

9-18-2015

## Peace Profile: Christiana Thorpe

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### Recommended Citation

Whitney McIntyre Miller & Michael Wundah (2015) Peace Profile: Christiana Thorpe, *Peace Review*, 27:4, 515-521, DOI: 10.1080/10402659.2015.1094347

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Peace Review*, volume 27, issue 4, in 2015, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/10402659.2015.1094347>.

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## **Peace Profile of Christiana Thorpe**

By Whitney McIntyre Miller and Michael Wundah

The profile of an illustrious Sierra Leonean, Dr. Christiana Thorpe, epitomizes a success story worthy of emulation. The cultivation of sustainable peace and political stability through the eyes of social activism, service for gender parity, and electoral and education reforms are at the heart of this account. Christiana's kind heartedness and relentless urge to labor in the service of her country and mankind make her a unique and fascinating peace maker.

Christiana Ayoka Mary Thorpe was born in 1949 in a colonized Sierra Leone, West Africa. From early in her life, Christiana was surrounded by the notions of peace in a world that was gravely chaotic. In 1952 she went to live with her grandmother, a washerwoman by trade, but also an herbalist. Christiana's grandmother was known by her neighbors in the impoverished community not only for her herbs and vegetables, but also for her reputation as a peace maker, as she would provide advice and assistance with conflict resolution for community members. She was seen as a force for peace that was caring and conscientious of all things. She was a very important influence on Christiana, and taught her early on that in life there were multiple forms of wealth.

Another strong influence on Christiana was her access to education. She considered herself very fortunate to receive the education she did; her parents believed that education was the one thing that they knew they could provide for her. In Sierra Leone at the time, being an educated female was a rarity. In fact, Christiana used to tutor the girls in the community that were unable to go to school, for she and her sister were the only females from their neighborhood in attendance. By 13, many of the girls Christiana knew were already married and having children, a common practice in the context of the culture. It was this memory that carried Christiana into a career in education, particularly the education of women and girls.

Her path toward becoming an educator, however, did not take an ordinary route. Driven by her Catholic faith and schooling, and her grandmother's private relationship with God, Christiana decided to join a convent after the completion of her secondary school studies. She left her home of Freetown and joined the order of St. Joseph of Cluny, in Ferbane, Ireland; the same order of sisters who had run her schools.

It was a difficult transition for Christiana to be away from what she knew and loved. With a bottle of chili sauce from her mother, and time, she began to settle into life in Ireland. She took her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in 1972 and then started her undergraduate studies at University College in Dublin the following year where she earned a joint degree in French and English.

Following her graduation in 1976, Christiana returned home and began her teaching career in a secondary school in Makeni, a town to the North East of Freetown. She stayed at the school for sixteen years, both as a teacher and as a principal. During this time she also returned for a period to Dublin to continue her studies in religion and adult education.

It was after this period that Christiana began to feel a disconnect between her work in the schools and the needs of the community. In a male-dominated society, education for girls was still not privileged and many girls would be forced to end their studies early in order to help meet the economic needs of their families. Driven by her experience with her grandmother, Christiana reached out to the community and tried to help lessen some of conflicts around girls' education and even began offering adult literacy classes for the women.

Her biggest challenge, however, was one of time. She was required to be back to the convent by 6pm in the evenings, and with her duties at the school, that left little time to make the difference she felt called to make in the community. Feeling torn between a desire to meet the needs of the community, and maintain the religious life that was extremely important to her, she attended a religious retreat in the United States to do some reflection on this current pressing challenge. After much thought and prayer, Christiana decided to leave the convent and in 1992 she was granted dispensation from her vows by the Vatican.

While on the religious retreat in the United States, the civil war, which would last over a decade had begun. It was in this context that Christiana returned to Sierra Leone. The government at that time was military-run, but many of the ministries were run by civilians. Known for her work in the schools in Makeni, Christiana was asked to join the Ministry of Education in early 1993. By the end of the year she became the Deputy Minister of Education, and by August of the following year, the Minister of Education- the only female minister in a 19-person cabinet.

