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# Transforming Conflict through Nonviolent Coalitions

Leymah Gbowee

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JOAN B. KROC  
*Distinguished Lecture Series*

# Leymah Gbowee

## *Transforming Conflict through Nonviolent Coalitions*

Delivered on March 13, 2013 at the  
Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice  
Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies  
University of San Diego

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*Fostering Peace, Cultivating Justice, Creating a Safer World*

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## **JOAN B. KROC SCHOOL OF PEACE STUDIES**



The University of San Diego’s Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies is dedicated to building and sustaining peace and justice through innovative learning, interdisciplinary analysis, advanced practice, and engaged public policy. Responding to visionary philanthropist Joan B. Kroc’s challenge to “make peace and not just talk about peace,” the Kroc School produces graduates who are scholar-practitioners able to address international conflicts and build sustainable peace with justice. They go on to serve in a range of international, national and local institutions, whether in civil society, government or the private sector. The school’s two institutes — the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice and the Trans-Border Institute — are engaged in ongoing peacebuilding and human rights projects around the world. They provide students with opportunities to gain practical experience and see how research and practice intersect.

Located on the University of San Diego campus, the Kroc School is a resource for international peacebuilders, students, faculty, community members and all who are dedicated to peace and justice. We invite you to learn more about the Kroc School at [www.sandiego.edu/peacestudies](http://www.sandiego.edu/peacestudies).

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## **JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE**

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. As one of the Kroc School’s institutes, the IPJ draws lessons for public policy from field-based peacebuilding and working with civil society, government and the security sector to strengthen women peacemakers, youth leaders and human rights defenders.

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Endowed in 2003 by a generous gift to the Institute for Peace & Justice from the late Joan Kroc, the Distinguished Lecture Series is a forum for high-level national and international leaders and policymakers to share their knowledge and perspectives on issues related to peace and justice. The goal of the series is to deepen understanding of how to prevent and resolve conflict and promote peace with justice.

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*Distinguished Lecture Series: “Transforming Conflict through Nonviolent Coalitions” with Leymah Gbowee*

March 13, 2013

**Leymah Gbowee**

2011 Nobel Peace Laureate

*Transforming Conflict through Nonviolent Coalitions*



### **BIOGRAPHY OF LEYMAH GBOWEE**



Nobel Peace Laureate Leymah Gbowee is a Liberian peace activist, social worker and women’s rights advocate. She is founder and president of the Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa, based in Monrovia. Gbowee is best known for leading a nonviolent movement that brought together Christian and Muslim women in the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, which played a pivotal role in ending Liberia’s devastating 14-year civil war in 2003. It also marked the vanguard of a new wave of women emerging worldwide as essential and uniquely effective participants in brokering lasting peace and security.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Gbowee and the women’s network played a key role in helping to peacefully disarm former combatants. Two years later, when it was time for Liberians to elect a new president, they launched a women voters registration campaign that paved the way for the election of Africa’s first female head of state, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who also received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

Gbowee is *Newsweek/Daily Beast’s* Africa columnist, serves on the Board of Directors of Gbowee Peace Foundation USA, the Nobel Women’s Initiative and the PeaceJam Foundation. She holds an M.A. in conflict transformation from Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va., and is the mother of six children.

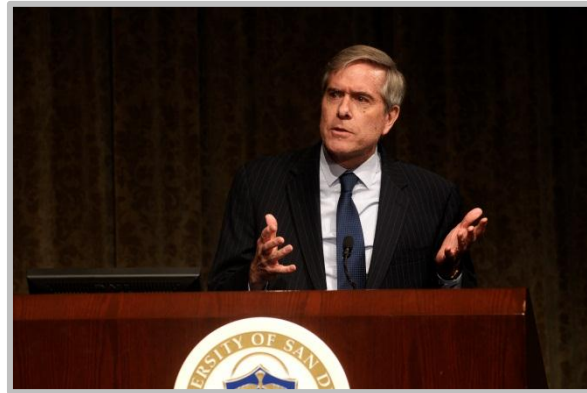
Gbowee was featured in the documentary “Pray the Devil Back to Hell” and wrote a memoir, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, with co-author Carol Mithers.

## **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

**Edward C. Luck, Ph.D.**  
**Dean, Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies**

Good evening, everybody. Welcome to the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies. In this school we believe that you don't have very much peace, and it's not very sustainable, without justice, and we don't think you have much justice without peace. The two go together inextricably.

We also believe that studies ought to be combined with practice, so our Institute for Peace & Justice and our Trans-Border Institute are very involved in the practice, in various places around the world, of peace and justice issues. We also believe that peace and justice shouldn't be an abstraction. It should be a challenge of public policy. So we are developing the school as the first school of public policy devoted to the questions of peace and justice.



This is going to be an inspiring evening. First because I'm going to be leaving the podium very shortly, and second because in Leymah we have someone who has inspired people throughout the world. I've only been dean of this school for a little over six months, but you learn a few things. One of the things you learn very quickly is to, whenever possible, delegate. So I am happy to delegate to Dee Aker, who is known as *the* woman peacemaker, and as someone who has known Leymah for many years and in fact welcomed her here five years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Dee is going to engage in a conversation with Leymah. Thank you all very much for coming. We appreciate having you.

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<sup>1</sup> Aker is the founder of the IPJ's Women PeaceMakers Program. Gbowee spoke at the 2008 Women PeaceMakers Conference, "Crafting Human Security in an Insecure World."

*Transforming Conflict through Nonviolent Coalitions*

Leymah Gbowee

**DA: Good evening. Let me add my welcome to our dean’s. Thank you for joining us here at the Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego, for the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice’s Distinguished Lecture, “Transforming Conflict through Nonviolent Coalitions,” with a truly brave and, above all, truly transparent and honest woman.**

It is my privilege and pleasure to share an evening with the 2011 Nobel Peace Laureate Leymah Gbowee and you, because it takes all of us, as she often points out. Our evening is designed to let us step into her world briefly: this Liberian mom of six, domestic violence survivor, peace activist, social worker, women’s rights advocate who speaks truth to power, who founded a number of organizations including most recently the Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa, and along the way got the Nobel Peace Prize — all before she was 40 years old.

A slightly longer bio is in your program. The book *Mighty Be Our Powers* tells intimately her story, as does the film “Pray the Devil Back to Hell.” Her nonviolent, conflict transformation activities are not passive and quiet, but very vocal, direct and shall we say risky as she leads the way to peace in Liberia and now around the world. Welcome, Leymah.



LG: Thank you, Dee. Thank you so much. It is truly an honor to be back here five years later. I now have a 3-year-old going on 40, so since I left I’ve been really busy.

