

Oral History Interview with Leymah Gbowee

Conducted by Sarah Rutherford

For Georgetown University's Institute for Women Peace and Security

Profiles in Peace Oral History Project

May 2017

01:01:38

Leymah Gbowee's Office, New York City, NY

Transcribed by Madeline Warner

This oral history interview was conducted with Leymah Gbowee by Sarah Rutherford in New York City, NY. Leymah Gbowee was born in 1972 in central Liberia. At 17, she lived with her family in Monrovia when the First Liberian Civil War broke out in 1989. She talks about how the civil war impacted her life and set her on a path to becoming a peacemaker. A mother of four children, she joined the Lucian Church Trauma Healing program which led her to attend conferences with the Women Peacebuilding Network in 1999. She became heavily involved with the network and led women in nonviolent protests to facilitate a ceasefire, intervention forces, and negotiations between the government and the insurgents.

Topics: women, children, nonviolence, nonviolent protest, First Liberian Civil War, Child Soldiers, social and trauma work, Women Peacebuilding Network, Nobel Peace Prize

Countries/regions: Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, New York

Sarah: Alright, so first question, going back to when you were 17 years old and the first civil war erupted. Can you tell us what impact that had on you?

Leymah: Well, at 17 I was a bubbly young woman, enjoying life, loving basketball, a huge fan of the LA Lakers, because... our TV Station was synced to show us everything. So, a normal 17 year old about to finish high school with dreams of going to med school, becoming a pediatrician, and then one day everything turns upside down. But I have to take a step back to say that my growing up years was on a solid foundation, not in terms of wealth, but in terms of community, character building, and all of the different things that we are struggling with in the world today. We lived in a community that had a mixture of ethnic groups. It was a very poor community. The first people that owned a television set amongst the local people, my family, so everyone would come watch TV with all of us belong to the community. If your parents were away, that wasn't a license to do wrong because then they was gonna whoop your behind, and also I had a grounded childhood, a childhood that taught me to not to look at the difference but to embrace everyone, you know, one example they always said to us was, "look at your five fingers, they are all not equal, but they all live on the hand together in harmony so and they need each other." So that was the kind of lessons that [we] were taught.

So, when the war came, and all of the rhetoric about division and ethnic groups that you can – it did not just shake my world, it shattered [2:00] parts of the foundation of my upbringing because it was like, hm I've never seen this kind of double standard before. I was socialized to one thing. And the same people who taught me this one thing, are the same people who are now saying another thing. So then, as a young person trying to wrap the displacement, wrap the death of childhood friends, wrap the persistent hunger and the fear, and all of the negativity that was happening, I was also trying to make sense of the double standards of my socialization, and then the anger seeped in, and for many years I carried that anger with me. Angry at society for lying to me, angry at the adults in my life for not protecting me, angry at seeing my nephews and nieces scramble for food, angry at seeing children eating from dumpsters, that's something that was really very strange to me, yeah.

Sarah: And around this time, you started developing an interest in trauma healing. Can you tell us how that interest evolved and how that transitioned into an interest in peacebuilding?

Leymah: Well, I tell people I happened on trauma healing, you know, so carrying all of this anger with me made a lot of mistakes in my own personal life, and then I, with all that bitterness, I became like the protector of some little girls in my neighborhood. They were virgins and they were like animals that were being preyed upon, so I had to like gather them, and just talking to them, more often to me, inviting other women to talk about issues. And eventually, one woman said to me, you know, you need to go into social work. I was like, [4:00] social work? After my

war years experience, even though the war still raging, the last thing I wanted to do was to spend four years in college, and spend some other years learning, because I knew that one bullet could undo ten years of education. So I was like, I'm fine, I'll just do what I can do. But then when I agreed to do this because, not only was this social work program pay me, but it would also give me food, in the midst of the war, so that was a drive for going into the program. And when I went into the program, I started really being intrigued by the whole process of healing and then trying to understand myself, and one day it struck me that I'm traumatized, not just from my experience of the war but from my personal life, as an abused woman, and then I have to go through the process of healing because I don't want to be stuck here.

And so, I started doing that work with the program. It was first a difficult pill to swallow because not just looking at my own person – that mirror of me as a wounded person – but then there was this thing about the wounded healer being the best healer, and so I was like, how do I heal people? When I haven't even found my way? But, as I embrace the healing and understanding that trauma is like physical trauma – emotional and psychological trauma is like physical trauma, they say. One example that stuck with me was when someone said, “You see, when your trauma – when you've gone through a period of trauma – [6:00] you have a scar on your mind, on your heart, on your soul, just as if you had a physical trauma. It heals, but the scar never goes away.” Then I understood okay, now because people used to say, you know, ‘trauma healing’ – and even till today there is that misconception that you're healed from your trauma, but yes you're healed but there's always that reminder. And so I think it was that understanding of trauma that drew me to it, that I want to let people know this: that you can pass that stage, that scar can be there but you can live and work. And so, my first group that I started working with was with child soldiers – it was not by choice, it was by force because I needed a job and I had these four children.

