TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF LIBERIA

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TESTIMONY OF
WOMEN'S PANEL

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

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

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

MS. PARKER: Huh?

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

MS. PARKER: Yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Adequate representation.

CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Adequate representation. Thank you.

MS. PARKER: That's the right word.

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

MS. PARKER: Yes. I am. Okay.

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

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

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

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

Shall we kindly rise.

(Witness Doris Parker was sworn in)

CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Please be seated.

DORIS PARKER,

having been first duly sworn to tell the truth,

tested as follows:

TESTIMONY OF DORIS PARKER

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

Our initial intention was to send relief items, which we did twice, to Liberia, food that was distributed in New Kru Town, West Point, and Sinkor on two different occasions. However, as time went by, we realized that there were pressing needs in our community where we live given the
fact that we had immigrants, Liberians who were being -- who were coming and being resettled in the state of Minnesota and were having problems similar to what was happening in Liberia. Therefore, our focus changed, and we decided to carry out some projects in the state of Minnesota.

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

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

Our program has graciously been funded by some foundations -- the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, the Otto Brenner Foundation -- and we're very grateful for that. We
also have some wonderful partners that we have worked with, American counterparts: the River of Life Lutheran Church, Brookdale Covenant Church, the Center for Policy Planning and Performance, Leadership Development Empowerment Group, and many other organizations. I may not be able to name -- Center for Victims of Torture. These organizations have helped us a lot to look for resources and for us to be successful.

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

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

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

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

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

And I also have an elder in our community who is
also our literacy student, Mrs. Tetee Cole, who is going to talk about her experience as an elderly Liberian woman.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you.

(Applause)

STATEMENT BY GEORGETTE GIBSON GRAY

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

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

My 21-year-old sister died suddenly in 2000, and I attribute that to the result of the war, simply because she could not get the medical attention she needed. She was at a graduation ceremony and passed out, and no taxi wanted to take her because she was bleeding profusely, because they didn't want their car messed up. So it took them up to 25
1 minutes to get her to the Redemption Hospital. And she went
to the Redemption Hospital. It took another 25, 30 minutes
for a doctor to see her. At that time she was bleeding.

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

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

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

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

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

The young women in our community, some of the challenges -- and Aicha will talk, go into depth -- go into depth with that, about that. They lack direction, motivation. We saw that in Liberia. The young women don't
I have hope. They've lost all their hopes from running from one place to another, from seeing their dreams shattered along the way. Every time there was a peace accord signed, the hope that there was peace coming to Liberia, and then when we look, we're fighting again. They've lost that.

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

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

Thank you.

(Applause)
STATEMENT BY AICHA COOPER

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

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

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

So going through the war in Liberia has been such a crazy experience for me, even going through school now that
I relocated here. I first came here with my parents during the '80s, when I was born and everything, and I never lived in the U.S. But when I went back, that's when the war broke out, and I just moved here to live in 2000. And I found it really hard. I had a lot of challenges and complexity in my freshman year in college because my mother was still in Liberia, and there was another conflict that broke out, causing me to not be able to focus in school, because I was the only girl for her, and going to school, I had so much challenges and complexities just to focus.

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

And being Miss Liberia, the main reason I participated in the pageant is not because of beauty of what I thought I looked like, it was all about me taking up this position to help -- to be an identifiable role models to other women. There was a time in my life when people told me I wasn't pretty enough, I wasn't smart enough, or whatever the case may have been. And going through the war, I'm both challenged being stuck and see -- and all of these challenges
I faced as a little girl, I found within myself inner peace to believe that I could accomplish everything or whatever I put my mind to.

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

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

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

STATEMENT BY HARRIET BADIO

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

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

For America, society, recognizing the epidemic of
domestic violence, has taken steps to improve the condition
that women live in. The effect of the war on domestic
violence is that for an already-existing problem that we have
in the Liberian culture, where we consider domestic problems
as something that only the family deals with, the war has
actually aggravated that problem, because rather than finding
ways -- rather than finding peaceful ways to solve problems,
we are perpetrator of these problems, just go ahead and they
become aggressive towards their domestic partners.

