

YAR DONLAH GONWAY-GONO

Interviewed by Heather Tosteson

TO ME, EDUCATION IS SACRED

Yar Donlah Gonway-Gono is a naturalized American citizen from Liberia. She has a PhD in Women's Studies. Her dissertation examined acculturation in Liberian women living in Atlanta. In the last year, she has returned to Liberia at the request of its president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, to become president of a new community college in Nimba County, one of the areas most affected by the Liberian Civil War. She was first interviewed by phone as she was preparing to leave for Liberia to assume her new position and again, more fully, a few months later when she had returned to celebrate holidays with her family in Minnesota.

When I was talking with the women in my study, they said that coming to America was also an opportunity to see themselves in the culture in which they were raised. This was true of me as well.

Growing Up in Liberia

I grew up in a small town, Flumpa, in Nimba County, the second largest county in Liberia. The emphasis was on the farm, not on education. The first process of growing up was to work with your mother if you were a girl, learning to cook, or with your father if you were a boy. The community of women taught girls how to dress, eat, how to behave.

Later on, my father took us to Lamco, Yekepa, where we settled in Sawmill Camp, a small town of low-income families. He worked at Lamco Vocational Training Center as a security guard. It was a different life. People came from very different walks of life. They were very poor and some worked as housekeepers in rich people's homes. My mother was a housewife and subsistence farmer. Young girls who went to school got pregnant and left very early.

My father was part of the indigenous community, not the

Americo-Liberians. My mother birthed eight children, seven of whom lived. I was very close to my mother and helped take care of my younger brothers and sisters. My father kept me at home to help my mother. My younger brother (Peter) and sister (Yei) both went to school first.

One time, my siblings and I were sick with a cold. The custom was that the company provided some type of document for the worker's children to be treated at a nearby clinic. We went with my father to his place of work for the document. A colleague of my father's asked my father, referring to me in these words: "Is this smart looking little girl going to school?" My father's reply was: "This one will stay at home to help her mother." But the colleague's job was to enroll the workers' children for school and he enrolled me. So in 1968 at the age of eleven, I went to school for the first time. I was in a classroom with children five years old. The names of the children were written on the desks, but I couldn't read so I didn't know where to sit. I understood that if I could not read I would not be able to do anything, so I got my younger brother to teach me the alphabet and the numbers. Once I learned to read and write, school was everything to me. My mother thought my going to school was going to take her help from her. And the neighborhood girls became jealous and they would steal my uniform and books. But when I entered the door of the school, that was all that mattered to me. I did so well that at the end of the year they gave me the sixth grade exam and promoted me to seventh grade.

I developed a passion for learning and took it as opportunity. I was not meant to go to school in my culture and in my family, but I told myself I was going to go on and get as much education as I could.

In eleventh grade, I got pregnant. But I told my family I was going to have the baby and continue with school. I took my baby and found someone to help the baby and continued to go to school. For me, nothing was ever going to stop me from learning. There was something mysterious in it. I was not going to give it up. This help didn't come from my village. No one in my family could read and write, except my younger siblings who went to school before I did. There was something in my being that kept me going. Life was very challenging; I was encouraged to move forward regardless.

At first, because I was really good in science, I wanted to be a medical doctor. My father kept me at home because I was the most caring child. So, I was going to continue my love for caring by being a doctor. After graduating from high school, I wanted to go to college. I took several college entrance exams