18 that war, my experiences has been devastating, like many
19 others. I was in a home with my parents, and we experienced
20 armed robbery. Well, I was so little, so I ran under the bed
21 for, you know, rescue or safety, and just to find out later
22 on there were two women in my home who were raped. And it
23 was just a chaos after that in the morning when we woke up.

24 So going through the war in Liberia has been such
25 a crazy experience for me, even going through school now that

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1 I relocated here. I first came here with my parents during
2 the '80s, when I was born and everything, and I never lived
3 in the U.S. But when I went back, that's when the war broke
4 out, and I just moved here to live in 2000. And I found it
5 really hard. I had a lot of challenges and complexity in my
6 freshman year in college because my mother was still in
7 Liberia, and there was another conflict that broke out,
8 causing me to not be able to focus in school, because I was
9 the only girl for her, and going to school, I had so much
10 challenges and complexities just to focus.

11 But what I want to say is that the war does
12 have -- the war does have a psychological, emotional, and
13 logical impact on young women. A lot of young women here, we
14 are looking for direction. We're looking for identifiable
15 role models, people we can look up to. We're looking for a
16 second chance. We're looking for opportunities that will
17 help build us and elevate us to the next level.

18 And being Miss Liberia, the main reason I
19 participated in the pageant is not because of beauty of what
20 I thought I looked like, it was all about me taking up this
21 position to help -- to be an identifiable role models to
22 other women. There was a time in my life when people told me
23 I wasn't pretty enough, I wasn't smart enough, or whatever
24 the case may have been. And going through the war, I'm both
25 challenged being stuck and see -- and all of these challenges

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1 I faced as a little girl, I found within myself inner peace
2 to believe that I could accomplish everything or whatever I
3 put my mind to.

4 And there are a lot of young women out there who
5 are -- who can identify with me. They do not have a place
6 where they can go and express their stories. They don't have
7 a friend that they can confide in. And, I mean, there are a
8 lot of young women who are really traumatized by what
9 happened in Liberia. And I'm just so glad that I'm actually
10 an affiliate with Doris's organization. I serve as a mentor,
11 to talk to -- you know, I have a mentee, and I talk to her
12 about issues, and I try to guide her, encourage her with her
13 education.

14 So there -- in closing, I just want to say that I
15 wish the community's leaders would, you know, believe in our
16 youth, invest in us, because we are the future for tomorrow.
17 Liberia right now is in pieces, and it takes you and me to
18 rebuild it. It takes our generation. It takes the young
19 people. If we abandon them, there is not going to be a
20 powerful and elevated Liberia tomorrow.

21 So I just want to encourage all of you out there
22 who are listening, invest in us, because our future, the
23 future of Liberia, Mother Liberia, freed land, the meaning of
24 that country alone is left upon the youth. It's our
25 responsibility to uplift our country. And I just want to

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1 encourage you guys to support and invest in us.

2 So, in closing, thank you so much, and I
3 appreciate the time for being here.

4 (Applause)

5 **STATEMENT BY HARRIET BADIO**

6 THE WITNESS: Commissioners, Members of the TRC,
7 Ladies and Gentlemen, I am privileged to be here to discuss
8 the effect of the war on domestic violence. And just as a
9 cautionary note, I am not, by standing here and discussing
10 domestic violence, advocating that the war has caused
11 domestic violence, because domestic violence is an epidemic
12 that exists all over the world. It happens here in America.
13 It happens in other countries. Liberia is no exception.

14 But what I do want to say is that domestic
15 violence as it relates to the Liberian setting is such that
16 our laws traditionally -- the culture that we are from
17 traditionally considers the woman as subservient to the man.
18 That was the traditional aspect of, the traditional role of
19 the woman. That has changed over the years, but we're not at
20 the point that we need to be yet.

