



Community Voices for Peace and Pluralism WhatsApp Workshop Seminar

Series 1

Conversation with Vaiba Flomo, Liberia

Lessons on Surviving the Ebola Epidemic

The Community Voices for Peace and Pluralism - Africa (CVPP) is a non-profit network that builds the capacities of women and other groups in preventing, transforming and solving violent conflict through a Peace and Pluralism approach. CVPP- Africa equips women to contribute to peace processes in decision making roles.

Convener: Alice Wairimu Nderitu, mediator of armed conflict and author

Moderator: Fulata Moyo, a World Council of Churches' Programme Executive for the project on A Just Community of Women and Men.

Coordinator: Regina Mutiru, Mentor and Founding Partner and Amani Women Network

Panelist: Vaiba Flomo, Women and Youth's Desk Officer for the Lutheran Church Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program in Liberia.

Rapporteur: Shama Shah, conflict analyst

Participants: Members of Community Voices for Peace and Pluralism Africa \

This was an interactive discussion with questions coming through from members all over Africa. The following transcript are notes from the workshop.

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Alice Wairimu Nderitu, Kenya: We wish to request you all not to send in any forwards or videos until we conclude a very important exercise. Today we shall have a workshop with panelists and as happens in a real seminar we will concentrate on the conversation at hand without interruptions.

We shall all speak to each other here, through Whatsapp, not Skype, Zoom or any other medium. The workshop is one of the great ideas that came from the group of fourteen who engaged on a zoom call to discuss the response on the call to ceasefire by the UN Secretary General. We resolved to identify thought leaders and have weekly discussions for solutions that can be put into use now and in the future.

We are in the middle of this huge pandemic crisis. But this is not the first time we in Africa are facing such a crisis. We have faced HIV/AIDS and Ebola before.

Before I say anything else, knowing what I now know because of COVID-19, I would like to start by apologizing to all African countries who suffered Ebola alone. We could have done more surely, for each other, even if it was just moral support. Facing a pandemic or epidemic is not easy.

Our sisters from Liberia are willing to share with us what lessons we can draw from Liberia that could help us deal with COVID-19. We shall be facilitated in this discussion by Fulata Moyo from Malawi. Our panelists sisters from Liberia are Vaiba Flomo and Ma Kamara. We also have sisters from DRC here, including Leonie, Mireille and Gratas who also have input on lessons learnt particularly as there was news yesterday of a new case of Ebola.

Please note that unlike a formal workshop we are all not sitting in one place and we are in different time zones so people are invited to input at whatever time they open their whatsapp. I now hand over to Regina who will introduce the panelists.

Regina Mutiru, Kenya: Meet our moderator Fulata Moyo from Malawi and Vaiba Flomo from Liberia (**Bios at the end of script**).

Fulata Moyo, Malawi: How did you survive Ebola in Liberia? How were you able to share solidarity in the face of a virus that is so infectious?

Vaiba Flomo, Liberia: Good afternoon, everyone. It is a pleasure for me to join you, to share with you, my sisters, the way we survived Ebola in 2014. This is just the basis, it is not in detail, but I'll just give you the overall of what we did as Liberian women to survive Ebola. When Ebola came, many of us thought it was something that we could close doors on ourselves and just cater to our immediate family. But that wasn't the case as we had just come from war and were trying to recover. With the role Liberian women played in getting peace, we felt and still feel we were the owners of our country and our communities so when things go wrong, we take the blame. That is the first thing, the key thing that Liberian women have done over the years – is taking ownership of community, and this played a major role in fighting Ebola.

We know men die from Ebola, yes, but we saw many women dying from it as well. The reason for women dying was just common sense, for God's sake, how will a woman see her child sick and she wouldn't be able to touch that child? That was the big question to us as women. How would I be in the same room as my child that is sick, and I can't cater to that child? The Liberian women came together taking the lead and, in my community, we brought in local ideas. Looking at our population in terms of poverty, not many rural families had money to purchase expensive things, so we'd buy plastic bags for them to take to the market to put foodstuff in it. We also told people how to prepare themselves if someone got sick in the house (use a little bleach (the measurement wasn't very harmful, but it was very powerful), little soap and chlorine, you mix it up, put it on the plastic bag). We taught the women how to dress up, the gear (they would wear the plastic bag) before they catered to their children. (We can arrange for a proper time and I can go into detail with you on this one. This is so practical, I cannot just say it, I need to demonstrate what I am saying so you get it in detail.)