**DA: When you were 17 years old the Liberian war had just started. You said that you turned from being a child into an adult in a matter of hours. Can you give us a feel for what that moment was like, what that journey was like from then on?**

LG: I grew up in a very sheltered, not rich, but very sheltered community. Where we grew up was the typical example of *ubuntu* — you are because I am; we all exist because of the other. Liberia has 16 tribes. The community we grew up in, maybe 10 of those tribes lived there. Everyone practiced the culture where we were children of the community.

At 5 o’clock, if you went to the next neighbor’s house, you took your bath there and put on someone else’s clothes, and they would take you home sleeping. We would stand on our porch and shout, “What did you cook today?” Someone would say, “We cooked rice with cassava leaves.” And we would say, “Can we share?”

Those were the kinds of things that we did. When lights went off, we sang and danced our cultural, traditional songs. Everyone came out. All of the parents were sitting on their porch. There was that

feeling that you are sheltered. We'd go to town to the very plush high schools, but also still sheltered because all of our parents knew each other. We were still children at 17. There was guidance.

And then we wake up and we were hearing all these stories about war. We wake up one morning, my mother is gone, my father is gone, and I'm waiting for a few hours to go to school. And then there's shooting, real loud shooting. This old man says, "I know this sound. The rebels have come." My sister's three kids are at home, and my two younger siblings are there. I'm the oldest child of my parents at home at that moment. My niece is running to the door and one of our relatives is coming with another child and she takes her out of the way.

Standing and observing that interaction at the moment, you have to take charge. I took all of those kids in, and that night people were coming and asking me, "What are we eating?" This is a question I was supposed to ask people. By morning we had over 50 people internally displaced in our home.



I had to be saying, "Let's cook this, let's do this, let's do that." You wake up at 8 in the morning and you are a 17-year-old. By 10 p.m. you are 30-something because you have the burden and the responsibility of a whole group of people on your shoulder. People are already beginning to tell you, "Look around and find those important documents of your parents to keep. Do this, do that." Those are not things that ordinary 17-year-olds think about. But in a matter of weeks I mastered all of it.

**DA: One thing that you had with your family and in your community was a sense of faith. You are a person of faith. But it seems that you came to know and live your convictions so much more than by church dogma. In today's world, institutionalized religions can seem separate from people and the way they live. But from that point on, how did you come to understand your faith?**

LG: When you live in a world where you see a lot of injustice happening and people who profess to be true believers of whichever religion, or people are committing atrocities in the name of all of those religions, you have to come to the place where you understand what your faith truly is. When I read different accounts in the Bible, I'm not just looking at "eye for an eye." You have to rationalize the meaning of "eye for an eye" into this world. One old lady said, "If you practice eye-for-an-eye now, we're going to have a group of damned blind people all over the world."<sup>2</sup>

One thing that I picked from the life of Jesus was compassion. There is no way that you can live and interact with people and not feel a sense of compassion when something has gone wrong or something is going wrong.

I had been writing a little book for so long but I paused on that book. My desire is to publish that book and just give it out for free. It's a tiny book that I've titled *Giving*. In that book, you get to understand how my faith grew so strong. In my life's journey, it hasn't been just Christians who have reached out to me. It hasn't been just Muslims. It has been people of different faiths. And they are reading different things and just trying to make sense of this world that we believe that a God

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<sup>2</sup> A variant of a quote frequently attributed to Gandhi, "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind."

created. If he created this world, how did he intend for us to live? How can you say I'm a person of faith and see a child suffering and not offer that person food? How can you be a person of faith and see a young girl with so much potential and you have the resources to send her to school, and turn a blind eye?

I tell people my life journey has been one that I track. I'll give you a quick story. My kids and I had been very, very poor for a long time. And then my sister moved back to Monrovia from exile, and we lived in a tiny apartment. I think the entire apartment was the size of this stage. I had four kids. She had one daughter, then I had a brother I took, and a niece came to live. Then we took a girl in to help her finish high school.

Every morning we would make breakfast and put it on the porch, and the kids in the neighborhood would cross over and come to eat. And I would say, "Make way for others to come and eat." My sister would glare at me and say, "You are going to call armed robbers to this house tonight," because it was a rough neighborhood.

Even though we were poor, there were people poorer than we were. We had all of these old pairs of shoes under the bed, and it was getting close to Christmas. I said to her, "Let's give these shoes out to the kids in the neighborhood." So we took everything out and children came, and not a single pair was left over.

We had made a list, but I had I think less than a hundred dollars for that Christmas. The kids were upset because it was two days until Christmas and mama can't seem to be filling this list. I had this friend who was a Catholic priest who used to visit. He had gone to England and he came that evening at midnight. A Catholic priest knocking at the window of a single woman at midnight? Of course, I was shocked. "What do you want?"

He said, "Just open your door. It's a long story. I'm tired. My flight came in late."

So when I opened the front door, he put two huge suitcases in my living room. He said, "I'm too sleepy. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

The kids woke up and said, "What's in the suitcase?"

I said, "Well, brother David brought these two suitcases."

He said that when he was leaving England, there was this woman who came running to the priest's house and said, "You are going to Africa. It's Christmas. I have these two suitcases. Go and give them to any single mother."

We sat down and opened those suitcases. Everything we had on our list was in those suitcases, including shoes and clothes for the kids. I turned and looked at my sister, and she looked back at me. When you've lived a life of lack, and when God has stepped in mysteriously on many occasions

*When you've lived a life of lack, and when God has stepped in mysteriously on many occasions — and that's just one — and provided in such an awesome way, sometimes you don't need the Bible to give you an understanding of who God is.*



— and that’s just one — and provided in such an awesome way, sometimes you don’t need the Bible to give you an understanding of who God is.

**DA: When you started working to organize women to stand up against Charles Taylor, how did you and your Muslim associate, the lead woman from that group, cross that boundary?**



LG: I had a notebook that I wrote everything in. I remember that night lying next to the window and having this notebook. I woke up shivering. In that dream, a voice said, “Gather the women to pray for peace.”

The next morning — my boss was a pastor — I went to him and said, “I had this dream.” And Vaiba was also one of my bosses then.<sup>3</sup> This person was saying to me, “Gather the women.” So I said, “Reverend, since you are a pastor, call the women of the church and give them this dream.”

He looked at me and said, “Leymah, the dream bearer is always the carrier of the dream.”

I said, “No, no, no, no, Reverend. I am in a relationship and I’m not married to the man. Oh, I am fornicating! No, Jesus could not be talking to me.”

He said no. And so we started the Christian Women’s Peace Initiative.

The first time we went to meet a delegation of the World Council of Churches, Asatu was the only Muslim woman who stood up to say she would take it back to her Muslim sisters. She went and threw the idea at them. The first question they asked was, “Who organized the Christian women?” And she said, “Leymah.” So technically they baptized me a Muslim to come and organize the Muslim women.

Most times when I’m having interfaith dialogue with people I ask, “In this work that we did, who do you think was the most problematic group?” Because of the impression, the myth of Muslim fundamentalism, everyone will say instantly, “The Muslim women were the most difficult.”

