

She is a Nobel Laureate, a peace and women's rights activist and an author, who holds no political office. Yet Leymah Gbowee's voice and work reverberates across the globe for her unflinching courage, strength, determination and leadership skills. In this exclusive interview with *New African Woman*, Gbowee talks about life, work, winning the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize and the legacy she wants to leave. Interview by **Belinda Otas**

Leymah Gbowee

"It's time women took Africa where we want to see it."



At the recent Women in The World Summit held in New York, Leymah Gbowee declared to a global audience: "It's time for women to stop being politely angry." Gbowee's words should not come as a surprise, for she has demonstrated before that a woman's 'Impolite Anger' can achieve the desired results. In 2003, during talks that would lead to securing peace in Liberia, Gbowee led a mission that brought 200 women to Ghana who barricaded the entrance of the venue where the negotiations were taking place, so that none of the protagonists at the table could leave until a positive agreement to end the war in Liberia had been reached. When security officers tried to arrest her and her colleagues for obstructing the course of justice as the peace talks stalled, Gbowee threw down the gauntlet and threatened to publicly strip naked – a move which many African societies regard as the highest form of curse or dishonour a woman, wife or mother can heap on anyone. Her determined action on that occasion forced the politicians to make their way back to the negotiating table and two weeks later a peace treaty was agreed.

Her movement continued to defy warlords, forced sworn enemies to talk and facilitated peace in Liberia after 13 years of ravaging civil war. The efforts of the women are largely credited with helping oust former Liberian president, Charles Taylor (now on trial for crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in the Hague), and changing the nation's political course for good, which has produced Africa's first and only female president to date, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

In her 2011 memoir, *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation At War* – described by President Sirleaf as a "captivating narrative that will stand in history as testament to the power of women, faith and the spirit of our great country" – Gbowee writes: "You can't cure trauma when violence is ongoing, so the primary effort must be working for peace..."

In the book, Gbowee recounts her journey with a candidness that reveals her struggles and triumphs. From being in an abusive relationship to her challenge with alcohol, Gbowee pulled through and remains a formidable force

and source of inspiration to women on the continent and beyond. It comes as no surprise that her message to African women, at a time when women are alert to their political, economical, social and educational possibilities is: "You have the power. Through time, before, during and after colonisation, independence struggles 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."

Gbowee's experience, alongside that of the women who heeded her call to pray and demand peace, is the basis of the critically acclaimed film, *'Pray The Devil Back to Hell'*, a compelling testimony to how grassroots activism can alter the history of a nation. Released in 2008, the film has garnered plaudits for its visceral storytelling through the eyes and voices of Liberian women on the frontline, and has been screened in several countries across the world. It is also used in women's empowerment meetings and has become a rally call to action for women globally. In 2011, it was part of *'Women, War & Peace'*, a five-part mini-series on the highly-rated US Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) network. At 40, her message for Africa's young women is categorical:

"The girls on the continent make up at least half of the continent. It's not just enough to be a beauty queen, beauty without brains is nothing. So I implore young women on our continent to know that it's important to be beautiful but it's even more important to be brainy and hard working. Step out there, leave legacies and leave marks because most beauty queens never leave a legacy. It's 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 got."

Today, Gbowee continues with her mission of peace-building and engaging women into being active participants in the running of their country.

Being a co-awardee of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, which she shared with her country's President Johnson-Sirleaf and Yemen's peace activist Tawakkul Karman, Gbowee says being accorded the highly ranked and regarded award, will not only help her stay grounded and true to her work, but she is aware of the added responsibility that comes with being a laureate.

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Leymah Gbowee's formidable campaigning for peace human rights has attracted a growing following of women

MICHAEL ANGELO FOR WUNDERLAND

me a bigger platform. 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. It's about how I translate what I see in the community into something that the global audience will understand and want to support."

She adds: "Now is not the time for me to celebrate the Nobel. This is a reflective period. How do I roll up my sleeves, work and translate what God has given me into good, so that 20 years from now, I can look back and see girls who will say we are a direct beneficiary of her life. Then that would be my time to celebrate."

Gbowee was 17 when the Liberian war reached the capital Monrovia. At first, she was reluctant to get involved in any form of activism. But as seen in the film, Gbowee became a force to reckon with when she became involved with a group of women whose call was to mobilise their sisters to fight for peace.

Her Nobel Peace Prize was therefore a very positive turning point in her fight for women's equality, as many received the news as one of the most empowering and inspiring moments of 2011 for women of Africa and the world at large.

She tells NAW: "I tell people most of the time that when you go into communities, they already have what it takes, they have the idea and the instinct but what they don't have is something that energises and engages them in the environment they are in. So a Nobel Peace Prize for President Sirleaf and myself is just what a lot of women and girls in the community need to push them up."