So, if I have to talk about my experience as a woman, as a young woman at 17, it's like a weave, you know. The story is intertwined: my experience as a survivor of war, as a young girl, as an abused woman, and a single mother of many children, a refugee internally displaced, and then someone tried to get out of that hole of depression to get a new life, and a new beginning for her children. And so then when I decided I wanted to do this job, it's like, okay, we can offer you a job, for free, because the school required that I should practice, and, but it has to be with ex-combatants, these were the people I hated. So most times when I tell it, and [08:00]tell it lightly, I say God has a sense of humor, you know, he's just laughing at me and saying, “You, just as you seek, or you've been seeking understanding for your problem, I will present you with the people that you think were responsible for your problem so you also understand.” So I started working with them, and the way I tell the story all the time is that, the first day I went to them, they abused me for 60 minutes, then next day I went there 59, the third day 58 minutes, and by the time we got to a 50 minutes, ten days later, they were like, “Can't you go away?” I couldn't

because I wanted to go to school and this is the only job that any organization would offer me, so somehow, all of my experiences and the means of getting all out of the hole of poverty – the means of getting out of the hole of hardship – was linked to the people I hated the most and I blamed them most for my problems. So then, I started working with them, and eventually, you know when you stay in a situation long enough and you open your heart and your eyes to see, then you get to understand. So I started understanding their predicament and I came to the conclusion that these people are not to be blamed for my problems, it's the ones that [pause] So then, while I was helping them work through their healing, I also wanted to work with the women who had children by them. And so my whole experience of trauma healing started to grow and then I understood that for anyone to do peace work, you have to go through that process first, of – that journey towards your healing. And for most women I say, the sponge that has absorbed [10:00] all of the dirt, they're trying to squeeze it out, so you're light, you're able now to take on other things. So, I became interested in myself first, and then interested [pause] my own story gave me the strength to want to understand, and then once I got that understanding about myself, and started helping young ex-soldiers, and started helping their wives. I wanted other women to experience what I had experienced, through the process of understanding that I will live with this scar, but I can do other things even with the scar.

Sarah: So you've mentioned now, and you said this before, that women suffer in particular ways and sometimes offer the most during conflicts, but you've also demonstrated and you've said that women are not only victims, but they can also be powerful agents for change. So, how did you start thinking that women can also be these agents for change?

Leymah: It took a long time. And, [pause], but I had to link – like I said, the healing part, too. Because most times, in all of the community, I would say it took a long time. In most of the communities that we work, the women were the ones who were always trying to – even in the midst of pain, they were being optimistic. So that optimism is the thing that drew me to... . After all of this, you can still think forward, you can still think about, you can still dream. [12:00] It took a group of women who were in a refugee camp from Sierra Leone, telling me, “Oh, we will go back and make changes.” At that time, I was still struggling with my own healing, and I would look at them. Like, one person had her breast cut off, another was amputated, and all of them were raped viciously in the Sierra Leonean war, but these women had that kind of vibrance that no one could quash! So, every time they tell me, you know, “Women, women, women...” [noise of dissatisfaction]. I was working with ex-combatants, working with youth, and that was my introduction to actually working with community women. I was like, “What is this? How can you be telling me that you are going to change things when you have all this pain?” And one day they asked me, “Were you raped? During the war in Liberia?” “No.” And so, then they say “Wow, but you know that you can make a difference because it's the women.” But the way they lectured me was not in an accusing way – in an understanding... drawing my own experience,

and I say, “See? We’ve suffered this but we still have hope,” but just laying it out for me. I went home; I couldn’t get it out of my mind. And that night it just hit me that, “You’re such a hypocrite.”

You know if those women, and so I don’t think, if I may take a step back to answer your question, I didn’t think that women could make change. I think I was called by a group of women who had suffered different forms of violation that they could make change, and I think, I describe it as my baptism into the women’s movement. But [14:00] I would say also that when this skill fell out of my eyes, that we’re not just victims, that everything that I had been doing – from protecting those little girls in the neighborhood – was actually a thing of strength, even though I felt as that I was protecting them in my anger, but it was something that women would naturally do. So, it wasn’t me, I won’t take credit for that. It was a group of Sierra Leonean women who actually laid it out for me.

Sarah: So, you talked about your baptism into the women’s movement. Tell us a little bit more about how you got involved, especially the Women in Peacebuilding Network, and what that did for you.