No. All those Christian women would come every morning with scripture references on reasons we should not interact with the Muslim women. Sometimes it got so bad that we had to take these women aside and just talk to them. It got to the place where one group of Christian women actually left us because they felt we were not fulfilling the work of God.

**DA: That brings up another question about when you think about standing up. Do you think about going alone first to see what needs to be done, or do you begin organizing coalitions?**

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<sup>3</sup> Vaiba Kebeh Flomo was a Woman PeaceMaker at the IPJ in 2010.

LG: I think the first thing to do is identify not one but several thematic concerns in different communities. People have to feel connected to something. So you look into this community and maybe rape, domestic violence, wayward children are the key issues. You have to go around and test the waters, if you’re trying to mobilize parents, to see which is at the top of the list. And then you use that as your rallying call.

For example, in the DRC when we went there two-and-a-half years ago, I knew we still had a lot of work to do. There was no way that what happened in Liberia [uniting the women to help end the conflict] would happen in Congo any time soon. Why? Because everyone sees the conflict from the lens of their ethnic group or their political ideology or some leader. They haven’t seen it from the standpoint of: Yes, I’m from this party and I’m from this ethnic group, but rape is an issue and is affecting us as women.

We went to Bukavu and had a very beautiful meeting where the women had all of the answers. Then you say, “OK, if we have to form a coalition, we need to get one person who will become the face of this movement. The person would be the voice, and when they’re not around no one can speak, because then the message is simple, concise and clear. No one is giving mixed messages.” The meeting broke down there.

In the Ivory Coast in 2004 before the war got hot we went to a meeting, and the same thing. They spoke the same language. When it came time to find the leader, the meeting broke down — the reason being, people still see that leadership within that women’s group from the perspective of the political group, ethnic group or the rebel faction that they support.

**DA: That’s a really interesting point. You have to get people to buy in to the whole idea of these coalitions that you want to create. On the other hand, certainly you’re going to have to find the leaders who are willing and accepted.**

LG: One of the things that we didn’t talk about it in “Pray the Devil Back to Hell” but which I think was a very important part of the work we did in Liberia, was when we started something called the Peace Outreach Project. We used to call it the POP. We trained 20 women from the Christian and Muslim groups, and those 20 women sat down and said, “We want to do something collectively.”



The first thing they said they wanted to tackle was HIV and AIDS. In two weeks the war started. We decided, “OK, let’s work on the war issue.” But the POP was something that they said, “We want to be able to go out and tell local women that they too have a stake in the peace process.” So the Peace Outreach Project was predominantly a time of awareness and mobilization, a rallying call. We did that for nine months. After nine months we called the group back to evaluate the work that we had done. We realized that there were issues that were coming up that were very unhealthy for the group that we are trying to build: Muslim and Christian women’s relationships.

We did a consultation that was paid for by Catholic Relief Services. First we brought the Christian women in the room. We were looking at peace and nonviolence from the perspective of the Bible, something that they were quite familiar with, very comfortable with. Most times when you talk to

the Christian women, they would be like, "Oh, my religion tells me to pray, so I'm not supposed to be out there. I'm not supposed to be on the forefront of protests. I'm just supposed to pray."

So we went back to the Bible, sat down and studied women in the Bible. We gave them Deborah, we gave them Esther, we gave them all those powerful women and said, "Did they just pray? No. Did they take action? Yes. So can you be a Deborah for your country? Of course."

Then we went into the Quran and into all of the different readings in Islam that we could find. The next day we brought the Muslim women. To demystify all of the myths and negative perceptions and stereotypes they had, we did two things with the Christian women on the day. What is it that you like about the Muslim women? They made a long list. What is it that you do not like about them? And they made their long list. What do you admire about Islam? They made their long list, kept it, and the next day worked with the Muslim women. On the third day we brought both groups together and the room was divided by religion. What was amazing was that two women drove in the same car, one a Christian, one a Muslim.

We brought two old ladies who had been friends for over 60-something years, one a Christian, one a Muslim. That was the turning point for us. The Muslim woman was as talkative as I am. And the Christian woman was so quiet and reserved. It was a total contrast from the perception that those women held. The Muslim woman, in talking about their friendship, said, "My friend's husband used to abuse her. I took money and took her to the courts and she divorced him." Of course the Christian women almost fainted. A Muslim taking a Christian woman to divorce her husband? "And I made sure she got away with all the property."

Afterward someone asked, "How has your religion influenced your friendship?" And those two old ladies had a blank look on their faces. "What are you talking about?" The Muslim woman turned and said, "Marta, when you look at me do you see a Muslim?" The Christian woman said, "No, I see a sister, a woman with many children, same problems that I have, unfortunately, cheating husbands." Faith has never ever played a role. Those two women in their communities, because of the intensity of their friendship, were called witches by community members. They suffered the worst together, but nothing ever took their friendship away.

*Who do I represent? A vast majority of those women I say I speak for may never make it to San Diego. If I'm afraid and ashamed to speak about their issues, I've failed them and I've failed them miserably.*

So that became the rallying call. You hear in the movie, "Does the bullet know a Christian from a Muslim? Can a bullet pick and choose?" Those two old ladies said, "Go in the bathroom, take off your clothes, one Christian woman and one Muslim woman. Look at each other and see whether you would see a Muslim written on your body or you see a Christian written on your body."

When you're trying to mobilize, it's so important that you spend time. Today, because of the horrific kind of violence that we see in communities, people expect that movements will just wake up. It needs to be nurtured like you're building a garden. Take out all of the weeds. That's what we did with those women for almost two years before we launched the mass action.



**DA: I’ve seen you take the podium to confront leaders of Africa and the Western world who you believe are continuing conflicts at some level. Does anybody ever listen to you? Does anybody respond when you speak out?**

LG: Well, when you don’t get invited to some high-level meeting, you take it that they heard. It’s upsetting to them. But the point, Dee, is that in this work that we do we should not be afraid of anyone. There shouldn’t be an office that we cannot touch. There shouldn’t be an individual that we cannot face. Most times when I sit and form my opinion and do my research and do my analysis about certain things, the first thing that comes to mind is that people expect that you are going to be quiet because you’re a girl: *How dare you talk to those male leaders!*

But when Archbishop Tutu says, “I cannot share a stage with Tony Blair because he’s a war criminal,” he’s applauded and I respect him for that. I think that is what should be. We should be able to say things like that, because who do we represent? Who is your constituency? Who do I represent? A vast majority of those women I say I speak for may never make it to San Diego. If I’m afraid and ashamed to speak about their issues, I’ve failed them and I’ve failed them miserably.