21 For America, society, recognizing the epidemic of
22 domestic violence, has taken steps to improve the condition
23 that women live in. The effect of the war on domestic
24 violence is that for an already-existing problem that we have
25 in the Liberian culture, where we consider domestic problems

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1 as something that only the family deals with, the war has
2 actually aggravated that problem, because rather than finding
3 ways -- rather than finding peaceful ways to solve problems,
4 we are perpetrator of these problems, just go ahead and they
5 become aggressive towards their domestic partners.

6 The war has caused Liberians to come to America.
7 There has been a huge influx of Liberians in Minnesota. The
8 problem is that these Liberians don't recognize the intensity
9 of the war against domestic violence perpetrators. So what
10 they do, they go out and abuse their partners. From
11 statistics that we have, they have no regards for the law,
12 and as a result, a lot of them get arrested. And when they
13 are arrested, they don't realize how aggressive the laws are
14 in this country against domestic violence perpetrators.

15 As Liberians, women, and one of the role of the
16 Liberian Women's Initiative is to empower women, to make
17 these women who are victims of the war realize that they
18 don't have to accept the abuse from their domestic partners,
19 because women are so used to that, especially from the
20 culture that we're from. They're so used to these things
21 that they're in a state of learned helplessness. They think
22 there is no recourse, they have nothing -- no way out. But
23 this organization empowers women and helps them to realize
24 that there is recourse for these kinds of violence against
25 women.

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1 So we tell them what their rights are. We can
2 even refer them to people, to sources out there that can
3 assist them with the problems of these domestic violence.

4 One of the things that I would like to recommend
5 for the Commission -- and this is not a testimony. The laws
6 in Liberia, I'm sure -- and I heard that there have been some
7 improvements in the laws towards women's rights, but I think
8 the laws need to be more aggressive so that women understand
9 that this is not an acceptable situation for women.

10 I lived in Liberia. I have experienced situations
11 where women have been abused, and in the heat of the
12 situation, the police was called, and they were told, "That's
13 your domestic problems," they have nothing to do with that.
14 And the war has actually aggravated it. And what the law has
15 done is made them more aggressive. I mean, it's not only for
16 the domestic violence situation, but the war has made people
17 more aggressive.

18 I was in Liberia a few years ago, and all of a
19 sudden it didn't seem like the same Liberia I knew, because
20 everybody you talked to seemed like they were just so
21 combative. You know, and I guess it was just a survival mode
22 that people were in.

23 So I would recommend that the laws become more
24 aggressive to protect women's rights and that people -- that
25 these perpetrators of the war and even, you know, victims of

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1 have killed my last daughter. I was frustrated, and I didn't
2 know what to do. I had to flew -- from 1990, October 12, I
3 had to flew to Canada. I've been in Canada all those years.
4 Before 2000, I flew in America.

5 When I came to America, I didn't know nothing. I
6 can't read and write. But we went so far -- Doris Parker
7 opened a school for widowed women, organization that we
8 didn't know how to write. Some of the women, they have one
9 of their husband killed. There are women, they have children
10 that are raped right in front of them. They were raped and
11 they were beaten. So every one of us, when we came to
12 America, we didn't know nothing. Our tutors, they gave us
13 this school when we went. We tell God thank you. American
14 people, thank you. Doris Parker, thank you that she make it
15 for us to know our in or out. We know how to call our people
16 in Liberia or other country, and we know if we go somewhere,
17 we get lost --

18 (Applause)

19 THE WITNESS: At least when we go somewhere, when
20 we are lost, when we ask -- when we reach to the police
21 department, when we tell them -- they ask for our address, we
22 tell them. So I am so happy for me to be in America. And
23 American people, thanks for opening the door for us, for us
24 to know our (unintelligible) right. So my fellow friends, my
25 children in Liberia, we want for you to work hard and listen

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1 with us and pay attention, because we are (unintelligible).
2 We didn't know anything. But right now, you ask me, I can
3 give my address to you.

