

## CASE STUDY

### Leymah Gbowee and the Liberian women's peace movement

Robert Greenleaf describes his desire for a 'more serving society . . . the climate that favors service, and supports servants,' and believes 'the basics [of solving social problems] are the incremental thrusts of individuals who have the ability to serve and lead.'<sup>23</sup> If we believe Greenleaf's vision, a more serving society – one comprised of both servant leaders and servant institutions – has ethical behavior embedded in its structures. If one's primary concern is for the well-being of people, then the choices that flow from that concern will necessarily be ethical choices, within the limitations of the practical concerns noted above. Accepting that this serving society is a worthwhile goal, how on a practical level can servant leadership most effectively be utilized to work toward a more service-oriented, and so more ethical, society? This is the question that we take up through the lens of the women's peace movement of Liberia and the ongoing legacy of its leader, Leymah Gbowee.

#### Historical context: Gbowee as servant leader

In 2011, Liberian peace activist Leymah Roberta Gbowee was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, along with Africa's first democratically elected female president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and Yemeni human rights advocate Tawakkul Karman. The prize that year highlighted the contribution of women around the world to the struggle for peace, stability, and gender equality. Of the 2011 awardees, Gbowee was the only one of the three with no formal political association or position.

Gbowee, a trained social worker who addressed trauma recovery in ex-child soldiers, rose to international prominence as the head of Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. This non-violent movement brought Muslim and Christian women together to pressure Liberian leaders to bring an end to their 14-year civil war through the signing of a peace agreement in 2003. In her Nobel lecture, articulated almost entirely in terms of collective work and

## CASE STUDY (continued)

accomplishments, Gbowee describes how the women of Liberia ‘used our pains, broken bodies and scarred emotions to confront the injustices and terror of our nation.’<sup>24</sup>

Gbowee describes the moment that catalyzed her movement-building work in a 2012 TED Talk:

Several years ago, there was one African girl. This girl had a son who wished for a piece of doughnut because he was extremely hungry. Angry, frustrated, really upset about the state of her society and the state of her children, this young girl started a movement, a movement of ordinary women banding together to build peace.<sup>25</sup>

This story clearly demonstrates that the desire for leadership grew for Gbowee from a desire to serve, a passion to fulfill a need for her child, and so for the children of others as well. In the pursuit of a peace agreement, Gbowee quite literally put her life and her body on the line in her work: leading groups of women in daily protests to pressure political leaders in the administration of dictator Charles Taylor into negotiations, organizing a sex strike among wives to pressure their husbands to get rebel leaders from the LURD opposition group to the table with Taylor to broker a cease-fire, and threatening to publicly disrobe in order to shame both of the warring parties back into participation during stalled peace talks. The act of engaging her entire self – including her physical body – into advocacy for the women and children of Liberia demonstrates the depth of her commitment to her followers, her community, and their shared goal of peace. Her ability to navigate complex political and social dynamics in service of long-range objectives (foresight), build effective coalitions based on deep relationship (empathy and healing), leverage cultural norms in service to her cause (awareness and conceptualization), and speak boldly and compellingly to both her peers and to global leaders (persuasion) demonstrate the power of her leadership. The combination of these factors defines Gbowee as a servant leader.

### Legacy and current challenges

After her Nobel Peace Prize, Gbowee has gone on to prominence as a speaker, author, member of international advisory groups and founder of the Gbowee Peace Foundation. While she has continued to work in a servant leadership role, she has also addressed some of the inherent challenges of this mode of leadership. In a 2010 interview for the *United Nations Africa Renewal* magazine, she describes ‘serious competition amongst women’ in the post-war Liberia, wherein ‘the collective way we embraced peace building is disintegrating because everyone is seeing herself as the next big thing.’<sup>26</sup> Adding to the complexity, Mariam Persson writing in 2012, describes the persistence of ‘chains of command and rebel structures of war, which officially have been demobilized, at the same time within the informal sphere, for different reasons [such as a need for security], are maintained and mobilized.’<sup>27</sup> In other words, the security situation in Liberia is still uncertain, and as a result, some of the wartime networks of power have been maintained and are still at

## **CASE STUDY** *(continued)*

play in the country's politics. And while the Liberian civil war has ended, the country still struggles with the fallout of decades of exploitation, militarization and ethnic tension, and experiences relatively high levels of insecurity and violence, including violence toward women. While the scope and power of Gbowee and her fellow Liberian women's accomplishments should not be downplayed, the continuing struggle to build sustainable, compassionate, service-oriented political and cultural structures in Liberia offers an opportunity to push the boundaries of the servant leadership framework in order to bring to light new aspects of its ethical implications.

