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"Women fight for peace and against sexual violence in Africa - and the international media look away, deliberately..."

Conversation between Leymah Gbowee, the heroine of the documentary "Pray the Devil Back to Hell", and the audience on Sunday November 22nd, 2009, after the screening of the film by Gini Reticker in Arsenal Cinema, Tuebingen, Germany.

Festival Director Irene Jung: We are very happy to have Leymah Gbowee here as our guest and time to have a small conversation with her. We will have another conversation round table with her and experts of Investigations in Peace and Conflict of the University of Tuebingen and the Institute of Education in Peace, right after the second screening of the film tomorrow.

Before we go into your questions and comments I have two questions myself: How was it possible that the women in Liberia could end the war without disposing of any political or military power? Which is something that neither the UNO with their blue helmet-troops nor any good-will-mission of friendly governments were able to achieve. And what are the elements that give the women this power?

Leymah Gbowee: Good evening. Thank you all for coming and thank you very much for the applause, I truly appreciate it.

Irene asks the question: how is it possible for people, for women, to make peace when the UN was unable to succeed? One of the things that I have learnt in my work is that the UN can not bring peace to any country without the communities' input (Applause).

They come into countries as strangers, they know nothing about the conflict except from what they have read and what they have heard. And it is only the people in these communities who know the roots of the conflict, and so we were operating from local knowledge. We knew who to get to, we knew how to talk to people, and these are things that the UN doesn't know. I can not come to Tuebingen and say, I can make peace. This will never be possible if there was a problem here. I can only come and say to the women, this is what we did in Liberia and how do you want to do it? But the UN come into countries and say: „We've come to do it! We don't want to know, how it happened or how it was done - we have come and we are the superpower“. So that is why they are ineffective (Applause).

Now, talking about what are some of the elements that give the women the power: for us who lived through what you saw in the film: I was 17, my highschool-graduation was december 24, 1989, and the war started the next week. And the war didn't end until I was 31. So for 14 years all we knew was war and suffering. And when the war started, some of the things that people were doing, was not as bad as what they were doing in 2003.

So one of the things that really gave us the strength to go forward was our desire to live. Or the desire to see our children have a future. We were living in a country where someone would walk into this room and he could just take your child and carry him

away to fight. But beyond that, men would come and make children, young boys, rape their mother in front of their fathers; they would see a pregnant woman, and they would place a bet: „she is carrying a boy“, „no she is carrying a girl“. And then they would open her stomach and would take out the baby to proof their bet.

What kind of life was that? We had gotten to the point where we needed to do something, if we didn't do something they were going to destroy us. And there were many examples of communities, where people just sat silent and would die. But we had decided that we were not going to. So those were some of the elements, even though they were negative, but those were the things that really pushed us to getting up and do what we needed to do.

Irene Jung: But also the elements that really made it effective....?

Leymah Gbowee: Some of the elements that led to reinforce that we can work together: one: we are a whole community of women, two: when there were conflicts we were the ones, that would bear the consequences.

Then we had to deal with some of the ethnic issues. Liberia is a country where we are 3.3 million people. Very small for Africa. And we have 16 ethnic languages. So most of the time these ethnic groups are at each other's throats. Some of the women who worked with us had brothers who were fighters. Some of them had children who were on the other side or were supporting groups on the other side. So we had to bring them together to understand that it wasn't about one ethnic group's victory. It was the victory of the women as a whole.

So we did a lot of those kind of communication, finally we used simple messages. Especially with the religious division between the Christian and Moslems, we had to talk about: can the bullet pick and choose? So I don't know how many different ethnic groups you have here in Germany, but if someone entered into this room and started shooting, the bullet would not say I'm going to only pick the men from the women. So those are some of the messages that we were putting forth, so they could understand. Those were some of the positive things, that we used.

Beyond that, most of us have been displaced from our homes: a 3.3 Million population by the time the war ended; and of those, 250.000 people had died, one million was internally displaced, 300.000 were refugees outside of Liberia. So you have a whole country that was turned upside down. There is not a single family in Liberia that can tell you: „I didn't lose a relative as a result of the war“. Everyone was effected, some way or the other.

Irene Jung: Are there questions in the audience?

Spectator: I wrote my bachelor thesis about Liberia. And what was really interesting to me today: women were not even mentioned in academic literature about this country. But today we saw that they **did** play an important role. How is your impression about that and how would you explain that difference?

Leymah Gbowee: Well we are part of a world structure in which patriarchy plays a major role. And in the patriarchal world, women they are minimum. I've been reviewing in Liberia: they have just done their Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

And their report came out, it is 384 pages long. So what we've done as women, is to take that report; we spent five days reading and analyzing the report. And we found out, that in those 384 pages of report you have less than ten pages that focus on women!

