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# UNDER THE INFLUENCE

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# LEYMAH GBOWEE:

“IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE BEAUTIFUL

BUT IT IS EVEN MORE

IMPORTANT TO BE BRAINY

AND EVEN MORE IMPORTANT

TO BE HARD WORKING.”

**Leymah Gbowee is revered globally for her unflinching stance and courage during the Liberian civil war as she led peaceful protest that led to the demise of President Charles Taylor. Today, she is a Nobel Laureate, a peace and women’s rights activist and an author, who holds no political office. Yet, Gbowee’s voice and work reverberates across the globe for her tenacious courage, strength determination and leadership skills. Gbowee talks about life after winning the Nobel Peace Prize, what gives her hope about raising women leaders, why African women must take their rightful place in society and her message to young African women — why legacies matter more than beauty.**

### Interview by Belinda Otas

**Belinda Otas: Congratulations on your Nobel Peace Prize, what has life been like since you woke up in 2011 with this honour associated to your name?**

Leymah Gbowee: Well, I’m no stranger to a stressful life. My work has always been stressful, working with communities and travelling around all over Liberia. When we did the documentary *Pray The Devil Back To Hell*, I think somehow, God was preparing me for the Nobel Prize because it was even worse – the travel and everything. So with the Nobel, I would say I have tried to discipline myself to bring some sanity to my life because before when the documentary came out, I felt like the world needed to hear it. Now I feel like the world has the story, what is needed is a part two of the story, which is ‘how have you used this story to empower your continent?’ Now I try to be more stable, grounded on the continent, doing meaningful work and I’m not saying travelling to different places is not meaningful but what is moving me is going to a village and a little girl, who has seen you on TV or on a billboard, says ‘this is the laureate!’ How do you inspire them to want more?

**It was a joint prize with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Tawakul Karman, of Yemen. Moving forward, what impact would you like to have on the world through the work that you do?**

It has given me a bigger platform. Before I used to say to people ‘I’m a local girl with a global audience.’ Now, if I stand up and speak about an issue, people will pay attention. That’s why being in the local community is important to me because I’m able to say this is the situation and they will listen. Let me give you an example, a little while back, we were all talking about a girls scholarship in Liberia and on the continent, so you go out and speak about it, to make it happen. Now, I’m not talking about the kind of scholarship that we have seen people give

one year and after that one year, the student is lost. I’m looking for a full four years and in my country — I have never really thought Liberia was a philanthropic country but when we had this drive, we raised over 54,000 dollars for college girls. A tiny group of local people were able to raise that kind of money, wow! So I said to myself, ‘you go about your work everyday in the community and get that kind of result, why not take that kind of initiative on a global stage?’ It gets bigger and bigger. So the question is — how do I translate what I see in this community that has become something the global audience will understand and want to support? It has been a reflective period for me — how do I roll up my sleeves and work, and translate what God has given to me into good, so that 20 years from now, I can look back and see 100 girls that will say ‘we are a direct beneficiary of her life.’ Then that would be a time to celebrate.

**What impact do you think two women winning the Nobel Prize will have on how African women perceive themselves in the long term?**

I tell people most of the time that when you go into communities, they already have what it takes, they have the ideas and the instinct but what they don’t have is something that energises them and engages the environment they are in. Let me give you a typical example from Nigeria; go to a village where you think women feel disempowered or have a negative image of themselves. Start a cooperative with those women and go back in two months and you will see those women, who had only tattered clothes, will be wearing the best *aso oke* and you will be wondering, ‘did they always know how to dress this good?’ And the answer will be yes, but they just needed someone to come in. So a Nobel Peace Prize for someone like President Sirleaf and I, is just what a lot of women and girls in the community need to push them up. What they don’t have is the resources and that is what I see in all of my work across West Africa. Women have what it takes. They know what they need but what they don’t have are the resources to take them to the places they need to get to. But with this Prize, I think what it needs to do, is for African women to use what they have to their advantage. So how is the African women’s movement

exploiting mine and President Sirleaf’s time? How are they trying to spread the word that women have won this thing? Most of the time, what I get are invitations from North and South America and different parts of the world to come and speak. Meanwhile you have on our continent, girls who need to be inspired and you don’t find people asking you to come and do this. I have said that this prize is for the continent, for Liberia and for the whole continent. It is about how to make it good for our continent.

**Your film, *Pray The Devil Back To Hell*, has screened in so many countries and continues to screen, what has the response and impact been like since it was first released?**

Everywhere we have screened it, women see the film as a rally call to action. It was screened in Central American countries like Mexico and the women came from all around the area to watch the film and as they sat there and watched. Afterwards, each and every woman in that room could identify with the film and said they saw themselves and their issues in the film. They saw what they go through on a daily basis. In Sudan, we screened the film for girls at the women’s university, at the end of the film, the women got up and said, ‘we want to start a petition and opposition statement about the crisis in Darfur’, and they were not necessarily only Dafuri women. There were women from Khartoum in Southern Sudan but they wrote a statement and were looking for over a 1,000 signatures. Everywhere we screen the film, women rise up and decide ‘these are issues in our communities and they are issues we need to tackle.’ In Chicago, a group of mothers screened the film and the next thing that happened was a group of women who pray for peace went into communities where they have drug lords, gangs and gang warfare. They held hands and had silent times like the mothers did back in Israel. These are the kinds of things which, according to them, this film has motivated them to do.

