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Leymah Gbowee and the Army of Women in White

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### Abstract

This paper describes the founding of peace activist Leymah Gbowee's Liberia Mass Action for Peace (LMAP) movement that helped to end the Second Liberian Civil War. It provides a biographical account of the life experiences that were crucial for Gbowee to advocate for peace and found the movement. The paper also compares the LMAP movement with the more recent #MeToo movement and analyzes Gbowee's personal critiques of #MeToo.

*Keywords:* Leymah Gbowee, women, activism, Liberia Mass Action for Peace, #MeToo

### Leymah Gbowee and the Army of Women in White

Since I am so passionate about activism and politics, I wanted to do my research on someone who is politically involved and has enacted significant changes in the world. Leymah Gbowee fits this description, as she won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for starting a successful women-led movement for peace in a war-torn nation where women received little respect. The story of how she started this movement is inspiring, which is another reason I chose to share it. The amount of change that she enacted in spite of the adversities she faced is an incredible demonstration of bravery, passion, and determination. In addition to these traits, she is exceptionally intelligent and caring with a strong sense of what is right. She is not afraid to advocate for what she believes in, regardless of what obstacles she faces. These are traits that I value and hope to embody, so who she is as a person is inspiring aside from her achievements.

Additionally, choosing Gbowee instead of a celebrity was a conscious decision on my part to move away from the idolization of celebrities we have in modern society. People focus far too much attention on celebrities and it draws attention away from other women (and people in general) who have far more important impacts on society.

### Early Life

Leymah Gbowee had a comfortable childhood where she lived in Monrovia, Liberia. Her parents had both grown up poor but worked their way out of poverty. Her family lived in a neighborhood with modern amenities, and she and her four sisters attended the best private school in Monrovia. Leymah dreamed of going to college to study biology and eventually become a doctor. However, this possibility disappeared when war broke out less than six months after her high school graduation (Gbowee, 2013, p. 5-7).

## Brutality

The Second Liberian Civil War started when Leymah Gbowee was only seventeen. When the fighting began to escalate, some of Leymah's extended family and friends of the family came to her home to take shelter due to fighting in their neighborhoods. At one point, there were over 30 people staying in her family's house. As the eldest in the household (her parents were temporarily trapped elsewhere), she was made responsible for hosting them, assigning them places to sleep, and cooking meals for them. This experience forced her to grow up quickly, as she has never really had responsibilities before. The situation got much worse when the fighting neared their home and they had to flee. While they were fleeing, food was scarce and they were in near-constant danger. During this time, Leymah experienced death for the first time, when she saw someone killed right in front of her, and then many more times after that. She witnessed first-hand the brutality of the soldiers on all sides of the war. They showed no mercy, barbarically and indiscriminately killing women, children, and babies and frequently raping women and young girls (Gbowee, 2013, chapter 2).

After Monrovia (but not the rest of Liberia) was safe for a brief period of time, Leymah married a man named Daniel, who was wealthy by Liberian standards and often bought her expensive things. He was kind to her at first, but then he became controlling and physically and verbally abusive. It was even worse when she got pregnant. Several times she had decided to leave him, but could not do so because she had become pregnant again and was financially dependent on him. Meanwhile, he chipped away at her confidence with his gaslighting and emotional abuse. She had four children with him before she was finally able to get out of the relationship (Gbowee, 2013, p. 41-49).

### Social Work Experiences

Her way out of her abusive relationship with Daniel was a program run by UNICEF, the Ministry of Health and Mother Patern College of Health Sciences, that trained people to do social work and counselling for those affected by the war. Upon completing the program, she worked with several organizations that were helping Liberian communities and working towards peace. This work transformed Leymah. She did a lot of trauma healing sessions with women who had been victimized by the war. In these sessions, she observed that women are like “sponges,” absorbing all of the pain around them and holding it in. The women shared their trauma and experiences with violence. They worked through it together, relating with one another. The experience of helping them also helped Leymah to heal from the trauma of her abusive relationship. Additionally, hearing about the awful things those women had experienced fueled her desire to take action. Around this time, she had a dream in which there was a voice commanding her to “gather the women to pray for peace.” So she did (Gbowee, 2013, chapter 11).

### Beginning to Mobilize

Using the interpersonal skills she had learned from doing social work, Leymah founded the Christian Women’s Peace Initiative (CWI), an organization where women gathered weekly to pray together for peace. The number of women each week grew steadily, which inspired a Muslim woman, Asatu Bah Kenneth, to rally other Muslim women to join the effort. This was powerful because in Liberia, while Christians and Muslims generally got along, they never worked together, especially for something that was political by nature. While the initiative was

successful in getting women involved, Leymah felt like prayer without action was not enough (Gbowee, 2013, 122-126).