They had the misfortune of putting me on a high-level task force on reproductive health and rights beyond 2015. I asked someone, “Do you really think you want me on this task force?” Because it’s not going to be about politics. It’s not going to be about statistics. It’s going to be about individuals. How do you live in a country where women die in the hundreds from maternal-related issues? They go to give birth and they’re dying. And then you have the children of some of the leaders riding the best cars. It’s simple things like an ultrasound machine that you can’t find in some of the health centers. You know, it doesn’t take a lot.

Most times I tell myself, if Dr. King was going to be afraid, there would be no civil rights movement in this country. I don’t think it’s fair for any of us whom God has given a space to dominate, to be afraid to speak our minds — especially if it has to do with people who cannot speak for themselves.

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**DA: You’ve been interviewed by people in the alternative news media and found them somewhat responsive. I think the role of media is profound and it’s essential that we have responsible media. When you go on someone’s show like Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert, are they in their own way trying to get the real word out there?**

LG: Those two, especially Jon Stewart, came into the green room, sat with me for almost 30 minutes. It wasn’t like calming my nerves; I didn’t need him to calm my nerves. But he was genuinely engaging: “I’ve read your book. I have kids. I’m concerned about the state of the world.” He came to me with a lot of respect. There was not this white male supremacy thing. It was like two equals having a conversation: You have something to say, I’m interested to listen to it.

I’ve been to many places and it’s not just in North America. Even in Africa you get the vibe when people are not interested and are just thinking, “Oh, we got this Nobel Laureate to come to this

event.” With this prize I’m not an ornament. No. I will be an ornament when I’m 70. At 41 there is work to be done and I can’t afford not to.

With Jon I really got the sense that he had read my book. It speaks volumes about someone interviewing you who has read, or beyond reading has gone and done different research. When we had that conversation, the people in that audience, if they had never thought about civil war or women’s rights issues, it brought it to them because he drove it home. At one point during the interview, he said, “Wow, you’ve been interviewed by one of the most popular journalists in America.” And I said, “Well, you’re in good company because you are interviewing the most popular African woman.”

**DA: I couldn’t resist asking the question. It’s hard when we talk about media to feel that we’re getting an honest sense about what’s going on in the world.**

LG: I think that we really need to take it more into those kinds of spaces if we want the world to take women’s issues seriously, because those people have followings. They have people who want to hear them. They’re like little gods to people. If some of them stand up and say, “Women’s rights is the end thing,” some people will be listening who have never stopped to think about it. When you talk about breaking new ground and going into different spaces and new places, I think those are the kinds of people that we need to engage with. Find the good men in the media.

One of the things I constantly say to myself as I go to be interviewed or go to some part of the world, there’s so much misconception about the African woman — saggy breasts, begging bowl, many children hanging on them. Sometimes I tell people, even if in Africa a woman has been raped, the one question you need to ask yourself is how is she still caring for 10, 20 children? Even after that horrifying rape, how is she still standing up with her shoulders high and providing for her family? You need to move beyond the act of the rape and look deep into that strength.

I’m representing a lot of those women in communities whom you cannot mess with. When the Nobel women came, we took them to a group of women in Totota.<sup>4</sup> When they were introducing themselves to the Nobel women, I just sat there smiling, because these were women I met decades ago who could not even find their voices.

This woman stands and says, “I have my lieutenants. Where are my lieutenants?” And these women stand up. These are the people whom community people would come to and say, “My daughter got raped and the culprit lives in that house.” Those women walk to that house, arrest the man, and take him to the police station. You dare not resist arrest.

*Even after that horrifying rape, how is she still standing up with her shoulders high and providing for her family? You need to move beyond the act of the rape and look deep into that strength.*

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<sup>4</sup> Gbowee is a member of the Nobel Women’s Initiative, which “uses the prestige of the Nobel Peace Prize and of courageous women peace laureates to magnify the power and visibility of women working in countries around the world for peace, justice and equality” (<http://nobelwomensinitiative.org/about-us/>). Four laureates visited communities, including Totota, in Liberia in January 2013.

If you have these things happen in community, how do you come off portraying those women you represent as weak? We have a whole new generation of young women who have formed their voices also, so they are nothing like weak. Previously when things used to happen, they would be so shy about talking about it. But we have seriously come to the place where African women are now saying, "If you rape me, I have nothing to be ashamed of. You should be ashamed of yourself."

We need to constantly portray that. Even in this country I always say, "Women, you have so much: the platform, the resources." Someone said to me, "I've won a million dollars for my organization." I said, "Gosh. Give me a million dollars and I know what to do with it."

Sometimes when you hear some of the things going on, you ask yourself, "These women are strong. They're smart. But what happened to their legs? Why can't they stand up?" Because you see there is so much that you have to offer us in Africa. People mirror what happens in this part of the world. If women's rights are not respected here, and our leaders are wining and dining with your leaders, they go back and say, "Even the U.S. is not working on it. Why should we give it to you here?"

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

*After the onstage interview the audience posed questions from the floor.*

**Q: In hearing you speak and in reading your book, I have been so struck by your strength and perseverance. You seem kind of superhuman to me. I'm not really sure how you do it all and keep a balance. I heard you say you had a 3-year-old and I have friends who have 3-year-olds and that's really all they do. And you have five more children. You don't seem crazy, so where do you draw this strength from and how do you keep a balance? You seem to be a happy and balanced person. How are you holding all of that together and changing the world?**

A: Thank you. Honestly, I don't know. I have so much energy that sometimes I'm afraid that when I'm old I will really feel it. But my faith in God is strong. Some days I have this thing that I do. You lay on your bed and it's time to wake up and you know you need to go somewhere. And then you just don't have the strength. I roll and throw myself down — boom! That's crazy, right? But that's the only way I'm able to say, "Leymah, get up! The world is waiting for you!"

One of the things that keeps me going is the stories of pain, suffering, rape, abuse. It enrages me. It's a constant reminder that you can't stop. You can't stop. I was in Chicago and this woman asked me, "Are you pessimistic?" I said, "Are you kidding me? That's not a word in my vocabulary." Because where I come from, I am one of those people who offers a ray of hope. How could I be pessimistic? You have these young girls coming to you and saying, "I want to go to school. I read your book and I know how much it took, and I know I can do it." So do I say, "Girl, it's not easy"? No. "Yes, you can do it." That attitude keeps you going.

When it comes to my kids, we have a thing. I'm a sucker for those kids. I spoil them. I love them. But I've mastered the eyeball. I don't hesitate to punish. My kids are my kids; they are not my friends. If I want friends I find 41-year-olds to be my friends. We have a relationship, but you don't talk to me any way you like. When I say sit, it means I understand why you should be sitting at that moment. And it makes my life so much easier that I can boss them around. We have an understanding. But when you talk about me not being crazy, that's not true. I'm still crazy.

