

## The Prize

By Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Friday, October 7, began like any other day for me. My plan was to go out campaigning for re-election, just four days away, as the first female President of my country, Liberia. I had heard it whispered that I was “being favored” for the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, but because I was so busy campaigning, I dismissed the thought, saying to myself, if it happens, it happens.

However, when family members and staff and the media – with their ear to the ground – started to arrive at my home, in anticipation of an announcement in Oslo at 9 a.m. (local time), I thought, well, maybe the time is now.

And then the call came, from the Norwegian Nobel Committee, informing me that I had been selected as one of three women to be jointly awarded the 2011 Nobel Prize for Peace.

I am honored, in Oslo, today, December 10<sup>th</sup>, along with a fellow Liberian, Leymah Gbowee, and Tawakkul Karman of Yemen, for our “non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work.” The Committee, in its announcement, also correctly declared, “We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society.”

The Nobel announcement cited UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), on women, peace and security which, for the first time, made violence against women in armed conflict an international security issue, and underlined the need for women to become equal participants with men in peace processes and in peace work in general. This resolution was the basis for a UNIFEM study undertaken by former Finnish Defense Minister Elisabeth Rehn and me, which chronicled the life stories of women affected by conflict.

In its reference to me, the Nobel Committee observed that, since my inauguration, in 2006, as Africa’s first democratically elected female President, I have contributed to securing peace in Liberia, promoting economic and social development, and strengthening the position of women. The Committee hopes that in awarding the 2011 Peace Prize to three women – raising to 15 the number of women who have won this most prestigious and coveted Prize in its 110-year history – would help end the suppression of women that still occurs in many countries, and help in realizing the great potential for democracy and peace that women can represent.

Along with that announcement came the realization that my life was forever changed. For with this Peace Prize comes the responsibility to work even more for women's participation, empowerment and leadership. Winning this Prize will place me under a microscope at all times, and everything I do or say will henceforth be judged within the context of the highest honor I have received for peace.

And yet, the burden of this Nobel Prize is a welcome responsibility, for it strengthens my conviction and my commitment to continue to advocate for human rights, for women's equal opportunity, and for a better life for all Liberians. This award belongs to the people whose aspirations I am privileged to represent, and whose rights I have the obligation to defend. This award belongs to the women whose courage, character and commitment have made this world a better place.

Nobody goes through life deciding to conduct her or his life in such a way that will result in a Nobel Peace Prize. I did not anticipate this. I did not expect this when I went through years of forced exile and imprisonment in the struggle for justice, peace and equity. I did what I did simply because it was the right thing to do, regardless of the consequences.

The highpoint of my life came when I was given the privilege to serve the people of Liberia and to lead the protracted processes of peace, reconciliation and national transformation.

I therefore humbly accept this Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the women of my country, the women of Africa, and the women everywhere who have struggled for peace, justice and equality.

Let me, through this medium, thank all who have been instrumental in shaping my life, which has brought me to this Nobel Peace Prize. Let me also acknowledge the thousands of individuals, from all over the world, who have called or written to me to express their congratulations – from the world's most powerful leaders; from my brothers and sisters across the African continent; from people I grew up with, or knew in school, or worked with many years ago, as well as the many people I have never met. I pledge to be the voice you expect, for women's and girls' empowerment, leadership and participation in the events that shape our lives.

Because the education and empowerment of girls is, for me, a burning issue, I hope to use a portion of my Prize money to work with faith-based institutions to expand their boarding facilities in order to accommodate and get more of our young girls off the streets.

To those who have honored me with the Nobel Prize for Peace, I express my profound gratitude and appreciation for this international recognition which will motivate women everywhere to find their voices, speak up, to assume leadership roles, to have the courage to stand up for the principles in which they believe.

I am, today, a proud African woman, President of the Republic of Liberia, and a Nobel Peace Laureate. My life has been a journey that could not be predicted, but whose course I would not have altered.

**This article appeared in the Norwegian daily, *Dagbladet*, on December 10, 2011 – the day on which its author, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in Oslo.**