

PEACE HUTS

The Palava Peace Hut as it is called in Liberia or the l'Arbre a Palabre as it is in other countries in West Africa such as Mali, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire is a traditional building and space that has been part of many West African cultures for many generations. Traditionally, women have never been part of this structure, which was considered as the domain of wise men, a consolidation of the patriarchy system, which exists in Africa. These structures draw upon a generations-old means to reconcile the wounds of disputes (domestic, family etc), quarrels and solve conflicts and are literally open to all sides equally and provide a neutral meeting place where members of a community can hear and impart justice. In this context, the usual win-lose rulings of courts can be transformed into win-win solutions for many civil cases.

WANEP believes in using indigenous methods of West Africa in doing its peace work through the collaborative approach. Using the peace hut concept, WANEP through its Women in Peacebuilding Network Program (WIPNET) established peace huts in Liberia following the end of the war in 2006. Instead of having only men in the Peace Huts, women collaborate with men to mediate and build peace in their communities. The huts are a safe space where women of the village come together to mediate and resolve community disputes. This is where women gather to discuss matters that affect their day to day lives. This is where the reconciliation and resolution of conflicts takes place, where rural women can openly and safely discuss issues of inequality and together take decisions on peace and security.

At first, the Peace Huts focused on a 'shedding the weight' process and counseling women who had experience grief and trauma as well as supporting ex-child soldiers after the civil war. From resolving cases involving pregnancy and abandonment, to counseling survivors of domestic violence or rape, the peace hut initiative in Liberia has grown since 2006. As time went on, the Peace Hut women began hearing cases, carrying out micro credit activities and skill training activities. The methodology is based on the traditional 'Palava' hut system: the complainant

and accused get to air their respective grievance and defense, then the local leader helps them reach an agreement that both consider fair and peace is restored.

The role and participation of women in the peace hut for the maintenance of peace in communities is increasingly being appreciated, and women in the communities now see themselves as crucial players in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. As the Peace Huts are evolving as a place to resolve conflict, they are becoming increasingly more inclusive of young girls and boys. Mentoring takes place as the youth is being molded to imbibe the values of prevention and mediation. There is a close relationship between the peace huts and the security agencies in prevention of crimes in the various communities.

Leveraging on the success of the peace huts in Liberia, WANEP-CI put in place 5 peace huts in 5 different locations in CI. Currently, two of the peace huts are functional.