

# In Conversation

## Women Mobilising for Peace:

Margo Okazawa-Rey speaks with Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff

In October 2007, the African Gender Institute began a new initiative on Gender and Militarism by convening a regional workshop on Gender and Militarism that was attended by a small group of researchers and activists working on conflict, peace building and security issues in Rwanda, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa. Margo Okazawa-Rey of the International Network of Women for Peace and Security co-hosted the meeting, and took the opportunity to engage Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, a member of the Sierra Leone Human Rights Commission and Vice President of the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) in the following conversation.

**Margo Okazawa-Rey:** You are currently one of five Commissioners for human rights in Sierra Leone. Can you tell us a little bit about how you became involved in human rights work, and particularly, about your interest in gender?

**Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff:** I became involved in human rights work because I come from a family of active politicians. My father is a party-political person, and my mother was involved in all sorts of women's work and volunteerism and women's empowerment activism. I've always been interested in doing something in the public as well as my own private work. When I came back from the UK as a young lawyer, my mother would draft me in to attend all her seminars and write papers on women's human rights issues. All that prepared me to begin realising that women's situation was quite bad. I come from a background according to which when you see something wrong, you have to do something about it – I suppose that's how I got involved in women's organizations.

During the military rule and because of the war, like many other women in Sierra Leone, I became radicalized. Very early on we could see that women were suffering disproportionately, and we could also see that women's experiences weren't being seen or heard. You didn't hear what was happening to them on the news. People didn't talk about it, and I found myself getting

more active and involved in the women's movement, where my mother was already involved. I got involved with the question of trying to return to civilian rule and women getting involved in the peace process.

I continued with women's activism when we went to Guinea during the war, when we were forced out of Sierra Leone by the military coup. By then I was in the leadership of the women's movement and we very much supported the idea of non-cooperation with the military. We encouraged people to stay away from work and leave the country. So we went abroad because we took the position that we would not cooperate with government unless they returned power to the democratically elected government. In Guinea, I got involved with some other African women I had already met, who were also working on women's issues.

**MOR:** You mentioned the impact of militarism and wars on women as a specific turning point in your own development and consciousness. Could you talk a little bit more about how you were affected, and what insights you gained?

**YJS:** There were two experiences that had a great impact on me. While in Guinea, we did a needs-assessment amongst the refugee population, where we met a young woman who had been chased by the war from Liberia to Sierra Leone to Guinea. She suggested that the solution to this conflict was for women in the three countries to get together and take collective action to stop the war. The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) was born out of her idea.

The second experience was also with a woman I met in a refugee camp in Guinea, who was someone I knew from Sierra Leone. She told me that one of the reasons that she was living in Guinea was because the refugee camp outside Freetown where she and her children had been living had been subjected to a terrible attack. The women there had taken their children and run for their lives – there were no men there. They came to a military checkpoint, and the soldiers told them they weren't allowed to go any further. It was too late in the day – they had to spend the night at that military checkpoint. So they lay down on the ground by the checkpoint with their children, without any shelter. They didn't want to go into the bush because they were scared. They were worried that armed rebels would come and attack them. So they stayed as close to the soldiers as they could. And as they lay there, they could hear the news on the radio when it came on at 8 o'clock. They said "Shhhh, listen! They are bound to say something about this attack!"

– because it was such a serious attack – everybody had been scattered. But they listened to the news right through to the end, and nothing was said about it. Yet many people had been wounded and killed, and had run for their lives! She said it was a really shocking experience.

The next day the soldiers allowed them to pass, and they came to Freetown and everybody was just going about their business. Nobody knew anything about what had happened. She went to look for me, but I wasn't in town. Now, she said to me, "You know we could have been killed and nobody would have known." And that really struck me. In some ways, we African women, we just don't exist. Nobody sees. People are just blind to us. After these experiences, I felt that I had to commit myself to hearing 'her' and seeing 'her'.

We had a similar experiences ourselves, when we got to Conakry, myself and my friends – elite women, professional women, women who were used to being 'somebody' normally. And we were treated with such contempt as refugees. Many of us did not speak French, but we were just Leone, as they used to call us. Many Guineans were very kind, but many of them felt that we had brought this thing on ourselves, that we were just slack. Guinea is a predominantly Muslim country, and there were Sierra Leoneans who drank alcohol, but there was just a lot of prejudice.

**MOR:** And moral judgment?

**YJS:** Exactly. Somehow we had brought this war on ourselves – "Look at them, they are decadent, they are lazy". We had to go and meet the UNDP resident representative to Sierra Leone, who now had an office in Conakry, because she called for a meeting with those of us she had been meeting with in Sierra Leone. We turned up in public transport, not in cars like we would have before. And we got to the front of this office and there were these guards. We tried to sweep past and go in, but they stopped us and demanded our identity cards. In Conakry you always have to produce your identity card. But you know, as Sierra Leoneans we didn't have identity cards, so he turned us back. It was a shocking experience. Some of the women were in tears. We were so disempowered!