**Q: I recently did a comparison about what you have done with feminism with your background and Western feminism through Naomi Wolf.<sup>5</sup> When you think of the issues facing Liberia — female genital mutilation and rapes and the war — and you look at some of the issues facing us young feminists here in the United States, you feel very apathetic. Do you have any words of wisdom for young American feminists on what we can do? Is there any advice that you can give to us so that we don't become apathetic and look at those problems and think that we have it so good, that women's rights aren't an issue here in the United States?**

A: I went to Texas and very wealthy women hosted me — very wealthy. One of their daughters, who I believe has traveled to fabulous places and has no idea of my world, said to me, "Madame Gbowee, when you come to places like Texas, are you amazed by the big buildings?" I said, "No,

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<sup>5</sup> Wolf is an American writer and commentator who has written several books on feminism, including *The Beauty Myth* and, most recently, *Vagina: A New Biography*.

mama. I don’t look at big buildings. I look beneath big buildings to see those homeless people living beneath the big buildings.” I’m not fascinated. I’m not a tourist. I’ve traveled to many places but I haven’t seen many places. What I’ve seen in those places is those things that take me to those places, whether it’s teenage pregnancy or war-affected youth or battered women.

I’ve been to domestic violence shelters in this country. You can never be apathetic about women’s issues in this country. Don’t ever feel that way because it’s not OK. When you were born, they brought you outside in pink and made you to think that you were a pretty little girl. You graduated from high school and everyone celebrated you. Your mother and father have told you that as an American the world awaits you. As a young woman the world is there for conquering.

When you step into the university of life, my child, you will find out that is totally different. That you don’t have enough women in the boardrooms, making someone like Sheryl Sandberg write a book.<sup>6</sup> You don’t have enough women speaking up that for every one dollar an American man makes, you make 77 cents. So don’t ever, ever, ever — even if it is good for you and you are making a million and you’re traveling and you’re enjoying — forget to take a moment to look below those buildings, and never be apathetic about the state of women’s rights in this country.

*I’ve been to domestic violence shelters in this country. You can never be apathetic about women’s issues in this country. Don’t ever feel that way because it’s not OK.*

**Q: I’m an international student from Iran. As you know, my country’s been causing a lot of trouble in the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women [CSW], with the language of the outcome document. I feel that I have a responsibility in this case as a student. Considering you have been dealing with state officials and governments, what do you think we should do as activists to approach governments who use excuses such as cultural relativism and religion to deny the rights of women?**

A: That’s a huge question. It’s really difficult. This morning Dee and Jen were quoting Ban Ki-moon’s speech,<sup>7</sup> and I was so annoyed that you all had to bring him into that beautiful room. It’s all lip service. Beautiful words with no action. Every year you hear the same thing. That’s why I think our struggle should now enlist men and boys who may not be very close to the powers that be or may not be in power.

I was watching the funeral of Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. I saw his mother and two daughters, and I thought, wow, we missed an opportunity, because this was someone who had a closeness to his daughters. I think what we need to start doing is finding time when we just ask leaders like President Obama to meet with us and let his daughters be in that room. And share stories about little girls that have been raped or who have been mutilated by FGM [female genital mutilation]. Ask them in the presence of their children, “Is this politically incorrect language, this life that has been destroyed by this practice? Is this a language or is this the life of someone?”

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<sup>6</sup> Sandberg is chief operating officer of Facebook and wrote the book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Freeman is program officer for the Women PeaceMakers Program. She and Dee Aker, interim director of the IPJ, spoke at a breakfast that morning celebrating International Women’s Day. They quoted from Ban’s speech on March 8, 2013, which can be found at [www.un.org/en/events/womensday/sgsmessage.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/events/womensday/sgsmessage.shtml).

I think the years of bra-burning have gone, but we have to find an alternative to radicalizing the issues of women’s rights. Because, trust me, the abuses that women face in different parts of the world are going from bad to worse to ridiculous. How do you rape a young woman in South Africa and then de-gut her? How do you do that? How do you rape a 1-year-and-5-month-old baby? Those were things that were unthinkable in the past. But it’s happening now.

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I think we’ve gotten too comfortable with a [U.N.] Special Representative on Sexual Violence — another political way of saying, “Your issue will be discussed later. We gave you this.” You applaud. The office is poorly resourced and we still applaud. And then every year we parade to New York, go to the U.N., go to the corridors.

I have a fantasy. My fantasy is that one day all of the delegates march into that hall, the General Assembly hall, and just cause chaos — so that they understand that when you’re talking about these things, they’re not statistics. Here we are. People. We are the ones facing all of these things. HIV and AIDS are the face of this woman. Rape has my face. Maternal mortality: It’s me. I think we need to go and give these people a reality check.

We shouldn’t stop where we find ourselves. It’s time to recruit boys and men, make them to understand why we are doing what we’re doing. Go into those corporate worlds and talk to women also who have power. I was reading Sheryl Sandberg’s book and she said that when she asked for a parking lot for pregnant women, it was given immediately. Imagine how many women have it within their power to say to their husbands, ban this and ban that.

How are we dealing with the first ladies of our world? It’s well and good that Michelle Obama has a passion for [fighting] obesity, but there are other things that are affecting girls like her daughter that she needs to add to her agenda. It’s very important for us to get radical now.

When people in the U.S. ask, “What can we do to help?” that is what you can do to help: Engage your first lady. Engage Hillary Clinton. Engage other people and make this thing a fight. It’s not a political issue anymore.

I hate going to conferences now where people just talk about these things. Sorry I’m ranting. But that’s how I feel. When my daughter was 12 she told me, “Mama, you and your friends go to your meetings and just talk to each other.” It’s true. We need to move past that. But we also need to take it to the government officials themselves. Not at the U.N. — don’t wait to come to CSW. Our problem with the women’s movement is that we’re too slow. We just ended one unsuccessful CSW. Everyone has gone back to their countries. No one has called a meeting to say, “How do you engage your leaders for 2014?” so that when they are coming to this thing they’re already prepared to have a conclusion. How are we doing those things?

**Q: As a man and a father and grandfather, I would be interested in knowing more about the father of your children and his role with your family, and perhaps more importantly, his role in his community and in the efforts of the work you’ve been doing.**

A: Man, if you were young I would tell you, "Date me." My first four kids' father left long ago, before my fourth child was born. He has never been in the lives of my children, even though we've reached out. I'm not a mad black woman; I've reached out and tried to make him be involved. Absolutely not interested.

My current partner is the father of my 3-year-old and, unfortunately for him, he is with someone whose world is about feminism and women's rights. For the last five-and-a-half years he's been on an education. I think he's at the level of 202. I can't give him the senior class yet. One of the reasons why — and I'm telling you my love life now — I've stayed is because it's very difficult in my world (this is something a lot of the women in the feminist movement share) to be a successful person and not have to apologize to your spouse about your success.