It is worth noting as we explore this case that servant leadership developed from, and is most often applied to, organizations, not nations. However, while the socio-political arena on a national level is undoubtedly more complex than even the largest multinational organizations or corporations, the differentiation between leadership aimed at consolidation of wealth and power versus leadership aimed at securing the well-being and empowerment of all followers is salient in both contexts.<sup>28</sup> There is a clear contrast between unethical leadership wherein people are seen as resources to be used in pursuit of profit and power, as exemplified by the dictatorship of Charles Taylor in Liberia, and ethical servant leadership, wherein people are seen as potential leaders to be nurtured and developed for the common good, as exemplified by Leymah Gbowee's leadership of Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace.

That being the case, the legacy of Gbowee's work begs two questions. How can servant leaders balance the goal to develop and empower their followers with the goal of maintaining a spirit of service and collective benefit in their sphere of work? And, can servant leadership by an individual or subgroup within a larger context effectively contribute to positive outcomes and ethical behavior on a large scale? In both of these questions, conclusions drawn from the example of the Liberian peace movement can be applied to organizational and community contexts as well.

We'll begin with the second question, whether servant leadership at the individual or small group level can effectively influence larger culture. Greenleaf clearly believes so, and makes the point throughout his writing that institutions, and societies, are made up of individuals and so can be pushed toward change primarily – maybe only – through changes in the hearts and minds of individuals. This is why the end goal of servant leadership is to move followers into the role of servant leaders themselves, and why servant leaders must be constantly, consciously engaged in developing relationships with followers and actively building a service-oriented culture. In an undated writing, 'Ethics of Business,' Greenleaf states, 'Even if the tradition of high ethical practice is long established in a business, unless individuals continue to inject new life into it and adapt it to new conditions, it is likely to deteriorate.'<sup>29</sup> To return to the five component analysis, the leader, and the dyad of the leader and follower in relationship, must constantly be active in shaping and reshaping the environment and context. Servant leadership posits that the norms, codes and values of an organization, or a society, are not static, but responsive to the influence of the environment as well as to the actions and beliefs of the individuals within that organization or society.

## **CASE STUDY** *(continued)*

Without active work to develop a culture of service, it is not surprising that the dynamics of an organization or culture tend to return to the default or previous state. In the case of Liberia, this is a particularly difficult problem. Writing about Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's 2005 rise to the Liberian presidency, journalist and Liberian native Helene Cooper explains in the lead up to the 2003 Accra peace talks, 'Liberia was dubbed one of the world's worst places,'<sup>30</sup> with literally hundreds of civilian casualties piling up each week from the civil war. The 14-year civil war 'left a quarter of a million dead, displaced five times that number and saw a generation of children drugged and turned into killers themselves. An estimated 70% of women were raped.'<sup>31</sup> Immediately after the signing of the peace agreement and the departure of Charles Taylor, Cooper describes the jockeying for position and influence that engulfed the remaining political players as they came to terms with the 'post-apocalyptic' humanitarian and political landscape of the recovering nation. In the wake of war came a political culture rife with corruption, bribery and grudges, along with a gutted economy and a torn social fabric. It is in this context that, although war formally ended in 2003, there has been a tendency for power structures and loyalties to default to those networks of influence established during the war. This tendency to recreate wartime networks of power comes often out of necessity as citizens seek protection, resources and a means of economic livelihood that are not being provided by the current government leadership at the community level.<sup>32</sup>

During the war, the culture of greed and violence was confronted through a powerful demonstration of servant leadership by the women of Liberia. It would stand to reason that a culture of service should again be effective in confronting ongoing challenges. After all, the election of the country's first female head of state in 2005 was largely the result of a campaign by now President Sirleaf to engage women and civilians throughout the country in dialogue about the future and how to rebuild the nation, a listening and follower-centered approach clearly based in a servant leadership framework. However, in practice, the ability of individual servant leaders to perpetuate a culture shift is limited, in this case by several factors, the most important of which may be the inner circle of the context in the Five Components Model. Even President Sirleaf, a standard bearer for women's rights and peace, is a deeply complicated figure who openly acknowledges political and moral compromises that she has made and continues to make in order to try to maintain peace and create economic and political stability. In her role as a political veteran and global negotiator 'steeped in the politics of African power,'<sup>33</sup> Sirleaf has been able to secure resources that are desperately needed by her people, but often in ways that are objectively unethical, such as bribery. In this sense, Liberian politics in the post-war, female-led world has a decidedly utilitarian ethical bent that sits uncomfortably beside the moral, spiritual doctrine of relationship, empathy and individual authenticity that forms the foundation of ethics in servant leadership.