Leymah: So as I worked with this program, the Lucian Church Trauma Healing program, we did not have a gender focus, not one at all at the time in the 90s and early 2000s. We were just a program that was just, go in, doing trauma healing, trauma healing, trauma healing, trauma healing. And then we recognized that – I recognized once they put me on the team of trainers – that we go into a space where 50 participants – ‘cause that was the maximum – and you apparently have two or three women that would never speak throughout the entire session until the men finish. And then, during lunch, they would seek me out as the only woman on the training team to talk about what they felt and how they saw this conversation, how they saw that, as a matter of fact, I was persistently mistaken for the cook of the team by men who were participants in the workshop. They’d walk up to me and say, “What are we having for breakfast today?” “I don’t know. Why don’t you know? They brought you here to cook.” So, I was either the cook on the team or maybe the comfort wife [16:00] – I don’t know – but they never really saw me as a trainer until I hit the training room.

So, then I went back to my bosses and said, “Let’s do something for women only.” [Noise of dissatisfaction] “Leymah, women only?” I said, “Yes, let’s start.” There was a security project so we decided we’d do the security women project, so we brought them together. Then the next thing was that there was this report that a lot of abuse had been taking place in the Church and that the wives of pastors and religious leaders were the most affected or impacted by abuse – domestic abuse. So, then we decided to watch out for pastors’ wives, and then we got this invitation for the Women in Peacebuilding Network in Ghana, and so I became their candidate

that the office would send for that training. I went and met – let me take a step back – there was a training for early warning, early response, and they asked me to go into that training. So I went to do this training, there was a lot of men, few women. But, also because of my background, because of the trauma that I had suffered, I never really felt credentialed enough in formal workshop space where you had people standing as a PhD, masters, I mean I was still fighting to get an associates of arts degree. And so, then, I would be so intimidated and when I would introduce myself I would say, “Leymah, the local activist.” You know, never giving myself any educational credit. So, these – one of the women at this meeting was a Nigerian and we did not speak to each other because she carried herself like, [18:00] I mean, like educated, suit and everything. One night, they decided they were taking us to a club, to relax, and they asked me to come. Against my better judgement, I decided I would go but I took a baseball cap and I put it on because I still used to do my tomboy kind of thing, I wasn’t lady-like like now. So we get to the club and they say I can’t enter because of my baseball cap, and I was like okay, so much for embarrassment in front of all these people.

But then this young Nigerian lady decided she didn’t want to go to the club, so the two of us ended up sitting in a car while everyone else partied and then we started this conversation. I thought she was snobbish, she thought I was snobbish, so for 5 days we had been in that workshop space and we never spoke to each other. And then she said, “I’m developing this new program, called the Women in Peacebuilding Network, and the meeting is actually in two weeks after this one. And I would like to invite you” because every now and then, I would speak in a meeting. And so, I [said], “Actually, I just started working on a program for women in my work,” and we spent that whole time – forgot that we were in a car while people were partying – talking. And two weeks later, I was invited to the launch of the Women in Peacebuilding Network, and this person is telling me, Kia, and that would end up being my very good friend till today.

So, we came to that Women in Peacebuilding Network and they brought women from all over West Africa and everyone was talking about their experiences. So, I was not the only one who didn’t have the educational background for what I was doing. There were women from like, so I was like, oh my God, this is like such a great space. And one of the nights we just decided to talk about our personal experiences, and I remember I said – first time I actually talked about, not my war experience, but the abuses [20:00] that I had gone through, including when I went to have my third child and how I was abused sexually by the nurses in the hospital – but after that night, the next morning there was just this, like, you’ve opened a cage for this bird – to just – so, there was this lightness about me.

Many things happened, and when I went back to Liberia, I was willing to launch, I was ready to work and launch the Women in Peacebuilding Network – Liberia’s chapter we started – while

still having my job at the trauma healing program, but I felt this call from God, and I know that he was telling me, “Leave this job, and focus on the women.” I was like, “Okay. I finally start to make a salary of \$150 to take care of 4 children, and now you’re telling me to leave this job and go into a job that is not going to pay me a dime. Are you kidding me, God?”

After a period, I just abandoned the whole trauma healing program, put in my resignation, and went to focus on the Women in Peacebuilding Network because it had taken on a life of its own, I was seeing me in most of the women we’re engaging. I remember the first time we presented that program, we had female ministers in the room, under President Taylor’s regime. They came, the Minister of Gender at the time, the Minister of Education has sat down, and some female members of parliament. When they sat down in a meeting, they were like, “Oh we have a huge funeral happening” – a state funeral, someone had died – “And we’re here for ten minutes. So, in ten minutes, you have to explain why you brought us.” Four hours later, they all canceled their going to the funeral and stayed all through the entire day. And I was like, this is what we haven’t seen. [22:00] But then, they started giving history of women in Liberia who had done great work at the community level. I was like, wow, I have stumbled on something amazing, and I fell in love. And I think I’m still in love.

