

A VOICE FOR FREEDOM!

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by

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Your Majesties, Royal Highnesses, Excellencies, Members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Nobel Laureates, my brothers and sisters,

On behalf of all the women of Liberia, the women of Africa, and women everywhere in the world who have struggled for peace, justice and equality, I accept with great humility the 2011 Nobel Prize for Peace.

I am particularly honored to be a successor to the several sons and one daughter of Africa who have stood on this stage – Chief Albert John Lutuli, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk, Kofi Annan, Anwar el-Sadat, Wangari Muta Maathai, Mohamed ElBaradei, as well as Barack Obama, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Bunche, Americans of African descent.

Your Majesties: I begin with a message to you and, through you, to the people of Norway. Your country faced a tragedy earlier this year with the murder of 77 people. It was a deliberate assault on the very heart of your society. Yet, in the face of such adversity, the response at every level of public and private Norwegian life has been consistent with your historical adherence to the values of openness, integrity and justice. For this, the world admires you and all of the citizens of this great country. I offer you the deepest sympathy of the people of Liberia for the loss of life and I extend to you our profound respect.

In its selection this year, the Nobel Committee has brought here three women linked by their commitment to change, and by their efforts to promote the rule of law and democracy in societies riven by conflict. The fact that we – two women from Liberia – are here today to share the stage with a sister from Yemen speaks to the universality of our struggle.

The enduring spirit of the great women whose work transcended gender and geographical boundaries is in this room with us. From Baroness Bertha Felicie Sophie von Suttner of Austria, honored for promoting the Hague Peace Conference of 1899, to Jane Addams of Hull House fame; from the American activist Emily Greene Balch to Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan of Northern Ireland; from Mother Teresa to the heroic Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as Rigoberta Menchú, Jody Williams, Shirin Ebadi, and

Wangari Maathai: these our forebears, these women who are Nobel Peace Laureates, challenge us to redouble our efforts in the relentless pursuit of peace.

I would like to take a moment to honor the memory of the late Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to receive this great honor. Her accomplishments will forever inspire us.

Accepting the award in December 2004, Professor Maathai said, “Those of us who have been privileged to receive education, skills and experiences and even power must be role models for the next generation of leadership!” May we all resolve to fulfill that duty!

I also honor the memory of countless women whose efforts and sacrifice will never be recognized, but who, in their private and silent struggles, helped to shape our world.

As Leymah and Tawakkul know, this award belongs to the people whose aspirations we have the privilege to represent, and whose rights we have the obligation to defend. We are but their reflection.

With such a distinction comes great responsibility. History will judge us not by what we say in this moment in time, but by what we do next to lift the lives of our countrymen and women. It will judge us by the legacy we leave behind for generations to come.

Tawakkul, you are an inspirational activist for peace and women’s rights. In your country, autocratic rule prevails; but where they had no voice, you found a way to be heard.

Leymah, you are a peacemaker. You had the courage to mobilize the women of Liberia to take back their country. You redefined the “front line” of a brutal civil conflict – women dressed in white, demonstrating in the streets – a barrier no warlord was brave enough to cross.

Mine has been a long journey, a lifetime journey to Oslo. It was shaped by the values of my parents and by my two grandmothers – indigenous Liberians, farmers and market traders – neither of whom could read or write. They taught me that only through service is one’s life truly blessed.

My journey was supported by my many teachers and mentors who guided me to a world opened up by the enlightenment of higher education, and which led to my conviction that access to quality education is the social justice issue of our time.

My life was safeguarded when thousands mobilized around the world to free me from imprisonment, and my life was spared by individual acts of compassion by some of my captors.

My life was forever transformed when I was given the privilege to serve the people of Liberia – taking on the awesome responsibility of rebuilding a nation nearly destroyed by war and plunder. There was no roadmap for post-conflict transformation. But we knew that we could not let our country slip back into the past. We understood that our greatest responsibility was to keep the peace.

Your Majesties, my sisters and my brothers,

The Nobel Committee cannot license us three Laureates to speak for women. But it has provided us a platform from which to speak to women, around the globe, whatever their nationality, their color, their religion or their station in life. It is you, my sisters, and especially those who have seen the devastation that merciless violence can bring, to whom I dedicate my remarks, and this Prize.

There is no doubt that the madness that wrought untold destruction in recent years in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Rwanda, in Sierra Leone, in Sudan, in Somalia, in the former Yugoslavia, and in my own Liberia, found its expression in unprecedented levels of cruelty directed against women.

Although international tribunals have correctly declared that rape, used as a weapon of war, is a crime against humanity, rapes in times of lawlessness continue unabated. The number of our sisters and daughters of all ages brutally defiled over the past two decades staggers the imagination, and the number of lives devastated by such evil defies comprehension.

Through the mutilation of our bodies and the destruction of our ambitions, women and girls have disproportionately paid the price of domestic and international armed conflict. We have paid in the currencies of blood, of tears, and of dignity.