In this situation, we see what is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of Greenleaf's model – the characterization of the context as a landscape that the leader navigates with and on behalf of the followers. In this formulation, the context seems to be posited as ethically

## CASE STUDY (continued)

neutral; it is a space that a servant leader can engage, wherein the individual who is leading works to eliminate obstacles for followers, but always through means that are consistent with her or his personal ethical code. A political leader, such as President Sirleaf, then, breaks from servant leadership when she chooses to give money to a corrupt official in order to secure a political advantage which she believes will be good for the country, or makes a policy that gives primacy to political feasibility rather than protection of marginalized followers. This indicates that there is a limit to the scale on which servant leadership can effectively be practiced within an environment that has serious material and security limitations.

One way to understand this limitation is to return to the basis of servant leadership as defined by Greenleaf, which is that the servant leader is servant *first*, and leader only by virtue of a desire to serve. In an environmental context larger than an organization – particularly one where scarcity or insecurity exists – leaders are often compelled to act in ways that privilege the leader identity over the servant identity, because these leaders cannot effectively be in direct relationship with followers in the dynamic, ongoing way that true servant leadership requires.

Accepting this challenge, what is the role of servant leadership in shaping ethical cultures within challenging environmental contexts? To engage this question, we shift focus from President Sirleaf's political leadership to Leymah Gbowee's community-based leadership. If it is not practically effective to practice servant leadership in a political context that is not already service-oriented, it stands to reason that the ultimate goal of servant leadership is to work long term to create more and better servant leaders within this context. If servant leadership can become widespread, the shift in the outer circle (values) of the Five Components Model will be able to overcome obstacles to ethical behavior within the inner circle (context) that are otherwise an impediment to individuals acting ethically in deep, consistent ways on an individual basis. This is a dynamic process, but servant leadership posits that it is possible to strengthen the power of the leader–follower influence to the point where it shapes the culture in which the leaders and followers operate.

Currently in Liberia, in Gbowee's view, younger women who were not actively engaged in the peace movement, and mentored by servant leaders, seem to be recreating a hierarchical, individualistic leadership structure, leading to the disintegration of the movement that had been based in a culture of service. So in the case of current female political leadership in Liberia, the restrictions of the context and cultural values are defining the leader–follower relationship, and not the other way around. This returns us to the question first posed: How can leaders balance the goal to develop and empower their followers with the goal of maintaining a spirit of service and collective benefit in their sphere of work? One answer, then, is to deal with the limits of the current context through a utilitarian perspective shaped by a servant leadership ethos, while working to shift the culture through active cultivation of servant leadership.

Key to this in practice is the process of mentoring and working with emerging leaders, so that the coming generation of political, community, and institutional leadership is immersed

## **CASE STUDY** *(continued)*

in a servant leadership culture. Those who have been nurtured as servant leaders, and built the corresponding individual moral compass and ethical commitment, will then work within their spheres of influence to move groups and institutions toward a more service-oriented culture. This model is already at work through the efforts of Gbowee to nurture young women as leaders in West Africa.

At her TED Talk in 2012, Gbowee expressed the goal of her work as engaging others to help girls fulfill their dreams and potential. In her own words:

Will you journey with me to help that girl, be it an African girl or an American girl or a Japanese girl, fulfill her wish, fulfill her dream, achieve that dream? Because all of these great innovators and inventors . . . are also sitting in tiny corners in different parts of the world, and all they're asking us to do is create that space to unlock the intelligence, unlock the passion, unlock all of the great things that they hold within themselves. Let's journey together.<sup>34</sup>

In the interview that follows, Gbowee frames her work in terms of generational change, saying she wants to look back in 20 years and see another female African leader carrying on the work she has begun. She also alludes to the power of servant leadership to shape the political sphere in a story describing working with a group of young women in Liberia to engage them in a local election. The girls asked candidates how they planned to help young women in the community – in other words, how they planned to be a servant leader, supporting the most vulnerable and marginalized. The candidate who did not engage the girls positively was voted out of office as a result of their efforts.