Sarah: That’s so great to hear. So, I’m interested in some of the particular tactics that you used to encourage women to take action. So if you can just walk me through a range of the different activities, from getting the women to pray, to getting women to occupy a field, how did you pick the tactics, how did you know that they were gonna work?

Leymah: Well thing first when we launched that first meeting, then we decided to do a training, we did a training using a manual that someone developed called the Women Peacebuilding Manual, and it was like a leadership manual. But this manual was very special, it had everything in it that concerned, I would say, the African woman. They had the conflict about marriage, the conflict about religion, the conflict about children, everything. So, we did that training, and one of the things that I recognized very early was that many people do not seem to understand when you’re building a movement, that the personal is political. Every time we tend to think, okay we just do the work, and done, go home. When women feel that you’re vested in their personal life, there is nothing you can ask them to do that they will not do. So then, eventually, my home became a space where people were coming to talk about their issues. I was sincerely interested in what was happening in the lives of the women that I was surrounded with [24:00] and, by extension, they were interested in the lives of other women, and other women, so that was the first part.

So, in all of the training that we did, we also made space for us to get to know each other socially. So, party, and I know no I do not want to pay, put money into women having parties, so

at night we would do different things. But what we recognized was that all of these things – from the sharing the weight, sitting down, sharing our individual stories, and say – we’re timeless, we’re in a safe space, so when I say ‘timeless;’ you can talk for as long as you want, to get out, squeeze out, go back in the history of your life and squeeze out everything. We were building that bond. Then, when we got to the place where we’re taking women to social evenings, and getting them to say –one time we said to them, “Dream of what you’ve never done that you’ve always dreamt of doing.” And, one Muslim woman said her dream was to always dress like a Christian and she always dreamed of wearing a blue dress, red shoes, and a red hat. We made that dream come true for her. We’d do fashion show, we’d do all kinds of things. Building their self-esteem.

I remember one time we did a show – beauty pageant. And this woman who had been in the military, she was one of the woman commanders under Taylor – she ran the port at the time – told me that, in one of our private conversations, she was the stepdaughter of her mother – She was the first child of her mother, through some kind of relationship, her mother got married, she became like this Cinderella in the house, and her stepfather would always say to her, “You’re so ugly. You’d only fit in the military.” So, by the time she finished high school, she went to police academy, and became a personnel [26:00] in the police, eventually worked her way to become the head of the port. Her dream was to start a school, and every time she used to say, “I want to be a teacher,” her step-father would laugh and say, “You’re so ugly that you will scare people’s children.” So, she ended up in the military. After we had that conversation, one of the times we decided to do the fashion show, and through some stroke of luck she fell in my group and we chose her to be our queen, and we did everything that we could do. We used to bring independent judges so we did not rig the process. But she won. And the sash was tissue paper, the crown was foil paper from our food, because we’re not allowed to leave when we’re having the training so you had to be creative. I remember that night when we celebrated her. She sat down in that dark – partially-dark – room, folding that sash, and saying to us, “I’m taking it home to my children, my husband, to show them that I, too, am a queen.” A year later, she fulfilled her dream of starting a school, resigned her job, and I think it was that moment that broke everything that held her back.

So, we did that part. So, not only did we work with the person-to-person, we built self-esteem and then we sat down with the women and said, ‘If you were to do actions, what do you think?’ And left them in the room to argue. So, after those trainings, [28:00] and the exhaling, and the helping to build self-esteem, the women came back to us and said, “We want to do something called the Peace Outreach Project.” So, why do you want to do this project? “Because we want women out there to know what we know –to know that they, too, can be part of the political process.” So, then, they started that.

Eventually, it was recruiting more women, so we did that for 9 months. Afterwards, we still did training here and then we started the leaders with their training, continue to build the movement, and put the message out. And then, eventually, the women decided, “Let’s protest.” So, it was not just in the training room, but was also a lot of interaction, a lot of building self-esteem. So, the way I describe it is that, all of us had been socialized one way, and in my growing up years, I was never involved in the national political discourse. I was involved in the politics at school, but never in the national political discourse. As a matter of fact, it was kept away from us. Not like today – children can access the internet, the radio station – we listen to music all of the time, TV was about fun stuff. So, when it came time for us to do this work, in order for us to be effective and I think the word you’re looking for, since this is Georgetown, we had to ‘resocialize’ ourselves. What the socialization teaches us – a lady is supposed to sit like this, you’re not supposed to be loud, you’re supposed to be at home, and sit still, don’t get involved in the people’s thing. In Liberia, government [30:00] issue was the people’s thing. So, in order for us to mobilize these women, to get them to that place, we had to do a whole process of resocialization – that you can sit like this, you can do like this, you can be like this, you can be loud, you can do this, you can get involved in politics because the price of rice, even though it is personal, or the hunger you feel, on the basis of the price of rice has a lot to do with the politics out there. So, if you don’t get involved.