What we did that really helped with the Ebola fight was we women really took it as our business because as I said a lot of the people that died from Ebola were women. We did a lot of community awareness and community outreach. We were in a taskforce, and dressed up in our gear and went around with a megaphone in our hands and made big noise in the community, "wash your hands!", "do not touch any sick person!", "if anyone is sick in your house call the ambulance, we will provide a number for you." And we read out the number very loudly for them. We did this over and over again, every day. It was real sacrifice that I'm talking about.

When we came to peoples' house and didn't see the bucket to wash hands, we sometimes did a one-on-one engagement to educate them. One thing that really got to people was we went on the internet and got documents on what happened in Democratic Republic of Congo and we would show everyone how Ebola treats people. That was one of the major things we did that really helped to spread the message on Ebola. As I mentioned, as Liberian women we did community awareness collectively. We would go around from block to block with megaphones in our hands telling people how to treat themselves and their children, and about the protective measures prescribed by the Health Ministry.

I will stop here, if there are any questions or any need for clarification, please get back to me and I will be able to provide clarity to you. Really what we did, just to conclude, was collective effort and community outreach. Thank you for the invitation to speak and I am on standby, anytime you want me. Goodbye.

Salim Musa Umar, Nigeria: From the discussion I learnt 1) That communities were able to innovate ways of tackling the menace despite many challenges. 2) Lessons can be derived from the community engagements where awareness was raised. COVID-19 challenges could be approached in the same manner for better understanding of our communities. From the discussion, it is clear the Liberian women mobilized themselves to raise awareness about the Ebola crisis.

Shukria Dini, Somalia: I learned a lot from the discussion including how Ebola affected more women than men in affected countries due to their primary caregiving role. As a result, women got organized and took actions to engage with members of their community preventing and responding to Ebola. Women utilized their own resources. Imagine what they could have achieved if they were given adequate resources to fight Ebola.

Rosemary Were, Kenya: I have learnt that community awareness is missing from our current approaches on COVID-19. Media approaches alone are not enough.

Fatima Suleiman, Nigeria: This is truly impressive and could be implicated in the present discourse on COVID-19.

Regina Mutiru, Kenya: Many thanks Vaiba for the wonderful and informative presentation, much appreciated. To all of us, we can raise questions we may have to Vaiba.

Fulata Moyo, Malawi: Thank you so much, Vaiba for these clear practical strategies.

So in summary, there was need for community-awareness, and need to address the vulnerability of women as compassionate beings: wives, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, etc., who out of compassion could not avoid reaching out to relieve the pain of those they cared for.

Response: women organized themselves and did the following:

1. Together provided the needed solutions, equipment and gears including soap, chlorine, protective gear;
2. Embarked on community-awareness - providing the needed information and demonstrating how to protect each other.

Are there any questions of clarity or need for more information? Community please speak.

Zelpha Ingasiah, Kenya: Thank you Vaiba for the presentation. I'd like to know if you experienced any hindrances from the authorities (local administration, government agencies, etc.)?

Regina Mutiru, Kenya: I have a question too. Sometimes with such initiative's women encounter challenges like lack of finances for instance you need to move from point A to B and some of the group members need facilitation. Did you encounter such and how did you handle it?

Shama Shah, Kenya: Thank you, Vaiba, for the informative presentation. I have a question around the youth - did they play a role in tackling the crisis? If so, what was their role and the impact they created?

Salim Musa Umar, Nigeria: Thank you once again Vaiba. Another question - do you have traditional institutions that gave support to the Women groups? For instance, here in Nigeria we have recognized traditional institutions that are very strong in terms of advocacy and reaching out to the larger communities. They are the head of their people and are instrumental in decisions affecting their people.