4 (Applause)

5 THE WITNESS: And I want to give my telephone and
6 write my name.

7 So again, God, thank you. Thank you for the
8 opportunity you have given us.

9 (Applause)

10 **STATEMENT BY LYNETTE MURRAY-GIBSON**

11 THE WITNESS: Good afternoon. My name is Lynette
12 Murray-Gibson, and I am the board chair for Liberian Women's
13 Initiative of Minnesota. I have been working with the
14 organization now for about two and a half years.

15 And I want to recognize some of my students. I
16 work with the literacy program, the adult literacy program,
17 and we meet every Saturday from 11 AM to 1 PM.

18 And I want to -- in the front, sitting right
19 there, Ma Hawa. Stand up.

20 Ma Kpannah.

21 Ma Fatu.

22 Ma Gorlon.

23 And Ma Zolu.

24 (Applause)

25 THE WITNESS: As Ma Tetee said to you, when they

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1 were here -- they came, these are women who ran their own
2 markets and stuff in Liberia, but because of the war, their
3 children -- they were resettled in Minnesota. Their adult
4 children brought them over, you know, resettled them here.

5 But some of the problems that they faced, they
6 were in the homes, and they were left alone with their
7 grandchildren, not knowing how to use the telephone, not
8 knowing how to recognize numbers or anything. So, as Doris
9 said earlier, the problem was we had to rethink some of the
10 aims of the Liberian Women's Initiative.

11 So the literacy program was started, and it was a
12 joy for me to see these women, not knowing their alphabets or
13 not knowing numbers, they're now able to go to -- they can
14 dial -- like she said, I can dial the phone number, call
15 Liberia, take down numbers. They can read and write. And
16 one of the things that they have expressed to me is their
17 desire to learn to read the Bible. And in the two hours that
18 I work with them every Saturday, they have come a very, very
19 long way.

20 A lot of them were left alone in the homes with
21 their grandchildren, as I said earlier, and the situation, if
22 there was an emergency, they couldn't under -- they couldn't
23 call the ambulance. They didn't know how to dial the 911 or
24 anything, and it was just a problem if a fire broke out or
25 anything like that. So we have been working with them

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1 through the leadership of Doris Parker and other women,
2 working with our elderly people.

3 Now, the war, a lot of them came here, and they
4 have been here in the United States not knowing how to get
5 around, not knowing how to get into the system, not knowing
6 things. And so they sit in the house and watch television
7 and watch African movies, but there is just so much
8 television and African movies that you can watch. You become
9 bored, and you sit there looking at the four walls, and it
10 begins to close in on you.

11 So their coming together every Saturday serves as
12 a way for them to socialize with each other. They talk about
13 problems. They even share jokes, that the grandchildren
14 laugh at them and tease them and say, "Grandma, you're going
15 to school. What are you learning?" Because they have to ask
16 them to please dial the numbers, and the kids want to do
17 their own thing. They don't want to be in the house and
18 helping them out. So now they're able to do that.

19 Some of their children work very hard, 16-hour
20 shifts, sometimes 18-hour shifts, and, as I said, left them
21 alone. So our meeting with them and teaching them, they
22 have -- I see a change in their attitude. I see a change in
23 their demeanor. They're able to relate better. They're able
24 to interact. And most times we take them out after class.
25 We take them shopping. We take them to different places,

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1 just on field trips and whatever. We use our own resources
2 to do this.

3 So we want to recom -- I would ask the
4 Commissioner or recommend to people here to be a part of it.
5 Give your time, give your resources, because these women have
6 grandchildren that they are bringing up, and they will teach
7 them the right way that they should go, because it says in
8 the Bible treat up a child in the way he should go, and he
9 will not depart from it when he is old. So I want to take
10 this opportunity to just thank you very much.

11 And, Ma Gorlon, we'll still go to the garage sale
12 later.

13 (Laughter)

14 Thank you so much.

15 (Applause)

16 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Mrs. -- Ms. Parker and
17 other members of the panel, we want to thank you for giving
18 the Commission a comprehensive perspective of what you all
19 are doing and advancing some of these recommendations, which
20 are not just necessary for the community here, but may be
21 relevant for other sisters back home in Liberia. So I want
22 to thank you for taking up your time to come and share these
23 moments with us.

