

## Women who demanded peace take Nobel stage

Nina Larson Oslo, *The Age*, 12 December 2011

THREE women who rejected the role of victims to challenge war and oppression have shared the stage in Oslo to receive the 2011 Nobel peace prize.

"You represent one of the most important motive forces for change in today's world: the struggle for human rights in general and the struggle of women for equality and peace in particular," Norwegian Nobel committee president Thorbjørn Jagland said before presenting the prestigious award to Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, her compatriot and "peace warrior" Leymah Gbowee and Yemeni "Arab Spring" activist Tawakkol Karman.

"You give concrete meaning to the Chinese proverb which says that 'women hold up half of the sky'," Mr Jagland told them.



*Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karman (centre) is flanked by Liberian President Ellen Sirleaf (right) and Leymah Gbowee (left) at the awarding of their shared Nobel Peace Prize. Photo: AFP*

Ms Gbowee, a 39-year-old social worker who led Liberia's women to defy feared warlords and bring an end to her country's bloody 14-year civil war, insisted "this prize could not have come at a better time than this".

"It has come at a time when in many societies where women used to be the silent victims and objects of men's powers, women are throwing down the walls of repressive traditions with the invincible power of non-violence," she said.

"Women are using their broken bodies from hunger, poverty, desperation and destitution to stare down the barrel of the gun," she added, noting that "ordinary mothers are no longer begging for peace, but demanding peace, justice, equality and inclusion in political decision-making".

Ms Gbowee, a mother of six who inspired Christian and Muslim women alike to wage a sex strike in 2002 and refuse to sleep with their husbands until the violence ended, pointed out that "we succeeded when no one thought we would, we were the conscience of the ones who had lost their consciences".

Ms Sirleaf, Africa's first democratically elected woman president who last month won a second term, also hailed the Nobel committee's focus on women's struggles after "unprecedented levels of cruelty directed against women" in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and her own Liberia.

Ms Karman, who at 32 is the youngest person to win the peace prize and the first Arab woman to receive a Nobel in any category, expressed confidence that the Arab Spring uprising would succeed even in her country.

"I see on the horizon a glimpse of a new world," the journalist and mother of three said, according to an English translation of her speech.

Ms Karman, however, expressed frustration with the lack of Western support for the Yemen uprising, calling on the "democratic world, which has told us a lot about the virtues of democracy and good governance", to support people struggling for freedom.

"All of that is just hard labour during the birth of democracy, which requires support and assistance, not fear and caution," she said.

"The promising Arab Spring will become a new winter if women are again left out," Mr Jagland cautioned.