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

As Liberians, women, and one of the role of the
Liberian Women's Initiative is to empower women, to make
these women who are victims of the war realize that they
don't have to accept the abuse from their domestic partners,
because women are so used to that, especially from the
culture that we're from. They're so used to these things
that they're in a state of learned helplessness. They think
there is no recourse, they have nothing -- no way out. But
this organization empowers women and helps them to realize
that there is recourse for these kinds of violence against
women.
So we tell them what their rights are. We can even refer them to people, to sources out there that can assist them with the problems of these domestic violence.

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

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

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

So I would recommend that the laws become more aggressive to protect women's rights and that people -- that these perpetrators of the war and even, you know, victims of
the war realize what rights they have.

And even those soldiers or those who have fought, they need to be rehabilitated. They need to also understand that the laws are there, and they will have to abide by the law; because we have a problem in Liberia where even if the laws are there, we have a problem of implementation of the laws. And I hope that with the Commission -- this is not a testimony, this is a recommendation of these experiences that we've had here. I hope that the Commission will go ahead and recommend these improvements in the law.

And I see that you have some attorneys here on your Commission, Counselor Bull, so I'm sure that she's working towards that as well.

So I would just like to thank you all, and we'll be available for questions, I'm sure, at the end of this testimony.

CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Your name?

THE WITNESS: My name is Harriet Badio.

CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Thank you. Thank you very much.

STATEMENT BY TETEE COLE

THE WITNESS: Good evening (unintelligible). I'm Tetee Cole. I have come to give my testimony today. I'm happy to share. I have through the war -- through the war, they have killed my husband right in front of me, and they
have killed my last daughter. I was frustrated, and I didn't know what to do. I had to flew -- from 1990, October 12, I had to flew to Canada. I've been in Canada all those years. Before 2000, I flew in America.

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

(Applause)

THE WITNESS: At least when we go somewhere, when we are lost, when we ask -- when we reach to the police department, when we tell them -- they ask for our address, we tell them. So I am so happy for me to be in America. And American people, thanks for opening the door for us, for us to know our (unintelligible) right. So my fellow friends, my children in Liberia, we want for you to work hard and listen
with us and pay attention, because we are (unintelligible). We didn't know anything. But right now, you ask me, I can give my address to you.

(Applause)

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

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

(Applause)

STATEMENT BY LYNETTE MURRAY-GIBSON

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

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

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

Ma Kpannah.

Ma Fatu.

Ma Gorlon.

And Ma Zolu.

(Applause)

THE WITNESS: As Ma Tetee said to you, when they
were here -- they came, these are women who ran their own
markets and stuff in Liberia, but because of the war, their
children -- they were resettled in Minnesota. Their adult
children brought them over, you know, resettled them here.

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

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

A lot of them were left alone in the homes with
their grandchildren, as I said earlier, and the situation, if
there was an emergency, they couldn't under -- they couldn't
call the ambulance. They didn't know how to dial the 911 or
anything, and it was just a problem if a fire broke out or
anything like that. So we have been working with them
through the leadership of Doris Parker and other women, working with our elderly people.

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

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

Some of their children work very hard, 16-hour shifts, sometimes 18-hour shifts, and, as I said, left them alone. So our meeting with them and teaching them, they have -- I see a change in their attitude. I see a change in their demeanor. They're able to relate better. They're able to interact. And most times we take them out after class. We take them shopping. We take them to different places,
just on field trips and whatever. We use our own resources
to do this.

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

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

(Laughter)

Thank you so much.

(Applause)

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

The Commissioners will ask you questions. They
may be directed to any one of you, or they may be thrown at
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the panel and any of you may choose to answer.

Ouma.

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

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

Personally, I've been activist for the past 35
years, and I should say, I must confess that at no time in
the past until now have I felt so inspired, especially of our
mothers. I think -- going beyond literacy, I think they also
have an important contribution to make, because I consider
them repositories of our traditional values. And there is
nowhere better place to impart these values to our generation
coming after us other than the home. So I would encourage
you to encourage them. I would encourage you to write the stories, all the stories that we know of that teaches moral lessons. And I know they know so much these stories. You can write them down, put them down, so that the younger ones can read and have some of these values instilled in them so that when they go home, they're not going to be completely lost.