Hibaa Ismael, Djibouti: Thank you Vaiba, for the presentation. I have a question, did you get any support from the Government in sensitizing the population, was there an ease of access to media for instance? Also what were the expectations you had from the authorities in terms of support.

Vaiba Flomo, Liberia: Good afternoon. Quickly to the question that has to do from moving from Point A to Point B. This is the challenge we have as community people because sometimes if you want something from organizations, they want this big proposal and office space; they are not really looking at the actual work. Once it comes to actual work, it is the community women that do it with the initiative of saying we'll do this for ourselves. So we did not have any funding, however we want to be grateful to Gbowee Peace Foundation as when we first started they gave us some money and we used this money to train women in communities on advocacy and awareness. So we didn't go from A to B, no, from A you stay in A and B you stay in B.

To the point of authority, every community has structures so when it comes to authority in the community, what we did was, we would contact the community chairman and leadership and asked them for blessing to work with their community women. We didn't have any problem with the authority as from the beginning they were our entrance into the community.

With regards to the youth, one of the things we did in our work was we didn't just move into the community and do the work, as I said we engaged the community leadership and every community leadership has youth representatives that will engage the youth. Sometimes we would have separate engagement with the youth especially since they had their own role to play in the awareness of outreach program. Most of the time they use the megaphone (especially the female youth) giving out the messages. The elderly women would then engage one on one when they didn't see the handwashing bucket outside the house. We carried the message of the ugly side of Ebola, that if one person in the house catches it, the whole household is in trouble. So you as the young person, you do not want your future to just go like that. The young people saw themselves as the stakeholder, they recognized the role that had to play in fighting Ebola because they saw their parents (like everyone else) not going back to work and they had to fight for their parents to go to work.

As I said this was really collective work and we all worked together. As a woman if you have the strength, we encouraged you to join us. However when it came to funding, it was really challenging for us because many organizations don't trust you the first time and even if you're doing the work they want to say "I have implemented this and that". We really want to be grateful to the Gbowee Peace Foundation owned by the 2011 Nobel Laureate, madame Leymah Gbowee. She's really been helping us at a community level, she gave us her money 3 times that did so much for us and enabled us to move from one point to another point.

For funding, another thing we did was once we recognized the financially strong women in the community, we'd go to them and tell them what we're doing. They women already know that it's the women that are caregivers and they were willing to fund other women. We told them we were willing to be the soldiers, they just needed to support us and they were able to give us some money every week. This is how we got support from other women in the communities.

Shukria Dini, Somalia: My questions are: were the women's contributions to preventing and responding to Ebola crisis recognized and documented in terms of research? Where are the heroic women who responded to Ebola now? Do they have a structure or institution that is currently functioning?

Vaiba Flomo, Liberia: When talking about documenting our work, I got a few pictures (and I will try and give it to you). Maybe the Gbowee Foundation will be able to give you documentation on the work the community women are doing on Ebola but to say there is a record section in this country that will tell you what the community women do at a community level, oh no. When Ebola came out as an epidemic, everybody came and said yes they want to follow us but on a daily basis, the women are the ones that were working with the youth, issues on drugs and community violence. The women are the ones that were taking initiative, but it will never be documented as people will probably just see it as part of women's obligation to family or the society.

One of the good things we have in Liberia amongst the women is equality; no matter where you come from, once it comes to women coming together, we are women. No matter who you are, you can be a pastor, you can be a bishop, you can be a farmer, a teacher, uneducated or traditional, once you are a woman you must answer to the call. We have that as a real powerful tool that works for us.

Alice Nderitu, Kenya: Thank you Vaiba we are learning so much. My question would be are there similar arrangements as were there for Ebola going on for COVID-19? What are women doing about it?