So, it was a whole process of resocialization – resocialization that took into consideration bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, sexual rights, things that women were not allowed to talk about, do. Those were all of the things that we did. So those were the tactics. There’s no way you can unveil a group of women to do work if there’s not a process of resocialization. You can’t – you, by yourself – cannot continue to be a lady, like this, and say you fight tiny, no. We cannot be in a tyrannical government. No one is going to listen to you, sometimes it will work but other times you have to bang the table and say, “Listen to me.” So, it’s that process of resocialization. That was the tactic. So, learning all of these strategies of peacebuilding came later, we have to work on self. And that’s the missing piece most times.

Sarah: That’s an incredible explanation; it’s so important. How did you ensure that the movement was going to be diverse and cut across ethnic lines?

Leymah: Well, we didn’t even think twice. The entire analysis of the conflict, that we had done, was that everything that destroyed us was on the basis on ethnic [32:00] crisis, ethnic group, this one group thinking they’re superior, and that one group thinking they can save the other. And if we were to be successful – so when the war started there were two groups, the government and the insurgent. Before we got to 2002, we had over 15 groups, and every group was formed on the basis of either religious or ethnic lines. If you had to do peace, you couldn’t do it one way. And so, we decided we were just going with mobilizing people from different ethnic groups to work –

different religious groups to work – because some of the groups were predominantly Christians, others were predominantly Muslims. How do you go and to talk to warring parties, if only Christians women were going to engage with Muslim women, there was no room in there. You know, it wasn't rocket science, it was common sense. And so, it brings me back to the thing where people think, "Oh, women do not understand the inner workings of peace and negotiations and all of the different things." No, we do. Even the ones who have not been schooled, like in a way that they were at the university, doing conflict studies of other things, there is a serious understanding of the communities and it's on that basis that they're able to do that. So we knew from the get-go, that if we were to be successful, we needed all hands on deck, through social class, ethnic, religious groups, everything.

Sarah: So, I know I'm taking huge chunks of history here, but walk me through some of the highlights of the protests, and then culminating in when you lead a delegation in Ghana?

Leymah: When we decided that we were going to do a protest, [sigh] Lord Jesus, [laugh] we decided first and foremost that we're writing a statement, and so when we wrote the statement [34:00] and looked at it, the desks that we were using had a big bullet hole in it; it wasn't a fancy office like this. The chair that we all sat on, people's chairs were propped on blocks, so it was a makeshift office. When we wrote the statement, we looked at it, and asked ourselves, "So we're putting it in the media? Yes. Let's call one ally in the media." This one girl called Janet, we'll call her, she came and we didn't have money. Someone took \$10 from their handbag and gave it to us, then we said, "So who signs it?" Someone said, "Let's sign 'Women of Liberia.'" Said, "No, that's fraudulent. How can seven people sit in a room, and sign 'Women of Liberia?'" So, we would name ourselves.– wow, Taylor government, and we were writing our names on a statement calling for the three things that he says he will never do: no ceasefire, no intervention force, and no negotiation, because he had his own justification. He'd say he was going to fight till the last soldier dies. He could not negotiate with the rebels because he was a legitimate sovereign government, and any foreign troops on the grounds of Liberia were going to be meddling in the sovereignty of the Republic of Liberia. He strongly felt these three things would not happen.

So, we decided to name ourselves. And that I think was the turning point. Because the next day, people will start to know who these seven women were, what made them so brave in the face of all of this. So, we started getting requests and more women started coming. The second thing that we did was then to find a suitable place to protest, then we started picketing, [36:00] then we started going to parliament to do letters. We used to be the sore eye to the American Embassy and the EU because we were there like three times in a week. So, we were just going everywhere. Not being abusive, but saying to ourselves that we used this peaceful thing. And the ultimate goal was to meet with President Taylor and present our statement, and eventually we

did. Once we presented the statement to him, he said that for him to see our process as genuine we had to present similar statement to the rebels. So, we sent our delegation to Sierra Leone, where we knew they were meeting in their own thing with different groups, and we went and issued a statement there. In that process, the government agreed that they were going to Accra. We decided this will not be a Monrovia-based protest that we're going to Ghana to. And one thing I will tell you is that as we did this work, we're learning not just from the past – because like we had like gone to dozen peace stops before that time – we were also learning from other women-led initiatives, where it was just localized, or where people did not push too hard, where once they met a leader they celebrated., You know, our problem in the women's movement is that we trust ourselves too long. And once we're trusting, other things are happening, before we come to our senses, it's already passed. You know, while we were trusting, is not relevant anymore. We did not want to be that. And in all honesty, we didn't have the – again, I had not gone to any peace study program; it was just our practical experiences that we're using to design everything. The closest I have come to academia at the time was studying Gandhi and King, [38:00] reading about them, and mother Theresa and other people because I was so interested in nonviolence, but that was about it. Not sitting in a master's program or PhD program for peace and conflict studies.