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

Thank you very much.

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

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

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

(Applause)

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

COMMISSIONER DEDE DOLOPEI: Hello to you all, and
it's good to see you and to meet you. It's also good to know
that a group of women have taken a (unintelligible) of the
women to come together and do such good work here in
Minnesota. So we want to say congratulations, and thank you
(unintelligible) to us that (unintelligible) you can get --
you can be able to make a difference in their life and change your community for the best. So we say thank you.

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

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

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

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

MS. PARKER: Yes, there are.

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

COMMISSIONER GERALD COLEMAN: Thank you for the presentation that has been made. I found it very inspiring. And, you know, as we reflect on the brutality of our war, the kind of things that were done, and we think about the fact that everyone who participated in that war was once a child under the love and guidance of a woman, and we see what happened, and then we compare that to the new movement of gender equality and the balance, I can just say glory halleluiah, because, you know, it's -- I remember when I first came back to Liberia after I lived here myself many years, I read a chapter in the Bible about what happened
after Adam and Eve fell. It said that God cursed Eve and
said, "You will be servant to your husband," so I saw that as
the beginning of women's inequality. Okay? But then I went
back to Liberia, I saw many times women's role was always in
this lower position. So to see the victory over all these
years and the change is a very inspiring situation because of
one key thing, the element of love and compassion. To me,
women have that seed element, you know. And if the equality
comes, they will be able to properly inherit it to the future
leaders of this country.

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

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

MS. BADIO: Well, I would say it's not -- if
you're using the Liberian standard, I would probably say yes;
but if you're using the American standard, I would say no.
And we're getting to that. And I think that's some of the
problems that Liberian families are having now, because they
bring with them the situation from back home, not recognizing that the system here is a little different, and so -- but they are learning. Because once they get in the arms of the law and they know what the consequences are for their violations, you know, they realize that there is certain things they cannot do and get by with. But then again, a lot of the Liberian families are trying their best to work together, because here you also have the economic aspect that actually forces people to work together because, you know, it's even difficult to have one person as a breadwinner. So they're actually trying to work towards that, but a lot of them are having -- a lot of us are having problems with the law because we don't recognize that the laws here are more stringent and more enforced than the ones back home.

COMMISSIONER GERALD COLEMAN: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER PEARL BROWN BULL: Commissioner Coleman, I actually believe that God has forgiven the Liberian women. And, you know, that curse that he put on Eve, he forgive the Liberian women. And remember the promise he made to women when he put men asleep to make us, because no longer in Liberia we are reminded and especially what you call indigenous women who have joined with the (unintelligible) women, and we say we are no longer behind, we are side by side. And, in fact, this time we don't accept second place when first is available. So I'm reminded -- I
was just reminded, flashback of 29 years ago, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Minnesota -- or Miss Liberia in Minnesota. When you stood up here, and all you asked for, a second chance. You can have it. You know what chance I'm on now? I'm on my seventh chance, and I got it in 2005, when it fell to the group -- the leader of the group and other women group and human rights group recommended me to serve again, my seventh chance, on the TRC. The first chance you get when you're born. That's where I got my first chance. And I'm going to tell you my other chances: 1980, second chance; '85 war, third chance; 1990, fourth chance; 1992, Octopus, fifth chance; 1996, April 10, sixth chance. I'm on my seventh chance. And I'm sure you see -- seeing people like you all give me the cause and the reason to even call for the eighth chance.

