On Campus

Learn Africa, says Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee

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Liberia's Leymah Gbowee addresses students in Low Rotunda in February. Photo: Eileen Barroso

The Liberian social worker and peace activist Leymah Gbowee, winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, had a strong message for audience members at a World Leaders Forum event in Low Rotunda on February 18.

Gbowee, forty-one, who led a nonviolent women's movement that helped end the Second Liberian Civil War (1999–2003), discussed Africa's leadership crisis — in part the product, she said, of a citizenry with insufficient education to hold their leaders accountable and a hypocritical West that bolsters corrupt leaders for its own

purposes. She spoke of the sacrifice African women have made for human rights, and of a need to “change the psyche” of African leadership. “It is important for us to showcase those leaders who see their role as mending fences and building bridges instead of perpetuation of the old order of ethnic division and the social-class system,” she said.

During a Q&A, a Nigeria-born student asked Gbowee how Africans educated in the West should work to effect change in their native countries if they return.

“Please do not adopt a mentality that ‘We are going back to save them,’” Gbowee pleaded. “Look at me. Even with your Columbia education, can you save me? Honestly?

“Child, don’t try it when you go to Nigeria. Go with an attitude of wanting to learn, wanting to serve, and not that ‘I’ve lived in New York and I come back with a Columbia education.’ Or you will come running back to the US.”



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