All of these experiences showed me that I had to do something. I had to make sure I didn't behave in the way I had been taught. If this young woman with nothing could have this great idea about creating a regional women's peace organization, then I decided I had to do my best to actualize it. I could see that she had actually thought about it and it meant a lot to her. I

am really cross with myself that we didn't take her name. It was just in the nature of the conversation - while carrying out the survey - we didn't take anyone's name. But I am really sorry that we aren't able to acknowledge her more.

We had a women's group in Guinea, women who had been active in the Women's Forum in Sierra Leone. Starting in 1994, women had been very active in bringing about a return to civilian rule. Our 'Democratization and Empowerment Project' was interrupted by the military coup of May 1997. So when we went into exile, we were fairly well organized. I continued to work with these women, and to network with other African women, particularly with women from Femmes Africa Solidarite (FAS). FAS is a regional organization that seeks to support and promote indigenous women's peace initiatives. So we talked to FAS and that's how we went about forming MARWOPNET. It took a long time. We met this woman in September of 1997, and the first meeting to establish MARWOPMET took place in May 2000.

**MOR:** Three years later!

**YJS:** Yes, and we went on from there. By May 2000, the crisis had really deepened. There was a lot of violence and many problems for Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees. The war was at its worst. I think that was the worst point - a lot of difficulties. Women were really spurred into action. It was good that we were able to connect to Guinean women, because all the time that we were in Guinea up until about May 1998, we had some contact with them, but we never really succeeded in getting them to understand or empathize fully with our situation. I understood where that was coming from, because we, ourselves, had not had complete compassion when we had looked at the situation of Liberian women refugees in Sierra Leone. I went to Liberia at this time, and the man who was driving around had told me about his terrible experiences in Sierra Leone as a refugee, with landlords who wouldn't allow you to cook on certain days of the week, or to cook certain things in their houses, or who got cross if you did your prayers at the wrong time of the day. So I wasn't as upset with the Guineans as some of the other Sierra Leoneans were, because I remembered that we hadn't been as good as we should have been to our refugees. That is a big issue for me - just being kind to strangers.

**MOR:** Yes, and here you were, three neighboring groups of women, who in some ways saw each other and in some ways didn't, and this crisis presents an

opportunity for you all to see each other in different ways than you had before. YJS: Absolutely. It not only enabled us to see each other in the three counties but also within the country. Because, one of the things that happened with that experience outside UNDP, was that for the first time I really understood women who did not speak English within Sierra Leone. It is not that you are not smart, it is not that you are not a good person. But you are completely disempowered – you don't have the language. You could be anybody, but actually you are just stupid.

MOR: That is a very important lesson.

YJS: That has shaped a lot of what I have tried to do. Therefore, I have always thought that part of what I should do is to facilitate more women to find their voices, in so many different ways.

MOR: You said that before the outbreak in 1997, there was a growing women's movement. What were some of the basic principles of that Sierra Leone women's movement, and how were those principles or values shaped by what happened subsequently?

YJS: The war had actually started in 1991. And in Sierra Leone there had always been quite a powerful and pervasive idea of women acting collectively. We have a lot of traditional women's societies. Women are in women's groups, they are in church groups, they are in *Bundu* societies (women's secret societies). Women normally would belong to some kind of collective. Having been forced out of direct party politics through violence, women put a lot of their efforts into welfare associations, women's organizations.

These women's organizations were galvanized by the inefficiency with which the authorities were handling the war. Right from the start of the war, there was this business of the difference between the propaganda and the reality. The government was "winning the war and there was nothing going on", but hundreds of people were turning up in Freetown in complete distress, coming with terrible stories of what was happening at the warfront. And the government was saying that nothing was happening. Throughout the 1990's, women's organizations had to fill that gap in the social safety net because the government refused to do anything, because it refused to admit that there was a problem. The women were saying, "we have to do something", because the government was not fighting the war very efficiently, and the rebels were moving in very fast, it seemed. We couldn't be sure that we weren't going to wake up and find them in Freetown.

MOR: So there was a great deal of insecurity and unpredictability.

