

Remarks by Leymah Gbowee
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Hosted by The National Council of Churches at
The Interchurch Center, New York City

The following is a transcript of her remarks to 200 persons in The Interchurch Center chapel at 3 p.m. the afternoon she learned she was a recipient of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize

Transcript of Leymah Gbowee Speech

Ann Tiemeyer:

I'm Rev. Ann Tiemeyer, director of women's ministries, and on behalf of so many we welcome you today, Leymah. The National Council of Churches has an initiation program called the Circles of Names, in which women nominate women who have been important in their own faith lives and we thought we would be honoring you, well, we are honoring you, by naming you to our Circles of Names Campaign, but another prize came into your life this morning. When this event was announced it was to be a small book release party and I was going around telling people, 'You have to come because I am sure she's going to be the Nobel Peace Prize Winner someday and you want to meet her before,' so this morning when I heard the news, I jumped out of bed, so excited, excited for your being honored, as well as the recognition that this brings to women's work in peace which is so critically important. We are in a new day and age and how we address issues of war and peace must include all voices, including women, so today we're not only grateful to be celebrating the release of your memoir, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, but also to acknowledge that this Tuesday, *Women, War and Peace* will premiere on PBS on Tuesday evenings that looks at the power and importance of women in war that Abigail Disney, one of the directors is here with us, and both of those things honor you and honor the circle of women and men who do this work. So with that I would like to present to you our fancy certificate from the Circles of Names.

Because this did start as a book release party, Leymah's going to open and then we'll take some questions, but first we'll take three questions from non-press people because we want you to know there are many on the ground so excited about the release of this book to share your story around the world. And, then, we will take press questions and then, we'll need to close up a little before four o'clock. Phil Jenks, the NCC press person will help to manage press questions when we get to that point, but first Leymah.

(applause)

Leymah Gbowee:

Thank you. Thank you. And, oh what a day! What a day! Well, as I walked into this room, I've been calling. I have a Nigerian friend who is really well-bred and lady-like, nothing like me. She and I were on the phone as we drove up here and I said, "If I do something to embarrass you now... What do I do so that I don't embarrass you? How am I suppose to act

now that I have this title?” And she said, “I’m not wasting my breath because no one can control you in any way.”

Several years ago, when I was a refugee and a mother of two talkative children, one three-year-old, one two-year-old and on the brink of having my third child, we fled to Ghana and we lived in a house with nothing and I was in an abusive relationship. And every evening I would take my two children and we would sit down and I would sing to them one of their favorite songs, and I feel like since we’re in a space like this, that I sang and I never really thought twice about that song until I walked into this room, is a simple song that everyone sings everywhere, but its “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. Let it shine, Let it shine, Let it shine oh yeah!”

In almost 60 years, I’ve done nothing really great or to let my light shine. I don’t feel like I’ve done anything extraordinary but to take my little light and shine it in darkness. The journey has been tough. The road has been rough but it has been rewarding. Someone asked me, “How has this changed your life?” And I asked the press guy from Associated Press this morning, “Do you think I will still buy street food?” And he looked at me, like, ‘ok his weird one has won the prize,’ and he said, “I think so”, and then I was like, “Can I still go out and jump all over the place?” and he said, “Well, that’s a tough one,” but for me this reinforces our message that women’s roles, women’s needs, women’s priorities in peace processes throughout the world is crucial; it’s important, and can never be minimized. There is no way you can fix a community and say you are bringing solutions to a community if you use half of that community. When men make peace, it’s not total peace. When women and men make peace, that’s what we call a holistic peace because we’re not just talking about guns coming down. It’s talking about the children going back to school. It’s talking about the broken women becoming whole again, and I think, as we celebrate this award, to women here in America, you have all been doing great jobs, but I think we need to take it to another level. Your world is upside down. Your society is upside down. You need to turn it upright. I don’t mean to come from Africa and be disrespectful by telling you how to conduct your business here. What you see, when America conducts here, effects how business is conducted in Africa. And, if you don’t conduct your business well, our business will never be conducted well. I think it’s time.