So, we then went to Ghana and decided we'll keep the pressure on, because we knew that we couldn't step back, or couldn't be slack, we had to keep it on. And, in Ghana, we were losing grounds because we didn't have the funding. Of course, those were not the days that anyone was doing women's rights or women's issues in conflict things. People were not interested in women at all. So, we had the African Women's Development Fund come and give us some money because they believe in the process and that's how we continued. When the peace agreement was signed, we decided to go back to Liberia, not to celebrate. Because while they were negotiating we had asked when the peace agreement was being developed for benchmarks to be set, so that the average women who couldn't read – and they said, “No.” So, we look at [an] almost 300 page document, how many grassroots women can read what is in there? So, as not to lose the momentum, when we got to Monrovia we had a consultative meeting of over 80 women leaders from all over the country, where we took those documents and broke it down into simplified form and set benchmarks for the grass- for the rural women. We went home in August. From September to October, if you don't see this happening, protest; from November to December, if you don't see this happening, mobilize your community. So, those things were set and everybody knew that this is what they were supposed to do. And that's how we did it. So, we never let go of any process. [40:00] Let me give an example, I'm trying to think of a peace process that is ongoing, or that has just happened. In most countries, when the agreement is signed, the women go home and sit down: they dance, they celebrate, and they sit back. We tell ourselves, ‘No, we will follow this agreement to the letter.’ So, when it was time for civic education, we had the women there; disarmament, demobilization, we were in the streets. So, it was a movement that

never slept, and then the greatest challenge we had was when do we shut this down? It was not doing the work, it was when do we end? And so, we just had to come to the place where we say, “When democracy has been established through elections, we’ll stop.” But, we were also making a firm commitment that if there was ever a need to come back together, we’ll do that. So, once we elected President Sirleaf, that December, we shut it down.

Sarah: And then, just one more question on this and then we can move. So, there’s this great scene that you’ve talked about a lot in Ghana where the women barri- can you just talk us through that really quickly?

Leymah: Well, we had gone to Ghana with enough money to last us for two weeks, because we assumed that the process will end in two weeks. Close to three months later, we didn’t have any money, there was no peace agreement, every ceasefire that was signed was destroyed; someone broke the ceasefire. And I began to lose faith in the whole power of nonviolence. In one of the days, I started slacking off from the protest. The excuse was that “Oh I’m going to this office to check emails and do some work.” But, because I was being choked [42:00] by the scene of the peace talks, men who came that could barely afford were now in suits and dress and looking so well-off, and they all had bodyguards. So, again, I came back to my socialization of, if I was told when I was growing up that the weak and those suffering will be protected by society, this is totally not it. So, I stopped coming and then one day I went to go read on the internet, that morning a girl had given birth and she came outside, to hang her baby’s clothes, and two little boys, the ages of my two sons coincidentally, were outside brushing their teeth, when the missile landed, and they were crushed to sardines. I remember I was sitting at the computer and just reading and crying, and crying and crying and crying and crying. There was one T-shirt in this office, I put it on, a white T-shirt, got in the taxi, went back to the peace talks, and started writing a hostage note, and my mentor Tudakapo Kush [? name of mentor] she was next to me, and she goes, “Send for more women on the camp, Leymah, they said they are going to cancel all the peace talks today.” I said, “Well today we definitely come back.” She says, “So what?” so she goes “Just sent for the women.” So, the last cash we had, she called Unikam [?] to get him buses to come. The media, I remember it was the BBC Africa correspondent, he was about to leave because he felt that there was nothing else going to happen that day. I went to him and said, “Don’t leave.” He said, “Why?” I said, “Today you have a new story.” Only but by that time we had stayed so long at that place that everyone knew everyone, said, “Leymah, tell me what it is.” I said, “No, no, no. If you want your news, stay.”

So I sat down, I wrote that message, no one knew what I was writing. The women came, and as God would have it, they asked all of the delegates to go in a room to make an announcement. So, it wasn’t like they were going in to talk, they were going [44:00] to just give announcement and leave. At that point, when the women arrived we sat, locked arms, and a knock on the door,

handed the hostage note to one of the Nigerian generals, to give to the chief mediator, and he read the note. Then, he came outside. So, that's when they said, "Oh, we're going to arrest you." I said, "What? I'm going to make it very easy for you all, I'll strip naked, for you to arrest me." Someone said, "Did you read the Greek play?" "No." I had no clue there was a Greek play of women stripping naked for peace. What I knew was that I had come to a place where I would never wish on my worst enemy. Someone said, "What difference does it make if you strip yourself naked in a place where a lot of people have been raped?" My answer to them is that, "When you're being raped, you're being forced. When you decide to strip yourself naked, it's saying to those who have offended you that I'm giving you the last shred of my dignity. And that was the place that I have found myself." It's two different things. Rape, and strip naked by force, is *by force*. Telling yourself, "In protest of this life, in protest of the lack of justice, in protest of no future for my children, I, I, in my sound mind, am taking my last shred of dignity, and I am giving it to you, in protest." It's totally different. And that was what happened that day. I was saying to those men, "We've had it. I have had it, and for the rest of my life, I want you to know that I am doing this in protest of the treatment [46:00] of the women and children of Liberia."