Spectator: In the film I found very convincing how you got together the Christian and the Moslem women. I would like to know: What were the upper hierarchies of the Christian churches and the Moslems thinking? Were they afraid of the power of women? Because we are dealing with religions, that put women down. So how did you deal with this problem?

Leymah Gbowee: Well when we started, we obviously had to massage the egos of the men. So we went to the Bishops and the Imams and said to them, „this is what we want to do, and we come to solicit your blessing.“ Some of them were like „Okay you have our blessing.“ For the Christian Churches it wasn't difficult. As the archbishop of the Catholic Church was the head of the Christian council of Liberia - and he was very powerfull - so by the time he endorsed us, every church had to.

But with the Moslems there was a serious conflict. As a matter of fact, the police woman you see in the film, for a long time could not go to pray, because she was called a prostitute by some of the Imams, that she was trying to bring the Muslim women out to be street women and similar things. But there was this one Imam, who wasn't in the hierarchy of any of the Moslem Sects. But who told us „I'm going to accompany you on this journey.“ I remember that there was one time, we had a prayer vigil. And all of the bishops and pastors came and then they went home. The vigil was out in the open air, and that Imam stayed with us from six in the evening till six a.m. in the morning. We danced, we sang Moslem songs, we sang Christian songs, while the rain poured down on us. But he stayed there until the next morning, The media picked it up and then he became like the faith, this one man. And so it became embarrassing for other Imams not to endorse the women.

So by the time he endorsed, the Catholic Archbishop had started to go from one Imam to the other, talking to them. So then the Chief-Imam of Liberia went on the Radio. We didn't have many Moslem women among us - when all of these negative things started the normal Moslem women began to stay away. When we got the Imam to go to the radio to say, that any Moslem woman who was not a part of the movement will have to answer on the day of judgement, because Allah was a god of peace, we got thousands the next day to participate with us.

So we really had different strategies. But even if they would have told us: No, we weren't going to sit down. But we talked to them, to get their blessing. And that is a lesson that I've learnt. People in power want to continue to feel important, even if they can't contribute anything to your life. So let's give them that due respect; and that's what we did.

Spectator: I would like to hear more about the reintegration of the young men, the soldiers. You had the poster where it said: „Put down your gun, I love you.“ How has that worked out with incorporating these men into the community?

Leymah Gbowee: My favorite story I like to tell is: in 2007 the women went to the Worldbank. We've been to many places, trust me. We carried a list of ten things, that

we needed the Worldbank to fund in post-conflict Liberia. And there was a huge panel who sat there. We had one of the women-leaders read her speech and present her list. And then this woman from the Worldbank eloquently spoke into the microphone and said to us: „Thank you for your presentation. Take your list, go back, and prioritise your priorities.“ So we had ten priorities on the list and when we first listet all ten, I think the ex-combatants were like number five. But by the time they said: „Go back, redo this list and define your priorities“, they came to number ten.

There is no way that you can address issues of rape.... I mean there are children who died at the hands of these young men. Whilst we love them, whilst we want them back in communities, but if the donors are telling us, we will fund one item at a time, they have to be at the end of the list. So their situation now is not very fine. Most of them are on the street, begging for arms. We find them living in unfinished buildings. Some of them have done quite well. There is a group that I worked with maybe ten years ago. So a few months ago we had a research-project that we needed an ex-combatant group to do. I was out of the country, and my office had been given to this group.

So I came back into Liberia, to check their office out. And they said to me „This our organisation“ - they formed themselves into something called „The National Ex-combatant Peace Initiative“. And then I got their brochure and look at the list of the board-members and they had me as a board-member! I didn't know that. No one wrote me, to tell me.

So you have some groups that are doing good, some are still in a state of traumatization, drug-abuse and drug-addiction, and then you still have some who are not doing good at all. But then also at the overall, we do not really have programmes, there are few programmes targeting them. So, whilst you say for the average Liberian who didn't fight, there are maybe 15% that were able to rearrange their lives, and improve their living conditions, of those boys maybe only 2% were able to achieve that.

Zuschauerin: Could you tell us more about this kind of forgiveness which is necessary, because I think that's very hard.

Leymah Gbowee: You know whilst forgiveness is hard, it is necessary for all reconciliation. And there is no way that we as a people can hold on to the past and expect that we will move forward. Also if you look at some of those who committed the worst crimes, the young boys, most of them were victims of circumstances. Some of the boys that I have worked with were ten years old when they joined the fighting. I mean there is no real sense of reasoning at that age. And most of them, when their parents were running from the shooting, got left behind. So as they stayed in those communities when the fighters came, they had to become porters, carrying things for them, and little on graduated to fighters as a need of survival. It is hard, but if you sit with them and really get to know them, you realise that these young people also have a longing in their hearts and there is a lot of broken dreams, that their whole future is destroyed because of where they found themselves.