A few days ago, never thinking of the Nobel Prize, I was at a space at the University of California in Santa Barbara and someone asked me, “What can I do to help the women of Libya?” The person wanted to go to Libya and be of assistance and I said, “The women of Libya have activists, what the activists in Libya lacks is resources. The US has resources but they lack activists. And she looked at me, like you got to be kidding me, but no, it’s time we do collective peace building. It’s time that we do collective experience sharing. It’s time for us to stop the hypocrisy of sending money to Africa when there’s communities here that need that money more than anything.

It’s time for you Christians to stop getting on planes to Rwanda to teach children to read when down the street in Brooklyn, children cannot read. Someone told me that in this country they spend 98 point something billion dollars per year on philanthropy and they must spend that money outside because I know organizations in this country that can’t find rent just like me in Africa. It’s time to do justice in our communities. If there’s anything to

be learned of the Nobel Prizes awarded today is that the three women who won them didn't set out to conquer the world. They set out to change their societies first and that's the message for all of us. Do peace and justice at home. Do peace and justice in your backyard. And spread your experiences outside. I thank you.

(applause)

Ann Tiemeyer:

OK, I think we have time for a few questions, and as we said, we're going to take a few first from non-press people. Right down here in the corner...

Question:

Your story of peace is amazing. I was especially amazed by Christian-Muslim women working together and we don't have a lot of examples of that. I was wondering if you could share what that was like in terms of relationship building.

Leymah Gbowee:

That was interesting. And if I asked people in this room, who were the problematic groups, who would you say? I'm sure people would say the Muslims. No, the Christians. Unfortunately, and fortunately, we have something called the Bible and we have quotes in there so everyday people came and said the Lord says, what fellowship does dark have with light? What can wood do with sand? And we were really, really adamant that if you come with your prophesy and your dreams and your prophesy and your dreams are not reflective of collectivity or community, you can leave. It was a real tough experience in the first place. Our world has descended. This country has descended. Since 9/11, it's us versus them. We were in that place. We had to tear down the wall of them to really look at the individuals behind the walls of discrimination and stereotype. One of the earlier exercises, we did with Christian and Muslim women was to sit all the Christian and women together in a room and write down the stereotypes you know about Muslim women. Positive and negative. And we sat the Muslim women down and said, write down all the stereotypes you have about Christian women. They wrote it down. And then, we put all the women together in the room and said put these up on the wall and you wouldn't believe the expressions. "Oh, my God, do they really think this about us?" When we got to the space of positive stereotypes and perceptions, they thought, "Wow, is this what they really think of us." What the Muslim women had written was that the admiration of Christian women is that they have one husband. They don't have to share their husband with other wives, and when they got to the Christian women, the Christian women said, "Hmm, do you really think so?" Ok, a lot of people understand where I'm going now. But when they got to that point, it broke it all down and people said, "Let's explain our lives to you."

If, God forbid, someone came into this room and started shooting, they wouldn't take the Muslims from the Christians or the Catholics from the Protestants, they would kill. When you give birth, does a Muslim woman give birth differently than a Christian woman? When a child dies, is the pain in your heart different as a Muslim or Christian? It was tearing down all of the walls of division. What discrimination about Christian, Muslim, ethnic, urban, Republican, Democrat is all about is that at the end you are no longer looking at an individual but that thing you have come to associate them with. So by the time we tore down the walls of that thing, women were looking at their sisters. They were looking at their

mothers. They were looking at their aunties. We didn't have major crises. From the initial stage, we had to tear down the walls, the demons we had regarding the other.

Question:

I would like to know, how have the years of your work affected your faith?

