

Building Peace From Below: Individual Empowerment in the Face of Militarism

Leymah Gbowee*

In 2011, Leymah Gbowee won the Nobel Peace Prize, along with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Tawakkul Karman, for her role in contributing to the resolution of Liberia's notoriously vicious Second Civil War in 2003 and for the "non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peacebuilding work."¹ In 2012, she founded the Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa, and serves as its president. This foundation creates educational and leadership opportunities for girls and women in Liberia. In addition, she is the Executive Director of the Women, Peace, and Security program at Columbia University's Earth Institute and a Sustainable Development Goals Advocate for the United Nations. She is a member of the World Refugee Council, a commissioner-delegate for the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and a founding member and former coordinator of the Women in Peacebuilding Program/West African Network for Peacebuilding. She also serves on the board of the Nobel Women's Initiative, is a Global Ambassador for Oxfam, has received numerous honorary degrees, and is a tireless advocate for peace, justice, and women's rights through her membership in several other organizations.

On November 10, 2018, Ms. Gbowee presented a talk to the students at Towson University on peace, militarism, women's rights, and empowerment. The Towson University Journal of International Affairs was a proud organizer and co-sponsor of this event. What follows is a transcript of her comments, which have been lightly edited for length and readability. A video recording of her full talk, including a question-and-answer session, can be found on the journal's web site by clicking on this link:

<https://wp.towson.edu/iajournal/events/leymah-gbowee/>.

Ms. Gbowee: Thank you so much for having us here this evening. It tells a lot about an institution when you see a lot of young people interested in global affairs and peace and security issues.

If you look at the state of our world today, you can easily become pessimistic about wars and violence everywhere. Places like the US aren't seen as being at war, at least not internally.

Maybe not technically, but if you look at gun violence, what are the stats? There's a website called "Gun Archive."² It's about the gun culture and gun violence in America. Yesterday, the statistics there showed 49,099 instances of gun violence had taken place this year. When I had checked it three days before, it listed about 48,800. And from yesterday until today, there have been another 185 gun incidents in the US. So, from yesterday evening, it went from 49,099 gun incidents to what it is now: 49,386.

*Ms. Leymah Gbowee is the founder of Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa (in Monrovia, Liberia), Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa-USA (in New York City, USA), and current President of the Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa. She currently serves as Executive Director of the Women, Peace and Security Program at Columbia University's Earth Institute.

¹ "Nobel Peace Prize 2011 - Press Release." www.Nobelprize.org. 2011-10-07

² <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>

To take another example, on the “Wars of the World”³ website a few years back, the Syrian conflict was just between the Syrian Army and one insurgent group. Today, there are 199 militia insurgent groups operating in Syria.

When people think about peace and security, they tend to hinge it on militarism. The general perception is that once we end wars, we have peace. Once we end wars, we have security. And you say to yourself, peace in this world is hinged on the number of armies that countries have. The number of jet bombers. My argument is that it’s not just the armies. When you look at peace and security, what you need to consider are those conditions that make you feel like a human and make me feel like a human.

A few months back, I found myself at the Naval War College up there in Rhode Island. All of these powerful generals were there from the US and Canada, and we’re having conversations about peace and security. The point that I try to drive home to them is that, until we get to a place in this world where we can re-imagine peace and security, not from an army and a military standpoint, but from a perspective of human security, where your basic human needs are met, we will continue to see these alarming rates of gun violence. We will continue to see an increase in militia groups in the different parts of the world.

Trust me. Because you are in this community and you have freedom of speech, you have a warm bed, you have food, you have all of the conditions met to make you feel like a true citizen of the space that you find yourself in, if someone came and offered you an AK-47 and said “Let’s go cause trouble,” you would think ten times. However, if you lived in a space where you are not treated like a human, where you’re treated like a second class citizen and your needs are not met, if someone offered you a gun and said to you, “If you join me and use this, we can change your world,” instantly you would say yes.

Let me demonstrate this to you. I went to the Italian Parliament during the Libyan War. I sit on the board for a group in Italy that is focused on restorative justice, reconciliation, and trauma healing. So, during the war in Libya when they were trying to get Gaddafi out, we were lobbying the Italian government (because it plays a huge role in Libya) to see if they could put some money not just into getting rid of this dictator, but into infrastructure development and healing the wounds of the people. Basically, I went to Parliament and made a case for the people, made a case for trauma healing, made a case for trauma awareness, and the government committed several million euros to this organization to go back to Libya to work.