Sarah: And that worked.

Leymah: Well, it did. And it worked in that, everyone, according to one of the warlords, who Abby and Jenny interviewed, when they were doing *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, said the men sat in that room and asked themselves, "What the hell have we done to bring our women to this place?" If I had not been resocialized to be a disruptor, I would probably be sitting and saying, "Please, give us peace." Well, I'm grateful that – those women taught me that I needed to be the loose girl sometimes, the diplomatic girl. So that resocialization was – so that entire process, yeah.

Sarah: And what was the significance of receiving a Nobel Peace Prize for all this work?

Leymah: You know, in all honesty, when – yes, before the Nobel came, everyone would tell me, "Oh, someday you win the Nobel Peace Prize." And I'd be like, "For what?" You know, I did what I had to do, at a time that it was necessary, you know, and I wasn't looking for any accolades. I would do it again, even if there wasn't a Nobel Peace Prize. So, the week before the Prize, a journalist from Japan called me, or Korea, and said, "You're highly placed to win this prize. We want to come and interview you, where will you be?" I said, "Please, I'm not interested in being interviewed, because I'm not going to win any prize." Click, click, click, I turned off my phone. [48:00] And the prize came, and it's taken me 5 years, and I'm still thinking, "Me? Nobel?"

Significance, I think, for me, is that... I feel the prize validated the work of grassroots women everywhere. My prize, the one that has my name on it, was a validation for women in Liberia, women in the Congo, women in Central African Republic, women in Sierra Leone. Those unknown women at the community level, who are facing men for domestic abuse, who are chastising the justice structure in their local community. That, for me, that prize, that has my name on it, says we recognize the role of grassroots, rural, community women as nurturers and sustainers of their society. Because, if you look at my name, it's a native name, "Leymah Gbowee," it's just recognizing indigenous community. Even in rural America, that prize is significant because it represents women in the countryside of this country that are doing work that may never have the opportunity to sit in front of a camera and be interviewed.

Sarah: So, turning now to your peace foundation, [50:00] you've worked to push for the inclusion of women as leaders and agents for change. What made you start the foundation and what impact has it had so far?

Leymah: I'm a very good student, I learn quickly. So, when I won the Nobel I had a whole team of friends and family. I remember I was sitting Oslo, in the high of the Nobel, just off going to give my Nobel lecture. And then these people sit and look at me and say, "So, what will be your legacy?" Isn't this my legacy? Can't you all see I have the Nobel Prize? No no no no no. I said, like, wow let me think. Because there weren't that many others in the room, so let me think. What has been the missing piece in my work? Youth. Young girls. I said I wanted to do something for girls. I wanted, through education, leadership, development, and so the idea was born, but it wasn't solidified or crystallized. Then we came to New York, and sat in Abby's apartment, and we agreed that this is the road that I wanted to take. Five years later, I think it's that thing that keeps me young. You know, engaging with the young people – my students, looking at the possibilities that exist for them, but also just looking at where we've missed the mark when it comes to different things in the movement for women, rights for gender equality, for everything that we say we've been doing all the years. How can we do it differently? How we're doing it differently? You know. And also, working with young people keeps you on your toes; so you are perpetua-. I am perpetually looking at the mirror and saying [52:00] to myself, am I a reflection of what these young people need? Into this world, with all the corruption, all of the different things?

And so, every day, I have to work on myself, and pray to God that I be me, or be that person that will be the suitable role model for them. And, I mean, people have been saying to me, "When are you going to get involved with politics in your country?" I love this work so much that I can go for another 20 years because it's sometimes my heart gets broken when I see the suffering of the young people. But, other times, I look at one person and I see – recently, I was back home, and