Our communities are so interconnected, that it is difficult not to forgive. I will tell you one story and I will stop then. And then everyone in this room can decide what to do, because these are the complexities of post-war Liberia.

We went to a village to work and this woman came to me and said: „I have a problem. My daughter is a refugee in Ghana, and she has gotten married and had two children, before I got in touch with her.“ So for five years she hadn't heard from her daughter. So the daughter had written to her and said: „My husband and my two children, we are coming home!“. As this daughter had gotten married as a refugee, her mother, her family were not there, when she married. The daughter sent pictures of her family and the man on the photo was identified by the mother as the killer of the daughter's brother. She had only two children. So this man killed her son and after the war ended, he went to the refugee-camp, met her daughter and married her.

They were coming home and this woman said to us: „What do I do?“ I ran away from her. Because still today, I can't answer that question. So these are some of the complex issues of forgiveness and reconciliation that we have to confront daily.

Zuschauerin: Are there women in other African countries who contact you and who want to learn from your experiences? Is it possible to transfer experiences onto other countries?

Leymah Gbowee: If I'm walking in the streets of uebingen and I see a man beating a woman, I will stepp in and tell him: Stop! And if he doesn't stop he has to beat me too. Because this has no borders!

So there are countries in Africa, that have asked us: „Can you come and share your experiences with us, make them available for us?“ But one country that really was very interested in this contact were the women of Simbabwe. They have come together and they are really, really fighting, even though their fight is more brutal than ours. Because most of them have been put into prison, they are being drugged, they are raped, they are abused, but they still keep on with their fight.

Or perhaps you've heard of Guinea Conakry, they just had a problem when the military leader decided to run for elections. People got into the streets, among them the women, and what the military did: they were shooting into the crowd, and every woman they grabbed, as they were running away: they brought them down and raped them publicly. As a means of suppressing their movement. So these are some of the difficulties the women face in these countries, as they try to come together and work together. But I think the message is that there is strength in numbers.
(Applause)

Round table conversation with Leymah Gbowee and experts of Investigation in Peace and Conflict of the University of Tuebingen and the Institute for Education in Peace, Monday, November 23rd, 2009 at Arsenal Cinema.

Moderation by the journalist and expert in development policies, Sabine Freudenberg.

Question for Leymah Gbowee: What were the strategies to involve and mobilize women for the goal of peace building and to develop the necessary public pressure?

Leymah Gbowee: We had a first meeting at the church with few women. Then for

the second meeting, we put announcements on the radio asking women to come. 65 women showed up. We had another meeting and put announcements out. 250 women showed up. We had this big program, about 500 women showed up. The day we decided to go to the streets to protest, over 2500 women showed up. So it was from 10 to 65 to 250 to 500 to over 2500. Within two years we had more than 10.000 women protesting in 9 of Liberia's 15 counties. So this is the kind of strategies of how to involve women. Going to the churches, talking to the bishops, talking to the imams, going to communities and talking to people. Men came and said they wanted to join us. But we told them no. We wanted it to be women only.

Sabine Freudenberg: At this point it might be interesting to hear from the expert in peace education: when you hear what Leymah Gbowee says, is that something you can learn from or where you say: that is exactly how things function?

Nadine Heptner (from the Institute for Education in Peace): Of course it has to happen exactly like this. No doubt. In the best case scenario, peace processes happen like described in this film and by Leymah, but they do so in the least cases. That is the big challenge for Education in Peace.

But from the example you saw in the film, the education in peace can learn a lot and probably use much of it for their work, because the analysis and dissemination of successful examples of peace building is exactly our task.

And there I see different approaches. One approach is the question: what role do women have in peace processes? There we surely have to work closer together with the peace studies to have a closer look at the role of women in peace processes and also use these insights: i.e. the resources that women develop in peace processes.

On the other hand, in the film you could see the impressive encounter of Christian and Muslim women, the dialogue between the Christian and Muslim women. And this dialogue and process of encounter is extremely interesting for the studies of education in peace. Because there are many things we can learn from each other, from different cultures. But here we can also see how conflicts can be solved in this encounter. One lady in the film said: if we had not stood together, we would not have achieved anything and that is also what Leymah says. The peace education wants to initiate encounters like that deliberately, too, and that is something they have achieved in any case, to initiate these kind of encounters deliberately.

Irene Jung: I want to ask Leymah to tell us something that she told the students at the schools this morning: how this process of encounters between Christian and Muslim women was possible. Because what she had to recount was really extraordinary.