Gbowee is founder and executive director of Women, Peace and Security Network Africa (WIPSEN-A), a women-focused and led pan-African NGO with the core objective of promoting women's strategic participation and leadership in peace and security governance within Africa (see *New African Woman* Issue 11).

As a peace-building practitioner, Gbowee speaks extensively on the continent about the devastating mental, emotional and physical pain war inflicts on women and children.

She explains the reason women bear the burden of conflict in categorical



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terms: "In most of our communities, it's a given, especially in our attitude and I don't want to limit this to Africa. But discrimination against women and the violent traditional practices they have to go through is as a result of the socialisation of the mindset that we (women) are just there for men, to be their comforters. Hence, when you see these things happening during conflict, it's because that's how society has always seen women."

She stresses that conflict erodes women's political, economic and social development in Africa because "the constant disregard of women's rights extends to the leadership in communities and undermines their ability and mobility to perform effectively. If these women were not being abused, pushed back and marginalised, think about how African countries would have fared?"

The importance of women as leaders in society is very close to Gbowee's heart and as such, within her capacity at WIPSEN, she runs the Girls Leadership Project, a programme that trains young women leaders by going into com-

Gbowee with President Johnson-Sirleaf, left, and, right, at the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize awards ceremony in Oslo, Norway

munities to identify young girls with such skills, and whom she mentors and spends a year working with.

"Beyond training and mentorship, we also allow them to define and develop in their community what they want to do and on this basis we evaluate and shortlist the final 20 that we take in as part of our next generation of leaders. What we have seen is that the girls see themselves as leaders because something has started in them," she says.

Gbowee has also set up the Gbowee Peace Foundation, which offers young women full scholarships to go to university. When she is not busy with WIPSEN, running the Girls Leadership Project along with her speaking engagements, Gbowee is on the road to different African nations, helping women to build empowering networks. In 2010, Gbowee visited the eastern DR Congo, where rape is used as a weapon of war and has led to tens of thousands of women and girls being raped, mutilated and scarred for life. Having seen the horrors of the Congo, which she has described as "Africa's mass tragedy and a sexual massacre", she came up with the "Name and Shame" radical approach to expose the perpetrators of these horrendous crimes against women.

Describing herself as a citizen of Africa (because she believes she cannot say she is a feminist and women's rights activist if her work is limited to borders) she says: "When people are being raped so violently and the issues are not being taken seriously, there's nothing else we can do but be radical. That's where we have missed the mark as African women by becoming too soft. Moreover, you'll find that when women mobilise for a cause around their similarities, they will also mobilise around their differences."

"My point is that you have mothers who live in peace and harmony and their sons are the ones going across the border to rape. Can we bring these women together with the victims of the violent acts of their sons, so they sit and listen to their sister's cry and ask 'if other men unleashed this on me, would I be happy?'"

Gbowee adds: "When you look at



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the conflict in the Great Lakes region, you don't hear much from women in that region about the Congo. They say silence means consent and it's like they have consented by being silent. If the people in Burundi, Rwanda and Congo Brazzaville woke up and there was a massive protest at their presidential palace, with the women saying you have



to give account for our sisters in DR Congo, something will happen."

Some may argue that such an approach is too radical and could have negative effects, but Gbowee disagrees: "It will bring mothers, if they are truly sincere, to question their sons. Every woman who has been through childbirth understands the pain of another woman. It's the power of our connection. That's the point I'm trying to make, how we can rally around our womanhood and use that power to change this situation for our sisters."

Gbowee also believes in the issue of empowering women politically and including them in peace-building initiatives: "In Kivu, Bukavu and Kinshasa, the issue is not just about the rape and abuse, but also the lack of political participation."

"That's why I keep saying I'm a believer in the power of African women and we should not continue to sit and wait for [UN] resolutions to do anything for us. We have to make resolutions work for us. We have become too comfortable and in my own radical way, I believe the patriarchal society has decided that to keep women quiet and happy by giving them resolutions. We have all of these resolutions, which in reality don't translate into actions, for example like women in the past translated theirs into the right to vote."

It is with this strong outlook that Gbowee recently participated in London TED2012, a global non-profit body devoted to the power of using ideas to change attitudes, lives and the world, with a focus on the need to invest in women and girls, as a means of achieving development.

In her opinion, great men like Nelson Mandela are celebrated for their spirit and generosity and being able to reconcile with the people who oppressed them. She says similarly: "When you go into communities that are affected by conflict, that's the everyday story of women, they reach out to people who oppress and suppress them. So how do we build upon this for the betterment of their lives?" ■

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