this little girl had tracked me to the place where I was giving a speech, and the crowd was too much, and when I came outside, the security would not allow her to come close to me. So, then I jump in my car, and everyone's like this and the media was around to do their interview. And I go to the office and I'm sitting there, trying to just [deep breath] – and then, someone comes in with this thick folder and says, “We need you to read this.” I have this assistant, in Monrovia, who is, like my last child. He knows no boundaries when he believes in a thing, and I like the fact that I have someone who would challenge me even when I say I'm tired, and “You know that this is going to be good for you because I think it's good for your state of mind right now, just read this, just one page.” And then, “Why do I need to read this?” “Well, this girl needs a scholarship to go to school.” And so he pulls out her folder, and I see a trend. Her first semester in university, she had a 4.0 GPA; second semester, 3.8; third semester [54:00] 3.5; and then, it came down to a 3.2; and then a 3.0. What's going on? And then she said to me, “When I started school, so like four semesters or five. The first semester I had someone to support me. Second semester, he said no. Third semester, no. And so, all of the times, this last semester, I left school, and did not come on campus, fighting to raise the money between my mother and I, and we got it just a week before exams. I paid, and I sat the exam, and I still got a 3 point something GPA” – I had not seen her, so she did not come into my office, my assistant is explaining to me. So, I said okay; I just signed off, let's pay her fees. And, this was in March. I said tell her to come back tomorrow for the slip because we pay the fees in. I thought she's gone, so I'm done, I'm leaving my office, I'm going home. And I get into the corridor of the office and this little girl is just looking at me, crying.

So, I'm looking at everyone, everyone is rushing out of their office because I, I make an entrance, when I'm coming to work, and I make an exit as well. I'm never quiet, I scream like, “Ahh everyone dot dot dot.” So I'm leaving, and I was like “Oh, so this person, how's your wife? Are you all in love now? Or is she still not loving you?” So that kind of thing, I'm that kind of person, I'm into everyone's business. And she's crying, so I turn around, and I said, “So why are you crying? What did I do to [56:00] offend you?” And then my assistant says to me, “That's the little girl you just paid her fees.” So I said, “Why are you crying?” and she says, “You don't even know me. You did not even see my face. We didn't even talk. It's a folder, and someone explaining my story, and you said yes.” I said, “Is that why you're crying? Let me tell you something. Your intelligence introduced you to me, if you leave campus for a whole semester, and come back just to sit exam and can still get a 3-point, I would invest in you any day.”

For me, it was like, how many more young women? And so that's why I said I wanted to keep doing this for the next 20, 30 years, because I know there are many more out there that I can reach, not just in Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, in other places, even here in the U.S.. So, and then, once they have that, there is hope of the possibility of an education, and other opportunities. You

see the gem, you know? That thing just springs out of these girls. And sometimes I sit back and say, “Wow, I’ll retire well. I’ll retire very well because of the young people that I find myself interacting with.” Another little girl lost both parents to Ebola, four siblings, she’s the oldest. We took her into the program. At 15, she got pregnant. Unfortunately for her, she lost her child, so that really – imagine, one year you lost all of your parents, and everything; another year, you get hope to go back to school, you get pregnant, then you lose your child, and then we bring you back to the program to go to school – and so she would barely speak. She would just sit there and look, and she’s quiet, and would just wring her finger the entire time. I was just back from Monrovia [00:58:00] and apparently the boarding school we had them in that we were told was so fantastic, but not so fantastic, that they’ve been going through a lot of abuses, including verbal assaults from one of the heads of the school, and so the government heard about it and sent people to investigate – because the government invests in this school also, even though it’s private. It’s all of the little girls were free to speak, and this – my one child – stands up in front of the government people and points at this woman and says, “She is abusive.” And the students were like, “Thank you!” But one of the seniors, who is one of my other students, because the seniors were not allowed to talk, calls and said, “You all would never believe what happened! No one wanted about to speak about this woman’s abuse to elementary students, and this one little girl – our girl – stood up and spoke!” I was like, “Yes!” I feel like there’s going to be many more disruptors, and not-so polite women who would speak for their rights. So, I feel like I’m doing the right thing, I love my job.

Sarah: Wow, that’s so good to hear.

Leymah: So, I’m just gonna go praise her when I finish this interview-

Sarah: [laughs] Well I have more questions here, but I think you’ve given us so much great--material--

Leymah: --yes-- Just one last one and then we’re done.

Sarah: So, at an international level, what more do you think needs to be done to help more women get agency and be a part of peace processes?

Leymah: You know what, I don’t mean to be insulting to the international bodies, but I think the agency is always and already there. They need to now realize that they need the agency of these women at the local levels. I never believed that it’s anything from the UN, [1:00:00] or the EU, or anywhere that can empower women. The women in those communities already have empowerment. What the international level can do, or at the international level can be done, is help to make visible the work that these women are doing, finish, use it to advance the cause for

peace and security in our world. Use it to advance the cause for economic justice, use it to advance the cause for development purposes, but until they can realize that the expertise is actually there, and keep imagining that they can come and give the expertise, they will miss the mark, it's like taking a leaking bucket to the creek and intending to come to fill another bucket. You lose all of your resources along the way, and you never get anything done. So, I don't think it's the other way around, I don't think it's this way, I think it's the other way around. How can the international bodies begin to think how to use the rich resources, the intellect, and all of the abilities at this level, to inform a lot of the things that they do at their level.

Sarah: Perfect. Okay, well, thank you so much for your time-

Leymah: -You're welcome-

End: 01:01:38