First, Leymah and a group of women she worked with founded and led the Peace Outreach Project (POP). During the nine months the project was active, they reached out to women across Liberia, talking to them directly, posting fliers, and answering questions. They aimed to empower them and change their view that peace negotiation was “men’s business.” This created the framework for a much larger movement. At the project’s end, the Christian-Muslim alliance was announced, and a group of 200 women of both faiths marched to City Hall together, wearing white. This would be the first of many protests. After receiving no response from President Charles Taylor or other political leaders, Leymah and her organization organized a protest. Every day, through all types of weather, hundreds of women gathered in a field outside of parliament, sometimes chanting, sometimes holding signs, sometimes praying, but always wearing white. This army of women in white demanding peace came to be known as the Liberian Mass Action for Peace (LMAP). As the movement went on, their numbers steadily grew. After a few weeks, Taylor finally agreed to meet with them. However, he did nothing after this meeting, so they continued their daily peaceful protests. In the process, they inspired others to stand up to the atrocities of the government. In addition to protesting, they encouraged women to deny their husbands sex until something was done to stop the war. While it had little effect on their cause, it was able to get them more media attention.

After a ceasefire was negotiated then near-immediately broken, Leymah and the other women were exhausted and frustrated from protesting day after day with little to no visible

effects. However, this frustration produced perhaps the most influential moment of the entire LMAP movement.

#### The Last Straw

Fed up with the lack of action, Leymah and 200 other women marched into the building where peace talks had been occurring for several weeks. They filled the halls and declared that they would hold the delegates hostage until a peace agreement was reached. When some of the delegates threatened to arrest Leymah for being the leader of the group, she threatened to strip naked. (Gbowee, 2013, p. 160-161). In addition to showing her desperation, this act invoked traditional African beliefs, because a woman deliberately baring herself was a curse that signified a mother taking back the life she had given (Prasch, 2015).

A peace agreement was not signed on that day, but their civil disobedience caused the peace talks to be taken seriously. Two weeks later, West African peacekeeping troops arrived in Liberia and other countries helped to intercept weapons. Within a month, Taylor resigned without a fight and the war was over (Gbowee, 2013, chapter 13).

#### Connections to the #MeToo Movement

I have engaged in much discussion regarding the #MeToo movement in my first-year seminar. While doing my research, I noticed similarities between Leymah Gbowee's LMAP movement and the #MeToo movement

The Me Too campaign was started by activist Tarana Burke as a way to show sexual assault survivors that they are understood and are not alone. It began to gain more attention when Alyssa Milano first used #MeToo in an effort to show the magnitude of the problem of sexual assault. From that point on, it went viral, with hundreds of thousands of women, and some men,



sharing their stories and posting #MeToo on their social media profiles. The movement led to the downfall of many people in powerful positions who were sexually harassing and/or assaulting women (North, 2017).

The main similarity between the LMAP and #MeToo movements is that they were both instrumental in dethroning powerful men who had been getting away with sex crimes. Gbowee's LMAP movement helped take down former Liberian dictator Charles Taylor, who was found guilty of "participating in the planning of murder, rape, sexual slavery and enforced amputations" (Holpuch, 2018, para. 14). The #MeToo movement was responsible for taking down 263 powerful people, almost all of whom were men, in fields such as business, politics, media, and entertainment (North, 2019). The success of these two movements in bringing down powerful people who have committed wrongs demonstrates the power of women working towards a common goal. This power is also exemplified by the fact that both of the movements began as grassroots efforts centered on women telling their stories. Through telling these stories, women in both movements were able to find solace with one another. Women in the #MeToo movement could hear other women's stories of sexual harassment and assault and know that they were not alone. Women in the Mass Action for Peace movement could relate to other women who had experienced similarly traumatic experiences due to the violence of the war.

To be sure, in making these comparisons, my intent is not to equate sexual harassment and assault with the violence of war. Both are pressing, very harmful problems within our society that disproportionately affect women, but the extreme brutality of the war in Liberia should not be discounted.

#### Criticisms of the #MeToo Movement

While she supports any effort to help women, Gbowee has some criticisms of the #MeToo movement. One such criticism is the celebrity-centric nature of the movement. Of the movement, she has said, “It turns what is a real-life situation for women into a question of trending.” She recognizes the movement’s importance in highlighting the issue of sexual harassment, but she thinks that there is not enough action and follow-through involved. In her opinion, if the celebrities want to help women who have been abused, they should set up shelters for them or pursue similarly concrete solutions (Torres, 2018). This lack of concrete action is part of a larger phenomenon of “armchair activism” within society. In the words of Gbowee, “A leader is not the person who tweets. Leaders are the ones who will stand up and speak when no one else is willing to speak up” (Heydarpour, 2018).

Both Leymah Gbowee’s Liberian Mass Action for Peace and the #MeToo movements were characterised by women supporting other women who have had similarly traumatic experiences. They involve women rejecting the unjust status quo, saying enough is enough, and banding together to make a change. Above all, these movements demonstrate the power and resilience of women in the face of adversity.

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