**You talk extensively about women bearing the burden of war, why do women suffer the most as a result of conflict?**

Elizabeth Rehn and President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf did a study, *Women, War and Peace*, in the early years of the civil conflict in West

Africa (I think the study came out in 2000 or 1999). One statement in that report that I think is the true reality of what we see was that ‘what you see, the interaction about the impact of conflict on women’s lives or the impact of the level of violence you see is a reflection of the interaction during peacetime.’ So, where you see women and girls being raped and women being mutilated, all of those things are reflecting the status quo in those communities during peacetime. For example, in most of our communities, it is a given thing especially in our attitude to fighting — and I don’t want to limit this to just Africa, discrimination against women and all of these violent traditional practices that women have to go through and the whole socialisation of the mindset is that we (women) are there just for men, to be comforters. At the end of the day, you see these things happening during conflict because this is how society has always perceived women to be.

**How is war eroding our [Africa’s] social, political and economic development on the African continent? And what is its ripple effect on women and their ability to function and have some dignity?**

One of the things that you see is that the constant discrimination against women and the constant violence against women and violation and constant disregard of their rights extends to the leadership in communities, and undermines their ability and mobility to perform effectively. For example, you have competent women who are supposed to step into the state and onto the stage but, during wartime, these women have been badly abused and all of that stigma — even if you have the leadership ability or capability — when it’s time for election, she is afraid to put her foot there because the first thing is that they will use that terrible harm that has been done to her against her, and they will be muscling it too. So it really does affect communities — not just women and girls, but the entire community. A lot of people live backwards, because if women were contributing their quota then these societies would come up more rapidly and quickly. Take a look at our villages — yes, the men do their share of the farming — but the women do more than 60 percent of the work. It is because of their contribution in the agricultural sector that you now see hunger has been avoided in some of these communities. So, if you consider that and think that if these women were not being abused and pushed back and marginalised in some of these countries, think about how our African countries would have fared. They would have fared very well.

**You have a Girls Leadership Project and made mention of a scholarship project for girls earlier — what are the aims of these projects in the course of empowering young women?**

We go into communities and identify young girls — not just those who are excellent academically but those who naturally take initiative. We spend a year working with them — beyond training and mentorship, we also

allow them to define and develop in their community what they want to do and on that basis, we evaluate them. From there, we have a final 20 that we take in as part of our next generation of leaders. What we have seen is that these girls see themselves as leaders in the community. Something has started in them. The girls leadership project is part of my organisation, *WISPEN-A* (Women, Peace and Security Network Africa) and in such communities, I have just set up my foundation, the *Gbowee Peace Foundation* — which, beyond other things, will provide scholarship for girls. So we are connecting what my organisation does with some of the girls we see in the communities to my foundation. We also have scholarships for girls to go to Egypt and study in any field. That is what my foundation is doing — working with girls in communities, who we see are initiative takers — those are the people we are looking at and we want to sign a contract with them and say you come back, you spend 6 months to a year in your community, giving back. We don’t want anything from you. If you are a nurse, go back to your community and give back, we will provide some form of payment for you — but just go and give something back.

**You made such great points during your Nobel Lecture and one of them was when you said ‘let this be a renewed contract that the integrity of women’s lives will not be subsumed under male traditions.’ Since you started your work and looking at where you are now, how do you see those male traditions transitioning to become more inclusive of women?**

Let’s not kid ourselves, there is a lot more that we need to do. On the issue of tradition and culture, we need to start coming to the place where we start to navigate and exploit all of these titles and honours to our advantage. If we start engaging traditional leaders, we can move ahead — that is one way. But honestly, when you get to the place where as a woman you become a laureate, people fear you. So sometimes I go to communities, where I used to go before and people would really not give me a second thought, but now everyone is acting and giving attention and wanting to do what they think I want them to do. For me, it is not how do I use this to my advantage or disadvantage but use it for all of us. The majority of women are not in leadership positions. Imagine our world on an equal par and what our world could be. So those are the kinds of things that I teach the community. However, two women winning the Nobel Laureate and with other things happening... we still have a long way to go. But it is not a hopeless situation.

**We have the ‘Decade of the African woman’ and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which was brought into effect to safeguard women from atrocities of war — yet they continue. Has that resolution failed African women, especially in places like DR Congo?**

It has not translated into much action, I can

tell you that. That’s why I keep saying that I’m a believer in the power of African women and we should not continue to sit and wait for these resolutions to do anything for us. We have to make the resolution work for us. We have come to a place where we have become too comfortable and it’s now about going back to being radical. When the platform for action was passed, we smiled and toasted. We have been toasting for too long, we have not taken that platform for action and turned it to true action. In my own radical view, I think that men and the patriarchy have decided ‘okay — you want to keep them quiet and happy, let’s give them more resolutions because they will never make any realistic thing out of it’ and this is what’s happening today. We have all of these resolutions, but we are not sitting as women and asking how we can translate the resolutions to actions, like women of the past translated their activities into the right to vote, right to have their own children, right to carry their father’s name when they got married. How can we translate this into action? We haven’t done that but are too busy speaking English, like I am speaking to you right now.

**Where Africa is concerned — African women in particular — what message do you have for them?**

One thing I would say to African women is that you have the power, through time, before, during and after colonisation, independence, struggle — among many others, you were at the forefront doing the things that helped to keep your community together when it didn’t make sense to the rest of the world. I think it is time for African women to step back into that role and take our continent and move it to where we want to see it. The girls on the continent make up at least half of the continent. It is not just enough to be a beauty queen — beauty without brains is nothing. So I will explore the young women of our continent — it is important to be beautiful but it is even more important to be brainy and even more important to be hard working. Step out there, leave legacies and leave marks because most beauty queens never leave a legacy. It is the hard working and intelligent beauty queens that leave a legacy. We have it all; all we need to do is start exploiting what we’ve got.

*Pray The Devil Back To Hell* is available on DVD courtesy of *Dogwood* and *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation At War*, is published by Beast Books.

Belinda Otas is a versatile journalist, writer, editor and cultural critic with a passionate interest in Africa politics, social development, arts and culture, gender and the African diaspora.