Leymah Gbowee:

Wow, first, thank God the media won't be an issue tomorrow. My office called, "The press people will be at the airport to meet you tomorrow." And I said ok. And they said afterwards, can we go to the office and I said, no, I'm going to church. That's where I'm going. I'm going to my pastor and I'm asking him to pray that I have a straight head. I need that. And, they, they said, Ok, well what do we tell the press people and I said, let them follow me to church. They need a bit of Jesus. Having said that, I couldn't not walk this walk all by myself. I've been telling students lately, to do nonviolence, there's not a single soul that can fight nonviolence and doesn't have a connection with something I call a higher power. Dr. King had that connection. Gandhi had that connection. Former President Mandela had that connection. Bishop Tutu had that connection. His Holiness the Dali Lama... How do you look at the enemy and still tell them the truth? You have to be able to go back and kneel to someone you're in total submission to and say by my own strength, I can't do this. My faith has really helped me so while I led peace, by life wasn't always peaceful.

If you read my book, you'll read my struggles, different things at different times. I have six children. Beyond the work I do, how do you think I still deal with that? It's Jesus because sometimes I look at those children and if I reacted the way I thought to react, I'd step out of my house a madwomen. I told the joke at the Clinton Global Initiative, I was coming back from Chicago on a book tour, got to New York, got to my room and saw that the elevator was down for like three minutes and I'm sitting there. It's three in the morning and I'm tired. Tomorrow I'm making a big presentation at the Clinton Global Initiative. I got to my hotel room and my baby is there with my sister and she's wide awake, "I want to watch Mickey Mouse. I want to watch Mickey Mouse." And, I thought, "Jesus, Jesus, if you don't go to sleep, I'm going to kill Mickey Mouse." And, then she started, "Momma said she's going to kill Mickey Mouse," and I was like, "Ok, this is what you get when you're affiliated with someone called Abigail Disney." But honestly, my faith has been that thing. Everything I do, I attribute to God. There are many women in this world with intelligence who have done greater things.

Today, God has chosen to honor me. My uncle called me from my village and I think the driver was thinking, "What is she speaking?" because I was trying to speak to the people and this village and explain what he award means. My mother lost her mind today. She says she's all over Monrovia telling people, "Who knew I would give birth to a Laureate?" This day was ordained up there. That's what I believe.

Question:

A few months ago, I was at a gathering, where there was a presentation that discussed the possibility that maybe certain wars get more coverage because of something involved called priceless resources and it really bothers me because in our situation back home, my dream is that there will come a day when the powers that be can see that every woman, every child,

every human being is more priceless than the diamonds, the oil, the other so-called precious resources. How can we make this goal a prominent one?

Leymah Gbowee:

I think this is a message that all of us should have. I know that the films from Abby and others have brought this message to the table. You must ask yourself, why Afghanistan, at this point in time? Why Libya, at this point in time? Beyond the horrible regimes. What are some underlying issues causing these problems to be prolonged? These are questions we need to ask ourselves. And, we need to start speaking loudly because a child's life is worth more than a barrel of oil. A woman's life is worth more than a barrel of oil. But even beyond that the pain of people taking millions of dollars from communities in natural resources and people are still dying in those communities from things like maternal mortality of malnutrition. You ask yourselves, what kind of world are we living in? And I do want to say, it's not a hopeless world, because right now there's a nonviolent revolution globally, that you have Occupy Wall Street. It's an indication that people are no longer sitting around taking it. Don't be surprised if you have occupy the White House lawn. People are getting to the place in this country that they're thinking no matter how comfortable we are, there's things we're doing that's affecting others adversely. Until we get it straight, the world will never get it straight. Do peace and justice at home. Start looking at the companies in your community that are doing evil and try to bring them to order. It's not enough for you to go to bed and sleep comfortably and say the problems of the world is the world's problems because someday the worst problems in the world are going to meet you on your doorstep.

Philip Jenks:

I'm Philip Jenks, the media relations officer for the National Council of Churches and we certainly welcome the media who are here today, and we welcome your questions, as well. If you would be so kind as to identify yourself by name and your outlet, we would be happy to give you a microphone.

Jennifer Crompton:

Hi, I'm Jennifer Crompton. I'm with Odyssey Networks and I'm also a pastor at First Avenue Christian Church. You spoke so eloquently a few minutes ago about our upside down society and how we must use our resources. The United States has been deliberating cutting funds for women's health issues that will effect situations domestically and internationally and I love to hear what you would say to our congress if you were standing right before them.

