

Leymah Gbowee



A Country in Turmoil

Leymah was 17 when the Liberian civil war began in 1990. Upon graduating from high school, she planned on attending the University of Liberia to become a doctor. Instead, she boarded a boat to Ghana and became a refugee as rebel warlords struggled for control of her country. With the population caught between the violent Liberian President Doe and rebel leader Charles Taylor, the war escalated into a ruthless conflict. The war turned her, she reflected, “from a child into an adult in a matter of hours.”

Leymah later returned to Liberia during a break in the fighting. Doe had been ousted and Taylor had assumed the presidency. She began training as a social worker and trauma counselor, helping ex-child soldiers. During this time, a friend approached her with a proposal: she had started an organization called the Women in Peacebuilding Network, and she wanted Leymah to head the Liberian chapter. Leymah said yes. New rebels were challenging the government and terrorizing the countryside. Liberia had been embroiled in violence for over a decade. It was time, she decided, to do something about it.

Taking a Stand for Peace

Leymah began to organize her fellow Christian women into a coalition of nonviolent protestors. Then, reaching out to the Muslim women’s community, she combined forces to create an interfaith movement known as the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. Thousands of women rallied behind Leymah as their spokesperson, staging protests and sit-ins in the capitol. Crowds of women dressed in white waved signs for peace, demanding that the government meet with rebel leaders

for peace talks.

Eventually, both the rebels and the government caved, and peace talks were scheduled to take place in Ghana. Both parties honored their word to attend, but after several days, it was clear that the talks had stalled. Frustrated, Leymah and a delegation of 200 Liberian women formed a human barricade around the building, refusing to let anyone through until the men had reached a peace agreement. When security forces attempted to arrest Leymah, she stood before them and threatened to disrobe. According to traditional beliefs, any man who witnessed her bare flesh would be cursed. The officials retreated. Within two weeks, Taylor resigned the presidency and a peace treaty was signed mandating a provisional government. It was 2003, 14 years after the civil war started.

In the aftermath of the war, Liberia elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf president—the first female head of state in African history. Taylor was convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2012. Leymah continues to work to attain lasting peace and security for her country, and to aid other nations in turmoil. She is the founder and president of the Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa, based in Monrovia. In 2011, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize alongside her fellow countrywoman, President Sirleaf. Now a mother of six, Leymah still worries about the child soldiers she worked with during the war. Many of those children survived the conflict only to face a battle against poverty and animosity. The future of Liberia is still uncertain—but stability won’t be attained through guns and violence. Once, men used children to tear the country apart. Now, the country must unite to protect them. The future depends on it.

"There is no time to rest until our world achieves wholeness and balance, where all men and women are considered equal and free."

-Leymah Gbowee

Women, Peace, and Security

War has long been considered a men's issue. Consider your typical soldier. Picture a general. Reflect on the Treaty of Versailles, the Big Four of World War I, the American Commander in Chief. Women aren't at the negotiating table, the peace talks, or leading the armies, but they are still bearing the brunt of war. In fact, Patrick Cammaert, the former commander of the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, believes that "it has probably become more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in an armed conflict."

Part of this stems from a changing approach to modern warfare itself. Recent wars have not taken place between strong states, but rather between weak, unstable states. Intrastate conflict is also common, like in the Liberian civil war. These weak states provide their citizens little security, and conflicts are fought with small arms (such as rifles) rather than battleships and fighter jets. As a result, the fighting is often close range, intimate, and within civilian centers. It also means that these fighters develop tactics to compensate for their lack of mass firepower—rape and torture have long-lasting and deep consequences for a community. By implementing civilian terror as a tactic of war, an aggressor can methodically destabilize

an enemy's foundations. When war exploded in the Balkans in the 1990s, for example, tens of thousands of women were systematically raped in a mass effort to demoralize and destroy a community. Many women were divorced by their husbands after the ordeal.

When Finland appointed the first female defense minister in human history in 1990, Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky remarked that "Any country that would choose a woman for defense minister deserves to be invaded." This attitude seems pervasive—the United States has never had a female secretary of defense, and today women represent less than 10 percent of those participating in peace negotiations. But women have much to offer, and much to gain, when it comes to playing an active role in peace and security. When it comes to preventing conflict, women are a large factor in creating state security. Because women are typically those who look after the health, education, and general well-being of their families, countries that treat women well are more likely to be stable, and less likely to be violent. Women are also integral to lasting peace efforts after a conflict has been resolved. For example, the UN oversees the disarmament of combatants after a conflict by confiscating weapons. By working with local women, peacekeeping forces could conduct a more thorough search—locals are more likely to know who in their community possess small arms, and women have the most to gain from weapons control.

Women like Leymah Gbowee are challenging the myth that war and peace are men's work. War and violence affect everyone in society, especially women. In the past, only half of the population had a say in the decision-making process. Women like Leymah aren't waiting any longer for an invitation to the table. Perhaps in the future, with men and women working together, we can craft a more inclusive and lasting kind of peace.