**YJS:** Yes, and fear. So out of that, you had the Women's Movement for Peace in Freetown, which was an organization that set about bringing women together to work for peace, and other women's organizations also became much more active and vocal. There were now also newer, smaller organizations, like the ones I was a part of – women organizing for a more enlightened nation, which were more 'small 'p' political'. We were all very much concerned with bringing about an end to military rule. The Women's Forum, which had previously been a space created for women just to be able to meet and talk about their issues, now this was taken up as the space in which we could mobilize, radicalize, and empower women for more activity. We were helped by the fact that there were all these networks that had been in existence all over the country before the war – like YWCA, the Catholic women's organizations, the Women's Association for National Development. The national electoral commission said to us "Help us to bring women from all over the country", and we wouldn't have known what to do, but I spoke to my mother, and she knew 30 women from all over the country, and she knew exactly who to contact. So those networks were still there – they had been submerged, but they were operational, and the women all knew each other. If I phoned up and said "I am calling because your name was given to me by so-and-so", they would say "Yes, of course! I'll be there".

**MOR:** So you built on existing credibility and connections among women. So when the gatherings happened, did they represent all of the sectors of women? Rural women, urban women, middle class, upper class, poor women?

**YJS:** Yes, very much so. Yes, obviously, as these things are, the elite women will dominate. But in Freetown, we had many displaced women, a lot of displaced rural women, but women's organizations worked with them. They did a lot of training, capacity building, economic empowerment work. There were networks that concentrated particularly on them. So they would attend, and they had links into their communities, and we were able to get a broad spectrum. Even now, I can go to many parts of the country, and a woman will recognize me from something I did in 1995.

**MOR:** So that was a great feat, really, wasn't it?

**YJS:** Yes, it was a big achievement. It was very empowering. It is still.

**MOR:** So how was it empowering for you, and how do you take those lessons to the work you are doing now? How do you relate the lessons from those times to the work you are doing now?

YJS: Well, a lot of it is very positive. Ten years from when we started, women are still ready to continue political action, which is very good. So in MARWOPNET, when I became the head of the Sierra Leone chapter, I was very much interested in expanding it out of Freetown. At the time when it came into existence, because of the war, the countryside was not easily accessible. So from 2000 to 2004, MARWOPNET remained very much focused in Freetown. Women from Freetown would go out, and the people that we met out there were at first, more beneficiaries than actors. However, since 2004, what I have tried to do is to make real this business of bringing in the marginalized. To go to the border communities and make the connection, so that they can talk to me, and I can either help them to talk to whoever they need to talk to, or I can speak to someone on their behalf. I felt really wonderful when I overheard a woman in one of the districts telling a friend, "If they tell you that they are going to take you to see the President, they will take you to see the President. You will get there!" So we try to keep to the principle of facilitating them to be able to speak for themselves. It can be difficult, but it is actually not as difficult as you think, because they are really talented. It is just opportunity or skills or introductions that they lack.

MOR: So these experiences challenged your assumptions about who the women really are?

YJS: Yes. Well, maybe not. When I think back I recall that my grandmother was a very big influence on my life. On the surface you would see a non-educated, poor African woman. If you saw a photograph of her, you would think, "Who is that?" But in fact, I knew that she had a lot of capacity, a lot of resources, a lot of skills. When I went to do my Masters in human rights law, I did Islamic law. And as I was reading through Islamic matrimonial law, I recognized all these things that my grandmother used to say to me. I realized that her knowledge of Malachi law, Islamic law, was absolutely spot-on. She knew it in and out.

MOR: And she didn't have an LLM...

YJS: Exactly! And everything she had said was correct. Many of the younger Muslim generation, my own generation, do not know anything about it. I remember my aunt telling me how their father insisted that the women learn the Koran as much as the men. She used to grumble about it because he said that they had to do it in spite of all their other chores. I realized that he had insisted, and he really had taught them, because after that I spoke

with my aunts, and they also were quite learned.

I also didn't realize until recently that there is a tradition of female scholarship in Islam. I hadn't been aware of that. There is a book, the biography of Nana Asma'u, the daughter of Usmanu 'Dan Fodio, the Nigerian Islamic warrior king who established a theocratic state, the Sokoto Caliphate, in Northern Nigeria. Apparently, he had a daughter who was a scholar and a teacher.

MOR: So your grandmother inspired you?

YJS: Yes, definitely.

MOR: Who else inspired you?

YJS: Well, many of the women in my family were very inspirational, I think. My mother is a librarian who is interested in history and family history, genealogy. That is why I have all these wonderful stories.

MOR: Yes, I can see it. Earlier when we were in the workshop, you mentioned the "difference between the ladies at the border and the ladies on the hill" as a metaphor for division between the women in the academy and the women in the grassroots or NGOs. What kind of relationship would you like those two groups of women to have? What do you see as the potential for the two groups to be working together?