Vaiba Flomo, Liberia: Last Monday, we trained between 11 – 15 women that could go back to their community and carry out awareness. I was one of the facilitators and one of my questions to them was what lessons we learned from Ebola that we can bring to COVID-19. All of them said we should go back and increase awareness. So the UN women, through the Gender Ministry, gave these women 3 buckets each with bleach and soap so that they can take it to their communities. What I want to do now is go to their individual communities so I can train that one person plus 5 other women so that they can go into the community and create awareness. For Ebola, they did not need to stay home, but for COVID-19 it is about staying home. What we decided as women in the community is how do we put strategies in place that will help us respond to anyone that will come down with the virus. We haven't concluded on that however we were planning to really engage with the community, and I will come back with the results once we conclude on them. I tell you; the women own the "washing hands", even asking each other if they washed their hands today and how many times.

Felistas Mushi, Tanzania: Thanks Vaiba. You pre-empted me on whether the strategy can be employed with the “stay at home” or maybe authorities can be engaged to give permission for such strategic interventions. This is not a question for Vaiba, just thinking aloud based on her presentation.

Vaiba Flomo, Liberia: Thank you for this. I am going to share with the women.

Shukria Dini, Somalia: The responses to COVID-19 have been top down. It is the Government and specific line ministry that is leading such responses. We should include women and CSO’s.

Vaiba Floma, Liberia: This is the point and I can say then the community will not feel the impact.

Fulata Moyo, Malawi: Probably getting authorization to go out and raise awareness would really be the way to go.

Let’s engage this question of “staying home” and the African context with its much rich communitarian spirit and also many challenges.

a) what does it meaning staying home for those who have to live from hand to mouth? Those whose means of livelihood is actually dependent on selling little this and that?

b) what about those families that are living in overcrowded contexts?

Salim Musa Umar, Nigeria: The lockdown or staying at home is inflicting a lot of hardship in families. This morning I was watching how people defied the lockdown in my neighborhood and went out looking for water.

Felistas Mushi, Tanzania: I think our strategy should start with the authorities to make them understand the importance of employing local solutions like that of Vaiba and her group.

Fulata Moyo, Malawi: This is a very important point: when the approach is top down from WHO in Geneva to local government down to community, how can the community be given their power to make the important contribution? Any suggestions?

Vaiba Flomo, Liberia: We will engage the Minister for Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection

Shukria Dini, Somalia: Power and space are never given by anyone. Women and CSOs need to create a space where they can carry out their critical initiatives... Currently the non-state actors that my country has been targeting are the local Imaams. Yes, while this is a great step, but they are men.

Felistas Mushi, Tanzania: In my country the Ministry of health held a meeting with religious leaders; that is also a good entry point.

Fulata Moyo, Malawi: For the welfare and safety of ourselves and our beloved ones, indeed we need to take initiatives and provide our community leadership. Let’s suggest to our governments to take the fight against Ebola, Cholera and many other challenges that the African child has survived and provide a global leadership on the importance of community-based responses!!

Sarah Lochodo, Kenya: I know Vaiba Kebeh Flomo. I shared an apartment with her in San Diego in 2010. Listening to Vaiba gave me more energy in curbing the current status of COVID-19 #Stay at Home. My sisters being one of the Government mouthpieces at the community level (Sarah is a Chief) with an office charged to disseminate policies, sometimes the suffering of the people especially women and children pushes one to explore other avenues that will bring sanity to the community. Thank God, Turkana county in the Northern Kenya where I come from and work hasn't recorded yet any Corona case but I tell you I wake up every morning to go and make sure all the travellers entering our county through my Location Kainuk are screened. I also remind travellers to carry drinking water and sanitizers. At 6pm I blow the whistle to remind my people curfew time, which begins at 7pm is close. While in the village there is cry for food and water, women cannot Stay at Home when they can fetch firewood and charcoal from the bushes for sale to bring food Home. So the women and I have to mobilize our own food from homes and, call youths in the diaspora to help the elderly and children by donating food and of course. In this way, we are able to we can maintain them for a week. Thank you Vaiba, i have learnt a lot. That in any crisis, women have to rise up and save the community, their families. My question is, what about media documentation?