24 The Commissioners will ask you questions. They
25 may be directed to any one of you, or they may be thrown at

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1 the panel and any of you may choose to answer.

2 Ouma.

3 COMMISSIONER OUMU SYLLAH: Well, I just want to
4 tell the Liberian Women's Initiative, along with the
5 director, thanks very much for the hard work you are doing
6 with the community. I'm proud of you, because you come in to
7 America, your concern was not only yourself. You thought
8 about the other women and tried to improve their lives. So I
9 just say thank you very much for the hard work, and I want
10 you to continue, as the Chairman said. There are other women
11 back in Liberia who need similar assistance and as they did
12 during the war. So please continue your good work. Thank
13 you for coming.

14 COMMISSIONER JOHN STEWART: To the distinguished
15 women out there, to our mothers, to you, I would like to say
16 thank you very much. Some of you I know, and you have given
17 me a lot of hope.

18 Personally, I've been activist for the past 35
19 years, and I should say, I must confess that at no time in
20 the past until now have I felt so inspired, especially of our
21 mothers. I think -- going beyond literacy, I think they also
22 have an important contribution to make, because I consider
23 them repositories of our traditional values. And there is
24 nowhere better place to impart these values to our generation
25 coming after us other than the home. So I would encourage

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1 you to encourage them. I would encourage you to write the
2 stories, all the stories that we know of that teaches moral
3 lessons. And I know they know so much these stories. You
4 can write them down, put them down, so that the younger ones
5 can read and have some of these values instilled in them so
6 that when they go home, they're not going to be completely
7 lost.

8 Again, I must commend you and urge you to
9 continue. It's a long way ahead, but I know with
10 determination and courage, you can make it.

11 Thank you very much.

12 COMMISSIONER MASSA WASHINGTON: Doris and Members
13 of the Liberian Women's Initiative, I just want to
14 congratulate you, your courage, to first of all dream of
15 putting together such an organization that will cater to
16 Liberian women in the state of Minnesota, particularly our
17 mothers who were resettled from Liberia here. And I'm
18 laughing because, interestingly, Doris, we were talking
19 yesterday, and you said when you started the Liberian Women
20 Initiative here, you had no idea there was another Liberian
21 Women Initiative already in Liberia. And I'm one of the
22 original founders of the Liberian Women's Initiative in
23 Liberia. At that time we advocated aggressively for the
24 inclusion of Liberian women in the peace process.

25 Initially, women were not a part of the peace

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1 process, because the peace negotiators included ECOWAS
2 leaders and heads of states. And even Liberian politicians
3 felt that women were not a party to the conflict, and so
4 therefore, their voices were not heard. And a couple of us
5 got together, put the organization together. We lobbied
6 very, very aggressively to make sure that women were heard,
7 and we attended a lot of peace conferences. Sometimes we
8 forced our way into peace conferences in all of those. So --
9 but the war is over now, and it's good to know that you have
10 an organization like this that is addressing those issues,
11 those post-war issues.

12 So congratulations, and I really do want to give a
13 big hand again to our mothers.

14 (Applause)

15 COMMISSIONER MASSA WASHINGTON: And we will pray
16 that, you know, God continue to bless you and Doris, and they
17 have assisted everybody, and everybody -- Georgette, all you
18 guys, hopefully you will continue to have the grants rolling
19 for your project, and we will keep you in our prayers.

20 COMMISSIONER DEDE DOLOPEI: Hello to you all, and
21 it's good to see you and to meet you. It's also good to know
22 that a group of women have taken a (unintelligible) of the
23 women to come together and do such good work here in
24 Minnesota. So we want to say congratulations, and thank you
25 (unintelligible) to us that (unintelligible) you can get --

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1 you can be able to make a difference in their life and change
2 your community for the best. So we say thank you.

