

Peace Is Not Enough <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/16/opinion/politics/leymah-gbowee-peace-liberia.html>

**Peace Is Not Enough**  
**By Leymah Gbowee**  
Sept. 16, 2018



A young girl passes pro-peace posters in Monrovia days before Liberia's presidential election in October 2017. Credit: Jane Hahn for The New York Times

*Leymah Gbowee is a Liberian peace activist, social worker and women's rights advocate. She shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the former president of Liberia, and the Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karman.*

Between 1989 and 2003, Liberia was somewhat synonymous with war. Stoking the existing tension among ethnic groups, military factions with power-hungry leaders unleashed an era of bitter internal conflict, coups d'état and uprisings during this period. Around 250,000 people died, and many more fled the country. When it was over, Liberia's economic and political system was in ruins.

The war raged for 14 years; the period of peace that followed has now outlasted it. We could not have reached this point without the contribution of the country's women, who used their voices and influence to win peace.

Civil war in Liberia took place in two bloody acts. The end of the First Liberian Civil War in 1996 and the election of Charles Taylor as president the following year did little to appease the country's long history of sectarianism. In the Second Liberian Civil War, which began in 1999,

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numerous rebel groups rose up in opposition to Mr. Taylor's regime. As the conflict spread, Liberia plunged into chaos. Women and children faced unprecedented levels of cruelty and displacement.

The normalization of violence in my community angered me. As one of the leaders of Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, I called on women to protest the war through whatever nonviolent means were at their disposal. We gathered in the streets and demanded a cease-fire, peace negotiations and the deployment of foreign peacekeepers. Despite President Taylor's initial opposition to negotiating with the rebel groups, our movement gathered so much momentum that he finally agreed to enter a dialogue with them.

At the onset, when we had this crazy idea to bring women together to call for peace, we did not see it as a political act. We were primarily focused on providing security and safety to our villages. We wanted to be able to feed, clothe and educate our children. We wanted change, but we did not explicitly center our efforts on the Taylor regime. We insisted that we were only working for peace, not politics.

Still, unknown to us, the tactics we were using were inherently political. We made public statements, appealed to the United Nations and reached out to politicians, the media, religious groups and the diplomatic community. When we realized that these activities had little impact on the rebels and the government, we turned to more disruptive actions, from organized daily sit-ins and pickets to vigils and street protests. We may not have called ourselves a political movement, but the large, visible presence of women unveiled our latent political power in Liberia.

As peace talks began in Ghana in 2003, we continued campaigning. Every day groups of women would visit the hotel where negotiations were being held. We dispatched observers to the meetings and spent our evenings lobbying the warring parties while continuing to mobilize people in Liberia. And we changed the narrative, showing that women can be legitimate actors in negotiating peace and establishing an interreligious movement that brought together Christian and Muslim women in Liberia.

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Image



Women gather to support peaceful voting during Liberia's 2017 presidential election. Credit Jane Hahn for The New York Times

The impact that we had on the negotiations was empowering. As the country prepared to elect a new president, the other leaders of the movement and I knew we had to start talking politics. Women had to realize that their social, economic and reproductive choices were in the hands of those in power.

It was now time to make sure women voted. So we went from village to village, providing civic education and urging women to register to vote.

Some pushed back.

“Peace is enough for us,” they told us.

“Peace is not enough,” we responded.

Peace is more than the absence of gunfire. Decisions made in the political realm affect directly whether our community is healthy, safe and at peace. If a country's agricultural budget is cut, female farmers will suffer. If education budgets are cut, fewer girls will go to school.

The outcome of Liberia's first postwar general election in 2005 was groundbreaking. Some 1.5 million Liberians out of a population of three million registered to vote. Voter turnout for the

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election's first round, in October, was around 75 percent. In the November runoff, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won the presidency, becoming the first female head of state in Africa.

Today Liberia is still far from achieving gender equality. Fewer than 12 percent of cabinet ministers are women, and only one woman ran in the 2017 presidential elections. There is still resistance to female leadership and participation at the community and national levels. But there is also an intergenerational movement of women who are building on the work of the women's peace movement and determined to have their voices heard.

Women are claiming the right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. In the lead-up to the 2017 presidential election, the Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa, the nonprofit I founded in 2012, mobilized Liberian women and youth to ensure that peace be maintained. Groups such as the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia drafted more punitive rape laws and expanded women's inheritance rights. When the Senate voted in 2017 to make rape an offense subject to bail, hundreds marched in protest over the bail provision. Women are also campaigning to outlaw female genital mutilation and are increasingly promoting education for girls.

Fifteen years have passed since the end of the civil war. But these 15 years of peace will mean little if they do not translate into a better life for the next generations. We must forge new paths so that our daughters' lives can be better. We must raise our sons to know how to share power and decision-making with the women in their lives. And we must ask all of our political representatives to place an emphasis on peace and sustainable development; it does more than just benefit women — it benefits us all.

Liberia's recent history shows that it is possible, and necessary, for women to be involved in the political life of their country. For politics to be centered on the needs of the common people, we must ensure that more women around the world have a seat at the table.

And if the table is not worth sitting at, women have the power to reshape and create their own decision-making mechanisms through political activism and mobilization.