Leymah Gbowee: Well, what you see in the movie is 3 years of work. It doesn't start one day, we didn't wake up and say we're going to do this or that. So here we heard a commentary about some of the theories of peace-building. And that is one of the fundamental problems with the theoretical part of peace-building. People think that you read about actions or you read about strategies and then you put it into practice. It doesn't work that way. I think, it is more the case that you draw from practice and put it on paper, i.e. the other way around.

When we started working with the Christian and Muslim women we started by creating awareness. So we went to the mosques and we tried to talk to these women on how to get involved in peace processes. We went to the Christian churches and talked to the women; but then we also went to the religious leaders, to the bishops and to the imams and said „We need your permission to get these women to work with us.“

So, when we got them to work together, we realized that we had serious problems. There were issues of stereotypes and prejudice. If you don't understand the religion or the faith of a particular person, you always imagine: it is like this. So we called for a consultative meeting with both groups. Three days: one day with the Christians, one day with the Muslims and one day with both groups.

Working with the Christians we had to go into the Bible, to look at women's roles in political processes during war times and then we also wanted to hear from them what their perception was of the Muslim women, both positive and negative. The next day we went through the same thing with the other group: we went into the Koran, to look at non-violent actions or women's roles in the community, as it is written in the Koran. And then we also had them talk about their perception about the Christian women. On the third day when both groups came, we put all the negative things about the Christians on one side on the walls and all the negative things about the Muslims on the other side and asked each group to go and read what the other group had written about them. All you would hear in the room was „Oh my god, is this really what they think about us?“ and most of them were really angry.

And afterwards we asked them to take a break and we put all of the positive things on the walls and then they said „Oh, that is so nice what they say, but it is not true.“ So you had some of the things that the Muslim women wrote, that the Christian women had the best life because of the one husband/one wife policy. And the Christian women were saying: „Even with one husband, it is still problems, so it's not true“.

And then we brought two old women, who had been friends for 60 years. One is a Christian, one is a Muslim. So they told their stories and these two women had unique stories. They were traditional birth attendants of their communities - in absence of hospitals they were the mid-wives. And they were both married to men who used to beat them. And both their husbands were drunks. And both of them had many children. When these two women were sitting like we are to talk, what was strange to the women that had gathered was, that the Christian woman was very quiet and the Muslim woman was the radical. So she said: „When my friend's husband beat her, I made her divorce him.“ But when we asked them the question: What role did your religion play in your relationship? They turned and looked at each other and said: „For 60 years all we have seen are two women. We've never seen a Christian or a Muslim. We've seen mothers, we've seen women who have been abused by their husbands. Religion has never played any part in what we have done.“ In June this year, the Muslim woman died. The Christian woman, as I speak, is critically ill and she may not live until the end of the year. That's how close the two of them were.

But by the time those two women finished telling their story, the Christian women and the Muslim women said: „Give us a sheet of paper. We want to sign a contract, that

we will work together in this Liberia and religion will never be a problem for us“.

Sabine Freudenberg: That is a very good example of how in praxis such a cooperation evolved at the grass-root-level and how it was nurtured and spiced politically. So now the question for the expert in peace studies at the Institute for Political Science of the University of Tuebingen: this is about working together at grass-root-level, but the women have also searched contact with the leading forces, the bishops, the imams. Does this type of strategy play an important role in Peace Studies?

Sophia Benz (from the Institute for Political Science): Yes, the topic of religion and conflict offers a big link to a theoretical approach and there is research on that being carried out at our institute. It is a beautiful example of how theory and praxis complement each other because you can find a lot of what was just said in theory also. When you look at the religious protagonists in this conflict, there are, no matter which religion you are talking about, very positive examples of religious protagonists that have acted in a manner that contributes to creating peace, but there are also - actually in every religion - examples where religious protagonists have nurtured conflicts and had a very bad influence on the escalation of violence, too.

In the meantime in science - or at least at our institute - one has reached the point of saying: the role of religion in conflicts has nothing to do with the content of the religion, because no matter in which religion, there is always a call for... maybe not for violence directly, but there are parts in the Koran and in the Bible that can be interpreted as an enhancement of violence and at the same time there are examples in every religion for the calling for peace, reconciliation and harmony. That means that the religious content is not crucial. What is crucial are the institutional factors and that is what Mr. Hasenclever is researching at our institute at the moment: the question under which circumstances religions can be instrumentalized for political aims, in situations of conflict.

And that enhances the question: which factors can make religions fruitful for creating peace. As they are the same factors that are crucial for this instrumentalization, in positive as well as in negative terms. And these factors are cosmopolitanism, tolerance in religion, networking abroad a.o..