3 But I just have a few information that I would
4 like to know, and I just want to know, the Liberian Women
5 Initiative in Monrovia or in Liberia is an umbrella group.
6 Is this fashioned almost like that? Do you have other women
7 organizations as members of the Liberian Women Initiative?
8 And also, are women in Minnesota cooperating with you? What
9 is the membership size of your organization? Thank you so
10 much.

11 MS. PARKER: No, it's not -- currently is not an
12 umbrella organization. It's just based here in Minnesota,
13 and we don't have other groups, you know, part of us.

14 Membership size fluctuates. We have anywhere
15 between 50 to 200. And I say this is that in the initial
16 stage when the organization started, we had a lot of people
17 who came in and wanted to be a part of it, and we ourselves,
18 you know, at the very infancy stage, you know, people come in
19 and sign up and say they want to become a member of the
20 organization, and maybe after a while this is not what, you
21 know, they want or things are not moving as fast as they are,
22 and we don't see them anymore. And we have meetings, but yet
23 we keep them on our roster. So I think at this point we have
24 50 members that are active, but we have a membership database
25 of about 200 members that have signed up initially and said

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1 they wanted to become members of the organization.

2 COMMISSIONER DEDE DOLOPEI: Are there other women
3 organizations in Minnesota, Liberian women that you are aware
4 of?

5 MS. PARKER: Yes, there are.

6 COMMISSIONER DEDE DOLOPEI: Okay. I think one of
7 the things people in Liberia when we were doing the march
8 session for peace was that when you network together, you
9 know, you get better results. So even if you're not able to
10 get people coming to you, you will reach out to them, and
11 then you have -- you all working together, especially to give
12 support to each of you, as you are here in another way. And
13 so I say thank you. Hats off to you, and continue the good
14 work. Thank you so much.

15 COMMISSIONER GERALD COLEMAN: Thank you for the
16 presentation that has been made. I found it very inspiring.
17 And, you know, as we reflect on the brutality of our war, the
18 kind of things that were done, and we think about the fact
19 that everyone who participated in that war was once a child
20 under the love and guidance of a woman, and we see what
21 happened, and then we compare that to the new movement of
22 gender equality and the balance, I can just say glory
23 halleluiah, because, you know, it's -- I remember when I
24 first came back to Liberia after I lived here myself many
25 years, I read a chapter in the Bible about what happened

1 after Adam and Eve fell. It said that God cursed Eve and
2 said, "You will be servant to your husband," so I saw that as
3 the beginning of women's inequality. Okay? But then I went
4 back to Liberia, I saw many times women's role was always in
5 this lower position. So to see the victory over all these
6 years and the change is a very inspiring situation because of
7 one key thing, the element of love and compassion. To me,
8 women have that seed element, you know. And if the equality
9 comes, they will be able to properly inherit it to the future
10 leaders of this country.

11 So my challenge and question to you is, do you see
12 the family situation as a stable reality here in the
13 diaspora, or are there problems that need to be dealt with?
14 Because if that isn't resolved and made solid, then even if
15 you stand in your proper role, the equality really will not
16 come there, because it's a combination of the man and a woman
17 working together that will bring the true harmony and future
18 peace for all of us.

19 So I don't know if any of you would like to
20 comment on that.

21 MS. BADIO: Well, I would say it's not -- if
22 you're using the Liberian standard, I would probably say yes;
23 but if you're using the American standard, I would say no.
24 And we're getting to that. And I think that's some of the
25 problems that Liberian families are having now, because they

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1 bring with them the situation from back home, not recognizing
2 that the system here is a little different, and so -- but
3 they are learning. Because once they get in the arms of the
4 law and they know what the consequences are for their
5 violations, you know, they realize that there is certain
6 things they cannot do and get by with. But then again, a lot
7 of the Liberian families are trying their best to work
8 together, because here you also have the economic aspect that
9 actually forces people to work together because, you know,
10 it's even difficult to have one person as a breadwinner. So
11 they're actually trying to work towards that, but a lot of
12 them are having -- a lot of us are having problems with the
13 law because we don't recognize that the laws here are more
14 stringent and more enforced than the ones back home.