This person may be so insecure that you have to pretend to be dumb to accommodate their dumbness. Anyone who expects a smart person to act dumb means, "Please be dumb because I'm dumb." But this man has proven to me and to a lot of my relatives and friends and people in the movement that he's solid. He's not intimidated by what I do. It's a complementary role. I'm a total failure when it comes to computers. Thankfully he's an IT giant. He helps me in those ways.

One of the things that makes it so important for me is when he sits with the daughters, the older ones that he did not father, and starts a conversation about relationships and what they should look for in a man, and what they should not accept and all of those things. It makes me very comfortable.

On March 8 our foundation celebrated International Women's Day by enlisting men to wear t-shirts that read, "I'm a real man," and on the back, "I hate rape." "I hate sexual violence." And he was my poster boy that day.

**Q: I wanted to ask you about the horrific violence not only in Liberia but in so many places in Africa. At the beginning you talked about this wonderful spirit in Africa of sharing, of taking care of each other: ubuntu. I wonder how we restore that. What were the dark forces that changed things, that brought this about, and how do we reverse it?**

A: I don't think the spirit of togetherness and oneness ever left Africa, or else people like us wouldn't be on the continent. The spirit is still there. What we have seen happen to our world is something that we cannot explain. I tell most of the young men who fought in the war that you are a victim of trying to live in an urban world, not fitting, and trying to live in your rural community and not fitting there anymore. But I cannot pinpoint what has happened to the spirit in our communities.

What I can say to you is that in some parts of the community those spirits are still there. It's the spirit that will cause women to rally around each other. It's that same spirit that will get some men to come around. Most times when I speak to a community of African men, I say to them that the reason why you all are now demonized is because a lot of you good men have stepped in the back, and the evil ones have taken over your space. The evil men, the men who perpetrate evil, are not many. The ones who are the good ones, they're very many, but somehow they've lost their spines and they're not doing enough to protect those women.

I don't understand what is happening. But I look at my own dad. As we grew up, no woman cried from her husband's house that he did not walk to and pull that man out and say, "If you want to

fight someone, let's fight." But today you see men, boys really most times — they just don't want to get involved. So how do we get them to be like the women again, bring back that spirit of community?

But I also think a lot of the violence that they too have seen has affected them in ways that we are not talking about. The good men, the handful of the evil ones have affected them; there's something about their pride that has been wounded. If you could not protect your wife from rape, who are you in this time of peace to stand up and say you want to be an advocate against rape? I think it's up to us as women and those of the other men who are doing this work to now start saying what happened happened, and it's time for us to take back our communities.

**Q: I've been thinking a lot about the grassroots movements and the organizing efforts. Not everyone is Leymah Gbowee. Not everybody is going to end up with a Nobel Prize. Who are your teammates? Who are the people who have walked with you in this journey? What kind of group do you like to surround yourself with to make a movement sustainable and possible and powerful?**

A: Crazy women. Risk-takers. People who will do anything, who are not concerned about "What do I stand to gain from this?" When we do this work I never claim the glory, or say I did this by myself. It was a group of women. Every time I try to tell people, "This one is more powerful than I am; all I did was to be the talkative one in the group."

The work that we've done has been a work of sacrifice. Those are the people whom if you're building a movement, build a movement around. You don't want to build your movement around those who are thinking, "Wow, how much money are we going to get out of this?" When we started the protests, and when we did all that we have done in the past, I tell people I could not keep a dime in my handbag. Because it wasn't just building a movement, it was building a community of women. We were building sisterhood to the point that we all knew each other's problems.

*The work that we've done has been a work of sacrifice. Those are the people whom if you're building a movement, build a movement around. You don't want to build your movement around those who are thinking, "Wow, how much money are we going to get out of this?"*

Vaiba, who came here to do the Women PeaceMakers Program, lost her husband in 2006. And that afternoon when he got really sick, they called me. I went and saw him taking his last breath. I had to be with her. When he died (he was a Muslim) his family came and immediately said, "You killed him. You have to explain to us how he died." One phone call, 25 women were in that house. The men said, "We changed our mind. You didn't do anything to him. He died a natural death."

But I saw us sleep in that tiny house, the next morning trek to the gravesite, and stayed with her for two weeks. When they finally were doing their official mourning, we did the women's mourning, which is not common in the Muslim faith. We did everything together. And that was what we did from one community to the other. Sometimes as someone gave birth we were all there. It wasn't just about peace. It was reaffirming ourselves as women, telling people that we've got your back. The



personal is political. There is no way any of us can say, “I’m a peace activist and I’m doing such a great job,” but with the people you work with you don’t interact or engage in that way.

My sisters tell me if I live in Africa I’m not going to be rich. And I don’t think I will be, because whatever you own has to be shared. So the kind of people you’ll find me hanging out with would be those women who when one person cries everyone will appear. And when they come together, even when you’re crying, they will do something to wipe those tears away from your eyes.

When my sister died in 2006, by the time I landed with the body at the airport, the WIPNET [Women in Peacebuilding Program of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding] women were lined up. Some of them were so drunk they didn’t know what they were doing. But that evening when my parents were grieving, I remember my dad was so sad. Those women decided to put on a fashion show for him. I just saw him looking like, “What kind of trouble is this, Leymah? Get these women out of this house.” And I said, “No, no.” You know, just after you could not hear crying in that house. That was the spirit. And that is the spirit of any movement that will survive.

**Q: You invoked Rev. Martin Luther King, whom we may agree was a prophet and a courageous one. He was also a man who had the failings that men and women have. But he stood up. In what ways would you encourage us to stand up and participate in civil disobedience in this country?**

A: When the Newtown shooting took place, as the Africa columnist for *Daily Beast* I stayed in my room and sent a rallying call to the mothers of America to rise up against gun violence in this country. I like the trend the debate is taking, but I think there is a need for — and this is my naïve African perspective — more grassroots organizing around the issue of gun violence in this country. After Newtown, what has happened to that conversation is that it has gotten very political. So it’s a Joe Biden issue. But when the shooters go on the rampage, it’s not a Joe Biden issue. I’m not saying your leaders are not compassionate. But the people who feel it the most are the community people.

I think when you talk about civil disobedience or protests, [gun violence] is the kind of thing that people really need to start standing up to. But if a community feels passionate about something — and that’s how we started the conversation — and if the community feels like they are not being heard about that particular issue, I think it’s important for people to be able to express themselves, express the way they feel about a particular thing. I am all for protests, peaceful protests, nonviolent protests and nonviolent engagement on issues that are not satisfactory for a group of people. I think there are many things in this country that women, men, boys and girls can decide we’re going to stand up to.



We were in Chicago a few days ago. Hafeeza, my assistant, makes me read all of these briefing books and there were all of these statistics about Chicago and the strategies of the police. When we met with the mayor that was what he constantly talked about: “Oh, my police chief is doing well.” I said

to him, “Sir, with all due respect, and I’m sure you are doing a great job, this is not just a police issue. It is a community issue. You should elicit the support of religious leaders, schoolteachers, parents, community people. Organize a different group of people so that this issue is tackled from the grassroots to the top level. Everyone has a role to play in making communities safe.”