In our example official channels have been used to take influence on religious protagonists. What I find interesting is that in this case a grass-root-level-approach with civilian engagement uses traditional channels of power and influence to reach finally peace. And that is the interesting question with respect to the theories. Does one as NGO, as peace activist in such a context have to walk new roads, what new ways are being tried out? Or should one especially use these structures of power that exist in the society or at an international level in order to exert influence?

Sabine Freudenberg: In Liberia there is now a female president and Leymah Gbowee has founded a pan-African peace network for women. The question is now: what are the requirements or what do you do with your organization, with your women, to secure, what you have achieved, for the future? What do you try to set up in order to guarantee, that what you have achieved with respect to peace, will live on?

Leymah Gbowee: Well, one of the things we've come to realize as women of Liberia is that peace is a process. It's not an event. It didn't end with the signing of the peace-agreement, it didn't come with the disarmament of the combatants, it didn't come with elections and definitely it hasn't come yet.

We have an absence of war, you know, but that doesn't mean that we don't have issues that we need to work on. What we continue to do is to fight to sustain the gains that we've made, in different ways.

So when it comes to issues of political processes, we still use our community mobilizing skills to go into the communities and to convince people that you need to participate. Before the election of this woman, Mrs. Sirleaf, we did different things - and again you have all these theories, I refer to what was just said on the panel, but if you don't bring these theories into your context, it can never work.

We did an analysis of the women who had been involved in the peace process in the moment that was leading to the elections. What we found out was that these women were not interested in going to vote. We went to the UN and said: „We have a serious problem. Women are not motivated to register to vote.“ And the UN didn't pay any attention to us.

The voter's registration was just for 10 days. Five days passed and early one morning I get a call from the UN and they say: „Women are not registering“. And then I said: „I'm hearing echo.“ (Laughter) „Because five days ago this is what I told you.“ Then they said: „What can you do?“

Because it was important for us to get women to vote, we put 200 women out in the 10 communities that we had identified. And those 10 communities were business communities. The guys and girls who were registering people to vote said to us: „We've been here for 5 days and some days we only registered 1 person.“ The day the team got out there the women were carrying babies, they were singing, they were dancing, motivating people to vote. After 5 days we registered 7425 women. (Applause) 7425 women were going to be out of the electoral process. By the time the entire registration finished we had more women than men registered to vote: 50 plus 1 Percent. So all of these little things we've been doing and we want to continue to do.

We also have some groups... because apart from us who do the peace and the political work, there are groups that do the legal work, and we try to complement each other - that is one strategy. People always talk about net-working in peace processes or in community-development processes, but it is always in words. What I've seen women do in Liberia is taking it from the paper and putting it into action. So the female lawyers came together and they formulate a law. Liberia never had a rape law. And then parliament is stalling. They don't want to pass that law. So these lawyers call us and say: „We need to get 1000 women out in the street to protest the passing of this law.“ And we woke up one morning and we put 5000 women in the streets. By the time we got to parliament they were confused. They said: „Go, we'll sign the law tomorrow.“ The next day the law was signed.

We never had an inheritance law for women who married under the customary law to inherit properties of their husbands. The female lawyers wrote that law act. We took it

to parliament. And we didn't put 5000 women, but every morning they came to session and the hall was filled with women just sitting there looking. And every morning they came, we were just sitting there and just looking. Eventually they said: „This silence is something for us“. They passed the law.

Currently our work includes looking at some crucial policy documents that tend to affect women, to see how we can push it, because you see, we will continue the struggles at different levels. While you have the activism, it's not every day that you want to go into the streets to protest. I am protesting now. I don't intend that my daughters will protest. How do we ensure that our daughters don't get into the streets? We have to ensure that there are laws and policies protecting their rights. So those are things we are currently doing in our work. Also we are doing a lot of leadership skills training for girls. Trying to make the young girls come to understand that... I intend to get involved in politics five years from now. When I step into the political scene, I will expect that some young girl will come and step into my shoes. So those are some of the things we are currently doing. (Applause)

Sabine Freudenberg: Now I would like to give the audience the possibility to ask questions, too, we will put several questions together:

Spectator: I would like to know more about the female president. About her background as well as about what she does at the moment. What is your view on what she does now? Do you work together or do you have to work in opposition?

Spectator: I would be interested in how have men changed their attitude towards women during this process and how is the attitude towards kids that were fighters and I'd say they are also victims, what has happened to them, and have they changed their attitudes as well?

Spectator: I have a question concerning WIPSEN, Leymah Gbowee's organization: do you get involved in other countries where there is war as well or do you only work in Liberia?

Leymah Gbowee: Well, the president is doing a great job. Liberia is a very difficult place. For 14 years no running water, no road network, no electricity. We have 3.3 million people. Currently in Liberia, there are only 20 professional Liberian doctors. Twenty. Two Zero. Every other doctor that is in Liberia, is sent by foreign countries. So we've taken doctors from Cuba, from Nigeria, from the United States, any doctor that comes, we take them. But for Liberian practicing doctors: only 20. This is just to show you how terrible things have gotten.