15 COMMISSIONER GERALD COLEMAN: Thank you.

16 COMMISSIONER PEARL BROWN BULL: Commissioner
17 Coleman, I actually believe that God has forgiven the
18 Liberian women. And, you know, that curse that he put on
19 Eve, he forgive the Liberian women. And remember the promise
20 he made to women when he put men asleep to make us, because
21 no longer in Liberia we are reminded and especially what you
22 call indigenous women who have joined with the
23 (unintelligible) women, and we say we are no longer behind,
24 we are side by side. And, in fact, this time we don't accept
25 second place when first is available. So I'm reminded -- I

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1 was just reminded, flashback of 29 years ago, Ms. Cooper,
2 Ms. Minnesota -- or Miss Liberia in Minnesota. When you
3 stood up here, and all you asked for, a second chance. You
4 can have it. You know what chance I'm on now? I'm on my
5 seventh chance, and I got it in 2005, when it fell to the
6 group -- the leader of the group and other women group and
7 human rights group recommended me to serve again, my seventh
8 chance, on the TRC. The first chance you get when you're
9 born. That's where I got my first chance. And I'm going to
10 tell you my other chances: 1980, second chance; '85 war,
11 third chance; 1990, fourth chance; 1992, Octopus, fifth
12 chance; 1996, April 10, sixth chance. I'm on my seventh
13 chance. And I'm sure you see -- seeing people like you all
14 give me the cause and the reason to even call for the eighth
15 chance.

16 So just to give you the second chance, you know, I
17 mean, I think the Liberian men and women can give it to you,
18 because they owe it to you. And I'm so happy to see the
19 women (unintelligible), you know, you're sitting up there, I
20 just (unintelligible). I didn't see your leader to say come
21 in front. That's where you belong. Don't never accept
22 second chance, second place, when first is available.
23 Because all those people just talk like things just
24 happening, but I can say if it were not 29 years ago for
25 Mommy Behr (phonetic), Behr (unintelligible), Tetee Gripper

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1 (phonetic), Mommy Baker (phonetic), and Liz Berkoleze
2 (phonetic), I wouldn't have had my first chance, second
3 chance, because the first time I saw Willie Tolbert
4 face-to-face, it was Mommy Behr (unintelligible) who rode in
5 the car and took me to Bentor (phonetic) to talk to him
6 one-on-one, and it was Liz Berkoleze who stood up and
7 recog -- and elected me, nominated me to be the national
8 chairman of the women wing of the True Whig Party. I just
9 want to humble your age; or if not your age, your size. So
10 I'm so happy and feel so good that you all can come here.
11 And for domestic violence, that's what we've got to work on
12 in Liberia, because we can say in America, I'm sure everybody
13 know to call 911. And, in fact, Tete Cooper, I will let
14 them know you can dial 911. In fact, you just dial it here.
15 Here, you don't even have to talk. So -- yeah, you don't
16 have to talk. So we are working, the women in Liberia,
17 they're trying with the domestic violence, probably when the
18 men -- and there are men who are also collaborating with the
19 women. They wear the T-shirt. And there are good men too.
20 So thank you.

21 Ms. Gray, you talk about the future. What you all
22 do now is for the future, but how about today? The future is
23 not promised to none of us, but -- so we have to work for
24 today. And Harriet referred to it as the survival mode. We
25 are surviving now, but why are we surviving? We can still

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1 live good, and those surrounding us can also live good. So
2 let's work today for -- not only for the future, but that
3 those who are around can live good.

4 Thank you very much.

5 COMMISSIONER SHEIKH KAFUMBA KONNEH: Well,
6 Officers, members of the Liberian Women's Initiative, we are
7 impressed and fascinated that you have initiated programs
8 that try to advance our models on our systems, and I want to
9 encourage you to continue. We know there are challenges, but
10 you must stand up strongly with family to carry out those
11 things.