**Q: My parents ran away from Somalia when I was a young kid. I came [to the lecture tonight] with the IRC Peacemakers.<sup>8</sup> I was wondering, how did you overcome all that you have?**

A: It’s something that never goes away. Everything you have seen, it’s easy to have a flashback. It’s easy to walk into a space and just blackout. It’s easy to cry. It’s easy to be upset and angry. And because you have all of these emotions happening every time, what is not easy is for you to keep going. That’s where I find myself. Some days I have this tough thing going on about me, but inside I’m like Jell-O. There’s so much happening. You’re just so emotional about things you see happen. And once you’ve gone through it, my dear, it’s internal. It’s not about where you come from anymore.

So I hear the stories of women in Mali, and it’s my story. When I hear the stories of women in Sudan, it’s my story. When I hear the stories of women even here in the U.S., single mothers who have gone through many different things, refugee women — it’s my story. Trust me. It never goes away.

One of the things I tell young people, old people, there is no way we can do this work that we’re doing if we don’t believe there’s a higher power responsible for some of the things happening. Now, I’m not saying be a Christian, a Muslim, a Jewish person, a Hindu. What I’m saying is you have to have a kind of faith to be able to negotiate this world if you’re a peacebuilder or peace activist or change agent, because you’ll see so many things that will make you angry.

I always ask this question, “What similar traits do Hitler and Martin Luther King share? Or Tutu and Charles Taylor?” The mayor of Chicago said, “Well, besides being human I don’t see anything they share.”

*What distinguishes us from the other is where we put our anger. Anger is fluid, has no shape or size. There is the peace container, and there is the war container.*

I said, “Anger.” Hitler was an angry man. Dr. King was angry. Mandela was angry. Charles Taylor was angry. I’ve been angry. Other women are angry. What distinguishes us from the other is where we put our anger. Anger is fluid, has no shape or size. There is the peace container, and there is the war container. Anger is not in any. You can decide, “OK, I’m really angry right now. But I’m going to pour my anger into the peace container.” And what you see is someone who is building peace and doing something positive with their anger.

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<sup>8</sup> The International Rescue Committee’s Peacemakers Program develops public speaking and leadership skills for refugee and immigrant youth in San Diego.

Anger is what keeps me going. Anger is like the fuel that I need to do something. But I never ever think that I'm going to put my anger into a violent container. Does it ever go away? No, it never goes away. All you have to do is decide, where do I pour my anger? Where do I pour all of those emotions that will make sense to the world, and will that leave a legacy?

Most times when you've gone through war, the question you need to ask yourself is, do I want to put this in this violent container and end up in The Hague or end up a villain? Or do I want to put it in this peace container and end up leaving a legacy, like someone like King or Mandela or Tutu or Mother Theresa? All of these people and the people we consider villains had one common thing, and that thing was anger.

Tonight I ask you to go home, think about it, teach your children that anger is neither good nor bad, but where you pour your anger is what your life story will be. Thank you all very much.

**INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY**

*Excerpts from Leymah Gbowee's Remarks  
at the IPJ's Annual Breakfast*

***Talking to the Converted***

What practical things can we do? What practical things can we do in San Diego to end violence against women? What practical things can we do as women to end violence against women? How can we step out of talking to the converted? This is a room of sympathizers. Everyone in this room understands why we are fighting.

I took my fight and my frustration to another level. There are three radio programs in Liberia. I hear that if President Sirleaf is not listening to one she listens to the other, and every politician listens to those three radio shows. So I invited those three journalists to my office and sat them down. I asked them, "Do you all have daughters?" They said yes. "Do you all have sisters?" Yes. "Obviously you have mothers because you are on earth."

As we sat there I began the conversation about the horrifying rape that is taking place in Liberia, that makes the back pages of most newspapers and never front-page headlines, never TV news, and never ever make radio. I asked one of them who seemed to be all-knowing, "Did you read about the woman recently whose husband poured boiling water on her because she refused to have sex with him?" "No, where did that happen?" I said, "Here."

"Do you know the story of young Olivia who died as a result of her rape, and her uncle who is responsible for raping her repeatedly is a free man, even though we have the strongest rape law in all of West Africa?"

I went on to recite and recount stories that had made different newspapers, about rape and abuse. Sadly, none of them knew anything. I said, "I want your show. I know you have a huge political platform. I want it. I want your space. I want Monday morning on all of your shows, every month for a year. I'll pay you. And those Monday mornings you can talk about nothing but women's rights issues and what they face in the Republic of Liberia."

Everyone said, "You have it."

My fight was not over because we have some of the dumbest parliamentarians in the world. Trust me. They act like they are from space. People who vote them into office are non-entities to them. I went to a high-profile funeral and met this Member of Parliament, very powerful man. I said, "How are you?"

He said, "Oh, my sister, I'm great."

I sat next to him and said, "How is your daughter?"

"Oh, she's very well."

"Well, how old is she now?"

"13."

"Wow, there will soon be a boyfriend."

"Stop it! I don't want to hear that."

I said, "Really? So you are not having any conversations with her about sex or boys."

"Leymah, you are making me very uncomfortable and I'm about to leave this seat."

I said, "Sir, do you know that in this country, your daughter and many other little girls like my little girls could probably be raped while they're in school?"

He said, "What are you telling me?"

I said, "Rape is a problem. There are stories upon stories, cases upon cases, of little girls being raped by their teachers in school in Liberia, and nothing says that your daughter cannot be the next victim."

The next thing that came out of his mouth: "What can we do?"

I said, "We hear that some of the male lawyers are about to take this thing back to the president and bring it to parliament to say that our rape law is barbaric and they want to water it down."

He said, "You know what? You have my support."

I said, "I will hold you to your word."

*In order for us to end violence against women, we need to stop talking to ourselves.*

The point that I make here: In order for us to end violence against women, we need to stop talking to ourselves. This time, next year, have this very beautiful breakfast. Bring in construction workers, bring in mechanics, bring in engineers, bring in the politicians of your state, people who do not understand what it is, and drive it home. Until we drive it home, we will continue to talk to ourselves. Until we make every other man or

woman in decision making who has no idea of why we fight and thinks that we're just a bunch of crazy people with nothing to do, until we make them to understand that your daughter that you so dearly cherish could be or is a possible victim, we will continue to talk to ourselves.

It is time for us to start a revolution. Sexual and gender-based violence is not going away. Even if there was a resolution in New York today, we will still see it. We will still have a problem with it. It's time for us to step out of our space and engage in new spaces. It's also a time for us women who speak this language to be very committed to what we do, walk our talk. We should not just be activists when there's a high-profile rape case and not interested when that rape case doesn't make the radio or the TV. It's time for us to work everywhere.

