

## Leading Change

An interview with Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee

**L**EYMAH GBOWEE is a Liberian peace activist and trained social worker who has emerged as an international leader through her efforts to promote peace, democracy, and women's rights. She is one of three women leaders who were awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize "for their nonviolent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work." During Liberia's second civil war, Gbowee worked tirelessly across religious and ethnic lines to organize a peace movement of thousands of women who held nonviolent demonstrations in Monrovia. Her efforts are documented in her memoir, *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War* and in the award-winning 2008 film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*. As founder and president of the Gbowee Peace Foundation and co-founder and executive director of the Women Peace and Security Network (WIPSEN-Africa) based in Accra, Ghana, she now works to help girls and women realize their potential as full participants and leaders in building and sustaining peace and security. She holds a master's degree in conflict transformation from Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

**IE: Why did you come to the United States to earn your master's degree in conflict resolution?**

**GBOWEE:** Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) had a great program that was practice focused. As a practitioner, I was looking for a school that would help me make sense of my practical peacebuilding work. I knew the application of peace work, but I needed the theory. I needed to learn how the practice of peace made sense. I also knew that a degree would give me the legitimacy to do the work I wanted to do.

**IE: How did your experience as in international graduate student in the United States influence your worldview?**

**GBOWEE:** Before EMU, conflict for me was Africa. Other global conflicts were just like so many statistics. Yes, I was informed, but it didn't resonate; it didn't apply to me. After EMU, my interest in conflict wasn't just limited to Liberia. Global conflict turned from bullet points of statistics into stories of people... with names and families and a thirst for security like

my own. I interacted with people from all over the world. It broadened my horizon and created a sense of connectedness to global conflict where I once felt so removed from it. Distance no longer mattered; it was personal.

**IE: Why do you think conflict resolution and peace studies should be part of higher education?**

**GBOWEE:** I knew of Dr. King and Gandhi before EMU, but higher education showed me how their philosophy and practices are applicable to my life. I let go of my anger I stored as a result of an abusive relationship when I studied Hizkias Assefa. I saw the need for Liberians to reembrace our traditional justice practice through the work of Howard Zehr who wrote about restorative justice. Higher education helped me organize and analyze my world and provided perspective. It linked my struggles to people and communities I never met, and deepened my sense of empathy and fairness. For women and young people, this is an invaluable asset.



Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee spoke at the 2012 NAFSA conference in Houston.

**IE: What part of the efforts of the Liberian Mass Action for Peace were the most successful?**

**GBOWEE:** No one expected that our movement would last, much less prevail. We faced so many difficulties that no one, including many of us, thought it would last. But we had faced so much uncertainty because of the war. The only thing we could make certain was our commitment and perseverance. I think our most successful effort was that we imbued a sense of purpose. We held a sense of purpose in a senseless war.

**IE: What inspired you to lead the women's movement to establish peace in Liberia?**

**GBOWEE:** Anger can inspire. The civil war lasted so long that my two oldest children, who were very young at the time, only knew fear and deprivation. And all of Liberia's children only knew the same. It made me angry, deeply angry. There were thousands of mothers and sisters and aunties who felt just like me. It was because of my experiences as a mother, social worker, and trauma counselor working with participants and victims of the war that compelled me to devote my life to peace activism. In my work, I listened to hundreds of women share

their stories of how the war changed their lives forever. I could not hear their stories and do nothing.

**IE: How did you organize Christian and Muslim women to rally for peace together?**

**GBOWEE:** The civil war took so much from us. It altered our way of life and how we viewed ourselves. In trying to strip us of our dignity, the war suspended our ability to see women as "the other." The war reinforced our commonalities—we all shared a need for security, to know our children would grow up. It was our shared humanities and experiences that bound us to the same fate.

We started the Christian Women's Peace Initiative to gather Christian women together to pray for peace. And it was Asatu Bah Kenneth who stood up at St. Peter's Lutheran Church before the congregation, and promised to gather Muslim women together with their Christian sisters to bring peace to Liberia. Unity was not immediate; there were some Christian women who felt that by joining with women from a different religion they were diluting their own faith. But bullets know no faith. Christian

“ It is through our collective actions that real change will manifest. ”

and Muslim women joined forces to collectively protest for peace. It took a diverse group of women leaders to bring together diverse groups of women.

**IE:** You are an example of how one woman can make a difference. What is your advice to young people about how they can impact social change in their societies?

**GBOWEE:** I am a representative of the thousands of Liberian women who stood with me in the rain, sat with me in the sun, and joined me in protest. I am humbled that these women have supported my recognition and am deeply protective of the mantle

I carry on their behalf. One man didn't start the war and one woman didn't end it. The Nobel Prize is a celebration and recognition of Liberian women's effort to end the war.

The global economy has created a tight network of major players—multinational corporations, global philanthropies, international NGOs—that operate in a small world. Young people and women cannot afford to advocate for justice in isolation because the forces that drive our countries' economic development—politicians, financial institutions, and corporations—work in concert. We need tight networks, too—to support, to collaborate, to stretch the boundary of opportunity beyond what

we think ourselves capable. We have made strides in coordinating our efforts through increased collaboration, communication, and networking forums via meetings, the Internet, and at conferences. Those of us who are privileged to live in safety and security are required to investigate how their governments, companies, and organizations contribute to unrest and injustice for young people and women in other communities. It is through our collective actions that real change will manifest. As Gandhi said, “Be the change.” If young people hope to see changes, they have to step up and make the change or be the change. **IE**

**ELAINA LOVELAND** is editor-in-chief of *IE*.

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