12 It is said that when a nation is unfortunate to
13 witness and experience war but is lucky to recover, it is
14 expected of its citizenry to approach the future with new
15 vision, new sense of direction, commitment, dedication.

16 In Liberia, the notion of division, of
17 segregation, is what Liberians who are foresighted are
18 fighting the war against. And so we want to encourage you to
19 make the Liberian Women's Initiative a truly Liberian women
20 initiative. And I'm saying this because one of your
21 spokespersons says that a request has been made now to teach
22 Bible in your class. That try to signify that perhaps the
23 group is composed of only Christians, while Liberia is a
24 multireligious and a multicultural society. So please try to
25 involve others.

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1 Thank you very much.

2 MS. PARKER: Thank you. I just want to say one
3 thing before we, you know, leave, to close.

4 To address your concern, when we started the
5 organization -- and all of our members, current and past, can
6 attest to that, that it was an organ -- it is an organization
7 to advocate for the rights of all Liberian women and to
8 include Liberian women from all ethnicity to be a part of an
9 all religious background. In fact, unfortunately --
10 fortunately, Ahmed Sirleaf can attest to that one of our
11 original students, Momu Sirleaf, is of the Islamic faith.
12 However, I think because of health reasons or whatever
13 reasons, she dropped out of the class. And if she
14 remained -- if she had remained in the class, we would make
15 every accommodation for her, to include her.

16 And I have appealed to Mr. Sirleaf in the past,
17 when he was part of the Mandingo association president, to
18 please, you know, have other women from the Mandingo
19 association come and be a part of that. We do not
20 discriminate. Our organization incorporates -- I mean
21 includes women from Gio, Krahn, all backgrounds in Liberia;
22 educated, not educated. We do not discriminate. Our focus
23 is to empower every Liberian woman on whatever level that is
24 appropriate and acceptable for them. For educated Liberian
25 women, may be looking for resources to further their

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1 education or networking for job advancement, career
2 advancement. For women like my mother, Tete Cole is helping
3 them to learn how to use the telephone and to write their
4 names. So we try to meet the need of every Liberian woman
5 based on their need.

6 Having said that, I wanted to close by making one
7 recommendation. All of us here are women, and we know that
8 there are so many stories, testimonies that were said, even
9 my own testimony about my sister who was raped. I know there
10 are laws addressing rape, you know, the perpetrator and so
11 forth, but I really want to see stronger laws. This is --
12 from what we're reading in the newspaper, either it's lack of
13 the capacity that these people are being tried or put in
14 prison, and they're let out in the early stage, and they go
15 back and commit the crimes again, or either because of lack
16 of facilities; or the judges in the rural areas, they're not
17 being prosecuted. This is what we're reading. I could be
18 wrong. But we just read in the news an eight-year-old girl
19 was just recently raped. That is not acceptable. And it
20 seems to be very prevalent in Liberia. The women are still
21 being raped and taken advantage of and violated in such a
22 way.

23 So my recommendation to the TRC is really to
24 recommend strong laws and a penalty against people who will
25 violate, you know, young girls, women as a whole.

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1 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Thank you very much.

2 MS. PARKER: Thank you.

3 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: All you have said today
4 as a panel are beyond denial. All of us here understand and
5 appreciate the role women played during the conflict. We
6 agree with you that women were unnecessarily violated during
7 the conflict. As my colleague has said, there were women who
8 campaigned vigorously. There were times where they broke
9 down our barriers because of their aggressive nature to
10 pursue peace. So we agree with everything you have said.

11 But two things stand out, especially being
12 Liberians living in another country. Your unity of purpose,
13 just the power-share agreement to work together coming from
14 diverse background, this is a very vast country. People work
15 the hours and all of that, but you can still find time to
16 work together. I think that is a significant attribute of
17 Liberian womanhood.