However, the need to defend the rights of women is not limited to the battlefield, and the threats to those rights do not emanate only from armed violence. Girls' education, seen far too often as an unnecessary indulgence rather than the key investment it is, is still under-funded and under-staffed. Too often girls are discouraged from pursuing an academic training, no matter how promising they may be.

As we celebrate today, we are mindful of the enormous challenges we still face. In too many parts of the world, crimes against women are still under-reported, and the laws protecting women are under-enforced. In this 21st century, surely there is no place for human trafficking that victimizes almost a million people, mostly girls and women, each year. Surely there is no place for girls and women to be beaten and abused. Surely there is no place for a continuing belief that leadership qualities belong to only one gender.

Yet, there is occasion for optimism and hope. There are good signs of progress and change. Around the world, slowly, international law and an awareness of human rights are illuminating dark corners, in schools, in courts, in the marketplace. The windows of closed chambers where men and women have been unspeakably abused are being opened, and the light is coming in. Democracies, even if tentatively, are taking root in lands unaccustomed to freedom.

As curtains are raised and as the sun shines upon dark places, what was previously invisible comes into view. Technology has turned our world into one interconnected neighborhood. What happens in one place is seen in every corner, and there has been no better time for the spread of peace, democracy and their attending social justice and fairness for all.

Today, across the globe, women, and also men, from all walks of life are finding the courage to say, loudly and firmly, in a thousand languages, “No more.” They reject mindless violence, and defend the fundamental values of democracy, of open society, of freedom, and of peace.

So I urge my sisters, and my brothers, not to be afraid. Be not afraid to denounce injustice, though you may be outnumbered. Be not afraid to seek peace, even if your voice may be small. Be not afraid to demand peace.

If I might thus speak to girls and women everywhere, I would issue them this simple invitation: My sisters, my daughters, my friends, find your voices!

Each of us has her own voice, and the differences among us are to be celebrated. But our goals are in harmony. They are the pursuit of peace, the pursuit of justice. They are the defense of rights to which all people are entitled.

The political struggles that our countries – Liberia, Yemen and others – have gone through will be meaningful only if the new-found freedom opens new opportunities for all. We are well aware that a new order, born of hunger for change, can easily fall back into the lawless ways of the past. We need our voices to be heard. Find your voice! And raise your voice! Let yours be a voice for freedom!

There will be failures along the way, for the world will not change overnight. But we have seen change in our lifetimes, and the world will continue to change in ways that affect us all. As inscribed on the wall of the memorial to Nobel Laureate Martin Luther King, Jr., “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Your Excellencies, brothers and sisters,

From this global platform, I want to speak for a moment of Liberia and to Liberians.

On November 8th, we concluded our second successive free and fair presidential and legislative elections, consolidating Liberia’s transformation into a stable, democratic nation. The Liberian people did me the great honor of re-electing me as their President to serve for another six-year term, allowing me to build on the foundations we started in 2006.

The electoral battle was hard-fought among several contenders, requiring a run-off contest. The process was not without its challenges, and a single and regrettable incident marred an otherwise peaceful and celebrated national achievement. As I stand here today, with sadness in my heart for the injured and the life lost, I truly hope that our nation will become stronger from our recent experience.

Liberia’s continued progress depends on policies and programs that invest in people and strengthen democratic institutions, while remaining grounded in the rule of law. Most importantly, they must stand the test of time. They must not be dependent on any one leader or any one political party. We must build space and respect for opposition voices; they are not the losers in our open society, but an essential component to strengthened accountability in government.

Throughout our political campaign, we heard the cry of our young population that they are impatient for their lives to improve. They want to make up for the time and opportunities lost during years of conflict and deprivation. They want better education, useful skills and jobs. They want to contribute to the rebuilding of their country. They have found their voices, and we have heard them.

As nations around the world, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, transition to representative democracy, we are reminded that the struggle for human rights and social justice is a difficult journey. It requires our voices, many voices. Our shared sacrifices are essential to achieve the justice that we seek.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It was exactly 63 years ago today that the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That document, the legacy of a generation that had just emerged from the horrors of a devastating World War, remains of great significance to us today.

It is a Declaration that is universal. It speaks of rights that all humans have simply by virtue of being human. These rights are not given to us by governments, which might revoke them at their pleasure. It is a Declaration that is legal, not a list of benevolent aspirations. It obligates states, even in their treatment of their own citizens, to observe, and to uphold, those universal rights and freedoms that belong to us all.

Today's decoration of three women with the highest universal Peace Prize must not be a passing historic moment. We must look upon this event as a milestone in the inexorable march toward the achievement of a genuine and lasting peace.

Let me close by reiterating my deepest gratitude to the Norwegian Nobel Committee for this great honor, and I express my profound thanks to all of you gathered here for your work in the service of peace and human dignity.

Thank you. And may God bless you.

Portrait photo of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf by photographer Ken Opprann.