Leymah Gbowee:

Hmm... you know until the Nobel Peace Prize, I would have said, you are setting me up not to get my visa renewed. But the questions I would ask you, is if you had the opportunity to meet with congress, what would you ask them? That's the question, because you see, and I'm talking about Liberians parliament. Someone just came back and said, "Oh, my God, how do you deal with those sexiest men in that house." I'm not talking about the U.S. I'm talking about Liberia, so maybe your group is quite different. You know, and I said, we have a way with them and right now they do these things like suck and squeeze places where there's women because they know the power we possess.

This country, when you go out in the world, girls want to be like American women, and if this is the place where freedom of speech and expression is at 100% and you feel like women's health and priorities are important and that money should go to those issues, the money is being cut my parliament, what are your rules? If it's the New York House, it's time for people to march from Manhattan and occupy that space and say, we're not leaving until you hear us because the thing about they way politics is being conducted, and I'm talking about Liberia, there's cutting down of the resources for poor people. We are supposed to be the masses they represent. In essence, one minister of Liberians government said, when they do these things, they are taking the 'm' from the masses. You know the spelling of the rest. So they are simply saying to us, you are fools because you will vote for us again and we will keep treating you the way we treat you. So they take all the attention from the critical things that are hurting us and put it on Obama's birth certificate or someone being overweight. And, I think the important thing for us is to bring the discussion to their doorstep. We will not accommodate this. You need to do this for the good of the people because when people say they are doing things for the good of people, the people need to start speaking out. It's no longer enough for you to vote for people who aren't going to stand up for your rights and priorities, and I'm speaking about Liberia.

Linda Bloom:

Linda Bloom, United Methodist News Service. Obviously your movement paved the way for the election of the first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and I was wondering if you would talk a little bit about your relationship to her.

Leymah Gbowee:

Every time President Sirleaf sees me coming, she's weary, because I will raise those important questions. The last time someone asked her, "Madam, do you know Leymah?" And, she said, "Yes, Leymah and I talk about all kinds of things." All kinds of things meaning the politics, the social and our own lives. Over time, President Sirleaf and I have gotten to the point where she respects my work, she respects my opinion, because I have come off, and I think being there in Liberia, he who is down feels no fall. So I feel like I'm already down; I cannot fall, so I can go to the President and speak the truth. "With all due respect, Madam President, this, this and this is happening and you need to do something about it."

I can also go to the President with some very unique ideas and she can say, Leymah, this is a great idea. I think we should do this. So over time, we've had this collaboration going on and I've been honored a few times to hear her call me personally in and say, I think you should join my government. And, I still say, I like bouncing around. I've not caught up to be a minister or ambassador or something. Please, just let me protest and do things I like to do best. So we have a professional working relationship and I have a lot of respect for this woman. When it comes to work, she's well disciplined. When it comes to being focused, she knows exactly what she wants and some say they like the way she kicks men's butt when it comes to politics. But, yes, we do have a very good professional working relationship, kinda like a mother-daughter, show me the way, if I ever need to find the way in my professional life; We have that kind of relationship.

Huffington Post Reporter:

Question about the uprisings in Lybia. Do you support these types of riots?

Leymah Gbowee:

Never, never, never, never, never. First of all, there are many things wrong with the current strikes in Libya. One, there's no way that violence can solve any problem. Violence, as the Bible says, begets more violence. Violence has never solved any problems. The unintended targets are women and children who have no idea how the war started or how Gaddafi started his business. Secondly, I think the time has far passed where we conduct politics in Africa like during the colonial era. There's something called an African Union, regardless of all of its faults, when other countries decide to ignore the intelligence of the whole continent and do their own business, something is wrong. I think it's about time that people recognize that while Africa has its faults, not all of the leaders in Africa are bad. It might take some time, but it will get there. There's something fundamentally wrong. This is my radical view. I think it's time that we use local experiences to build global peace. You can't always say you are going to import peace in the form of a jet-bomber. It has never worked and it will never happen.