During her time as Minister of Education, Christiana became a member of the nongovernmental organization the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). This was a group based in Nairobi, Kenya that worked to ensure girls access to quality education. Christiana founded the Sierra Leone (FAWE-SL) chapter in March of 1995 and focused the organization's mission on educating the children who were impacted by the war. As many internally displaced children were coming into the city, she worked to increase enrollment at the schools and set up emergency camp schools with the assistance of the United National Children's Fund and Plan International.

Of great importance to Christiana was the involvement of the local communities in these school projects. She encouraged both residents and displaced persons to utilize their skills to help the children- whether they were retired teachers and caregivers or those who could gather local supplies for the schools. This involvement promoted a sense of empowerment within the communities and built the capacity for development and progress despite the circumstances of the war.

In January of 1996, while Christiana was engaged in this work, and thinking about the role of education in FAWE-SL and the country as a whole, there was a government coup. Fortunately all of the Ministers were spared their lives; they were just relieved of their duties and thanked for their service. The new government held elections in February, and a newly elected president, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, was in place by March. Just over a year later, Kabbah was overthrown by a faction of the military

connected with the rebel forces. This coup was far less friendly and many were forced into exile.

Christiana was one of those who could no longer stay in the country. As she was in Zimbabwe attending a summit at the time of the coup, she was left virtually stateless. After a brief stint in the United States, Christiana joined the thousands of refugees, including many of her family members, in Conakry, Guinea. Here, with the displaced members of FAWE-SL and FAWE-Guinea, she helped to coordinate education programs for the children of the camps in an effort not only to educate, but to ensure their safety and security by keeping them off the streets.

With the help of the national FAWE office and the United Nations Development Program, the educational camp program moved beyond traditional education to include curriculum that addressed the trauma of the war. Christiana had noticed that there was a culture of violence forming from exposure to the war. With the help of nearly 100 volunteer teachers, a complete curriculum of trauma healing and counseling, drama, physical and health education, English, French, mathematics, and peace education was put into place. The four-month program served approximately 4,000 4-25 year old children- both boys and girls. This curriculum set the stage for peace education curriculum that would be used throughout the Mano River Region of Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

Upon returning to Sierra Leone in May of 1998, Christiana and the women of FAWE-SL with the support of the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, expanded their mission by researching and designing a Training Module on Women's Traditional Conflict Resolution and Mediating Practices. This module built off traditional practices of mediation and conflict resolution found within the women's traditional secret societies. Christiana and FAWE-SL believed that enhancing the women skills and practices would contribute to the overall peacemaking in the country.

Christiana's efforts were put on hold in January of 1999 when the rebels attacked Freetown. The fighting and attacks were intense and those not in hiding were likely killed, mutilated, or raped. Like many others, Christiana remained hidden in her home for ten days before the forces were pushed out with the help of the Economic Community Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), an intervention force from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Able to get to the FAWE-SL headquarters, Christiana surveyed the damage to the building and began to hear the stories of the war through the perspective of the girls. Many girls had been raped and forced into serving the rebels in their camps. Sexual violence was a common tool of the war. Despite a cultural norm to not speak about acts of sexual violence, it was clear to Christiana that something needed to be done. She reached out to the national FAWE headquarters for funds to help the rape victims. She strongly believed that until the girls and women were healed from these atrocities they could not focus on education.

With the help of Doctors Without Borders, and several other NGOs, Christiana and FAWE-SL developed a medical care and trauma counseling program for the girls who had been victims of sexual violence and began educating communities about sexual

violence and other gender-based issues. Despite criticisms about the work and its incongruity with traditional society, more and more girls sought the help of FAWE-SL. Many of the girls they served had been abducted by the rebels and forced into sex slavery. Some were pregnant, and therefore FAWE-SL also offered training on child rearing as these girls became mothers. Programs also included literacy and skill-building to help the girls earn a living and contribute to the community. Girls came to FAWE-SL as shells of themselves as a result of the conflict, but after counseling and trauma healing, they were able to find hope again and help care for themselves and their children, and to break the silence about rape in the culture.

After the peace accords in 1999 brought an end to the fighting, there was still much work to be done in the country. Christiana testified at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that was established, and FAWE-SL helped girls and women prepare their own testimonies- giving them a chance to share their stories of war in an effort to allow for healing. It was clear that healing needed to be encouraged at the community level, but also that the national government needed to build institutions of integrity after the war, and not to fall into the trap of corruption that had plagued the country since independence.