So just to give you the second chance, you know, I mean, I think the Liberian men and women can give it to you, because they owe it to you. And I'm so happy to see the women (unintelligible), you know, you're sitting up there, I just (unintelligible). I didn't see your leader to say come in front. That's where you belong. Don't never accept second chance, second place, when first is available. Because all those people just talk like things just happening, but I can say if it were not 29 years ago for Mommy Behr (phonetic), Behr (unintelligible), Tetee Gripper
(phonetic), Mommy Baker (phonetic), and Liz Berkoleze (phonetic), I wouldn't have had my first chance, second chance, because the first time I saw Willie Tolbert face-to-face, it was Mommy Behr (unintelligible) who rode in the car and took me to Bentor (phonetic) to talk to him one-on-one, and it was Liz Berkoleze who stood up and recog -- and elected me, nominated me to be the national chairman of the women wing of the True Whig Party. I just want to humble your age; or if not your age, your size. So I'm so happy and feel so good that you all can come here. And for domestic violence, that's what we've got to work on in Liberia, because we can say in America, I'm sure everybody know to call 911. And, in fact, Tetee Cooper, I will let them know you can dial 911. In fact, you just dial it here. Here, you don't even have to talk. So -- yeah, you don't have to talk. So we are working, the women in Liberia, they're trying with the domestic violence, probably when the men -- and there are men who are also collaborating with the women. They wear the T-shirt. And there are good men too. So thank you.

Ms. Gray, you talk about the future. What you all do now is for the future, but how about today? The future is not promised to none of us, but -- so we have to work for today. And Harriet referred to it as the survival mode. We are surviving now, but why are we surviving? We can still
live good, and those surrounding us can also live good. So let's work today for -- not only for the future, but that those who are around can live good.

Thank you very much.

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

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

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

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

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

And I have appealed to Mr. Sirleaf in the past, when he was part of the Mandingo association president, to please, you know, have other women from the Mandingo association come and be a part of that. We do not discriminate. Our organization incorporates -- I mean includes women from Gio, Krahn, all backgrounds in Liberia; educated, not educated. We do not discriminate. Our focus is to empower every Liberian woman on whatever level that is appropriate and acceptable for them. For educated Liberian women, may be looking for resources to further their
education or networking for job advancement, career advancement. For women like my mother, Tetee Cole is helping them to learn how to use the telephone and to write their names. So we try to meet the need of every Liberian woman based on their need.

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

So my recommendation to the TRC is really to recommend strong laws and a penalty against people who will violate, you know, young girls, women as a whole.
CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Thank you very much.

MS. PARKER: Thank you.

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

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

The second one is the witness to continue advocating not only for yourselves, but for others who are less fortunate in terms of education and maybe economic standing. That leads me to suggesting maybe we haven't considered, I heard Ms. Murray speaking of the Saturday classes and how it's an opportunity for women to get together and socialize. I know the benefits of social clubs to Liberian women, social meetings where there is yet another
chance for socialization. It's used to build trust, and it empowers and supports each member of the institution.

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

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

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

(Overlapping speakers)

CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: I don't know. I'm just wondering from by whom -- even hear stories.
MS. BADIO: I wouldn't call that reverse abuse, if that's what you're refer -- aggression as what you're calling it. I think it's called empowerment.

CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Hmm?

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

CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: It has to be because --

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

MS. MURRAY-GIBSON: I want to take this opportunity to -- Commissioner Konneh, about the Bible, when I said that their desire is to read the Bible. This is what some of the women in the class have expressed to me, that they want to learn to read so that they can read their Bible. And once they learn to read, they can read the Koran, they can read anything that they get their hands on. We have taken them to the library here in Minnesota. They have all gotten their library cards. They've checked out books from
the library. And so, I mean, they are being empowered to do that and read whatever religious thing they want to read.

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

(Applause)

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

(Applause)
CHAIRMAN JEROME VERDIER: Thank you very much on behalf of the Commission. We say you are always welcome to interface with us at any level of our work, and we appreciate you coming today. Thank you very much. You can all leave now.

MS. PARKER: Thank you.

(Women's panel excused)

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REPORTER'S CERTIFICATE

I, Jean M. Whalen a Registered Diplomate Reporter, do hereby certify that the foregoing pages of typewritten material constitute an accurate verbatim stenographic record taken by me of the proceedings aforementioned before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia, on the 14th day of June, 2008, at the time and place specified.

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