Chris Herlinger:

Has the election of Liberia's president created more of a space for peace for Liberians?

Leymah Gbowee:

Six years. Yes. If you had went to Liberia in 2003 and you went to Liberia today, you would see the difference. If you interacted with the young people years ago, and you interacted with them now, you'd see the difference. That fear that we live with everyday is slowly going away. People are coming to the place where they are thinking things don't have to be chaotic for us to survive. We can survive in a place of peace. We have been surviving for six years so those elections in 2006 really paved the way for where we find ourselves.

Reporter:

How do we empower women to empower men?

Leymah Gbowee:

I think men already have their powers. Where we are now, we need to come to a place and have a conversation about the whole concept of empowerment. A man once said to men, a lot of men don't understand the concept of empowerment. Because in order to empower, you must give up some of your power and we find ourselves in places where some of the people aren't willing to give up their power. So if we started sustained conversations about issues of women's rights and starting bringing it home because sometimes we have it to way up in the clouds.

I was in the UK last year with 350 girls guides and one of the little girls said to me that every Sunday when she opened up the local newspaper she was really troubled by the center spread of a naked teenager or a scantily dressed teenager and she did her research and found the name of the company that supported that ad and found out that the guy that paid for that ad every Sunday had a daughter so she gathered a community of her friends and scheduled an appointment with him. She said, "Ms. Gbowee, we got there and he thought we were going to talk girl scout cookies and candies because we're all 15, 16 years old. By the time we sat down and started talking to him, I took a copy of the newspaper out and said, 'Sir, if this was your daughter in the center spread of the newspaper every Sunday, how

would you feel?” He did not respond. She said, “I think I succeeded because the following Sunday, we never saw that ad run again.”

Bring it home. Even with the toughest gangsters, the toughest rebel leader, you want to touch them, touch their mothers, touch their daughters. Bring it home. Bring your voice straight home. I think we’ve been beating around the bush, too concerned with how uncomfortable we make people feel. There is nothing comfortable about an abused woman. There is nothing comfortable about a rape victim. There’s nothing comfortable about the objectification of young women in the media as sex objects. We need to take the conversation out of the comfort zone and into a bigger area. If they kick you out of their offices, find another way around it. And, if they kick you out of that space, find another way around it. Gone are the days when we sat down and felt that someone would deliver it to us. If you go back into the history of this country, the slave lives, the plantation lives of the African-Americans of this country did not end by people sitting and saying God will deliver freedom. There were people like Harriet Tubman. There were other people when the Civil Rights Movement was going on, when segregation was going on. Dr. King, Rosa Parks, and all of these people.

You see, in Africa it’s an indication that your world is upside down. The media is killing your young people. You yell stories about different things and one of my favorite stories—I will tell this story until I’m tired of telling it—A few weeks ago, I was sitting at Abby’s house with my sister and we’re looking through magazines, imagining we’re rich people, and there was an image in the magazine of this young man, really polished well. The disturbing thing about that image is that he had a wristwatch on his tie. They were advertising the wristwatch. I asked my sister, “Is that a new way people wear watches here in America?” I don’t see the correlation. I wear my watch on my hand. Why would I advertise it on my tie unless to indicate a new way to wear a watch?

That’s just to show you how sick it is, and it’s not just for here. Africa, Liberia, young people think, young girls think, their bodies start from here (points to breastbone) and ends here (points to thigh). We need to take the conversation from the comfortable space and let’s not just talk amongst ourselves, women; It’s time to invite the men. It’s time to invite them. Listen to some of these stories. See some of these things. And, it’s also time for the men to stand up and say, I’m going to stand working and standing up for women’s rights because it’s my issue.

(applause)

Philip Jenks:

Thank you very much for coming. Ms. Gbowee has had a complicated day and has a complicated agenda still to follow so we’re going to wrap it up again, but thank you very much for your presence.