While this is just a single example in one village, the long-term goal is clearly to reshape the political sphere such that an attitude of servant leadership, and a dedication to ethical leadership that is based in an ethos of care for followers, become the expected norm. It is the same long-term goal that Robert K. Greenleaf worked toward when he shifted his focus to teaching, and made a point to focus much of his personal work on college campuses in his effort to transform American culture and leadership to a more service-focused orientation.

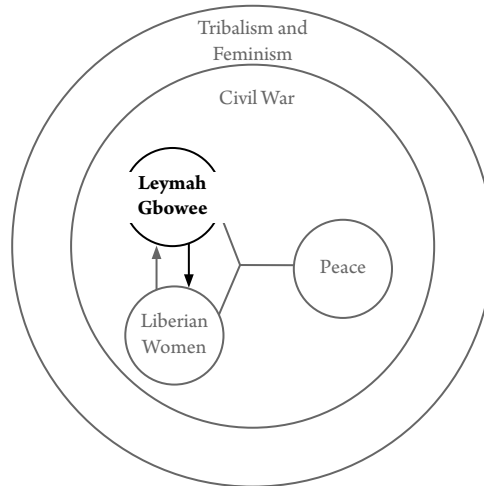
### **Five component analysis of Leymah Gbowee and the Liberian women's peace movement**

Reviewing the case in terms of the Five Components Model shows us how each element of servant leadership has been enacted in the Liberian women's peace movement.

The leader–follower dyad in this example has Gbowee as the leader acting in dialogue and cooperation with followers to create change. Gbowee came to her position as a leader through engaging fellow women in conversation about what they wanted and needed, and then in organizing them through collective action to achieve those shared goals. The relationship between leader and follower in this example is also dynamic, since Gbowee as a servant leader works to empower those around her to step up into a leadership role themselves.

## CASE STUDY (continued)

**Figure 13.3** Five Components of Leadership Model applied to Leymah Gbowee and the Liberian Women's Peace Movement case study



The goal, in this case, is the establishment of a peaceful society wherein all the needs of citizens are met through just, cooperative, non-coercive processes. In keeping with the servant leadership model of 'the means are the ends,' the goal in this case, broadly stated, is to free the country from the violent grip of dictatorship and civil war and establish a functional civil society. The empowerment of the people of Liberia to participate in collaborative, non-violent, organized political and social engagement is the means by which this end is accomplished. Simply stated, empowering followers to reach the goal is synonymous with the accomplishment of the goal.

The constantly changing context of war and peace, security and insecurity, prosperity and poverty, forms the backdrop of this case. In this context, one is struck by the impressive ability of Gbowee and others in the peace movement to change tactics – from prayers to marches, from marches to sex strikes, from public campaigns to quiet political negotiations, and more – as the situation evolved. Moreover, the servant leader quality of foresight is clearly at play in Gbowee's ability to intuitively understand this shifting context and to apply effective pressure at the exact right points to, for example, move the peace talks forward, or promote disarmament. The ability of Gbowee to step up and successfully direct the leader-follower actions within this changing context is the hallmark of an effective servant leader.

Gbowee based her actions as a leader during the war clearly on a deep understanding of the culture values, and norms of Liberian society. During the civil war in Liberia, women could not, and did not, want to engage in conflict on the male-dominated military or political stage. Instead, Gbowee's work as a leader drew on the culturally relevant role of women as mothers, wives and caretakers, and leveraged the power of those roles and the associated social values in order to achieve the goal of empowering women and ending the

### **CASE STUDY** *(continued)*

---

war. What could not be achieved by political power and brute force, the women's movement successfully achieved through wielding the power of cultural norms to create hope, empathy, or even shame among political and military forces. For example, Gbowee organized daily marches of women to pressure Charles Taylor to engage in peace talks. Rather than mount an intimidating or armed campaign, which could have easily drawn a violent repressive response, women attended these protests dressed all in white, barefoot and singing. The male military and political leaders were compelled by cultural values and norms to acknowledge and engage with the women when they presented themselves in this manner. Beyond the ending of the war, the work of Gbowee to mentor and empower young women in and beyond Liberia continues to draw on the cultural values and norms in which these followers are embedded – promoting cooperation, connection, respect and a sense of family. At the same time, she simultaneously actively works to build the power of service-oriented and ethical norms among followers to influence political and social structures toward justice and inclusion.