And this woman is in a position where I would never love to be, because anyone who comes after 14 years of war whether man or woman will have a tough time. One of the things that she has been able to do was: we were deep in debts and she has gotten some of those debts cleared, the economy is growing. For the first time in the history of Liberia you have a very high enrolment rate of girls in school. And now they've started the free education policy for primary schools.

But also some of the challenges we have is that Liberia has the worst maternal mortality rate in the entire world! So today in Liberia from 1000 women who are going to give birth and have their babies, 96 will die. So that's almost like 10 per cent. Out

of 1000 births you have almost 100 women dying at birth or when they are going to give birth! That's it.

We also have a very high rape rate. Rape has increased. So much to your question how the men are taking the women. Young babies, as young as 9 months old, are being raped. So maybe this is like a backlash for the powerful women's movement that we have. We don't know. Armed robbery is on the increase. It's so bad. Communities are still struggling with the issue of armed robbery. And this is closely linked to the fact that the government really doesn't have the resources to attend the needs of these ex-child soldiers. So they are still roaming the streets, they're forming gangs. And these are some of the outcomes of war.

My relationship with the president: we have a very cordial relationship, I won't call it friendship. Before, people told her that I didn't support her and I wasn't a big fan of hers. And so we were not very close. But she went to New York and saw this film and came back to Liberia and said: „I didn't know that you had done such a great work.“ Because she was never in the country during the war. So now she supports the girls project that we do. We finished the project and last week they called my office to say that the president is giving us 40.000 Dollars to continue the girls project. But also she has a lot of respect for the work that I do. Last time she and I spoke, she said: „Come home. I have a political appointment for you“. I said: „I'm coming but that is not going to happen“.

Leymah Gbowee: What do I do? My work now is not just concentrated in Liberia. We're working in Sierra Leone. Last week we were in the Ivory Coast – Cote d'Ivoire. Cote d'Ivoire is supposed to go to elections soon and so we took a group of women from around West-Afrika to Cote d'Ivoire, because they are the first country after Liberia to have a woman who is running for president. So we went to show solidarity to her and to encourage women to vote for her. We also work in Nigeria in the Niger Delta region where they have the oil conflict, where women try to start a movement that would help the communities get something of what they need.

We do a lot of networking with our different colleagues in different parts of Africa. Now we've got a request to go to Simbabwe next year to start working with one of the advocacy groups there; hopefully next year we will go there. So it's not just Liberia. But also we do a lot of cross continent work on issues of the UN Security Council resolution 1325 and 1820, advocating for the implementation at different levels.

Spectator: Well, I would like to say a couple of things. You achieved giving all of the women a voice, and that this voice was heard, so that they actually were able to act. Before, that was not possible. The other thing that really impressed me is that you were able to change and even use the structures that normally segregate society by getting the imam and the bishop to support you.

With respect to the question, why nobody informed about the peace women: I think what you achieved is dangerous for the male power potential in this world. You showed that women are able to bring down a government. In a peaceful way. That's what I wanted to say. Thank you.

Leymah Gbowee: She's very right. Because what we've seen in many countries after our movement is, that every time women try to step out, there is a serious

clampdown on their activities. In Guinea-Conakry women came out along with some of the men to protest the military government. What they did was to fire into the crowd, they killed 157 people that day, but beyond you can find these disgusting images in the internet of soldiers raping the women publicly. So afterwards they went from hospital to hospital and told the women: If you say you were raped, they take you out and they execute you.

So right now in Guinea you have a movement of women that has virtually died. No one wants to talk about political issues. In Zimbabwe, some of our sisters who started protesting have been put into prison for almost one year. The Mugabe government say they want to overthrow him.

So these are some of the backlashes that we've seen happening in different communities as a result of women uprising. But it is good because right now the world can see that armless women have power! If women weren't powerful, when they step out in their numbers, the governments would not be jittering, you know.

So someone asked me: „Do you think we need another Beijing, another World Conference of Women?“ And my answer is: „No, we don't need a World Conference of Women, we need a World Protest of Women at the UN!“ I have also a sister from Zimbabwe, who is one of the CNN heroes, she will be honored for her commitment. She said: „I am tired of workshops. If it is Mugabe we want to deal with, let's get on a plane, go there, deal with him and move on. That is what women should do right now, and I think we are on that way....“ (Applause)

Conversation between Sabine Freudenberg and Festival Director Irene Jung after the round table conversation with the experts and Leymah Gbowee, Arsenal Cinema, November 23rd, 2009

Sabine Freudenberg: This film “Pray the Devil Back to Hell” is so extraordinary to me because I discovered that I learned something that I have not experienced in 35 years of journalistic work.