Fatima, Mali: It was only today that I was able to listen to Vaiba's webinar. I have learned a lot, and am inspired, as a result. I hope she will not mind if I ask her a few questions in private messaging, since the presentation is over.
Thanks Vaiba for sharing, this was really educative.

Halima Yoman, Nigeria: I am so impressed with the courage you and your group took in saving the lives of many but putting a halt to spread of Ebola in your country. I wish our fellow women can emulate your hard work in sensitizing and mobilizing our community to avoid the spread of COVID-19 across the nation at large. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, my workplace have been using the opportunity of having a radio program slot to sensitize and pass information mostly to the hard to reach communities through radios and jingles to teach them the etiquettes of staying away from contacting the said virus. This has been achieved via interviews in the different languages to make them aware of the danger of the pandemic.

Alice Nderitu, Kenya: So many thanks dear Fulata for moderating. So many thanks Regina our coordinator. So many thanks for the rich questions and comments to everyone. So many thanks everyone for contributing because even listening is contributing.

A big round of applause for dearest Vaiba our heroine of the day. Vaiba it was so great to hear your voice. You sounded like you were with us - you were present in our homes wherever we are on the continent and around the globe.

Much appreciated!!

Peace! Rain! Prosperity!

With those closing sentiments and remarks by Alice Nderitu, the first of many Seminars was concluded.

Biographies



Vaiba Flomo

Vaiba is the Women & Youth's Desk Officer for the Lutheran Church Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program in Liberia.

A peace activist and social worker, Vaiba has worked since 1998 to heal both her nation and its women from the 14-year civil war between rebel groups and the Liberian army. Vaiba supervises psychosocial services to war-affected women and girls and empowers them to build peace and promote nonviolence in their communities.

Adamant that the health of Liberian society depends on the participation of women and youth, Flomo continues to focus on healing and rehabilitating women and girls, mending broken relationships between survivors and offenders of the civil war, and increasing the number of women involved in post-war peacebuilding and reconstruction.

Vaiba was nominated a 2010 Women PeaceMaker by the Joan B Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, and participated in the precarious progress on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Vaiba has extensive training in Conflict Resolution/Transformation and Peace Education at local and international levels. She is also featured in the documentary Pray the Devil Back to Hell for her efforts to end Liberia's fourteen-year civil war.



Fulata Moyo

Fulata L. Moyo is a World Council of Churches' programme executive for the project on A Just Community of Women and Men based at the headquarters in Geneva. She believes that within

the religious tradition that women are made in God's image are authentic resources to affirm the dignity and entitlement of women to human rights. She received her doctorate from the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in Religion and Theology focusing in Gender and Sexual Ethics with grounding studies in Sexual Ethics, Feminist Liberation Theologies, and Epidemiology, social scientific research methodologies from Yale University's Divinity School and Department of Public Health respectively, Connecticut, USA.

She is passionate about working with religious resources to raise awareness and build a movement of gender justice and peace with zero tolerance for sexual and gender based violence. To this end, she works on mobilising churches to adopt the Thursdays in Black campaign for a world without rape and violence, which was born during the ecumenical decade of churches in solidarity with women (1988-1998), inspired by several women's protest movements including: the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina who were protesting at the Plaza de Mayo on Thursdays against violence that had their children killed; the Women in Black in Israel and other parts who were then protesting against the use of rape as a weapon of war, and Black Sash in South Africa.

Her WCC protocol includes a mandate to coordinate the building of women's networks in liaison with the 345 WCC's member churches both in processes of awareness raising and policy making locally, regionally as well as internationally especially through participation in the UN sessions including the Commission on the Status of Women and the Human Rights Council, CEDAW and UPR, and how to access and implement SDG5 and the UNSCR1325.

Currently she is a visiting scholar at Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, USA where she is developing an Ethic of Care with guidelines to help religious communities to respond to trafficked and sexually violated women and girls through accompaniment towards healing and wholeness. She is a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She is a Board member of Life and Peace Institute based in Sweden <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-fulata-l-moyo-world-council-of-churches>