It's important for us as women not to sit down. The last time I was in San Francisco at Sheryl Sandberg's house, someone asked me, "What can we do to help?" I have a very good answer for that: "Take one girl in your community and mentor her. You will be helping the world greatly."

In order for us to end violence against women, we need to make our message simple and clear. Let's leave all of the jargon. It's not statistics. It's not numbers. I just came back from Chicago. We went to see Mayor Rahm Emanuel. In that conversation he started talking about the numbers — that the numbers dropped. The numbers, and the numbers, and the numbers. I said, "Mayor, those are individuals. Those are families mourning, people going through emotions."

*Every time we start to talk about sexual and gender-based violence, they are not numbers. They are not statistics.*

Every time we start to talk about sexual and gender-based violence, they are not numbers. They are not statistics. They are our daughters. Our sisters. And some woman who could be the first president of this great nation. Thank you.

### ***Women in Leadership***

One of the threats that we are facing as women globally, and not just in a particular place, is speaking from the corners of our mouths. We're managing to be much more political like the men. We want women in leadership but we don't want women in leadership to be criticized by other women. If we're serious about leadership, we have to be able to stand firm and say, "If you want to be in the game, we are your biggest constituency. We should criticize you publically and privately, and we should still be able to move on."

First things first, every woman is a potential voter for your network. Every woman, regardless of her political opinion, should be heard by your network. It's only in talking and dialogue that you can get the other over. But if she's called Tea Party and Republican and you don't listen, you're going nowhere. That is what the men are using to keep us apart. So let's have a conversation.

I'll give you a quick story. We went to the DRC [Democratic Republic of the Congo], and it was at the time that I was writing my memoir. They brought this journalist to follow me. She's from North America. I had a lot of things going on in my mind. Sometimes I can be very distant, and sometimes I can be very intense, and sometimes I can be all smiling. But from the border of Rwanda into DRC, I was traumatized. It brought back memories of the war in Liberia. So it was a really reflective time for me.

The night before we left DRC — after going to Kivu, Bukavu and Kinshasa — I observed the brutal beating of a girl who had been raped by a humanitarian worker. I was the only woman standing there screaming for someone to help her. I'm not a racist, but when I looked around it was all white men standing with their arms folded as the police pounded on this girl, all because this man who had violated her said she had come to harass him.

So the next morning I'm standing in the elevator and this event is playing through my mind. I am angry. If that journalist had said anything to me, I did not hear her because I was in a totally

different world. I get to New York two weeks later and I see a letter from the people who had hired her. It said that she came back and said you're racist and you hate her.

I'm not a person to defend myself because I feel like people's opinion will always change. But it was so sad. And I kept saying to the [people who hired her], "I sincerely apologize if she felt that way. I honestly did not pay attention to her. I didn't hear her because my mind was messed up." We met at the Hamptons a few months later, and I walked up to her and said, "I sincerely apologize if you feel that way. You see, this work that I do is God's work, and I cannot do this work if I have hate in my heart for any human being." We made up and kissed, and now I have permission to stay at her house any time.

But the essence of this story is that we need, as women regardless of where we find ourselves, to dialogue. Talk about it. If Dee [Aker] has a policy in this institution<sup>9</sup> that you don't like, please don't let it be a coffee table conversation in your home. Come to her. In that way, you are building alliances. It's time for us as women to really start talking, trashing our petty things, because those petty things stop us from achieving what we hope to achieve.

### ***Involving Young Men in the Fight Against Sexual Violence***

I like to tell this story of how we are trying to get youth to move beyond what they are learning in the classroom and do things that will get them into universities. We'll get in a room and have girls and boys. The first thing we ask the girls is, "How many of you are teen mothers?"

So I flipped that question around that day to young men. "How many of you are teen fathers?" There were about 20 in the room; 10 raised their hands. I got down from where I was speaking and walked up to them and said, "So, my man, what happened?" One said, "I don't know." I asked another one. "Well, I don't know because it didn't take long." Another one said that it wasn't very enjoyable sex. All of them had very stupid answers to the questions.

When we went back to debrief as staff, some people said, "Wow. Those boys were stupid."

I said, "No, they weren't stupid. Actually we are the stupid ones because we've targeted the girls, talking about teenage pregnancy. Can they impregnate themselves? Those boys were spewing ignorance because no one asks a Liberian man or stops to say to them, *One second of unprotected sex can lead to pregnancy.*"

Working with child soldiers, one told me he never raped any woman. I said, "Really?"

He said, "Yes."

"Let me turn this question around. Did you tear off anyone's clothes and force them to have sex?"

He said, "Yes, I did. But Leymah, isn't that what women were made for?" Child soldier. He was 16.

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<sup>9</sup> Dee Aker is interim director of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

Three years ago, my daughter was 12 and went to school telling her friends it's International Women's Day. (Coming from the house of a feminist they have to act like feminists, too.) "It's International Women's Day and they have to treat us girls right."

*Put a gun in his hands, he will assault and rape women and come back and say, "I raped no one." Why? Because all of his life he's been brought up to believe that the body of a woman is there for taking.*

One of the little boys, 12 years old, stood up and said, "Sit down and shut up. What are women good for but making babies?" Put a gun in his hands, he will assault and rape women and come back and say, "I raped no one." Why? Because all of his life he's been brought up to believe that the body of a woman is there for taking.

Yes, continue to work with the girls but work with men who will sit with these boys and really start to teach them. We have a lot of work still ahead of us.

### ***The Meaning of Peace***

For anyone in this room to think that peace is the absence of war, you've missed the mark. For anyone to think that peace is the absence of sexual and gender-based violence, you've missed the mark. In my opinion, there will never be peace until we, as global citizens, begin to treat each other the way we want ourselves to be treated. That is peace.

And that sums up why we have all of the problems that we have. Natural resource conflicts: If one ethnic group in power could decide to give some of the wealth to another ethnic group, we won't have wars. Or maybe we wouldn't have wars if one group would start treating each other the way they wanted to be treated; if it wasn't white and black, southern and non-southerns, Republican and Democrat, Tea Party and not Tea Party.

People, get into place: men looking at women as equal citizens of this world. Women looking at other women from poverty-stricken backgrounds as equal citizens, and not coming into their spaces and thinking they've come to change or teach you something, but rather you've come on a journey of learning. That is peace.

Until we can start to teach that to our children, we will continue to see what we see. Peace is allowing one group of people to command and dominate their space the way they know how, and not someone else coming and telling them. We can never have peace until we come to that realization as global citizens.

When someone looks at me and sees that I have a baby that carries an American passport and I stand at customs, and without reading my passport, says, "Oh, you've come here to pop out another baby," what do I do? I straighten up — even though I've been on 11 hours of flights — fix my clothes, look at her and say, "I am the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner."

Until we don't judge a book by its cover, we will not see true peace.



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