That there was a movement of peace women, a big movement, that had a decisive part in ending a civil war, in electing a female president, the only female president in Africa. And this movement has been kept dead silent by the media!

We can also say that the media had no chance, for whatever reason, to talk about it. But this is really outrageous! I feel it is really a scandal that in a world, where so many things happen and we talk about so many vanities, we learn nothing about something so important, so moving for an entire country.

The second point that I find so surprising about the fact that these peace women went totally unnoticed, affirms what Erhard Eppler once said to me: that at first the history of Europe was a history of going out into the world and discovering it. That we eliminated all the “white spots”, the unknown places on the maps. We informed ourselves, we talked about it and we got to know everything.

And since a few decades we can notice that the entire world that we mapped

politically, ethnologically and economically, that we conquered, that this world suddenly is gaining again more and more “white spots”.

For example Liberia, for example Sierra Leone, very badly the Congo. Nobody dares going to these countries because even as a journalist you can get killed just like that. I can't blame any journalist for it, but what consequences does it have? We have no idea about what happens in those countries. And that also means that the women who are committed there, receive no publicity at all, no international attention and therefore no safety and no means of pressure against their governments or the UNO.

And that is for me embarrassing in the end. That we all fail, understandably fail perhaps, but still fail. And that our highly praised media coverage finally surrenders.

Irene Jung: And you are not an average consumer of the media coverage, you are working in this field as an expert for 35 years now. And you have special access to getting information about these topics...

Sabine Freudenberg: I have been concerned with development policies in my work as radio journalist for 35 years and I also did much voluntary work in this sector. I was especially involved with the media coverage of Africa. And I have to say: I didn't know anything about it and that is what I find strange. And what enforces this strange uneasiness during the last months since I watched this documentary is, that I did some research, I looked it up everywhere and **nowhere these peace women are mentioned** when they talk about Liberia, the civil war and the peace building elements in this conflict. And I have to say that I read an interview with the president the other day and she doesn't mention these women either, that means there is a weird interaction of everybody involved.

Irene Jung: When you talk about those white spots and about the media coverage, that journalists are kept from reporting on Liberia for example, then one has to say on the other hand, that it is not true that we did not receive any images about Liberia, but that they were very special images.

Those were no images of the brave women but of the armed men, blood, violence, helpless victims, that is what we got to see. That means that when there is war, there are always many war correspondents, usually men, who have a very special point of view.

And that was the origin of the round table conversation and this question today. How can it be that we are so badly informed although there are so many news and news coverage?

The filmmaker of “Pray the Devil Back to Hell” desperately tried to get footage and photos of these women. She really searched everywhere and the only tapes she could find of these women back then were shot by the dictator's personal cameraman, who filmed everything the dictator did. And when the dictator had to meet the women because they build up so much pressure, this cameraman filmed that too.

And then there was this international photojournalist who was asked by the filmmaker: “How is that possible? Didn't you see these women?” And he said: “Yes, I

saw them, but I didn't want to take pictures of them. They were too pathetic."

This for us is an outrageous, a scandalous sentence! And it expresses the point of view of these mostly male war correspondents. We have already shown a film about female war correspondents and there was an analysis of the different focus you can perceive, when a woman goes into these regions of war as a correspondent.

But as this sentence and the fact that nobody covered the women's fight for peace means such a scandal for us, we wanted to reflect more about it. We had already analyzed issues linked to the theme during our former film festivals. For instance that stories about perpetrators sell better than stories about victims, or that news of catastrophes are given a priority in the media and that that leads them to portray in first instance the men in arms, in winners' poses, in poses of power.

Yes, and we have questioned ourselves, and I reached the judgement that there are some subliminal powers that act in these war correspondents: that they as men only acknowledge other men as forces that are politically decisive and that they don't want to take women seriously. But also that there is an unconscious identification with the perpetrators, that means that through identification they receive the welcome feeling of power, as many of us feel increasingly powerless in such a complex, globalized world.

And that these war correspondents are gauged in a way, that they find only persons with political or military power to be able to set the course for their society and that they disrespect the power of civil society to intervene in and decide the destiny of their country.

Sabine Freudenberg: That's one side of the medal. On the other hand we have to consider that we talk about countries that are under the influence of wars, civil wars and marauding troops. You don't know anymore what to call those conflicts, what they really are, in the end they are murder and death conflicts. What practical consequences does that imply for the media coverage?