1. Democratic nations tend to practice less aggressive foreign policy, and are more reluctant to go to war than nondemocratic nations. Why do you think this is?
 2. In the United States, women can vote and hold political office, but are still underrepresented in government at all levels. Can a nation be called democratic if women are legally allowed to participate, but are socially discouraged from doing so?
 3. There are many reasons that women have been excluded from the men's club that is war. One common objection is that women just aren't tough enough. Do you think Leymah and the Liberian women were "tough enough" when they demanded peace?
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With thanks to the following organizations for resources used:

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Gbowee, Leymah. "Nobel Lecture." Leymah Gbowee -. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/gbowee-lecture_en.html (accessed March 20, 2014).

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"War Redefined." *Women, War & Peace*. Film. Produced by Peter Bull. Alexandria, Va.: PBS Distribution, 2011.

Leymah Gbowee

Resource Guide



[“Unlock the intelligence, passion, greatness of girls”](#)

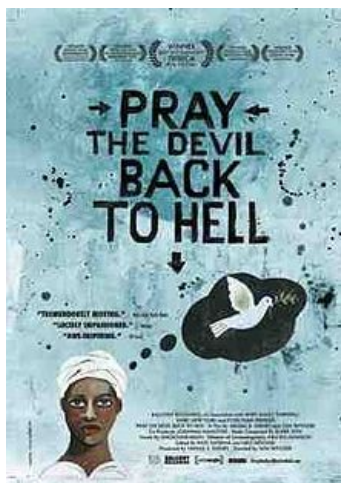
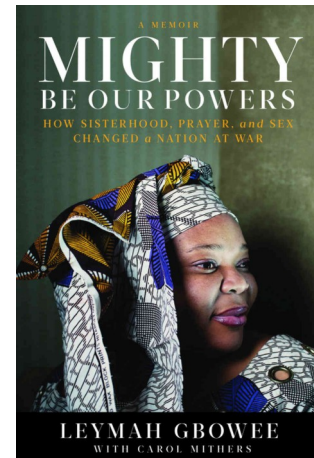
Leymah Gbowee meets ambitious, intelligent, and hard-working girls everywhere she goes. Unfortunately, most of them do not have the resources to attain their full potential. In this 15 minute TED talk, she challenges us to imagine what girls could accomplish, given the chance.

Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War

By Leymah Gbowee

In her 2011 memoir, Gbowee recounts how she helped organize and then led a coalition of Christian and Muslim women against Liberia’s violent leaders. In the midst of a bloody power struggle between Liberia’s president and its rebel warlords, Gbowee remade herself from a civil war refugee into a women’s rights and peace activist.

Available at [Multnomah County Library](#), [Powell’s Books](#), and [Amazon](#).



Pray the Devil Back to Hell (2008)

Directed by Gini Reticker and produced by Abigail Disney

This documentary follows Leymah Gbowee and the formation of the peace movement Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. The thousands of white-clad women singing and praying in solidarity for peace eventually achieved their goal of ending Liberia’s 14-year civil war. In the aftermath, Liberia saw its first female head of state take power.

[Watch it here, thanks to PBS.](#)

“We must continue to unite in sisterhood to turn our tears into triumph, our despair into determination and our fear into fortitude.”

[Leymah Gbowee’s Nobel Lecture](#)

In 2011, Leymah Gbowee won the Nobel Peace Prize, along with activists Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Tawakkol Karman. In her Nobel lecture, Gbowee attests to the power of nonviolent protest and community unity. Reveling in the newfound power of women traditionally repressed, she urges the unarmed citizens of the world to action.

[“It’s Time to End Africa’s Mass Rape Tragedy”](#)

Leymah Gbowee addresses the rampant practice of rape as a weapon of war in Africa, advising women on how to support each other. “We are all complicit,” she says, urging mothers to discuss the matter with their sons, and, above all, not to remain silent.

Gbowee is a contributor to *The Daily Beast*. Read more of her work [here](#).



Newsweek

[“A Dictator, Vanquished”](#)

In this article for *Newsweek*, Leymah Gbowee reflects on the conviction of Charles Taylor, Liberia’s ex-president, for war crimes in Sierra Leone. Rather than the end of a battle, Gbowee sees the verdict as the beginning of a new fight—this time to reconcile and rebuild the country. She describes some of the major challenges the country still faces.

Women, Peace, and Security



[Peaceful Protests Lesson Plan](#)

This lesson plan from PBS explores the history of nonviolent protest around the world. In three to four class periods, students learn about Leymah Gbowee and the women of Liberia, and discuss the letter Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from jail in Birmingham, Alabama.

Click [here](#) for more PBS lesson plans on the theme of women, war and peace. Topics include women in Afghanistan, rape as a tool of war, and refugees.



[War Redefined](#)

This hour-long video from PBS challenges the conventional wisdom that war and peace are men's domain through incisive interviews with leading thinkers, Secretaries of State and seasoned survivors of war and peace-making. Interviews include: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Secretaries of State Condoleezza Rice and Madeleine Albright; Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee; Bosnian war crimes investigator Fadila Memisevic; and Zainab Salbi, Founder of Women for Women International, among others.