So we went into Libya a little over a year after the fall of Gaddafi. We got there, and they had probably four insurgent groups. I had the opportunity to meet a room full of one hundred young men. We started to talk about peace and justice, transition, and moving away from the war mentality. And then I asked a question. “Where do you see yourselves in five years?” These boys started laughing. If someone asked me where I saw myself in five years, or if someone came to one of you students and said “Where do you see yourself in five years?,” off the tongue you would roll it out. If not five years, maybe three; if not three, maybe two. The easiest thing for you to say would be to get out of Towson. “I want to graduate!” And then, for those who put a lot of thought into life: “I’ll graduate and go to grad school. I’ll go to grad school and start my own business.” From there, it’s easy for some people. But at least you will know, from now until tomorrow, that this is what I want to do. But these boys started laughing. They said, “Auntie, you are a very funny person. We don’t see ourselves in the next 30 minutes.” In my mind, I told myself that this is a recipe for disaster. Today the number of insurgency groups in Libya has gone up to over forty. Every person now sees an AK-47 or their involvement in some kind of militia group as a means of security, as a means for a better life.

So, why am I taking you on this journey? I’m taking you on this journey because it is high time that each and every one of us with some stake in human life or human affairs begins to think about how we get involved in turning our upside-down world upright. There’s a lot of outrage in this country about

³ <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/global-conflict-tracker>

this-and-that and politics and democracy and the meaning of democracy and there's a lot of social justice action.

But change has to begin from within the community. The idea of social justice is that we want to create big change and go to the UN and do big things. Trust me, not a lot happens there. We bring coffee, we annoy the hell out of each other, we talk, we make big plans, we leave, we come back, and the next year we talk about the same things. The real change must start from down below.

So what can we do? Last year, we observed when President Trump made the proclamation that some students or people from other countries will not be allowed here. So, people flooded the airports to protest. I was fortunate to be at a particular university that was very proud that their students had been a part of this walk-out movement. They were there and they were protesting. And so, I was there giving lectures in different classes, and I asked, "How many of you have been protesting for them to restore the rights of the people?" Hundreds of them raised their hands. And then I asked, "How many of you live in dormitories where Iranians, Pakistanis, Yemenis, and others from the excluded countries live?" They also raised their hands.

And then I asked, "How many of you have one of those ethnicities as your friend?" You could barely see hands. So, my underlying question was: How different are you from this administration? The double standard is that you dare go to airports to protest when you have the same people walking in the dorms and the halls of your university and you never stop to say hi. That's human security, that's peace building: when you feel secure and you feel appreciated. Many students from foreign countries want to go back home. They're so miserable. People pass over them. Roll their eyes over them. Some of them barely get a good morning.

That's just the beginning. The point I'm trying to make is not to make anyone feel guilty, but to drive home that, for us to do justice and to move beyond militarism, we have to start small. Start by working on our communication. Start with our interactions, start with our passion. Start with being tolerant. Don't start with wanting to do everything. You can start small and then you can go up and do bigger things. You can go to a foreign country to teach children. Can you start teaching English in the cities where you have your universities, and use that as a stepping stone for cultural tolerance, respecting other cultures, and doing all these different things?

One of the lessons I learned from the mass action of peace we did in Liberia was the understanding that, even though we had protests in our country, and there were fifteen different locations where we protested, I wasn't the boss of any location. People, the women who lived there, were the ones who would say, "We're going here." They decided.

More recently, we got this grant to do a radio program showcasing the needs of women and the human security concerns these women had. So we went into a community. We brought together 30 or 25 women, plus us facilitators, and we went into the training room. We had our flip charts, spreadsheets—you know how you do all of these things, right? But none of these women had been to school. We're trying to elicit from them the problems in their communities. They said, "You know what? We don't want to sit in classrooms because we've never been in class." So, we walked outside, and we sat in front of a church. One after another, these women told us stories that made us cry, that made us laugh, that got us angry, but they kept on telling stories and stories and more stories.

One of the women told a story of her chickens getting lost repeatedly and going to the local court. They tried to kick her out because she took the dog of her neighbor, but she said that this is the dog that has been eating my chickens. She said, "I can prove to you that this neighbor's dog is the one who ate my chickens." The judge is sitting in the courtroom watching her. She takes a chicken out of her pocket and put it in front of the dog! We laughed and cried, but at the end of the day, when the dog tried to attack the chicken, she grabbed the chicken and said, "Now we've got the culprit." So, the neighbor had to pay for everything.