It means that no media owned by the state will send their correspondents there; they will be withdrawn from these regions. It was like that on the Balkans, that the state media said with respect to the international coverage: we can't allow this, we have a responsibility to provide for the security of our reporters and then they say: we don't let our reporters go there. That means that actually only these "war correspondents", as you call them, go there and those are sometimes real adventurers. And they often fulfill the exact conditions that you have described. That is a certain type of person who needs the kick and says: I go where the bullets are flying.

That is a very, very difficult issue within the journalistic work. There is the big question: how far goes the duty to cover what happens in the world, and how far goes the duty of protecting your own staff? Then you get the following problem: You are offered the news material that you regret, that I regret, too, and then the editorial staff has to choose and say either "We don't show that because we can't verify it" or other media say "We show these blood pictures and blood films" and then only this problematic focus of events in that country is offered to the audience.

So all objectivity is missing, because you can't prove it. That is a problem for

everyone involved. So it is an enormous problem and also a political scandal.

But it is hard to say how to get out of that. I can't tell you either. I only notice that I am totally shocked, really shocked, that there is something like that and we don't get to know any of it. That there are 14 years of murder, that there is a war and the world only gets to know that the people there are killing each other but what really happens does not become public.

Irene Jung: And you have also mentioned that this has also a certain effect on prejudices.

Sabine Freudenberg: Yes, of course. Because obviously when I only see those problematic point of views, I am reinforced in thinking, that in such a country everything is upside down, that there are only marauding troops, that people are on the run. Then I have the impression "Aha, there is chaos, that's what it's like and always has been like."

Then the corrective point of view is missing, for ex. to get to know that there is a civil society that expresses itself in the social movement of these women, who are enormously brave, who dare to speak up publicly, to put on pressure. But when I don't see them I can't appraise what is happening, and say: "Ah, there is a contradicting force". Because the contradicting forces need my support! They need the publicity, they need the institutions of public opinion in order to exert power on their account. And that is why these women are so admirable. Whereas I now have heard that they actually were heard by the regional media. And through that they were able to build up small power structures.

Irene Jung: Yes, and it's really important for us. For TERRE DES FEMMES and especially for the TERRE DES FEMMES filmfest, where we are working with images and pictures. If we want to provoke solidaric engagement, we need images that are able to give hope. We need to know that there are persons fighting for something and that these persons have a chance for succeeding. That's a motivation for me. Within myself I can say: There's a sense in this support, it's not hopeless.

When we are choosing the films for screening at our festival, we try to consider this aspect: that there are women depicted that fight against violation of human rights of women or for other social causes. That they have strength and power, like Leymah showed us today. Then it is a film and a story where we don't need to look away, where we can look with open eyes and say: There's a sense in supporting them and I want to support them.

Sabine Freudenberg: Yes, and another encouraging aspect, of which we haven't spoken about yet, is that these women are also connected to other people involved in peace processes. Just the fact that they have been able to achieve, that Christian and Muslim women work together, and make the leading elites cooperate as well. I.e. they have also involved the men, what seems to be a very important aspect for me. Something like that can only work out with a strategy: You have to deal with the leading figures of society and win them over in order to have success. So success is not only an emotional thing, but also a rational issue.

Irene Jung: Sure. Leymah also said, that out of praxis, theory is created. For me,

that's also one of the very impressive strategies of Leymah. Because she's not only once and then creating a strategy but she has nearly every day a new idea for how to achieve her aims with a new strategy. That's so impressing to me.

In the movie we could see this several times happening, how she developed strategies: How can I get through for example to the leading elites. First, how can I get through to the dictator, how can I have an impact on him, how can I put pressure on him? How can I make pressure at the peace talks? How can I guarantee that the war criminals, who are in the interim government, are not going to be victorious in the elections? How can I achieve that a real democracy be created, that a woman become president? At the moment she thinks about: What will we do, which strategy will we have, so that in three years, when Mrs. Sirleaf will finish her presidency, the men don't return and say: „Okay, you have had your chance for six years, you made a good job and now we come again and take over.“ Leymah is very farsighted and really visionary and she has defined a strategy also for this moment.

For example that women are getting prepared at a medium political level for filling the vacuum, that the outgoing president will leave. But she thinks also about the young girls and women: that they are being involved and receive training, so they get aware, that it is not an exclusive privilege of men to bear responsibility, but it is the right of girls and women to participate in political responsibilities, and that they should assume this responsibility.

Sabine Freudenberg: The responsibility depicted by these women is also very impressive! Leymah said: Peace is not an event but a process. To me, that's the central aspect of all. You can't say, we have peace, now we can twiddle our thumbs, but you have to create structures that support a lasting peace. That's what she is doing. At the moment especially for women, but in this case you need more than women to achieve your aims.

But it's a beginning. We can see, that women, especially in a country like Liberia play a very important role. They are crucial for economy but also for social structure. There's a lot of responsibility shown by these women.

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