

## **Women of faith a conflict breaker**

**LORNA EDWARDS, The Age, 7 December 2009**

AT THE brutal height of the civil war in Sierra Leone, a group of women of different faiths, distraught at their children being forcibly recruited as child soldiers, boldly decided to confront the rebels in their mountain bases.

The rebel group was surprised by the approach of the women and after negotiations allowed them to take some of the child soldiers back with them. A feared rebel leader remarked to one of the women that she resembled his mother.

The incident was an example of how women have contributed to resolving conflicts in Africa, even though they are largely excluded at the political level, said Jacqueline Ogega at a discussion of the impact of women in conflict resolution at the Parliament of the World's Religions yesterday. Ms Ogega, from Kenya, established the African Women of Faith Network and is director of the women's program at the World Conference of Religions for Peace.

Women of faith had also banded together after the genocide that claimed up to 1 million lives in Rwanda to overcome deep hatred between Tutsis and Hutus and their own personal trauma to promote forgiveness, she said.

"Women are generally undervalued or not valued at all and are marginalised in terms of conflict resolution - it's normally seen as something where only men belong," she said.

"Most of the time we look at women as victims of conflict rather than as [resolving conflicts] and it is very important for us to shift that mentality," she said.

Those gathered for the panel discussion expressed disappointment that Liberian peace activist Asatu Bah-Kenneth, who founded the Liberian Muslim Women for Peace, was unable to join the panel as she could not get a visa for Australia.

Self-described American Jewish "soccer mom" Sande Hart told how the events of September 11 inspired her to form an interfaith group to encourage harmony between religions at a grassroots level.