The woman told us how difficult it was for a poor woman like herself to access justice. So, she wanted us to talk about access to justice for women who have nothing. And another person talked about their child being raped while being at school. She wanted to tell us about teachers defiling little girls. So, one after the other we unpacked the stories, we took out the core, and we decided, "Let's put it out there."

I'll tell you another story. In Congo, I had a room full of women who had been sexually violated and all of the top media people from around the US and different parts of the world were there. I'm head of the delegation. As we sit in that space, one after the other these women told their stories. One after another they told us.

So, I'm taking my notes. But then I looked down and realized that, as these women are telling their stories, there is a common theme. And the theme in the stories was: "I was raped. I wanted to die. I tried to commit suicide and nobody came. And nobody listened. But then the women came." They had full network of survivors; once they heard one sister was violated, they would go to her. They would take her to the doctor. They would pool together what little they had and raise money. If you don't have a home, you went to their home. But, trust me, not a single soul in my grant-support delegation had picked up that message.

Instead, everyone in the delegation kept reinforcing the story of abuse because that's the narrative that they wanted to take out of these communities. And those narratives of weak people, of people who cannot change the dynamics of their own situation, reinforce the need for militarism in a lot of these communities. So, once we said that, everyone stopped. One after another, these women started to tell us, not just the stories of abuse, but stories of power. How they were able to overcome adversity even with nothing.

So, my point to all is that we need to reimagine peace and security, not just from a militaristic perspective, but from human security perspective. We have to see ourselves as people; we can't read it or break it down into statistics. We will continue to go on those websites and see horrible things and get very, very depressed about our world and how it's not a good place. But peace and security, social justice, doesn't necessarily come from up there; it starts from down here.

Look back over history. For example, Gandhi, and all the other people that we see as our heroes, rose by starting with one small thing. When Martin Luther King started, it was at a church with a few individuals. When Mandela began the anti-Apartheid struggle, it was just a few individuals. As we start our movement, I like to think that I can be a part of that group of powerful people. I can just sneak us in there. But when we started our movement, we started with seven women and ten US dollars. And now today, we seven women with ten dollars can be found in museums around the world. It is upon each and every one of us to change not just the social history of our communities, but the political history. In changing the political history of our communities, it takes you and I trying to reimagine our world from a very different perspective.

I know students' first question that comes to mind is: "How do I start?" And one place where you can start down this path is by beginning to peel off your stereotypical lens, the lens that makes you see me dressed like this and imagine me as an "immigrant," the lens that views those of different sexual orientations as bad people.

In my office, for example, my staff learned a hard lesson. We hired a young man who I think is the only openly gay man in the Republic of Liberia. My society is very homophobic. Everyone in the office has always had very negative things to say about gay people. So, we go to a staff retreat and I decide to talk about sexual orientation before we get to actual work. And everyone's going on and on about homosexuality. I can't repeat some of the things that they were saying. And our new worker just sat there and took it in. I said to them, "Do you think that homosexuals are bad people?" And they said, "Oh yes! Evil!" So, I said about their new colleague, who they did not know was gay, "Would you trust him to cross the street with your child?" And they said yes. "Would you trust him with your food?" And they

said yes. I responded, "But he is gay." And the entire room became extremely quiet. So, I told them that for us to do the work that we do, we have to be all embracing.

I have one more story. I had just taken a long flight and was extremely exhausted. I was about to speak with three hundred children. My taxi driver had an Arabic name, and I thought, "Oh, thank God! I'm going to sleep on this journey because young Arab men don't talk to strangers." I got in the car. "Ma'am, do you want coffee?" "No, thank you." "Do you want this?" "No thank you." "Do you want that?" All I thought was, please stop bothering me.

As we started to drive, he said, "Excuse me ma'am?" I said, "Yes?" He said, "I apologize, but I would like to talk to you. I wanted to meet you and I haven't had any sleep just to be at the airport to meet you." And then he said to me, "Ma'am my parents are from Turkey and my best friend is Kurdish." Turks and Kurds don't get along. "I've never been to a mosque; my friend is the same; he's never been a part of any of that." He then said, "When 9/11 happened, when those towers fell, I died. And every time there's a suicide bomber, I die again. I stop being me. Now, I'm just another possible terrorist suspect. A possible bomber." He just went on to pour out his pain, literally saying to me, "I got into this car to talk to you because I imagined that you would see my humanity. Because I see yours." That is the goal for each and every one of us: to see each other's humanity. Once we can see each other's humanity, that is the beginning of getting rid of militarism and encouraging peace and security.

Thank you.