YJS: There was another woman who I was very friendly with, a woman called Hajia Aisha Sasu. She was a Krio woman, a Christian woman who became a Muslim when she got married. One of the things that Hajia said to me was, "You are educated, and you have all these skills, now you have to use them for *us*. Don't imagine for one second that God educated you for yourself only. No, it's for a purpose." And that's what I think is lost. I think the women in the university don't understand the connection between themselves and the women in the community. When you live in some parts of Africa, you can be just overwhelmed by guilt because you have so much and others have so little.

MOR: Because of the vast inequalities within countries?

YJS: Exactly. I used to say to my friends in university who know that I am part of the comprador class, part of the enemy. But you can do what Hajia would ask you to do. For example, she said to us, "I don't like this word 'grassroots'. It means that we are down there and you are stamping on us. Go away and come back with another word." Eventually we came back with 'community-level women', which she approved of. So, if you can do what Hajia asked you to do, I believe that it is a very satisfying thing,

because it means that you can use your skills for other people and you get so much in return. If you have within yourself a tendency to the ‘collective’ (as opposed to the Western ‘individualizing’ culture), if you don’t work with the people at the community level, if you don’t keep yourself connected to your African-ness, this is where you begin to have problems.

In the university, women are very individualized, so they are easily victimized. I have had bad experiences in the public, official domain where I have felt very victimized, alone and unprotected. So, I think connecting is a benefit to both sides because our work will have value. Coming together gives people more ways to see and understand themselves, and to live with themselves. Because some of the experiences that the women have had, you don’t have language for it. It is beyond comprehension. In the kind of society you have been brought up in, some of the barbarity, you don’t have the language for it. Other people can come and give you the words that would help you to understand, process and deal with your experience.

MOR: So in some ways, part of the work is helping people to become multi-lingual – to have various languages for different situations. And in your experience with Hajia, it sounds like you also had to re-conceptualize. It wasn’t just about the word ‘grassroots’ but you yourself as ‘teacher’ were also ‘learner’. It was a reciprocal process.

YJS: Absolutely. One was constantly learning, and I think I am a natural disciple. I like to learn. Now I am beginning to realize that I do have some leadership capability, but I think my natural instinct has always been to be a follower.

MOR: Really? I can’t imagine that!

YJS: Yes. And it’s just more recently, now that I am coming to accept myself and say, “No, Yasmin. Some of your problems arise because in some situations, you want to lead, you can lead, and you should”. During such moments, forcing yourself to be the disciple is not helpful.

MOR: Also, we dichotomize leadership and follower-ship, and I wonder if you have thought about how the two are actually related. If you think about feminist leadership, what would you say are the three most important principles of feminist leadership – leadership for real women’s liberation?

YJS: Goodness! Well, it would have to involve listening, wouldn’t it? And I suppose the Christian idea of service – “The first shall be the last and the last shall be the first”. That would also be part of it. That’s two! You give me another one.

**MOR:** I think it would have to be something about a participatory process, and not a hierarchical process.

**YJS:** Yes. Because for years, for instance, in the Women's Forum, we had this idea of a rotating Chair. Each month one organization would take charge of the Forum and chair the meetings and implement all the activities. I thought it was a wonderful idea, but there were those who insisted that it wouldn't work. You know, the government wants to know, on any particular day, who the President of the Forum is, so that the President can talk to the President. In the end, they bureaucratized the Women's Forum, and it died!

**MOR:** It took the life out of it?

**YJS:** Yes. So now you have an executive that just talks to itself. Nobody else turns up. And you have all these formal structures, but no dynamism. The donors were very instrumental in this process.

**MOR:** I have one more question for you. We talked a lot about security and human security and human security for women. What do you think are the key elements of that?

**YJS:** I think one of the key elements of human security would be the need for consistency and certainty for people in their lives, at every level. That is an ideal, it is something to which we aspire. But I think the more certainty and coherence people have, the more they can understand their environment and be able to control it to some extent. That feeling – that it is not completely out of your control, whatever it is. And so for that, you would need to have some information and some openness. I think information is also important, because information allows you to make choices. So you can decide for yourself. You have autonomy. How people perceive themselves is a very important part of human security.

Then, I think human rights and economic and social rights are an important component – the fact that you are able to enjoy or have the opportunity to access your right to food, your right to education and health. Our own past experience shows that police and soldiers don't have much to do with security.

**MOR:** No, it's just the opposite, probably.

**YJS:** I know that if people have autonomy and information, they can secure themselves. And I think that creating the opportunity for people to be able to secure themselves is an important part of human security.

**MOR:** So that concept of self-determination, not just in the individual sense, but in the collective sense.

YJS: Yes. I think participation - the opportunity to be heard, to really participate in the decision-making - is very important. Local government, government that is close to you, is an important part of what I would see as security.

MOR: Thank you very much.