18 The second one is the witness to continue
19 advocating not only for yourselves, but for others who are
20 less fortunate in terms of education and maybe economic
21 standing. That leads me to suggesting maybe we haven't
22 considered, I heard Ms. Murray speaking of the Saturday
23 classes and how it's an opportunity for women to get together
24 and socialize. I know the benefits of social clubs to
25 Liberian women, social meetings where there is yet another

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1 chance for socialization. It's used to build trust, and it
2 empowers and supports each member of the institution.

3 I don't know the legal constraints against such a
4 program here in the United States, but I heard one of our
5 mothers talking about a sewing machine. I heard about a
6 garage sale. Is that where you go buy it?

7 MS. MURRAY-GIBSON: Yeah. They go to garage sales
8 and stuff to shop.

9 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: You can get it cheap,
10 right? Sometimes you see it cheap in the morning out there,
11 you know. So I think an informal governing structure of that
12 nature could help. And for the short time I've come around
13 here, I've managed to understand some of the things that
14 happened in the community, and one of the things that I've
15 understood is happening to you as what I normally term
16 reverse aggression. Women who suffer abuses in Liberia in
17 silence and all of that are here and return to the U.S. when
18 they come -- when they migrate to the U.S. and get empowered
19 and all of that, they take it out on their spouses. There
20 are several cases where the man is thrown out, the man is
21 abused because the woman has been empowered, and she's
22 being -- but I don't know how your experiences have been.

23 (Overlapping speakers)

24 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: I don't know. I'm just
25 wondering from by whom -- even hear stories.

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1 MS. BADIO: I wouldn't call that reverse abuse, if
2 that's what you're refer -- aggression as what you're calling
3 it. I think it's called empowerment.

4 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Hmm?

5 MS. BADIO: I think it's called empowerment,
6 because what -- yeah, because what we do and the reason why
7 you didn't hear that back home, because women were not
8 exposed -- women were not given the opportunity to actually
9 express themselves, and the medium is not there for them to
10 seek recourse. Here, it is there.

11 CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: It has to be because --

12 MS. BADIO: And because women have the opportunity
13 to express themselves, they are empowered. So they see the
14 signs of abuses, they see the signs of disadvantage, and they
15 speak out. So I don't think that's abuse, I think they're
16 just empowered.

17 MS. MURRAY-GIBSON: I want to take this
18 opportunity to -- Commissioner Konneh, about the Bible, when
19 I said that their desire is to read the Bible. This is what
20 some of the women in the class have expressed to me, that
21 they want to learn to read so that they can read their Bible.
22 And once they learn to read, they can read the Koran, they
23 can read anything that they get their hands on. We have
24 taken them to the library here in Minnesota. They have all
25 gotten their library cards. They've checked out books from

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1 the library. And so, I mean, they are being empowered to do
2 that and read whatever religious thing they want to read.

3 And also I want to recognize one of our board
4 members -- forgive me -- Etta, Etta Bornor. Please stand up.

5 (Applause)

6 MS. MURRAY-GIBSON: She's another very hardworking
7 Liberian woman in the community. And going to the garage
8 sale is just a place where people put things out, and they
9 buy it really cheap. And, yes, some of them, I have taken
10 them to garage sales and what they call rummage sales, and
11 they've bought sewing machines and different things. And I
12 take them to Wal-Mart to buy their reading glasses, you know,
13 just take them out. The other day I took a bunch of -- all
14 of them to Northwestern Bookstore because some of them had
15 expressed an interest in getting the large-print Bible, so I
16 took them there. And we just have a great time. I look
17 forward now to getting up every Saturday morning at
18 nine o'clock and going to the class. Before, I used to just
19 lay around the house in my nightgown, but I see -- because I
20 used to say, well, this is my day to rest, because I work,
21 you know, very hard. But they give me -- they encourage me.
22 They make me get up every Saturday morning and leave my
23 house. I look forward to seeing them all the time. Thank
24 you.

25 (Applause)