Christiana believed that including the community in this process was essential. She worked for a time on various organizations that helped to build and sustain peaceful communities in the region, including the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding and their West African Peace Institute. She also continued to grow FAWE-SL. In 2004 there were already 23 FAWE-SL branches throughout the country with a primary school, 15 with skills-training centers, and others that provided non-formal education programs, health programs, rape prevention programs, and other community-based initiatives. In just under ten years, 10,000 girls and women had been served by the organization.

Christiana's work building community was very important in fulfilling her calling to address women's and girl's education. She had, however, a growing interest in returning to the national sphere in order to make broader-based change in the redevelopment of the country. In 2005, history was made when then-restored to office President Kabbah appointed her as the first ever female Chief Electoral Commissioner of the country's National Electoral Commission (NEC). She settled quickly into her coveted but sensitive and challenging role. It was an appointment that took the male-dominated society by surprise.

Jumping into the new role, Christiana embarked on a massive restructuring program in order to transform the commission into a credible and functional organization. This overhaul included self-financing to maintain autonomy, staff capacity development, the facilitation of logistical support, overall modernization, the acquisition of state of the art equipment and technology, and the reformation of the obsolete electoral laws in order to ensure fairness through a credible voter registration. Hitherto, election fraud had been a common culture that undermined the democratic values of the country and often led to violence and bloodshed. President Kabbah even made this observation in his own biography.

Christiana's first test came in the form of the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections. The stakes were high because peace was still fragile and foreign aid was

tioned to the democratic and successful conduct of the elections. Despite being marred by contentions, the elections were deemed a success. Christiana was seen as maintaining a strict independence and high level of integrity. Receiving international media attention, some even believed these to be the best-ever elections in Africa.

The success of the 2007 elections was not an excuse to rest on her laurels; Christiana was dedicated to continuing and expanding the reforms to the NEC. She worked to enhance the organization's performance and credibility through the delimitation of the constituency boundaries, review of voters' registrations, and building organizational capacity by recruiting core senior staff. The 2008 Local Government Elections were conducted with even more transparency.

Through hard work and determination, Christiana transformed the Commission into an integral part of Sierra Leone's democratic renewal. Asked to complete another term as commissioner, the NEC's work in the 2012 presidential elections was a chance to demonstrate that the 2007 elections were not a fluke, but in reality evidence of sustained changes to the electoral system. The 2012 presidential elections demonstrated just that.

Christiana's distinguished services to free and fair elections earned her many international awards, chief among them was the 2013 International Golden Award from Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. She was also appointed as the esteemed President of the Coordinating Committee of the Network of Electoral Commissions in West Africa (ECONEC), and as member of the Executive Committee of the West African Civil Society Forum. Christiana's work began another transition, however, when she retired as NEC's chair in the summer of 2014 after turning 65.

Ambition to strengthen the peace in Sierra Leone did not end with Christiana's retirement from the NEC. She revealed, at the launch of her biography in May, a new local Non-Governmental Organization, named after the book: the Reach In for the Stars (RIFTS) foundation. The philosophy of RIFTS is to encourage young women to find their hidden and unknown talents in order to create a better world for themselves and the people around them. This philosophy is put into action by empowering young women to attend and graduate university in order to combat the chronic skills shortage and lack of gender equity still in place in the country.

One of the largest short-term challenges of RIFTS is addressing the current issue of the "trade for grade" syndrome, where female university students regardless of their academic competency are expected to offer sexual favors in return for passing grades. Allegedly rampant throughout tertiary institutions in Sierra Leone and throughout Africa, the "trade for grade" practice is putting the success of women in higher educational systems at risk. RIFTS aims to address the underlining morality of this issue in order to help ensure safe passage of women through the university system.

RIFTS is a nationally-registered organization with a team that comprises of experts from a variety of fields. The secretariat operates in the spheres of legal assistance, research, counselling, and the granting of scholarships. As ever, through this foundation Christiana remains resolute to travail through societal landscapes in the course of service for mankind. In this next phase of her work, Dr. Christiana Thorpe

is continuing her drive and passion to support the women and girls of Sierra Leone and build peaceful communities in the country she loves.

Recommended Readings:

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