

TEACHER'S NOTES

KS3 ASSEMBLY PRESENTATION

CONFLICT AND PEACEBUILDING IN LIBERIA

The following notes are written as a script so that, together with the accompanying slides, the teacher can deliver this as an 'off the peg' assembly. Of course, teachers are also free to adapt this script to suit their own needs and circumstances.

SLIDE 1 (TITLE SLIDE)

This is a picture of the Nobel Peace Prize, an international prize awarded every year to people who have made an outstanding contribution towards the promotion of peace.

In 2011 this Peace Prize was awarded to two Liberian women: Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became President of Liberia in 2006 – the first ever elected female head of state in Africa. The elections that saw her come to power were significant not only for that reason but because they took place peacefully and democratically. This was remarkable because the country had just emerged from a bitter 14 year civil war that had ravaged the country.

Leymah Gbowee was instrumental in bringing about the end to that war. Her story is one of incredible bravery and a testament to the power of action for peace.

SLIDE 2 (LEYMAH GBOWEE)

This is Leymah Gbowee as a teenager.

When war broke out in Liberia in 1989, Leymah was just finishing up high school and living in the capital city, Monrovia, with her parents. She was about to head to university to study science and had ambitious plans for her life.

However, like her fellow Liberians, the course of Leymah's life was completely changed

by the conflict. She had to stop going to university and saw many of her friends flee the country. She witnessed people being murdered by rebel soldiers in the street. The war caused her to become separated from members of her family and, struggling for money, food and shelter, she had to keep moving around the city to avoid the fighting, constantly in fear of her life.

At some points during the conflict Leymah lived in a refugee camp just outside the conflict zone. This photograph was taken while she was living in the camp and making doughnuts to sell to make money.

SLIDE 3 (CIVIL WAR IN LIBERIA)

The Liberian civil war was one of Africa's bloodiest conflicts. During this 14 year period from 1989–2003 the Liberian population experienced widespread slaughter and human rights violations. Tensions were stirred up between different ethnic groups and old friends and neighbours turned on each other. Child soldiers as young as eight took part in the conflict.

At least a quarter of a million people were killed, many of them children, and a huge number of the population fled to refugee camps in neighbouring countries. The country they left behind was almost completely destroyed, with no electricity, no running water or sanitation, no public services or jobs. Roads were blown up and buildings looted.

The toll of this conflict on the Liberian people

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is almost unimaginable. Leymah describes herself as completely changed by her experience of the war. Everything she had previously taken for granted had been swept away.

SLIDE 4 (LEYMAH'S JOURNEY TOWARDS PEACE ACTIVISM)

During a brief respite in the war, Leymah decided to gain some social work training in order to provide support to people who had been traumatised by the war.

Her first job was providing counselling for former child soldiers. Leymah saw them as victims, like herself, saying they had been 'exploited, used up and thrown away' by the rebel leaders. She felt that the war had destroyed their childhoods, like it had hers. The experience of working with these young men motivated Leymah, who was by then a mother herself, to become an activist for peace. She decided that women had to speak up and play an active part in saving the nation's children from the horrors of the conflict.

Leymah started to learn as much as she could about politics, economics, conflict and injustice. In order to be able to act for peace, she realised she needed to be armed, not with weapons, but with ideas. She therefore began educating herself, so she better understood the issues at stake, and said that she felt her brain 'lighting up' with new ideas.

SLIDE 5 (WOMEN IN PEACEBUILDING NETWORK)

When the conflict started gathering pace again, Leymah founded the Women in Peacebuilding Network, a group of Muslim and

Christian women who wanted to take action for peace. The group issued a statement of intent, saying that 'In the past, we were silent... War has taught us that the future lies in saying NO to violence and YES to peace! We will not relent until peace prevails.'

True to their word, the women began gathering everyday in the streets of war-stricken Monrovia to call for peace. They started wearing white T-shirts to represent the peace that they were hoping for. And more and more of them began to get involved.

The women lobbied Charles Taylor, then the Liberian president, to attend peace talks. After repeated attempts, they finally succeeded and talks began in Ghana. A group of the women then travelled there, remaining outside everyday to continue applying pressure on the delegates from the different groups involved in the conflict to negotiate a way to peace.

The talks dragged on, however, with little progress, while the horrors of war continued back in Liberia. Frustrated and angry, the women forced themselves into the meeting room and staged a sit-in protest. They declared that they intended to hold the delegates hostage, so that, as they put it they would 'feel the pain of what are people are feeling at home.

Eventually, the delegates had to give in. The women's arguments and their actions, though entirely peaceful, were so powerful that they forced the various parties to move the negotiations forward. Peace was declared shortly afterwards.

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SLIDE 6 (LEYMAH RECEIVING THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE)

It is widely recognised that the Women in Peacebuilding Network played a major role in ending the conflict in Liberia and in bringing about the transition to peace.

Leymah's amazing contribution was acknowledged by her award of the Nobel Peace Prize. Today she still works in the area of peace activism and human rights and speaks around the world on these issues.

Peacemaking doesn't end when the conflict is over. As is clear from Leymah's story, the experience of war takes a devastating toll and it is a difficult path back to peace. Leymah has said, 'A whole generation of young men had no idea who they were without a gun in their hands... To a person, we were traumatised.'

After a war, traumatised people need the opportunity to reassess and rediscover who they are. One of the ways they can do this is through education. Leymah herself came to terms with some of her own experiences through learning more about conflict and peace

and seeking further training in peacebuilding and counselling, so that she could help others.

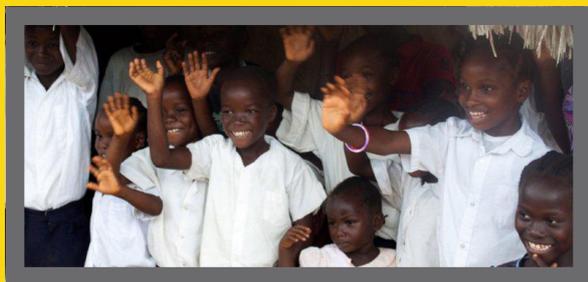
SLIDE 7 (CHILDREN IN CRISIS LIBERIA)

The British charity, Children in Crisis, is involved in this process of building for peace in Liberia by helping to restore the educational system that was damaged by the war. Children in Crisis knows that rebuilding communities through their schools and helping the next generation of children to develop their literacy skills so that they are better able to read, write, speak and act could help prevent conflicts in the future.

It is not an easy process but Leymah's story should inspire us as to what can be achieved. As Leymah said herself, 'You can tell people of the need to struggle, but when the powerless start to see that they really can make a difference, nothing can quench the fire.'

*All the quotations in this presentation are from the book, **Mighty be our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War** by Leymah Gbowee, with Carol Mithers (2013), published by Beast Books.*

CHILDREN IN CRISIS LIBERIA



Children in Crisis is a UK-based charity established in 1993 to give children in some of the world's poorest countries the education they need to help transform their lives. Where resources are few, where education is needed to heal the nation, and where it is too remote

for others, our aim is to support children to read, write, think, pursue their life goals and contribute positively to their communities.

Children in Crisis works in countries affected by war, such as Liberia, delivering education programmes for young people and their communities. This includes: building and equipping schools; supporting parents to learn vocational skills so they can better provide for their families; training teachers; and promoting high quality education for all, especially girls who do not have always have equal access to school. www.childrenin crisis.org