

Nobel Prize has a gender imbalance

Colman McCarthy | Dec. 12, 2011



Leymah Gbowee(Newscom/Jessica Rinaldi)

Commentary

Anyone lucky enough to be teaching peace studies courses soon notices that more females are in the classes than males. Many, many more. Noticeable also is that women tend to write more passionate papers, ask more cogent questions and know how to keep class discussions lively. Puzzled by all this, I explained it away by theorizing that it must be genetic: Women have a peace gene floating around inside them.

A while back, I offered this theory to my students at Georgetown Law. Leaving class, a female student approached. As I remember it, she said: "Professor, let me explain what's going on because it's clear you'll never get it on your own. More women than men are in these courses because more women than men are victims of violence, and victims always want solutions quicker."

I was reminded of this when the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize went to three women: Leymah Gbowee, Tawakkol Karman and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. The awards were given out Saturday in Oslo, Norway.

Gbowee, 39, a social worker and once a student at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va., organized Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, a nonviolent group that helped end her country's 14-year civil war in 2003. Much of her story is told in the award-winning documentary "Pray the Devil Back to Hell."



Karman, 32, a newswoman once imprisoned for criticizing the violent

Yemeni regime of the now-deposed President Ali Abdullah Saleh, ran Women Journalists Without Chains, a

group that demanded press freedoms. She has survived attacks by mobs.



Sirleaf, 72, the first woman elected to the presidency of an African nation,

said of her award: "We particularly give this credit to Liberian women, who have consistently led the struggle for peace, even under conditions of neglect."

The Norwegian committee that awards the prize endowed by Alfred Nobel, the dynamite manufacturer, is making up for lost time. Since 1901, 85 men and 15 women have won, including this year's trio.

To correct the 110-year imbalance, the Norwegians would do well to disqualify men from consideration, at least for a half century. This is especially needed when it comes to American politicians.

In 2002, Jimmy Carter won. As president, his peacemaking skills included selling arms to Middle East dictators as well as to the military government of El Salvador, despite the 1979 pleas from San Salvador Archbishop Oscar Romero not to. On March 24, 1980, Romero would be slain while saying Mass. The death squad included killers trained at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Ga. To protect the flow of oil from the Middle East, Carter pledged to use "any means necessary, including military force."

In 2007, it was Al Gore's turn. Smitten by the former vice president's fretting over global warming, it ignored his years in Congress voting for weapons deals and increasing the military budget to record levels.

Worse still was the selection in 2009 of Barack Obama, whose campaign oratory soared to the heights while his presidential decisions would sink to the depths. Apparently the Nobel committee wasn't listening when Obama claimed Afghanistan was "a necessary war." They applauded his acceptance in Oslo, including the lines, "Yes, the instruments of war do have a role to play preserving the peace." This was one more feeble utterance trying to legitimize American militarism, similarly heralded by the bellicose Theodore Roosevelt -- the 1906 Nobel laureate.

It is far from automatic that women corner the market on peacemaking. As secretaries of state, Madeleine Albright and Hillary Clinton docilely obeyed the war policies of their White House commanders in chief. Among the 13 women currently in the Senate, their voting records on Pentagon spending, weapons procurement and military adventurism is indistinguishable from the votes of the Senate males. In the House, it falls on Barbara Lee to break from the pack. The Oakland, Calif., Democrat was the only member of Congress to oppose the invasion of Afghanistan, the vote taking place on the afternoon of Sept. 14, 2001, three days after 9/11. Two years earlier, Lee had been the only member of the House to defy President Bill Clinton and Albright's plan to bomb Serbia.

If she keeps it up, Lee will soon deserve to be nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. For me, she would be a sure-thing winner.

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